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### **Neoconservatism and Leo Strauss: the place of a liberal education**

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**Abstract:** This paper is concerned with the work of Leo Strauss, specifically his two essays on liberal education. Strauss is often claimed to be a founding thinker of neoconservatism and while much scholarship has been produced analyzing his work, very little discusses his essays on liberal education and how these fit within his larger project. This essay begins to fill that void by outlining the two essays and discussing their relation to his projects of critiquing both modernity and Western liberal democracy. The essay further draws out some tentative connections between these essays of Strauss's and the larger landscape of neoconservative thinkers currently in favor within the United States government.

**Keywords:** Neoconservatism; Leo Strauss; Liberal education; Modernity

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## Introduction

For those who follow current politics and political theory the term ‘neoconservative’ is most likely a familiar one. It is used often to describe certain key persons, within both the current Bush administration, as well as key conservative ideologues within the US. Seemingly, according to both popular press as well as academic scholars, the current administration of George W. Bush is a haven of neoconservative thought and personnel. Whether this is a positive or negative circumstance depends on who is writing, but for those seeking to explain the actions taken by the Bush administration during its stint in the White House, the appeal to neoconservative ideology is prevalent. Whether one is discussing the justifications for engaging and continuing the war in Iraq, or the claims made by senior officials in the White House in order to justify treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, or the use of the constant rhetoric of fear to allow increasing amounts of domestic spying, neoconservative tenants are, arguably, at the center of justifications for the above actions. The interesting feature about the term neoconservative is its use on both sides of the political spectrum. For those embracing neoconservatism, the term is one of pride, while for those criticizing the movement the term is a derisive one. Regardless of how the term is applied, it is important to understand the foundational thought of neoconservative ideology, for such an understanding provides insight into the actions and policies of those currently in power in the US.

A central figure in the debates surrounding neoconservatism is Leo Strauss. A German Jew émigré from Nazi Germany, Strauss eventually became a professor of political science at the University of Chicago after escaping to the US, where he served as a faculty member from 1949-1968. It was during his tenure there that some claim Strauss influenced the founding thinkers of neoconservatism, at least in the United States, such as Irving Kristol, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Joseph Cropsey, and Allan Bloom. Through Strauss’s students (and the students of his students), his influence spreads out to such current conservatives as William Kristol, Paul Wolfowitz, and even, some claim (see Drury, 1997), to the US’s Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and former Speaker of The House Newt Gingrich.<sup>1</sup> Because of this (claimed) influence, interest in Strauss and his writings has increased. Strauss was a vigorous scholar of classical political philosophy, with writings ranging from discussions on philosophers such as Plato, Hobbes, and Nietzsche, to critiques of modernity, historicism, and liberal democracy. However, like many philosophers, his writings on education are few and underdeveloped. Consequently, there has been little analysis offered on how Strauss’s discussion of liberal education fits within his overall system of thought. Furthermore, the current neoconservatives in power in the US seem to have adopted educational policies and goals that are neoliberal in nature, such as the *No Child Left Behind Act* and the push for greater educational privatization. If this is the case, then one would be right to ask what value excavating the educational thought of Strauss would hold.

I will offer two reasons. The first is that Strauss is an important thinker in his own right. His critiques of modernity and liberal democracy deserve serious consideration, for in Strauss we do not get the move toward a Nietzschean recreation of the self as the moral end of the postmodern human. Instead, Strauss argues for a return to the ancients, for recognition of the importance of the tension between Athens and Jerusalem, between reason and revelation, which he argues has made western liberal democracy great. Though as much of a supporter as Strauss seemed to be of liberal democracy, he criticizes it (as well as the current political ethos in general) for embracing historicism and positivism, and abandoning the big questions that concerned Plato and Aristotle

as to the best life to lead. While much scholarly and popular work has been published concerning these ideas, very little explains how Strauss's ideas on liberal education play their part. This essay seeks to begin to fill that gap. A second answer to why excavate Strauss's educational writings concerns the desire for explanations of actions taken by the US government. To whatever extent one takes seriously the argument that neoconservative ideology is driving political decisions within the current Bush administration (see Xenos, 2004 for such a discussion) then one must understand where and how these individuals were educated in the art of politics. Neoconservatism differs in important ways from traditional conservatism, and part of that difference rests on the philosophy (and philosophers) from which it draws its foundational ideas. If it is the case that Strauss's ideas are central to neoconservative ideology, then understanding his ideas on education becomes a necessary part of understanding the foundational thought of neoconservatism.

