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To give you some background for if you cannot figure why this article is so hard to understand.

In the article, Lawler refers to Heidegger's best student. The cite leads to LEO STRAUSS. But no Heidegger scholar has ever considered Strauss to be a Heidegger expert. Instead, we can be sure Lawler is a Strauss scholar, meaning that Lawler believes it is important to confuse the average reader (read the info below on Strauss!) So please do not accept what Lawler says about Heidegger be very wary, Heidegger never said technology removes everything important from life. Berry College - Experience it Firsthand where Lawler teaches: scroll down to read info about this school that might help

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Leo Strauss, Conservative Mastermind

By [Robert Locke](#)

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IN CONTEMPORARY American intellectual life, there is only one school of conservative intellectuals that has taken root in academia as a movement. They are the Straussians, followers of the late Leo Strauss (1899-1973). The hostile New Republic referred to Straussians as "one of the top ten gangs of the millennium." Strauss is an ambiguous, sometimes even troubling, figure, but he is essential to the conservative revival of our time and he offers the intellectual depth we are so desperately in need of. As a crude measure of his importance for those readers who continue to believe that philosophical matters are of no practical importance, consider the following list of his students or students of his students: Justice Clarence Thomas; Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork; Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz; former Assistant Secretary of State Alan Keyes; former Secretary of Education William Bennett; Weekly Standard editor and former Quayle Chief of Staff William Kristol; Allan Bloom, author of [The Closing of the American Mind](#); former New York Post editorials editor John Podhoretz; former National Endowment for the Humanities Deputy Chairman John T. Agresto; and, not meaning to class myself with this august company but in the interests of full disclosure, myself.

The great significance of Strauss for mainstream conservatives is that his is the deepest philosophical analysis of what is wrong with liberalism. Technocratic, legalistic, and empirical criticism of liberalism is all very well, but it is not enough. He believes that contemporary liberalism is the logical outcome of the philosophical principles of modernity, taken to their extremes. In some sense, modernity itself is the problem. Strauss believed that liberalism, as practiced in the advanced nations of the West in the 20th century, contains within it an intrinsic tendency towards relativism, which leads to nihilism. He first experienced this crisis in his native Germany's Weimar Republic of the 1920s, in which the liberal state was so ultra-tolerant that it tolerated the Communists and Nazis who eventually destroyed it and tolerated the moral disorder that turned ordinary

Germans against it. A Jew, he fled Germany in 1938. We see this problem repeated today in the multiculturalism that sanctions the importation into the West of Moslem fundamentalists whose foremost aim is the destruction of the Western society that makes that tolerance possible, and in an America so frightened of offending anyone that it refuses to carry out the basic duty of any normal state to guard its own borders.

Strauss believed that America is founded on an uneasy mixture of classical (Greco-Roman), Biblical, and modern political philosophy. Conservatives have not failed to note that a significant part of the mischief of liberalism consists in abandoning the biblical element; this story has been told many times and is well-represented in Washington. Where Strauss comes in is that he is the outstanding critic of the abandonment of the classical element. His key contribution to fighting the crisis of modernity was to restore the intellectual legitimacy of classical political philosophy, especially Plato and Aristotle.

Strauss's first move, which came as a stunning shock to a 1950s academic world sunk in scientism and desirous of making "political science" substitute for political philosophy, was to reactivate the legitimacy of ancient philosophy as real political critique. It is almost impossible to overstate how unlikely this seemed at the time, it being then a casual article of faith that ancient philosophy had no more to say about modern political problems than ancient physics about modern engineering. But he succeeded. When leftists today feel obliged to denounce Great Books curricula, it is because they know, consciously or unconsciously, that classical thought is very much alive and is a real threat to them. The holy grail of Straussian scholarship has been to understand the ancient philosophers not from a modern point of view but from their own point of view. The implication is that then we become free to adopt the ancient point of view towards modern political affairs, freeing us from the narrowness of the modern perspective and enabling us to step back from the distortions and corruptions of modernity. Strauss contends that the modern view of politics is artificial and that the ancient one is direct and honest about the experience of political things.

