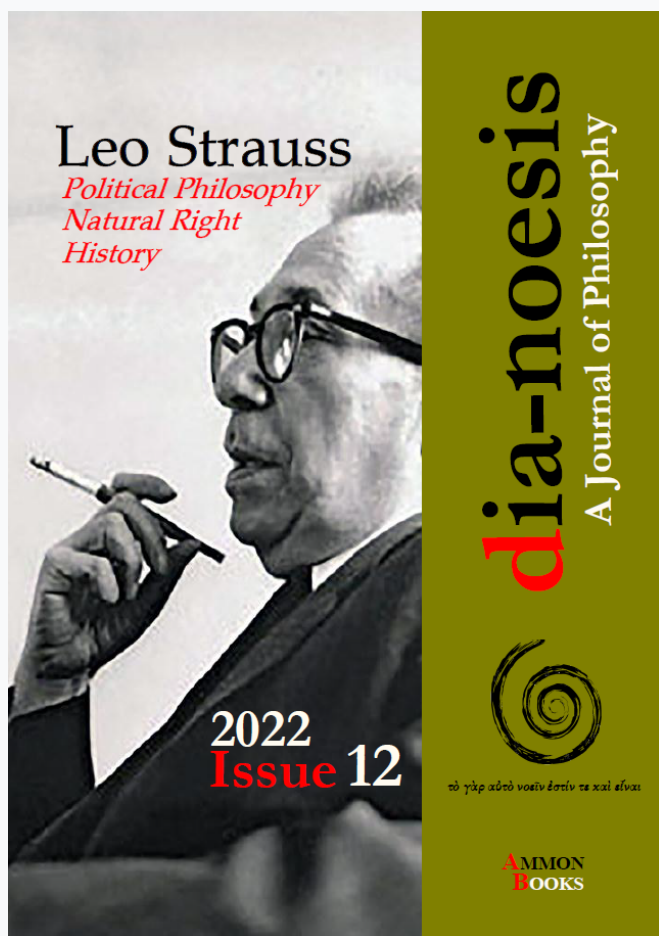


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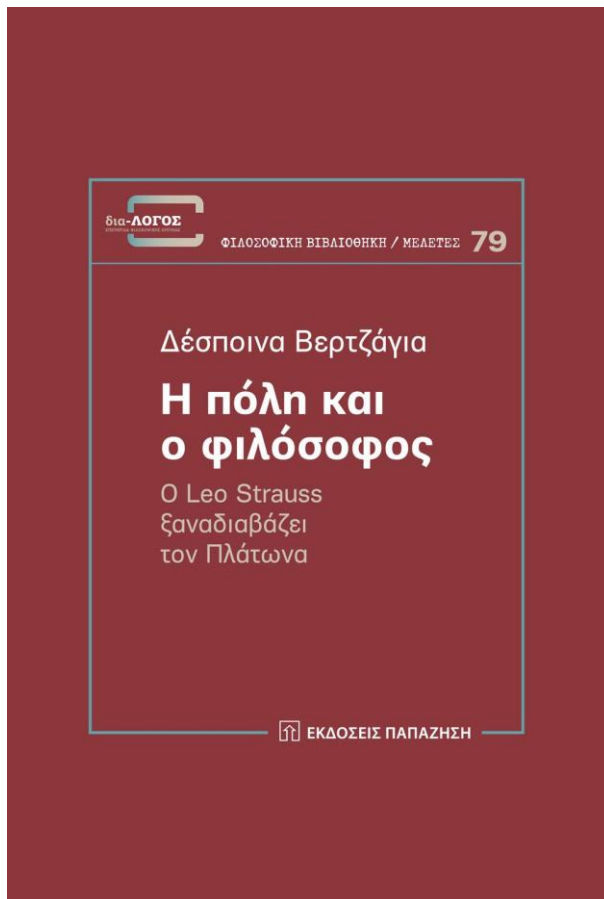


Book Review The City and the Philosopher:

George Bifis

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Book Review
*The City and the Philosopher:
Leo Strauss revisits Plato*



