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Response to Contributors

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The demonstrated willingness of ten knowledgeable scholars to read and comment on parts of my work is, indeed, a great honor. As Mary Keys's introductory remarks show, the contributors are friends. However, although their comments are generally appreciative, they are by no means uncritical. I thus welcome the opportunity to respond to them.

I begin with the comments on *Postmodern Platos*, because, as Michael Gillespie points out, it raises the questions with which I have been primarily concerned for my entire professional career. As all three of the commentators note, anyone who reads the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger and takes their arguments seriously is led to ask: What is the human activity we call philosophy? What has it been in the past? Does that activity remain tenable now and in the future? Having learned that it constitutes a Sisyphean effort to achieve an impossible goal, should we simply give it up? Or should it be conducted in a new way on the basis of a new understanding? What value does or can philosophy have for those who participate in it as well as for those who experience its effects? Some of those effects, for instance, the discoveries of modern medicine and the relief of poverty, appear to be beneficial, but others, such as the destructive potential of nuclear weapons, climate change, and enhanced means of control and manipulation, also appear to be extremely dangerous. The last question indicates some of the reasons why a person who teaches in a political science department would engage in such an inquiry.

In *Postmodern Platos*, I compared the answers given to those questions by five "postmodern" thinkers, all of whom had gone back to what is commonly thought to be the origin of the Western philosophical tradition in Plato in order to ask what that origin actually was and then to discover whether and, if so, why Plato and his successors had gone astray. I described Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Strauss, and Derrida as "postmodern" because they all question the promise raised more or less explicitly by all "modern" philosophers that the search for knowledge, particularly in the form of modern natural science, would culminate in the provision of means whereby human beings could massively improve the conditions of their

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lives. These questions are provoked partly by the ambiguous results of the development of modern technology, but they are by no means limited to it. Because technology is an intentional result of human activity, even if it has unintended effects, the questions extend to what it means to be human. And, because human beings have traditionally been distinguished by our reason, speech, and political organizations, the inquiry involves the source and status of all these capacities.

In his comments, Jeffrey Church suggests that the questions I raise concerning the value of philosophy point to a fourth: What is the good life for human beings? And, if philosophy is the answer to that question, what sort of philosophy? He then derives three kinds of answers to that question from my analysis of the five postmodern philosophers: (1) the traditional rationalist understanding of philosophy as contemplation of the eternal, intelligible order of the universe implicit in the denial of the existence of such an order by all five of the postmodern thinkers, and (2) two alternative responses to the perceived untenability of traditional rationalism represented by Nietzsche and Heidegger, on the one hand, and Strauss and Gadamer, on the other. (If, as I suggest, Derridean analyses can only be critical, deconstruction does not and cannot represent an answer to the question about the best way of life.) Since I seem to prefer Nietzsche to Heidegger and Strauss to Gadamer, Church concentrates on the first author in each pair.

Because most nonbelievers in the current age find it difficult to accept the notion of a rationally and hierarchically organized cosmos, Church suggests, we are left with these two alternatives. (1) Recognizing that there is no naturally "given" answer to the question concerning the best human life, but that there are, in fact, multiple and incommensurable "goods," we can embrace and seek to secure the freedom we have to choose among them. However, as Kant and Nietzsche show, if in very different ways, that freedom extends not merely or even primarily to choices among material or "consumer" goods in the market. It extends in the most important and fundamental way to the constitution of our "souls," that is, our understanding of ourselves as individuals and in communities. Not all individuals are able to effect such a transformation of "the inner life of humanity" by "transforming a worldview, rather than affecting the material conditions around a people." As Nietzsche saw, this transformation is the task of the philosopher. Yet everyone benefits, because as a result of their transformed views of themselves and others, people find a justification for and thus redemption from the pain inseparable from animate existence. (2) Rather than declare that philosophy has come to an end and that human beings must make a radical new beginning, as Nietzsche and Heidegger do, if in somewhat different ways, both Gadamer and Strauss strive to revive the tradition, but on the basis of a new understanding of it.

As Church sees, I favor the second alternative. Rather than emphasize the freedom human beings have to define themselves, both as individuals and in communities, I would urge readers to hearken to the philosophers who have

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reemphasized the limitations of human knowledge, especially but not only in light of the horrible consequences of the attempt by some human beings to transform not merely nature, but human nature that became evident in the mid-twentieth century. The fundamental reason that all such attempted transformations of human nature have had such horrible effects is that these attempts are made by what continued to be mortal, hence fallible, human beings. In seeking knowledge, however, we cannot look merely at its results or effects. As Nietzsche points out at the beginning of his *Genealogy of Morals*, we have to take account of the source. And to discover what human beings can or cannot do, we first have to look at what some have achieved—and failed to achieve—in the past. What happened or not in the past is not simply or in itself determinative, of course; we have to investigate the reasons why some past attempts succeeded and others failed—as well as the standard by which we measure improvement.

In contrast to Nietzsche and Heidegger, both Gadamer and Strauss attempt to retain some of the traditional understanding of philosophy, less as contemplation and more as everlasting search or inquiry. But they retain that understanding on the basis of quite different conceptions of the character and context of human thought. As Gadamer observes in his correspondence with Strauss concerning the publication of *Truth and Method*, they engage in similar hermeneutical practices insofar as they both try initially to understand a text as its author understood it, and both recognize that involves taking account of the historical circumstances in which the text was produced.[1] Acknowledging that they began in a similar place, Strauss contends that he and Gadamer have moved in completely opposed directions. Although Gadamer embraced Heidegger's contention that all human thought is bounded by a horizon, Strauss notes somewhat ironically that Gadamer's notion of the "fusion of horizons" in the appropriation of a past text by a current reader in effect denies the existence of any fundamental problems or oppositions, including the "ontological difference" between Being and the beings that Heidegger himself emphasized. Gadamer thus holds open the possibility of a continuous expansion of human knowledge, whereas Strauss emphasizes the "eternal questions" or insoluble problems involved in the oppositions between poetry and philosophy, ancients and moderns, theology and politics that result in philosophy's always remaining a search for wisdom rather than culminating, as Hegel promised, in the possession of "science" or knowledge. In maintaining that philosophy and the civilization that fostered it is now in an unprecedented crisis, Strauss sees himself closer than Gadamer is to Heidegger.[2]

[1]Hans-Georg Gadamer and Leo Strauss, "Correspondence concerning *Wahrheit und Methode*," *Independent Journal of Philosophy,* no. 2 (1978): 5–6.

[2]Church is correct to suggest that at the time I wrote *Postmodern Platos* I thought that Strauss was responding more to Nietzsche than to Heidegger. In a letter to Karl Löwith

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Gillespie pushes the question raised by Church further and more pointedly. He first argues that both Nietzsche and Heidegger show that the practice of philosophy in Europe culminates in "the realization that there is no meaning, purpose, or goal for human life. What is even more important to note, however, is that for both of them nihilism is not just a recent phenomenon." Beginning with Plato's turn away from the pre-Socratics, both Nietzsche and Heidegger argue that the history of philosophy constitutes a series of attempts to defend something like Platonic metaphysics "against the deconstructive power of radical questioning … or real philosophy. These attempts, however, ended not in the security of self-certain reason but in the rational demonstration of the impossibility of rationality (in Kant's antinomy doctrine)." Nietzsche and Heidegger thus "abandon philosophy in the traditional sense for art and/or religion." I doubt that Nietzsche would accept the equation of his "philosophy of the future" with art any more than Heidegger would accept the equation of a new dispensation of fate or disclosure of Being with religion. But it is certainly true that neither

on June 23, 1935, Strauss wrote: "Nietzsche so bewitched me between my 22nd and 30th years, that I literally believed everything that I understood of him," but that he had subsequently concluded that Nietzsche had not succeeded in "repeating antiquity at the peak of modernity," and "became untrue to his intention … because of his confinement within modern presuppositions" (*Independent Journal of Philosophy*, nos. 5–6 [1988]: 183–84). And in a lecture he gave in 1956, Strauss stated that "it is certainly not an overstatement to say that no one has spoken so greatly and so nobly of what a philosopher is as Nietzsche" (first published as "An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism," in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989], 40). Further study has convinced me that Strauss thought Heidegger raised an even more fundamental challenge. Although Nietzsche maintained that all the rational structures philosophers claimed to have discovered in the world were, in fact, "magnificent moral structures" of their own creation, he persisted in affirming an underlying cause in the "will to power" and something eternal, if only in the form of an eternal return. Heidegger argued that all human life and thought are historically bounded and thus, according to Strauss, condemned "to oblivion the notion of eternity." Strauss thought such an "estrangement from man's deepest desire and therewith from the primary issues is the price which modern man had to pay, from the very beginning, for attempting to be absolutely sovereign, to become the master and owner of nature, to conquer chance" ("What Is Political Philosophy?," in *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959], 55). The fact that human beings desire contact with the eternal does not mean that they can achieve it. It does mean that we should not give up our deepest desire without trying to satisfy it. What I hope is an improved understanding of Strauss in this respect is reflected in the two books I coauthored with my husband, Michael P. Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), and *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

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Nietzsche nor Heidegger thought that philosophy could continue to be conducted as it had been in the past.

Gillespie observes correctly that I present Gadamer, Strauss, and Derrida as thinkers who explicitly recognize the danger announced by Nietzsche and Heidegger, but reject their nihilistic conclusions as a result of a reconsideration of Plato. However, I do not recognize my own readings in Gillespie's description of my criticism of Gadamer as a relativist and Derrida as following Nietzsche in considering every form of life to be a particular form or constellation of power, but not believing that any of them constitutes a whole. In fact, I underscore Gadamer's emphasis on the Idea of the Good in Plato, fault his notion of the "fusion of horizons" for denying the existence of any insuperable oppositions, and suggest that he cannot, therefore, explain the need for political associations because of the persistence of war. Likewise, I argue that Derrida's central concept is the "trace" left from past events, which is continually being emptied out and filled in with new content, so that there is constant change. Talk of various constellations of power sounds much more like "the new Nietzsche" proposed by Gilles Deleuze. Gillespie summarizes his understanding of my accounts of their reinterpretations of Plato in response to the challenges posed by Nietzsche and Heidegger very briefly, however, in order to concentrate on asking whether, as I suggest, Strauss presents the strongest argument for philosophy and the supreme value of the examined life. Gillespie thinks not.

