

READING STRAUSS

Darren Hynes
Memorial University of Newfoundland
dhynes@mun.ca

Leo Strauss is known today primarily as a political philosopher whose work is seen by some to be having a major influence on contemporary American politics. Yet there is a problem in the interpretation of Strauss' thought that has been persistently acknowledged in the literature and that goes to the heart of assessing his work: determining his enigmatic intentions. He has been seen as an atheist, a deist believer in natural law, a pious Jew, and an antiquarian. Was he a classicist who thought that fifth-century Greek democracy was the highest form of civilization? Or a political thinker whose doctrine of natural right influenced the thinking of the neo-conservatives in the Bush administration? Or a Nietzschean engaged in an elaborate philosophical burlesque? Harry Jaffa, an American political historian, says that Strauss taught him to see that the Declaration of Independence embodied "eternal and eternally applicable truth"; Thomas Pangle, another student of Strauss, tends to see such things as more like conventions.¹ Then there is the European Strauss, who is more concerned with problems like Zionism

¹ See the letters in *The New York Review of Books*, Oct. 10, 1985, p. 41. For more on the varied interpretations of Strauss see Thomas Pangle, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. ix-xi; see too, Steven B. Smith, "Leo Strauss' Platonic Liberalism," *Political Theory*, vol. 28, no. 6 (Dec., 2000), pp. 802-03. For Strauss as antiquarian classicist see Brian Barry, *Political Argument* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 290; deist believer see J.G.A. Pocock, "Prophet and Inquisitor," *Political Theory* 3: 384-401 (1975); Strauss and Jewish thought see *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, Leo Strauss, edited with an introduction by Kenneth Hart Green (State University of New York Press, 1999); for Straussians and American government see the coverage in *The New York Times*, particularly James Atlas, "Leo-Cons -- A Classicist's Legacy: New Empire Builders," Sunday, May 4, 2003: Section 4, p. 1; see too Earl Shorris, "Leo Strauss, George Bush, and the Philosophy of Mass Deception," *Harper's Magazine*, June, 2004; for more scholarly treatment see Anne Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire*, and Shadia Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1997); Drury also paints Strauss as an atheist nihilist Nietzschean in *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988); see too John Micklethwait, *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America* (New York: Penguin, 2004); the most devastating attack on Strauss was by Miles Burnyeat, "Sphinx Without a Secret," *The New York Review of Books*. (May 30, 1985): 30-36; see too the replies by Strauss' followers on Oct. 10. For an overview see the bibliography in David L. Schaefer, Jr., "The Legacy of Leo Strauss: A Bibliographic Introduction," *Intercollegiate Review*, vol. 9, no. 3 (Summer 1974), pp. 139-48. See also Neill Robertson, "Leo Strauss' Platonism," *Animus* (4) 1999.

and the Jewish question, the legitimacy of the modern Enlightenment, the rival claims of philosophy and revelation, and, most fundamentally, the possibility of restoring the Socratic practice of philosophy as a way of life.² To complicate matters further, there is some textual grounding for each of these interpretations.

I argue, however, that Strauss himself, through his very writing, offers us a means of reading that shows us a way out of these interpretive dilemmas. The key lies in Strauss' interpretation of the Platonic approach to the problem of order, embodied in the dialectical imagination of the dialogues and the consequent textual polyphony that arises from them. The logic of the late Platonic dialogues and unwritten doctrines explain the character of Strauss' approach to philosophy and the history of philosophy. Strauss can be explained through the late Platonic dialogues and the unwritten doctrines of Plato.

Strauss' Plato, not surprisingly, is the esoteric Plato, the Plato of the unwritten doctrines. For Strauss, and for others in this tradition, the Platonic dialogues are primarily vehicles for the esoteric presentation of Plato's metaphysics, which is comprised primarily of a fundamental relation between limit, or the One, and the unlimited, or the Dyad, also known as the Great and the Small. Strauss' Platonism consists in his practice of writing "dialogically," or polyphonically, utilizing as a principle of composition the unwritten Platonic doctrine of the indeterminate dyad, the principle of duality that governs the world of change and which, as Aristotle says, is called *duopoios* because it "doubles" everything it "lays hold of."³ The dyad thus grounds Strauss' well-known

² See the review by Mark Lilla, "Leo Strauss: The European," *The New York Review of Books*, Oct. 21, 2004. Reviewed there is Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vols. 1-3, edited by Heinrich Meier (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, Second edition); *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings (1921-1932)*, translated from the German and edited by Michael Zank (State University of New York Press); David Janssens, *Tussen Athene en Jeruzalem: Filosofie, profetie en politiek in het werk van Leo Strauss* (Amsterdam: Boom); Heinrich Meier, *Die Denkbewegung von Leo Strauss: Die Geschichte der Philosophie und die Intentionen des Philosophen* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler); Heinrich Meier, *Das theologisch-politische Problem: Zum Thema von Leo Strauss* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler); Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: Une biographie intellectuelle* (Paris: Grasset).

