

## Introduction

Leo Strauss is famous for his recovery of classical political philosophy. This does not initially bespeak a friend of democracy. As he himself succinctly puts it, “To speak first of the classics’ attitude toward democracy, the premises: ‘the classics are good’ and ‘democracy is good’ do not validate the conclusion ‘hence the classics were good democrats.’ It would be silly to deny that the classics rejected democracy as an inferior kind of regime. They were not blind to its advantages. . . . [But] the classics rejected democracy because they thought that the aim of human life, and hence of social life, is not freedom but virtue.”<sup>1</sup> There are to be sure, as he frequently noted, differences between classical democracy, which was, owing to economic scarcity, inevitably the rule of the poor and hence the uneducated, and modern democracy, which has far more abundance and which is structured toward greater abundance. Yet modern democracy, which Strauss considered the most decent of the available modern regimes, suffers from a new malady: it is “mass democracy,” and as such stands in need of an education that “broadens and deepens” the soul—the very type of education that its dynamic economy of plenty threatens to destroy.

Strauss disagreed, moreover, with a number of his prominent contemporaries, some of them friends—Krüger, Löwith, Voegelin—on the secularization thesis, according to which modern democracy embodied the historically disclosed “truth” of Christianity, the secular manifestation of an advanced moral consciousness, first expressed within Christianity, of the equal dignity of each individual. He argued that modern democracy emerged, rather, through the modern philosophic-scientific project, and has therefore within

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1. Strauss, “What Is Political Philosophy?,” in *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (New York: Free Press, 1959), 36.

it the very serious threat to humanity that is posed by technology. In fact, he goes on to argue, after the passage I have quoted, that “the difference between the classics and us with regard to democracy consists *exclusively* in a different estimate of the virtues of technology.” The classics foresaw that “the emancipation of technology, of the arts, from moral and political control . . . would lead to disaster or to the dehumanization of man.”<sup>2</sup> It is this concern that predominates in Strauss’s analysis of modern democracy.

### Modern Political Thought as Technological Thought

Yet students of Strauss may well be surprised by his claim that the fundamental difference between the ancients and the moderns on democracy rests on the difference in their respective assessments of technology. Given Strauss’s attention to *political* philosophy, one may even be (fairly) inclined to consider that statement (or even to dismiss it) as an exaggeration. In fact, however, Strauss not only made similar and corroborative statements throughout his work—from his earliest to his latest—but understood technological thinking to be at the very core of modern political philosophy: in its stand toward nature as something to be “conquered” by the increase of human “power,” and its shift in human attention away from the political-moral question of the right end or ends of human life to the means to *any* desired end; in its enlisting of modern science and its attention to efficient causality in the project of conquering nature, including human nature; in its consequent and important obfuscation of the radical difference between the theoretical and practical/political/moral life; and in its promulgation of democratic and liberal political teachings.

That Strauss understood modern science as technological science is clear. In the Hobbes chapter of his first book, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, he identifies the spirit of modern “physics” with “technology”: the very title of the book’s first subsection is “The Spirit of Physics (Technology) and Religion.”<sup>3</sup> And, as this section of the work makes clear, he identifies technology with the goal of the conquest of nature. It is a distinctively modern goal, not found in the classics. (Since recent scholarship has presented the recovery of Lucretian Epicurianism as playing a decisive role in the

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2. “What Is Political Philosophy?,” 37 (emphasis added).

3. Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, trans. Elsa M. Sinclair (New York: Schocken, 1965), 88.

birth of modernity,<sup>4</sup> it is worth noting that, as Strauss later made clear, he included Lucretius among the classics and hence as quite distinct from the modern, technological thinkers: “For Lucretius, happiness can be achieved only through contentment with the satisfaction of the natural pleasures, no rushing out, no conquest of nature, glory, domination, power, or even charitable technology—technology inspired by the desire to improve the human lot. There is a very radical difference.”<sup>5</sup>)

That Strauss saw the moderns’ disposition toward technology as decisive for at least one modern political regime is also clear. Readers of Strauss are bound to be familiar with his statements concerning technology’s effect on the prospects, not indeed of democracy, but of modern tyranny. In his “Restatement on Xenophon’s *Hiero*,” for example, he states:

