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Introduction to Two Unpublished Lectures by Leo Strauss

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These two lectures by Leo Strauss, "What Can We Learn from Political Theory?" delivered in July 1942, and "The Re-education of Axis Countries Concerning the Jews," delivered November 7, 1943, include not only Strauss's most elaborate statement about the relation of political philosophy and political practice (in the first), but what may well be his fullest written public statements about matters of contemporary foreign policy. Both lectures obviously were carefully considered, composed, and corrected, but Strauss did not attempt to publish either. He may have had second thoughts about some of the arguments he advanced in these lectures, or he may simply have chosen to concentrate his literary efforts elsewhere. Other lectures he prepared during this period but did not publish himself have since been published: "The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy," delivered April 1940 at Syracuse University, and "Reason and Revelation," delivered January 1948 at Hartford Theological Seminary, both in Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem* (Cambridge University Press, 2006); "German Nihilism," delivered to the New School's General Seminar February 26, 1941, is in *Interpretation* 26:3 (Spring 1999).

One is immediately struck by the scholastic form of the first lecture. Strauss first presents the negative argument—that we can learn nothing from political philosophy—in three parts, followed by an argument "to the contrary" taken from "authority," and then the positive arguments setting forth what we can learn from ancient political philosophy. The positive arguments are modifications rather than total denials of the negative arguments. Strauss presents a version of the contrast between the "legitimate utopianism" of ancient political philosophy and the "spurious utopianism" of modern political philosophy that he was to modify or develop later. On this basis, Strauss urges us to accept the absolute limits on human progress without becoming cynical or ceasing to do our best and to live with reasonable joy.

Among Strauss's intriguing incidental remarks are his suggestion that "If the sophists had not undermined the basic principles of political life, Plato might not have been compelled to elaborate his *Republic*," his preference for the "tolerably decent imperialism of the Anglo-Saxon brand" over the "intolerably indecent imperialism of the Axis brand," his endorsement of the modern policy of religious toleration, and his recognition of the need for a sincere entente with the Russians after the War.

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The second lecture is skeptical about the prospects for liberal democracy ("the true doctrine") in postwar Germany on the grounds of its historic weakness in Germany and the inability of one nation to educate another. In the course of this analysis, Strauss rejects the Nazi doctrine that crime pays, stresses the importance of compromise in the practice of Anglo-Saxon liberal democracy as well as its failure to live up to its principles (instancing racial segregation in the United States and British policy in India), shows his awareness at this date of the rivers of Jewish blood flowing in the Reich, and denies that (as a Jew) he ever considered himself a German. It may be useful to consider the last sentences of the two lectures together in the light of Strauss's lifelong preoccupation with what he called the theologico-political problem.

A discussion of some aspects of these lectures can be found in my "Will the Real Leo Strauss Please Stand Up?" in *The American Interest* 2:1 (September/October 2006): 120–28.

Steven Smith drew the first lecture to my attention (the typescript can be found in the Leo Strauss Papers, Special Collections, University of Chicago Library, Box 6, Folder 12). Joseph Cropsey made available to me the handwritten manuscript of the second lecture, which I transcribed with the aid of Heinrich Meier, and gave permission on behalf of the Estate of Leo Strauss for both lectures to be published in the *Review of Politics*.[1] Catherine Zuckert offered to publish the lectures in the *Review*. I transcribed handwritten portions of the first lecture and have standardized spelling and punctuation, indented paragraph beginnings, italicized titles and foreign words, corrected a few grammatical errors, inserted a few words in brackets, and used footnotes to indicate Strauss's own changes and to provide relevant information. I am responsible for any errors.

[1]Please note that Joseph Cropsey gave permission on behalf of Strauss's estate for publication of the lectures in ROP, but that the Estate retains copyright in them for purposes of controlling book publication and translation.

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