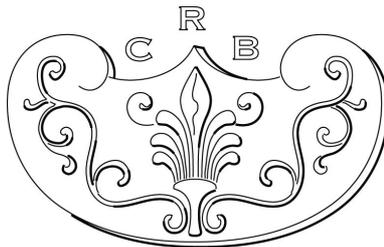




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Book Review by Peter Minowitz

## The Enduring Problem of Leo Strauss?

*The Enduring Importance of Leo Strauss*, by Laurence Lampert.  
University of Chicago Press, 360 pages, \$55

*Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy*, by Michael P. Zuckert and Catherine H. Zuckert.  
University of Chicago Press, 416 pages, \$45

ELEVEN YEARS HAVE ELAPSED SINCE THE U.S. invasion of Iraq, and political-philosophy professors are still being blamed for it by people who should know better. In a new book published by Routledge, for example, a British scholar includes Harry Jaffa among the Straussians who allegedly “intervened in and around the political establishment...in ways that explicitly promoted” the war. Jaffa’s contribution? Roughly five weeks before the invasion began, Jaffa happened to ask—in a CRB article about America’s founding principles—whether Saddam Hussein’s claim to have won 99% of the vote in the last Iraqi election made “his regime any less tyrannical.”<sup>1</sup> Another ludicrous claim with implications for the war can be found in *Leo Strauss, Education, and Political Thought*, whose co-editor includes Albert Wohlstetter (a key mentor to Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, Zalmay Khalilzad, and Ahmad Chalabi) among Strauss’s “protégés.”<sup>2</sup>

In the light of these and comparable inanities, it is a blessing that world-class scholars such as Catherine Zuckert, Michael Zuckert, and Laurence Lampert are writing about Strauss with so much breadth, rigor, insight, imagination, and clarity. Each of the new books builds upon a

prior work—*The Truth about Leo Strauss* (2006) by the Zuckerts, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* by Lampert (1996)—and includes revised versions of previously published pieces.

Both books emphasize Strauss’s long chapter on Plato’s *Republic* in *The City and Man*, along with his synoptic essay, “What Is Political Philosophy?” Lampert adds dissections of, among other things, Strauss’s chapter on Yehuda Halevi (the medieval Jewish poet), his chapter on Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*, his introduction to *Philosophy and Law*, his late 1930s letters to Jacob Klein about esoteric writing, and his second book on Xenophon. The Zuckerts add, among other things, a chapter about Straussians; a chapter about Strauss’s “Practical Politics”; a chapter that compares Strauss with Heidegger, Arendt, and Emil Fackenheim; and an analysis of *The City and Man* that explores important but easily overlooked puzzles in its treatment of Aristotle. In addition, the Zuckerts dissect two more articles reprinted in *What Is Political Philosophy?* (“Political Philosophy and History” and “Locke’s Doctrine of Natural Law”), Strauss’s chapter on Marsilius of Padua, his paired essays on liberal education, and “Progress or Return” (a 1958 lecture). Beyond its

breadth, their book also stands out because it recapitulates how Strauss conducted himself in the classroom and uses recordings of his classes (now available on the Leo Strauss Center’s website) to elaborate his critiques of positivism and historicism.

HAVING ADDRESSED THE IRAQ-spawned firestorm at greater length in their 2006 book, the Zuckerts here focus on issues of more lasting significance. To their credit, their new discussion of the firestorm covers important material their first book did not address, particularly the 1933 letter to Karl Löwith in which Strauss appears to celebrate “fascist, authoritarian, and imperial principles.” Although they never confront William H.F. Altman’s defiantly revisionist analysis of the letter, they admit that uncertainties remain, and they respond sensibly to the feeding frenzy the letter has spawned. For example, they illuminate how the letter was framed by the particular difficulties Strauss and Löwith faced in contending with their homeland’s plunge into anti-Semitism (Strauss wrote from Paris, and Löwith fled Germany in 1935). The Zuckerts also argue that what Strauss subsequently expe-



rienced—and learned—during the decades he spent in England and America left him favorably disposed toward modern democracy.