³ Bakhtin defines a dialogic text as polyphonic and open-ended. Dostoevsky is perhaps the best known example, though the technique is also exemplified in the genres of the serio-comic tradition, particularly in the Socratic dialogue and Menippean satire. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and tr. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), p. 5. Compare Thomas M. Lennon's Bakhtinian reading of the enigma of Bayle in *Reading Bayle* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979). Lennon, however, makes no mention of Platonism or the indeterminate dyad, though a kind of Academic skepticism is perhaps implicit. The similarities between Bayle and Strauss have been explored by Gianluca Mori in *Bayle: Philosophe* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999), and in "Persécution et art d'écrire: Strauss, Skinner et Pierre Bayle," in *Leo Strauss. Art d'écrire, politique, philosophie* (Paris: Vrin, 2000). Perhaps Plato can provide a link between the two? Bayle's *Dictionnaire* conspicuously contains no entry on Plato, but we do not know the principle of inclusion. For Aristotle on the dyad see *Metaphysics*, 1084a 5, 1091a 12, 1082a 14, 987b 33.

esotericism, which “doubles” his intention by constantly calling his motives into question, thereby highlighting the dialectical poles of interpretation through which the problem of intention must itself be approached.⁴

Strauss, therefore, approaches the authors on whom he comments in the same way as he thought Plato approached his relationship to his characters in the later dialogues – namely, as vehicles for the indeterminate dyad, which is essentially embodied in the dialectic itself. Strauss’ explanation of the intelligibility of the world, like Plato’s, ultimately reduces the problem to its metaphysical basics, to the relation between the One and the indeterminate dyad, or between the limited and the unlimited, where the unlimited in fact describes the world of change, encompassing the continuum of phenomenal being, which Plato also called the world of the Great and the Small. So, like Plato, Strauss consciously uses a dialectical voice whereby opposite positions are constantly being weighed in the balance. His own readings often bring out the implicit contradictions at the heart of any text, and the weighing of positions is exemplified in his own practice of offering varied readings of the texts of others. The dyadic doubling thus recurs in interpretative repetition, which emphasizes the open-endedness of the dialectic. The indeterminate dyad explains Strauss’ dialogic or poetic method of presentation and is thus responsible for his historiology (his philosophy of historical writing), the polyphony of his texts, as well as the many and varied textual interpretations of his work.⁵

Strauss was acutely aware of the many-faceted role that history plays in philosophy and philosophy in history. But there is a reflexivity in the presentation of his philosophical foregrounding that is deliberately bewildering. It is nevertheless possible to work through this Straussian hall of mirrors. Indeed, in terms of philosophical significance, Strauss himself might say that it is not the destination that matters so much as the journey. His approach is an illustration of his own position that “wisdom cannot be said,” it can only be lived.⁶ In this respect Strauss’ work is not so much a history of philosophy as a philosophy of history.⁷

Strauss’ Platonism and the Esoteric Plato

In *The City and Man*, Strauss writes that the Platonic Ideas are “utterly incredible.” But what he means by this is that the proposition that there are ideas independent of their phenomenal manifestations “appears to be fantastic,” especially in so

⁴ That Strauss himself is an open-ended and esoteric writer has already been ably demonstrated by Shadia Drury in *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*. Drury takes this open-endedness as an indication of Strauss’ Nietzscheanism; Nietzsche, however, simply uses the same dyadic and Platonic strategy -- as Strauss himself realizes. See “Note on the Plan of Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*,” in Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 174-191.

⁵ See Allan Megill, “Philosophy of Historical Writing/Historiology,” *Encyclopedia of Historians and Historical Writing*, ed. by Kelly Boyd (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1999), pp. 539-43.

⁶ Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand, McNally: 1964), p. 231.

⁷ Adapting Drury, *Political Ideas*, p. 62.

far as “no one has yet been able to provide a satisfactory account of the doctrine.”⁸ Yet, as Strauss’ students knew, behind these seemingly dismissive remarks is an open-ended reading of Plato where the doctrine of the Forms, as Kennington points out, “departs markedly from that usually found in the mouth of Socrates in the Platonic writings.”⁹ Specifically, this open-ended reading sees the theory of the Forms as indicating the basic philosophical problems, rather than offering solutions.

This provides the standard reading of Strauss’ Platonism, as seen, for example, in Catherine Zuckert’s excellent discussion in *Postmodern Platos*.¹⁰ Indeed, Steven B. Smith has recently argued, in *Reading Leo Strauss*, that the concern for the philosophical freedom to discuss these problems is what is behind Strauss’ “Platonic liberalism”: “an intensely skeptical cast of mind consonant with a free spirit.”¹¹ Smith’s skeptical Strauss is thus a friend of liberal democracy, as is Thomas Pangle’s, but Pangle describes Strauss’ project (with rather less reliance on the Forms) as “classical political rationalism”: “the moral, political, and theological justification or vindication of the Socratic way of life.”¹² Yet, neither Smith nor Pangle discuss the indeterminate dyad and its significance for understanding the dialogic approach; and although Zuckert’s book contains a superb discussion of the indeterminate dyad and its role in Gadamer’s Plato, she makes no mention of this concept in relation to Strauss, despite her discussion of the “fundamental dualism” at the heart of Strauss’ Socratic *ethos* and its connection to Straussian esotericism.¹³

Esoteric writing and the problem of unbelief had been recognized as an historical problem since the late nineteenth century: it is implicit in Andrew Dickson White and J. W. Draper’s history of the warfare of science and theology, and also plays a key role in the early image of Descartes as scientist.¹⁴ The problem has played a significant role in the tactics of controversy even longer, usually being associated with the question of the relationship between faith and reason. Sometimes, though, it arises in connection to the more general question of religion and persecution.¹⁵ Most previous scholars have focused

⁸ *City and Man*, p. 119.

⁹ See Richard Kennington’s review of *Natural Right and History*, “Strauss’s Natural Right and History.” In *Leo Strauss’s Thought*, Alan Udoff, ed., (Boulder: Lynne Reimer, 1991), pp. 227-52. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).

¹⁰ Catherine H. Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Strauss, Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

¹¹ Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); see too his earlier “Leo Strauss’ Platonic Liberalism,” *Political Theory*, vol. 28, no. 6 (Dec., 2000), p. 804.

¹² Thomas Pangle, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, p. xii.

¹³ Zuckert, pp. 96-100; p. 165.

