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Three Arguments for the Philosophical Life

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Abstract: One of the many contributions of *Postmodern Platos* is that it raises an old question in the postmodern age: what is the value of philosophy? This essay finds and assesses three distinct arguments for the philosophical life in Zuckert's book, which she associates with Aristotle, Nietzsche, and Strauss. Philosophy, according to all three arguments, represents the highest life for human beings because it realizes our highest capacity, and it secures for our otherwise finite existence a measure of permanence. The arguments diverge on the question of the order and goodness of nature. The case for philosophy has relevance in our postmodern age, as we are driven to ask the question of the best life yet are unequipped to answer it.

Postmodern Platos brings into dialogue five postmodern thinkers—Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Strauss, and Derrida—on fundamental questions about the nature and possibility of philosophy: What is philosophy? Is it possible in a postmodern age? What is the relationship between the philosopher and politics?[1]

But there is a fourth question concerning the value of philosophy—the focus of this essay—which is the answer to the question, What is the good life for human beings? The postmodern philosophers, Zuckert shows, revive the case for the philosophical life, but develop new arguments in support of it. In this paper, I argue that there are in Zuckert's book three main arguments for the claim that philosophy is the best life. My aim in these comments will be to identify and build on these three arguments so as to clarify the main alternative answers, and finally bring them into dialogue in the way Zuckert does in *Postmodern Platos*.

Very few scholars and philosophers have examined the value of the philosophical life in recent years. The only other major philosopher to discuss it has

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[1]Catherine H. Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Parenthetical references in text are to this work unless otherwise indicated.

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been Pierre Hadot, but his focus was on the ancients.[2] The scholarship on the postmodern philosophers also has not discussed this issue at length.[3] Zuckert's book is a landmark work in contemporary political theory and in the scholarly study of the postmodern figures, and indeed, on the question of the value of philosophy in particular, the book remains an essential contribution to helping us grapple with philosophy's relation to the best human life.

Argument 1: The Dogmatic Rationalist Argument (Platonism, Aristotle, Hegel)

Zuckert points to the first argument indirectly, since it is this one the postmodern thinkers react against. It is not Plato's argument, but that of Platonism, the form of metaphysical idealism according to which the world possesses an intelligible rational order and purpose. Zuckert includes in this tradition Aristotle and Hegel, according to whom it is possible "to attain the knowledge of the whole" (254), as well as St. Augustine, the Stoics, and Leibniz, among many others, who "posit the existence of an independently existing, eternally intelligible order which could be replicated or copied by means of words or signs in the human mind" (255).

Consider Aristotle as a representative of this tradition in his case for the philosophical life.[4] In *Nicomachean Ethics* X.7, Aristotle offers two reasons why the contemplative life is the best life for human beings. First, this life consists in the perfection of the highest thing in us, our intellect. The intellect is highest because when we look at the world, we see that the world itself is ordered according to rational principles and ends. Reason is in this sense

[2]Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson (Oxford: Wiley, 1995).

[3]An exception in the case of Nietzsche has been the work of Laurence Lampert (*Nietzsche's Teaching: An Interpretation of "Thus Spoke Zarathustra"* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986] and *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996]). On Heidegger and Strauss, see Richard L. Velkley, *Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy: On Original Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[4]For further discussion of Aristotle's view of the value of the philosophical life, see Kristen Inglis, "Philosophical Virtue: In Defense of the Grand End" in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics,"* ed. Ronald Polansky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 263–87; Charles L. Griswold, "Happiness, Tranquillity, and Philosophy," *Critical Review* 10, no. 1 (1996): 1–32, doi:10.1080/08913819608443407; Ronna Burger, *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates: On the "Nicomachean Ethics"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), chap. 7; and Collins and Bartlett's commentary on Book X in *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

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what is highest in the world, as it provides the natural rule or governance of the cosmos. The world generates the standard for what is best or highest for us to live up to.

