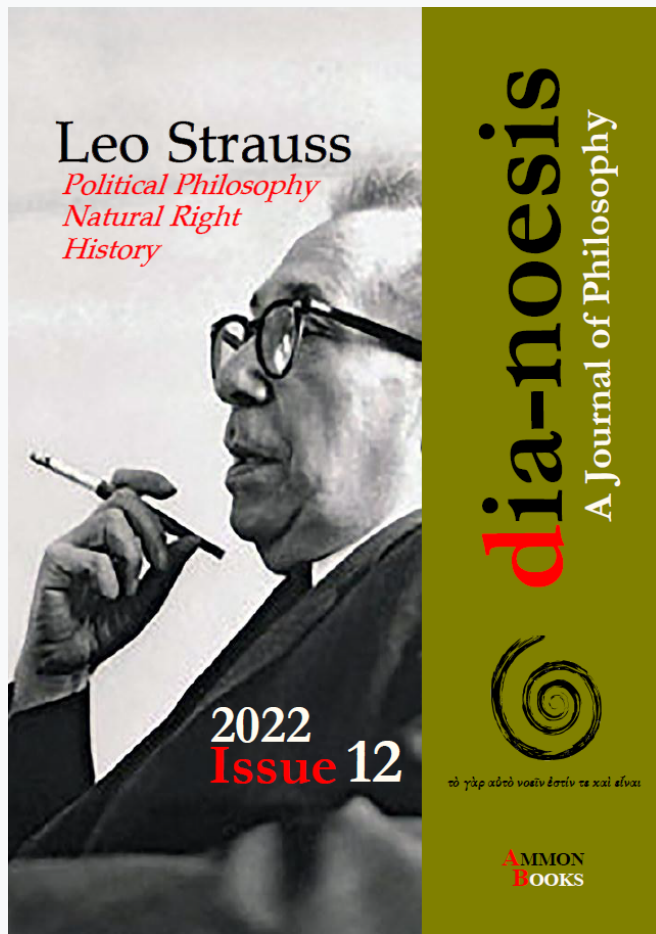


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### The logical status of history and the paradoxes of historicism

*Kyriakos Demetriou*

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## The logical status of history and the paradoxes of historicism

**Kyriakos Demetriou,**  
*Professor, University of Cyprus*  
k.demetriou@ucy.ac.cy

**Abstract:** Much of the philosophical project of Leo Strauss involved an attempt to restore pre-modern philosophy, yet the impetus for the reconsideration of the interpretative textual methodologies was undeniably of a modern complexion. Strauss not only took historicism as a threat to philosophy, as it replaced philosophic questions with historical questions, but also as a source for the intellectual crisis of the West. Over and above 20<sup>th</sup>-century political crisis there was an intellectual crisis, not unrelated to the belief in the mutability of values, in moral relativism resulting in a kind of nihilism. In a nutshell, historicism, in assuming that all human thought is historical, rejected the idea of philosophy as the attempt to grasp fundamental problems coeval with human thought – a rejection that ultimately amounts to a full critique of human thought as such. In his massive work, in both his historical and his strictly philosophical writings, Strauss pursued the restoration of political philosophy as a meaningful and urgent enterprise.

**Keywords:** Historicism, Contextualism, Decontextualism, Relativism, Critique of Historicism, moral universalism, political philosophy

### Modernity's flight from scientific reason

Strauss' argued that the Western world was facing an intellectual crisis essentially connected with moral relativist theories brought about through social science positivism in the universities and historicism or the historical approach in philosophy. The political crises of the twentieth century culminating in Nazism and the Holocaust, Soviet totalitarianism, the Cold War, the threat of nuclear annihilation, were paralleled by a perceived crisis in philosophy. Crisis in the political can be seen as a profound intellectual crisis, reflected in (a) the positivist claim that the only knowledge achievable is scientific knowledge and that there is a fundamental difference between facts and values – only factual judgments are within the sphere of rational inquiry. Positivists in effect announced the death of political philosophy “for political philosophy is the attempt truly to know both the nature of political things and the right, or the good, political order”; In rendering political philosophy incredible, Positivism represented a political threat, in that it undermined the confidence of the West in itself and ignited a fatal flight from rationalism; and (b) in historicist rejection of the possibility of political philosophy, “because of the essentially historical character of society and of human thought”.<sup>1</sup> So, to the extent everything originates from historical exigencies, constraints and accidentalities, historicism like positivism lead to a kind of relativism. There can be no knowledge of a truly good society, or of right and wrong in ethics and politics (the so-called value relativism). It was largely a mental and spiritual crisis as it was a crisis of the Western world. The supreme goal of scholarship is the pursuit of truth, but modern scholarship has been submerged in a project of unveiling social causes the goodness of which it confessedly cannot judge. This intellectual crisis mirrored by political nihilism undermined faith in humanity and endangered humanity's own survival in the long run. Today,

