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# Was Leo Strauss a Zetetic Political Philosopher?

I

In recent years, the ideas of Leo Strauss have received a great deal of attention. They have also been a source of controversy. Strauss's concept of political philosophy and his interpretation of canonical philosophical texts gained influence in the 1950s with the emergence of the Straussian school and spread over the following decade as former students took teaching jobs at major American universities. Several years after Strauss's death in 1973, the academic writings of his disciples triggered the first wave of Straussianism. The wave's swell was amplified by the entry of Straussians into top-level government circles during the first Reagan administration, where they served as political advisors, particularly in the State Department. In 1987, Straussianism became known to the wider public through *The Closing of the American Mind*, the best-selling work by Allan Bloom, Strauss's most illustrious student.<sup>1</sup> As surprising as this public resonance was, Strauss's teachings would rise to even greater prominence two decades later during the heated debate about the pivotal role Straussians were alleged to have played in George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq.

Amid the ongoing disputes between Straussians, their opponents, and some more measured voices, contemporary scholars have begun to take a closer look at Strauss's political philosophy. Volumes such as *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss* (2009) and *Brill's Companion to Leo Strauss' Writings on Classical Political Thought* (2015) have since secured Strauss a place in the academic pantheon. 'Among the great philosophers of the twentieth century,' Heinrich Meier, a leading interpreter and the editor of Strauss's collected works in German, wrote in 2014, 'political philosophy had only one advocate.'<sup>2</sup> Whether this assessment of Strauss is justified—and whether his political philosophy is a mere product of idiosyncratic readings of other philosophers—will not be discussed here. Rather, I am interested in a specific vein among the great variety of interpretations of Strauss:<sup>3</sup> the view that

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1 Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987). The book grew out of an article he wrote for *National Review* in 1982; see <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/218808/our-listless-universities-williumrex>.

2 Heinrich Meier, "How Strauss became Strauss," in *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s*, eds. Martin D. Yaffe and Richard S. Ruderman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014): 13.

3 In addition to the usual distinctions between East Coast, Midwest, and West Coast Straussians, Michael Zuckert also identifies rationalist, decisionist, zetetic, faith-based, Aristotelian, and Platonic

he is a sceptic, or, in Grecophile terms, a zetetic, philosopher. Stephen B. Smith, Catherine and Michael Zuckert, Daniel Tanguay, Thomas Pangle, Leora Batnitzky, Laurence Lampert, and other scholars have sought to define exactly what constitutes scepticism and zeteticism in Strauss's thought.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, they have used the label 'zetetic' label to distinguish him from the Straussians in the reception history of his work.

In examining the aptness of this label, I will primarily consider *On Tyranny* (first published in 1948) and Strauss's correspondence with Alexandre Kojève, because these sources contain the few passages in which Strauss addresses zeteticism directly.<sup>5</sup> I will argue that Strauss's zeteticism is an insufficiently elaborated form of scepticism that builds on ancient models but whose philosophical jumping-off point lies in the philosophy of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Husserl. The enduring motifs of those philosophers are for the most part hidden in Strauss's work, and as such can only be staked out, not systematically investigated.<sup>6</sup> Like Nietzsche and Heidegger, Strauss was sceptical of modern philosophy and the philosophical tradition, which he thought sclerotic and stale.<sup>7</sup>

I will begin by describing the meaning of 'zetetic' in antiquity and its use in later-day approaches (II). After taking an interlude to sketch out some of Strauss's key ideas (III), I will turn to the role of the 'zetetic' in his interpretation of Xenophon (IV). I will then discuss several passages in which Strauss uses the terms 'zetetic' and

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approaches; see idem, "Straussians," in *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, ed. Steven B. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 267.

<sup>4</sup> See Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Catherine H. Zuckert and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Thomas Pangle, *Leo Strauss* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Leora Batnitzky, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy and the Politics of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Laurence Lampert, *The Enduring Importance of Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> See Viktor Gourevitch, "Philosophy and Politics," *The Review of Metaphysics: A Philosophical Quarterly* 22.1 (1968): 59; and idem, "Philosophy and Politics, II," *The Review of Metaphysics: A Philosophical Quarterly* 22.2 (1968): 281–325.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of these motifs, see Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) and Michael Zank's seminal "Introduction" to Leo Strauss, *The Early Writings (1921–1932)*, trans. and ed. Michael Zank (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002): 3–49.

<sup>7</sup> In 1930, Strauss wrote: 'The tradition has been shaken at its roots by Nietzsche. It has altogether forfeited its self-evidence,' see idem, "Die religiöse Lage der Gegenwart," in idem, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, ed. Heinrich Meier (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1997): 389; translated in Leo Strauss, "Religious Situation of the Present," in *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s*, 234. On the relationship between Strauss and Heidegger, see Richard L. Velkley, *Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy: On Original Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) and Rodrigo Chacón, "Reading Strauss from the Start: On the Heideggerian Origins of 'Political Philosophy'," *European Journal of Political Theory* 9.3 (2010): 287–307.

‘sceptic’ in order to better understand Straussian scepticism and its limits (V) before drawing some conclusions about the kind of philosopher Strauss was (VI).

