

Anti-Strauss

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Abstract

Leo Strauss's textual interpretations are epistemologically naive. Previous critics have not shown the full breadth and depth of Strauss's problems. The early, pre-esoteric Strauss makes some unduly certain claims on very slender evidence. The mature, esoteric Strauss's methodological principles rest on false dichotomies and logical errors. Most problematic is Strauss's one-sided approach: too often, he takes a single hypothesis, looks for and finds evidence which fits it, and thinks that this constitutes proof; he states too many conclusions as if they are certain, without adequately considering alternative explanations. Since we can see the same technique in his pre-esoteric writings, this suggests that the problem is not esoteric interpretation itself, but Strauss's particular version of esoteric interpretation. In short, the problem is not Straussianism, but Strauss.

Keywords: esoteric, history of political thought, interpretation, Leo Strauss, Machiavelli.

Introduction

Uncertainty and under-determination are central to textual interpretation. We can never be certain what Locke thought about God, what Marx meant by ‘class,’ or who influenced Jefferson; we cannot know how right or wrong our answers are. Uncertainty is inevitable for empirical research in any field. So is under-determination: at least two different explanations are always possible. This means that we should not think an explanation is right if we find evidence for it; we should weigh up the evidence for and against it, and ideally, repeat this with plausible alternatives.

Uncertainty and under-determination cast new light on Leo Strauss’s work in the history of political thought. Strauss is best known for esoteric interpretations about hidden messages, such as Plato’s irony, Machiavelli’s blasphemy, and Locke’s closet Hobbesianism. This paper argues that throughout his career – even before his esoteric phase – Strauss has a naive epistemology. He finds evidence that fits an explanation, states it with apparent certainty, and looks no further. The early, pre-esoteric Strauss makes overly bold claims, sometimes with evidence which no one could reasonably find convincing. The mature, esoteric Strauss compounds this natural enthusiasm with flawed methodological rules based on false dichotomies and logical errors, and with implausible theoretical expectations which are not critically scrutinized; he thinks that what he finds is intentional, and does not see how easily it could arise by chance. He reports most conclusions with equal certainty, and without adequately considering alternatives. The full extent of Strauss’s one-sided epistemology has not been fully grasped.

This paper is broader and deeper than other critiques of Strauss. The broadest critique, by Shadia Drury, consciously refrains from challenging Strauss’s textual interpretations (2005, lix, 114). Most criticisms of Strauss’s textual interpretations are, understandably, not so broad: they tackle one theme, like Strauss’s Platonic interpretations (e.g. Rhodes 2003, 72-95), or just one of Strauss’s works (e.g. Germino 1966). By comparing textual interpretations from both Strauss’s

esoteric and *pre*-esoteric period, I find problems deeper than Strauss's esoteric method. Breadth gives depth.

This paper also seeks depth by tackling Strauss's epistemological difficulties, as with Klosko's (1986) analysis of logical flaws in Straussian interpretations of Plato, and Pocock's (1975) attack on intellectual errors in Strauss's Machiavelli interpretations. Pocock does not always hit the mark, though. For example, he rejects Strauss's method as non-falsifiable (Pocock 1975, 393; see also Gunnell 1978, 131; Gunn 1981, 182). As discussed below, though, all methods are non-falsifiable. Most other critiques are not deep enough. Many are inevitably too brief, whether because they are in short book reviews (e.g. Saunders 1976), in wider discussions of Strauss (e.g. Larmore 1996, 69), or in general methodological reviews (e.g. Skinner 2002, 71-2). Some criticisms are too easy to rebut, as with Harris's suggestion that accounts of Spinoza's character by his contemporaries are 'inconsistent with the kind of dishonesty and prevarication implicit in any such [esoteric] practice as Strauss alleges' (Harris 1995, 125-6; compare Bagley 1999, 227, 230-1). Many criticisms simply lack bite. For example, Holmes scorns Strauss's 'dubious generalizations' and 'analytical inadequacies' which 'irritate most readers'; Holmes also mentions 'a few petty annoyances,' such as Strauss's attention to centers (1993, 75, 87). But a lack of examples, and Holmes's emphasis on irritation and annoyance, gives readers little insight into Strauss's striking epistemological difficulties.

My paper tries to show Strauss's deeper intellectual problems. A key conclusion is that the problem is not Strauss's *esoteric* method, but *Strauss's* esoteric method. There is nothing wrong with esoteric interpretations in general. But there is a lot wrong with Strauss's particular esoteric interpretations – and with some of his 1930s non-esoteric interpretations. In short, the problem is not Straussianism, but Strauss.