Gillespie agrees that Strauss "tried to show that nihilism was not in fact a Western problem that had its origins in the Greeks but a modern problem (beginning with Machiavelli and Hobbes), and that the crisis of modernity was not theological or technological but moral and political." He also agrees that Strauss thought that philosophy was not practiced in isolation, but in association with others, and that Strauss emphasized the necessary tension between the radical questioning of all opinions that is philosophy and the conventional moral, theological, and political beliefs which hold the members of any political community together.

However, in describing the way in which Strauss thought that he had found a partial response to Nietzsche and Heidegger by rereading Plato through the lenses of Farabi and Maimonides, Gillespie does not present an altogether accurate account of Strauss's argument. His subsequent critique thus fails to hit its target.

First, he suggests that Strauss saw two ways philosophers could deal with the tension between their questions and the requirements of their communities. The first was for the philosopher to act on the basis of the knowledge of the nature of a just society he had obtained by becoming a "prophet" or lawgiver. However, although Strauss acknowledges that in the *Republic* Socrates *seems* to call for philosophers to become kings, he points out that Socrates also makes it clear that no philosopher qua philosopher will ever want to rule.[3]

[3]Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), 125–28.

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Likewise, Strauss argues at the beginning of his account of "The Philosophy of Plato" that Farabi initially *seems* to suggest that a philosopher seeks knowledge in order to become a prophet who benefits everyone in the community by becoming a knowledgeable lawgiver. But, Strauss points out, Farabi later acknowledges that a philosopher can arise and flourish in a less than perfect polity.[4] In sum, for Strauss, there has never been nor is there ever apt to be the philosopher-legislator Nietzsche describes in *Beyond Good and Evil*, sect. 211. According to Strauss, the practice of philosophy does require a philosopher "to do a great deal more than examine himself." He has to learn why the persistent problems are and will always be insoluble and thus why philosophy will always constitute a search for wisdom rather than culminate in the possession of knowledge. But his inquires do not require him "to secure the space, time, and companions for such examination," that is, to found or maintain a government or school. A philosopher does *not* "also have to be a political and moral teacher, defending the best possible conventional realm that philosophizing revealed for a particular people and culture." Strauss never denied that Parmenides, Heraclitus, Descartes, or Leibniz was a philosopher, even though none of them has an explicitly political teaching.[5]

It may be true, as Gillespie claims, that "accepting Strauss's account depends at its core upon accepting his interpretation of Plato and especially the Platonic doctrine of the forms." However, Gillespie objects, "what Strauss has to say about the knowledge of the forms … is mysterious at best and seems on many occasions to be incoherent." Is it? In *The City and Man* Strauss describes the "doctrine of ideas which Socrates expounds to his interlocutors" as "very hard to understand; to begin with, it is utterly incredible." But he then goes on to explain: the "ideas" seem to refer to the nature of a thing or class of things. The problem concerns the claim that the ideas exist separately from the "things" said to participate in them. (As Strauss recognizes, this claim is the target of Aristotle's critique in his *Metaphysics*.) Strauss acknowledges that the separate existence of the ideas makes sense with regard to geometrical concepts that cannot be found among sensible things and virtues such as justice that may never be found

[4]In the body of the text of *Philosophy and Law*, trans. Eve Adler (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), Strauss suggests that Farabi and Maimonides sought to make classical political philosophy compatible with the religious law of their communities by arguing that the philosopher's search for wisdom would culminate in his becoming a knowledgeable legislator. But in his later work "Farabi's *Plato*," Strauss shows that, like Plato, Farabi thinks it is possible for a philosopher to live in an imperfect society. In other words, a philosopher does not necessarily have to become a legislator.

[5]Quite the contrary. See Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*, rev. ed., ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (New York: Free Press, 1991 [1953]), 201. Strauss explicitly and frequently recognizes the existence of different modes of philosophizing, but argues that the Socratic is best.

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purely or perfectly in individual humans or societies. However, he observes, "it is hard to say that a perfect bed is something on which no man can ever rest," as Socrates seems to contend in Book X of the *Republic*.[6]

Strauss points out that there is no consistent list or "doctrine" of the ideas to be found in the Platonic dialogues. But his explanations of the basis of the general notion of the "ideas" and why Socrates thought that he and his interlocutors should seek knowledge of such are neither "mysterious" nor "incoherent." In *Natural Right and History*, he explains the connection he sees between Socrates's characteristic "what is x?" question and his general argument concerning the "ideas." Socrates is famous for turning from the cosmological inquiries of his predecessors to the study of the human things. His "study of human things consisted in raising the question 'what is?' in regard to those things." But, contrary to Aristotle's famous description in the *Metaphysics*, Strauss argues, Socrates's study "was not limited to raising the question 'what is?' in regard to specific human things, such as the various virtues." The reason is that "it is impossible to grasp the distinctive character of human things as such without grasping the essential difference between human things and the things which are not human, i.e., the divine or natural things. This, in turn, presupposes some understanding of the divine or natural things as such."[7]

Strauss acknowledges in *The City and Man* that Socrates ascended from law to nature "with a new awakeness, caution, and emphasis" that led him to emphasize "the human things," to demonstrate his piety by not raising the questions, what is god? and what is soul?[8] However, in both *Natural Right and History* and *The City and Man* Strauss argues that "Socrates' turn to the study of human things was based, not upon disregard of the divine or natural things, but upon a new approach to the understanding of all things. … [He] deviated from his predecessors by identifying the science of the whole, or of everything that is, with the understanding of 'what each of the beings is.' For 'to be' means 'to be something' and hence to be different from things which are 'something else.' Hence the whole cannot 'be' in the same sense in which everything that is 'something' 'is'; the whole must be 'beyond being.' And yet the whole is the totality of the parts. To understand the whole then means to understand all the parts of the whole or the articulation of the whole." Explaining the connection between this approach and Socrates's conception of the "ideas," Strauss adds, "if 'to be' is 'to be something,' the being of a thing … is primarily its What, its 'shape' or 'form' [the basic meaning of *eidos* or 'idea' in ancient Greek]."[9] One would think that a

[6]Strauss, *City and Man*, 119–20.

[7]Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 121–22.

[8]Strauss, *City and Man*, 20.

[9]Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 121–23.

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man who has studied Hegel the way Gillespie has would not find Strauss's explanation of the connection between Socrates's characteristic "what is?" question and the ideas either mysterious or incoherent.

Gillespie's questions about the adequacy of Strauss's response to Nietzsche and Heidegger are directed primarily at a statement Strauss makes in "What Is Political Philosophy?" about the reasons he thinks, in opposition to Hegel, that philosophy will remain a search for wisdom or knowledge rather than the possession thereof. But Gillespie does not respond exactly to what Strauss wrote. According to Strauss, "classical political philosophy … was originated by Socrates. And Socrates was so far from being committed to a specific cosmology that his knowledge was knowledge of ignorance." But, Strauss emphasizes, "knowledge of ignorance is *not* ignorance." Rather than assert that Socrates claimed "to know nothing," as Gillespie states, Strauss maintains that Socrates and his followers have known rather precisely what they do not know. Moreover, he describes the kinds of knowledge that they possess and that they lack. They know "the elusive character of the truth, of the whole." Socrates thus "viewed man in the light of the mysterious character of the whole." Linking that knowledge of the elusive or mysterious character of the whole with his understanding of the "Platonic" ideas, Strauss adds, "We may also say he viewed man in light of the unchangeable ideas, i.e., of the fundamental and permanent problems." Then Strauss describes at least one, if not *the* fundamental problem:

> The whole eludes us but we know parts: we possess partial knowledge of parts. The knowledge which we possess is characterized by a fundamental dualism which has never been overcome. At one pole we find knowledge of homogeneity: above all in … mathematics. … At the opposite pole we find knowledge of heterogeneity, and in particular, of heterogeneous ends; the highest form of this kind of knowledge is the art of the statesman and of the educator. … It seems that knowledge of the whole would have to combine somehow political knowledge in the highest sense with knowledge of homogeneity. And this combination is not at our disposal. Men are therefore constantly tempted to force the issue by imposing unity on the phenomena, by absolutizing either knowledge of homogeneity or knowledge of ends. … [But as a search for knowledge of the articulation of all the different kinds of beings in the whole] philosophy is characterized by the gentle, if firm, refusal to succumb to either charm.[10]

Strauss's recognition of this insoluble dualism does not leave him, as Gillespie suggests, with the "suspension of belief" characteristic of Pyrrhonian skeptics. On the contrary, Strauss not only declares that knowledge of the heterogeneous ends of human life is superior to the knowledge we have been able to obtain by reducing nature to homogeneous, calculable units. In *Natural Right and History*, he also explains why, like Socrates, we need to begin the search for

[10]Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 39–40.

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knowledge "not from what is first in itself or first by nature but from what is first for us." Observing that "the being of things, their What, comes first to sight, not in what we [literally] see of them, but in what is said about them or in opinions …, Socrates thus began his search for his understanding of the natures of things from the opinions about their natures. For every opinion is based on some … perception with the mind's eye, of something." Strauss thus describes Socrates's turn to the investigation of opinions "in present-day parlance" as a "return to 'common sense' or to 'the world of common sense,'" in which human beings "naively" perceive different kinds of things related in various ways to one another, not a fundamental stratum of matter, motion, or energy. "Socrates implied that disregarding the opinions about the natures of things would amount to abandoning the most important access to reality which we have." We would lose Socrates's initial insight that the world is composed of essentially different kinds of beings, and that philosophy consists in the attempt, first, to identify what those "beings" or parts are and, second, to show how these different beings are related to each other so as to constitute a whole. Challenging René Descartes, as it were, before the fact, Socrates "implied that 'the universal doubt' of all opinions would lead us, not into the heart of truth, but into a void."[11] This was the universe Blaise Pascal thought that he confronted as a result of his study of modern mathematical physics. According to Strauss, our confrontation with a void is the result of modern philosophy. On the basis of his study *Nihilism before Nietzsche*, Gillespie might agree.

