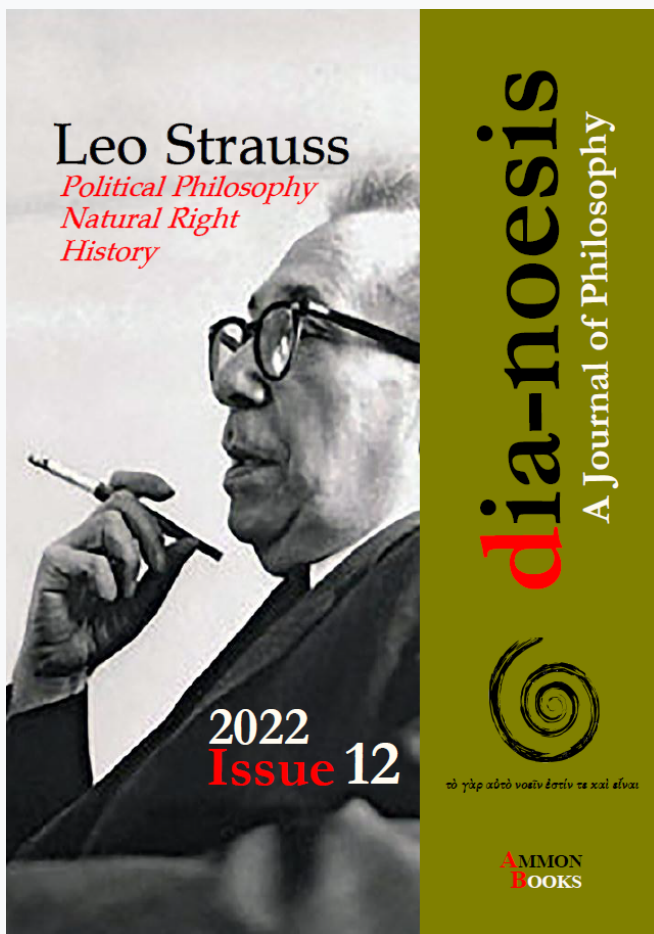


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**Philosophy as a way of life and the nature of the political:**

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Philosophy as a way of life  
and the nature of the political:  
The ‘problem of Socrates’  
in Leo Strauss’ thought

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**Abstract:** The *theologico-political problem* has marked Leo Strauss’ engagement with the question of the Western political thought from Plato onwards. Strauss brings to the fore the relationship between *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa* or the relationship between the philosopher-citizen and the city and in this sense, the question concerning the life of Socrates in ancient Athens as well as the meaning of the Socratic phenomenon itself. It is no exaggeration to claim that Strauss’ *oeuvre* can be regarded as an intellectual endeavor on Socrates’ presence in the Athenian *agora* as the ideal exemplification of a philosophical way of life within a political community.

**Keywords:** Strauss, Socrates, politics, philosophy, theology.

Socrates was the most interesting man that ever lived,  
his life the most interesting that has been recorded  
Søren Kierkegaard,  
*Fear and Trembling...*, p. 154<sup>1</sup>

The tragedy of Socrates' death  
rests on a misunderstanding:  
what the polis did not understand was that  
Socrates did not claim to be a *sophos*, a wise man  
Hannah Arendt,  
*The Promise of Politics*, p. 11<sup>2</sup>

The so-called *theologico-political problem* and in turn so-called return to the medieval Enlightenment have marked Leo Strauss' systematic engagement with the question of the character and the content of the tradition of the Western political thought from Plato onwards. By so doing, Strauss brings to the fore the central problem of the relationship between *vita contemplativa* (philosophical life) and *vita activa* (political life) or, in other words, the crucial relationship between the philosopher-citizen and the city and in this sense, the critical question concerning the life of Socrates in ancient Athens as well as the meaning of the Socratic phenomenon itself.<sup>3</sup> Thus, it is no exaggeration to claim that Strauss' *oeuvre* can be regarded as a steady intellectual endeavor, through many reflective readings and investigations, on Socrates' presence in the Athenian *agora* as the ideal exemplification of a philosophical way of life within a political community.<sup>4</sup>

This arduous intellectual process is reflected in much of the *opus* of the German-Jewish thinker as an absolutely

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<sup>1</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and the Sickness to Death*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013 (Translated by Walter Lowrie).

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, New York: Schocken Books, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism. An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp. 103-183.