In conformity with his title, Lampert goes farther in focusing on Strauss's "enduring importance." Even though he includes a chapter (revised from the version published in *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*) on Strauss's 1930s letters to Jacob Klein—and even though another chapter scrutinizes the introduction to Strauss's 1935 book (*Philosophy and Law*), Lampert says nothing about the notorious letter to Löwith. Lampert's book, furthermore, never mentions Iraq, and it offers only a handful of (mostly unflattering) remarks about Straussianism. In his earlier book, Lampert gently chided Strauss for encouraging his students to promote or adopt conservative stances conveying loyalty to God and nation (less gentle is a footnote in which he rues that Strauss failed to issue public comments about "the work of Bloom, Jaffa, White, Dannhauser, Cropsey, and the rest"). Lampert is also more dismissive regarding the secondary literature on Strauss. Whereas the Zuckerts cite the work of 50 scholars who have written about Strauss, Lampert engages seriously with only a handful. Seth Benardete, whom Lampert extols in his chapter on Homer, dominates the landscape, while Heinrich Meier plays a secondary, but still distinctive, role.

**B**OTH BOOKS CONSISTENTLY ATTEMPT to demonstrate that Strauss was writing between (as well as on) the lines. The authors also strive (unlike Strauss) to communicate their views in a maximally straightforward and lucid fashion. They differ, however, regarding the degree of esotericism they perceive. Strauss's chapter on Halevi from *Persecution and the Art of Writing* provides an easy-to-summarize illustration of the difference. Although the Zuckerts characterize Halevi as "a great defender of orthodoxy," Lampert argues with daunting subtlety that Strauss's chapter, read with sufficient attention to detail, maintains that Halevi was actually a Socratic philosopher who chose to "appear to be an adherent of a religion in which he does not believe."

A similar lesson awaits readers who scrutinize the two virtuosic chapters Lampert devotes to *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse*, Strauss's commentary on Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*.<sup>3</sup> The following passage focuses on *XSD*'s eighth chapter, the second in a four-chapter series united by the title *Gynaikologia* (i.e., discourse/reasoning about wives):

as to centers, paragraph 4 of the second chapter on the *Gynaikologia* occupies a special place: following the central paragraph of the chapter, which invoked the

central paragraph of the previous chapter and prepared the central paragraph of the next chapter, it is itself a central paragraph, the eleventh of the twenty-one paragraphs of the *Gynaikologia*. What could it center after a center that had such profound implications for the questions of gods, nature, order, and human action?

To fathom such passages, most readers will need to proceed painstakingly while consulting both *XSD* and Xenophon, as I did. As elaborated compellingly by Lampert, the fourth paragraph in the *Gynaikologia*'s second chapter contrasts "two competing stories of order, the perfect gentleman's and the philosopher's" (Strauss uses "perfect gentleman" to translate the Greek *kalos kagathos*, literally "noble/beautiful and good"). The first story describes how Ischomachus, a wealthy gentleman-farmer, had been dazzled by the organization of tools, supplies, weapons, and cargo he once encountered on a Phoenician merchant ship whose boatswain emphasized that "the god," by creating storms at sea, "threatens and punishes" lazy sailors (*Oeconomicus*, VIII.16). The second story is told by Socrates to Kritoboulos, the wealthy young man whom Socrates is instructing in *oikonomikē* (household management); it describes the beautiful "pleasure garden" allegedly maintained by a resplendently adorned Persian leader who had "measured out and ordered each kind of thing" (IV.20-23).

**B**UILDING ON STRAUSS'S HIGHLY COMPACT analysis, which in the central paragraph of the third *Gynaikologia* chapter introduces the term "teleotheology" to describe "Socrates' most comprehensive teaching," Lampert argues that the gentleman's view is grounded ultimately in "fear and concern"; Socrates will counteract its roots in utilitarianism and "misanthropic theology" by adding—as edifying "adornments"—useful oaths and other anthropocentric elements of the teleotheology (in explaining "teleotheology," Strauss cites three passages from Xenophon's *Memorabilia*—"IV.3.13, I.4.8, I.4.13, and contexts"—in which Socrates powerfully invokes, among other things, "the one who places together and keeps together the whole cosmos, in which all things are noble and good, and who always provides them unravaged, healthy, and ageless for our use"). This teleotheology will also "guarantee the prudent and assiduous the rewards of their virtue and devotion." In Lampert's evocative words, the "Socratic discourse" that "educates the many Kritobouloses to gentlemanship" also "invites the rare Xenophon into the pleasure garden of philosophy while training him in training gentlemen."

Drawing on various hints by Strauss, some of which are merely footnote references to Plato's *Phaedo* and *Parmenides*, Lampert proceeds to extract from *XSD* a profound sketch of "the Socratic turn." Strauss, Lampert concludes, suggests that the mature Socrates taught the Ideas as something "both salutary for young gentlemen and useful for prospective philosophers." The *Gynaikologia* shows a young Socrates "learning what would, over time, make him the teacher of a teleotheology"; while learning how to edify gentlemen, however, Socrates would continue "on the path of understanding cause, of learning the truth about gods, nature, and order"—a primary activity of the pleasure garden. Strauss extends his account of this ongoing *physiologia* when he scrutinizes the *Oeconomicus* chapters in which Ischomachus employs dialectical techniques while teaching Socrates the art of farming.