In what follows, I discuss the two essays Strauss published on liberal education. (Strauss in fact produced three essays discussing education. However, the third essay is an amalgamation of the other two.) The first was delivered as a commencement address and the second was commissioned in order to explain some of the ideas presented in the first. They were both later published in a collected work entitled *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*. In the conclusion, I will discuss the contribution Strauss's essays on liberal education make to his overall system of thought, what his ideas might contribute to the current state of education, and whether the two essays contribute anything to an understanding of neoconservative thought.

## **Liberal Education**

The first essay, 'What is liberal education?', was delivered originally as a commencement address at the Tenth Annual Graduation Exercises of the Basic Program of Liberal Education for Adults at the University of Chicago on June 6, 1959. What Strauss seems to be offering in this brief essay, is both what the subject matter (construed broadly) of a liberal education should be, and an argument as to the importance of a liberal education in relation to modern democracy. Strauss begins his discussion on liberal education by stating, 'Liberal education is education in culture or toward culture. The finished product of a liberal education is a cultured human being' (Strauss, 1968, p. 3). Originating from the Greek word *cultura* (meaning the cultivation of the soil in harmony with its nature), Strauss claims the definition of culture derivatively means cultivation of the mind in order to develop the mind's natural capacities. While it is certainly the case that individuals manage this cultivation to a certain extent, early in this process the majority of those who direct the cultivation of the mind are teachers. Nevertheless, as Strauss recognizes, teachers are themselves students, and must have been taught by other teachers. Therefore, he wonders who the ultimate teachers are. Avoiding an infinite regress, Strauss reasons that there must be teachers who themselves are not students.<sup>ii</sup> These teacherless men are the greatest minds. Since it is unlikely that the greatest minds are accessible directly, that is, in person during one's lifetime, one must settle for discovering their thoughts through their writings. Because of this fact, a liberal education becomes the 'studying with the proper care the great books which the greatest minds have left behind' (Strauss, 1968, p. 3). Combining the above explanations produces a tentative definition of liberal education as something like an education toward the cultivation of the natural capacities of the mind by studying with 'proper care' the greatest minds through their writings, in order to produce a cultured human being. Additionally, this study will

be one in which the ‘more experienced pupils assist the less experienced pupils, including the beginners’ (Strauss, 1968, p. 3).

Strauss admits that this study of the great books (as he calls them) is not an easy task, recognizing at least two difficulties with the above definition of liberal education. The first difficulty is determining what is meant by studying the great books with ‘proper care.’ Since the greatest minds disagree, sometimes vehemently, about the most important themes they discuss, the consequence of such disagreement, at the very least, is that liberal education cannot be indoctrination. For if there is no clear doctrine that emerges from the writings of the greatest minds, then there is nothing to indoctrinate. Unfortunately, there is no further explication in this essay of ‘proper care.’ However, there are two things I argue Strauss would include within this concept. The first, which Strauss discusses later in this essay, concerns bringing the greatest minds into dialogue with one another. Because the greatest minds wrote monologues and rarely discussed their ideas with one another, Strauss claims it is left to those wishing to understand their writings (and discover their wisdom) to bring them into conversation with one another. As mentioned above, it is clear that the greatest minds do not agree on the most important issues, and it is for the student to determine the points of agreement. In judging their writings, however, one discovers that one is not qualified to judge as to what those points of agreement are, and thus one is left in a quandary. Though one may deceive oneself into believing one is fit to judge the greatest minds (and in some sense, one must be bold enough to make an attempt), in the end, according to Strauss, these delusions are of no help. For Strauss, this situation is caused by the jettisoning of authoritative traditions that provide the guidance necessary for determining such points.

If this is the case then, one must use whatever powers of reason one possesses in order to find one’s own way. This activity is our only comfort. We must strive to understand the writings of the greatest minds, and in striving to understand, we occasionally gain an insight. For Strauss, when we become aware of what we understand and the fact that we are in the process of understanding that thing, we have ‘so high, so pure, so noble an experience that Aristotle could ascribe it to his God’ (Strauss, 1968, p. 8). This experience leads to an understanding of the dignity of the human mind. In realizing this, we in turn become aware of the dignity humans themselves possess and the righteousness of our world. This rather poetic statement is meant to bring the reader full circle to understanding how liberal education reminds one of human excellence and greatness, the importance of which I will elaborate below.