<sup>4</sup> Leo Strauss, *The City and Man*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1964, pp. 1-12.

immersion into this cognitive field which he defines as classical political philosophy and which concerns nothing but the exhaustive examination of the constitutive question *What Is Political Philosophy?* In fact, Strauss attempts to give a decent reply to so-called *theologico-political problem* by substituting it for the equivalent question of the nature of political philosophy *per se*. From another point of view, it could be said that his *problématique* is centered on the study of modern political philosophy from Machiavelli to Nietzsche, within a huge research project that he delimits as *The Three Waves of Modernity*. Actually, behind this interrogation, he raises the question of the crisis of West and the crisis of modernity as well, having as a constant point of reference the Socratic way of life: that is to say, the conflictual, dynamic and sometimes tragic relationship between polis and the thinking citizen.<sup>5</sup>

The American period of Strauss' life and work, which is a period of reflective maturation of his political thought, is bordered by a set of books, a kind of tetralogy,<sup>6</sup> from 1948 to 1972, or even from 1939,<sup>7</sup> at the very beginning of World War II, where, having as a stable theoretical basis Xenophon and Aristophanes' writings, he tries a systematic and detailed introspection of classical political philosophy, with reference to the figure and by extension to the tragic death of Socrates. Socrates not only embodies classical political philosophy, but also the classical ideal of civic virtue versus the modern

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<sup>5</sup> Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988, pp. 9-94 and Leo Strauss, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy. Ten Essays*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989, pp. 81-98.

<sup>6</sup> Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny. Revised and Expanded Edition Including the Strauss-Kojève Correspondence*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000; Leo Strauss, *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse. An Interpretation of the Oeconomicus*, South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 1998; Leo Strauss, *Xenophon's Socrates*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1972; Leo Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980.

<sup>7</sup> Leo Strauss, The spirit of Sparta or the taste of Xenophon, *Social Research*, Vol. 6, No 4, 1939, pp. 502-536.

virtues of glory, power, property, finance and the Nietzschean superman.<sup>8</sup>

In the Introduction he writes for the voluminous collective work *History of Political Thought*, in the early 1960s, Strauss strongly claims that Socrates is the founder of political philosophy and mainly the founder of so-called classical political philosophy. For Strauss, modern political philosophy is not a continuation of classical political philosophy, but a break, since it consciously deconstructs all the principles and values founded by Socrates. Socrates, using the *aporetic* method of philosophy, seeks the meaning of the nature of the whole in the sense of form or idea. At the epicenter of this revolutionary and innovative philosophical action and questioning, he placed the human soul or, in other terms, the human consciousness within the political context of city. As aforementioned, for Strauss, the relationship between the city and man is conceived as the hard core of classical political philosophy,<sup>9</sup> something he repeats constantly and at every opportunity throughout his rich work.<sup>10</sup>

Strauss' systematic involvement with Plato and Xenophon has a catalytic link with the presence and life of Socrates in the ancient city of Athens and consequently the Socratic teaching at the heart of classical political philosophy. The Platonic dialogues, he points out, are but a monument, a lasting memory of the life of Socrates, that is, the way he turned his life into a practical model of philosophical life in the city, urging and often guiding his fellow citizens to identify the nature of politics and the political itself with virtuous life.<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note that from the very beginning, Strauss connects so-called 'problem of Socrates' with the *theologico-political problem*, through the relevant question of piety. For Strauss, piety is a philosophical issue *par excellence* and only by approaching it in this way, we

<sup>8</sup> Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy? ...*, op. cit., pp. 40-55.

<sup>9</sup> Leo Strauss, *Introduction* in Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (eds), *History of Political Philosophy*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987, pp. 1-6.

<sup>10</sup> Leo Strauss, *The City and Man*, op. cit., p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Leo Strauss, *Plato 427-347 BC* in Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (eds), *History of Political Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 33.

have the opportunity to bring to light the critical stake of virtue.<sup>12</sup>

From this point of view, the relationship between theology, politics and philosophy within the city acquires a completely different meaning. Socrates, argues Strauss, as the personification of the ideal philosopher, does not introduce new demons into the city, on the contrary, through the use of the formalistic metaphor of Ideas, brings to the fore, in the very heart of the public sphere, a poetic conception of divinity and the divine as a whole, which contributes positively and constructively in the philosophical approach of the *theologico-political problem*, creating the field of a harmonious confrontation between politics and theology, so to speak, without the danger of censorship and persecution. Thus, the Platonic dialogue *Euthyphro* is for the German-Jewish thinker a first-class opportunity to highlight through Socrates a kind of philosophical sanctity, that is to say, piety as a high philosophical virtue, which concerns the way of life in the city (*vita activa*), as a life that seeks the knowledge and the truth of the nature of the things and of the whole as such, through an honest and moderate reflection (*vita contemplativa*).<sup>13</sup>