**R**ELATIVELY FEW READERS SMIRK OR groan, I venture to suggest, at the way the fourth and final chapter of Strauss's *Gynaikologia* extracts lessons for philosophers from the "cosmetics" Ischomachus exhorted his wife to forswear. As Lampert puts it, a wife-like philosopher, despite her resemblance to a queen bee (*Oeconomicus*, VII.17, 32-34), "outfits herself in the invisible cosmetics of obedience" to the ruling gentlemen's "standard of being, truth, and nature"; Socratic cosmetics make it possible for gentlemen to live "at home in a cosmos they would believe to be ruled by perfected gentlemen," gods who rule the cosmos as the gentlemen think they rule their households. Lampert also emphasizes how Strauss maneuvered to make "Cosmetics" the central chapter of his book.

Going back all the way to Homer, Lampert insists, philosophers have been using a refined type of "poetry" to create or enhance religious/moral horizons that bolster society. In the book under review and elsewhere, Lampert argues that Socrates in the *Republic* replaced the Homeric gods, whose hold on Athenian elites was already dissolving, with the Idea of the Good and with genuinely moral gods; this moral/theological package, according to Lampert, was subsequently coopted by Christianity and then "appropriated" by moderns such as Bacon and Descartes (the Zuckerts, by contrast, suggest that Aristotle contributed more to such developments than Plato did).

Drawing on his distinctive interpretations of Homer, Plato, and Xenophon, Lampert complains that Strauss significantly exaggerates the difference between ancient and modern philosophy, particularly by downplaying both the ancients' commitment to shaping the world and the moderns' commitment to un-



derstanding it. The Zuckerts, by elaborating Strauss's lament that the worldview Machiavelli trumpets makes it difficult if not impossible for him to account for his own achievements as a knower, provide a partial rejoinder. Neither book, however, explores Strauss's most far-reaching claim about Machiavelli. Strauss's Machiavelli, between the lines, not only recommended techniques of political control that incorporate lessons he'd gleaned from Christianity's unprecedented global influence; he also recruited a future brigade of philosophers who would employ such techniques on behalf of an entirely worldly agenda. The explanations that Harvey Mansfield and Leo Paul S. De Alvaréz have provided of such "spiritual warfare," I maintain, have yet to be sufficiently developed and assessed.

**A**LTHOUGH LAMPERT IDENTIFIES HIMSELF as a Nietzschean, and argues that Nietzsche pioneered the strikingly revisionist history of political philosophy that Strauss worked so assiduously to unearth, Lampert regards Strauss as "the greatest reader of the twentieth century." By revealing "the benefaction of the philosophers," Lampert concludes, Strauss was a "benefactor of humanity." Lampert also credits Strauss for hinting at one of Lampert's boldest theses: that Plato's views about *eros* prefigure the Nietzschean will-to-power ("the good in itself," in this framework, is "a satisfaction of striving that can only be the initiation of new striving and not satiation"). Lampert sketches this thesis in his two books on Strauss, and extends it in his 2010 book on Plato, *How Philosophy Became Socratic* (a sequel is pending). Echoing his first Strauss book, furthermore, Lampert's new book celebrates Strauss's explanation that, for Nietzsche, the *fact* of the will-to-power grounds "the new highest value, affirmation of the eternal return of the world as it is, the real world." (This anti-nihilistic point might require the Zuckerts to soften their claim that Lampert's Strauss, because he is "too timid to legislate values in the open as Nietzsche did," reverts in public to "the view that philosophers discover rather than create truth"). Lampert proceeds to fault Strauss's students for having caricatured the will-to-power philosophy as "a monster of merely willful dominance."

The Zuckerts offer nothing that matches the "ingenuity" Lampert displays regarding *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse*, but they too pay careful attention to centers, to the numbering of paragraphs, and to subtle variations between Strauss's earlier and later statements (within and sometimes between books) on selected topics. The hermeneutical maneuvers they (and Lampert) undertake are all ones Strauss regu-

larly employed (like Lampert, they also examine Strauss's citations). In interpreting Strauss, furthermore, the Zuckerts and even Lampert are less radical than Strauss was regarding Xenophon, Farabi, Maimonides, and Machiavelli.