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<sup>1</sup> Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*, Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1959, pp. 6 and 23.

in the aftermath of Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine, where the dark face of militarist totalitarianism unveils, spreading darkness and the fear of a totally disastrous nuclear war, Strauss' recovery of the potential of political philosophy, his political epistemology, along with his political studies and commentaries, are just as relevant as they were in his times.

Historicism, shifting from hermeneutic and deductive interpretative schemes, claims that any given political thought is historically constituted, i.e., intensely particularized and fragmented responses shaped by problems that have been posed for theoretical inspection during a certain era. The historian of ideas must be ready to acknowledge that historical-social-empirical contexts are isolated compartments, encapsulated in historical episodes, and by now evaporated into thin dust. Thus, the historian of ideas in the age of modernity is effectively an antiquarian, an archaeologist of unit ideas, confronted with an indefinite variety of relativist notions of right or justice rather than universal standards. There are no recurrent questions and issues presented to a theorist, no perennial, transtemporal, timeless philosophical or moral questions to be investigated, because the political assumptions, e.g., which unite Marsiglio and Bodin are totally different from Rousseau who was writing in the context of the rise of modern national states. Historical *development*, or the idea of progress, defined the limits of a historian's perspective in encountering the past. Historicism, in its more extreme version, of the kind Quentin Skinner originally deployed, even denies microscopic "continuities", in the form of the residue of the past in the present.<sup>2</sup> There is no self-illuminating text, i.e. detached from the social, economic, linguistic, and political conditions and conventions out of which it evolved. As a result, the history of political theory must be written essentially as a history of ideologies – "ideology" being the primary object of study for the historian of political thought. Under this ultra-reductionist light, it is the context of a text that determines its meaning, the

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<sup>2</sup> See Wood Neal, "The Social History of Political Theory", *Political Theory*, 6, 1978, pp. 345-67.; Cary J. Nederman, Quentin Skinner's State: Historical Method and Traditions of Discourse, *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 18, 1985, pp. 339-52.

conditions that supposedly brought the text into being. What a historian of political ideas can attain, is, at best, primarily an understanding of the historicized-contextualised meaning of a given text, nothing more, nothing less. And that's the highest purpose a theorist can credibly accomplish: to grasp the allegedly embodied meaning in a given text, reducible to its immediate determinative or originative circumstances, never wavering as to the causal connection between ideas and contexts. Such a purpose can be achieved only by reconstructing contexts rather than assume any constancy or continuity between past and contemporary ideas and ways of thinking.

A theoretical rationale for the “rapprochement between philosophy and history” –reinforcing the historicist apparatus that immediately preceded Strauss, albeit oscillating between early idealism and the paradoxes raised by Michael Oakeshott (1901-1990) in his *Experience and Its Modes* (1933) –, is provided by Robin Collingwood (1889-1943), who in his *Autobiography* rigorously denied the “permanence of philosophical problems”. Collingwood encountered the hurdles of Oakeshott's sweeping analysis of history as a way or ‘mode’ of seizing experience. History, said Oakeshott, as a mode of understanding is defective; is neither the beginning nor the end of knowledge because any assumptions are epistemologically revealed to be arbitrary and conditional. Oakeshott denied the credibility of any method designed to facilitate the recovery of the *intentions* of past authors – temporal discontinuity imposes unsurpassed cognitive obstacles. The historian just infers events and circumstances derived from individual present awareness and from present evidence of a past which no longer exists, out of one's immediate experience. Oakeshott proclaimed that the historical past is dead, not “living in the present”, and that any attempt to revive it would be not history but “a piece of obscene necromancy”.<sup>3</sup> For Collingwood, however, history is “a living