Present-day tyranny, in contradistinction to classical tyranny, is based on the unlimited progress in the “conquest of nature” which is made possible by modern science, as well as on the popularization or diffusion of philosophic or scientific knowledge. Both possibilities—the possibility of a science that issues in the conquest of nature and the possibility of the popularization of philosophy or science—were known to the classics. (Compare Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.1.15 with Empedocles, fr. 111; Plato, *Theaetetus* 180c7–d5.) But the classics rejected them as “unnatural,” i.e., as destructive of humanity.<sup>6</sup>

Seven years later, in *Natural Right and History*, one finds the same focus, in the difference between the ancients and the moderns, on technology’s effect on the prospects of universal tyranny:

The world state presupposes such a development of technology as Aristotle could never have dreamed of. That technological development, in its turn, required that science be regarded as essentially in the service of the “conquest of nature” and

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4. See Steven Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011).

5. Strauss, in Rasoul Namazi, ed., “Leo Strauss on Thomas Hobbes and Plato: Two Previously Unpublished Lectures,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 47, no. 4 (2018), 16.

6. Strauss, “Restatement on Xenophon’s *Hiero*,” in *On Tyranny*, ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth, rev. and exp. ed. (New York: Free Press, 1991), 178. See also 208.

that technology be emancipated from any moral and political supervision. Aristotle did not conceive of a world state because he was absolutely certain that science is essentially theoretical and that the liberation of technology from moral and political control would lead to disastrous consequences: the fusion of science and the arts together with the unlimited or uncontrolled progress of technology has made universal and perpetual tyranny a serious possibility.<sup>7</sup>

Both statements speak to the dark prospect of universal and perpetual tyranny, made possible by technology—a prospect that is, to say the least, as real as ever. What is less often observed are both Strauss's highlighting, in these statements, of the ancients' awareness of the possibility of technology, and their rejection of it on the ground that the use and dissemination of "essentially theoretical" science would be destructive of humanity. And the fundament, according to Strauss, of the ancients' humane stand against both technological science and its dissemination ("enlightenment") is the certainty that "science is essentially theoretical," and hence the gulf between the theoretical life and the life of praxis.

But this gulf obtains, necessarily, in considerations of the desirability of modern democracy no less than of modern tyranny. That this is so—and that the "destruction of humanity" is a term that encompasses not only our physical destruction—is perhaps no more clearly stated than in the original Walgreen lectures that became *Thoughts on Machiavelli*.<sup>8</sup> Here Strauss again makes explicit that a different disposition toward technology is the decisive difference between the ancients and us on the choice for or against democracy. He presents it as emerging from an "estrangement" or alienation from the fundamental "human situation" of "acting man," that is, of attempted discernment of our end or ends in the world of human action. And he distinguishes his attention to this estranging shift from the alternative tendency to attribute the rise of modernity to a newfound and better understanding of justice. In its stead, he proposes a different assessment of, or disposition toward, technology:

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7. Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 23. *Natural Right and History* is hereafter referred to as *NRH*.

8. Published in Anthony Vecchio and J. A. Colen, eds., "The 'Modern Principle': The Second Walgreen Lectures by Leo Strauss (1954)," *Interpretation* 47, no. 1 (Fall 2020), 43–117.

The shift from the perspective of the founder to the intellectual situation of the founder, i.e. the shift from the direct apprehension of the end to the reflection on the efficient cause implies an estrangement from the primary issue, and therewith an estrangement from the human situation, from the situation of acting man. This estrangement is connected with the assumption that chance can be conquered and therefore that the founder of society has not merely to accept the materials of his art, just like the smith and the carpenter, but that his material is almost infinitely malleable. . . . We cannot leave it then at applauding Machiavelli as a fore-runner of modern democracy, but most consider the reason why the tradition which Machiavelli attacked was not democratic. Plato and Aristotle did not lack social justice or a sense of it. They knew as well as we can know them the true principles of justice, the beautiful principles of justice. They saw therefore, as well as we do, that a society ruled by a privileged group is of questionable justice, since social superiority and natural superiority do not necessarily coincide. But it is not hard to see that only men who are truly educated, who are experienced in things noble and beautiful, ought to rule, that average men cannot fulfill this condition, if they are not well-bred from the moment they are born, that such good breeding requires leisure on the part of both the parents and the children, that such leisure requires a reasonable degree of wealth, and that having or lacking wealth is not necessarily proportionate to deserts. The classics accepted this element of arbitrariness, and therefore of injustice, because there was only one alternative to the social scheme they espoused, that alternative being perpetual revolution, which means perpetual chaos. They did not consider another alternative, namely, that all members of society should receive the same good breeding. They did not consider this alternative because they took for granted an economy of scarcity. Not a different understanding of justice, but a different notion of whether an economy of scarcity could or should be replaced by an economy of plenty, separated modern man from the classical thinkers. The problem of scarcity or plenty is however connected with the problem of [whether] the mechanical and other arts should be emancipated from moral and political control, and whether or not theoretical science should lend its supports to