This is not a full analysis of Strauss's work. I ignore his normative arguments, which are not relevant to assessing the plausibility of his interpretations. I sidestep his broader commentaries, such as his ideas about changes in doctrines of natural right (Strauss 1971). And I

accentuate the negative, giving few positive examples from his work. I will let others work out what is still standing when we have cleared the rubble. My point is that there is a lot of rubble.

My main emphasis is thus on the root causes of Strauss's problems, which I usually illustrate only briefly. I do not count how often Strauss actually errs in practice. It could be interesting to compare the frequency of his different techniques: for example, he uses centrality much more than density. But the key issue for this paper is that Strauss does not see how easily both phenomena can arise by chance – a huge problem for anyone claiming that such things are intentional. It would be hard, meanwhile, even to count how often Strauss assumes perfect speech: this basic assumption is only implicit in most of his work. But the key issue for this paper is that rejecting this indefensible assumption weakens much of the Straussian interpretative edifice. This too is a serious problem for anyone trying to recover authors' intentions. Overall, Strauss's epistemological naivety is recurrent, pervasive, and fundamental. His techniques, both frequent and rare, tell us a lot about Strauss – and probably little about most of the writers he discusses.

Note that I take Strauss's interpretations at face value: I assume he is sincere when he makes claims about what authors meant. 'The task of the historian of thought is to understand the thinkers of the past *exactly* as they understood themselves' (Strauss 1996, 321-5; see also 1945, 99; 1952, 143). This is why Strauss censures historicists, who in his view simply cannot be right about what authors meant (e.g. Strauss 1952, 26-32; Strauss 1996, 323-5). Most Straussians also treat his interpretations as sincere (e.g. Storing 1973, 1349-52; Bloom 1974, 377, 383-6; Pangle 2006, 56-63; Smith 2009, 6-7; Lampert 2010, 15; see also the letters by Cropsey and Jaffa in the *New York Review of Books*, 30 May 1985).

Of course, Strauss's historical interpretations are often philosophical commentaries as well (Gourevitch 1968, 59-60). 'Scholars who rebuke Strauss for misreading Machiavelli,' writes Smith, 'clearly miss the point. His book is less a scholarly commentary on Machiavelli than a prolonged meditation on the problem of political theology' (2009, 37). But if the book is *partly* a

scholarly commentary on Machiavelli, then we can legitimately question Strauss's reading of Machiavelli.

Some scholars see Strauss's writings as esoteric texts in their own right (Peterman 1986, 322-51; Drury 2005, 26, 34-5, 114, 117, 121, 132), even if the esotericism only has educational aims (Pangle 1988, xiii-xiv). Strauss was certainly skilled enough to offer sincere interpretations while hiding ideas between the lines. But there is a more worrying possibility. For one Straussian, Alan Verskin (2004), Strauss's errors in interpreting Maimonides are so obvious that they must be intentional. If this is true of Strauss's historical interpretations in general, my criticisms would be less relevant. But there are three reasons for optimism. First, I doubt that *all* of Strauss's historical interpretations are intentionally wrong; nor does Verskin imply this. Second, as just noted, many Straussians believe that Strauss's interpretations are sincere. Indeed, some think his work 'proves' that certain writers wrote esoterically (Pangle 2006, 60). Third, if Strauss's historical interpretations turn out simply to be pointers to his own esoteric techniques, this would confirm my suspicion that the only person who actually uses most of these esoteric techniques is Strauss.

This paper runs as follows. I start by outlining two key principles of good interpretation. Next, I give examples of overstatements in Strauss's pre-esoteric phase, before criticizing several aspects of his esoteric work, including both theoretical arguments and substantive interpretations. I then summarize three deeper problems in Strauss's methodological and substantive writings. After applying Strauss's approach myself, to try to prove the impossible, I offer some conclusions.

Uncertainty and under-determination

Uncertainty is faced by all textual interpreters making empirical claims. Did Aristotle write *The Constitution of Athens*? Does Rousseau think that women can be free? Why did Tocqueville write about America? We will never know the answers for certain. Even our most

confident claims are merely ‘inferences from the best evidence available to us, and as such are defeasible at any time’ (Skinner 2002, 121). (For a longer account of the ideas in this section, see Blau 2011.)

Uncertainty has two key implications for textual interpreters. First, we should try to increase the certainty of our conclusions, for example by seeking more evidence. Second, where relevant we should say how certain our conclusions are. In particular, which ones are we confident in, and which are more tentative?