¹⁴ A.D. White, *History of the Warfare of Science and Theology in Christendom*, 2 vols. (New York: Appleton, 1936, c. 1896); J. W. Draper, *History of the Conflict Between Religion and Science* (London: The Pioneer Press, 1923).

¹⁵ The problem of unbelief was most famously taken up in connection with Rabelais in Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century*, tr. Beatrice Gottlieb

solely on individual context and cases; Strauss, however, claimed to have uncovered the larger philosophical tradition of which esoteric writing is a part, and Plato is one of the originators of this tradition.¹⁶ We will first examine the esoteric Plato, before turning to look at how Strauss takes up his position.

Plato's Esoteric Doctrine

The esoteric Plato is not a big part of Anglo-American philosophy, but to Continental philosophers he is fundamental.¹⁷ This Plato starts from a metaphysical consideration about limit, the unlimited, and Being that is explicit in neo-Platonism and which can be traced back to the pre-Socratics. Anaximander first suggested that an understanding of the origin of the world of limited things depended on an understanding

(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982). For a thorough discussion of the literature see Perez Zagorin, *Ways of Lying: Dissimulation, Persecution, and Conformity in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990). For the relation of esotericism to the use of the *reductio ad absurdum* in the seventeenth century discussion of Locke, see Thomas M. Lennon, *The Battle of the Gods and Giants: The Legacies of Descartes and Gassendi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 371-74.

¹⁶ Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, *passim*.

¹⁷ James A. Arieti, *Interpreting Plato: The Dialogues as Drama* (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991); "How to Read a Platonic Dialogue." *The Third Way: New Directions in Platonic Studies*, ed. by Francisco J. Gonzalez (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995); Gerald A. Press (ed.), *Who Speaks for Plato? Studies in Platonic Anonymity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); Charles R. Griswold, *Platonic Writings/Platonic Readings* (Pittsburgh: Penn State Press, 2001); John Findlay, *Plato: The Written and Unwritten Doctrines* (New York: Humanities Press, 1974); K. Gaiser, "Plato's Enigmatic Lecture 'On the Good,'" *Phronesis* 25 (1980), pp. 5-37; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, tr. By P.C. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); Kenneth M. Sayre, *Plato's Late Ontology. A Riddle Resolved*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). Jacob Klein, *Plato's Trilogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); Hans Joachim Kramer, *Plato and the Foundations of Metaphysics*, Ed. And tr. By John R. Catan (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1990); Hans J. Kraemer and Kenneth M Sayre, "Plato and the Foundations of Metaphysics," *Ancient Philosophy* 13, 1993, pp. 167-184; Alexander Nehemas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Giovanni Reale, *Toward a New Interpretation of Plato*, tr. from the tenth edition and edited by John R. Catan and Richard Davies (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997); James C. Klagge and Nicholas D. Smith, eds. *Methods of Interpreting Plato and his Dialogues*, [*Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, supplementary volume, 1992] (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Kenneth Dorter, ed. "Plato Redux". *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 29:3 (1996). Luc Brisson, "Premises, Consequences, and Legacy of an Esotericist Interpretation of Plato," *Ancient Philosophy* 15, 1995, pp. 117-134. See the thorough discussion of most of these authors by Carol Poster, "Framing Theaetetus: Plato and Rhetorical (Mis)Representation," *Rhetorical Society Quarterly* (Summer) 2005.

of the unlimited or the “boundless” from whence it came, but it was probably the Pythagoreans who provided the immediate background for Plato. Philolaos, for example, held that the world and everything in it came into being from two primordial principles: limit, and its imposition on the unlimited, so as to create the limited.¹⁸ Of these two principles the limit, the unit, or the One was the good which they called mind or God, and the other was the indefinite dyad, or being considered as plurality and evil.

The Plato of the unwritten doctrine similarly starts off with two fundamental principles: the One and the Indefinite Dyad, or the Great and the Small. Though he never explicitly adopts the Pythagorean terminology, the thematic discussion of these principles of limit and the unlimited is found throughout the later dialogues, in the *Gorgias* and the *Philebus*, in particular, but also in the *Parmenides*, where he argues that you cannot predicate anything of the One without running into a contradiction, because to speak of the One a two-fold principle of predication must be operative. Difference must come into play, but difference itself cannot be understood without some idea of limit. So limit and the unlimited are mutually constitutive. We thus have to speak about form and matter, unity and multiplicity, finite and infinite. Alexander of Aphrodisias, citing Aristotle’s lost work *On the Good*, says that according to Plato the one and the indefinite dyad, which he spoke of as the Great and Small, are the principles of all things and even of the Forms themselves. He might also have seen this in Speusippus, Xenocrates, and the work of others who attended Plato’s original lecture on the Good, which provided the basis for Aristotle’s commentary.¹⁹

The primary metaphysical relationship for the esoteric Plato is thus the dyadic one between the limited and the unlimited. In these terms the indeterminate dyad has a doubling function which, on the technical side, accounts for Plato’s number theory as well as his theory of the phenomenal world: Twoness exemplifies both the double and the half, being a limited form of the two tendencies of the Great and the Small towards increase and diminution.²⁰ These tendencies are determined by the relationship between the limited and the unlimited. But it turns out that the division between the limited and the unlimited cannot be maintained, as is seen in the *Philebus*. In fact, they intrude on one another, because each has another split in it, which shows that it has the other within itself. Limit is not only infinitely one, it is nothing without something to limit, and that something is the indeterminate, which has to be limited in order to be conceived. There is an activity between limit and the unlimited in which they are mutually constitutive moments of life, the universe, and everything. How this relation was to be understood was something the Platonic tradition had to work out. It could be described as an interpenetrating continuity, but from the beginning in it seems to have been understood as a relation of love, self-love, and desire.

