testified to the need for a contemporary defense of the tradition to fully and dialectically integrate the most radical critiques of this tradition. Since the traditions of classical liberal education have lost their obviousness, such an education cannot do without an examination of its most radical critics: Friedrich Nietzsche, Heidegger, even Jacques Derrida. As Burns's book shows, reading Strauss always leads one to consider these criticisms seriously and to try to respond to them, but it is not clear that the philosophers of the future will be entirely satisfied with the answers and the political moderation preached by Strauss. Contemporary liberal education must integrate the tradition of the critique of that education, but it is not clear that it will be able to control the effects of that integration. Strauss himself, in his noble effort to provide a vaccine against "German Nihilism," has in some ways contributed to spreading the virus.

Commentary

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Burns's book offers the most lucid and accessible account I know of a thinker who continues, fifty years after his death, to provoke intense intellectual and political controversy. It forms a most welcome and eloquent addition to a number of recent defenses of liberal education in the classic sense. At the same time it offers a learned and unusually searching analysis of Strauss's claim to be a friend but not a flatterer of liberalism.

Burns's point of entry is both political and striking, as he claims that "the modest political recommendation that Strauss offers for our time, a time dominated by the technology of modern science, is faithful adherence to a liberal democratic constitutionalism whose tone and direction may be provided by a sub-political 'aristocracy within democracy,' one whose thinking is informed by both serious religious education in one's ancestral traditions and a study of the Great Books" (15). One might wonder in what sense such a goal, which seems, at least at first, to challenge the basic principle of our regime—namely, the natural equality and liberty of all—can rightly be called modest. The answer would seem partly to lie in the term "subpolitical." The aristocratic corrective that Burns's Strauss has in mind takes advantage of modern liberalism's own distinction between the public and the private and will be conducted privately. My first question is how, and to what extent, an education that means to set "the tone and direction" of a

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constitutionalism that is "liberal democratic" can or should remain "subpolitical," that is, avoid entering the fray of politics.

Burns takes up four writings that address the meaning of that subpolitical corrective: the first three chapters of *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, plus "German Nihilism," the (unpublished) text and notes for a lecture that Strauss delivered to the General Seminar at the New School for Social Research in February 1941. Burns thus begins *in media res*, in precisely that realm of action, or the "human situation" of "acting man" (4), as Strauss puts it in the 1954 Walgreen Lectures[10] that formed the basis of *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. But what seems to be authoritative to members of contemporary mass democracy in 1954 and even 1968 is technological science, whose sway makes doubtful the "serious religious education in one's ancestral traditions" for which Strauss, on Burns's reading, calls (15).

Hence if liberal education is to again become possible, the sway of modern science must be countered at least to the extent of making plausible religious traditions in which, according to Strauss, we no longer trust, or no longer trust as a matter of broadly shared public belief. The first task of such a corrective is thus, on Burns's distinctive account, to make doubtful the theoretical legitimacy of the victory of modern science, and the philosophic insights and/or errors on which it is predicated, over the biblical tradition that it claimed to vanquish. For that victory succeeded, Strauss suggests, not through a genuine refutation, but through a practically induced oblivion of the human situation as it is naturally, that is, pretheoretically, encountered. That natural horizon has two dimensions: the earth below and the heavenly vault above; earth signals human mortality and the vault above our awareness, however indistinct, of some sort of unchanging order to which we look up.

If we are naturally born into a way of life which establishes an authoritative rule or ordering principle for human conduct, we are confronted in an "unplanned" way (100), as Burns puts it, with the terrifying fact of our (or rather "my") own death. This leads me to a second question: whether the overriding emphasis Burns seems to place on that encounter is fully justified. Terror in the face of one's mortality can be dissolved, if I understand Burns's argument, in one of two more or less healthy ways: first, through hope of immortality, supported by our moral attachment to the authoritative norms into which we are born—e.g., and especially, by making ourselves worthy of immortality through our sacrifice of personal pleasure for the sake of those norms. This is the more or less stable natural or traditional solution to the inherent tension between what is good for me and what is good for my community, the tension between man and citizen. The second remedy for the terrors

[10]Published as "The 'Modern Principle'": The Second Walgreen Lectures by Leo Strauss (1954)," ed. Anthony Vecchio and J. A. Colen, *Interpretation* 47, no. 1 (Fall 2020): 43–117.

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of death is philosophic resignation, based on an acceptance of death's necessity if the genuine goods of human life are to be possible, or on "probity" (*Redlichkeit*) in an ancient rather than Nietzschean sense, which remains in thrall to an unfounded hope based on a moral economy of sacrifice.

I am extremely grateful to Burns for bringing out with such vigor and clarity the character of these two responses: one basically philosophical, one fundamentally religious—along with what they share in contrast to the dishonest or unearned oblivion of death on which modernity, according to his account of Strauss, is predicated, and from which even Nietzsche and Heidegger did not fully extricate themselves. Burns's analysis of Strauss's eulogy for Jason Aaronson is particularly remarkable, as is his account of Strauss's spontaneous (as I gather) classroom eulogy for Winston Churchill. But it does reinforce my second question concerning the centrality for Strauss of the encounter with one's own death, especially for motivating philosophy. For one could begin to suspect on that account that political philosophy (if this indeed means learning how to die through a dialectical encounter with the authoritative norms of one's own tradition) is philosophy as such rather than a mere preparation. One might begin to suspect that the only natural necessity that is genuinely knowable is the dependence of a fully human, that is, happy life, on resignation to one's own mortality. This strikes me as a somewhat truncated view of the full scope of philosophy (or what has been called such) and what it seeks. For does not Aristotle himself say that philosophy begins in wonder?

This then is the nub of my second question: namely, whether terror with respect to my own death is indeed the prime mover of the soul, as might seem to be the case based on some of Burns's remarks, as in the following passage:

> *religious experience and philosophy are responses, albeit radically different ones, to the unplanned human encounter with mortality*. . . . It is through *the painful, dialectical purification* of this yearning and the thoughts to which it gives rise, a yearning which in the classical political philosophers is called "erotic," that philosophers secure the serene if sad resignation to necessity that, according to Strauss, marks the philosophic-scientific disposition or attitude. (100, emphasis added)

But is philosophy only a "response" to one's "unplanned encounter" with one's own mortality? Must there not also be some positive delight in knowing, of which the soul's "eros" is also a metaphorical expression (cf. p. 47)?

Let me offer an alternative suggestion. Strauss may have had rhetorical reasons in 1941 for stressing and perhaps even exaggerating the appeal of sacrifice, not only to explain the young Germans to his immediate American audience but also to hearten them for the likely military challenges ahead. This brings me to a third question: namely, the current relevance of Strauss's lecture on German nihilism, or his 1968 book on liberal education. For the young Germans of which he spoke in early 1941, at a time in which

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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

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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'"

[11]Leo Strauss, "German Nihilism," *Interpretation* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 368.
[12]Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 226.

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