the increase of productivity. But increase of productivity means necessarily also increase of destructivity. What separates modern man from the classics is not a different notion of justice, but a different attitude toward technology. We are no longer so certain as we were a short while ago that we have made a decisive progress beyond the classics by taking here a different stand, or that we have chosen wisely.<sup>9</sup>

What here comes again into clear relief is Strauss's understanding of technology as entailing the introduction of theoretical science, and its attention to efficient causation, into the arts. The radical disjunct between theoretical and practical life—which, as we will see, is finally denied by Martin Heidegger—is a crucial part of Strauss's understanding of technology and hence of the difference between the ancients and the moderns, including their different assessments of democracy.

As Strauss next makes clear in the same talk, he did not consider the move to technology to have been necessary or impelled by a correction of an alleged weakness in philosophic thinking begun by the ancients that found its fuller elaboration or fate in the moderns: "But can we speak here of a choice? Must we not speak rather of a fateful dispensation?" (The implicit confrontation with Heidegger, who viewed technological thinking as the mysterious or fateful dispensation of Being in the West, continues here.) Strauss first, to be sure, makes the case that there was indeed a weakness to classical political philosophy that moved Machiavelli to correct the ancients by introducing an embrace of technology, or conquest of nature:

As I see it, there was only one fundamental difficulty in the political philosophy which Machiavelli attacked. The classics were what is now called conservative, which means fearful of change, distrustful of change. But they knew that one cannot oppose social change without also opposing what is now called technological change as well. Therefore, they did not favor the encouraging of invention, except half-ironically in tyranny. Still, they were forced to make one crucial exception: they had to admit the necessity of encouraging technological invention as regards the art of war. They bowed to the inescapable requirements of defense. By accepting this principle, they might seem to be driven eventually to the acceptance of the hydrogen bomb. This

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9. Strauss, in Vecchio and Colen, "Modern Principle," 107–10.

is the only difficulty which could be thought to be an entering wedge for the modern criticism of classical political philosophy, and therefore indirectly also for Machiavelli's criticism. This difficulty might be thought to imply the admission of the primacy of foreign policy.

But as he goes on to argue, it was the strictly speaking unnecessary, unfated enlistment of theoretical science in the artful conquest of nature that was decisive:

It seems to me, however, that the real difficulty arises, not from the admission of the necessity of military invention, but from the use of *science* for this purpose. Therefore the fundamental issue concerns the character and the function of science. If we were to consider this fundamental issue, I believe we would realize that the classical position is not only thoroughly consistent, but as irrefutable as it has always been.<sup>10</sup>

As this statement suggests, Strauss—again, contra Heidegger—understands technology not as originating with Plato but with Machiavelli; he sees it as born not of a “fateful disposition” of Da-Sein in the West but (as he goes on to argue) of anti-theological ire;<sup>11</sup> as something to be distinguished sharply from the *techne* of the smith or carpenter and his tools (to which Heidegger frequently appeals early in *Being and Time* to elucidate heedful being together with the “world,” or our association in and with the surrounding world);<sup>12</sup> as “an *estrangement* from the situation of acting man,” and as consisting not of thinking essentially directed to a “standing reserve of energy,” as does Heidegger, but most essentially as the deployment of theoretical science in the conquest of nature.

As the following statement from the (published) *Thoughts on Machiavelli* makes clear, Strauss did not alter his position on this matter. To the

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10. Strauss, in Vecchio and Colen, “Modern Principle,” 110 (emphasis added).

11. “I would then suggest that the narrowing of horizons which Machiavelli affected, was *caused by an anti-theological ire*, a passion which has produced and is still producing a stronger blindness in otherwise free minds, than any other passion of which I know.” Strauss, in Vecchio and Colen, “Modern Principle,” 111.

12. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), secs. 15–16 (*Sein und Zeit*, pp. 66–76); see also sec. 69a, pp. 322–26 (*Sein und Zeit*, pp. 352–56).

contrary: the original Walgreen lectures help us the better to understand the import of what he says in that published work:

The classics were for almost all practical purposes what now are called conservatives. In contradistinction to many present-day conservatives however, they knew that one cannot be distrustful of political or social change without being distrustful of technological change. Therefore they did not favor the encouragement of inventions, except perhaps in tyrannies, i.e., in regimes the change of which is manifestly desirable. They demanded the strict moral-political supervision of inventions; the good and wise city will determine which inventions are to be made use of and which are to be suppressed. . . . The difficulty implied in the admission that inventions pertaining to the art of war must be encouraged is the only one which supplies a basis for Machiavelli's criticism of classical political philosophy. One could say however that it is not inventions as such but *the use of science for such inventions* which renders impossible the good city in the classical sense. From the point of view of the classics, such use of science is excluded by *the nature of science as a theoretical pursuit*. Besides, the opinion that there occur periodic cataclysms in fact took care of any apprehension regarding an excessive development of technology or regarding the danger that man's inventions might become his masters and his destroyers. Viewed in this light, the natural cataclysms appear as a manifestation of the beneficence of nature.<sup>13</sup>

As the founder of the technological project of putting theoretical science in the service of the political goal of the conquest of nature, Machiavelli, in Strauss's reading, launched modernity and its move toward democratic politics.

We will attempt in subsequent chapters to spell out more fully how, according to Strauss, both the promise and the threat of technology is not limited to modern tyranny but is posed likewise by modern, liberal democracy, and how the "destruction of humanity" that he has in mind involves not only its material annihilation. For now, we will note that Strauss attributes technological thinking to "our present-day orientation" broadly, and to the political doctrine and practice of liberalism—of which he considered Hobbes the founder—more particularly.

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13. Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958), 298–99 (emphasis added).



He does so most explicitly in two lectures, on Hobbes and on Plato, given in 1954.<sup>14</sup> As these lectures make clear, what he had identified as the Machiavellian technological shift toward efficient causality was expressed broadly in Hobbes as the technological shift toward “power,” that is, toward the *means* to whatever ends we happen to desire—a shift, again, away from the consideration of the right ends of human life. This shift Strauss understands to inform the political distinction between the state and society that is so crucial to modern, liberal democracy:

The Hobbesian concept of power implies a certain indifference to the end for which the power is used. The power is, in a way, independent of the end for which it is used or to be used. This means that the concept of power as developed first by Hobbes, implies a shift in orientation from the end to the means, and this had infinite consequences. One of them, the distinction between state and society, is one of the basic principles of our present-day orientation.

As he goes on to say:

One further point about the concept of power: Hobbes also said that science is for the sake of power. Thus, the whole theoretical, philosophic enterprise is subordinated by Hobbes to the concern with power. There is nothing said about the use of that power. We all are the heirs to this situation.

The primary *political* doctrine of modern liberalism—the distinction between the state, on one hand, and society, on the other—is thus traced by Strauss to the technological disposition (and hopes) of the moderns.<sup>15</sup>

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14. “Leo Strauss on Thomas Hobbes and Plato,” 13.

15. Consider also the very Cartesian reading that Strauss gives to Hobbes’s work in his first (incomplete and left-unpublished) book on Hobbes, *Hobbes’ Critique of Religion*, trans. Gabriel Bartlett and Svetozar Minkov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). See Timothy W. Burns, “Leo Strauss on the Origins of Hobbes’s Natural Science,” *Review of Metaphysics* 64, no. 4 (June 2011), 823–55. On the composition of the German original, see Heinrich Meier, introduction to *Hobbes’s politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften—Briefe* (2001), Band 3 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Heinrich Meier (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2008), ix–xii.

But we cannot leave off this initial account of Strauss's presentation of the technological orientation of modern, liberal political philosophy, and therewith of modern man, without briefly noting that, according to Strauss, a crucial incoherence defines it from the outset. He attributes Hobbes's novel argument concerning our pursuit of "power" to Hobbes's account of a natural (innocent) desire, shared with other animals, to find the best means to any desired ends. But he ascribes Hobbes's argument about "right"—the *just* use of that power—to Hobbes's (quite incompatible) argument concerning our distinctively *human*, nonmaterial capacity to conceive of "effects imagined," to our thinking about things with regard to something other than their immediately intended utility, and thereby to our becoming aware of our power, of our powerfulness, and hence to our becoming vainglorious—to our no longer *innocently* pursuing power like animals but instead our becoming capable of consumingly and *wrongfully* proud of our ability to acquire many powerful means to our ends.