Examining the philosopher/city relationship is for the German-Jewish thinker the only possible conclusion to any genuine philosophical search. It can be argued that all the individual problems of Strauss' political thought are stemmed from this *problématique* and in a sense return here. His intensive spiritual contribution to this fundamental question, with Socrates as a stable point of reference, is traced in his lively dialogue with the famous Hegelian French philosopher Alexandre Kojève on Xenophon's *Hiero*. Thomas L. Pangle, one of Strauss' most authoritative interpreters, points out that the Strauss-Kojève dialogue on tyranny, that took place from 1948 to 1963, is one of the most brilliant philosophical

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<sup>12</sup> Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy? ...*, op. cit., pp. 32-33.

<sup>13</sup> Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism...*, op. cit., pp. 187-206.

debates of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>14</sup> Alvin Johnson, referring to *On Tyranny*, writes the following very characteristic of Strauss' reading methodology: "His approach to a classical author is as direct as that of Erasmus and Montaigne". To conclude: his approach "may mark a new direction in classical scholarship, a systematic effort to excavate the classical authors from the successive strata of ashen scholarship and win back for us the original freshness and splendor of a great literature".<sup>15</sup>

If nothing else, *On Tyranny* (1948) is not just the beginning of this critical return of Strauss' political thought in the ancient Greek literature, which was interrupted by his death in 1973, with what this may mean for the fundamental tug-of-war Jerusalem/Athens,<sup>16</sup> but also the starting point of the revival of the debate and/or quarrel around the importance of the rebirth of classical political philosophy in relation to the ideological character of modern political philosophy.<sup>17</sup> As the authors of the entry 'Leo Strauss' in the Stanford Philosophical Encyclopedia underscore, in *On Tyranny*, the German-Jewish thinker "offers a close reading of the rhetoric of Xenophon's dialogue, which highlights [...] the tension between the philosophical quest for truth and the requirements of society".<sup>18</sup>

Steven B. Smith writes that *On Tyranny* brings to the fore four themes, which formed the backbone of the late Straussian *corpus*, which are detected as seminal ideas and in his equally important early work, with the difference that here they are presented as part of a single contemplative project. These issues are identified as follows: 1. In *On*

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas L. Pangle, *Editor's Introduction* in Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism...*, op. cit., p. ix.

<sup>15</sup> Steven B. Smith, *Leo Strauss. The Outline of a Life* in Steven B. Smith (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 28.

<sup>16</sup> Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy? ...*, op. cit., pp. 9-10.

<sup>17</sup> Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism ...*, op. cit., pp. 49-62 and Leo Strauss, On a new interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy, *Social Research*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1946, pp. 326-367.

<sup>18</sup> Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, *Leo Strauss*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/strauss-leo>, 2012, p. 3.

*Tyranny*, Strauss demonstrates the art of careful reading, which is related to his position on esoteric writing. Focusing on the Xenophon's rhetoric on the dialogue between the poet Simonides and the tyrant Hiero, Strauss reveals the central theme of philosophical writing itself: the struggle between philosophical life and power. 2. Strauss uses *On Tyranny* as a vehicle to signify the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns, which he will deal with in detail in his seminal treatise *Natural Right and History* (1953),<sup>19</sup> henceforth shifting the focus of his *problématique* in the field of modernity and his essential argument about the crisis of Western civilization in the forms of relativism, historicism and nihilism,<sup>20</sup> but also of the crisis of political philosophy itself,<sup>21</sup> which was culminated in the phenomenon of Totalitarianism as a product of modern Natural Law. 3. The only way to overcome the distorting lens of modern reading is to focus on the ancient texts, as long as there is no higher circle of ideas than the spiritual horizon of the Ancients. 4. At the end, he returns to the question of the best way of life. As can be seen in Xenophon's rhetoric, the crucial question is the relationship between philosophical and political life. The question is clear and urgent: which way of life is the most excellent? Thus, the *theologico-political problem* merges into the question of the best way of life and becomes the dominant motif in late Straussian thought.<sup>22</sup>

Therefore, in order for someone to grasp Strauss' political thought, both the *theologico-political problem* and the problem of the crisis of modernity as 'crisis of our time',

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<sup>19</sup> Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1965.

<sup>20</sup> Leo Strauss, German Nihilism, *Interpretation. A Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol 26, No 3, 1999, pp. 353-378; Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism ...*, op. cit., pp. 13-26; Leo Strauss, *The Crisis of Our Time* in Harold J. Spaeth (ed.), *The Predicament of Modern Politics*, Detroit: University of Detroit Press, 1964, pp. 41-54.