Strauss was not ignorant of the reasons modern political philosophy had come about. He saw it as a grand compromise made when the demands of virtue made by ancient political philosophy seemed too high to be attainable. Modern political philosophy provides no rational basis for higher human achievement, but it provides a very solid basis for the moderate human achievement of stability and prosperity. He famously described modernity as built on "low but solid ground." ([Natural Right and History](#))

The key Straussian concept is the Straussian text, which is a piece of philosophical writing that is deliberately written so that the average reader will understand it as saying one ("exoteric") thing but the special few for whom it is intended will grasp its real ("esoteric") meaning. The reason for this is that philosophy is dangerous. Philosophy calls into question the conventional morality upon which civil order in society depends; it also reveals ugly truths that weaken men's attachment to their societies. Ideally, it then offers an alternative based on reason, but understanding the reasoning is difficult and many people who read it will only understand the "calling into question" part and not the latter part that reconstructs ethics. Worse, it is unclear whether philosophy really can

construct a rational basis for ethics. Therefore philosophy has a tendency to promote nihilism in mediocre minds, and they must be prevented from being exposed to it. The civil authorities are frequently aware of this, and therefore they persecute and seek to silence philosophers. Strauss shockingly admits, contrary to generations of liberal professors who have taught him as a martyr to the First Amendment, that the prosecution of Socrates was not entirely without point. This honesty about the dangers of philosophy gives Straussian thought a seriousness lacking in much contemporary philosophy; it is also a sign of the conviction that philosophy, contrary to the mythology of our "practical" (though sodden with ideology and quick to take offense at ideas) age, matters.

Strauss not only believed that the great thinkers of the past wrote Straussian texts, he approved of this. It is a kind of class system of the intellect, which mirrors the class systems of rulers and ruled, owners and workers, creators and audiences, which exist in politics, economics, and culture. He views the founding corruption of modern political philosophy, which hundreds of years later bears poisonous fruit in the form of liberal nihilism, to be the attempt to abolish this distinction. It is a kind of Bolshevism of the mind.

Some dispute whether Straussian texts exist. The great medieval Jewish Aristotelian Moses Maimonides admitted writing this way. I can only say that I have found the concept fruitful in my own readings in philosophy. On a more prosaic level, even a courageous editor like my own can't print certain things, so I certainly write my column in code from time to time, and other writers have told me the same thing.

According to Strauss, Machiavelli is the key turning point that leads to modern political philosophy, and Machiavelli's sin was to speak esoteric truths openly. He told all within hearing that there is no certain God who punishes wrongdoing; the essence of Machiavellianism is that one can get away with things. Because of this, he turned his back on the Christian virtue that the belief in a retributive God had upheld. Pre-Machiavellian philosophy, be it Greco-Roman or Christian, had taught that the good political order must be based upon human virtues. Machiavelli believed that sufficient virtue was not attainable and therefore taught that the good political order must be based on men as they are, i.e. upon their mediocrity and vices. This is not just realism, or mere cynicism. It amounts to a deliberate choice as to how society should be organized and a decided de-emphasis on personal virtue. It leads to the new discipline of political science, which is concerned with coldly describing men as they actually are, warts and all. It leads ultimately to Immanuel Kant's statement that,

"We could devise a constitution for a race of devils, if only they were intelligent."

The ancient view is that this will get you nowhere, because only men with civic virtue will obey a constitution. The modern view leads naturally to value-free social science and social policies that seek to solve social problems through technocratic manipulation that refrains from "imposing value judgments" on the objects of its concern.

The key hidden step in the Machiavellian view, a bold intellectual move that is made logically rigorous and then politically palatable by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, is to define man as outside nature. Strauss sees this as the key to modernity. Man exists in opposition to nature, conquering it to serve his comfort. Nature does not define what is good for man; man does. This view is the basis for the modern penchant to make freedom and comfort (read "prosperity") the central concerns of political philosophy, whereas the ancients made virtue the center. Once man is outside nature, he has no natural teleology or purpose, and therefore no natural virtues. Since he has no natural purpose, anything that might give him one, like God, is suspect, and thus modernity tends towards atheism. Similarly, man's duties, as opposed to his rights, drop away, as does his natural sociability. The philosophical price of freedom is purposelessness, which ultimately gives rise to the alienation, anomie, and nihilism of modern life.