Strauss’ work on the esoteric “tradition” actually points to the significance of the

¹⁸ Diels and Krantz, 44B1.

¹⁹ See Findlay, *Plato: The Written and Unwritten Doctrines*, Appendix I.

²⁰ Jacob Klein, “The Concept of Number in Greek Mathematics and Philosophy,” in *Jacob Klein: Lectures and Essays*, ed. by Robert B. Williamson and Elliott Zuckerman (Annapolis: St. John’s College Press, 1985), pp. 43-52.

way we read the Platonic texts of the past. We should be wary of taking them at face value; the neo-Platonists of the third and the fifteenth centuries, for example, who deal explicitly with the Platonic themes of limit and the unlimited, have a more subtle side. They are not only appreciative of the more literary or “hidden” aspect of Plato’s work, they also utilize these literary techniques themselves. It seems clear that at least one aspect of what Strauss means by the esoteric tradition refers to a kind of underemphasized skeptical history of the Platonic indeterminate dyad, which is found in the discussion of limit and the unlimited in thinkers from Plotinus to Cusanus to Pascal.²¹

Moreover, as the example of Plotinus shows, the dyad can be seen to have both a good side and a bad side; and in Christian neo-Platonism it is the good side that is increasingly emphasized in so far as the Trinitarian aspect of the One/Dyad relation was brought to the fore, as we further see in the work of Pseudo-Dionysius, who explicitly explores such themes.²² And while it is true that “hiddenness” of a kind is to be found in Plotinus, Boethius and Pascal, these authors are certainly not esoteric in the sense of having a message to hide from a public readership: Plotinus’ productions were mostly in-house affairs written for his school, while the audience is unclear in the cases of Boethius and Pascal. At any rate, the question of readership is a factor that distinguishes the various meanings of esotericism in Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and Modernity.

²¹ Yet this history is not so much secret as it is untold, for it is there to be read in the texts in so far as all these authors discuss limit and the unlimited in a way that explicitly draws on the Platonic dyad. A brief sketch can be given by names and titles: Boethius, “The Consolation of Philosophy”, but especially the Preface to the “Theological Tractate”; Cusa, the opening of the second book of “On Learned Ignorance”; Steuchius, “The Perrenial Philosophy”; Eriugena, “On the Divisions of Nature”; Pico della Mirandola, “Oration on the Dignity of Man”; Ficino, “De Amore”; Pascal, “The Disproportion of Man”. See too the discussion in “The Strauss-Kojève Correspondence” in *On Tyranny: Including the Strauss-Kojève Correspondence*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael Roth, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 269-72, where Kojève discusses a link, through an *oral* tradition, between neo-Platonism and Farabi; and vol. II of the Straussian leaning *Independent Journal of Philosophy*, “Leo Strauss: Essays on the Issues and Themes of his Life-Work.” Discussed there are Socrates, Plato, Maimonides, Hobbes, Locke, Leibniz, and Montesquieu. The final chapters of John Findlay, *Plato and Platonism* give some indication of this larger history. Aspects of dyadic neo-Platonism are also evident in French post-modern thought. See Wayne Hankey, “French Neo-Platonism in the 20th Century,” *Animus* (4), 1999; see too, Catherine Kuckert *Post-modern Platos* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

²² Compare Plotinus’ Second Ennead, Tractate Nine (“As Against the Gnostics”), and Fifth Ennead, Tractate One, for the optimistic and pessimistic views, respectively: *The Enneads*, translated by Stephen MacKenna, 4th ed. rev. by B. S. Page, with a foreword by E. R. Dodds and an introd. by Paul Henry (London: Faber, 1969). For Pseudo-Dionysius see *Divine Names and Mystical Theology* (Marquette University Press, 1980), and Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge and Paul, 1964), especially the chapter on Pseudo--Dionysius and Ficino.

The Dyad in Strauss: Meaning and Truth

Both Kennington and Benardete have already pointed out the dyadic aspects of Strauss' thought in their reviews of *Natural Right and History* and *The City and Man*, respectively, but neither has explicitly addressed the consequences of this approach for our understanding of Strauss' own writing – their dyadic reading is necessarily implicit. In a later conversation, however, Benardete is more explicit about the role of the dyad in both his own review and Kennington's; indeed, he has made the dyad and the dyadic reading of ancient texts his own, as a glance at his titles shows.²³

Benardete defines dyadic duality in general terms as: “A pair whose members are not independent units that can be simply counted as two, but rather, parts of a whole, each of which in some way contains the other in itself.”²⁴ The duality of each part in itself and of both together, Benardete argues, is encapsulated in the formula for Greek tragedy, *pathei mathos*, learning by experience, which involves uncovering your erroneous starting point, followed by the deeper recognition of the necessity of that starting point. Plato, he suggests, provides a paradigm in Socrates' description of his “second sailing” – the discovery of his own path through recognition of the mistakes he initially shared with his predecessors. A good example is in the *Republic*, where he discusses the *periagoge*, the student's turn from the world of becoming to the world of being. The formal structure is thus in tension with the dynamic of the plot, or the action. What starts off as a kind of rigid structure, like the relation of justice, piety, and might in the opening of the *Republic*, turns out to be in motion in such a way as to explain what that structure is, so that the plot of the opening scene, for example, is a good indication of the true structural relations at work. The opening scene of the *Republic*, for example, reveals the tension between philosophy and politics. There is an internal tension implicit in the *eidōs* of the dialogue. The key to seeing the dynamic of the argument is in some kind of symmetry breaking in a pattern. This usually leads to a kind of third insight about the relation between the first and the second.²⁵

As Benardete points out, Strauss' work epitomizes the indeterminate dyad on many levels, but it is primarily evident thematically with respect to the relationship between, on the one hand, trying to discern the nature of things on a metaphysical level,

²³ Seth Benardete, Encounters and Reflections: Conversations With Seth Benardete: With Robert Berman, Ronna Burger, and Michael Davis, ed. By Ronna Burger (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 183.