## II

Zétesis (ζήτησις) is an ancient Greek word meaning ‘open inquiry.’ Its most precise definition can be found in Sextus Empiricus’ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, in which four variants of scepticism are distinguished:

The Sceptic School, then, is also called ‘zetetic’ from its activity in investigation and inquiry, and ‘ephectic’ or suspensive from the state of mind produced in the inquirer after his search, and ‘aporetic’ or dubitative either from its habit of doubting and seeking, [...] and ‘Pyrrhonian’ from the fact that Pyrrho appears to us to have applied himself to scepticism more thoroughly and more conspicuously than his predecessors.<sup>8</sup>

Sextus Empiricus describes scepticism as:

An ability, or mental attitude, which opposes appearances to judgements in any way whatsoever, with the result that, owing to the equipollence of the objects and reasons thus opposed, we are brought firstly to a state of mental suspense and next to a state of ‘unperturbedness’ or quietude.<sup>9</sup>

Two features of the ancient understanding of scepticism are striking from today’s perspective. For one, it is primarily practical, not epistemological, and hence strongly associated with a way of life.<sup>10</sup> For another, many thinkers of antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the early modern era understood Socrates as a sceptic without much differentiation between his statements in the early aporetic dialogues and the later ones containing Platonic doctrines. ‘Zetetic’ was a known term in modern bourgeois philosophy—Kant, for instance, would occasionally use it in his lecture announcements<sup>11</sup>—but over time, it became obsolete. It was not until the late twentieth century that scholars took a renewed interest in the idea. In his 1990 monograph *Zetetic Skepticism*, Stewart Umphrey provides a broader account of the term and argues

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Richard H. Popkin and José R. Maia Neto, eds., *Skepticism: An Anthology* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2007): 58.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, 59.

<sup>10</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism*, ed. Richard Bett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) emphasises this point.

<sup>11</sup> In his “Notice Concerning the Structure of Lectures in the Winter Semester 1765–1766,” Kant writes that ‘the special method of instruction in philosophy is *zetetic*, as some ancients called it (from *zetein*), that is to say *investigative*. It only becomes *dogmatic*, that is to say *decisive*, in various parts by well-practiced reason,’ see Immanuel Kant, *Akademie-Ausgabe*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Reimer, 1900): 307.

that in the *Meno* Socrates was a zetetic but not a sceptical philosopher.<sup>12</sup> In 2014 the ‘Zetesis Research Group’ was founded,<sup>13</sup> made up mostly of Italian philosophers devoted to the study of zetetic sceptical philosophy in antiquity and the modern era.

The interpretation of Strauss as a zetetic philosopher is part of this revival, but it is also a special case, for it simultaneously harkens back to the term’s classical roots while seeing in it a key to understanding Strauss’s ideas. To date, interpreters have sought to define Strauss’s scepticism in three different ways.<sup>14</sup> The first view locates his scepticism in his anti-utopianism and in his principled distrust of opinions in favour of an unending search for truth. The second sees his scepticism in his criticism of revealed religion. The third is formulated by Leora Batnitzky: ‘Strauss’s kind of skepticism also is skeptical of itself.’<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that none of these definitions comes off the back of a systematic review of all passages related to zeteticism in Strauss’s writings.

### III

In sketching out the scepticism attributed to Strauss—and assessing whether it can be called zetetic—I first want to recall several of the basic ideas of Strauss’s middle and late periods. It is well known that Strauss argues for antique political philosophy as the authoritative way of doing philosophy. For Strauss, philosophising is a radical, stubborn interrogation of limits, a search for wisdom that is not itself described as wisdom. Scholars—among whom Strauss counted himself—dwell in a cave deeper than the one that Plato famously describes, where they can do no more than rearrange the discussions of great philosophers.<sup>16</sup> True philosophy only begins in the first cave, but reaching it is improbable given the dominant opinions of the day. As a result, religion must provide the orientation that the masses are unable to achieve through philosophy, lacking as they do the mindset for a philosophical form of life. In his 1953 book *Natural Right and History*, Strauss writes:

No alternative is more fundamental than this: human guidance or divine guidance. The first possibility is characteristic of philosophy [...] the second is presented in the Bible.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Stewart Umphrey, *Zetetic Skepticism* (Wakefield: Longwood Academic, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> See <http://zetesisproject.com/tag/zetetic-philosophy>.

<sup>14</sup> I am drawing here on various ideas, especially those of Steven B. Smith and Michael Zuckert in *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, ed. Steven B. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Batnitzky, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas*, 129.

<sup>16</sup> For more on this and on other passages I have not singled out individually, see Harald Bluhm, *Die Ordnung der Ordnung: Das politische Philosophieren von Leo Strauss* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (1953; reprinted: Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971).

In addition to his return to ancient philosophy, two other areas are useful in approaching Strauss's scepticism: his interpretations of the ancient sceptics—Socrates, Plato, and Xenophon—and his notion of political philosophy. Strauss's scepticism can be characterised as an *existential* scepticism that examines fundamental philosophical questions. In the 1950s, Strauss published several essays tying his sceptical viewpoint to the political. Almost all of those essays have been collected in the influential volume *What Is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (1959).<sup>18</sup> There, Strauss describes political philosophy primarily by stating what it is not: it is *not* the history of political philosophy, though it itself is philosophical; it is *not* political thought, for that also includes political opinions; it is *not* political theory, which contains ideas about the political order with the goal of policymaking; it is *not* modern political science, which Strauss associates with positivism and relativism; and it is *not* political theology, which seeks to link politics with divine revelation. Instead, he locates political philosophy in the attempt to safeguard the possibility of philosophy through a tenacious search for truth. This branch of philosophy results from the necessity of taking the conflict between politics and philosophy seriously, and doing this means safeguarding philosophy as the Socratic enterprise of searching for truth and ascertaining the best way of life. Strauss describes ancient political philosophy as classical because it inquires into the natural attitude of the political order unadulterated by previous tradition.