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<sup>3</sup> Oakeshott Michael, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, London: Methuen, 1962, p. 166. *Experience and its Modes*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933, 102. See also, *Lectures in the History of Political Thought*, ed. Nardin Terry, and O'Sullivan Luke, Exeter, 2006.

past, a past which, because it was thought and not mere natural event, can be re-enacted in the present and in that re-enactment known as past”.<sup>4</sup> In effect, what Collingwood asked is: how is it possible to understand the thoughts of any historical actor, thinker or agent, who lived in a distant past? Collingwood indeed never achieved a coherent synthesis as to the question of the logical status of history (as his thought alternates between the identity and the distinctiveness of historical and philosophical thinking), yet his account of re-enactment paved the way for the radical conversion of the historicist approach subsequently developed by the Cambridge School led by Quentin Skinner, John Dunn, Keith Thomas, and John Pocock amongst others, who took inspiration from a prior generation of Cambridge historians, such as Herbert Butterfield and Peter Laslett. History proper, is the history of mind as distinguished from ‘natural history’ and the subject-matter of history is understood as a science of the mind, i.e., its subject matter is actions understood as doings of human beings in so far as they are rational (embedded in rational thinking). Hence, all history is the history of thought. An action’s meaning is to be discovered in a re-enactable syllogism, and through it we may reach a point where the meaning of a text is not different for each generation of interpreters because we are able to see the world entirely from a past philosopher’s point of view. Intergenerational consensus about ‘the meaning’ requires that we temporarily suspend our own epistemic and motivational premises to fully understand the inferential processes that guide thinkers with radically different mindsets and beliefs. Historians require active critical thinking, and that means “re-thinking past thoughts” by means of a “re-enactment in the historian’s own mind” or “the re-enactment of past reflective thought”, and that in turn requires an active and autonomous historical imagination based on scrutiny of source-evidence.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Collingwood, R. G., *The Idea of History*, Oxford University Press [1946], 1994, 158.

<sup>5</sup> Strauss, “On Collingwood’s Philosophy of History”, *The Review of Metaphysics*, 4, 1952, pp. 559-586.

## Encountering historicism

In the early 1950s Strauss tried to expose the logical weaknesses of historicism, which he understood as an existential threat to liberal democracy and a potentially massive disruption of human civilization. Over a span of several decades Strauss demonstrated in huge works the vigour of an interpretative approach that sought to revitalize, if not to regenerate, political philosophy. Space limitations granted, what follows is just a synopsis of his major arguments that exposed the logical, ontological, and broadly theoretical weaknesses of historicism.

First and foremost, Strauss argued that political philosophy is not a historical discipline. A sense of history is not an integral part of philosophy itself. Philosophical questions vis-à-vis historical ones are fundamentally different, because the latter always concern individuals, i.e., distinct groups, persons, achievements, or even single civilizations. Consequently, “political philosophy is fundamentally different from the history of political philosophy itself”. Past thought is somehow always present, and therefore the “questions raised by the political philosophers of the past are alive in our own society”.<sup>6</sup> What is the usefulness of studying history then? A history of philosophy is useful only in that it may make one familiar with the way in which certain philosophical views have come to be developed and formed. Yet there always remained the distinction between how those views evolved and whether they could prove *valid*. Historical knowledge is at best only auxiliary and preliminary to political philosophy and by no means an integral part of it. It is exactly value relativism, which Strauss identified as the intellectual crisis of the time, that led to the “crisis of political philosophy” – the loss of continuation of the tradition of classical political philosophy, the loss of the meaning of studying the ancients who represented the quest for universally valid standards. In this way, Strauss’ legacy

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<sup>6</sup> “Political Philosophy and History”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 10, 1949, pp. 30-50, at p. 213 and 215, reprinted in King Preston, ed., *The History of Ideas*, London: Croom Helm, 1983, pp. 213-232. All references are to this book.

consists of reopening the fundamental questions of political philosophy. In other words, Strauss believed that there are historical problems and philosophical truths which are transhistorical, enduring and fundamental. His exercise in the history of ideas involved understanding the past, but his ultimate goal was to attain a genuine philosophical understanding per se, independent of historical accident and not subject to change.