The second aspect of ‘proper care’ that I argue Strauss means to include is his concept of esoteric writing. In brief, Strauss argues that the ancients wrote during periods when governing authorities were not open to criticism and in fact punished such severely. This being the case, according to Strauss, philosophers of antiquity wrote for two different audiences. The first were the general mass of readers, who would acquire an understanding of what was explicitly stated. This was the exoteric teaching of the text. For the careful reader, however, the text would reveal the philosopher’s true thoughts, thoughts that would have led to the philosopher being chased out of the city, if not put to death altogether. This was the esoteric teaching of the text, and it was a hermeneutic technique Strauss passed on to his own students. However, this interpretation is not without its critics, and in fact, there is substantial controversy surrounding this reading of the ancient philosophers by Strauss. I only mention the exoteric/esoteric distinction because it seems

to be an obvious candidate for inclusion into reading the great books with ‘proper care.’ I leave off this topic, as it is one that is beyond the scope of this essay, but refer the reader to Strauss’s *Persecution and the Art of Writing* for a more in-depth discussion.

The other difficulty Strauss sees with his definition of what a liberal education consists (stated above), lies in the idea of culture. To begin, Strauss admits that the culture to which he refers is western culture, but recognizes that a modern understanding of culture places western culture among many others. Additionally, to limit liberal education to only western culture would seem to be a type of parochialism, something antithetical to the ‘generosity’ and ‘openmindedness’ Strauss thinks a liberal education entails. This pluralistic conception of culture is problematic for Strauss, for it seems to endorse a type of relativism. Where people suggest ‘that culture is any pattern of human conduct common to any human group,’ as they currently do, Strauss states, ‘it is as if someone would say that the cultivation of a garden may consist of the garden’s being littered with empty tin cans and whisky bottles and used papers of various descriptions thrown around the garden at random’ (Strauss, 1968, p. 4). This attitude toward the popular understanding of culture is what liberal education, in effect, is meant to militate against, and it is in his discussion of what liberal education means currently that we are introduced to his critique of popular democracy as it relates to culture.

Popular or modern democracy, for Strauss, is substantially different from a past understanding, one that he wishes to resurrect. Describing this earlier way of conceiving of democracy, Strauss states:

It was once said that democracy is that regime that stands or falls by virtue: a democracy is a regime in which all or most adults are men of virtue, and since virtue seems to require wisdom, a regime in which all or most adults...have developed their reason to a high degree, or *the* rational society [original emphasis]. Democracy, in a word, is meant to be an aristocracy which has broadened into a universal aristocracy. (1968, p. 4)

This is the ideal of democracy, not democracy as it actually is. This ideal, however, is not what the field of political science studies, the field Strauss was a part of to a degree. Modern political science concerns itself with the actuality of democracy, and views the ideal as a mere illusion. Instead, what matters are the actors and actions taken within democracies. The actuality of democracy, according to Strauss, is that of mass rule, or would be, if the masses were not ruled by elites. These elites rule due to a main virtue of modern democracy, a virtue required for democracy’s effortless operation, i.e., what Strauss calls electoral apathy.<sup>iii</sup> He goes on to criticize the average citizens of modern democracies as those ‘who read nothing except the sports page and comics section,’ and thus ‘democracy is then not indeed mass rule but mass culture. A mass culture is a culture which can be appropriated without any intellectual and moral effort whatsoever and at a very low monetary price’ (Strauss, 1968, p. 5).

Modern democracy, or for Strauss, mass culture, still requires certain qualities that are antithetical to mass culture, namely those of dedication, concentration, and intellectual breadth and depth. This then gives us a new understanding of liberal education, especially in its current form. Liberal education, then, is:

The counterpoison to mass culture, to the corroding effects of mass culture, to its inherent tendency to produce nothing but ‘specialists without spirit or vision and voluptuaries without heart.’ Liberal education is the ladder by which we try to ascend from mass democracy to democracy as originally meant. Liberal education is the necessary endeavor to found an aristocracy within democratic mass society. Liberal education reminds those members of a mass democracy who have ears to hear, of human greatness. (Strauss, 1968, p. 5)

It is important to note that Strauss is using aristocracy as Plato did, meaning rule by the most virtuous. This new understanding is less a definition of what liberal education is, in the sense of entailing what the subject matter should be or what pedagogical techniques to employ, and more about the motivation for obtaining a liberal education and the hopeful outcome for certain citizens who receive such an education. In this sense, it adds to our understanding of the motivation for promoting liberal education, though Strauss denies that this is the type of education that should be replicated on a mass scale.

In the rest of ‘What is liberal education?’ it is unclear to what end Strauss is moving. He makes the claim that liberal education is ‘education to perfect gentlemanship, to human excellence, liberal education consists in reminding oneself of human excellence, of human greatness’ (Strauss, 1968, p. 6). He then asks how liberal education reminds one of human excellence, and takes Plato’s suggestion of philosophy being the highest form of education as the answer. For Plato, as well as Strauss, philosophy is the search for wisdom or those attainable things that are most valuable, which Strauss claims are virtue and happiness. However, since man is incapable of being wise, and therefore happiness and virtue imperfect, it seems as if liberal education promotes an unreachable goal. Strauss claims that in spite of this limitation on our abilities, those who are philosophers are said to possess all the best of which man’s mind is capable of achieving. Strangely, though, Strauss dismisses the possibility of attaining this highest form of education without giving a reason as to why. He warns us not to be fooled by those from academic philosophy departments who call themselves philosophers, for just as it would be strange to think that those in art departments were artists due to their membership in such departments, we would be wrong to accept those who teach philosophy in colleges and universities as philosophers simply because of their chosen occupation.