Second, contemplation is "most continuous," that is, we are "able to contemplate continuously," not dependent on fortune or the choices of others for the success of this activity, in the way that the practical life is heavily dependent on others. This makes the philosopher "most self-sufficient" (1177a). In this way, her life reflects or emulates the permanent or eternal things in nature that do not depend on anything for their existence, but are themselves enduringly self-sufficient or whole. In some sense, then, she participates in the eternity of those rational principles she apprehends, she becomes as far as possible the thought that thinks itself, and in this way the life of philosophy is closest to "making oneself immortal" (1177b).

Contrast the case for the contemplative life with the main alternative, the practical life. The practical life fails to live up to what is highest in us because the citizen and statesman must recognize the authority of conventional law. To challenge convention in the name of the natural order would undermine the law and defeat the very aims of the practical life. The practical life also does not secure self-sufficiency or wholeness, because the citizen and the statesman depend on the needs and efforts of others to achieve their ends. For instance, the citizen depends on other citizens to render a jury verdict and the statesman depends on the willingness of citizens to follow his orders. The efforts and needs of others are uncertain and changeable. The statesman may be a hero today, but a villain tomorrow as the public mood changes. In these ways, the practical life is always divided between one's aims and the practical world that sometimes satisfies and sometimes frustrates these aims. Satisfaction is never permanent, in contrast to the philosophical life.[5]

The problem with this argument, the postmodern thinkers argue, is that it relies on a metaphysical assumption about the rational intelligibility of the world. As Zuckert points out, Nietzsche identifies Kant as a watershed figure who destroys the metaphysical tradition's hope to gain knowledge of the world as it is in itself, independent of human beings. After Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, we can no longer take nature as our normative guide to the best human life. The post-Kantian thinkers instead hold that our access to the world is mediated through human subjectivity and at best we can only gain a partial understanding of the whole.

[5]Cf. Catherine H. Zuckert, "Aristotle on the Limits and Satisfactions of Political Life," *Interpretation* 11, no. 2 (1983): 185–206, for a discussion of Aristotle on the limits of the practical life.

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Argument 2: The Redemption of Humanity Argument (Nietzsche, Heidegger)

Zuckert discusses five postmodern thinkers on a variety of issues, but on the question of the value of philosophy, as I read her, she groups Nietzsche and Heidegger together, and Strauss and Gadamer. In each grouping, Zuckert regards one of the thinkers as making the better argument—Nietzsche and Strauss over Heidegger and Gadamer. Derrida offers no positive case on this question, since, as Zuckert states, "Derridean analyses can only be critical, they cannot generate positive principles or a picture of a desirable way of life" (269).

To begin with the first grouping: Nietzsche and Heidegger both hold philosophy to be the most valuable life because it redeems human existence. Both philosophers "regarded philosophy as the highest and most spiritual form of human existence" as a way to transcend and redeem modern conditions that undermined genuine spiritual excellence (254). Nietzsche worries about the dehumanization of modern peoples as we gradually embrace materialistic ends and denigrate spiritual striving and transcendence. He famously pictures dehumanized man in his harrowing discussion of the "last man," who does not even know "what is love? What is creation? What is longing?" Rather, he works only for "entertainment" and has his "little pleasure for the day" and "little pleasure for the night," and "everybody is the same." Heidegger is concerned with the rise of modern science and its transformation of the world—including human beings—into "standing reserve" to serve human ends. By turning us into mere instruments, parts of machines, modern science destroys our distinctive spiritual access to being.[6]

However, the main difference between the two on Zuckert's view is that Nietzsche uses philosophy to make the case for philosophy, while Heidegger uses philosophy "to embrace an entirely tradition-based world." Heidegger employs philosophy as a way to call attention to the problems of modernity and enjoin a future task for human beings. However, his historicism means that philosophy is "founded on explicit denial of the existence of any eternal or universally valid truths." If that is true, then philosophy as the pursuit of truth would be impossible, and Heidegger's "world would have no philosophy or science" (66). Once philosophy completes its destruction of philosophy, then humanity's longings would best be satisfied through art and tradition instead. Though Nietzsche and Heidegger both ground philosophy's value in the redemption of humanity, Heidegger's argument is weaker on Zuckert's view, as it results in the eventual elimination of philosophy.

[6]Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 17–18; Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: HarperCollins, 1982), 17.