The former (the pursuit of power) informs Hobbes's account of the sovereign as the person or persons who, upon calculation, we must always obey, in pursuit of our power, regardless of his or their justice, lest we revert to the dangerous state of nature. This is a strictly materialist argument. "When Hobbes says that there are no criteria of judgment independent of positive law he implies there is nothing but natural bodies and political bodies. In no moral or political matter can you ever go behind the body politic, ultimately the will of the sovereign."<sup>16</sup> The latter (the distinctively human pursuit of vainglory), on the other hand, informs Hobbes's *moral* argument concerning the sovereign as a person or persons whom we must obey because his or their rule is *just*—kingly rather than tyrannical. For the human tendency to vainglory rather than to fearful, rational self-preservation is what opens up in Hobbes the possibility of naturally unjust (not self-preserving but vainglorious) action, in the sovereign or in anyone. Hobbes, that is, *attempts* to make his argument concerning "right" something grounded in our material, animal nature—with our reason as having not two ends, social and rational, but only one, rational (self-preservation), since he denies that we are beneficently social by nature. But Hobbes's attention to justice, to what (he and other) citizens or subjects believe when they distinguish between a tyrant and a just ruler, leads him, inconsistently, to abandon his naturalist-materialist account while still presenting it as a materialist account—an account allegedly consistent with, but certainly meant to bring

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16. "Leo Strauss on Thomas Hobbes and Plato," 14–15.

about, the transformation of human life, by means of the new technological science, the reorientation of man away from any nonmaterial happiness that this would entail. It allows for the establishment of government that

should make possible for the citizen to enjoy all sorts of innocent delectations and surely an air conditioner and a refrigerator are innocent delectations. In other words, Hobbes would have been very enthusiastic about the full development of the productive forces of the society and with a deep understanding of the profit motive.<sup>17</sup>

We will have occasion later on to spell out how this inconsistency is not, for Strauss, merely problematic, but helps to account for the continued, sustained role of a nonhistoricist, commonsense moral reasoning, and even greatness, in modern, liberal regimes. For now, we must turn to a brief, preliminary sketch of Strauss's account of how the modern technological transformation of modern politics became fully democratic.

### Technology and Democracy

If the classics foresaw that “the emancipation of technology, of the arts, from moral and political control . . . would lead to disaster or to the dehumanization of man,”<sup>18</sup> and if it is this concern that predominates in Strauss's analysis of modern democracy, how, specifically, according to Strauss did the modern, essentially technological thought of modernity come to be democratic?

Strauss's account of how it did so begins to become clear in a sketch of the evolution of modern liberal democracy, in its resemblance to and its difference from the classical mixed regime, that Strauss draws in “Liberal Education and Responsibility.” The sketch begins as follows:

The modern doctrine starts from the natural equality of all men, and it leads therefore to the assertion that sovereignty belongs to the people; yet it understands that sovereignty in such a way

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17. *Ibid.*, 15. See also *What Is Political Philosophy*, 175n.

18. “What Is Political Philosophy?,” 37 (emphasis added). See also “Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*,” 178.

as to guarantee the natural rights of each; it achieves this result by distinguishing between the sovereign and the government and by demanding that the fundamental governmental powers be separated from one another. The spring of this regime was held to be the desire of each to improve his material conditions. Accordingly the commercial and industrial elite, rather than the landed gentry, predominated.