Thus Strauss sets out to confront the relativistic outlook in the history of philosophy, and in doing so he provides an assault upon the crucial logical weaknesses of historicism. His major counterarguments or critique against historicism are already present in both his early “Political Philosophy and History” (1949) and in the first chapter of *Natural Right and History* (1953).

(a) In the pyramid of the paradoxes of historicism (came to be known as contextualism) lies a fundamental incoherence for if historicism is projected as a method or an interpretational principle or a doctrine it should necessarily be self-tested. To wit, if historicism could be legitimately elevated to the status of the true or appropriate method of reading and interpreting past ideas (i.e., to a methodological universal), then, to be consistent with itself, it should apply the same principle to itself, to its major conceptual and epistemological components. In this way, it logically follows that radical historicism is fundamentally a product of its own context and if projected as a universal interpretative method must yield an intrinsic incoherence. Historicism is “true” in its own context and that implies that it cannot always be truly true.

“Historicism is not a cab which one can stop at his convenience: historicism must be applied to itself. It will thus reveal itself as relative to modern man; and this will imply that it will be replaced, in due time, by a position which is no longer historicist. Some historicists would consider such a development a manifest decline. But in so doing they would ascribe to the historical situation favourable to historicism an



absoluteness which, as a matter of principle, they refuse to ascribe to any historical situation.”<sup>7</sup>

(b) The “historicist thesis is self-contradictory or absurd”, since one cannot assert “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”. To put it simply, any historicist claim involves history and any attempt to understand past history is by implication trans-historical. Temporality does not exist in a historical vacuum; the concept itself presupposes transtemporality – they are almost causally related; individualized segmentation of the temporal is logically impossible. Further, if all human thought is radically historical, then historicism itself is a historical human thought and as such is destined to be of only temporary validity; it does not convey the weight of “a truth valid for all thought”. It would be a paradox if historicism “exempts itself from its own verdict about [the finality of] all human thought”: that is, as a historical product ‘thought’ is destined to perish along with the conditions that nourished it. Thus, the historicist thesis essentially “means to doubt it and thus to transcend it”.<sup>8</sup> But in this case the historicist claim is apparently self-defeating and cannot stand any logical critique.

(c) Historicists claim that non-historical political philosophy is merely a chimera since all political philosophers who have attempted to answer the question of the best political order ended up with a disarray of systems, a huge variety of “philosophies”. Therefore, non-historical or a-historical political philosophy cannot stand the test in as much as there are many irreconcilable political philosophies that refute each other. Strauss, however, dismissed the idea that political philosophies of the past refute each other; one can argue that they *contradict* each other, which raises the question as to which of given contradictory theses concerning political fundamentals is *true*. Far from disproving the validity of universal and transtemporal principles, historicists’ argument

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<sup>7</sup> “Political Philosophy and History”, p. 227.

<sup>8</sup> Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, The University of Chicago Press, 1953, p. 25, emphasis added.

concerning the plurality and “anarchy of systems” simply shows that non-historical political philosophy has hitherto failed, it proves our ignorance concerning the fundamentals of philosophy – of which ignorance we are aware without any historicist instruments – and accordingly demonstrates the necessity of philosophy. In his *Natural Right and History*, Strauss similarly points out that the existence of different notions of justice at different times was not a modern discovery. This knowledge was very well known and accepted among ancient philosophers. If the moderns have discovered an even greater number of notions of justice or natural right simply strengthens the contention that behind the realization of the variety of notions of justice or right lies *the eternal non-historical incentive* for the quest for natural right.

(d) Further, related to the above, is the epitome of the historicist argument, namely that the plurality of previous political philosophies incontestably shows that each political philosophy is inextricably bound to (and contingent upon) the historical situation in which it had emerged. The variety of political philosophies is above all a function of the variety of historical factors. For example, Plato’s political philosophy historicists claim, is essentially related to the Greek polis as John Locke’s is related to the Glorious Revolution, thus the two philosophies are not only irreconcilable but also invalid beyond their historical boundaries, worthless if disjointed by the historical situations in which they were developed. However, the ‘historically-conditioned’ political philosophies, Strauss asserted, is a mere illusion and has a much-limited bearing than assumed. Historicists, in their obsession with contextualizing texts and thus treating ideas solely as a meaningful embodiment of immediate circumstances, have overlooked according to Strauss the ability of the human mind to deliberately adapt itself to existing prejudices, aiming to institutionalize or materialise what was considered desirable or feasible under specific circumstances. Thinkers’ premeditated adaptations, intelligibly communicated to the many on the basis of generally received opinions, could be called “civil” and not purely “philosophical”. Past philosophers did not limit themselves to expounding what they considered *the* political