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So instead let us focus on Nietzsche. If the first metaphysical argument for philosophy begins with wonder about the order of the whole, Nietzsche begins with horror. For Nietzsche, as Zuckert observes, the philosophical pursuit to discern the rational order of the world "culminates only in the knowledge that we cannot know" (13). The world itself possesses no intelligible order or end, and so we are cast adrift in a meaningless, purposeless world that is indifferent to human life. Nietzsche expresses this point in the form of three "deadly" doctrines in his *Untimely Meditations*, namely, "the doctrines of sovereign becoming, of the fluidity of all concepts, types, and species, of the lack of any cardinal distinction between man and animal."[7] Far from being a special part of the cosmic order, human life is a cosmic accident and in some ways an unfortunate, self-contradictory one. We embody the "contradiction at the heart of the world" in our longing for intelligible order amid the irrationality of the whole.[8]

For Nietzsche, when human beings are faced with this "tragic wisdom" about the whole, they quickly create illusions and mythic stories to evade this truth.[9] Nietzsche speaks of various "myths" in *The Birth of Tragedy* and necessarily closed "horizons" and "forgetting" in the *Untimely Meditations*.[10] Indeed, Socrates himself saves Western culture from "practical pessimism" and a "horrifying ethic of genocide out of pity."[11] Platonism itself represents the most enduring and powerful illusion for Nietzsche, because it portrays the whole as an orderly caring universe populated by gods, all of which help to reconcile us to our fate. However, the very rationalism and love of truth implicit in the Socratic-Platonic tradition ends up destroying itself. The love of truth reveals these illusions of Western thought as illusions, leading to the death of God, such that we now wander "through an infinite nothing."[12] As he states in *Twilight of the Idols*, the "true world is gone: which world is left?"[13] The modern world creates an unprecedented spiritual crisis.

Nietzsche's case for the philosopher rests on his singular ability to overcome this crisis. To make this case, Nietzsche transforms the vocation of the

[7]Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 112.

[8]Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 50.

[9]Ibid., 87.

[10]Ibid., 109–10; *Untimely Meditations*, 62–63.

[11]Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 74.

[12]Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science, with a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 120.

[13]Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 171.

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philosopher from the traditional role of contemplating the whole to now "legislating" that order. As Zuckert points out, Nietzsche describes this legislation in various ways: as the "declaration of the highest values," as the synthesis of "all existing knowledge," determining the "whither and the wherefore of humanity" (22). In his early work, he speaks of philosophy as "legislating greatness," and in *Beyond Good and Evil*, the "true philosophers are commanders and legislators," as they "first determine the 'where to?' and 'what for?' of people." "Their 'knowing' is creating, their creating is a legislating."[14] This new type of self-consciously creative or poetic philosophy Nietzsche aims to enact in his own writing.

Why is this vocation best for human beings? In my view, Nietzsche follows in the broad Kantian tradition, which holds that human beings are distinctive in our freedom, our capacity to transcend nature's blind causality and set ends for ourselves.[15] In *The Gay Science*, for instance, he celebrates the autonomy of the philosophers, those "who give themselves laws, who create themselves."[16] By setting ends for ourselves, we create value in the world. By generating value in an indifferent cosmos, we prove our worth through our own free activity.

Freedom here for Nietzsche does not mean unconstrained or arbitrary activity, nor the brutal political tyranny sometimes associated with his name, since whimsical activity and political tyranny are themselves determined or shaped decisively by some underlying natural desires and social conventions. Genuine freedom is the capacity to transcend nature and convention and introduce new conventions at the highest level—Nietzsche refers in this sense to philosophy as "the most spiritual will to power … the 'creation of the world,' the causa prima" or first cause.[17] In this way, the philosopher, as one who legislates a new set of values that shapes decisively an entire people—as did Socrates or Plato, for instance—represents the freest life.

Nietzsche's case for the philosophical life shares the formal features of the first, metaphysical argument for philosophy. On that view, philosophy is the best life because it contemplates what is highest or most comprehensive and because it contemplates what is most lasting or permanent. For Nietzsche, philosophy is the best life because it effects what is highest or most

[14]Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, trans. Marianne Cowan (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2012), 43; Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 106.