<sup>21</sup> Leo Strauss, *The Crisis of Political Philosophy* in Harold J. Spaeth (ed.), *The Predicament of Modern Politics*, pp. 91-103.

<sup>22</sup> Steven B. Smith, *Leo Strauss. The Outline of a Life* in Steven B. Smith (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, op. cit., pp. 28-29.

‘crisis of the West’ and ‘crisis of liberal democracy’, we must systematically and thoroughly go through the fundamental ‘problem of Socrates’. In other words, we have to immerse ourselves in what he defines as classical political rationalism, in the hard core of which dominates the grand project of classical political philosophy as a rival to modern political philosophy in the sense of Machiavellian political science.<sup>23</sup> At the heart of this rationalism, points out Pangle, dominates the figure of Socrates and especially the investigation of the philosophical way through which Socrates deals with the constitutive question of the meaning and position of the divine in human life and the city.<sup>24</sup>

As we have said, in Strauss’ entire work, a specific *corpus* of articles and books stands out, in which the German-Jewish thinker raises and/or analyzes Socratic issues with his distinctive reading style, tracing the life as well as the tragic death of Socrates through the most important texts of the ancient Greek literature. Socratic life reveals the tension between philosophy, theology and politics and especially the fragile relationship between philosophical and political life, which, in the unique case of Socrates, is not a simple fact, but the statutory act of the genesis of the political philosophy herself. “*It was not Aristotle*”, he writes in *The City and Man*, “*but Socrates* who originated political philosophy”.<sup>25</sup> In the book of *Socrates and Aristophanes*, he underlines in the same logic: “Political philosophy was founded by Socrates”.<sup>26</sup>

*On Tyranny* and the *Restatement on Xenophon’s Hiero* (1959) delimit the ‘problem of Socrates’ to a large extent.<sup>27</sup> At the heart of Strauss’ political thought is Socrates not as an archetypal figure but as a critical question that reflects the very essence of classical political philosophy herself. Strauss opposes Socratic political philosophy to Machiavellian political science, arguing that while in Socratic rhetoric the

<sup>23</sup> Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy? ...*, op. cit., pp. 9-27.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas L. Pangle, *Editor’s Introduction* in Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism ...*, op. cit., p. xxix and p. xxx respectively.

<sup>25</sup> Leo Strauss, *The City and Man*, op. cit., p. 13.

<sup>26</sup> Leo Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, op. cit., p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny ...*, op. cit., pp. 177-212.

question of human freedom acquires the characteristics of virtue in Machiavellian political science power tends to be identified with tyranny.<sup>28</sup> The trauma of the trial and death of Socrates dominates Strauss' thought as well as Plato's political philosophy. Strauss contrasts Socrates, which explicitly distinguishing him from the sophists, with tyranny, and even democracy, in the sense that leaders and especially tyrants often persecute and exterminate philosophers out of envy and suspicion and due to the freedom of thought and virtue that a wise man brings to the city.<sup>29</sup>

For the German-Jewish thinker, Machiavelli is the tangible example in the long tradition of Western political thought of how one can become a teacher and inspirer of tyrants, by cutting politics off from ethics.<sup>30</sup> The victory of the wise over the tyrant takes place with words, that is, with persuasion.<sup>31</sup> Socrates represents political prudence and virtue. The central point of politics against tyranny lies in the concept of violence. Politics is based on the will of the citizens, without violence and in accordance with the laws of the city. Political freedom is a function of obedience to the law.<sup>32</sup> Socrates realizes freedom as a virtue and vice versa, for the sake of the city, the laws and the public interest. Socratic justice is synonymous with law enforcement and civic legitimacy.<sup>33</sup>

Strauss does not shy away from raising the 'problem of Socrates' as a problem between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. In a sense, Strauss, throughout his life, mainly from 1937 onwards in the USA, when he began to deal systematically with the ancient Greek philosophy, tries systematically to solve the problem of the relationship between philosophy and politics, which, in a way, is reflected within the broader context of the *theologico-political problem* or, in other words, by incorporating the latter into the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 22-27.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>30</sup> Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy? ...*, op. cit. pp. 40-48; Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1978; Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny ...*, op. cit., p. 56.

<sup>31</sup> Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny ...*, op. cit., pp. 58-59.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 68-69.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

*problématique* that he develops for the rebirth of the classical political philosophy.