²⁴ Benardete, *Encounters and Reflections*, p. ix.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 145. An easier, non-temporal example of dyadic duality, I suggest, is found in the division of Plato's Line, the geometrical representation of the world of Being, which is divided according to the Golden Proportion. The parts of the divided Line thus exemplify dyadic duality in so far as the two parts of the Line cannot simply be counted as two, but each must be considered as part of a larger whole such that each half contains the other in itself (in so far as it expresses proportionality). There is a kind of mutual containment in dyadic duality, and this reciprocal relationship captures the structure of esoteric writing as well, where authors say one thing and mean another.

and on the other hand, doing this through a return to the great texts.²⁶ There is thus a strict analogy here to the two-fold character of interpretation, i.e., what does an author mean and is it true? Meaning and truth, however, apply to the world as well as the text. Perhaps it applies to the world as text insofar as the world either has meaning or it does not. Yet meaning itself is a complex and time-bound affair: you usually come to a conclusion or interpretation about what something means and then it turns out not to be true. Both Plato's dialogues and Strauss' essays are imitations precisely because they repeat this two-fold structure. They present to us what it means for people to understand things as they do, but they also point to another understanding that is not in agreement with that understanding at all – and they then give an account of how the two are related to one another. Plato and Strauss both seem to have gone out of their way to present this double character. The upshot is that our understanding of our own experience can be wrong: education is designed to save you from yourself.²⁷

The whole point is that meaning cannot be approached directly. As the angling metaphor in the *Sophist* shows, thematic meaning is discovered in an indirect manner – you have to sneak up on it. You have to use Pascalian *finesse*. In this sense there is a parallel between Strauss' work and philosophizing in general, for what it reveals is the necessary aporetic structure of understanding. This shows a deeper level to esotericism. Strauss' approach to Plato connects the small with the big by getting us to see how the parts of his argument fit together, both within and between the dialogues, without making either the big a mere enlargement of the small or the small a mere anticipation of the big. He rather showed that the correction each imposed upon the other altered the level of the argument itself. This is the essence of the Socratic dialectic.²⁸

Kennington explains the duality of *Natural Right and History* in a similar dyadic way: Strauss, he suggests, uses the term “idea” in opposed ways in different chapters, so that the duality of the concepts of natural law and natural right and their inter-relations governs all the distinctions Strauss makes. Stylistically, this comes through in the way he uses terms in the wrong chapter: it is always in another chapter that a crucial idea is discussed, as opposed to the one where it seems most relevant. The general technique is to present two different orders of things in such a way as you have to do something to put them together as a third thing.²⁹ The “and” of the dyad – of *Natural Right and History* and *The City and Man* – is, Kennington argues, both disjunct and conjunct. There is a movement from two things that are seen as separate, to an awareness of their connection. *Natural Right and History* seem to be disjunctive throughout, both in its general theme and its particulars, but a closer look reveals that each disjunct depends upon the existence

²⁶ Ibid., p. 183.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 184.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 20.

²⁹ Ibid. See too Seth Benardete, “Leo Strauss's *The City and Man*,” *Political Science Reviewer*, vol. 8 (1978), pp. 1-20; Kennington, “Strauss's Natural Right and History,” especially pp. 248-51; and Victor Gourevitch, “The Problem of Natural Right and the Fundamental Alternatives in *Natural Right and History*,” in Kenneth L. Deutsch and Walter Soffer eds. *The Crisis of Liberal Democracy: A Straussian Perspective* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1987). Gourevitch does not mention the dyad.

of the other, so that they are more interconnected than first appears.³⁰ This relation is captured, for example, in the movement from the origin of the idea of natural right to the idea of natural right, which essentially relates the order of becoming and the order of being.

Pairing and parting belong together and, as Benardete points out, the Socratic name for that procedure is dialectics.³¹ Strauss' work exemplifies this dialectic, so it will always show a kind of open-endedness and dyadic structure. Thus Strauss' work is an enigma, just as he says "the Platonic dialogue is an enigma . . . one big question mark." Strauss elaborates: "A question mark in white chalk on a blackboard is wholly unrevealing. Two such question marks would tell us something; they would draw our attention to the number two."³²

Strauss' Dyadic Skepticism

Strauss' philosophy of interpretation thus instantiates the essential dyadic indeterminacy of Plato, which is exemplified in the dialogues: we can never claim to have reached the final understanding of what Plato meant, especially when any one interpretation can be refuted by passages taken from other dialogues. Indeed, Strauss seems to take the controversy over the constitution of the Good "to serve as evidence for the tentative and provisional character of all Platonic interpretation."³³ The dialogues, Strauss writes, awaken us to "the mystery" of being and "assist us in articulating that mystery" (*City*, pp. 61-62). In this way Strauss' interpretation of Plato's Ideas highlights their dyadic structure by seeing them as something like "the permanent problems of philosophy." Strauss thus rejects the usual form of this doctrine as describing the abstract being of the categories of existence.³⁴ In this he is following a dyadic Platonic skeptical tradition that can be dated back to the "New" Academy of Arcesilaus.³⁵

Strauss thus characterizes his own approach as "zetetic (or skeptic in the original sense of the term)."³⁶ This word, meaning "searching," was originally applied by Sextus Empiricus to skepticism.³⁷ According to Sextus, there are two schools of skepticism: the academics, who hold that we know that the truth cannot be known, and the Pyrrhonists, who suspend judgment even on this, supposing it possible that someday "some things may be apprehended."³⁸ Strauss's work seems to indicate that the reason why the truth

³⁰ Benardete, *Encounters and Reflections*, p. 121.