Strauss never explains why we cannot achieve wisdom, or why we cannot become philosophers in his sense of the word in this essay. It could be that he thinks only the ancients were able to achieve this wisdom, or had the capacity to actually become educated in the highest manner in order to become philosophers. If this is so, it still does not explain why no one currently can achieve this goal. Moreover, while we may not be able to become philosophers, Strauss claims we can pursue our love of philosophy and our desire to understand its insights through ‘listening to the conversations between the great philosophers or, more generally and more cautiously, between the greatest minds, and therefore in studying the greatest books’ (1968, p. 7). Strauss does not necessarily limit the greatest minds solely to the West, admitting there may be those worth reading in India or China, but it is just an unfortunate necessity that we do not speak these languages and do not have the time to learn all languages and must work with what is available.<sup>iv</sup>

## Liberal Education and Responsibility

The second essay in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 'Liberal education and responsibility,' expands on the themes presented in the first. This essay was commissioned by the Fund for Adult Education to discuss the topics of liberalism and education. In effect, what Strauss offers is an outline of his historical critique of modern liberal democracy and modernity. Strauss's critique is historical in the sense of beginning with the Greek conception of democracy (and liberal education) and then tracing that conception through Machiavelli, the Enlightenment (with specific references to Locke and Mill), into the current age of capitalism and market-driven politics. It is a history meant to highlight the changing role of those who govern, the justifications given for such a change, and the way in which a liberal education has slowly lost its original sense and the detriment this entails for modern liberal democracy. While this essay is a passable introduction to the thought of Strauss, the reader unfamiliar with Strauss's work would be better served by reading either *Natural Right and History* (1953) or Thomas Pangle's edited volume *The rebirth of classical political rationalism* (1989). Nevertheless, I will attempt to highlight the main points of his critique of liberal democracy, paying attention to the function of liberal education.

Strauss initiates the discussion by noting that liberal education and responsibility, while related, are not synonymous. Instead, the current understanding of 'responsibility' is something like duty, virtue, or conscience. If one is said to be responsible for some action, then one can be held accountable for said action. Here, Strauss notes that being responsible is a precondition for being virtuous. In effect, Strauss is setting the stage for contrasting the current understanding of responsibility as a substitution for (or assumption of) virtue with an older, more robust understanding of what virtue meant. Since this is the case, Strauss ends the discussion by stating that his misgivings concerning this understanding of responsibility were predicated on his ignorance as to the meaning of the substitution of responsibility for virtue in the common understanding. To his relief, Strauss is not writing to address the topic of education and responsibility (understood in its modern sense), but to clarify a few sentences from his essay discussed in the previous section. Those sentences are the following: 'Liberal education is the ladder by which we try to ascend from mass democracy to democracy as originally meant. Liberal education is the necessary endeavor to found an aristocracy within democratic mass society' (Strauss, 1968, p. 10).

To begin, Strauss contrasts the original and current understanding of 'liberal.' Originally, a liberal man was one who was free, as opposed to being enslaved, but free in a certain way. The liberal man was a man of wealth, the administration of which took little time or effort and was usually left to competent supervisors, thus allowing him time to pursue other (political) interests. Moreover, he would have been a farmer, instead of a merchant, but one who lived in town in order to be near the center of political life. Those who were free, but with little leisure time because they must work were the poor masses, the majority of society's citizens. If the liberal men or gentlemen, as Strauss calls them, were not in power, then they would be at the mercy of those who are not gentlemen. As Strauss states, 'The way of the life of the gentlemen is not secure if they are not the unquestioned rulers of their city, if the regime of their city is not aristocratic' (Strauss, 1968, p. 11). These are the material conditions of the gentleman, but one does not achieve this status by simply living an easy life. One must be educated through a liberal education in order to become a gentleman.

Strauss notes that education, in the Greek sense of the word, concerns children and not adults. It implies a sort of playfulness, and gentlemen are in earnest. They are in earnest because they are concerned with the most important matters, the proper ordering of the city. Therefore, liberal education is concerned with the potential gentleman, and the proper subject of this education is that of the child's character and aesthetic sense. Strauss, borrowing from Plato, outlines the liberal curriculum as follows: it is to include poetry, history, rhetoric, and the three Rs. Additionally, future gentlemen need some sort of physical education. In order to learn the skills necessary to govern properly, both in his house and in public affairs, the burgeoning gentleman should converse with older gentlemen and elder statesmen and participate in the political life of the city. Once again, this type of education requires a certain amount of wealth and leisure to accomplish.