The Zuckerts' forays into esoteric interpretation, like those of Strauss and Lampert, regularly argue that the relevant texts are less pious than they appear to be. By means of delicate readings of what Strauss wrote about Aquinas, Marsilius, and Locke, for example, they argue that Strauss had serious doubts about the adequacy of "traditional natural law," which he apparently regarded as "an impossible synthesis of rational and revealed." The Zuckerts also make deft use of Marsilius while comparing Strauss's three most prominent accounts of Machiavelli, and they end up approaching Lampert's complaint that Strauss's emphasis on "anti-theological ire" was unfair to Machiavelli (and to some of his successors).

**I**N LEO STRAUSS AND NIETZSCHE, LAMPERT praised Strauss for having fathomed "the inward intransigence of philosophy's opposition to the idiocies of revealed religion." As interpreted by the Zuckerts, however, Strauss is more appreciative of Jerusalem. Although they worry that Strauss may have placed "his own critique of Christianity and its effects on both politics and philosophy into the mouth of the infamous 'teacher of evil'" (Machiavelli), their Strauss lacks "anti-theological ire" and wants to "restore both Socratic philosophy and biblical religion in their pristine and inherently conflicting character"; their Strauss swam against the tide in seeking to "revive 'intellectual' or 'philosophical' respect for the claims of religion"; their Strauss concludes that because philosophers realize they cannot refute revelation, it's possible that philosophy is *not* "the right way of life" and philosophers are therefore obliged to begin by showing that it is. Criticizing Stanley Rosen, finally, the Zuckerts note that neither belief nor unbelief is typically the fruit of "decisions"; they likewise deny that Strauss and the ancients based either politics or philosophy on "an act of faith or will."

Lampert never equivocates about his own atheism—or about his enthusiasm for Nietzsche, the author he defends most vigorously against Strauss's objections. Are Lampert's views too settled? Although his long and detailed commentaries on Nietzsche—which include a book on *Zarathustra*, a book on *Beyond Good and Evil*, and a 143-page trio of chapters on *The Gay Science*—are remarkably insightful and beguiling,<sup>4</sup> perhaps Lampert proceeds too hastily in explaining away Nietzsche's pitches for cruelty and war. While scrutinizing *The Gay Science*, Lampert admits that Nietzsche "could have put less trust in

his readers' ability to appreciate ironic excess on delicate subjects." On various occasions, however, Lampert says or implies that Nietzsche's excesses were justified as ways of loosening the stifling grip of widely held modern—e.g., egalitarian, utilitarian, and pacifist—values. But Lampert is no militarist. He favors the development of "ever more comprehensive units of allied human beings united under a modern banner"—united partly by a tragic awareness that natural processes will eventually exterminate the human race—and he regularly cites Nietzsche's claim (in the *Ecce Homo* section on *Human, All-Too-Human*) that the war he was conducting in the "underworld of the ideal" was a "war without powder and smoke." This disavowal, alas, hardly suffices to counteract the paeans to belligerency, destruction, and purification that were so widely embraced by fascists and Nazis.

**S**TRAUSS CRITICIZES ONE OF NIETZSCHE'S most alarming paeans in two prominent places. His fullest discussion comes in the introduction of *Socrates and Aristophanes*, where he relays Nietzsche's hope for "a new kind of politics that includes as a matter of course 'the merciless annihilation of everything degenerating and parasitical.'" The quoted phrase is from the *Ecce Homo* section on *The Birth of Tragedy*, where Nietzsche outlines how the world would look a century hence if his efforts "to assassinate two thousand years of anti-nature and desecration of humanity" have succeeded: a Nietzsche-inspired "faction in favor of life" (*Partei des Lebens*) would, while "breeding humanity to higher levels," carry out "the merciless annihilation of everything degenerating and parasitical" (*die schonungslose Vernichtung alles Entartenden und Parastischen*). When Strauss invokes this agenda in the last paragraph of "What Is Political Philosophy?," he provides less detail but more protest: "Being certain of the tameness of modern western man," Nietzsche "preached the sacred right of 'merciless extinction' of large masses of men with as little restraint as his great antagonist had done." In the book under review, Lampert faults Strauss's paragraph for the associations it conveys between Nietzsche and the Nazis; in his first Strauss book, he suggested—cautiously, one must concede—that the phrase Strauss quoted was never used by Nietzsche. (Lampert's later discussions of "What Is Political Philosophy?" acknowledge that *Ecce Homo* includes the pitch for "merciless annihilation.")