³¹ Benardete, "Leo Strauss's *The City and Man*," p. 20.

³² Strauss, *City and Man*, p. 55.

³³ Leo Strauss, "On a New Interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy," *Social Research* 13 (1946), p. 351.

³⁴ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 32.

³⁵ Leon Robin, *Pyrrhon et le scepticisme Grec* (Garland Publishing: New York and London, 1980), p. 43.

³⁶ Strauss, *On Tyranny*, p. 196.

³⁷ Sextus Empiricus, *Selections From the Major Writings on Skepticism, Man and God*, Phillip P. Hallie, ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), p. 32.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 94. The question of the connection between these two schools, however, is a

cannot be known is because of a knowledge of the indeterminate dyad, which outlines the fundamental problems. Pyrrhonians, as Sextus points out, suspend judgement even on this. For Strauss, the experience of history seems to show that these problems “persist or retain their identity in all historical change”.³⁹ For him, philosophy is thus “nothing other than real consciousness . . . of the fundamental and comprehensive problems” -- and the existence of this framework itself is not a hypothesis that is *prima facie* evident, it must be uncovered through a way of reading unique to each person.⁴⁰ Strauss’ work, in fact, has many affinities with the main features of Academic skepticism identified by José Maia Neto: 1) he does not deny that truth exists, but only that human beings can apprehend it; 2) he thinks that although we cannot have certain knowledge, we do have fallible probable opinion, where “probable” refers not to the degree of closeness to the truth, but to the “degree of persuasiveness” of a presentation; 3) any claim to know the true essence of something is thought to be an immodest dogmatist claim; 4) he advises us to limit our enquiry to what lies within our reach, and; 5) his argument focuses on scholarly integrity in so far as he wants readers to make up their own minds about the issues his work reveals.⁴¹

This issue of intellectual integrity is related to esotericism -- and to Academic esotericism in particular, and the link here highlights another similarity between Strauss and the Academic tradition. Sextus says that Arcesilaus was thought to be a secret Platonist, who made trial of his pupils by the method of doubt only “to see whether they were naturally suited for the reception of the Platonic dogmas, and to those pupils who were thus naturally suited he communicated the doctrines of Plato.”⁴² In terms of the development of the Academy, we see that Academic skepticism, beginning with Arcesilaus, arose directly out of the dyadic tradition in Speusippus, Xenocrates, Polemon, and Crates.⁴³ Augustine, too, in his *Contra Academicos* (III. 37-42) says that he believes the New Academics, and Carneades in particular, were secret Platonists.⁴⁴

This skepticism is not the negative dogmatism, as defined by Sextus: that nothing can be known. Rather, it is the methodological position expressed by Cicero’s injunction always to preserve the integrity of one’s power of judgment; that is, not to dissipate it in accepting as true what one does not perceive to be true.⁴⁵ Thus, behind the apparent indeterminacy of Strauss’ skepticism lies a duty to the truth.⁴⁶ Integrity is a matter of

vexed one, as Sextus also points out that the approach of the Academic Arcesilaus is “quite in agreement with the arguments of Pyrrho” (p. 96).

³⁹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 32.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ José Maia Neto, “Academic Skepticism in Early Modern Philosophy,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 58 (April 1997): pp. 199-220.

⁴² Sextus, pp. 96-97.

⁴³ See John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* (London: Duckworth, 1977).

⁴⁴ In Maia Neto, “Academic Skepticism,” p. 211.

⁴⁵ *Academica* II.8.

⁴⁶ For the indeterminism of Strauss’ skepticism see Stewart Umphrey, “Natural Right and Philosophy,” in Kenneth L. Deutsh and Walter Nicgorski, eds., *Leo Strauss Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker* (New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 1994), pp. 275-96.

honestly preserving the wholeness of one's own judgment, either when considering an argument or when considering metaphysics, where as Strauss points out, in thinking about the fundamental problems we are naturally attracted "toward one or the other of the rare typical solutions," and we are thus drawn into the sectarian realm.⁴⁷

The Dyad and Political Life: The Way of Thrasymachus

While faced with the dyadic alternatives we are drawn into sectarianism, and here the way of Thrasymachus, the argument from force comes to the fore. Most philosophical discussion takes place in the world of politics and opinion and this is a realm that is propagandistic and hostile. Even the discussion of the validity of particular philosophical viewpoints has to take place in the realm of opinion. Insofar as such discussions are part of the political realm, therefore, Strauss would be unconcerned with whether or not his reading of the philosophical tradition is "correct." He refers to his own picture of the historical past as a naive construction: in correspondence with Lowith he refers to his "simple-minded" view that philosophy should begin by understanding the whole. This clearly applies to his view of history as well. When we try to understand history in this way we are led to simplify the narrative.⁴⁸

Provoking awareness of the central issues is thus Strauss' main task: "The highest form of rest is not, like the form represented by Sparta, opposed to daring but presupposes the utmost daring . . . The highest form of rest can therefore not be coordinated with moderation."⁴⁹ For Strauss, "moderation is not a virtue of thought," although moderation usually, but not always controls the philosopher's speech.⁵⁰ Thus, "for all ordinary purposes we ought to loathe the people who act and speak like Thrasymachus and never imitate their deeds and never act according to their speeches. But there are other purposes to be considered."⁵¹ It is this tendency to the way of Thrasymachus, and particularly its discourteous aspects, that explains what Pocock called the "enmity" of the Straussians, particularly the savagery of their polemic.⁵²

Umpfrey mentions the dyad, citing Benardete's review of *City and Man*, and asks how it might be related to the issue of the connection between natural right and homogeneity/heterogeneity raised by Strauss in *What is Political Philosophy?* Their relation, writes, Umpfrey, becomes clear when we adopt the position from *The Statesman* that shows how justice is a matter of both more-or-less and fittingness. See Leo Strauss *What is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1959)

⁴⁷ Strauss, *On Tyranny*, p. 196.