Acknowledging that Strauss suggests that we can have knowledge of the natural ends of human life, Gillespie asks how we obtain this knowledge, how we know that there are heterogeneous ends, and how we know or can learn their natural rank. Strauss suggests that our knowledge of the heterogeneity comes first from our own "common sense" experience; different individuals have different goals. Later we learn that various societies, cultures, or civilizations have also had different goals. (Nietzsche's Zarathustra suggests that there have been 1001.) "Classical political philosophy," as introduced by Socrates and in contrast to modern political philosophy, "consists … in the ascent from opinions to knowledge or to the truth." Socrates called that philosophy "dialectics," because dialectics "is the art of conversation or of friendly dispute." It is "made possible or necessary by the fact that opinions about what things are … contradict one another. Recognizing the contradiction, one is forced to go beyond opinions toward the consistent view of the nature of the thing concerned. That consistent view makes visible the relative truth of the contradictory opinions; the consistent view proves to be the comprehensive or total view."[12] By severing the connection

[11]Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 124.
[12]Ibid.

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between its investigations and their "common sense" origins, modern philosophy makes such an ascent impossible.[13]

But, Gillespie asks, has Strauss not admitted that philosophers will never acquire the knowledge of the whole they seek? How does he know that there is such a whole?

In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss contends in agreement with both Heidegger and Gadamer that "all knowledge, however limited or 'scientific,' presupposes a horizon, a comprehensive view within which knowledge is possible." In other words, the precondition of any human understanding of anything is "a fundamental awareness of the whole." Strauss's knowledge of the existence of the whole thus comes from reflecting on the character not only of his own understanding of things, but also of the differing understandings of others. He recognizes that there are different "comprehensive visions" held by various individuals and communities at different times and places, but he insists, first, that they are all "visions of the same—of the whole." Second, the fact that they not merely differ but contradict one another forces one "to realize that each of those visions, taken by itself, is merely an opinion or an inadequate articulation of the fundamental awareness of the whole and thus points beyond itself toward an adequate articulation." The difference between Strauss, on the one hand, and Heidegger and Gadamer, on the other, does not concern the necessity or fact of the perception of a whole as the basis of all human understanding. It concerns the adequacy of understanding the whole as perceived at any given time and place as anything but a part. Strauss acknowledges that "there is no guaranty that the question for adequate articulation will ever lead beyond an understanding of the fundamental alternatives or that philosophy will ever legitimately go beyond the stage of discussion or disputation." But, he maintains, "the unfinishable character of the quest for adequate articulation of the whole does not entitle one … to limit philosophy to the understanding of a part, however important."[14] Strauss explicitly recognizes that what he calls "radical historicism" (i.e., the thought of Martin Heidegger) fundamentally challenges the presupposition of philosophy as Strauss understands it by contending that "what is called the whole is actually always incomplete and therefore not truly a 'whole,'" because "the whole is essentially changing" and "the whole as it is in itself can never be grasped, or it is not intelligible." He does not think that this challenge can be met by "clinging to a more or less

[13]Strauss puts "common sense" in quotation marks, because he recognizes that opinions differ not only from individual to individual, but even more from society to society, and at different times and places. In all cases, however, he insists that we must, like the classics, begin from these opinions. Otherwise we risk losing our sense of the essential differences among beings, especially the differences between human beings and gods, on the one hand, and human beings and animals, on the other.

[14]Ibid., 125.

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persistent tradition of philosophy, for it is of the essence of traditions that they cover or conceal their humble foundations." On the contrary, he urges the necessity of an "unbiased reconsideration of the most elementary premises of philosophy." But he suggests such a reconsideration will show that "the 'experience of history' … may blur, but … cannot extinguish, the evidence of those simple experiences regarding right and wrong … that historicism either ignores or else distorts." In opposition to Heidegger's claim that human beings first understand things in the world practically in terms of their use and ask theoretically what the things are "in themselves" only after they cease to be useful, Strauss observes that prephilosophical human beings understand themselves and things in their world morally, in terms of what is right and wrong or what the gods command and forbid. Confronted with disagreements about these matters, some are led to philosophize. And he concludes, "the 'experience of history' does not make doubtful the view that the fundamental problems, such as the problems of justice, persist or retain their identity in all historical change, however much they may be obscured by the temporary denial of their relevance and however variable or provisional all human solutions to these problems may be. In grasping these problems as problems, the human mind liberates itself from its historical limitations. No more is needed to legitimize philosophy in its original, Socratic sense: philosophy is knowledge … of what one does not know, or awareness of the fundamental problems [e.g., of the whole and justice] and, therewith, of the fundamental alternatives regarding their solution that are coeval with human thought."[15]

But if philosophy can never reach its goal, Gillespie asks, why should human beings persist in it? Strauss acknowledges that philosophy "could appear as Sisyphean or ugly, when one contrasts its achievement with its goal." Yet "it is necessarily accompanied, sustained and elevated by *eros*. It is graced by nature's grace."[16] A reader might well ask what Strauss means by "eros" or nature's (as opposed perhaps to God's?) grace.

In his response to *Postmodern Platos* David O'Connor suggests that neither Strauss nor I recognize that "the divination, the datum, the given, the gift, to which we must be true … has the character not just of knowledge, but of love." If Heidegger, Strauss, or I had reflected on the reasons why we loved to teach, we would not have walked through the valley of death on the way to asking "the all-important question which is coeval with philosophy although the philosophers do not frequently pronounce it—the question *quid sit deus*." Following Aquinas, we would have recognized that the gap between piety and philosophic questioning is not so abysmal as Heidegger and Strauss suggest. And, relying on our own experience of teaching, we would have engaged in philosophy much more cheerfully.

[15]Ibid., 32.
[16]Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 40.

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Strauss agrees with O'Connor in thinking that what he calls Socratic or "political" philosophy, the philosophy concerned chiefly with "the human things," with "what is by nature right and noble," is "the core of philosophy or rather 'the first philosophy.'"[17] It is first not chronologically (Strauss explicitly recognized that there were pre-Socratic philosophers), first in itself or first by nature, but it is first for us.[18] Socrates thus began with questions that are raised in ordinary human existence: how should we live? Strauss insists that we should not lose touch with that beginning or the "roots." But he argues that pursuing those questions rigorously and thoroughly in a way few human beings are either able or willing to do necessarily leads those who do to ask questions both about the character of nature as a whole (of which we are obviously only part) and the divine. In other words, we cannot know who we are until and unless we have answered those questions. O'Connor has correctly identified the beginning point, but he does not see where that beginning necessarily leads.

But if we cannot find answers to those questions, Gillespie and O'Connor ask, why persist in philosophizing? And, more pointedly, why try to encourage others to do so by teaching? The first reason would be that it is impossible to know that there are insoluble perennial problems unless one studies the solutions put forward in the past and can explain not merely their defects, but why there can be no solution. Nietzsche and Heidegger turned to art and religion, according to Gillespie, because they thought that reason did not and could not provide answers. At the very least, Strauss responds, we should not simply give up on reason without a fight. In the *Apology of Socrates*, the philosopher observes that poets—or artists—cannot account for the source of their wisdom. Nietzsche traces the source of their work, as he does philosophy, to an unconscious "will to power." Religion is also a problematic source of guidance insofar as it depends upon an unexplained revelation or dispensation of fate to certain individuals at particular places and times. For everyone else, it becomes a matter of faith or opinion. Reason appears to be the only possible source of an answer to the question concerning the best, the most noble and just form of life that is in principle universal.[19] Contemporary philosophers should begin, as Socrates did, with opinions. But, Strauss also observed, the opinions of our contemporaries have been shaped by a long history of philosophy. For example, contemporary political practices, institutions, and goals are often justified by appeals

[17]Strauss, *City and Man*, 20.

[18]Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 123–24.

[19]Philosophers do not opt for reason rather than revelation as a matter of will, as critics of Strauss such as Stanley Rosen have maintained. They ask what the best way of life for a human being is and reason about it, because this is the most urgent question. See Leo Strauss, "Progress or Return?," in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 260.

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to various political "theories" or ideologies that have their foundations in modern political philosophy.[20] But these "theories" or the various forms of modern political philosophy contradict one another as well as religious and philosophical opinions some of us have inherited from an even more distant past. We thus need to examine the arguments originally given in support of these various opinions in order to determine their validity and to try to move beyond the contradictions among them. In our time, he therefore concluded, philosophy must begin with a study of the history of philosophy in a way it had not before.[21] With regard to the results, Strauss suggested that even if we learn that there are problems that cannot be solved, we will have learned not merely what those problems are and why they are insoluble. We will have learned "the limits set to all human action and all human planning (for what has come into being must perish again)." We will "not expect salvation or satisfaction from the establishment of the simply best social order," and "will therefore not engage in revolutionary or subversive activity." Because philosophers are human beings, and human beings are naturally attached to others, philosophers who have thus learned the limits of human knowledge and action will try to help their fellows by mitigating, as far as possible, "the evils which are inseparable from the human condition." In particular, they will offer advice to their city or rulers. "Since all advice of this kind presupposes comprehensive reflections which as such are the business of the philosopher, he must first have become a political philosopher."[22] Offering advice is not ruling or legislating, however. The motives and passions of a philosopher differ fundamentally from those that animate political actors.

As O'Connor knows, there are different kinds of "love" or "eros."[23] In his debate with Alexander Kojève, Strauss argues that "the philosopher's dominating passion is the desire for truth, i.e., for knowledge of the eternal order, or the eternal cause or causes of the whole. As he looks up in search for the eternal order, all human things and all human concerns reveal themselves

[20]In *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 27–55, Strauss examines first the classical and then the modern solutions. And in "The Three Waves of Modernity" (in *An Introduction*, 81–98), he explicitly connects the logical progression of modern political philosophy with the development of three distinctive new kinds of political regimes.

[21]"If we want to clarify the political ideas we have inherited, we must actualize their implications, which were explicit in the past, and this can be done only by means of the history of political ideas. This means that the clarification of our political ideas insensibly changes into and becomes indistinguishable from the history of political ideas" (Leo Strauss, "Political Philosophy and History," in *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 73).