Continuing, Strauss discusses the question of justice in relation to society, namely by asking whether a society could be just if it were ruled by these gentlemen. Strauss answers this indirectly, by noting that if the gentlemen do rule, they are under an obligation to rule in the best interest of the entire society, not just in their own interest. Further, they must show that their rule is in fact in the best interest of the society in which they rule. However, as Strauss states, justice requires equals be treated equally, and there is no reason to think that the common man and the gentleman are unequal, except by an accident of birth. The gentleman's response to this criticism amounts to something like the following: 'Indeed, you may be correct that my station is an accident of birth, but that is just the way it is. It is not my fault your parents could not afford the proper type of education for you, and since you do not have the proper (i.e., political and character) education, you cannot rule, for you do not know how. Now please let me go about my business of ordering the best society possible, both for myself, but more importantly, for you.' The gentlemen are in effect stating they are not responsible to the common people, and that the common person cannot understand their way of life. This inability to communicate rests on the place of virtue in the lives of each. For the gentlemen take virtue to be praiseworthy, and thus to be chosen for its own sake, while the masses praise virtue for what it can bring them, for its instrumental value. Therefore, while the gentleman rulers of a society may not be, and cannot be according to Strauss's reading, responsible to the common person, they are still responsible for the common person's welfare. This gentlemanly rule is aristocracy as originally meant; those with the right material circumstances, proper political and character education, who take their civic responsibility to be paramount, are best at ruling and therefore should rule the city.

Nevertheless, aristocracy and democracy are at odds, and if one adopts aristocracy as the proper form of rule, one rejects democracy. Even if one were to weaken the notion of gentlemanly rule, Strauss argues, one must necessarily reject democracy. Since democracy is rule by the free citizens of the city, and since only a minority of citizens can afford to be educated in the proper way in order to be qualified to rule, democracy must be rejected because it is rule by the uneducated, and thus by those unfit to govern. This brings Strauss to one of his central themes, that of the role of the philosopher within the city. Strauss states that the proper pursuits of the gentleman were said to be politics and philosophy (Strauss, 1968, p. 13). The philosopher is constantly in search of answers to the whole, to the most important questions, taken in the sense of Plato and Aristotle, whereas the gentleman must accept certain things on faith. In fact, the purpose of a liberal education is preparation for pursuing the philosophical life.



Because philosophy is presupposed by politics, 'philosophy transcends gentlemanship.' Accordingly, philosophers and gentlemen do not share the same virtues. Strauss claims that the virtue of the gentleman is a (political) reflection of the virtue of the philosopher. This reflection of virtue is ultimately what justifies the rule of the gentlemen, since philosophers are considered to be best educated, to have the finest characters, to be the wisest of men. It would seem strange, then, that philosophers do not rule. However, the quest by the philosopher for wisdom disqualifies him from ruling, in that the philosopher's quest never ends, or, put differently, the philosopher's education continues throughout his life, since the seeking of wisdom is more important than obtaining it. For this reason alone, that the philosopher is constantly searching for wisdom and cannot settle for expedience, philosophers cannot be allowed to rule. Therefore, philosophers are ruled by their inferiors, the gentlemen, which is unnatural, according to the Greek understanding of natural hierarchy.

This problem is overcome if one assumes philosophers exist alongside the city as opposed to being an essential part of it. Strauss is not claiming that philosophers live entirely outside of the laws of the city, and in fact cites the argument Plato gives in the *Crito* concerning the duty of the philosopher to obey even unjust laws as proof otherwise. The distinction being made is that while the philosopher is not obliged to become politically involved in the governance of the city, he contributes to the well-being of the city by being who he is and pursuing his interests, since 'philosophy has necessarily a humanizing or civilizing effect' (Strauss, 1968, p. 15).

Strauss finishes his discussion of the philosopher's relation to the city as viewed by the ancients, and moves to discussing the modern form of republicanism currently in place in the west. Strauss claims that the ancients understood the implausibility of a genuine aristocracy ever coming to fruition and instead settled for a 'regime' in which the masses and gentlemen shared power, and where the gentlemen held their position through popular election. This is what Strauss calls a mixed regime. The mixed regime, then, is one 'in which the gentlemen form the senate and the senate occupies the key position between the popular assembly and an elected or hereditary monarch' (Strauss, 1968, p. 15).