The interesting question is why Strauss chose to "spill the beans" about Straussian texts if they are supposed to remain a secret. The answer is that he felt he had to, given the severity of our crisis. Admittedly, the concept of the Straussian text is one susceptible to intellectual mischief in the form of wild claims about the esoteric meaning of texts, not to mention rather off-putting for anyone who doesn't like know-it-all elites. But before getting too huffy about this elitist view of the good society, it is best to remind oneself that it is strikingly similar to the view cultivated for centuries by the Catholic and Orthodox churches and by Orthodox Judaism, not to mention other religions: there is a small number of men who know the detailed truth; the masses are told what they need to know and no more. Free inquiry outside the bounds of revelation is dangerous. And yet Strauss practiced free inquiry and taught anyone who could afford the tuition at the University of Chicago how to do so. Clearly he is not just an elitist trying to return to the past that he claims existed; he strongly hints this is impossible anyway.

So what was his positive teaching about the good? In a nutshell, Strauss would lead us back to the Aristotelian conception of man as naturally political. Politics implies natural goods that are prior to human thinking about them. If man is political by nature, the goods of politics also exist by nature. The goods of politics are the ways man must behave to make political community work. If there are natural goods, there is a natural hierarchy of goods, and therefore a natural hierarchy of men, as different men pursue different goods. Civic equality may be salutary for the functioning of society, but men are not truly equal in value. All these things and more follow. Following Strauss's arguments, it is not hard to realize that much of what conservatives find attractive in society is ultimately premised on philosophy that is pre-modern and to some extent anti-modern. We realize that our America is a modern society but not only a modern society. This alone is worth the price of the Straussian ticket.

It goes without saying that one naturally wonders whether Strauss's own writings are Straussian texts. That is, what did Strauss really believe? Basically, there are two schools of thought on this question, which turn on whether or not one thinks that Strauss really believed he had found an answer to nihilism. Does the restoration of classical political philosophy really re-establish convincing values? Are Aristotle's virtues really virtues? Is Plato's critique of democracy true? Did Strauss find the answer? Did he think he did? Or

was he just spinning a new myth for intellectuals to keep them from spreading relativism and nihilism? There are vigorous Straussian partisans for both views.

Strauss believed that the great competitor of philosophy is revealed religion. He believed that reason and revelation cannot refute each other. He believed that religion was the great necessity for ordinary men. For him, religion is in essence revealed law, and he took his native Judaism to be its paradigm. Strauss had an ambivalent attitude towards Christianity. On the one hand, Christianity is the only practicable religion for America. On the other hand, Christianity has troubling strands within it, like St. Aquinas's claim that reason and revelation are compatible, for him the precise opposite of the most important truth. It is a commonplace that Christianity is a synthesis of Greek philosophy with biblical theism; Strauss rejects the idea that such a synthesis is possible. For him, religion is at bottom simply dogmatic and unapologetic about it. It is not quite *credo quia absurdum est*, but it is a very bright line in the sand. Nietzsche was right: man needs lies. Or, as we saw above, maybe some men don't.

Strauss was an atheist, which is the thing I find most troubling about him. He never produces a proof that there is no God. More seriously, there's his apparent certainty that (Judeo-Christian) religion is false, not just uncertain. Of course he combines this with a vigorous defense of that same religion, which is part of what makes him attractive to conservatives, but there's something unnecessary and rather dangerous about being an atheist rather than an agnostic. Agnosticism would fit in with the rest of his teachings just fine, and without either begging the question of how Mr. Strauss has proved the non-existence of God or tempting his followers with the impunity that atheism confers. Far better for the conservative intellectual who doesn't believe in God to be not quite sure on the point and to live his life so as to stay out of too much trouble with the Almighty if he turns out to exist. In my view, this is the ultimate basis for the self-restraint and humility before existence that conservative thinkers must cultivate. True agnosticism which is not a version either of lazy atheism or lazy theism, is a rare and difficult intellectual balancing act, requiring great intellectual poise and a skill for reasoning in terms of balanced probabilities and multiple simultaneous values. This Strauss does not teach.