A crucial part of Strauss's understanding of philosophy is its dual mode of presentation: a manifest, exoteric message directed at the public and a hidden, esoteric message directed at true philosophers. This dual mode of presentation is necessary, Strauss maintains, because the masses are unable to absorb the truths of philosophy. The distinction between the masses and the philosophers is one that Plato made after the death of Socrates, which is reflected in the staged drama of the dialogues. By pitching their ideas on two different levels, Plato and other philosophers can dilute ideas that call the existing system into question while allowing the sceptical search for truth to continue. Strauss's rhetoricisation of philosophy places the philosopher in a privileged position, an author who codes his text in different ways for different readers. This not only has consequences for how the philosopher lives, but also highlights his opposition to non-philosophers.<sup>19</sup>

An idea related to this dual mode of communication is Strauss's rarely scrutinised idea of teaching. Shaped by Heidegger's own rhetoricisation of philosophy

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<sup>18</sup> See Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Chicago: Chicago University Press 1959) and Rafael Major, ed., *Leo Strauss' Defense of Philosophic Life: Reading "What Is Political Philosophy?"* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013). I would like to thank Thomas Meyer for pointing out to me some additions that Strauss made in the English-language edition of his Hobbes study in 1936 (GS III, 184), including the distinction between classical and modern political philosophy. In letters dated Nov. 27, 1938 (GS III, 558) and Feb. 16, 1939 (GS III, 566), Strauss mentions working on a text about classical political philosophy, which he later published in February 1945.

<sup>19</sup> See Leo Strauss, "Exoteric Teaching," *Interpretation* 1.1 (1986): 54f., written in December 1939.

in his lecture on Aristotle, especially in the summer semester of 1923, Strauss uses the term in a variety of ways to describe a theory's concealed meaning, that part of it that goes unsaid.<sup>20</sup> Teaching, too, is an effort to dilute philosophical ideas that transform systematic constructions into problems of philosophical inquiry. But unlike Heidegger, who reinterprets philosophies and thinks largely in terms of language, Strauss assigns the philosopher an emphatic role as an author who consciously encrypts his writing with multiple meanings. The work of interpretation consists in understanding the philosopher's texts in the way he understood them himself.

In *What Is Political Philosophy*, 'zetetic' appears only in the "Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*," Strauss's response to Kojève's critique entitled "Tyranny and Wisdom." Strauss does not use the word in an active sense, but as a casual self-description. He laid the groundwork for this zetetic inquiry in the manuscript of his 1932 lecture "The Intellectual Situation of the Present," in which he writes:

*Our freedom is the freedom of radical ignorance.* The intellectual situation of the present is characterized by our knowing nothing anymore, by our knowing nothing. Out of this ignorance grows the necessity of questioning, questioning about right and good. And here the following Paradox presents itself: while the present is *compelled to question as any age*, it is *less capable of questioning than any age*. We must question without being *capable* of questioning.<sup>21</sup>

Based on this briefest of sketches, I now want to describe the path to Strauss's scepticism in more detail.

## IV

Strauss's novel method of interpretation is closely linked to his scepticism in his understanding of political philosophy. The obvious assumption—that Strauss encountered the idea of the zetetic in his work on Plato and Socrates and developed his scepticism from there—is partly correct, but it is not the entire story. Strauss's understanding of the zetetic is initially informed by the ideas of Xenophon, whose rhetoric, he argues, is simpler than that of Plato and, as such, provides a springboard for un-

<sup>20</sup> See Stuart Elden, "Reading *Logos* as Speech: Heidegger, Aristotle and Rhetorical Politics," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 38.4 (2005): 281–301; also Chacón "Reading Strauss from the Start: On the Heideggerian Origins of 'Political Philosophy'." Chacón shows that the Weimar period put Strauss on the path to Socrates via the 'destruction of tradition,' cf. *ibidem*, 293. He concludes that 'Strauss' bold venture was to reclaim the land that Heidegger discovered but neglected to explore—and to call it Socratic "political philosophy",' cf. *ibidem*, 302. Simon W. Taylor argues that Strauss's turn away from Nietzschean atheism led to his viewing of religion and Zionism from a zetetic vantage point; see *idem*, "Leo Strauss's Skeptical Engagement with Zionism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 78 (2017): 95–116. Velkley notes Strauss's nearly life-long engagement with Heidegger's ideas; see *idem*, *Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy*.