Strauss next notes that there is a connection between this concept of the mixed regime and the modern form of republicanism (i.e. modern liberal democracy) practiced in the US. However, Strauss is quick to point out the important differences between the two. The foundation of modern republicanism rests upon what he calls the 'natural equality of men,' as opposed to that of virtue for gentlemanly rule. From this 'natural equality of all men' flows the contention that the sovereignty of government rests with the people. The modern doctrine further prescribes, according to Strauss, that all people be guaranteed their (natural) rights, that the powers of government be fundamentally separated, that each (qualified) person count for one vote, and that the right to vote be guaranteed regardless of class, religion or race. Further, the actions of government are to be as transparent as possible, and since the government is put into power through popular elections, it is held responsible to the people, whereas the responsibility of the masses to the government cannot be legislated (Strauss, 1968, p. 15). Perhaps the biggest difference between the conceptions of sovereignty is that of their foundations. As mentioned above, the gentleman rule because, of all who live in the city, they are the ones who have been educated in the best way to rule, and at heart are concerned with human flourishing. For modern republicanism, the wellspring of sovereignty is that of the improvement of material conditions,

according to Strauss, and thus that is why industrialists and economic elites came to dominate modern republicanism, as opposed to the landed gentry of ancient times.

As mentioned, the masses, those who place elected officials into power, are not held legally responsible for their choice. Strauss argues this imbalance was traditionally mitigated through religious education for the masses. While not referring to any specific religious education, Strauss emphasizes that, in general, it taught personal responsibility for individual actions and thoughts. Strauss seems to be implying something more than a traditional conservative line of personal responsibility. Instead, referring to his comment above concerning the electoral apathy or lack of public-spiritedness of the masses, religious education helped to bond people to the common good. While it is certainly the case that Strauss seems to ignore the darker aspects of speaking of a common good (e.g. the oppression of minority voices under what counts as 'common'), it is a prescient critique of modern apathy concerning the lack of responsibility people feel for allowing officials to come to power, whether through directly voting them into office or failing to vote altogether. Strauss is speaking historically, and goes on to mention Locke's distinction of the necessity of a liberal education for the potential rulers, an education that was not meant for the masses. Strauss further points out this same argument in the *Federalist Papers*, specifically the writings of Alexander Hamilton, and the writings of John Stuart Mill. The reason he brings the writings of these authors to the reader's attention is to point to a problem with the current education of citizens within modern liberal democracies. This problem is both the decline of religious education for the majority of citizens and the decline of liberal education for the potential representatives of the people.

These are, however, theoretical considerations, and as stated above, Strauss acknowledges that an ideal democracy cannot be formed. Since there are no more true philosophers, and since the gentlemen are a reflection of the philosopher, there cannot be any true gentlemen rulers either. Instead, he turns toward the state of modern liberal education, and argues that just as classic liberal education was supported by classical philosophy, the current form of education is built on the new direction in philosophy as well, at least in focus if not in practice. Strauss seems to be critiquing the turn in philosophy away from *philo sophia* to *philo episteme*, and with this change in orientation comes the conflation of the ends of the philosopher with the ends of the non-philosopher (and the ends of the gentlemen with the ends of the non-gentlemen), thus making philosophy more democratic. One result of such a conflation, implicitly, is that it eliminates the traditional role of the philosopher. Instead, the traditional role is supplanted by that of the philosopher-scientists, who are concerned with the study of the philosophy of science. The philosopher-scientist no longer contemplated things eternal, but began to wonder how to improve 'man's estate,' or how to improve the lot of all people. Thus begins Strauss's discussion of the turn of the modern intellectual landscape toward scientism and positivism.

This role of the philosopher-scientist was originally to prepare the masses to receive a new type of knowledge, namely scientific knowledge. However, this knowledge had to be filtered, and what is left after such a process is what Strauss designates as popular science. As Strauss states, 'In order to become willing recipients of the new gifts [of science], the people had to be enlightened. This enlightenment is the core of the new education. It is the same as the popularization of the new science. The enlightenment was destined to become universal enlightenment' (Strauss, 1968, p. 20). Along with this move toward universal enlightenment and

*philo episteme*, came the move toward a more functional type of moral education. No longer was virtue pursued for its own sake, instead, enlightened self-interest took its place. Even this new understanding of moral education was unnecessary as long as the proper institutions were established, providing both political and economic incentives and punishments, to ensure people would act properly and reasonably. In addition to this new morality, a new understanding of equality, that of equality of opportunity, was gained. Now, no longer were natural inequalities considered a chance for acting virtuously towards one's inferiors. Instead, tolerance became the catchword of the day, and as long as each person began the race with the same opportunities, each could do as he or she saw fit with their natural abilities. The foundation of such thinking is that all people are naturally equal, they share the same natural rights, and compassion becomes synonymous with goodness.