[15]See Jeffrey Church, *Nietzsche's Culture of Humanity: Beyond Aristocracy and Democracy in the Early Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) for a fuller defense of this interpretation. Nietzsche scholarship has recently recognized the importance of freedom in Nietzsche. See, for example, Ken Gemes and Simon May, *Nietzsche on Freedom and Autonomy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[16]Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 189.

[17]Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 9.

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comprehensive and creates what is lasting and permanent. It effects what is highest because the values legislated by philosophers determine our self-understanding at the most fundamental level. The philosopher governs the earth. In this sense, Nietzsche's view of the philosopher is not just poetic, but also prophetic, in the constitution of the structure of an entire world.

Furthermore, philosophy also effects what is lasting and permanent. In creating worlds, philosophers redeem humanity, making their free lives the pattern for others to emulate. Nietzsche says that together, all the great philosophers make possible the expansion of the "concept 'man' and make it more beautiful" and "exist everlastingly": that these philosophical lives "constitute a chain, that this chain unites mankind across the millennia like a range of human mountain peaks … —that is the fundamental idea of the faith in humanity." The life of the philosopher "will live" on long after him as the "monogram of [his] most essential being, a work, an act, a piece of rare enlightenment." The philosopher's life testifies to the "faith in the solidarity and continuity of the greatness of all ages and a protest against the passing away of generations and the transitoriness of things."[18] Whereas in Aristotle, only the philosopher could enjoy immortality, in Nietzsche, the prophetic philosopher invites the community as a whole into his eternal personality, redeeming our existence which is subject to the irrational, purposeless flux of nature.

Nietzsche's case, to an even greater extent than Aristotle's, involves the apotheosis of the philosopher, in particular, the creative, world-shaping, redemptive character of the philosopher. It is here that Leo Strauss objects. As Zuckert shows, Strauss doubted the efforts on the part of Nietzsche as well as other late modern thinkers to synthesize the ancient commitment to human excellence with the Christian spirituality of soul, the Caesar with the soul of Christ. Indeed, much of his work on Plato aimed to show that "philosophers would not and could not rule as such" (147). It is difficult to imagine how a philosopher could pull off such a feat or why he or she would want to, especially given the enduring political tension that characterizes all human communities. Strauss and Gadamer instead locate the value of the philosopher not in his or her redemptive freedom, but in the intrinsically satisfying life that is led.

Argument 3: The Skeptical Rationalist Argument (Strauss, Gadamer)

The final argument comes from Gadamer and Strauss. They share the view that the philosophical life is good because it is intrinsically satisfying, not because it redeems or completes some historical human process. In this

[18]Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 68–69.

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way, they return in part to the ancient argument that the philosopher's life is good because it demonstrates *eudaimonia*, in contrast to Nietzsche's argument that the value of philosophy lies in its freedom. However, Gadamer and Strauss depart from the ancients by denying that the philosopher is guided by an intelligible cosmos. Both are skeptics about the possibility that human beings can gain knowledge of the whole. However, on Zuckert's view, Gadamer goes too far in his skepticism, since he inherits Heidegger's historicism. Far from being able to apprehend the whole, the human mind is bound by historical tradition. As Zuckert points out, Strauss himself challenges Gadamer on this point, criticizing the latter for holding that "all thought is essentially historical and … philosophers can never, therefore, attain the truth in the traditional sense" (104). If there is no truth, then the love of it is not valuable.

Strauss, then, on Zuckert's view, has the stronger argument. His starting point in making his case is Heidegger's and Gadamer's historicism. If historicism is true, then philosophy is impossible. He responds to historicism with his thesis of esotericism, as several recent Strauss scholars have recognized.[19] At the same time, however, Strauss admits the force of the modern critique of metaphysics and does not seek simply to return to the ancient dogmatic defense of philosophy. Strauss accordingly puts the case for philosophy on a different foundation. The first metaphysical argument posits the rational intelligibility of the world, the second assumes the irrationality or nonrational character of the world. As Zuckert points out, Strauss sees the world as partially intelligible: "the irreducible heterogeneity of the cosmos, in particular the difference between the heterogeneous ends of human life and the homogeneous mathematical knowledge that can be applied to productive tasks, makes it impossible for us to know the whole" (259). We cannot synthesize the heterogeneous nature of our human, practical life with the homogeneous nature of scientific analysis. Nature presents us in this sense with a permanent mystery.