Socrates represents not just wisdom and virtue, but the philosopher-citizen, who stands as an ideal milestone in relation to politics as the art of governing. Understandably, the death of Socrates hurts the relationship between philosophy and politics, putting the philosopher under persecution by the city. To the extent that politics threatens philosophy with extermination, Strauss, possibly paving the way for Jacques Derrida's relevant analysis,<sup>34</sup> strongly argues that the philosopher is transformed into a foreigner, symbolizing the arrival of strangeness in the city. Strauss' thought reaches the limits of a political phenomenology, which is not far from Emmanuel Levinas' thought.<sup>35</sup> At this point, Strauss' position in favor of an ancient liberalism, in the sense of the wise (see Socrates), which acquires an ontological value towards the city's dominance, is also traced.<sup>36</sup>

The Strauss-Kojève debate is indicative of the way in which Strauss sees the relationship between philosophy and politics, and therefore the *theologico-political problem* itself, that is, the relationship between the philosopher (Socrates) and the city (Athens). As in the relationship between philosophy and theology, Strauss argues, unlike the Hegelian Kojève, who puts the relationship in the context of a reconciliation, that philosophy and politics cannot be reconciled, since politics refers to some common and accepted perceptions, which in turn philosophy challenges, to the

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<sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality. Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to respond*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 13 (Translated by Rachel Bowlby) and Spiros Makris, Politics, Ethics and Strangers in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Fifteen critical reflections on Jacques Derrida's concept of hos(ti)pitality, *Theoria & Praxis. International Journal of Interdisciplinary Thought*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2017, pp. 1-21.

<sup>35</sup> Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny ...*, op. cit., pp. 78-97 and Spiros Makris, Emmanuel Levinas on Hospitality. Ethical and Political Aspects, *International Journal of Theology, Philosophy and Science*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2018, pp. 79-96.

<sup>36</sup> Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny ...*, op. cit., p. 99.

extent that the role of philosophy is to deconstruct every form of power and establishment.

For Strauss, this almost ontological and epistemological tension between philosophy and politics is unresolved. In contrast to the Hegelian Kojève, who takes philosophy as a pure knowledge, Strauss, with Socrates and Plato as his point of reference, sees philosophy as a questioning *ad infinitum*. Philosophy is by definition skeptical and *zetetic*. This revolutionary character of philosophy is sometimes perceived by the power as a threat or even sabotage. However, when philosophy loses this aporetic character, then, according to Strauss, it is transformed into dogmatism and ideology, as is the case with modern political philosophy.<sup>37</sup>

Consequently, the dynamic, intense, and tragic relationship between philosophy and politics is transformed into political philosophy or philosophic politics, to the extent that the philosopher, like Socrates, settles in the city, moves within the city walls, metaphorically and poetically in the Platonic cave, and ultimately sacrifices his life for the city, which persecutes and kills him, taking his philosophical discourse as an explicit manifestation of disrespect to her gods. This point highlights Strauss' dual approach, the fact that in ancient liberalism, both the city and the individual are two realities that, although opposed, must coexist for the benefit of the polis itself.<sup>38</sup> This inextricably tragic element of politics *lato sensu* has been pointed out by all modern thinkers of the archetypal model of the ancient Greek city, including Cornelius Castoriadis, who characteristically emphasizes that the fierce conflict between the crowd of democratic Athens and the philosophical wisdom in the face of Socrates brings to the fore the onto-theological tragedy of the city *per se*.<sup>39</sup>

Strauss summarizes the *theologico-political problem* and consequently the question of the critical relation of philosophy with the city in his famous *Restatement on*

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<sup>37</sup> Leo Strauss, *The City and Man*, op. cit., pp. 2-6.

<sup>38</sup> Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth, *Introduction* in Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny...*, op. cit., pp. xi-xxii.

<sup>39</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, *On Plato's Statesman*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 1 (Translated by David Ames Curtis).

*Xenophon's Hiero*, where he clarifies in a very detailed way that classical political philosophy is clearly different from modern political philosophy and in particular its ancestor, Machiavellian political science, to the extent that it does not separate wisdom from *phronesis*. The so-called classical writing is for the German-Jewish thinker a monument of moderation, temperance, kindness and calmness. This can also be a complete definition of philosophy herself as a love of wisdom. Classical political philosophy highlights a specific kind of life, that is, a way of life that is devoted to wisdom and virtue.<sup>40</sup> This, however, is an ethical framework of philosophical discussion as a perpetual search for knowledge and truth, which, according to Strauss, here too the model of a liberal republicanism may unfold that is not so far from Hannah Arendt's republicanism, cannot be developed in the absence of the city, since it presupposes both friendship and the existence of the market (*agora*), that is, of equal citizens and a common sense view of political things.<sup>41</sup>