truth. At certain times, despite their unceasing effort to discover the truth (which is exactly what classical philosophers did), prompted by a sense of social responsibility, they understood that to replace opinion with knowledge could have endangered the existence of political communities, because such communities largely rest on opinion. If one wants to fully understand past philosophers one should try to uncover aspects of their esoteric writings – a practice followed by many because, first they wanted to assist their gifted readers with hints that would allow them to discover the truth for themselves and secondly, because philosophers in illiberal societies constantly feared persecution.<sup>9</sup> That means, Strauss suggested, they have developed techniques to convey their true ideas only to the few who could decipher them, while conveying other, more conventional thoughts that would be beneficial to the many. In challenging historicism Strauss unleashed esotericism as a proof that great minds can liberate themselves from the specific opinions which rule their particular society; as a metaphor, philosophy amounts to ascending from the Platonic cave or world of arbitrary conventions to the light of truth and knowledge (convention vs nature).

(e) Theoretically historicism results in a paradox, to the effect that if each doctrine is linked to a particular historical setting, then no doctrine can simply be true. In this way political philosophy becomes obsolete and lifeless, an intellectual experiment for academic recreation, because the historical conditions that fostered certain propositions or doctrines have ceased to exist. This argument amounts to the de-politicization of political philosophy, which claims that “every political situation contains elements which are essential to all political situations: how else could one intelligibly call all these different political situations ‘political situations?’”<sup>10</sup> If we consider classical political philosophy, which is firmly associated by historicists with the city, now superseded by the modern state, we cannot fail to observe that classical

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<sup>9</sup> In Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, The University of Chicago Press, 1952.

<sup>10</sup> “Political Philosophy and History”, p. 220.

philosophers were aware of other forms of political association (the tribe and the Eastern monarchy); if we dig further into the depths of classical philosophy, we should realize that classical political thinkers consciously preferred the polis to other forms of political association in the light of the standards of freedom and civilization. And their preferences were not associated with the exigencies of historical experience. Up to the eighteenth century outstanding political philosophers, like Rousseau, preferred the city to the modern state on the grounds of its merits judged by the standards of freedom and civilization. And to the extent nineteenth-century philosophers favoured the modern nation-state, it was simply because they could plausibly claim that this form of political association provided effective protection of freedom and civilization. In other words, the genesis of an idea may defy the immediate context of time and space.

(f) What blurred the vision of historicists was the cynical idea of progress, the conviction of the moderns' superiority to all earlier ages, and the expectation that the future is moving directly into the paths of further progress. Apart from being a misconception, belief in linear progress raises an insurmountable intellectual barrier to genuinely being engaged in studying the past, that is, "if we know beforehand that the present is in the most important respect superior to the past".<sup>11</sup> Historicists, as antiquarians, feel no need to explore the past in itself, because they understood it only as a preparation for the present.

"In studying a doctrine of the past, they did not ask primarily, what was the conscious and deliberate intention of its originator? They preferred to ask, what is the contribution of the doctrine to our beliefs? What is the meaning, unknown to the originator, of the doctrine from the point of view of the present? What is its meaning in the light of later discoveries or inventions? They took it for granted then that is possible and even necessary to understand the thinkers of the past better than those thinkers understood themselves."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "Political Philosophy and History", p. 222.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

But this is a fantasy and an invention, driven by an imaginary sense of objectivity. Read the exegetical models: you will be astounded by the large variety of interpretations of a doctrine of the past, some of them solidly grounded on firm theoretical premises and foundations. All these interpretations were largely motivated by the conscious or unconscious effort to understand an author better than he understood himself. They are united under a common enterprise, and yet there is a fact one cannot easily question: that the originator of a doctrine understood it *in one way only* and therefore *there is only one way* of understanding him as he understood himself.