[22]Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 200.

[23]In the *Symposium*, which O'Connor teaches regularly, Plato's Socrates describes three different kinds of *eros* in ascending order. In *Four Types of Love*, C. S. Lewis describes yet another kind to include the overflowing love of God which Christians believe He nevertheless wants them to reciprocate to the extent to which they can.

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to him in all clarity as paltry and ephemeral." A philosopher is therefore "as unconcerned as possible with individual and perishable human beings and hence also with his own 'individuality,' or his body as well as with the sum total of all individual human beings and their 'historical' procession." However, a political man "cannot tolerate this radical depreciation of man and of all human things (Plato, *Laws* 804b5–c1). He could not devote himself to his work with all his heart … if he did not attach absolute importance to man and to human things. … The political man is consumed by erotic desire, not for this or that human being, or for a few, but for the large multitude, for the *demos* … and in principle, for all human beings. But erotic desire craves reciprocity; the political man desires to be loved by all his subjects … regardless of their quality."[24] A philosopher qua philosopher does not desire to be so loved.

Although they are "trying to transcend humanity (for wisdom is divine)," Strauss recognizes, philosophers are still human beings who cannot help living as such and cannot, therefore, be dead to human concerns. In the first place, they cannot devote their lives to philosophy, if other people do not take care of the needs of their bodies. But "man's need for other men's services is founded on the fact that man is by nature a social animal or that the human individual is not self-sufficient. There is therefore a natural attachment of man to man which"—contrary to Gillespie's suggestion that Strauss implies that philosophers, like all human beings, according to Hobbes, seek their own self-preservation first and foremost—"is prior to any calculation of mutual benefits. This natural attachment to human beings is weakened in the case of the philosopher by his attachment to the eternal beings." As a result, "the philosopher is immune to the most common and the most powerful dissolvent of man's natural attachment to man, the desire to have more than one has already and in particular to have more than others have; for he has the greatest self-sufficiency which is humanly possible. Hence the philosopher will not hurt anyone."[25]

As the love of wisdom, "philosophy requires liberation from the most potent natural charm … that consists in unqualified attachment to human things as such." As a result, a philosopher "is concerned with nothing but the quest for wisdom and kindling or nourishing the love of wisdom in those who are by nature capable of it." Because philosophers love wisdom, they seek to see their love perpetuated.[26] They must therefore "go to the

[24]Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 198–99.

[25]Ibid., 198–200.

[26]Strauss suggests that philosophers are attracted primarily to those human beings who demonstrate their own potential for becoming philosophers. Because their desire to learn the truth overrides the desires that tend to make human beings fearful, immoderate, and unjust, such human beings have well-ordered souls; and these well-ordered souls reflect the eternal order to a higher degree than those which are chaotic or diseased. But, Strauss acknowledges, "observations of this kind do not prove the

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marketplace in order to fish there for potential philosophers." And their attempts "to convert young men to the philosophic life will necessarily be regarded by the city as an attempt to corrupt the young. The philosopher is therefore forced to defend the cause of philosophy." But, Strauss insists, that does not mean that a philosopher has to try to rule or even to work toward the establishment of the best regime. "For philosophy and philosophic education are possible in all kinds of more or less imperfect regimes." What Strauss calls "philosophic politics" consists "in satisfying the city that the philosophers are not atheists … [and] that they are not subversives." He thinks that "this defense of philosophy before the tribunal of the city was achieved by Plato with a resounding success"; and that Cicero did the same thing in Rome, as did Farabi for the Islamic world and Maimonides for Judaism. He wonders, indeed, whether "the political action of the philosophers on behalf of philosophy … has not been too successful."[27] As a result of the intentional propagation of the arguments of modern philosophers, beginning with Machiavelli, people no longer recognize the fundamental tension between the desire of the philosopher to obtain knowledge of what is eternally true and the desires of most human beings for a safe, comfortable existence.

Like many other critics of Strauss, Gillespie finally asks, why should we believe him? Doesn't he suggest that philosophers tell "noble lies" in order to support the civic order in which they find themselves? Why shouldn't we regard his praise of philosophy as the best way of life merely as his way of trying to dissuade ambitious young readers from seeking to become tyrants? Michael and I have attempted to respond to such critics in two books, the arguments of which I will not try to recapitulate here. I will simply observe that if Strauss wanted to deceive his readers by presenting a "secret teaching" by "writing between the lines," he would not have explicitly called their attention to such a possibility. He did not fear persecution, because he had emigrated to a country where he enjoyed freedom of speech. He might have been restrained by a sense of social responsibility in explaining why he himself did not choose a life of piety in order to preserve the moral notions he thought necessary to maintain a decent social and political order. But, in fact, he emphasized the tension between reason and revelation or, as in the Jewish and Islamic traditions, philosophy and law. He emphasized the tension between reason and revelation not only because he thought this tension was the vital core of Western civilization, but also because he thought it brought out the limits of both philosophy and theology. He observed that earlier writers thought that "the gulf separating 'the wise'

assumption … that the well-ordered soul is more akin to the eternal order." Moreover, "one does not have to make that assumption in order to be a philosopher, as shown by Democritus and other pre-Socratics, to say nothing of the moderns" (ibid., 201).

[27]Ibid., 205–6.

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and 'the vulgar' is a basic fact of human nature which could not be influenced by any progress of popular education." And to readers who asked what this meant in the context of a truly liberal society, he responded: "The works of the great writers of the past are very beautiful even from without. And yet their visible beauty is sheer ugliness, compared with the beauty of those hidden treasures which disclose themselves only after very long, never easy, but always pleasant work."[28] In other words, no one can know the beauty, nobility, and goodness of philosophy except by engaging in it; and only a few human beings will ever desire or be able to do so. The supreme good of the philosophical life can only be experienced, not described. Strauss's praise of the philosopher is thus stated negatively: he is "immune to the most common and the most powerful dissolvent of man's natural attachment to man, the desire to have more … than others."[29] A philosopher will not vaunt the superiority of his own way of life to the other alternatives, especially to the political alternative of serving the needs and desires of the many, because that would merely arouse envy.

In responding to the comments on *Postmodern Platos*, I have been defending my conclusion that of the three major alternatives I had identified, Strauss offered the best response to the challenge posed by Nietzsche and Heidegger, because that is the point the commentators all question. However, my intention in writing the book was not to justify Strauss. On the contrary, by reading Strauss as a response to Nietzsche and Heidegger in comparison to others I hoped to get some distance from, and thus to be better able to see and evaluate, the perspective from which I had learned the history of political philosophy. The posthumous publication of Strauss's letters and lectures has made the way in which he began from problems announced by Nietzsche and Heidegger clearer than it was during his lifetime, so reading his writings in that context is no longer controversial. As I observe at the conclusion of my book, however, all of Strauss's "readings of individual philosophers, including preeminently his reading of Plato, have proven to be extremely controversial. That is, they invite debate and rebuttal."[30] The pressing question for me upon concluding my study of the "postmodern Platos" was which if any of them was correct. What had Plato presented as the true or original character of philosophy? And what were its political consequences?

[28]Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (New York: Free Press, 1952), 36–37.
[29]Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 200, cited above.
[30]Catherine H. Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 276.

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Plato's Philosophers: The Coherence of the Dialogues

Turning from recent reinterpretations of Plato to the dialogues, I immediately faced a huge problem: Plato never says anything in his own name. How do we know what he—as opposed to any of the characters he presents speaking in the dialogues—actually thought? It was common for readers to take a short cut and identify Plato with Socrates, who is obviously the dominant philosophical character and speaker. But there remained the disquieting fact: Plato did not always present a man named Socrates as the philosopher speaking. Why not? And what should we make of that fact? In the nineteenth century scholars, especially in Germany, attempted to make the presentation of philosophy in the dialogues more consistent by arguing that many of the dialogues traditionally attributed to Plato were inauthentic. There was, however, little agreement on which dialogues had been improperly attributed to Plato or why. A greater consensus emerged around another explanation of the observed differences among the dialogues: they pointed to Plato's development from "early" dialogues in which Socrates merely questioned the opinions of others to "middle" dialogues in which Plato put his own "theory of the ideas" into the mouth of Socrates to "late dialogues" in which Socrates is often not the major philosophical spokesman. But this approach, too, ran aground in the late twentieth century, because no one actually knows when or in what order Plato wrote the dialogues.[31]

Enter Catherine Zuckert circa 1994. I had been trained by Leo Strauss and his "first generation" students to read each of the dialogues as an artistic whole, characterized by "logographic necessity." I thus approached the problem of Plato's not saying anything in his own name by observing that, even though he did not say anything in his own name, he was responsible for the topic, selection of characters, setting, time, and outcome of each of the conversations he related. In other words, I thought one could see his hand and perhaps identify his thought in the organization of each of the dialogues taken singly—and ultimately in the relation of each to the others.

I took my "Platonic turn," as Kevin Cherry dubs it—that is, I discovered that Plato was not attributing the same positions to all the philosophers he presented in the dialogues—when teaching a graduate seminar on the trilogy at Fordham University. In the last class, a student kept talking about the Eleatic Stranger's "idea of the good," and I responded that the Eleatic

[31]The only external information we have about the dates of composition is Aristotle's report in the *Politics* that the *Laws* was written after the *Republic* (but not the date at which either of these dialogues was written) and the ancient rumor that the *Laws* was left in wax. Because the text of that dialogue could, therefore, still be changed, scholars concluded that it was left unfinished; and all attempts to order the dialogues according to the dates of their composition rest on the conviction that the *Laws* was last.