The fully developed doctrine required that one man have one vote, that the voting be secret, and that the right to vote be not abridged on account of poverty, religion, or race.<sup>19</sup>

Few would find fault with this brief description of the modern doctrine of (liberal or constitutional) democracy. But even as Strauss found “unhesitating loyalty to a decent constitution and even to the cause of constitutionalism,” as he says later in the same essay, to be a requirement of political “wisdom,” he found liberal democracy to be highly problematic. As he continues:

Governmental actions, on the other hand, are to be open to public inspection to the highest degree possible, for government is only the representative of the people and responsible to the people. The responsibility of the people, of the electors, does not permit of legal definition and is therefore the most obvious crux of modern republicanism.<sup>20</sup>

Especially in light of the fact that he begins the same essay by explaining that “responsibility” is the contemporary (and degraded) substitute for “virtue,” the “crux” to which he refers here initially comes to sight as the problem of the maintenance, in modern liberal regimes, of public-spiritedness or sense of duty in the people, who exercise sovereignty in liberal democracy—under the dominant activities of its new “commercial and industrial elite.” But Strauss does not simply or for long identify the maintenance of public spiritedness among the people as the crux of the problem. Rather, he initially presents that as the crux of the problem as it was perceived at a certain period (the

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19. “Liberal Education and Responsibility” in Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 9–25. The quotation is from 15. *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* is hereafter referred to as *LAM*.

20. *LAM* 155.

late eighteenth and early nineteenth century) by friends of the modern democracy that had come into being. The *deeper* (and earlier) problem, as he subsequently suggests, is tied up with the original, anti-biblical intention of the founders of the modern technological-scientific enterprise and its goal of “enlightenment” of the people. Owing to developments within the “stupendous enterprise” of modern philosophy-science, which, Strauss will argue, was from the start *behind* modern democratization, a “race” to “enlighten” the people before it came into its sovereignty replaced what had appeared, subsequently, to some to be the problem of educating the people in public-spirited virtue. The late, open admission of modern science that it is (and ever was) incapable of providing any moral guidance to anyone, but (however increasingly efficient and specialized) is in fact “value-free,” has finally had the result that what most characterizes our present situation is “hardly more than the interplay of mass taste with high grade but strictly speaking unprincipled efficiency.”<sup>21</sup> Technology, in its anti-theological end, causes democracy to emerge out of modern philosophy, and has resulted in the highly problematic, deeply degraded contemporary situation in which we find ourselves.

We have alluded to Strauss’s implicit disagreement with Heidegger on the source of technology and the best disposition towards it. The more we examine Strauss’s presentation of liberal democracy and technology, the more Strauss’s debt to Heidegger and break with Heidegger will come into focus. We note for now that, in a talk titled “Existentialism,” Strauss indicates that his concern about the degradation of humanity posed by technology is one that he had in common with Heidegger.<sup>22</sup> And in a letter to Heidegger student Hans-Georg Gadamer, Strauss goes so far as to express his agreement with Heidegger’s characterization of our present situation as that of “the world night”:

It is strange that there should be a difference between us where you take a stand against Heidegger and I stand for him. I shall

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21. Strauss first uses this phrase in this essay (at *LAM* 19) with reference to what is taught in contemporary political science, but he later speaks of it as emerging from modern science simply (*LAM* 22–23), on which contemporary political science attempts to model itself.

22. “Existentialism,” a talk originally given at Hillel House, University of Chicago, in 1956, published in David Bolotin, Christopher Bruell, Thomas L. Pangle, eds., “Two Lectures by Leo Strauss,” *Interpretation* 22, no. 3 (Spring 1995), 303–20.

state this difference in a way which probably does not do full justice to you. I believe that you will have to admit that there is a fundamental difference between your post-historicist hermeneutics and prehistoricist (traditional) hermeneutics; it suffices to refer to your teaching regarding the work of art and language which at least as you present it is not in any way a traditional teaching; this being so, it is necessary to reflect on the situation which demands the new hermeneutics, i.e. on our situation; this reflection will necessarily bring to light a radical crisis, an unprecedented crisis and this is what Heidegger means by the approach of the world night. Or do you deny the necessity and the possibility of such a reflection?<sup>23</sup>

That Strauss's work is everywhere a "stand toward" Heidegger, and therefore deeply informed by the work of Heidegger, is clear from the introductory remark that he makes prior to one of his rare published confrontations with that work (and even a possible invitation to dialogue with it): "As far as I can see," says Strauss, "[Heidegger] is of the opinion that none of his critics and none of his followers has understood him adequately. I believe that he is right, for is the same not also true, more or less, of all outstanding thinkers? This does not dispense us, however, from taking a stand toward him, for we do this at any rate implicitly; in doing it explicitly, we run no greater risk than exposing ourselves to ridicule and perhaps receiving some needed instruction."<sup>24</sup>

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23. Strauss, letter to Gadamer, May 14, 1961, in "Correspondence with Hans-Georg Gadamer concerning *Wahrheit und Methode*," *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 2 (1978), 11. On "the world night," see Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 40–41 (*Einführung in die Metaphysik* [Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1953], 29): "For the darkening of the world, the flight of the gods, the destruction of the earth, the reduction of human beings to a mass, the hatred and mistrust of everything creative and free has already reached such proportions throughout the whole earth that such childish categories as pessimism and optimism have long become laughable." See also 47 (34 of the German): "The essential happenings in this darkening are: the flight of the gods, the destruction of the earth, the reduction of human beings to a mass, the preeminence of the mediocre."