Even in the case of the heterogeneous nature of our practical life, Strauss recognizes the difficulty of justifying a single ranking of the many divergent ends of human life. If we examine these various ends—political virtue, piety, artistic excellence, and so forth—each corresponding life makes a claim for its essential goodness, and the cosmic order does not settle the dispute. As Zuckert puts the point, "the irreducible division Strauss sees in human knowledge is reflected in the series of dichotomies he presents between reason and revelation, ancients and moderns, poetry and philosophy. … Nor is it clear whether we should organize our common life in order to enable a few human beings to achieve the highest possibilities … or

[19]Michael P. Zuckert and Catherine H. Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Arthur M. Melzer, "Esotericism and the Critique of Historicism," *American Political Science Review* 100, no. 2 (2006): 279–95, doi:10.1017/S0003055406062162.

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whether we ought to lower our sights and secure the best possible conditions of life for most" (260). The irreducibly heterogeneous ends of human life, along with the competing views of how to organize communal life in service to these ends, generate human conflict, as each side seeks to lobby politics to support it and restrict the other.

The prospects, then, for defending philosophy as the best life seem dim—wouldn't philosophy just be one end among others, neither first nor last, but equally valuable and unable to best the others? Strauss nevertheless develops a novel argument for philosophy's value. The philosopher on Strauss's view does not gain access to the eternal truth about things, as he does for the ancients, but does nevertheless apprehend the permanent questions or unchanging problems about human existence. As Strauss puts it, "if the fundamental problems persist in all historical change, human thought is capable of transcending its historical limitation or of grasping something trans-historical."[20] Other candidates for valuable human lives—the practical life, the pious life—only grasp and respond to particular problems and questions relevant to their particular ends and communities. They approach these problems with concepts and beliefs based on received or partial authority. The philosopher's life is higher in that she questions this authority and ascends beyond it, moving incessantly from belief toward knowledge.[21] The philosopher thus attains a higher vantage point on the particular problems and questions raised by these other candidates for valuable human lives by subsuming them as particular instances of universal problems and questions.

Thus, Strauss's argument for philosophy also shares the formal features of the previous arguments. Philosophy is highest because it participates in what is highest and most enduring, or what is perfect and most complete. For Strauss, philosophy is not the best life because it contemplates the highest and most lasting things in nature. Rather, it is the best life because it contemplates those highest and most enduring questions about humanity. Because of the partial intelligibility of the whole, the philosopher does not attain complete knowledge, but she nevertheless gains knowledge of the heterogeneous structure of the world. With his "noetic heterogeneity," the philosopher can understand why no final or complete answers can be given to the permanent problems.[22] She knows what she cannot know. In doing so, the philosopher participates in the eternal and hence achieves the measure of self-sufficiency Aristotle and Nietzsche sought. She participates in particular in an eternal conversation about the permanent problems in human life, a conversation that in part examines the recurring problems appearing in political life. In

[20]Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 24.

[21]Leo Strauss, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 4–5.

[22]Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 142.

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living up to the highest potential of our distinctively human capacity, and in participating in such an enduring conversation—in perfecting our humanity and in achieving wholeness—the philosopher can lead a life that is intrinsically satisfying.

In this way, Strauss's philosopher need not embrace the turn from the contemplative to the practical life characteristic of post-Kantian philosophy represented in different ways, by, for instance, Marx and Nietzsche, in which the philosopher's vocation is to engage in a comprehensive project of redeeming humanity. Nevertheless, as Zuckert points out, the partial intelligibility of the whole generates an enduring conflict between politics and the philosopher. Politics creates a conventional order that requires belief and loyalty. The philosopher, committed to knowledge rather than belief, questions all conventional order in her ascent to the universal. In this way, the philosopher represents a threat to the political, and so she is always in danger of persecution.