(g) There is an intrinsic contradiction between the claims of historicism and the actuality of the whole of past thought which was radically ‘unhistorical’. Strauss means that by historicizing thought by means of contextual determinism, historicists contradict the non-historical nature of the philosophy of the past. This is the (ironic) paradox of historicist contextualism. On the one hand, historicists claim that intellectual historians should try to establish the authorial intent of a text by contextualizing it within the specific circumstances that generated it; on the other hand, we discover that in comparison past philosophers tried to transcend the immediate context of their eras (or never thought their ideas had validity only within the boundaries of the historical situation in which they found themselves writing). Past thinkers’ intentions would never coincide with the principles of contextualism – how then we could seriously believe that we can ascertain their true intentions and purposes by relating their thoughts to contexts? The outcome is disheartening because it is essentially contradictory. The philosophers of the past claimed to have found universal truths unrelated to historical exigencies. But the historicist clearly denies that possibility and thus his/her project revolving around the historicity of philosophy actually destroys the possibility of any adequate understanding of the philosophies of the past. Thus, by its very principles, historicism is constitutionally unable to grasp historical exactness, if for example an intellectual historian who could label himself a contextualist wants to seriously understand the thought of a political thinker

precisely as a certain thinker understood it. That's merely a logical impossibility.

(h) Historicism, in the interest of promoting the scientific character of empirical knowledge, insisted that the only solid knowledge of human beings qua human beings, of what is genuinely human, should be derived from history as a study of reality divorced from any abstract or metaphysical assumptions. Thus universal principles were dismissed and replaced by the belief that historical studies would reveal concrete norms and standards. But standards or norms revealed by historical studies cannot held unless authoritative; and here lies the futility of the historicist enterprise: particular or historical standards can become authoritative (and thus useful to a particular society) only on the basis of a universal principle which ordains that we are committed or somehow obliged to embrace the standards suggested by tradition.<sup>13</sup> But that obligation becomes meaningless once an individual realizes that all standards suggested by history (as historicism claims) are fundamentally ambiguous, subjective, and variable and thus unfit to be considered 'truly standards'. To a certain degree, historicism culminates in nihilism, as it defies the possibility of an objective distinction between good and bad choices and permanent and universal values against contingent and unique to unmitigated chance.

### **The Revival of political philosophy and its meaning today**

In insisting that "political philosophy is not a historical discipline" and deploring modern historicist epistemology on the grounds that it undermined our appreciation of the "nature of political issues", Leo Strauss revitalized the potential of political philosophy against the currents of both positivism and regnant historicism.<sup>14</sup> Once scorned and bitterly criticized (as

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<sup>13</sup> *Natural Right and History*, pp. 17-8.

<sup>14</sup> Strauss, "Political Philosophy and History", in *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Chicago, 1959), 56-77, at p. 56-7. On his legacy, see Behnegar Nasser, "The Intellectual Legacy of Leo Strauss (1899-

an illiberal, neo-conservative, Zionist, occultist, even an elitist partisan),<sup>15</sup> Strauss appears to be the forerunner of twenty-first-century revival of “grand narratives” in the history of thought, either in the form of David Armitage’s “serial contextualism” project, or in even much deeper transhistorical theoretical challenges.<sup>16</sup> Any viable philosophical investigation should start from classical thought,<sup>17</sup> which was superior to modern political scientific thought (succumbed to empirical description, explanation, and prediction), not merely because the ancients could have provided better answers but because they were guided by better questions. “What is the best political order?” But any axiological question such as “what is good?” is one modern historicism cannot ask. Historicism, by subordinating all questions to immanent self-referential social and political actualities, subjectivizing and relativizing all ethical problems within ever-changing socio-political material

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1973”, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1, 1998, pp. 95-116; Burns Tony, Connelly James, eds., *The Legacy of Leo Strauss*, Imprint Academic, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Such unrelentless animus against Strauss is pervasive in accounts like Ryn Claes G., “Leo Strauss and History: The Philosopher as Conspirator”, *Humanitas*, 18, 2005, pp. 31-58. In certain academic circles in the US “Straussian” still conveys something of sinister character. See also Matthews Fred, “The Attach in ‘Historicism’: Allan Bloom’s Indictment of Contemporary American Historical Scholarship”, *The American Historical Review*, 95, 1990, pp. 429-447.

<sup>16</sup> Armitage David, “What’s the Big Idea? Intellectual History and Longue Durée”, *History of European Ideas*, 38, 2012, 493-507. Armitage proposes “a model of transtemporal history, proceeding via serial contextualism to create a history of ideas spanning centuries, even millennia”.