The presence of philosophy in the city signals the essence of political action.<sup>42</sup> This absolutely dynamic, intense and sometimes tragic condition of coexistence of philosophy and city is embodied in the statutory forms of Socrates, Alfarabi and Maimonides and represents for Strauss an endless and indissoluble struggle between the totalization of power and the need, at the same time, for the philosophy to question the political ontology and axiology themselves, without this being perceived as disobedience and/or disrespect towards the divine and metaphysical origins of the city. Thus, in a sense, the *theologico-political problem* has never ceased to be at the heart of the work of the German-Jewish thinker in either the Weimar or the American phase of his thought.<sup>43</sup>

Strauss reposes the thorny question of the relation of politics to philosophy or the relation of power to the philosopher, with Socrates as its main point of reference. In his conversation with the Hegelian thinker Alexandre Kojève,

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<sup>40</sup> Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny ...*, op. cit., pp. 183-190.

<sup>41</sup> Leo Strauss, *The City and Man*, op. cit., pp. 10-12.

<sup>42</sup> Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny ...*, op. cit., pp. 191-195.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 195-212.

Strauss takes a stand in favor of philosophy and a philosophic politics and against power, especially when it dresses in the form of a totalitarian state: the Hegelian conception of the state, realized by Marx and Marxism.<sup>44</sup> At this point, he brings to the fore the technique of esoteric writing,<sup>45</sup> looking back to the Middle Ages and the figures of major philosophers in the field of Islam and Judaism such as Alfarabi and Maimonides,<sup>46</sup> arguing that the only way to save philosophy from power and her envy of wisdom, is the philosopher to adopt a cryptic expression, while maintaining an exoteric teaching,<sup>47</sup> which would not put his thought and especially his life in danger. Through this Socratic problematic, Strauss even develops and applies for himself a systematic methodological tool for the study and interpretation of classical political philosophers and those who continue their thinking, with an emphasis on the Middle Ages and so-called medieval Enlightenment.<sup>48</sup>

The 'Socratic turn' of Strauss, in the terminology of Pangle,<sup>49</sup> spreads throughout the American phase of his work, from 1939, when he publishes the article *The spirit of Sparta or the taste of Xenophon*, until the end of his life, in 1973. Actually, as we have seen above, it takes the intellectual form of a tetralogy, but also includes some relative seminal essays.<sup>50</sup> In all cases, he seeks the authentic Socrates or, otherwise, the course and the meaning of the life of the philosopher in the city. Through his systematic readings on Plato, Xenophon and Aristophanes' works concerning

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<sup>44</sup> Leo Strauss, *On Hegel*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2019.

<sup>45</sup> Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988, pp. 22-37.

<sup>46</sup> Joshua Parens, *Leo Strauss and the Recovery of Medieval Political Philosophy*, New York: University of Rochester Press, 2016.

<sup>47</sup> Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism ...*, op. cit., pp. 63-71.

<sup>48</sup> Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny ...*, op. cit., p. 206.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas L. Pangle, *Introduction* in Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983, pp. 13-18.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 105-136 and Leo Strauss, Greek Historians, *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 1968, pp. 656-666.

Socrates,<sup>51</sup> that culminate in the two works of the late phase of his thought, that is, *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse* (1970) and *Xenophon's Socrates* (1972), Strauss methodically looks for answers to the 'problem of Socrates' as the metonymy of the *theologico-political problem* that tragically haunts modernity from the era of Baruch Spinoza until the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the persecution, the killing and the exile of many eminent philosophers, especially during the gloomy years of the Nazi regime.

In the Preface of *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse*, the well-known American intellectual Allan Bloom, one of Strauss' prominent university students as well as one of the founders of so-called *Straussians*,<sup>52</sup> points out that Strauss' obsession with Xenophon's Socrates concerns his anxiety to illuminate the relationship between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* or, in other terms, the tense relationship between philosopher and the city in the best possible way.<sup>53</sup> From the beginning of his Introduction, Strauss presents Socrates as the originator of political philosophy, as it is defined in the context of so-called Great Tradition. In fact, from the outset, it defines the thematic context of this 'Socratic turn' and/or re-turn (Socratic Return: 1962-1973),<sup>54</sup> mainly through the relevant dialogues of Plato, the Socratic writings of Xenophon and Aristophanes' *Clouds*.

This Introduction is absolutely enlightening to the question why the Platonist Strauss gave equal importance to the Socratic works of Xenophon, significantly upgrading the image of the ancient Greek historian.<sup>55</sup> For Strauss, Xenophon, as a historian, objectively portrays the public

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<sup>51</sup> Leo Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, op. cit., p. 314.