24. Strauss, "Philosophy as a Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy," in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 30.

But unlike Heidegger, who likewise identifies the problem of technology and utilitarian thinking as a great threat to humanity,<sup>25</sup> Strauss does not call for a “new thinking,” characterized above all by an authentic and resolute, angst-induced attunement to one’s true, “thrown” situation as disclosed in full awareness of death, to replace or directionally supplement the technological thinking that, Heidegger alleges, became more dominant in modern philosophy but has its roots in Plato’s alleged failure to grasp the “ontological difference” and the need, in the light of it, to become attuned to an angst that makes possible an authentic life of being-toward-death. Strauss instead finds Plato and the other ancient political philosophers unflinchingly aware of their mortality and the passing away of all human things and of its significance, and for that very reason as drawing a sharp distinction between philosophy and political-moral thinking, with religion and ancestral tradition having an important and admirable role in the latter and serving as both a bulwark for human excellence and a crucial interlocutor with philosophy. And unlike the nihilists, both of Germany in the 1930s and of today, whose repulsion at what they saw as the immoral and amoral character of modern society led them to will the destruction of liberal democracy, he saw political-moral thinking and action, and even greatness, as manifestly still possible in modern democratic regimes—with the example of Winston Churchill being most important. The modest political recommendation that Strauss offers for our time, a time dominated by the technology of modern science, is faithful adherence to a liberal democratic constitutionalism whose tone and direction may be provided by a sub-political “aristocracy within democracy,” one whose thinking is informed by both serious religious education in one’s ancestral traditions and study of the Great Books.

The four writings in which Strauss most directly addressed these matters are “What Is Liberal Education?,” “German Nihilism,” “Liberal Education and Responsibility,” and “The Liberalism of Classical Political Philosophy.” Looking first at the two works on liberal education and then at “German Nihilism” will enable us to understand the meaning of an “aristocracy within democracy” that Strauss intended as the best means to sustaining and improving the regime of which he considered himself not a flatterer but a friend and ally, and the recovery of the nonhistoricist political reasoning that

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25. See Martin Heidegger, *Gelassenheit* (Pfullingen, Ger.: Günther Neske, 1959), 24–25; *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 55–56.

would make this possible. Having examined these works, we will turn to the fourth, Strauss's extended review of Eric Havelock's *The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics*. Havelock attempted in his work to find in the classics—in Plato's work and in the pre-Socratics—a buried ground for contemporary liberalism and technology, over and against the "moral absolutism," begun by Plato, that he saw as a threat to these. By examining the classical works on which Havelock's study relies, Strauss brings to light the reason for the ancients' stand against the autonomy of technology, for their support for healthy ancestral traditions, and for the art of writing that was required by their insight into the true character of moral-political life, in its opposition to the philosophic life. In the course of doing so, he extends his critique of Heidegger and his project, which he had begun in its explicit form in *Natural Right and History*, even as he indicates some limited agreement with him on the matter of "rootedness."

Before approaching these writings, I offer the following caveat. Among the thinkers whose words Strauss examines in these essays is John Stuart Mill, who likewise devoted attention to the problem of education within modern democracy, and who likewise suggested the reading of the classics as part of liberal education. Mill did so in part because the works of the classics, unlike most works written in modern democracy, were, in his words, "not written in haste," but rather with each word carefully chosen. The *seventeen-page* essay of Strauss in which this quotation from Mill is given was written in response to a request for an elaboration on *two sentences* from "What Is Liberal Education?" It thus permits us to see, among other things, how weighted is Strauss's own writing, and so to see the careful reading that is needed to understand such careful writing. While what follows can claim to be no more than a preliminary study of these four works, I invite readers—friends and foes alike of Strauss—to join me in this preliminary effort with this need in mind.