<sup>21</sup> Leo Strauss, "The Intellectual Situation of the Present (1932)," in *Reorientation*, 237–253.

derstanding more complicated Socratic dialogues.<sup>22</sup> Strauss employs his new method of interpretation in his first essay on Xenophon, “The Spirit of Sparta and the Taste of Xenophon.”<sup>23</sup> In this now-famous text, he reads Xenophon’s comments on the “Constitution of the Lacedaemonians” as a satire, though they are often understood as a panegyric. Some remarks by Laurence Lampert help us to understand the role of Xenophon in Strauss’s thinking:

Over two months pass before Strauss again mentions his work in his letter, but the letter in which he does [February 6, 1939] is the most explosive of them all. He announces his intention to write the essay that appeared nine months later as “The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon”: ‘I plan to prove in it that his apparent praise of Sparta is in truth a satire on Sparta and on Athenian Laconism.’ ‘Xenophon is my special *Liebling*,’ he says, ‘because he had the courage to clothe himself as an idiot and go through the millennia that way—he’s the greatest con man I know.’ The clothing, the con that so endears Xenophon to Strauss, leads him to conclude that what Xenophon does, his teacher did: ‘I believe that he does in his writing exactly what Socrates did in his life.’ [...] Strauss here elaborates the most radical aspects [...] of his recovery of esotericism, and he revels in it: ‘In any case with [Xenophon] too morality is purely exoteric, and just about every second word has a double meaning.’ Socrates and his circle stand beyond good and evil.<sup>24</sup>

Arguably, by 1939, Strauss had, for the most part, worked out his idea of political philosophy. Even if there is no talk of political philosophy *per se* in his Xenophon essay, Strauss’s remark that classical political science is based on foundations laid by Socrates while modern political science follows Machiavelli makes his meaning apparent.<sup>25</sup>

In “Exoteric Teaching,” an essay from the same year, Strauss develops a specific understanding of scepticism that significantly broadens its scope to include morality, religion, political life, and even philosophy. Though Strauss considers philosophy to be an important search for truth, it is not wisdom itself, and cannot and should not provide direct guidance to politicians, scholars, and the masses. As Lampert correctly stresses, philosophers are not moral role models like the prophets. Rather, they are, in Nietzsche’s sense, beyond good and evil. Anticipating a possible objection

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<sup>22</sup> See Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: Including the Strauss-Kojève Correspondence*, ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000): 26. *On Tyranny* is Strauss’s most important text on Xenophon. It was originally published in 1948 and then expanded in 1961 to include the debate with Kojève. The 2000 edition also contains the written correspondence between Strauss and Kojève.

<sup>23</sup> Leo Strauss, “The Spirit of Sparta and the Taste of Xenophon,” *Social Research* 6.4 (1939): 502–536. See also Heinrich Meier, *Die Denkbewegung von Leo Strauss* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1996): 15.

<sup>24</sup> Laurence Lampert, “Strauss’s Recovery of Esotericism,” in *Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, 69.

<sup>25</sup> Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 23f.



here, Strauss states that ‘the distinction between exoteric and esoteric speech has then so little to do with ‘mysticism’ of any sort that it is an outcome of prudence.’<sup>26</sup>

Strauss puts special emphasis on the definition of philosophy as a search for wisdom, and from there draws consequences for the sceptical treatment of politics. He places wisdom in relation to the virtue of moderation, which comes to bear primarily in one’s public activity. Here, he uses Machiavelli to argue indirectly against Nietzsche and Heidegger.<sup>27</sup> Like them, Strauss thinks radically, but he does not try to dissolve the tensions between politics and philosophy. For him, political and philosophical life exists in permanent opposition, and it is precisely because the opposition is unavoidable that philosophers must practice moderation. Their scepticism about political opinions and the gods can confuse the body politic and destabilise its order; it is imperative, therefore, that philosophers conceal their radicalism and atheism. For Strauss, radicalism in thought and moderation in politics operate in entirely different spheres.

The point of Strauss’s nuanced study is to reconstruct Xenophon’s original intentions, not to analyse his arguments. The distinction between form and representations puts Strauss on the path that leads him to discover scepticism, the dialogue form, and the difference between what is said and what is alluded to. Recently, Xenophon scholars have raised a number of objections to Strauss’s interpretation of “Constitution of the Lacedaemonians” as satire.<sup>28</sup> Thanks to Strauss’s surprising interpretative reversal—returning Xenophon to the status of rousing, accomplished thinker that he enjoyed before the eighteenth century—he manages to remain in the spotlight of current scholarship.<sup>29</sup>

Strauss originally published his second study on Xenophon dealing with the dialogue *Hiero* in 1948. Besides being an extraordinary contribution to the totalitarianism debate and exemplifying his position that big questions demand alternative answers, it is also methodologically interesting, because in it he develops his understanding of political philosophy.<sup>30</sup> Strauss’s interpretation of *Hiero* has been

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**26** See Strauss “Exoteric Teaching,” 53. Other candidates for exoteric writing are Maimonides and Lessing, the latter of whom plays a prominent role in “Exoteric Teaching.” Strauss writes that Lessing, after ‘having had the experience of what philosophy is and what it requires’ (57), adopted the distinction between the esoteric and the exoteric in his writing.

**27** Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 184.

**28** See Vivienne J. Gray, ed., *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Xenophon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) and eadem, *Xenophon’s Mirror of Princes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011). In the second book, Gray distances herself from Strauss’s readings of Xenophon. However, she too stresses Xenophon’s remove from the Sparta of his time.

