

he could still remark that the Nazis did not seem “serious”¹¹ about their anti-Jewish policies, were not the Americans he addressed in his 1968 volume on liberalism; nor are the youth of today entirely like those of ‘68 (of which I myself once was one). Might his description, in 1941, of the danger at hand have been modified by a fuller awareness that the Nazis’ sole positive principle was, as Strauss later put it, “murderous hatred of the Jews”?¹² And would he give the same counsel today that he gave in 1968, when the triumph of world communism still seemed possible?

Strauss’s own restoration of classic liberal education in a modern setting partly rested on a reassertion of the intellectual plausibility of religious traditions in which, according to him, we no longer trust, or no longer trust as a matter of public belief. And yet those religious traditions were arguably made mutually compatible only on the basis of a modern transformation of religion’s own self-understanding. Indeed, the desirability of liberal-democratic constitutionalism is increasingly questioned by some religious conservatives for this very reason. Nor are contemporary progressive creeds exempt from such doubts. What are the implications of these and other changes (including the rise of postmodernism or what calls itself such) for those who wish to carry forward the task or tasks Strauss sets?

Author’s Response

Timothy W. Burns

Baylor University, Waco, Texas, USA

doi:10.1017/S0034670522000985

Let me thank the contributors for their thoughtful and kind remarks. It is heartening to have such careful readings of my book by such serious scholars of Strauss’s work.

Rodrigo Chacón argues that according to my Strauss, even the foundational tenets of our moral and legal self-understanding, such as human rights and dignity, are “part of ‘the technological project of enlightenment’”

¹¹Leo Strauss, “German Nihilism,” *Interpretation* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 368.

¹²Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 226.

This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

(101). This is only partly true: Strauss, as I point out, stresses the moral character of Hobbesian natural right, and its crucially important appeal to the commonsense moral reasoning of praise and blame. To this extent it is not scientific, and it points the way to an opening to commonsense, nonscientific moral reasoning. It is also true, as Chacón argues, that Strauss's account of the rise of our modern notion of inviolable human dignity has been explained by others as the result of secularized Christianity. But Strauss had good reason to offer his alternative to the regnant secularization thesis. Premodern Christians do not speak of sacred and inviolable human dignity. Thomas Aquinas, for example, speaks of human dignity when addressing the justice of capital punishment. By sinning a man "falls away from his human dignity" and "falls into the slavish state of beasts," ready to be killed; for it is evil to kill a man only "so long as he maintains his dignity."¹³

Chacón also notes that citizens, not political philosophers, are responsible for the changes in modern politics that have moved us in the direction of individual rights and dignity. This is an important reminder of something that I, not Strauss, may have slighted. But if, as Chacón argues, the "concrete meaning and institutional form" of the doctrine of natural rights have depended, in practice, "on social and political struggles" (102), this does not mean that they have not likewise depended on "great thinkers debating across the ages," and on the institutions that philosophers have persuaded human beings to bring into being.

I am puzzled that Chacón would conclude from my account that little is to be gained from studying Locke and Aristotle "in addressing the challenges posed by democracy, technology, and liberal education today," and that "there is virtually nothing to be learned morally and politically from engaging with the 'moderns,' say from Baruch Spinoza to Hannah Arendt to Simone de Beauvoir. We should focus instead," Chacón has me arguing, "on the exemplary lives of (for instance) Cyrus the Great and Churchill" (102). That is a telling formulation, since I never mention Cyrus the Great, and for good reason. I discuss the greatness of Churchill as something Strauss saw as evidence of human greatness in the modern world, contrasting it both with the German nihilists' despair of such greatness and with Tocqueville's admonition to give up on greatness in our democratic age. I also highlight Strauss's rather remarkable praise of Churchill's book on Marlborough, in which political prudence and high-order statesmanship are shown to be still possible in

¹³ST II-II, q. 64, art. 2 ad 3 (Leonine ed., 1897): "homo peccando ab ordine rationis . . . decedit a dignitate humana, . . . et incidit quodammodo in servitutem bestiarum. Et ideo quamvis hominem in sua dignitate manentem occidere sit secundum se malum, tamen hominem peccatorem occidere potest esse bonum, sicut occidere bestiam, peior enim est malus homo bestia, et plus nocet." See also Ernest L. Fortin, "'Sacred and Inviolable': *Rerum Novarum* and Natural Rights," *Theological Studies* 53, no. 2 (1992): 203–33.

modernity's "changed circumstances."¹⁴ I argue that admiration for Churchill is, for Strauss, no more than the starting point of liberal education (see esp. 174–75), one that offers a return from the debilitating and self-deceiving value relativism promoted by the social sciences. As such it is not presented by Strauss as a substitute for the serious study of the Great Books.