<sup>52</sup> Noël O' Sullivan, *Conservatism* in Terence Ball and Richard Bellamy (eds), *Twentieth-Century Political Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 159-160.

<sup>53</sup> Allan Bloom, *Preface* in Leo Strauss, *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse...*, op. cit.

<sup>54</sup> David Tkach, *Leo Strauss's Critique of Martin Heidegger*, Ottawa, Canada: Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, University of Ottawa (Thesis), 2011, p. 68.

<sup>55</sup> Leo Strauss, Greek Historians, *The Review of Metaphysics*, op. cit., p. 657.

image, the words and the deeds of Socrates, focusing on two critical points. Firstly, Socrates puts at the center of the philosopher's relationship with the city the major stake of justice, as the highest civic virtue. Secondly, Socrates, with his public presence, consolidates this sense of justice through the equal virtue of friendship, by making himself beneficial to his associates and to society in general. Thus, in the Socratic writings of Xenophon, Strauss resolves, in a way, the complicated Gordian knot of a supposedly ungodly and impious Socrates, who corrupts the young and insults the gods of Athens.<sup>56</sup>

In 1972, it is released *Xenophon's Socrates*, which is Strauss' last work before his death. No doubt, it is a work of maturity and explicit reflection, which, however, also signifies the culmination of his long engagement with the Xenophon's Socrates, as part of a wider investigation on the one hand of the *theologico-political problem*, on the other hand of the character of classical political philosophy and the nature of the political *per se*. Bloom writes here a minor Foreword, where he summarizes and evaluates exceptionally both the overall work of his teacher on Xenophon, and of course the statutory presence of Socrates in the Straussian project as a whole. With this book, he underscores, Strauss attempts to highlight the ancient way of writing, with putting special emphasis on the underestimated, in his opinion, Xenophon, and through this programmatic goal to contribute to the discovery of the true Socrates and the character of classical political philosophy.<sup>57</sup>

In the first part of the book, which focuses on Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, Strauss analyzes in detail the virtues of Socratic life as the pre-eminent life of the philosopher in the city and the market, which he likens to the life of a gentleman, especially justice, sobriety, wisdom, piety and friendship. The so-called Socratic *daimonion* is set as a whole onto-theological framework, which assembles the Socratic philosophical and political virtues as a solid corpus (*vita activa + vita contemplativa*) and largely symbolizes Socrates'

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<sup>56</sup> Leo Strauss, *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse...*, op. cit., pp. 83-91.

<sup>57</sup> Leo Strauss, *Xenophon's Socrates*, op. cit.

piety as a kind of a constant and courageous questioning of divine and human affairs. Therefore, for Strauss, Socrates' life in the city not only does not corrupt his fellow citizens and does not lead to impiety, but, on the contrary, sets the established conditions for a just and happy life.<sup>58</sup>

In the second part of the book, which deals with the *Apology of Socrates to the Jury*, Strauss, in a masterful way, highlights what he defines as ancient liberalism and liberal education,<sup>59</sup> namely the fact that the philosopher Socrates, who was tried and convicted by the democratic city of Athens, possibly not so much for his excessive wisdom as for the fact that many of his fellow citizens, among them the judges, envied his *megalegoria*, he lived in the city guided by the interest of the city, obeying its laws and gods and proposing, either by his words or by his deeds, until the end, the virtues of generosity, moderation, justice, courage and simplicity. Above all Socrates' exceptional virtues, Strauss emphasizes bravery as an alloy of kindness and wisdom.<sup>60</sup> In the final part of the book, which concerns the *Symposium*, Strauss, with a detailed analysis, summarizes, in a way, his position that Socrates can be seen as a gentleman, who taught and embodied in his political life, as a philosopher-citizen, the virtues of wisdom, courage and prudence as metonymic conditions of justice.<sup>61</sup>

Finally, we must say that undoubtedly the whole Straussian *corpus* on the Socratic writings of Xenophon is summarized in the famous 'Five Lectures' of 1958, with the Nietzschean title 'The Problem of Socrates'.<sup>62</sup> This long text should be approached as a turning point in Strauss' overall work, in which he creatively and organically connects the *theologico-political problem* (let's say the Weimar-driven Strauss) with the 'problem of Socrates' (let's say the American-driven Strauss). Both now are focusing on the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. 3-126.

<sup>59</sup> Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient & Modern*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995, pp. 3-64.

<sup>60</sup> Leo Strauss, *Xenophon's Socrates*, op. cit., pp. 129-140.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp. 143-178.