**29** For a helpful account of Strauss’s interpretation of Xenophon, see Richard S. Ruderman, “‘Through a Keyhole’: Leo Strauss’ Rediscovery of Classical Political Philosophy in Xenophon’s *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*,” in *Brill’s Companion to Leo Strauss’ Writings on Classical Political Thought*, ed. Timothy W. Burns (Leiden: Brill, 2015): 213–226 and Eric Buzzetti, “A Guide to the Study of Leo Strauss’ *On Tyranny*,” in *ibidem*, 227–257.

**30** See chapter 5 of Bluhm, *Das politische Philosophieren*.



commented on by many. I am only interested in looking more closely at his ideas on scepticism and their two-pronged attack against the mostly positivist, value-judgment-eschewing discipline of political science. In its place, Strauss favours a normative practice of political science that resists historicism, which, besides being relativist, is shaped by a hubristic claim to understanding past authors better than they understood themselves.<sup>31</sup> The starting point for Strauss's interpretation of *Hiero* and the normative philosophy of Xenophon is his understanding of the Socratic dialogues. Like Plato in his dialogues, Xenophon hides his true meaning in *Hiero*. Understanding it involves accessing his original intention. Strauss begins with a brief structural analysis of the two-part dialogue. Simonides, who plays the active role, visits the tyrant Hiero and strikes up a conversation. His intent—Strauss calls Simonides a wise man—is not to give Hiero advice, but to develop an active discussion. Simonides wants to show what is wrong with the tyrannis over which Hiero rules (its pathology) and how to make things right (its therapeutics), but he can only do this if he proceeds indirectly. The idea is to make Hiero at least partially aware of the problems of tyrannical rule by letting him become caught in his own contradictions. In this way, Strauss argues, the tyrant can be turned into the benevolent despot.<sup>32</sup> Whether Simonides achieves this is unclear, but he does manage to show that Hiero's way of life is questionable and could change were he to give more consideration to the *polis*. By moving the dialogue from way of life to the question of virtue, Xenophon puts tyranny and its problem into stronger relief. But in doing so, he also, according to Strauss, employs a radical scepticism, one buried beneath the surface in an esoteric layer that is only revealed by what is not said: the silences, Xenophon's concealments, and Simonides' omissions.

Strauss first mentions the concept of the zetetic in his debate with Kojève—despite his strongly opposed viewpoint, he was one of the few people by whom Strauss felt understood—and only in his “Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*” (1950). Kojève, who was influenced by Heidegger in his early life, not only defends Hegel, but, as his own breed of Marxist, even indirectly defends Stalinism.<sup>33</sup> Kojève takes this position because he assumes that the utopia of benevolent despotism described by Xenophon was achieved in the modern era using different means. A Frenchman by choice, Kojève uses historical arguments to claim that the expanding authoritarian regime, the coming world-state, is a good, the highest form a state can achieve. Furthermore, he believes that tyrants are particularly open to the advice of philosophers, although their recommendations must first be adapted to the circumstances by intellectuals, in whose company he places Simonides. Strauss rejects these extreme views, but he agrees with Kojève on one point: that the understanding of totalitarianism demands a return not to Machiavelli, as many contemporaries believed, but to Xeno-

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<sup>31</sup> Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 24 f.

<sup>32</sup> Strauss argues that the compromise of the benevolent despot is strictly opposed to the Athenians, who categorically reject tyrannical rule in any form. Hiero, of course, is no Athenian.

<sup>33</sup> Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 188.

phon's *Hiero*. Machiavelli, who intentionally avoids the term tyranny in *Il Principe*, would presumably dismiss a ruler like Hiero. But to Strauss, an ethically rich understanding of tyranny unfettered by a restrictive theory of power is the basic prerequisite for understanding modern tyranny.

The crucial part of the dispute between Strauss and Kojève for our purposes concerns their respective concepts of philosophy. Kojève's historical speculation is fundamentally at odds with what Strauss, in the following passage, calls 'zetetic philosophy':

What Pascal said with antiphilosophic intent about the impotence of both dogmatism and skepticism, is the only possible justification of philosophy which as such is neither dogmatic nor skeptic, and still less 'decisionist,' but zetetic (or skeptic in the original sense of the term). Philosophy as such is nothing but the awareness of problems, i. e., of the fundamental and comprehensive problems. [...] Yet as long as there is no wisdom but only the quest for wisdom, the evidence of all solutions is necessarily smaller than the evidence of the problems.<sup>34</sup>

To Strauss, Kojève verges on sectarianism because he, like the Hegel of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, decides for only one solution. Strauss believes his own position is open (though this might confuse readers given his conservative return to virtues, antiquity, and moderation). His "Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*" marks a definitive switch from political science to philosophy, to philosophical politics and the political actions of philosophers.<sup>35</sup> By the time of his debate with Kojève, Strauss had come to understand political philosophy as *prima philosophia*, grounded in the irrevocability of the human problem and the unavoidable conflict between philosophy and the *polis*.<sup>36</sup> Strauss continues his interrogation of these basic problems throughout *On Tyranny*, both in his interpretation of Xenophon and in his debate and later correspondence with Kojève.<sup>37</sup> As I will argue in the next section, Strauss's use of zetetic to explain his own approach is at once a revival of an ancient Greek idea and an act of appropriation to alter its original meaning.

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, 196.

<sup>35</sup> On the philosophical politics of Strauss, see his *On Tyranny*, 205f. Here, Strauss emphasises that part of philosophy consists in convincing the state that philosophers are not atheists and that they do not put everything into question.