Daniel Tanguay wishes that my book had given more attention to the post-*Kehre* Heidegger, who withdrew from political life. Tanguay sees Strauss's neglect of this Heidegger as illustrative of "a central difficulty with Strauss's position on liberal education as it relates to liberal democracy" (104). He notes that the decisionism evident in the rectoral address is not present in Heidegger's later writings, which are characterized instead by a call to a preparation for Being's new disclosure, through a releasement from things. This is a fair criticism; I should have been more explicit about this. For Strauss does address the later Heidegger and his "withdrawal" (as he calls it in "Existentialism").¹⁵ But he does not consider this withdrawal from contemporary politics to constitute a decisive break with the type of philosophizing that the early Heidegger practiced. In the first place, the decisionist Rectoral Address was followed in 1935 by the publication of the equally decisionist *Introduction to Metaphysics*, which was republished in 1953—as Strauss notes in his "Existentialism" talk¹⁶ and says in his 1971 "Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy," "long after Hitler had been muted."¹⁷ More importantly, Strauss says, after summarizing the late Heidegger's call for a dialogue between Eastern and Western thinkers that would "lead to the consummation prepared, accompanied or followed by a return of the gods," that "one is inclined to say that Heidegger has learned the lesson of 1933 more thoroughly than any other man." But he adds: "Let us turn from these fantastic hopes, more to be expected from visionaries than from philosophers."¹⁸ To put this in Tanguay's words, Heidegger is still bent on "the salvation of the world from the threats of technology and a modernity that has forgotten the world" (104). The philosopher as "shepherd of Being" is still a philosopher who is attempting to "guide a political-moral transformation or revolution, by philosophic thought" (104).

¹⁴Leo Strauss, "German Nihilism," *Interpretation* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 372.

¹⁵Leo Strauss, "Existentialism," *Interpretation* 22, no. 3 (Spring 1995): 315–16.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 306.

¹⁷Leo Strauss, "Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy," *Interpretation* 2 no. 1 (1971): 30.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 33–4. See also Strauss's extended account of the "late" Heidegger's attempt to overcome technology through dialogue with the East in "Existentialism," 317–18. See also this earlier statement in "Kurt Riezler 1882–1955," *Social Research* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1956): 18: "Eventually a state was reached which the outsider is inclined to describe as paralysis of the critical faculties: philosophizing now seems to have been transformed into listening with reverence to the incipient mythoi of Heidegger.

Turn, pietate gravem ac meritis si forte virum quern
Conspexere, silent arrectisque auribus adstant."

And, tellingly, Heidegger still expects everyone to practice the thinking in which he is engaged, just as he had in *Being and Time*, where, rather astonishingly, he even claims or promises that it brings “joy” (*Freude*).¹⁹

For similar reasons I am not persuaded that Strauss and Heidegger shared what Tanguay calls a “philosophical mania, entailing the view that the highest accomplishment of human existence is to lead a philosophical life,” and that in this respect, both were Platonists, or that Heidegger’s attention to Being can be called a version of “Platonic philosophic mania” (104). For neither Plato nor his Socrates nor Strauss took for granted “that the highest accomplishment of human existence is to lead a philosophical life” (104). Heidegger did take this for granted. He also—and here I am saying things that Strauss says only indirectly—mistook the Platonic dialogues as Platonic philosophizing, rather than seeing that they are a propaedeutic to philosophizing, the means of settling the challenge posed to philosophy by the possibility of creative gods or god. This needs to be borne in mind, incidentally, when considering the meaning of Strauss’s claim that the place of political philosophy is in Heidegger’s thought taken by the gods.