⁴⁸ See *Independent Journal of Philosophy*, George Eliot Tucker, ed.. "Correspondence Concerning Modernity: Karl Lowith and Leo Strauss." Vol. 4 (1983): p. 108.

⁴⁹ *City and Man*, p.160.

⁵⁰ Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?* p. 32.

⁵¹ *City and Man*, p. 74.

⁵² See the exchange between Harvey Mansfield and J.G.A. Pocock in *Political Theory*, vol. 3, no. 4 (November 1975): Pocock exhorts Mansfield to "put away his bayonet and take up Ockham's razor - a more benign as well as a more precise weapon - in its place. Enmities - and this is no misprint - are not to be multiplied beyond what is necessary" (p.

So, far from being moderate, Strauss' negative dialectic is explosive. Meaning is not based on rationality and the will to dialogue alone. Rather, it is made possible by negation, by the relations of words to other words within the ever-evasive network of being. Our relation to the speech of others, or to the texts of the past, is primarily not one of mutual respect and interaction. It is a relationship in which we have to struggle with misunderstanding and dissemination, and in which the focus on community provides but a harmful illusion. Rational discourse, consisting in the recognition of the possible truth of the other's point of view, tends to cover up both the way in which the other escapes me, and the way in which I escape myself.

Strauss says he learned from Plato that the proper way to proceed in such matters is to combine "the way of Socrates with the way of Thrasymachus."⁵³ Thus "To prove to citizens that philosophy is permissible, desirable, or even necessary, the philosopher has to follow the example of Odysseus and start from premises that are generally agreed upon, or from generally accepted opinions: he has to argue ad hominem or 'dialectically'."⁵⁴ He describes the dialectic as ad hominem because in the realm of opinion reason will not work, nor, strictly speaking, will rhetoric, which is why Strauss agrees with Aristotle that the Sophists were "blind to the sternness of politics."⁵⁵ The way of Thrasymachus is angry, discourteous, and savage: "He is lawless and shameless in deed and in speech; he blushes only on account of the heat."⁵⁶ This political understanding of the dyad recognizes the dialectical interplay between freedom and necessity, between rationality and persuasion. In the *Republic*, as Strauss points out, the most savage man also presents the most savage thesis, i.e., that justice is in the interest of the stronger. Socrates can offer no immediate counter to Thrasymachus' argument, Strauss notes, but he is able to tame him, thereby showing how there is some truth to the

400). Harvey Mansfield, "Strauss' Machiavelli," pp. 372-83; J.G.A. Pocock, "Prophet and Inquisitor": pp. 385-401. The "savage" tradition is continued in Michael P. Zuckert, *Natural Rights and the New Republicanism*, who also directs his intemperance at Pocock. Another example is seen in the exchange between Mark Glouberman and Tom Lennon, "Gods, Giants, Fractals, and the Geometry of Early Modernity: Descartes, Gassendi, and the Rise of Science," a review essay of Thomas M. Lennon's *The Battle of the Gods and Giants*, in *Perspectives on Science: Historical, Philosophical, Social*, vol. 3, no. 4 (Winter 1995), pp. 480-519. The Straussianism shines through in Glouberman's conclusion, Section 13, "Metaphilosophical Animadversions." Lennon, mystified by the attack, replies in the same issue: see "Descartes and Gassendi: A Reply to Glouberman," pp. 520-33. See too the debate between Edwin Curley and Hiram Caton in *The Independent Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 5/6 (1988), pp. 1-23: Hiram Caton, "Tory History of Ideas"; E.M. Curley, "The Problem of Professor Caton's Sincerity"; Hiram Caton, "Reply to Curley". Curley is also responding here to a sweeping attack by Caton published several years before: "Analytic History of Philosophy: The Case of Descartes," *The Philosophical Forum* 12 (1981): pp. 273-294.

⁵³ *City and Man*, p. 16.

⁵⁴ Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?* p. 93.

⁵⁵ *City and Man*, p. 23.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

idea that any art is a kind of justice -- a principle which, Socrates shows, lies at the heart of even the Thrasymachean view.⁵⁷ There is unity even in a gang of thieves. But, as Socrates subsequently shows with respect to the tyrant, an unjust unity governed by *eros* alone leads to unhappiness.

The city itself, however, does not sublimate any *eros*, interpretively or politically. It, like the tyrant, is free to satisfy itself in any way.⁵⁸ In cases where its self-preservation is at stake, even the principles of commutative and distributive justice may be sacrificed for public safety. On an international level, on the other hand, skullduggery is the rule. Any conduct may be deemed just if it is seen as required under the circumstances; there is no way of knowing what might be needed in any given situation for the preservation of the city. This is an idea very much alive in contemporary American politics. On an international level, the internal principles of justice are suspended, though Strauss suggests that we leave these “sad exigencies covered with the veil with which they are justly covered.”⁵⁹