<sup>36</sup> Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 205.

<sup>37</sup> A new translation of the "Restatement of Xenophon's *Hiero*" can be found in Emmanuel Patard, "'Restatement' by Leo Strauss," *Interpretations* 36.1 (2008): 3–100. Patard also published the unabridged version of Kojève's contribution; see Emmanuel Patard, *Critical Edition of Alexandre Kojève, "Tyrannie et sagesse" and 'Tyranny and Wisdom',* in *Philosophy, History, and Tyranny: Reexamining the Debate Between Leo Strauss and Alexandre de Kojève*, eds. Timothy W. Burns and Bryan-Paul Frost (Albany: State University of New York): 287–357.

## V

The interpreters of Strauss I mentioned at the beginning of this paper characterise his philosophy as zetetic. I will now discuss this claim using passages from Strauss's writings, especially from statements in letters in which he expresses himself freely.<sup>38</sup> I will confine myself to those passages in which Strauss uses the term 'zetetic' or 'sceptic' to show what he means by this, which are rarely considered collectively.<sup>39</sup> My take on those passages shows that they provide a number of explanations but no systematic justification of zeteticism. Firstly, I want to recall the polemical context: since the late 1920s, Strauss fought against relativism, historicism, and positivism.<sup>40</sup> Notably, these are all movements associated with modern scepticism. As the following passage from 1931 shows, it is no surprise that the young Strauss distanced himself from this kind of scepticism:

There is no *teaching* of Socrates. Socrates *could* not teach; he could only *question* and through this questioning help others to gain understanding. First, he helped them realize that what they believed they knew, in reality they did not know. Not that he himself knew what others did not know. Instead his wisdom—the famous wisdom of Socrates—meant that he knew that he did not know anything. Even this knowledge of knowing nothing is not a *teaching*. Socrates is also not a *skeptic*. A teaching, at least a philosophical teaching, is an answer to a question. But Socrates did not answer anything. The answer that he appears to give (the knowledge of knowing nothing) is only the most poignant expression of the question. Socratic philosophizing means to question [...]. Why, however, does Socrates *persist* in questioning? [...] How can he persist in questioning *despite* his knowledge? The answer is that he *wants* to persist in questioning [*in der Frage bleiben*], namely because questioning is what matters, because a life without questioning is not a life worthy of man.<sup>41</sup>

I will put aside for a moment the issue of a worthy life to stress again that Strauss expressly does not call Socrates a sceptic; his terminology would not undergo a se-

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**38** As Thomas Meyer observes: 'Strauss as an author of letters is almost completely undiscovered [...]. He has been underestimated in this capacity—and, by extension, in his thought. From the beginning, his letters possessed something unconditional: they directly address the subject and its vis-à-vis,' see Thomas Meyer, "'Dass es mir nicht erlaubt ist, für einen Augenblick das Meer von Blut zu vergessen': Hans-Georg Gadamer and Leo Strauss in ihren ersten Briefen nach 1945," in *Nach dem Krieg—Nach dem Exil? Erste Briefe, First Letters: Fallbeispiele aus dem sozialwissenschaftlichen und philosophischen Exil*, eds. Detlef Garz and David Kettler (Munich: edition text + kritik, 2012): 99–118.

**39** Restricting my scope in this way seems necessary since it is simply impossible to discuss all of the essays, lectures, and statements by Strauss and the mass of interpretations concerning his view on Socrates and Plato in any one article.

**40** In 1929, Strauss heavily criticised Karl Mannheim for dissolving truth into ideology, the hallmark *par excellence* of relativism. He made a similar attack on Max Weber's positivism, though his appraisal of him is different. Strauss makes no distinction between axiological and methodological relativism, all his post-empirical epistemology notwithstanding.

**41** Leo Strauss, "Cohen und Maimuni," in idem, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1997): 411.

mantic shift until his later period. The passage also shows Heidegger's influence on Strauss.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that 'to persist in questioning'—*in der Frage bleiben*—is downright Heideggerian in formulation. What is also interesting about this passage is Strauss's multilayered remark that Socrates has no teaching. The Greek dialogical philosopher does not have a doctrine; he *questions*. Strauss's later distinction between the esoteric and the exoteric for philosophers like Plato who rely on the written word does not apply to such a thinker. Nevertheless, while the early Strauss may have wanted to return to Socrates, his starting point was a modern one. He follows Nietzsche (apart from his criticism of Socrates) and is taken with Löwith, who reads Nietzsche as an author who 'repeats antiquity at the peak of modernity.' In his 1931 review article on Julius Ebbinghaus, Strauss defines the purpose that Socrates and his specific form of scepticism should serve:

The not-knowing [*Nichtwissen*] that is real in the present day is not at all the natural not-knowing [*Nichtwissen*] with which philosophy must begin; then a long detour and a great effort are first needed in order even to return to the state of natural ignorance [*Unwissenheit*].<sup>43</sup>

The emphasis on 'natural' in 'natural ignorance' should not be overlooked. In the seldom-remarked-on third chapter of his *Natural Right and History*, Strauss alludes to a kind of epistemological explanation of his position: philosophical scepticism develops from 'pre-philosophical experience' with hearsay and appearance. Drawing on Husserl's idea of a natural, pre-philosophical attitude, Strauss defines a normative concept of nature—one opposed to the diversity of gods and mores—that establishes a framework for doing philosophy.