Strauss is tracing, through the above briefly outlined intellectual history, the descent of modern society into nihilism and relativism. With the change of focus in modern philosophy, the beginning of which is often attributed to Descartes and his *Cogito*, the change from the contemplation of the highest things to the consideration of how to better each person's lot in life, came a subsequent devaluing of those things considered unscientific. Since morality, or virtue, is something that one cannot gain a scientific understanding of, science, and especially social science can no longer make claim to evidence for a universal moral nature. Thus, for Strauss, 'Values are regarded as...conventional' and moral education is nothing more than 'conditioning through symbols verbal and other, or...adjustment to the society in question' (Strauss, 1968, p. 23). Here then is the dreaded nihilism, the relativism in to which modern society and mass democracy has sunk so low.

Strauss ends this essay by noting that the current understanding of liberal education is liberal in name only, that those 'educated' by such an education will have, unfortunately, a large influence over both the ends of education and the means used to arrive at such ends. One might reasonably ask what is to be done about such horrid educational and social conditions. Strauss suggests two things. The first is that of moderation. Moderation, which cannot be separated from wisdom, demands loyalty to both a proper character and to constitutionalism. This will allow truly liberally educated people, girded with moderation against the extremes of radical idealism and political apathy, to find, once again, a voice in the governance of society. The other suggestion is a return to the original understanding of liberal education. Strauss finishes with the essay with these words of hope:

We must remember that liberal education for adults is not merely an act of justice to those who were in their youth deprived through poverty of an education for which they are fitted by nature. Liberal education of adults must now also compensate for the defects of an education which is liberal in name or by courtesy. Last but not least, liberal education is concerned with the souls of men and therefore has little or no use for machines. If it becomes a machine or an industry, it becomes undistinguishable from the entertainment industry unless in respect to income and publicity, to tinsel and glamour. But liberal education consists in learning to listen to still and small voices and therefore in becoming deaf to loud-speakers. Liberal education seeks the light and shuns the limelight. (1968, p. 25)

## Concluding Commentary

What are we to gain from Strauss's critique of western liberal democracy and liberal education? As someone who fled a totalitarian state, it is understandable that Strauss is concerned with the slide into relativism and historicism (*a la* Heidegger and Nietzsche) that he saw the modern condition producing in the United States specifically, but in the west more generally. For, as Strauss saw it, if western liberal democracy is to hold out the hope of overcoming the seductive call of Nietzsche to remake oneself in one's own image, thus allowing the emergence of something like the Nazi regime, it cannot give into the moral apathy of the postmodern. This was what Strauss called 'the crisis of our time' and this crisis was mainly of a political and moral nature, as Catherine and Michael Zuckert have argued succinctly in their book *The truth about Leo Strauss*.<sup>v</sup> Liberal democracy as originally understood, or as Strauss reads the ancients as endorsing, is, in the end, the best form of government, according to Strauss. For within it there is both the element of popular sovereignty and original aristocracy, and it implies a citizenship engaged enough to choose leaders who are practically wise, and leaders who are educated properly and who recognize a duty to govern in the best interest of all citizens.

As for the current state of education in the US generally, it is unclear whether Strauss would have much to offer. Certainly he would promote a return to a classical understanding of liberal education, in order to militate against the slide into relativism and lack of public-spiritedness. It is less clear whether he would support something like privatization or school choice schemes (as many neoconservatives do), though one could, conceivably, argue for such from Strauss's description, and implicit endorsement, of the conditions of the liberal person and the role of liberal education in producing gentleman rulers. However, as I mentioned in the introduction, current US educational policy pundits seem to use either classical economic arguments in support of school choice schemes (i.e. those put forth by Milton Friedman), or such neoliberal justifications as increasing global economic competition. Nevertheless, there is no doubt Strauss saw education as playing a central role in his system of thought, for two reasons specifically. The first is that a liberal education (as originally understood) produces the types of citizens and rulers necessary for a strong liberal democracy. It ensured a link for the gentlemen rulers to the wisest of all people, the philosophers. It also ensured that these rulers' characters were educated properly. The other reason is that it reminds its students of 'human greatness.' It does this through studying the greatest minds, minds that were concerned with the best human life to lead, who understood the importance of virtue and guiding tradition, and who comprehended the element of the divine within the human soul. The hope for Strauss is to halt the slide from modernity into postmodernity, and return to a better place, both politically and morally, for the human condition.