Accordingly, for Strauss, contra Aristotle, the philosopher cannot be transpolitical; nor, contra Nietzsche, can she govern politics. Instead, she must engage in political philosophy, devoting part of her philosophical concern to identifying the "political preconditions" for the possibility of philosophy, as well as the limits of politics (200). Given the enduring tension between politics and philosophy, the philosopher must delicately balance the political and transpolitical character of her vocation. Socrates is the model for Strauss, in contrast to Nietzsche's Caesar with the soul of Christ. Socrates engaged in philosophy privately with the youth, scrupulously avoiding the political life which would on Socrates's view (as expressed in the *Apology*) have required him to compromise his integrity as a philosopher. Strauss's philosopher thus is partially dependent on the vagaries of political life, but can nevertheless achieve as much self-sufficiency as is possible for human beings through a prudent relationship to her political community.

How might Nietzsche respond to Strauss's argument? Strauss's case for philosophy rests on the permanent problems accessible to reason, while Nietzsche's case relies on the expression of human freedom and creativity. The emphasis on enduring questions constrains the philosopher's creativity to introduce new questions and problems into humanity, to "expand the concept 'man,'" in Nietzsche's terms. Accordingly, on Nietzsche's view, the philosopher is not able to redeem human life if she is not able to demonstrate our freedom from the irrationality of nature. From Strauss's perspective, if we take leave of reason and its permanent problems and instead emphasize human freedom and creativity, it is not clear by which standard we can evaluate and ultimately render intelligible to one another these expressions of freedom. Nietzsche is insistent that his exemplary individuals of the future are artists, saints, and philosophers,[23] but there is nothing in Nietzsche's view that prevents an unfettered creativity from taking a more monstrous turn.

[23] *Untimely Meditations*, 159.

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Conclusion

What is the significance of these reflections on the philosophical life in our postmodern age? First, Zuckert's analysis of the postmodern arguments can clarify for our age the importance of raising the question of the best life. Second, there are a few currents in modern thought and culture sympathetic to these arguments for philosophy as the good life.

Why excavate the question of the good life at all? Once an important feature of philosophical thought in antiquity, major modern thinkers from Hobbes and Locke to John Rawls have sought to reject the question of the *summum bonum*, claiming that "the philosophers of old did in vain enquire, whether *summum bonum* consisted in riches, or bodily delights, or virtue, or contemplation." It was in vain because though "all men desire happiness … their wills carry them so contrarily … that the same thing is not good to every man alike."[24] There is no single answer to this question, and indeed each individual is in a better position to understand his or her good than a distant philosopher. The wise no longer have insight into the best life; each one of us is better equipped to answer this question for ourselves. The rejection of the question thus fit quite well with the development of modern liberalism, which denied that the state should be engaged in fostering the good life. Instead, it should establish rules and protect rights so that individuals would be left free to pursue the good as they see fit. Thus, on this modern view, philosophy might be good for thee, but not for me. Society should neither promote nor discourage philosophy—or any other life—but rather leave the choice of life up to individuals.

The problem with this modern pluralistic approach is that on occasion the goods of human life do conflict, and so we are forced to decide among them. Young people ask themselves the question, What should I be when I grow up? They dream about different vocations and explore different possibilities, but there comes a point where they must choose. Choosing one vocation will involve giving up another. On what basis can these individuals choose? Reason is but the "scout and spy" of the passions, and so cannot provide a standard for assessing different lives.[25] However, our passions and desires are sometimes unreliable—chasing our passions can be exhilarating, but it can also be dangerous and self-destructive. We seem to need a standard independent of our desires to assess them. Furthermore, postmodern philosophers worry that the development of a pluralism about the good life leads ultimately to materialism and hedonism—a worry felt already by Kant. Without a standard to weigh the competing goods in life, we fall back on our most powerful passions to guide us, which tend to be the material

[24]John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 268–69.

[25]Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. 8.

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drives. Hobbes, after all, found the fear of death to be the most powerful passion, and Locke conceives of happiness in terms of pleasure and pain. Thus, modern life ends up flattening the soul. To stave off dehumanization, these postmodern philosophers argue, we must once again reflect on the question of the best life.