<sup>62</sup> Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism...*, op. cit., pp. 103-183.

question of so-called classical political philosophy, that is to say, philosopher's relationship with the city. As we saw, at the heart of the classical political philosophy prevails the onto-theological question of justice, or, otherwise, the question of the human soul herself.<sup>63</sup> Undoubtedly, this solid Straussian *problématique* is haunted by the tragic event of persecution and possibly the barbaric killing of the philosopher by the power, even by a democratic power.<sup>64</sup>

Strauss' lectures on the 'problem of Socrates' can be summarized as follows: First, Strauss contrasts Plato and Xenophon's Socrates with Aristophanes' Socrates, with the main aim of highlighting the Socratic way of life as an ideal mixture of *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. However, in essence, the German-Jewish thinker puts philosophy at the forefront of political life in the sense of classical political philosophy. Second, through the clash of polis and philosophy, in the person and life of Socrates, Strauss highlights the onto-theological envy of the city towards the absolute independence of speech and perfect freedom. Freedom of thought does not need popular applause.<sup>65</sup> Although this seems to be an indirect concession of Strauss to a kind of philosophical elitism, for anyone who studies his work as a whole, it is but an explicit commitment to ancient liberalism, which by definition has an anti-totalitarian character, even when it comes to democracy as the ideal sort of political community.<sup>66</sup>

Smith claims that Strauss' Platonic liberalism is skeptical and suspicious of any form of tyranny, even of mass democracy. What excites Strauss and seems determinative of both the *theologico-political problem* and the 'problem of Socrates' are dealt with is neither economic freedom, nor equal rights, nor democratic deliberation, but the freedom of *philosophizing* as the highest virtue.<sup>67</sup> Classical political

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<sup>63</sup> Leo Strauss, *The City and Man*, op. cit., pp. 50-138.

<sup>64</sup> Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, op. cit., pp. 7-21.

<sup>65</sup> Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism ...*, op. cit., p. 105.

<sup>66</sup> Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient & Modern*, op. cit., pp. 26-64.

<sup>67</sup> Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss. Politics, Philosophy, Judaism*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006, pp. 106-107.

philosophy, Strauss sums up, is liberal in the true sense of the word.<sup>68</sup>

Thirdly, political philosophy, something that Alfarabi has uniquely highlighted for Strauss in the context of medieval Enlightenment, is the product of a political coexistence of philosophy and the city. The grave danger that the philosopher faces in the city is significantly mitigated by the search for a civic model that does not refer to a celestial polis, not to a totalitarian city, not even to a civic form such as ancient Athens, which ultimately does not allow the philosopher to lead a noble and free life.<sup>69</sup> Socratic moderation and *phronesis* compose the solid basis of classical political philosophy.<sup>70</sup> Philosophy, writes Strauss, is primarily a political philosophy, because political philosophy is a field of onto-theological protection of human dignity and especially of the inner *sanctum* of philosophy *per se*.<sup>71</sup>

Fourth, Strauss never stopped reflectively reconstructing the *theologico-political problem* of the Weimar period, which he projected in the United States through the ‘problem of Socrates’. It is no coincidence that in the key article of *The spirit of Sparta or the taste of Xenophon*, the now exiled German-Jewish thinker, raises at the end of the text, almost programmatically, the major, thorny but also unsolvable question of the onto-theological incompatibility between politics and philosophy, which includes the related question of the relationship between philosophy, theology, and politics, since, as he points out, Socrates was led to death because he was accused of not believing in the gods of the city. Both Plato and Xenophon, according to Strauss, place in their

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<sup>68</sup> Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient & Modern*, op. cit., pp. 28-29.

<sup>69</sup> Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, op. cit., pp. 11-19.

<sup>70</sup> Spiros Makris, *The Ancient as Modern. Leo Strauss and the Revival of Classical Political Philosophy* in Konstantinos Boudouris (Editor-in-Chief), *Proceedings of the XXIII World Congress of Philosophy*, Volume 69, Political Philosophy, Charlottesville, Virginia: Philosophy Documentation Center in cooperation with the Greek Philosophical Society and the Fédération Internationale des Sociétés de Philosophie, 2018, pp. 283-288.

<sup>71</sup> Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism ...*, op. cit., p. 133.

Socratic works the tragic dimension of the persecution of the free-thinking man as the fundamental element and/or stake of the existence not only of the political philosophy herself, but of the organized social and political life as such.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Leo Strauss, The spirit of Sparta or the taste of Xenophon, *Social Research*, op. cit., pp. 531-535.

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