In part, one can read Strauss as a conservative critique of postmodernism. He is concerned with the state of modern democracy, which he compares unfavourably to an older definition. He argues that part of the problem rests in the jettisoning of authoritative traditions that act as guides, while the other part is the slide into relativism and scientism, both of which deny the legitimacy of religion as a positive source of knowledge. Finally, Strauss frames everything within a political and moral context. However, one could read him as somewhat iconoclastic, especially in light of his interpretation of the political philosophers of antiquity and their esoteric writing style. Interestingly enough, Strauss was not involved in the politics of his day, and rarely, if ever commented directly on policies and practices of the United States government. It is his

students who become actively engaged in politics, whether it is Allan Bloom writing his best seller *The Closing of the American Mind*, lamenting the state of liberal education in America, or William Kristol, prominent neoconservative intellectual, writing for the *Weekly Standard* and appearing on political talk shows.

If it is true that Strauss was not politically active, then, one might ask, why all the controversy surrounding him? Why all the media attention? In part, it is a question of influence. That is, to what degree can one person's philosophical thought be said to influence the actions of his followers, and to what degree does the interpretation of his followers deviate? One need only to look at the followers of Karl Marx, Michel Foucault, or John Dewey to understand how difficult it is to assign blame (or praise). Nevertheless, one can see where current neoconservatives might draw philosophical grounding for actions taken by President Bush's administration. For instance, one could read Strauss as highly distrustful of the masses, and in fact, construe certain actions taken by the Bush administration as a coherent philosophy of democracy. Arguably, neoconservatives could claim that what is truly needed to make America great again are gentlemen rulers who understand that hard decisions need to be made in order to reclaim the moral high ground. If this is the case, then it makes sense certain actions would need to be taken in order to strengthen the national government. Whether that means using executive orders to bypass Constitutional requirements, or invading a country known to be hostile to America and its interests and being unconcerned with the veracity of justifying intelligence, certain modern democratic ideas have to be sacrificed. Moreover, while the *No Child Left Behind Act* is surely a neoliberal policy at heart, the continuing involvement of the federal government in education, the constant push to measure all children to see who excels and who does not, and the championing of choice in opposition to the evidence of its failure could be construed as neoconservative in nature.

I realize that the above are tentative connections between the actions taken by neoconservatives and the philosophy of Strauss, and I am not making such connections just to be inflammatory. Instead, I am trying to accomplish two things. The first is to take Strauss seriously and see what he has to offer, both as a critic of modernity and liberal democracy. The second is to see whether certain actions taken by the neoconservatives in power are explainable, in part, by appealing to Strauss's philosophy. Especially in light of the fact, that so many neocons were either students of his or students of his students. I hope that what I offer above sparks discussion on both fronts.

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<sup>i</sup> Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke (2005), in their book *America Alone*, offer an excellent overview and critique of the neoconservative movement from a conservative standpoint. They discuss the influence Strauss has on past and current neoconservatives and claim that while first generation neoconservatives seem clearly influenced by his ideas (e.g. *The Closing of the American Mind* by Allan Bloom), the current generation either treats him with indifference or is wholly unfamiliar with his work.

<sup>ii</sup> Arguably, one could hold a less hierarchical concept of teaching and learning in which the student/teacher relationship is more reciprocal, less rigidly differentiated. This would be one where the teachers learn from their students and incorporate life experiences to enhance such

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learning. Under this model, the concern of an infinite regress disappears as the clear distinction between student and teacher blurs.

<sup>iii</sup> Electoral apathy is a real concern, even 38 years after the publication of Strauss's book. However, those concerned with this 'lack of public spirit' are not usually so dismissive of the masses, as Strauss seems to be. Certain people like Noam Chomsky make similar points concerning the use of mass media in order to distract the general public from issues that are more important. On the other hand, Chomsky usually places the blame squarely on the shoulders of the elites for this state of affairs, and does not argue that the masses are incapable of ruling themselves, something Strauss seems to imply throughout his discussions on modern democracy. In his defense, it is unclear whether Strauss is actually dismissing the ignorant masses or simply critiquing modern democratic politics.

<sup>iv</sup> In fact, Strauss studied the Islamic philosopher and scientist al-Farabi and the Jewish philosopher and rabbi Maimonides. However, it seems to be the case that these two were the exception to the rule.

<sup>v</sup> This book is written by two former students of Strauss. It is a sympathetic reading of Strauss, and is meant to combat much of the criticisms offered by the media and specifically Shadia Drury. It makes a strong case for reading Strauss as a postmodern thinker, in the sense of being critical of modernity and the modern condition. It also addresses the debate over whether Strauss wrote esoterically, and argues that he did not. For those interested in an introduction to Strauss, both by those who studied under Strauss and who are sympathetic to his teachings, it is a good one. For those wishing to hear both sides of the story, so to speak, it is good for that as well.

### Notes on contributor

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