An important aspect of Strauss's concept of philosophy can be found in the 1945 "Farabi's Plato," an essay often assigned special significance in his work. There, he writes:

It is the way leading to that science rather than that science itself: the investigation rather than the result. Philosophy thus understood is identical with the scientific spirit 'in action,' with *σκέψις* in the original sense of the term.<sup>44</sup>

The term 'political philosophy' does not appear here—Strauss speaks only of political science—but the phrase 'scepticism in the original sense' is one he will later use when talking about the sceptical character of his philosophy.

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<sup>42</sup> As often observed, Strauss abandoned the impulses of Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig that were directed against philosophical systems and epistemic methodology. Like these Jewish thinkers, he focused on ethical questions concerning man in general and open (oral) discussion; see Zank, "Introduction," 35f.

<sup>43</sup> Leo Strauss, "On the Progress of Metaphysics," in idem, *Early Writings*, 215.

<sup>44</sup> Leo Strauss, "Farabi's Plato," in *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume* (New York: The American Academy for Jewish Research, 1945): 393.

A peculiar feature of Strauss's scepticism is its preoccupation with alternatives. In *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (1958), Strauss writes:

We did assume that there are fundamental alternatives, alternatives which are permanent or coeval with man. This assumption is frequently denied today.<sup>45</sup>

Similar anthropological claims can be found in *Natural Right and History*: the permanent problems are not only coeval with man; they are always the same, independent of time and context.<sup>46</sup> Strauss frequently claims that all fundamental problems have the character of an alternative. This is more than a preference for a dual code; it recalls Carl Schmitt's notorious distinction between 'friend and foe.' But Strauss does not provide a single argument why, for a sceptic, all problems must assume the form of an alternative. Why should there not be three, four, or five possibilities? Why should unresolvable problems not be trilemmas or pentalemmas? Strauss's fixation on alternatives significantly restricts the scope of his scepticism, though he does concede in his debate with Kojève that multiple philosophical solutions can exist.<sup>47</sup> At any rate, it is a strange turn for someone who expressly rejects problem histories in the neo-Kantian mould and who argues against Hans-Georg Gadamer that the content of problems and their solutions can change.<sup>48</sup> Despite tying the understanding of a problem to the philosophising subject, Strauss remains tethered to the belief in eternal problems as such.

Several passages from Strauss's correspondence with Karl Löwith shed more light on his conception of scepticism. In a letter from July 19, 1951, he responds to an essay by Löwith:<sup>49</sup>

It is excellently written and compared with the madmen who dominate the world stage, I agree with you 1,000 percent. But compared with the *real σκέψις*, the Socratic-Platonic? You read Plato with Montaignean or Christian eyes. Socrates is no skeptic in a vulgar sense, because he *knows* that he knows nothing. To start, he knows what *knowledge* is—and that's not nothing. Moreover,

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<sup>45</sup> Leo Strauss, *Thought on Machiavelli* (1958; reprinted, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978): 14.

<sup>46</sup> Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971): 32.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 196: 'Philosophy as such is nothing but genuine awareness of the problems, i.e. of the fundamental and comprehensive problems. It is impossible to think about these problems without becoming inclined toward a solution, toward one of the very typical solutions. Yet as long as there is no wisdom but only quest for wisdom, the evidence of all solutions is necessarily smaller than the evidence of the problems. Therefore the philosopher ceases to be a philosopher at the moment at which the 'subjective certainty' of a solution becomes stronger than his awareness of the problematic character of that solution. At that moment the sectarian is born.'

<sup>48</sup> See Stephan Steiner, *Weimar in Amerika. Leo Strauss' Politische Philosophie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013): 209.

<sup>49</sup> Strauss is most likely referring to the essay "Skepticism and Faith," which appeared in the Jan. 1, 1951 edition of *Social Research*.

he knows that the *problems* are, *the* problems, the *important* problems—that is, what is *important*. In other words, he knows that philosophizing is a *unum necessarium*.<sup>50</sup>

Strauss goes on to make a distinction between Socratic scepticism and the vulgar scepticism of Pyrrho. In Strauss's eyes, Pyrrho's scepticism boils down to *ataraxia*, a state of philosophical equanimity which is both apolitical and individualistic. Socrates, by contrast, knew that he knew nothing, but he also knew that this was a special form of knowledge. Socratic philosophising is a political act because it seeks, through the interrogation of prevailing opinion, a renewal of the *polis* based on sound principles. The philosophy that Strauss talks about—the *unum necessarium*—is not compatible with stringent scepticism.<sup>51</sup> It would be naïve to assume that Strauss is unaware of the paradox in his position; as an expert in ancient philosophy, he was no doubt familiar with Cicero's maxim that we cannot even be certain that everything is uncertain. Strauss concludes his letter to Löwith by pointing to a particular source of his scepticism:

To be quite frank, your article helps strengthen the sympathy for Heidegger that recently awoke in me, who remained loyal to himself by making no concessions to belief.<sup>52</sup>

Sixteen years earlier, Strauss wrote the following to Löwith:

But these late antique philosophies are far too dogmatic, even the skeptics, for someone like you to remain with them and not go back to their forefather, Socrates, who was *not* dogmatic.<sup>53</sup>