Lampert's discussions of the phrase may nevertheless illuminate an area in which the Zuckerts are insufficiently cautious (their book includes many more hedges than Lampert's does). When they quote the "What Is Political Philosophy?" passage, they add "Marx" in brackets after "great antagonist." Although Strauss's



essay says very little about Marx, its penultimate paragraph does link “[t]he delusions of communism” with the “philosophy of history” (pioneered by Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel), and its last paragraph highlights Nietzsche’s effort to summon “a new nobility” and thereby repudiate “the alleged necessity of a universal classless and stateless society.” It is not obvious, however, that Strauss regarded Marx as Nietzsche’s slaughter-friendly “great antagonist”: unlike Lenin and Stalin, Marx neither summoned nor superintended massacres, and Strauss’s essay says nothing about either proletarian misery or “the expropriation of the expropriators.” Lampert, in any case, focuses on why Strauss would use religious terms (“preached” and “sacred”) to describe the calls for revolution issued by Marx, whose atheism is vastly more clinical and dismissive than Nietzsche’s (Lampert joins Nietzsche in commending the soul-deepening that Christianity bequeathed to Western civilization and in hoping that quasi-religious “poetry” will enrich mankind’s cosmopolitan future). In one of the two central paragraphs of “What Is Political Philosophy?,” Strauss emphasizes that Socrates’ refusal to participate in the jailbreak Crito had arranged reflected “a prudential consideration of what was the right thing to do in the circumstances” rather than “a categorical imperative demanding passive obedience, without if’s and but’s.” According to Lampert’s Strauss, Nietzsche’s “great antagonist” was God, whose categorical imperatives included “directives for the annihilating apocalypses devoutly prayed for by his believers.” As Lampert emphasizes, Strauss concludes the opening paragraph of the essay by proclaiming that he would not “for a moment forget what Jerusalem stands for.” On behalf of the Zuckerts, I would point out that in both his 1967 and 1972 courses on Nietzsche, Strauss referred to Marx as Nietzsche’s prima-

ry “antagonist”—even though Nietzsche never mentions Marx and probably hadn’t read him.

AS SUGGESTED ABOVE, LAMPERT SPEAKS confidently in criticizing Strauss (he also speaks confidently when interpreting complex texts). The Zuckerts are more humble, admitting doubts about whether they have “always or completely succeeded in explicating Strauss’s thought.” Even they, however, are not “convinced that Strauss’s novel readings of the work of canonical philosophers are simply correct.” Perhaps their most important doubts are two-fold. First, the Zuckerts find it “extremely difficult to determine, in the end, whether and, if so, how Strauss thinks an Aristotelian understanding of political practice can be made compatible with an understanding of the nature of the universe derived from modern physics.” Along these lines, they also wonder whether an understanding of philosophy as “theoretical contemplation of an eternal intelligible order” can be separated from Aristotle’s “ostensibly teleological understanding of nature” (Lampert, who firmly endorses the Enlightenment and the advance of modern science, is clearly frustrated by Strauss’s posture regarding both, and he regards the “sovereignty of becoming” as a settled truth). Second, the Zuckerts wonder whether Strauss’s reinterpretations of classical political philosophy around “the conflict between philosophy and law”—an explicit concern of medieval philosophers such as Farabi and Maimonides—“distort the thought of those ancient philosophers who were not aware of and did not explicitly address scriptural revelation.” Since Lampert insists that Plato’s *Republic* provided a theological-political edifice that “set the course for Western thought from Plato to Nietzsche,” he might defend Strauss against this objection. One could write “a commentary consist-

ing of many volumes” on each of these books. Whether you ultimately prefer Lampert’s Nietzsche-oriented Strauss, or the Zuckerts’ more “honest and plain-spoken” version, you will not regret the time you spend on either book, and additional rewards await those who explore the tensions that emerge when the books are juxtaposed.

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#### Notes

- 1 Aggie Hirst, *Leo Strauss and the Invasion of Iraq* (London: Routledge, 2013), 81, 109.
- 2 J.G. York and Michael A. Peters, eds., *Leo Strauss, Education, and Political Thought* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011), 184.
- 3 Leo Strauss, *Xenophon’s Socratic Discourse: An Interpretation of the Oeconomicus* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970).
- 4 The three above-mentioned books by Lampert were published by Yale University Press: *Nietzsche’s Teaching: An Interpretation of Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1986); *Nietzsche’s Task: An Interpretation of Beyond Good and Evil* (2001); *Nietzsche and Modern Times: A Study of Bacon, Descartes, and Nietzsche* (1993). The 1993 book includes Lampert’s chapters on *The Gay Science*.