Let me conclude optimistically, by arguing that the two postmodern arguments are significant because they can find some traction with important modern currents of thought. First, the philosopher's value rests, for Nietzsche, on his prophetic role, on his ability to confer meaning and purpose on humanity in an indifferent universe. Many modern thinkers before Nietzsche judged nature to be harsh and indifferent to human life—consider Hobbes and Locke on the state of nature, for instance—and invested great value in freedom to reorder the world in service to human ends. The Baconian scientific project comes to mind first and foremost, but in a more humanistic vein, modern thinkers such as Machiavelli and Rousseau thought political founders invested community with a coherence, character, and end.[26] The late modern tradition of thought from Kant through Marx upheld the idea of the progression of humanity from dumb "beasts" to our self-determined liberation.[27] Modern thinkers thus recognize the importance and possibility of human agency in reshaping the world. As a result, it is a common refrain today that meaning in life stems from "making a difference," changing the world so as to benefit humanity at large.

Nietzsche's case for the philosopher might find traction here, because many of the familiar candidates for "making a difference"—the political founder, the artistic innovator, the citizen devoted to social justice—all reshape the world in quite limited ways. Modes and orders come and go, and founders and innovators are often forgotten. The progressive realization of justice may help in the long run, but only through a sacrifice of oneself to the cause. Moreover, there is no guarantee of the success of progress, in which case one's efforts might be wholly in vain. In contrast, the philosopher's aim is comprehensive—to reshape the life of a people or all of humanity. Moreover, the philosopher reshapes the inner life of humanity, transforming a worldview, rather than affecting the material conditions around people. By reshaping humanity at a fundamental level, our philosophical efforts can be more lasting. We remember the lives of philosophers—less so the lives of great scientists or activists—because they shape more fully who we are, as their answer to the basic question of the purpose of existence becomes fundamental to our identity. The philosophical life in this sense more completely promises to realize the Promethean transformative aspiration of modern freedom than do other lives.

[26]Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chap. 6; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, II.6.

[27]Immanuel Kant, *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. H. S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 41–42.

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Second, Strauss's case for the philosophical life rests on our dissatisfaction with dogma. Human beings strive for knowledge and are dissatisfied with following the received authority of others. This natural human desire is expressed most famously and powerfully in the image of the cave in Plato's *Republic*. However, it is familiar as well to the modern Enlightenment tradition, which fought against the received authority of the church and sought to extend the empire of reason. The modern Enlightenment is quite different from the Platonic enlightenment in important ways, especially in the scope or reach of enlightenment. Nevertheless, it places great emphasis, as Strauss does, on the ascent from belief to knowledge. Often the Enlightenment is connected with the accumulation of scientific knowledge, as in the case of Bacon or Descartes. But many Enlightenment figures considered it essential to pursue knowledge about human nature and morality as well—Bacon and Descartes themselves, but also Leibniz, Voltaire, Hume, and Kant, among many others. Furthermore, many of the claims about human nature that early modern thinkers make—especially the view that human beings are largely self-interested, and that our passions frequently dominate our reason—suggest that, like the ancients, they were skeptical about the universal perfectibility of human beings.

Strauss's case thus might find a sympathetic audience with the moderate Enlightenment of early modernity. The philosopher, after all, devotes herself to the pursuit of knowledge and does not identify with any party or sect—she is no fanatic nor dogmatist. Strauss obviously looked back to antiquity in conceiving of the nature of the philosophical life, but as several commentators have noted, Strauss did not long for us to return to the politics of the ancients, but was satisfied that the moderate views of the early moderns could provide good conditions for the emergence of the philosopher.[28]

The most difficult question, however, is, which case (if either) for the philosopher is true? It seems that if we reject the traditional, metaphysical justification of the philosopher, we are left with the conflict between these two options: between the Promethean late modern impulse to transcend all given order and achieve the victory of human freedom, and the ancient recognition of the finitude of our capacities to know and to act. Given that human beings seem perennially torn between the longing to achieve perfection and the need for wholeness, it is not clear to me how to approach resolving this disagreement. Let us hope that Zuckert writes a sequel to this book and guides us on this question as well.

[28]See, e.g., Catherine H. Zuckert and Michael P. Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), chap. 2.

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