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The objective of *The City and the Philosopher: Leo Strauss revisits Plato*¹ by Despina Vertzagia – the title counterpoints one of Leo Strauss’s most well-known works that focuses inter alia on Plato, i.e. *The City and the Man* –² is twofold. At first, to familiarize the reader with the thought of Leo Strauss, which is crystallized into – and defined by – three core-issues: a. the conflict between antiquity – or, pre-modern thought in general – and modernity, b. the theologico-political predicament, and c. the distinction between esoteric and exoteric writing. This exposition serves the purpose of convincing the reader about the importance of Strauss as a political philosopher and also, as Vertzagia mentions in the preface,³ of clearing the mist that surrounds the effect Strauss had on the contemporary political arena in the U.S. The verdict the author arrives to is reached not in the form of any blatant exoneration, but as the fruit of a laborious study of the work of Strauss.

The second goal of *The City and the Philosopher* is to examine Strauss’s interpretation of Plato not by directly questioning its validity, but by dealing with it as a radically interesting and – at times – illuminating alternative to the standard hermeneutic tradition.⁴ As Vertzagia asserts, Strauss’s contribution to the study of the Platonic corpus can be summarized in two points: firstly, the disputation by Strauss of the importance of the Platonic dogmas, such as the theory of Ideas and the immortality of the soul, and secondly the shift of his focus to the morphological, dramatic or literal aspect of the Platonic text, seeking for details seemingly irrelevant with the main theme or argument of each dialogue, nonetheless indicative of its true, concealed meaning.⁵ For, according to Strauss, all the inconsistencies encountered in the Platonic

¹ Despina Vertzagia, *The City and the Philosopher: Leo Strauss revisits Plato* (Athens: Papazissi, 2022).

² See Leo Strauss, *The City and the Man* (Chicago, and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1964).

³ Vertzagia, 11-13.

⁴ Ibid., 18.

⁵ Ibid., 69-74.

dialogues point towards a form of esotericism entertained by Plato – or, in the words of Leo Strauss, “nothing is accidental in a Platonic dialogue.”⁶ The author detects in this interpretation a concealed response to Martin Heidegger and his well-known polemical stance against the theory of Ideas as the starting point of the “forgetting of Being” (Seinsvergessenheit).⁷ Strauss also entertains a form of skepticism regarding the theory of Ideas – or more precisely, its perception by the analytical hermeneutic tradition; alas, his viewpoint is gnoseological rather than metaphysical. Through his interpretation of the Socratic ignorance and irony, Strauss comes to redefine the ontological status of the Ideas. Instead of forming a rigid ontological system, the Platonic Ideas for Strauss represent an open world of superhistorical questions destined to remain unanswered: a fitting destiny if one considers the innate limitations of human understanding and knowledge, and yet at the same time keeps believing in the possibility of this answer. Vertzagia writes:

the Socratic route, and ultimately the Platonic route, or, to Leo Strauss, the authentic philosophical route, serves as an alternative between dogmatism and relativism, or stands in opposition to ideology as a whole.⁸

At this point, a special reference should be made to the author’s broad overview of the subject-matter, since while discussing the arguments of Strauss she takes also into consideration the analytic hermeneutic tradition of the Platonic corpus, as exemplified in the works of Gregory Vlastos, and Alexander Nehamas.⁹

The City and The Philosopher is divided in two parts, as I already mentioned, each part consisting of three chapters. For

⁶Strauss, *The City and the Man*, 60.

⁷Vertzagia, 76-77.

⁸Ibid., 79.

⁹See the footnote 161 on pages 71-73 for a detailed account on the way the perception of irony by Gregory Vlastos is used in Vertzagia’s study and leads to a more complete understanding of the notion.

a philosophical treatise, this sonata-esque structure is remarkable and, in my opinion, serves a deeper purpose; it not only facilitates the exposition of Strauss's thought, but it is also in accordance with what Strauss considered as an ideal work. But I shall leave this thread of thought for the concluding remarks.