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does not recognize or appeal to any such idea. The "greatest" ideas about which he speaks are of being, rest, motion, same and different—not of the good, just, or noble like Socrates. Unlike the Socratic ideas, moreover, the Eleatic's ideas do not exist purely "in themselves"; some of them coexist with others. I wrote an article detailing the apparent similarities, but fundamental differences, between Socrates and the Eleatic, and then turned to studying the *Parmenides*, the dialogue in which the Eleatic's philosophical "father" or "teacher" examines the young Socrates. Because the Eleatic states explicitly that he has modified the doctrines of his famous predecessor, and Parmenides just as explicitly criticizes Socrates's argument about the ideas, I then had three different philosophical positions advocated by three different characters. I knew that there was another dialogue in which a philosopher-statesman named Timaeus presents an account of the intelligible construction of the visible cosmos to Socrates, who merely listens, and that the philosopher in the *Laws* and *Epinomis* is called the Athenian Stranger. (This latter I initially thought might be Socrates. But after I noticed that the Athenian never mentions the Peloponnesian War, which forms the backdrop of most, if not all, of the Socratic dialogues, cites the epic poets Homer and Hesiod positively and uncritically, and proposes a view of the cosmos in which good and bad souls are constantly at war, I concluded that he, too, articulated a different comprehensive view.)

But then I confronted another problem: Plato's depiction of each of these non-Socratic philosophers is limited to one or two dialogues. That was manageable. But how was I going to deal with Socrates, the philosopher who appears in thirty-three of the thirty-five? Having worked on the *Parmenides*, in which Plato gives us our first view of a very young Socrates, I wondered: might it be possible to line the dialogues up in terms of their dramatic dates? In fact, I found that it was. To be sure, the evidence concerning the dramatic dates of many of the dialogues is slight and in some cases contradictory. As presented, some of the most important conversations, for instance, those related in the *Republic* and *Phaedrus*, could not actually have taken place, because the characters shown were not all in Athens at the time indicated. The dating, according to the time at which Plato indicates the conversation occurred—and not, I should emphasize, a hypothetical estimate of the date at which Plato wrote the dialogue in question—had to be somewhat tenuous. As I studied the dialogues further, I changed my mind about the dramatic dates of some, and concluded in the end that the references to historical events and people served only as hints or indications of the order in which the conversations took place. More important than the dramatic date of any particular dialogue was the narrative that emerged from trying to line up the dialogues according to the indications of their dates: they traced the emergence, development, and limitations of Socrates as a distinctive kind of philosopher.

Because Michael Davis's remarks "On the Coherence of *Plato's Philosophers*" are so elegantly and artfully written, I am not certain that I have understood them. I believe, however, that he is implicitly questioning the adequacy of my

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attempt, and perhaps any attempt, to show that there is a unity or principle of coherence in Plato's corpus—particularly on the basis of the dramatic dates of the individual dialogues.

Davis raises the question explicitly in terms of the relation of the parts to the whole and suggests, following Heidegger, that we mortals have to begin with a part and that both our beginning point and our final view of that part as well as of the whole will be limited by the fact that we are mortal and live in time. With regard to reading Plato specifically, that means that all of us necessarily begin with a single dialogue and that we initially read that dialogue as a whole. In a sense, this is true; each dialogue is presented as a discrete conversation. Davis acknowledges that some of the dialogues are explicitly linked to each other, but he observes that each of the dialogues most obviously related to one another in the so-called trilogy points to a fundamental duality between being and becoming that appears in different forms. Plato shows that "try as we must to know the whole, we nevertheless only ever get parts masquerading as the whole. And yet at the same time, Plato's account shows us that and why, since it is not possible for mortals to live apart from some version of the whole in some way born of some version of 'the desire to know,' grasping these parts sequentially and seeing their interrelation, we come to be aware of a partiality that would not be available to us without some intimation of the whole of which it is only a part." Davis thus concludes that "understanding the necessary, albeit problematic, togetherness of this pair—of what moves us, on the one hand, to treat the *Theatetus* as a whole and, at the same time, to understand it as the bridge between the *Meno* and the *Euthyphro*, on the other—is self-knowledge. This is the goal of Socratic philosophy, which is to say, for Plato, and (if I have understood her correctly) for Catherine Zuckert too, it is the goal of philosophy simply."

There is clearly a significant overlap between the way in which Davis reads the dialogues and the way I do. But I also think there are some important differences. He emphasizes the fact that all human inquiry has to begin somewhere; and he suggests, like Heidegger, that we are thrown into circumstances not of our own choosing as a result, one might say, of dispensation or chance. I agree that we begin all inquiries, therefore, somewhat arbitrarily when, like the interlocutors in the Platonic dialogues, we question opinions we have absorbed from our immediate environment. Davis may also be correct in suggesting that "the explicit question of a dialogue may never truly be answered" adequately in that dialogue. However, I am not certain what exactly Davis means when he writes that "the true origin of this question is nevertheless always disclosed." He seems to be referring to the inescapably dual nature of all things that provokes us to continue thinking by preventing us from coming to an altogether satisfactory answer to our questions. If so, all the dialogues show basically the same thing. I don't think they do. Nor do I think that "self-knowledge stands in for knowledge," that self-knowledge is the goal of philosophy, or that Socrates and Plato thought that it was. Asking why we seek knowledge and of what constitutes

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the necessary first step, but it is only a first step. What is first for us is not necessarily first in itself. And to acquire self-knowledge, we have to come to understand what is not-self. We are all wholes to a certain extent as individuals and even as communities, but we are clearly also only parts of a broader whole, the only parts that may have access, however dimly, to the whole as a whole. In *Plato's Philosophers*, I argue that Plato shows that Socratic philosophy is the best form of philosophy, but by presenting the other philosophers, who give different arguments in addressing different sorts of interlocutors, he also shows that Socratic philosophy is by no means completely adequate. A clear sign of this inadequacy is Socrates's failure to articulate a cosmology. His search for self-knowledge would presumably include knowledge of what kind of being he is or of what we call human nature; but one cannot know human nature without understanding the relation between this specific kind of nature and nature as a whole. The other philosophers featured in the dialogues do not therefore merely represent "supporting characters" in the overall narrative; they represent real alternatives, each having advantages or taking account of points that Socrates's philosophy does not, but each having its own faults or limitations as well. The narrative or story indicated by the dramatic dates that I argue enables us to see the dialogues in relation to one another does not indicate the order in which any student should read the dialogues. I suspect that students will continue to begin with the *Apology of Socrates*, often taken to be first, even though it clearly constitutes a speech Socrates gave very late in his life. The importance of the order that emerges from the dramatic dating becomes evident to those who have read and studied a great many, if not all of the dialogues and begin to ask: what does Plato think about the characters and arguments he has presented? If he does not simply agree with Socrates and use his teacher as spokesman for his own ideas, does he agree with Timaeus? Or the Eleatic Stranger? Or the Athenian? Or, as Joseph Cropsey came to think, with Parmenides? *Plato's Philosophers* concludes with a description of the particular problems Plato highlights in his presentations of each of these "other" philosophers.

Like Davis, Collins emphasizes the importance or question of the beginning—in this case of my book. She focuses, in particular, on problems that arise from what she calls the "double-frame": (1) the presentation of the dialogues in accord with their dramatic dating, and (2) my contention that Plato presents the life of Socrates and the distinctive form of philosophy he practices as best in comparison with the other philosophers we encounter in the dialogues, even though he shows that Socratic philosophy is not perfectly adequate.

I suggest that the dramatic dates of the dialogues enable us to string them together to form an account of the rise, development, and limitations of Socratic philosophy. But, Collins observes, I almost immediately break from that format by considering parts of three dialogues—*Phaedo*, *Parmenides*, and *Symposium*—separated from the dramatic dates and general content of those dialogues taken as wholes. I use these parts to construct an account

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of Socrates's development of a distinctive form of philosophy in response to the problems Plato dramatized in earlier politics, poetry, and philosophy. How, she asks, can I justify such a break?

After announcing my thesis with regard to the story that emerges if we attend to the indications provided by the dramatic dates, in the introduction to *Plato's Philosophers* I observe that there are different kinds of dialogues. Some do not even have dramatic dates, but can be incorporated into the story on the basis of their thematic content. Most are written as prose dramas in which we read accounts of the conversations that occurred without any other frame or commentary. But, as Strauss pointed out, nine of the dialogues are narrated—four entirely by Socrates (*Lysis*, *Lovers*, *Charmides*, *Republic*), two by Socrates after a dramatic introduction (*Protagoras* and *Euthydemus*), three and only three (*Phaedo*, *Parmenides*, and *Symposium*) by other characters. And these happen to be the three dialogues which contain segments with dramatic dates different from the conversations in which they are recounted that describe stages in Socrates's philosophical development. In other words, it is not I, but Plato (and Strauss) who point out the exceptional character of these dialogues. I was using the same basic form of analysis when I put these segments together to trace that development as I did using the dramatic dates to string the dialogues taken as wholes together. I explain why I think Plato shows Socrates admitting that he once studied natural philosophy only on the day of his death, after he was convicted of the capital crime of not believing in the gods of the city. In the defense speech Plato has him give at his trial he denied investigating such questions. The account Phaedo gives of Socrates's description of the reasons he developed his "hypothesis" concerning the ideas is, moreover, not presented directly by Socrates himself, but in a later description of Socrates's last conversation by one of his admirers to another. In other words, like the later recitation of the exchange between Socrates and Zeno as well as that between Parmenides and Socrates, the narrative is two times removed from the conversations described.

By presenting Parmenides's critique of Socrates's "hypothesis" concerning the ideas as occurring in approximately 450 BCE, Plato indicates that Socrates turned away from his study of natural philosophy before he was twenty years old. However, he also shows that Socrates learned that his "turn" to examining the *logoi* (apparently of other philosophers such as Anaxagoras and Zeno) and the "hypothesis" concerning the ideas he developed in order to do so were not adequate. Socrates does not relate Parmenides's critique of his argument about the ideas to the friends who have assembled in his cell on the last day of his life, because he is trying to convince them that they will be able to continue to philosophize in his absence. Seeking to encourage rather than to discourage, he does not point out the problems Parmenides identified when he presents his hypothesis about the ideas as a branch to which his younger friends can safely cling. As Collins observes, that hypothesis includes Eleatic elements insofar as it

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suggests that only purely intelligible, unchanging beings such as the ideas can be truly known; but it also represents an important break from Parmenides in maintaining that there is more than one such being.