<sup>17</sup> Strauss’ attack on historicism was inextricably linked to his perception of the virtues of classical philosophy. Modern scholars have been unable to interpret classical philosophers since they are prevented by the constraints imposed by the modern historicist outlook that eroded any belief in the possibility of re-discovering of “The Good” or, that this ultimate good even exists. The superiority of the ancients is based on at least three interconnected factors: (a) they were guided by better questions and thus were able to render better answers, (b) their philosophical edifice was unmolestedly constructed and led by pure “natural consciousness”, (c), it was the unbiased pre-philosophic mind and pre-modern rationalism that raised questions unaffected by circumstances clearly tied (solely or predominantly) to epochal concerns.

conditions, ended up defying the achievability of philosophy, which is intrinsically an attempt to replace opinion with knowledge: philosophy is thus not only unable to reach its goal; it's simply absurd. Strauss's understanding of philosophy is associated with a desire for searching "Knowledge of the eternal order" as a quest for knowledge of the "whole", or the eternal cause or causes of the whole. Consequently, "The highest subject of political philosophy is the philosophic life: philosophy – not as teaching or body of knowledge, but as a way of life – offers, as it were, the solution to the problem that keeps political life in motion".<sup>18</sup>

Strauss' critique of the waves of modernist historicism was ironically a historic failure— indeed, a number of scholars at Chicago were fascinated by his interpretative assumptions and the grand design of his philosophical edifice, but he was rebutted with profound indignation and acid rebukes by the vast majority of intellectual historians. Historicism, under the auspices of Skinner and the Cambridge School dominated the history of political thought for decades.<sup>19</sup> But Strauss' legacy proved solid and enduring as all true legacies are.<sup>20</sup> Skinner was examined in his own terrain because his contextualist method had to be contextualized and thus subjected to the test of his own methodological premises.<sup>21</sup> Today historians of political thought are much less inclined to commit themselves to historical contextualism and its major claims, and attracted criticism from several quarters and on several grounds, the most profound of which is that this approach reduces the authors to their situational settings and ignores permanent or

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted, in Steven B. Smith Steven B., "Philosophy as a Way of Life: The Case of Leo Strauss, *The Review of Politics* 71, 2009, p. 37 (37-53).

<sup>19</sup> See Major Rafael, "The Cambridge School and Leo Strauss: Texts and Context of American Political Science", *Political Research Quarterly*, 58, 2005, 477-85.

<sup>20</sup> Recent literature on Leo Strauss is vast and interest in his philosophy has continued to grow. See the "Introduction: Straussian Voices", in Tony Burns, James Connelly, *The Legacy of Leo Strauss*, pp. 1-27, with the bibliographical sources attached.

<sup>21</sup> See Perreau-Saussine Emile, "Quentin Skinner in Context", *The Review of Politics*, 69, 2007, pp. 106-122.



long-lasting truths and insights.<sup>22</sup> In this way, contextualism(s) prevented the development of a more broad-based philosophical history of political experience, such as those presented in grand narratives, like those of George Sabine and Isaiah Berlin. But why do we need transhistorical narratives in intellectual history and in political philosophy? What is the significance of Strauss' effort toward the recovery of classical political philosophy?

The answer is provided in his works, whereby he stated that the recovery of political philosophy, or going back to the fountain of the ancestral roots, is dictated by "the crisis of our time, the crisis of the West" which is largely constituted by the collapse of modern political philosophy into historicism, and into the doctrine that there are no universal purposes or timeless truths. Historicism was a of process of the "self-destruction of reason".<sup>23</sup> Strauss believed that liberal democracy was in crisis because it has become uncertain of its purpose. Faced with the calamities of his era and the struggle against totalitarian regimes Strauss came to believe that 'the crisis of our times' was largely caused by value relativism which resulted in disintegrating the liberal idea. Intellectual and moral decay was equated with civil unhappiness. We could easily draw some analogies between Strauss' era and ours. Indeed, twenty-first-century public intellectuals repeat that liberal democracy is going through an existential crisis. Further, outside the West, in vast regions, totalitarianism and autocracy reign, either in China, the Middle East, or the Russian Federation and its protectorates. Violence, terrorism, religious intolerance, abuse of human rights and unrelentless wars, plus the global warming and major economic anxiety have the potential to lead to massive destructions. It might be possible to identify the links between the intellectual crisis of the mid-twentieth century and the crises of our own time, even

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<sup>22</sup> For a survey of the state of the field of political thought, see Danielle Charette, Skjönsberg Max, "State of the Field: The History of Political Thought", *History*, 105, 2020, pp. 470-83.