The first part of the book entitled "Reading Leo Strauss" begins with the chapter "The Conflict between Ancients and Moderns." In this chapter, Vertzagia explains the reasoning that lies behind Strauss's concealed skepticism about whether Descartes was indeed the father of modern philosophy.¹⁰ To Strauss, the *first* philosophy is political philosophy. Vertzagia claims:

[...] for Leo Strauss the problem of philosophy can best be summarized in the questions of political philosophy, or, political philosophy provides the equipment that is necessary in order to explore the deeper – or, even, elusive – questions as being tangible *locus*, yet one that partakes in vastness.¹¹

This is why, to Strauss, the dawn of modern philosophy should be sought in the thought of Niccolò Machiavelli. To quote Vertzagia – echoing Strauss's thought as presented in his monumental essay "The Three Waves of Modernity," the contribution of Machiavelli has been twofold:

[...] [firstly] the shift of interest from the way people *do* live to the way they *ought to* live, and the conviction that chance (*fortuna*) may be overcome merely by human means (reason). In other words, Machiavelli introduces for the first time in the history of ideas a line of demarcation that separates ethics and politics by re-interpreting political virtue (*virtù*), while at the same time he relocates the imperative of modern science to politics: *Scientia*

¹⁰Ibid., 23-25.

¹¹Ibid., 23-24.

*propter potentiam.*¹²

Alas, the advance of modernity, characterized by the absolute distinction of facts and values, together with the rise of historicism, introduces a fatal danger for the existence of philosophy as such in general.¹³ This is why this ‘conflict’ between antiquity and modernity is of extreme importance for Strauss, as he is trying to defend the validity of, as Vertzagia puts it, “the central superhistorical gnoseological and ethical problems.”¹⁴ Vertzagia then, moves on to compare the political philosophy of Plato and Hobbes, as the representatives *par excellence* of antiquity and modernity respectively.¹⁵ Throughout this chapter Vertzagia discusses Strauss’s argumentation by presenting a plethora of bibliographical references, demonstrating that she possesses ample knowledge of the sources on the issue, while at the same time managing to keep the interest of the reader.

In her second chapter, entitled “Between Athens and Jerusalem,” Vertzagia focuses on one of the most central subjects in Strauss’s thought: the fundamental contrast within the western tradition, the ongoing predicament between classical Greek and Roman tradition on the one hand, and Judeo-Christian on the other: “The eschatological viewpoint of the Bible survives deformed in the central imperative of the Enlightenment: that of progress [...].¹⁶” Vertzagia detects striking similarities between the account Hobbes provides for man’s natural condition, and Biblical account of man’s condition after the Fall. The same applies to the fear of a violent death, which is nothing more than the secularized fear of God.¹⁷

Vertzagia continues by comparing those two different

¹²Ibid., 29-30. See also Leo Strauss, “The Three Waves of Modernity,” in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, ed. Hilail Gildin, 81-98 (Detroit, MC: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 84-88.

¹³Vertzagia, 32-33.

¹⁴Ibid., 35.

¹⁵Ibid., 35-41.

¹⁶Ibid., 44-45.

¹⁷Ibid., 45.

traditions and their views concerning the problem of justice. One would expect the condemnation of even the slightest religious element, yet Vertzagia's stance seems dispassionate; like Strauss, I guess, she suspects that:

[...] the human longing for a solution to the eternal enigmas – to the degree that modern science has not succeeded to provide any, while philosophy has been limited only to a positive answer concerning merely the method for, and never the context of, a possible solution – is as such the condition that could urge humanity to decide instantly and irrevocably in favor of the revelation, the Bible, that is privileged when it comes to certain necessary answers.¹⁸

The third and the final chapter of the first part bears the title “Esoterism and the Art of Writing.” In this chapter Vertzagia sets out to explain in a clear and concise manner Strauss' alternative method of reading philosophical texts, based on the distinction between esoteric and exoteric writing. Once again, the author displays a stunning ease to navigate through the Straussian corpus. Special emphasis is given on distinguishing philosophical texts to any other form of literature. Following Strauss, she compares Plato to Shakespeare,¹⁹ the former admittedly being far more dangerous to society than the latter:

As a result of this unilateral tension, society becomes the ‘common enemy’ against philosophers, though an enemy that defines the very nature of philosophy per se. Society is an enemy for philosophy as *hostis*, and not necessarily as *inimicus*, to use the terms of Carl Schmitt.²⁰

This discussion of esoteric writing allows the author to

¹⁸Ibid., 54.

¹⁹Ibid., 62-63.

²⁰Ibid., 64.

smoothly move on to the second part of her work, entitled “Reading Plato,” that discusses the way Strauss interpretes Plato.