Asking why Socrates does not mention Eleatic philosophy and his relation to it in the "intellectual autobiography" he presents in the *Phaedo*, Collins takes that statement to constitute a full account of his development as a philosopher. I argue, on the contrary, that when we look back from Socrates's statement of where and why he began to philosophize as he does in the *Phaedo* to the conversations Plato depicts as having occurred before this final statement, we see that Socrates developed his distinctive way of philosophizing in stages. In his first depiction of Socrates as a young philosopher in the *Parmenides*, Plato shows that Socrates was unable to respond to the elderly Eleatic's criticisms of his argument concerning the ideas and was, therefore, necessarily aware of its inadequacies. But in the dialogues that follow the *Parmenides* dramatically, Plato also shows that Socrates did not follow Parmenides's advice. He does not practice arguing in the Eleatic style in terms of the "is" and "is not" (although he does occasionally employ such sophistical arguments). Instead, we are told in the *Symposium* that Socrates learned how to avoid the *aporiai* resulting from the Eleatic opposition between what is and what is not (exemplified by the elder Eleatic's demonstration of his mode of philosophizing in the *Parmenides*) by examining opinion as that which is between knowledge and ignorance. He suggests that he learned this from a priestess named Diotima at least ten years before the plague which occurred in 429 BCE and thus after the conversation related in the *Parmenides*. The opinions he began to investigate concerned especially the noble or the beautiful and the good, because Socrates also learned from Diotima that the good is what human beings most desire. As a result of her instruction Socrates became a "philosopher" who claims to know only "the erotic things," that is, what human beings desire and thus by extension what we most want to learn in order to satisfy our deepest desire. He emphatically does not claim to be a "wise guy" (*sophos*) who possesses such knowledge. In the *Apology* he explains that his investigations of the opinions of the politicians, poets, and artisans concerning the noble and good angered the fathers of the young men who not only enjoyed seeing Socrates refute their elders but also went home and imitated him. Only after he is convicted does Socrates make it clear that he cannot explain why he does what he does to the Athenian *demos*. To learn why Socrates proceeds as he does, we readers have to look back at the dialogues in which Plato shows him examining a variety of other individuals and the fragmented narrative account others provide of his development.

In the "dramatic" dialogues, Plato relates what Socrates asked and the answers he received to his queries, but not the reasons why he came to ask such questions instead of engaging in either natural or Eleatic philosophy in the mode of his predecessors. In writing narrated as well as dramatic dialogues, Plato thus preserves a distinction between philosophical questioning

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and argumentation, on the one hand, and a narrative account or history of the way and reasons why something—in this case, a certain kind of philosophical practice—emerged. Socrates himself usually asks what something is, not how or why it came to be what it is.[32] That is both the advantage and the limitation of Socratic philosophy. It is the reason he cannot explain the way in which the ever-changing sensible things "participate" in the purely intelligible, eternally unchanging ideas, that is, why he does not have a cosmology. It is also the reason that he can provide better answers to the question about what human beings truly seek in life—the good, the noble, and the just—than the other philosophers.

Collins does not restrict her questions about my account of Plato's depiction of the emergence, development, and limitations of Socratic philosophy to what seems to be a break from the indications provided by the dramatic dates of the dialogues in my treatment of Socrates's "becoming." Acknowledging that there has been a great deal of controversy about the status of the ideas or "forms" in Plato's thought from the time Aristotle wrote, she also wonders "whether Plato's Socrates does or could set aside the question of the cause of the whole—that he does or could rely so much on a hypothesis [concerning the ideas]—in establishing the possibility and goodness of the philosophic life as the life of independent reason. … At the very least," she thinks, "his setting aside of this question would cast a dark shadow over the latter claim."

I do not think that Plato shows Socrates simply putting aside the question of the cause of the whole in the *Phaedo* or later. In the "intellectual biography" he presents in the *Phaedo* Socrates explains that he had hoped to find such an account in Anaxagoras, who had claimed that *nous* was the source or cause of all. Socrates tells his interlocutors, moreover, that he thought that such an account would consist in an explanation of why it was best that everything be as it is. Sadly he did not find such an account or explanation in Anaxagoras or anyone else, so he took a different tack. That "tack" consisted, first, in using his "hypothesis" about the ideas in asking what each of the kinds of being is. However, I argue, he modified his initial examinations of the *logoi* of previous philosophers when he learned from Diotima to examine the opinions (*doxai*) other human beings had about the good, the noble, and the just. In the *Symposium*, Socrates claims only to know *ta erōtika*, that is, the things human beings desire but lack. And what human beings desire, Socrates insists in both the *Symposium* and *Republic*, is "the good." As Socrates recognizes explicitly in responding to

[32]As Strauss, *City and Man*, 85–93, points out, Socrates's attempt to discover what justice is by looking at it "writ large" in a city and then asking about the origin of a city in the *Republic* is a notable exception. But, Strauss suggests, Socrates proceeds there as he does because he is responding to Glaucon's definition of justice based on its origin.

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Aristophanes's understanding of *erōs* as a desire to become whole, the good is not necessarily the same as the whole. As he describes himself in the *Phaedo*, Socrates had wanted the whole to be good; but he recognizes a difference in the *Symposium*. He also recognizes that the fact that human beings want everything that is to be good does not mean that it is so; in fact, most of us perceive the world as not simply or entirely good. In the *Republic*, Socrates reminds Plato's brother Glaucon that many human beings would be willing to accept what only appears to be noble or just, but that no one wants anything that is only apparently but not truly good. The "greatest" and most important knowledge human beings can obtain is, therefore, of what is purely "good in itself" or the "idea of the good." But he also informs Glaucon that very few human beings are willing or able to undertake such a study. Socrates cannot even explain his own opinions about what is good in a way that Glaucon will be able to understand. He thus presents only the "children" or "interest" of his understanding of the "idea of the good" in the three famous images of the sun, line, and cave. By drawing an analogy between the sun, which produces the light that constitutes a necessary condition for both sight and growth of sensible things, and the idea of the good as the cause of both the intelligible beings and our knowledge of them, Socrates might seem to be equating the idea of the good with the "sun" he suggested in the *Phaedo* would blind those who sought to view being directly. Perhaps like the Eleatic stranger Socrates had come to see that lacking any qualities, undifferentiated being would be impossible to cognize or define. In any case, the division Socrates draws between the intelligible and the sensible suggests that the good, insofar as it is the cause of the first but perhaps not of the second, may be not the cause of all. If the cosmos is composed of essentially different kinds of things, as Socrates's argument concerning the ideas seems to suggest, it is not clear that there is or could be a single cause. Socrates makes the suggestion that the "idea of the good" may be the cause of everything only in the *Republic*; in other dialogues, he lists the good as one among a variety of other ideas (and the list is never exactly the same). But in no instance does he claim to know what is good in itself; he claims only to know that this is what human beings most desire—and need—to discover. He does not put aside the question of the character of the whole, I thus submit; he does raise questions about whether there is a single cause and, if there is, whether it can be known by human beings.

If Socrates is not able to answer this absolutely fundamental question, Collins then asks, how can he know (or Plato suggest) that his form of philosophizing constitutes the best form of existence for a human being? The general form of this question would be whether Socrates or Plato thinks that it is possible to have knowledge of a part, absent knowledge of the whole. Strictly speaking, I would say, they do not. Knowledge of any part might be modified by additional knowledge of the whole. That is the reason Plato has Socrates state in the *Apology* that the Delphic oracle told his friend Chaerophon that no one was wiser than Socrates: Socrates

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possesses a certain kind of "human" wisdom in recognizing that he does not know. But as Strauss observes, knowing that you do not know is not to lack knowledge simply. It amounts at least to a claim to know what knowledge is. Later in the dialogue Socrates assures the jurors that he knows that it is wrong not to serve the god and remain at his station. He has tried to persuade his fellow Athenians that they should not fear death, because they do not and cannot know that it is something to be feared. Likewise, he has urged his fellow citizens to seek the good of their soul, truth and practical wisdom, rather than try to amass ever more wealth and honor, because the desires for these more worldly goods can never be satisfied; there will always be more wealth or honor to be gained. And after he is convicted he tells his fellow Athenians "that this even happens to be a very great good for a human being—to make speeches every day about virtue and the other things about which you hear me conversing and examining both myself and others—and that the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being" (38a). How does Socrates know this? Why isn't the happiness he has experienced merely a dream or illusion? Plato shows that Socrates has experienced this "very great good" in conversations he has held with a variety of other human beings repeatedly for more than fifty years; both he and others can testify to his evident perception of the goodness of these conversations. In contrast to Descartes, however, Socrates does not claim to know this or anything else with certainty. In his *Meditations* Descartes urges his readers to begin from radical doubt, as he does, instead of examining the opinions of others, as Socrates did, because there can and will be no end to such examinations. Socrates agrees. Lacking knowledge of the whole, he understands that any conclusion to which he has come may need to be revised. After his trial, he thus insists to his friend Crito that they must always be willing to re-examine opinions they hold.

As Kevin Cherry points out at the beginning of his remarks, many readers have thought that "Plato made Socrates his hero," and such a reading "generally leads to an emphasis on Plato's use of the dialogue form. This would have been a more radical claim a few decades ago, but the importance of the dialogue form is no longer in much dispute. Studies of Plato's dialogues which emphasize the action as well as the argument are now the norm." Zuckert's study suggests "that the real genius of Plato is not that he wrote dialogues … but that he wrote only dialogues that incorporated different, competing philosophers." Cherry calls this the "metadialogue" or conversation. Since Plato never shows his philosophers actually conversing with one another, I describe it as a comparison and contrast of five different comprehensive views, methods of argumentation, kinds of interlocutors, and problems that cannot simply be melded into one. And, I argue, these differences, summarized in a table on pages 44–45 of *Plato's Philosophers*, show why philosophy continues to be a search for wisdom rather than the possession of knowledge.

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As Cherry also sees, this reading of Plato leads me to question the accuracy and adequacy not merely of Aristotle's presentation of the thought of his teacher, but of his claim to possess knowledge or science. I am by no means the first to do either. As Church observes, the success of modern natural science has led most educated people today to dismiss Aristotelian physics and metaphysics. In *Plato's Philosophers*, I suggest that the skepticism of our contemporaries about the existence of a consistent rational account of the whole makes the tension Plato presents between the investigations of "the human things" and cosmology more revealing of and relevant to the situation in which we find ourselves than Aristotle's claim to have a science of the whole. To be sure, Aristotle explicitly recognizes that we have different kinds of knowledge of the different parts of the whole. That is one of the reasons that his teaching about politics comes as close as it does to Plato's.