The canard has been leveled at Strauss that he was in a profound sense anti-American. This is so because he is the profoundest modern critic of the modern natural-right teaching on which our society is based, but as I argued above, this is an incomplete view of our foundation, and he only criticizes modern natural-right because he thinks it destroys itself and becomes untenable. As Strauss says, "just because we are friends of liberal democracy does not entitle us to be flatterers of liberal democracy." In his public utterances on contemporary politics he was a conventional conservative patriot who backed the United States against Nazi Germany in WWII and Soviet Russia in the Cold War. He was boldly anti-Communist at a time when most Western intellectuals were dangerously equivocal, if not outright sympathetic. What is undeniable is that he did see the United States as the most advanced case of liberalism and therefore the most susceptible to the nihilism he dedicated his life to fighting. But he also saw the United States as partly founded on the classical and Biblical political wisdom that offered an answer. There is no doubt that he saw the United States as the world's only hope. One of

the lessons we can draw from him is that the essence of liberal modernity is so problematic that America cannot afford for its essence to be liberal modernity, whether that liberalism takes Lockean, classical (in the sense of 19th Century) or postmodern form.

Strauss describes the purpose or project of modernity as "the universal society, a society consisting of free and equal nations, each consisting of free and equal men and women, with all these nations to be fully developed as regards their power of production, thanks to science." (essay, "The Crisis of Our Time") It is interesting to note that this crisp conception makes clear that globalism is not the inevitable culmination of modernity, as its proponents believe, but a perversion which would first make nations unfree and then abolish them outright. Strauss was a trenchant anti-globalist *avant la lettre*, writing that "no human being and no group of human beings can rule the whole of the human race justly." ([Natural Right and History](#)) His most serious reservation about the Cold War was its lurking premise that the undesirability of Soviet world rule implied the desirability of American world rule. He believed that world citizenship is impossible, as citizenship, like friendship, implies a certain exclusivity, and universal love is a fraud. (I would say if it exists, it is the province only of God.) Good men are patriots or lovers of their patria or fatherland, which must by definition be specific. The United Nations has failed in its fundamental mission: to prevent war.

What are Strauss's drawbacks? His followers are accused of being cultish, which they are to an extent, though not in my experience offensively so, and this is irrelevant to the truth of his ideas. When I was a student at the University of Chicago, there was a circle clustered around Allan Bloom and his great Nobel-laureate friend Saul Bellow. Favored students of the usually haughty Bloom were gradually introduced to greater and greater intimacies with the master, culminating in exclusive dinner parties with him and Saul in Bloom's lavishly furnished million-dollar apartment. (Read Bellow's novel [Ravelstein](#) if you want the details). Bloom was reputed to say that he liked his students to come to him "virgins," not having read philosophy before, so he could shape their entire outlooks. Straussians talk in a kind of code to one another. When one refers to someone as a "gentleman," it means they are a morally admirable person but not capable of philosophy. They network in academia and in Washington and find one another jobs. A lot of their academic money comes from the John Olin Foundation. This is the inside dope on them; I don't find it particularly damning, as the Left seems to.

Intellectually, one may criticize Strauss with the simple question: are you really arguing that the classical view of man is true? If so, are you also defending classical physics and metaphysics, which the classical thinkers thought was essential to their teachings? If not, and the classical teaching is just a useful corrective for modernity, not a truth in its own right, then what is the good regime? What is your ideal? Perhaps unsurprisingly, Strauss is elusive on these points. He certainly argued in the direction of defending the classical view of man, but there is nowhere where he declares, QED: here I have proved it. To some extent, this is just honesty on his part, and the Straussian project awaits others to complete it.

Note: If you want to learn about Strauss for yourself, start with Allan Bloom's [The Closing of the American Mind](#) to get a popularized version, bearing in mind that Bloom is an odd character with his own peculiar obsessions. Then try Strauss's own [Natural Right and History](#), followed by [Persecution and the Art of Writing](#). With his student Joseph Cropsey, Strauss also edited [The History of Political Philosophy](#), which has essays on all the major political philosophers and is an excellent and reliable introduction to the field as a whole. Shadia B. Drury is the Left's designated debunker of Strauss; her first book on him, [The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss](#), written when she still had some respect for him, is somewhat useful, though not wholly reliable. Her second book, [Leo Strauss and the American Right](#), is a snide, careless and inaccurate piece of liberal boilerplate.