In the first chapter “The World and the Interweaving of the Platonic Dialogues” the author first presents the hermeneutic approach by Friedrich Schleiermacher, and its significance for the reading of the Platonic corpus.²¹

While there are similarities between his and Strauss’s approaches, Vertzagia pinpoints that for Strauss the difference between exoteric and esoteric writing is a difference of *kind*, not of *degree*; meaning that the philosophical way of reading is completely distinctive, and of a different nature.²² According to Strauss, the Platonic corpus “consists of many dialogues because it imitates the manyness, the variety and heterogeneity of Being.”²³ In that way, each dialogue reveals the truth about a part of the whole. As a consequence, the conceptual autonomy of each dialogue can be contested.²⁴ For Vertzagia just one course of action is available: she follows that thread of thought by navigating – once again, with ease – through the Platonic corpus and by displaying a vast, yet also deep knowledge of the subject she discusses.

Another part of the Straussian interpretation that Vertzagia expands upon is the comical element in the Platonic thought. In her second chapter titled “Socrates and Aristophanes: Plato and the Comical” Vertzagia, following what Strauss implies in the *City and the Man*,²⁵ juxtaposes the fate of Socrates with that of Jesus – both being condemned to die by their cities – and their reaction to it.²⁶ The comical element is not just present, but actually defines the final moments of Socrates; this is the case with philosophy in general as a *way of life*.²⁷ Nevertheless, laughter is also to be found in Judeo-Christian tradition (Vertzagia cites the case of Rabbi Akiva, and expands upon what distances it from the philosophical viewpoint, as

²¹Ibid., 81-83.

²²Ibid., 83.

²³Strauss, *The City and the Man*, 61.

²⁴Vertzagia, 84-85.

²⁵Strauss, *The City and the Man*, 61.

²⁶Ibid., 100-101.

²⁷Ibid., 101-102.

exemplified by Socrates).²⁸ Vertzagia then advances further to examine the Platonic dialogues *Euthyphro*, *Theaetetus*, the *Apology*, the *Republic*, all in juxtaposition to (in a fashion reminiscent of Bach's counterpoint, if I may say so) the works of Aristophanes *Wasps*, *Clouds* and *Assembly of Woman*. Once more, it must be noted that academic preciseness is not sacrificed on purpose of blindly following Leo Strauss: for example, Vertzagia considers extensively the definition provided by Gregory Vlastos for Socratic irony.²⁹

The *City and The Philosopher* concludes with in a final chapter entitled "The Relation and the Concurrence of Politics and Philosophy: The Limits of the City," that is a thorough examination of the question entailed in the title of the book itself and is also inherent in the thought of both Plato and Strauss: namely, the relation between politics and philosophy, between the city and the philosopher. The examination of this central question culminates in the concluding chapter that focuses on contemplative life; its importance for Strauss is emphasized by Vertzagia in her arguing that it has been the core of the so-called Straussian return to classical political philosophy. On this basis, despite the *actual* impossibility of any concurrence between philosophy and politics, Strauss and Vertzagia maintain an optimistic attitude as long as:

[...] the philosopher manages to rise steadfastly above the political arena and the principles that govern society by ensuring the vitality of an alternative human reality, which – in opposition to political action – is not devoid of freedom, or, more accurately, autonomy, and to which one can resort when any given political project seems to fail. [...] Leo Strauss sees in the Platonic opus the most vivid depiction of a worldly shelter in the face of dark political times: the super-political life of the philosopher.³⁰

²⁸Ibid., 102-103.

²⁹See footnote 280, on page 107.

³⁰Ibid., 141.

In a lecture given at the University of Chicago in 1957, Strauss compared any book to a work of art: “The book in this sense is a conscious imitation of living beings. There is no part of it, however small and seemingly insignificant, which is not necessary so that the whole can fulfill well its function. [...] The perfect book acts, therefore, as a countercharm to the charm of despair which the never satisfied quest for perfect knowledge necessarily engenders.³¹” It is my firm belief that Despina Vertzagia’s book *The City and The Philosopher: Leo Strauss Revisits Plato* would meet these criteria.

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³¹Leo Strauss, “Interpretation of Genesis,” *Jewish Political Studies Review* 1, nos. 1-2 (1989): 91.