Around a month later, he wrote to Löwith again:

Why did I not respond to 'The doctrine of the mean?' Because I know who you mean, namely people like Burckhardt. I would like to believe you that B. was the ideal representative of the moderation of antiquity in the nineteenth century. But the subjects of his philosophizing are

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**50** Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 675. It should be mentioned in passing that Strauss follows Schleiermacher's interpretation of Socrates. Schleiermacher wrote that Socrates' not-knowing is based on a concept of knowledge that includes knowledge on the path to knowledge, see Daniel Friedrich Schleiermacher, "Ueber den Wert des Sokrates als Philosoph [1815]," in Daniel F. Schleiermacher, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. I.11 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2002): 201–228. Andreas Arndt is critical of this view, however; see Andreas Arndt, *Schleiermacher als Philosoph* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2013): 285–295. As an aside: Schleiermacher did not see Xenophon as a philosopher.

**51** The formula 'the one necessary' ('Das Eine, was not tut') stems from Søren Kierkegaard and was made familiar by Heidegger; see Karl Löwith, *Mein Leben in Deutschland vor und nach 1933. Ein Bericht* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1986): 28. It is interesting and a little ironic that Strauss uses this decisionist formula—which Löwith explains in his "Von Hegel zu Nietzsche," in idem, *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 4 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1988): 195, especially in his letters to Löwith.

**52** Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 675.

**53** Letter to Löwith dated June 23, 1935, in Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 650.

only possible on the basis of modern ‘immoderation’: no ancient philosopher was ever a historian [...] No, dear Löwith, Burckhardt—that really won’t do.<sup>54</sup>

Burckhardt, whom Löwith revered, did not figure similarly for Strauss. He associated Burckhardt, a historian, with relativism and saw no philosophical radicalism in his doctrine of the mean, despite the aristocratic remove from his contemporaries. To Strauss, Burckhardt’s moderation was nothing more than a theory of the *juste milieu*. But while Strauss disagreed with Löwith about Burckhardt, they both rejected the decisionism of Heidegger and Schmitt.

## VI

Strauss redefines scepticism, or zeteticism, in contradistinction to modern relativism with recourse to Xenophon and Socrates. It is embedded in his political philosophy and in his notion of exoteric and esoteric writing. His rhetoricisation of philosophy, its reduction to zetetic questions, is meant to facilitate and protect political philosophy. Its critical value is primarily polemical; compared with other forms of current political philosophy, it is unable to provide a detailed diagnosis of the present situation beyond a mirroring of theory in antiquity and assuring itself of its impact in the modern era through self-reflection. Instead of being a mere sub-discipline—a ‘branch,’ as Strauss calls it—political philosophy rises to first philosophy. In this capacity, it is the ceaseless, normative interrogation of fundamental human problems and of the political order. For Strauss, philosophy is the only framework in which this can meaningfully occur.

As I suggested at the beginning, several levels of zetetic questioning can be found in Strauss’s writings. He is sceptical of modern philosophy and tradition—including social sciences, political theory, political science, and revealed religion—for being neither radical nor normative enough. The philosopher’s scepticism is directed at opinions in general and at the political in particular. Strauss argues again and again for moderation in politics and accuses other radical philosophers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger not only of self-instrumentalisation, but also of not doing enough to prevent misunderstandings by disciples, intellectuals, and the poorly educated. Of course, it is doubtful whether Strauss did enough to prevent such misunderstandings himself, given the later success of some Straussians. His central topos—the warning not to separate wisdom and moderation in *On Tyranny* and in other places—can hardly be ignored, yet he remains vague.

Strauss’s implicit set of anthropological assumptions, his concept of political philosophy, and his belief in the insufficiency of reason form the basis of his conservative approach, which was noted by his disciples, political sympathisers, and oppo-

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54 Letter to Löwith dated July 17, 1935, in *ibidem*, 565f.



nents alike. Yet one must admit that his zetetic approach, while producing innovative interpretations of canonical political philosophers, yields few substantive guidelines.

Strauss's attempt to ground scepticism anthropologically may be interesting, but he can hardly conceal its limited scope, the lovely line about scepticism being a form of wisdom notwithstanding. Methodically, his philosophising is tied to the distinction between exoteric and esoteric writing, with all its illuminating and surprising insights. According to Strauss's interpretative hermeneutics, the hidden meanings in philosophical texts enable radical questioning while shielding the public from its ramifications. His political philosophy does not aim at specific solutions; rather, it is meant to have humanising side-effects on the city, on the political community, and on gentlemen. Strauss believes that philosophical scepticism, correctly understood, refuses instrumentalisation and, despite its radicalism in theory, is moderate in questions affecting the political order more narrowly.

Nevertheless, the limited scope of his scepticism means that his thinking can be called zetetic only in part. That limited scope grows out of Strauss's commitments to antiquity—to Socratic questioning, to persisting in questioning, and to understanding philosophy as a way of life. At the same time, Strauss wanted to elude criticism of the foundations of modern political philosophy and theory. His insufficiently elaborated existential scepticism can problematise relativism, historicism, and positivism—the spectres, in his mind, responsible for the crisis of modernity—but he cannot shake them systematically. His entire critique of modernism and liberalism stands on feet of clay. Interpreting Strauss's philosophy as sceptical does not do enough to address this or its scant epistemological underpinnings.