Strauss thus explains the enigma of Plato by appealing to Plato's dialectical literary imagination, spinning-out the indeterminate dyad in dialogue form. This same Platonic dyad also explains the enigma of Strauss, for it explains his “duplicity.” Behind Strauss’ historical Pyrrhonism lies an even subtler philosophical position, grounded in the “indeterminate dyad,” which accounts for the dual nature of the world of becoming. The dyad is thus the key to reading Strauss, and for understanding his esotericism and his “philosophy of error.” His thought and writing is governed by the dyadic and duplicitous structure of the phenomenal world that is implicit in Plato's late dialogues. He almost explicitly tells us this in “How to Begin to Study Medieval Philosophy” where he discusses the esoteric Platonism of the Middle Ages:

It would be wrong to trace the esotericism in question to certain spurious phenomena of dying antiquity: its origin has to be sought in Plato himself, in the doctrine of the *Phaedrus* concerning the superiority of oral teaching to teaching by writings, in the doctrine of the Republic and Laws concerning the necessity of noble lies, and, above all, in the literary technique used by Plato himself in all his works.⁶⁰

It may seem that the true philosophical message of Strauss’ approach is considered so dangerous that it cannot be revealed directly and is, therefore, hidden or presented in a deliberately obfuscating way. For Strauss, however, this kind of distinction between the esoteric and the exoteric, the depth and the surface, does not really make sense. While it is true that writers dissimulate for many reasons, political personal, or religious, the connection between the esoteric and exoteric is best described as a dyadic relation between the *esoteric* and the *exoteric* themselves. The

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁵⁸ See the discussion of *eros* in Strauss, *City and Man*, p. 226. *The Republic*, he suggests, is an ideal city “in speech,” as all interpretations are.

⁵⁹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 160.

⁶⁰ Pangle, *The Rebirth of Political Philosophy*, p. 225.

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two terms are interchangeable when referring to a “dissimulating” text – as is brought out clearly by Strauss’ own usage in “Persecution and the Art of Writing”: the exoteric teaching contains the esoteric message; the esoteric teaching contains the exoteric message; the exoteric message contains the esoteric teaching; and the esoteric message contains the exoteric teaching. Such a text is simultaneously esoteric and exoteric, so Strauss uses the terms interchangeably throughout the essay.

On the epistemological side, as Socrates points out in the *Theaetetus* (176a), we can only know a thing in terms of its opposite, so that evil would seem to be required for the existence of the good. For Strauss we can only understand the good in terms of the persistence of evil, which again reveals a dyadic relation insofar as that which was supposed to be exterior to the good and separate from it, is paradoxically a condition for the good’s very existence.⁶¹ This discussion of good and evil, however, is undone by the very fact that philosophy in itself, according to Strauss, is incompatible with morality. The philosopher’s quest for truth is sometimes incompatible with moral authority, a relation that in its various senses provides numerous reasons for the philosopher to dissimulate – pedagogical, political, or philosophical. Paradoxically, the rejection of Good and Evil is itself evil, so ultimately, for Strauss, philosophy is born in vice. Evil is the price we have to pay for our love of knowledge. This explains the epigraph to “Persecution and the Art of Writing” from W.E.H. Lecky: “That vice has often proved an emancipator of the mind, is one of the most humiliating, but, at the same time, one of the most unquestionable facts in history.”⁶²

Conclusion

The solution to the enigma of Strauss with which we began thus lies in the realization that there is no solution. Strauss is neither a Nietzschean, an atheist, a deist, a Jew, or a classicist. Or rather he is all of these and he is none of these. His writing is deliberately polyphonic and designed to show all the philosophical sides of the issues -- and this particularly comes out in his historical work, where even his reading of Plato is obliquely presented.

In the end, for Strauss the history of philosophy and its relationship with past thought is philosophical at the expense of being historical. He appears to adopt a Pyrrhonist line according to which the truth about the past is impossible to discover, which supposedly justifies the outrageousness of some of his historical views as well as his unusual interpretations of texts.⁶³ He writes in a deliberately self-conscious style, full of apparent errors, that points the way to a deeper meaning to his texts. In short, he is an esoteric writer in the sense that Strauss himself described in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. The significance of this esotericism, however, is only understood in relation to

⁶¹ *City and Man*, p. 127.

⁶² *Persecution*, p 24. See the discussion in Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, p. 43.

⁶³ See, for example, Hiram Catton, *The Politics of Progress: The Origins and Development of the Commercial Republic, 1600-1835* (University of Florida Press, 1988).

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Strauss' Platonism, which provides a metaphysical system, grounded in Plato's late ontology, which governs Strauss' approach to philosophical/historical writing – just as it supposedly governed Plato's.

Strauss thus thinks he is following the example of Plato himself in highlighting philosophy's problematic relationship to writing. Like Derrida, another dyadic thinker, he shows that writing cannot be seen as simply the representation of speech, nor can speech be said to indicate the simple presence of intention.⁶⁴ His work reveals the problem that both determines and subverts every theory of meaning: meaning is located not so much in the shared relationship between words, as in the spaces within texts; yet the text itself may be said to provide the limits of interpretation, grounding the revelation of the fundamental alternatives in both philosophy and its historiography. The duality behind the mysteriousness of Strauss' work thus highlights the central philosophical issues concerning intelligibility and order: the questions of beginning, of intention, of the status of reason, and reasons, as a ground for action and/or thought.

The answer to the riddle of hidden meaning is that there is no hidden meaning, *per se*. Philosophy holds no answers, only awareness of the fundamental problems, which can only be presented in a dyadic and dialogic style. Strauss writes that: "The problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things."⁶⁵ The point is that the presentation is itself a significant clue to understanding the message, which is hiding in plain sight, not hidden in the depths.

⁶⁴ See Hankey, "French Neo-Platonism in the 20th Century."

⁶⁵ Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958), p. 13. Note the clumsy nature of the metaphor.