Finally, the late Heidegger never took back or reconsidered his critique of what he in 1929 called Plato’s “correspondence” doctrine of Truth, a doctrine that Heidegger saw as the beginning of the oblivion of Being, or of the attempted mastery of the whole, by knowledge of what allegedly is always, and so the first major step toward the catastrophic technological thinking that he traces through Aquinas, Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche. Heidegger never reconsidered the Platonic dialogues in the light of Strauss’s rediscovery of their dialectical character, of their dramatic and ironic character, as Strauss lays out in the Plato chapter of *The City and Man*.²⁰ Heidegger equates Plato with the Platonic character “Socrates,” as one who, optimistically, exercised thinking under the protected belief in a demiurge, with the intention of reforming Greek civilization. Strauss, by contrast, sees Plato as one who, radically aware of the problematic status of the claims of science concerning causality, is preparing through the dialogues a very few youth for the path to the philosophic/scientific life, even as he is protecting philosophy from citizens and citizens from philosophy.

Similarly, I think Strauss is right not to see, as Tanguay does, either the early or late Heidegger, “with his idea of the elusive character of Being,” as “not so

¹⁹“Together with the sober Angst that brings us before our individualized potentiality-of-being, goes the unshakable joy in this possibility.” Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 286; *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1967), 310.

²⁰See also Leo Strauss, “The Problem of Socrates,” *Interpretation* 22, no. 3 (Spring 1995): 324: “I remember only one statement of Heidegger’s on Socrates: he calls him the purest of [all] Western thinkers, while making it clear that ‘purest’ is something very different from ‘greatest.’ Is he insufficiently aware of the Odysseus in Socrates? [Perhaps.]” See also 333 (on Odysseus and his two types of speech).

far away from" the ancient wisdom, a wisdom that entails "a resignation accompanied by the recognition of the relative insignificance of human action and production" (105). Heidegger's effort aims to enhance the status of Man and his world, rather than offer a serene recognition of man's relative insignificance.

This brings me to Tanguay's final claim, concerning the dual nature of liberal education as Strauss understands it, as involving a paradox: either liberal education "intended for the training of a political elite preserves it from philosophical mania and thus fails in its highest goal," or it "prepares the advent of the philosopher at the risk of ruining the possibility of forming a decent political elite" (105). Tanguay goes quite far in his concluding remarks on this paradox, stating that Strauss has, by his insistence on including in liberal education the late modern critics of the authoritative traditions that once guided liberal education, such as Nietzsche, contributed to the crisis of which Strauss writes. I think this charge is mistaken. The nihilism that affects modern life came before the Nietzschean proclamation of God's death; nihilism was not the result of it. It was and is the result, rather, of commerce and technology, of their demystifying and disenchanting transformation of the given world, and of the new science's value relativism, which Nietzsche's doctrine of the Will to Power and Heideggerian decisionism (or distinction between authentic and inauthentic choices) aimed to overcome.²¹ As Strauss (quoting Jünger) puts it in "German Nihilism," the German youth of whom he speaks were the "the sons and grandsons and great-grandsons of godless men."²² "What Is Liberal Education?" attributes the loss of all authoritative traditions to the fact that "our immediate teachers and teachers' teachers believed in the possibility of a simply rational society."²³

Susan Shell wonders whether a liberal education that aims at a subpolitical aristocracy within liberal democracy can remain subpolitical. I see nothing in principle to prevent this, just as there was nothing to prevent the industrial Protestant elite from once setting the tone subpolitically. Shell further argues that a recovery of ancient science would be needed for this to come about. Perhaps. In any case, that recovery has been begun in earnest with the work of Christopher Bruell, David Bolotin, Thomas Pangle, and others. It will doubtless take some time before its results find the wide audience they deserve, and will entail a thoroughgoing reconsideration of the history of science and philosophy. What its political effects will be, given the vast gulf separating genuine philosophizing from political life, is impossible to say.

²¹See, e.g., *Natural Right and History*, 5–6.

²²Strauss, "German Nihilism," 360.

²³Leo Strauss, "What Is Liberal Education?," in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 8.