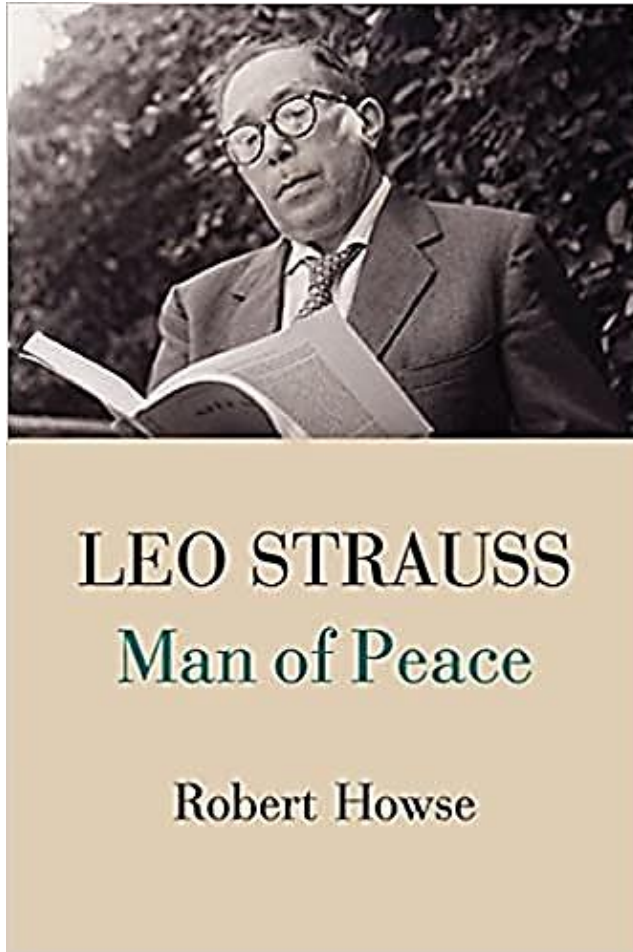
<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Bruell Christopher, "A Return to Classical Political Philosophy and the Understanding of the American Founding", *The Review of Politics* 53, 1991, 173-186, at p. 174.

to consider that the crisis of Strauss' 'own times' is almost identical to the 'crisis of our times'. The analogies are terrifying. But what does intergenerational-transhistorical similitude indicate other than the existence of recurring questions within the realm of the 'political' that require raising exactly the same questions to find fundamental answers? Further, Strauss predicted that the modernist-historicist "critique of knowledge" would also result in academic compartmentalization and specialization – in his own words "Specialization: knowing more and more about less and less", which fosters "universal philistinism and creeping conformism".<sup>24</sup> And that is a firm indicator of intellectual poverty in the age of artificial intelligence which threatens to delimit critical thinking within the confinements of technological automation. The idea of progress is, after all, an elusive concept and the cyclical theory of history is not as deceptive as once thought to be.



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<sup>24</sup> Pangle Thomas, *An Introduction to His Thought and Intellectual Legacy*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006, pp. 79-80.



Leo Strauss is known to many people as a thinker of the right, who inspired hawkish views on national security and perhaps advocated war without limits. Moving beyond gossip and innuendo about Strauss's followers and the Bush administration, this book provides the first comprehensive analysis of Strauss's writings on political violence, considering also what he taught in the classroom on this subject. In stark contrast to popular perception, Strauss emerges as a man of peace, favorably disposed to international law and skeptical of imperialism - a critic of radical ideologies who warns of the dangers to free thought and civil society when intellectuals ally themselves with movements that advocate violence. Robert Howse provides new readings of Strauss's confrontation with fascist/Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt, his debate with Alexandre Kojève about philosophy and tyranny, and his works on Machiavelli and Thucydides and examines Strauss's lectures on Kant's Perpetual Peace and Grotius's Rights of War and Peace.

Robert Howse, *Leo Strauss: Man of Peace*, Cambridge University Press, 2014