Cherry asks: If I think that Plato's philosophical problematics are superior to Aristotle's more comprehensive and coherent vision, why did I publish two such praising accounts of Aristotle's political science? As Cherry observes, in both of my early articles I emphasize not only the importance of participating in politics, according to Aristotle, but also the limits on what we should expect to achieve by doing so, thus bringing him closer to Plato. In this context, I could also add that in studying ethics and politics, Aristotle follows a quasi-Socratic method of beginning with the opinions his contemporaries hold about them, finding contradictions, and seeking a more consistent, comprehensive view. He thus begins with what is "first for us," although he does not think that it is first in itself. What I have come to doubt is whether one can finally separate such investigations of "the human things" which entail a view of "human nature" from a conception of nature as a whole. Aristotle did not. I have thus criticized some of the contemporary students of "virtue ethics" for trying to revive an Aristotelian conception of human excellence or virtue explicitly shorn of his "metaphysical" or "teleological" view of nature as a whole. In trying to revive not merely such an understanding of "ethics," but more importantly the practice and achievement of "human flourishing" in the context of a liberal democracy, I have also suggested that they could pay more attention to their own work as educators.[33] They could learn from Aristotle's analysis of the many different forms of regimes that citizens of a democracy will not tolerate much if any regulation of their private lives. Because much of the formation of a person's character occurs in private, the sort of habituation Aristotle maintains constitutes a necessary foundation for the acquisition of virtue in a liberal democracy does not

[33]Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning and Narrative* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), remedies this defect by explaining that one function of his work as a professional philosopher is to dispute theories that make the acquisition of practical reason difficult for contemporary readers.

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and cannot be a direct result of public mandate or law. Some such habituation or training to virtue—we might say responsible behavior—might be fostered indirectly, however, through regulations concerning the care and education of children in and outside of their families. Aristotle argues that freedom of choice is a necessary prerequisite of virtue, and in liberal democracies, most citizens enjoy a good deal of freedom. But Aristotle also argues that freely choosing it is not sufficient to make an action virtuous. No action is truly virtuous unless it is freely chosen solely because it is virtuous and not for any other reason. And to choose to act as one does solely because the act is virtuous, one has to know what virtue is. It is—or ought to be—the responsibility of teachers to try to help their students learn what true human excellence is.

Because I conclude *Machiavelli's Politics* by pointing out the differences between his understanding and Aristotle's, it may be appropriate to turn now to the comments on that book, the title of which was intended to suggest a comparison and contrast with Aristotle's *Politics*.

Machiavelli's Politics

I began teaching Machiavelli at the University of Notre Dame for somewhat accidental reasons. I had taught Machiavelli at Carleton earlier. Like many other instructors, I suspect, I had found that many more American undergraduate students were attracted by the apparent immorality or "realism" of *The Prince* than were repelled by it. I thus continued to teach *The Prince* in the introduction to political theory; but I also wanted to help an entering graduate student develop her senior thesis into a master's paper. So I began teaching graduate seminars on Machiavelli's political thought. In those seminars, I gradually discovered that in studying Machiavelli, I was, in fact, investigating *the* alternative, as the ancient Socratics saw it, to philosophy as the best form of human existence. And I concluded, disagreeing with Strauss to this extent, that Machiavelli proposed his new understanding of politics not ultimately to save philosophy from the ire and envy of the many, but in an attempt to benefit everyone, himself included. In other words, for Machiavelli, politics was more important than philosophy.

Sullivan begins by situating my work in the context of contemporary debates in the scholarly literature. As she observes, I try to bridge the current divide between those who read Machiavelli's works primarily in terms of their historical context, literary form, and republican commitments, and those who follow Strauss in arguing that Machiavelli is the founder of modernity. Strauss does not ignore the historical context in which Machiavelli wrote to the extent to which members of the so-called Cambridge school have claimed, nor is his Machiavelli as antidemocratic as other commentators have maintained. However, having praised the moderate character of my work, Sullivan then contrasts her own readings of Machiavelli and Montesquieu with mine. In particular, she disagrees with

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me concerning the importance of religion in Machiavelli's thought. And, although she agrees with me that Montesquieu was an admiring student of Machiavelli, she emphasizes his criticism of "Machiavellianism."

It is possible to be more precise, however, about the core of our disagreement. In *Machiavelli's Politics* I do not, as she and Alexander Duff seem to think, "abstract from religion." No reasonably competent reader of the *Discourses* could, confronted with Machiavelli's explicit criticisms of the deleterious political effects of Christian beliefs and the Catholic Church and his praise of the Roman patricians' prudent manipulation of the religious beliefs of the plebs to maintain control of the city and their armies. However, one of the questions I do explicitly raise is whether Machiavelli's chief goal in writing was to undermine the Christian faith, as Sullivan argues it was. (In *Discourses* 2.5 he suggests that it may be dissolving as a result of the rampant corruption in the church without his help.) Sullivan and I agree that Machiavelli treats religion as a useful instrument in the hands of rulers. And I acknowledge that some of the chapter titles and incidents reported in his *Discourses* can be read, as she, Strauss, and Harvey Mansfield read them, as "metaphorically" referring not to their seeming ancient sources, but as indirect criticisms of Christianity. But I argue that that these titles and reports also make sense as referring to actual incidents in ancient and Florentine politics. And I ask, what justifies this metaphorical reading, if and when "reading what is on the lines," as Strauss used to say, makes sense. In suggesting that Machiavelli thought that "Christianity has had insights into human behavior and that on their basis he suggests specific political responses," Sullivan follows Mansfield's analysis of the *Discourses* in *Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders*, but not Strauss. Strauss claimed that "there is in the whole work of Machiavelli not a single true observation regarding the nature of man and of human affairs with which the classics were not thoroughly familiar"; and that "the only element of Christianity which Machiavelli took over was the idea of propaganda. This idea is the only link between his thought and Christianity. He attempts to destroy Christianity by the same means by which Christianity was originally established."[34]

The contrast Duff draws between the ways in which Strauss and I approach the "surface" of Machiavelli's writings would have been better and more accurate if he had contrasted my reading of the *Discourses* with that which Strauss gives instead of confining his remarks to our respective readings of *The Prince*. The differences come out more clearly there, and at the beginning of my chapter on the *Discourses*, I explain how and why I have departed from Strauss. "Observing that the *Discourses* are explicitly related only to the first ten books of Livy's history, but that like Livy's history as a whole,

[34]Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 43, 45; Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 173.

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Machiavelli's work has 142 chapters and so presumably covers the whole, Strauss contends that 'Machiavelli's use and nonuse of Livy is the key to the understanding of the work.'" Acknowledging that "Livy was much more widely read and better known by educated readers in Machiavelli's time than now," I nevertheless suggest that "it is difficult to believe that Machiavelli expected his readers to follow the intricate way in which he, according to Strauss, used (and changed) Livy's history not merely to convey his own understanding of politics in the spaces created between the two texts, but to present a covert critique of the Bible by questioning the authority of Livy. There is no evidence, in fact, that anyone before Strauss read Machiavelli this way—brilliant as his reading is." I acknowledge that I have "learned a great deal from Strauss." But "in light of the evidence that Machiavelli hoped to have an effect on his immediate audience as well as possible later readers, and that his primary concern was not a critique of Christianity so much as an improved understanding and practice of politics," I have tried "to show that Machiavelli's *Discourses* constitute a coherent argument about the difficulties of establishing and maintaining a free way of life by means of a republican form of government." And in a footnote to that passage I observe that "in doing so, somewhat ironically, I am heeding Strauss's admonition in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* … [that] 'reading between the lines is strictly prohibited in all cases where it would be less exact than not doing so. Only such reading between the lines as starts from an exact consideration of the explicit statements of the author is legitimate. The context in which a statement occurs, and the *literary* character of the whole work as well as its plan, must be perfectly understood before an interpretation of the statement can reasonably claim to be adequate or even correct. One is not entitled to delete a passage, nor to emend its text, before one has fully considered all reasonable possibilities of understanding the passage as it stands—one of these possibilities being that the passage may be ironic.'" And I remind readers that "I am arguing that Machiavelli was not merely an artful but an ironic writer. He was addressing more than one audience—not only his immediate but also future readers—and that he had reasons to be less than perfectly open about the revolutionary character of his praise of the Roman republic and its institutions. I do not deny that he was critical not merely of the Church but of the effects of Christian teachings more generally (as in *D* 3.1). However, I am arguing that these criticisms were for the sake of introducing a better political order that would benefit most people (including rare individuals like Machiavelli himself). Like [Heinrich] Meier, I think that Strauss was trying to revive philosophy. Machiavelli, however, was trying to improve the lives of as many human beings as possible by improving their understanding and practice of politics."[35]

[35]Catherine Zuckert, *Machiavelli's Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 118n20.

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Duff is correct that Strauss begins *Thoughts on Machiavelli* by highlighting a problem that lies on the surface: Machiavelli writes two books that appear to be quite different, but states in the dedication to each that it contains everything he knows. Strauss makes that observation, however, to establish a point that is not on the surface—namely, that in the works said to contain everything that Machiavelli has learned, there is no mention of the soul or the devil. I explicitly acknowledge that Strauss concludes from the fact that there are 142 chapters in both Livy's history and the *Discourses* that, contrary to the full title of Machiavelli's book, it concerns the entire history, not merely the first ten books. (Reading the *Discourses* confirms that suspicion about the contents.) Strauss also emphasizes the importance of the literary "conceit" that *The Prince* is addressed to Lorenzo. He pays less attention to the specific characteristics of the two young men to whom Machiavelli dedicated the *Discourses* than I do, but he also notes the difference in the character of the dedicatees of Machiavelli's two major prose works. We do not disagree, therefore, so much about the "surface" of these books as Duff suggests. Like most commentators, we see that the *Discourses* is clearly divided into three books concerning the domestic politics of the Roman people, their foreign policies, and their leaders, but that the order of the particular discussions contained within each of these three books is far from clear. Where we differ is in the way we proceed to deal with the lack of clarity in Machiavelli's ordering of the topics. Strauss looks to the chapter numbers, especially multiples of thirteen. As Duff observes about my reading of *The Prince*, so too in analyzing the *Discourses* I ask why every chapter follows from the previous one and understand the whole book as addressed simultaneously to two different audiences. First, Machiavelli addresses the two young Florentine aristocrats to whom he dedicates the book, and shows how they could revive republican politics in their city. As in *The Prince*, however, so in his characterization of these two young men in the *Art of War*, Machiavelli indicates that he does not think that they will actually heed his advice. He thus also addresses future readers who may have the good fortune to be able to implement his advice. Moreover, that advice does not consist, as it at first appears, merely in showing them how they can imitate the ancient Romans; it consists, rather, in a new understanding of a new form of republican politics that will benefit everyone. Unlike Duff, I do not think that constitutes a "prosaic" project.