Shell also wonders if the emphasis I give to Strauss's statements on painful dialectical purification of erotic longing is not shortchanging his presentation of the pleasure or joy of philosophizing. She asks whether philosophy is "only a 'response' to one's 'unplanned encounter' with one's own mortality" and wonders: "Must there not also be some positive delight in knowing, of which the soul's 'eros' is also a metaphorical expression?" (108). She points to a passage that I quote (on 47) from the *City and Man*, in which Strauss describes the philosophers as "being dominated by the desire, the eros, for knowledge as the one thing needful, or knowing that philosophy is the most pleasant and blessed possession," and hence as having "no leisure for looking down at human affairs." "They believe," Strauss continues, "that while still alive they are already firmly settled far away from their cities in the 'Islands of the Blessed.'" ²⁴ While Shell's points are important, they do not fully represent my argument. I do not mean to argue that for Strauss, philosophy is simply a response to the painful awareness of one's mortality. I argue that for Strauss, philosophy is a life led in search of understanding causes. It requires, certainly, an acceptance of one's mortality, gained through dialectics.

But, Shell points out, Strauss speaks here at least "metaphorically" of philosophic "eros." But Strauss rarely uses this term, and when he does, he always qualifies it, so that the reader might see his loose or somewhat humorous usage. Here, the philosophers are, tellingly, said to "believe," and the mentioned Isles of the Blessed are of course a land of immortals, but mortality is precisely what Strauss says is the subject of resignation. Elsewhere he stresses the painful character of the ascent out of the cave—for example, in his 1929–32 talks on the Religious and Intellectual Situation of the Present ²⁵—as indeed does Plato's Socrates in the allegory of the cave. The philosophic life itself is not the ascent; it is instead lived outside the cave; it is the life of science. That it begins in wonder, as Shell justly quotes Aristotle as saying, does not mean that it is nothing but untutored wonder.

I do not find that Strauss's emphasis in "German Nihilism" on the German youth's longing for "sacrifice" was exaggerated or intended to "hearten" his American audience "for the likely military challenges ahead" (108). Over and against Hermann Raushning's claim that the German youth are amoral, Strauss's goal was to describe what he understood to be that youth's deep

²⁴Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 123–24.

²⁵English translations by Anna Schmidt and Martin D. Yaffe of these three talks appear in *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s*, ed. Martin D. Yaffe and Richard S. Ruderman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), as Appendix A, "Leo Strauss: 'Conspicuousness' (1929)" (217–24); Appendix B, "Leo Strauss: 'Religious Situation of the Present' (1930)" (225–35); and Appendix C, "Leo Strauss: 'The Intellectual Situation of the Present' (1932)" (237–53). See also my "Strauss on the Religious and Intellectual Situation of the Present," in the same volume, 79–113.

concern to rescue the moral life endangered by modern rationalism. He does not suggest that American youth need heartening—and telling his audience that the German youth are indeed longing to sacrifice themselves in acts of courage would not seem to be an effective way of heartening them. As to the question of Strauss's changed assessment of the Nazis from 1941 to 1968 and how it might have modified his characterization of "the danger at hand," this tends to conflate what Strauss distinguishes—Nazism with the nihilism of the German youth and their teachers. For Strauss "the defeat of National Socialism will not necessarily mean the end of German nihilism. For that nihilism has deeper roots than the preachings of Hitler, Germany's defeat in the World War and all that."²⁶ He aims to understand "the singular success, not of Hitler, but of those writers" who "knowingly or ignorantly paved the way for Hitler (Spengler, Moeller van den Bruck, Carl Schmitt, Ernst Junger, Heidegger)"; the nihilistic youth would have said: "The Nazis? Hitler? The less is said about him, the better."²⁷

Finally, on the broad question that Shell raises of the implications of contemporary political, religious, and intellectual trends, including postmodernism, on the "task or tasks Strauss sets" for us (109), it seems to me that Strauss anticipates these very trends, which he sometimes calls "ultra-modern." He recognized early what became clear to others only later—that Heidegger's thought would exercise extraordinary influence over the West and whatever parts of the globe succumbed to modern rationalism. The pedigree of most of the trends to which Shell points can be traced to Heidegger and/or the concern with technological rationalism with which he wrestled. Strauss's work presents—and will, I think, increasingly come to be seen to present—a thoroughgoing alternative to Heidegger and to the antirationalism to which he leads.

²⁶Strauss, "German Nihilism," 357.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 362, 363.