Faisal Baluch raises another question that has been fiercely debated by commentators on Machiavelli's work, one that concerns his relation not to Christianity, but rather to philosophy. As Baluch observes, because of his concentration on practical political affairs, most commentators have concluded that Machiavelli was not a philosopher. There are exceptions, however; commentators like Strauss and Erica Benner have observed that Socrates also concentrated on "the human things," and Socrates is generally acknowledged to have been a philosopher. I, too, suggest that Machiavelli displays a surprising number of traits in common with Socrates. Like Socrates, Machiavelli not

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merely associates with the young, but seeks to attract them. Further like Socrates, he not only challenges current or dominant opinions; he is even willing to appear to be ridiculous in doing so. Baluch does not mention my observation that like Socrates, Machiavelli is able to make up stories to illustrate his points. But Baluch usefully adds that, as well as addressing the young, Machiavelli, also like Socrates, seeks to learn from "the old." In describing the way in which he spends his days in a letter he sent to Vettori, Machiavelli famously reports that in the evening he retires to his library where, clothed in regal garments, he enters "the ancient courts of ancient men" and asks "them the reason for their actions; and they in their humanity reply." And in many of his works, he not merely looks to, but emphatically recommends imitating, the example of the ancient Romans. It is not clear to me, however, that Socrates and Machiavelli seek to learn the same kinds of lessons from the same kinds of "old" men. In the Platonic dialogues, Socrates praises his philosophical predecessors Parmenides and, to a lesser extent, Heraclitus; but he (unlike the Athenian Stranger and Timaeus) does not look to famous legislators such as Lycurgus or Solon for guidance. Both in his letter to Vettori and in the dedication to *The Prince*, Machiavelli writes of learning about the reasons for the *actions* of great men. Nor does he seem to meditate on them. Like Socrates, Machiavelli seems to question and ultimately seeks to supersede his predecessors. But the "old" men he wishes to supersede do not appear to be philosophers, whom he rarely mentions; they are the statesmen and generals whose deeds are recorded by the historians. Most importantly, Baluch observes, in the central chapters of *The Prince* Machiavelli both asks and answers the Socratic question, "what is virtue?" Baluch thus concludes that for Machiavelli as for Socrates, virtue (or human excellence) consists in knowledge. But I think one has to ask, knowledge of what?

In *The Prince* Machiavelli does provide a new understanding, if not definition, of "virtue." However, as he presents it, *virtù* is not something purely "in itself" or an eternally intelligible "idea," as it would be for Socrates. Machiavellian *virtù* consists rather in knowing how to be able not to be good and to use that knowledge according to necessity. As we learn from reading the treatise as a whole, *virtù* consists in the ability to see and use an opportunity to free oneself and one's people from oppression, as the four legendary founders are said to have done in chapter 6. It requires a leader to be able to attract, train, and arm followers who will enable him to seize control and keep it in the face of inevitable opposition. It also requires a leader to know how to use "cruelty" well, not continually, so as to arouse hatred or contempt. Having seized control and established order, a leader must furthermore know how to maintain it by showing his people that his government acts to secure their lives, families, and property. In the best case, he will institute laws that also secure their liberty, including the opportunity for an able individual to gain wealth and honor by rising to a position of preeminence. Machiavelli observes that the virtues are the qualities that are

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praised; and he concludes: "Let a prince win and maintain his state: the means will always be judged honorable, and will be praised by everyone. For the vulgar are taken in by the appearance and the outcome of a thing, and in the world there is no one but the vulgar."[36] In other words, Machiavelli recognizes that glory is ultimately merely a reflection of public opinion; in general he sees that the public honors individuals who serve its interests, by, for example, founding an order that not merely protects them, but enables them and their heirs to prosper. However, he also sees (*D* 3.34) that the people are sometimes impressed by what appear to be extraordinary deeds of self-sacrifice more than by ordinary military victories and legislative acts that contribute more substantially to the common good. Machiavelli understands full well that human beings act on the basis of what they deem to be good. In his writings, he thus not merely challenges the coherence of common opinions; he seeks to persuade his readers to change their opinions, especially concerning what they should do. In contrast to Socrates, however, he does not seek to engage his interlocutors or readers in an ongoing conversation or inquiry about what is truly good or virtuous. Nor does he claim to be happy and satisfied himself. Claiming to have found the "effectual truth," he seeks to have an effect on the politics not only of Florence, Italy, or contemporary Europe, but also of future nations and their leaders by reminding them of the importance of establishing and maintaining political order as the necessary condition for all other forms of human achievement. Rather than seeking to make themselves or others good and virtuous, they should see human beings as they are: weak, fearful, and characterized by constantly expanding desires that can never be satisfied but that necessarily put them at odds with others. It is futile to seek personal happiness or satisfaction in this life; and claiming to have knowledge solely of worldly affairs, Machiavelli remains generally silent about any life thereafter. The best one can do is to recognize the passions that naturally make human beings hostile to one another and create a system of laws that balance the "humors" against each other in order to give individuals the maximal freedom possible to pursue their own goals. In doing so, however, one needs to understand that it will always be necessary to devise new "remedies," because in this world everything that comes into being also decays. *Pace* Baluch, Machiavelli does not seek, therefore, to be "reputed" as a founder. He explicitly seeks merely to be an adviser to "princes," who include the leaders of republics. Even if the recommendations of an adviser are followed and prove successful, he observes (*D* 3.35), the adviser will at most receive half the credit. If the policy he recommends fails, he will be blamed, but he will be blamed even more if he shows that he knew what

[36]Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 71.

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should have been done under any particular set of circumstances, but did not inform the parties able to act.

Like Socrates and his students Plato and Xenophon, Machiavelli presents himself and his teaching "ironically." But the form of his dissimulation differs from theirs—as do the contents and form of his works. In contrast particularly to Plato, who merely reports the speeches and deeds of others in his dialogues, Machiavelli reminds his readers of himself and his own immediate concerns at the beginning of most of his works. By presenting himself as a poor man seeking a job from his "aristocratic" superiors in order to support himself and his family, he shows that he shares the concerns that animate most people most of the time. Unlike either the people or their rulers, he also shows in the body of his work that he knows and is seeking to teach them how their desires can best, although never entirely, be satisfied. In the democratic republic he advocates, an exceptionally talented young man like Machiavelli would be able to rise and prosper in a way he could not in the "aristocratic" republics of the past. His proposals are thus in what could be called his "self-interest," but he does not make them simply for the sake of securing his own life, wealth, or honor. On the contrary, he indicates rather clearly that he does not think that his contemporaries will heed his advice. He does not appeal to their good will towards him or others, because he does not think that most people act on the basis of such benevolent feelings most of the time. He appeals first to the desire most people have for security and then to the ambitions most display when their basic fears are assuaged. He does not deny that some rare individuals do act benevolently upon occasion. Indeed, he proves himself to be one such individual. Acting on the basis of his understanding of the liabilities of our shared human condition, he attempts to persuade his readers to limit the goals of politics to securing the lives, properties, and liberties of most.

Machiavelli does not fit neatly into either of the two forms of *eros* Strauss finds in Xenophon's *Hiero*. His attachments to other human beings are not loosened by his love of the truth about all things; attempting to benefit everyone, he seeks the effectual truth. He may be said, therefore, to love the *demos*; but he does not demand or perhaps even desire the love of the people in return. He understands too well that they, like everything else in this world, are changeable; there is no such thing as immortal fame.

The picture of philosophy Plato presents in his dialogues is much more beautiful and, in that sense, more noble than the analysis of the requirements of political life that Machiavelli presents. It is not clear, however, that Plato's philosopher is as generous as Machiavelli. He does not harm anyone, but he does not try to benefit everyone. He is arguably, therefore, less humane.

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Summing Up

At the conclusion of the conference at which these papers were first presented, Michael Zuckert gave a talk about the work I had done on politics and literature. Most of that work was published while we were teaching at Carleton College before we moved to Notre Dame. But as Michael presents it, one can see a certain continuity in both content and method. In studying American novels, he observes, I was trying to expand our understanding and study of American political thought by extending its questions about the basis and fundamental principles of the regime. Novelists raise such questions, I argued, not directly by presenting arguments either in their own name or in the mouths of their characters so much as indirectly, by showing how various characters acting on different passions and sets of beliefs in given circumstances interact with others. In effect, novelists present thought experiments which depict the inner life of human beings we all experience, but which is not directly observable externally or "objectively" using the methods of contemporary social science. One can easily see the overlap between the political-philosophical approach I took to the study of literature and the literary approach I have taken to studying philosophers such as Plato and Nietzsche that Michael notes at the end of his talk.

In the coming years, I hope to extend the combination of literary with philosophical and scientific methods and content in a study of "the search for self-knowledge." As an eminent sociologist recently observed, one would think that no knowledge should be easier for us to acquire; is there anything closer to us than ourselves? In fact, however, the search continues because no one has found satisfactory answers to the questions that almost immediately arise in conjunction with this search: What if any relation is there between who each of us is as an individual and the distinctive kind of being we all are as "human"? Are we really or significantly different from all the rest of nature—or the universe? What if, as "string theory" suggests, there is no "fit" between the intelligible order of the universe and the operations of the human mind?

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