Strauss seems well aware of uncertainty and often tries to counter it. But most of his conclusions, even highly speculative ones, are stated with excessive certainty. One reason is his neglect of under-determination. Under-determination, also called indeterminacy, means that there always appear to be at least two ways of explaining the evidence – different ways of joining the dots, so to speak (Newton-Smith 2000). As Devitt writes, this ‘weak underdetermination thesis,’ that ‘[a]ny theory has rivals that entail the same ... observational evidence,’ is an ‘obvious truth’ (2005, 768). When Hobbes denies that he is an atheist, for example, he could be sincere or insincere; we need more evidence. But this evidence too can be explained in different ways. Under-determination is ever-present.

Nonetheless, there is no good reason to accept the ‘strong underdetermination thesis,’ that competing explanations must be *equally* good, empirically *equivalent* (Devitt 2005, 777-88; Norton 2008, 18-21, 27-9, 40). Sooner or later we usually find good reasons for preferring one over another. But we cannot do this if we only look at a single explanation.

One implication of under-determination is thus that we should consider evidence for *and* against our favored interpretation *and* plausible alternatives. If we only look for evidence which fits our interpretation, we may overstate its plausibility. Strauss, I will suggest, does just this, which is epistemologically simplistic. We all do this to greater or lesser extents; with Strauss, the extent is greater. Nor does Strauss seem to see how dubious some of his theoretical expectations are.

Note that I mostly ignore falsification. Popper argues that hypotheses cannot be proved, but can be disproved with falsifying facts. Under-determination, though, shows that even falsifying facts can be explained away (Newton-Smith 2000, 534-5). There is neither proof nor disproof in textual interpretation. Falsification has important implications for textual interpreters (Blau 2010). But falsification itself is not fundamental.

The pre-esoteric Strauss

I now turn to Strauss's interpretations. I will mainly discuss his esoteric writings, which are more controversial, and which have more textual interpretation than his pre-esoteric writings. But his pre-esoteric writings are especially instructive in the present context: we can see questionable conclusions drawn from slender evidence, and stated with undue certainty – the same problems as with the mature, esoteric Strauss. This suggests a deeper problem than an esoteric approach alone.

I therefore start with the 'pre-Straussian' Strauss (Bloom 1974, 383, 385), writing before his eye-opening esoteric experiences of 1938-9 (Lampert 2009, 63-76). Of course, Strauss had discussed esotericism before then (Strauss 1937, 100; 1990, 11, 18, 21; 1995, 95-6, 102-3, 145; 2004, 542-5), and even in 1936-7 he briefly used techniques more typical of the mature Strauss (Strauss 1990, 17; 2004, 544). As far as I know, though, the early Strauss does not elsewhere interpret texts esoterically.

Strauss's best-known pre-esoteric study, his book on Hobbes, was written in German in 1935 (Strauss 1965) and published in English in 1936 (Strauss 1963). Unlike his esoteric work, it does not seek hidden messages. But like his esoteric work, it looks beneath the surface of texts to uncover authorial beliefs. And like his esoteric work, it is overly certain. The early Hobbes, states Strauss, saw vanity as the most dangerous passion, a claim 'proved' [*beweist*] by the fact that the dedication to his translation of Thucydides 'emphasizes no less than three times that his patron [the second Earl of Devonshire] was completely free of this passion' (Strauss 1963, 111; 1965,

111). No one could reasonably call this proof, or even strong evidence. Another example involves Hobbes's first two mature political tracts mentioning, and then ignoring, the conventional view that monarchy is the most natural kind of government (*Elements of Law* 20.3, 138; *De Cive* 10.3, 117). The fact that these traditional defences are mentioned 'justifies [*berechtigt*] the assumption that Hobbes came only gradually to cast them aside and that he at first considered monarchy to be the only natural form of authority' (Strauss 1963, 60; Strauss 1965, 65). Strauss's evidence does not justify this plausible but poorly supported inference.

A third example involves *Leviathan's* account of magnanimity: 'one may assume [*darf man annehmen*] that Hobbes momentarily adopted it, under the strength of the impression made by Descartes's *Passions de l'âme*, which appeared in 1649, at the time when the *Leviathan* was being composed. ... But how is one to judge the fact [*die Tatsache*] that Hobbes in passing borrowed Descartes's theory of *générosité*?' (1963, 56; 1965, 62). Again, the evidence does not permit us to 'assume' this 'fact,' only to hypothesize or speculate about the possibility. (Compare the more nuanced account by Pacchi 1987, 116-7.) Note another fallacy here: Strauss analyses similarities, but not differences, between Hobbes and Descartes (Herbert 1989, 101-12). Saying that Hobbes 'adopted' or 'borrowed' Descartes's account exaggerates the proximity of the two theories. We should check both sides of the case, as Strauss himself says in criticizing partial comparisons of Locke and Hooker (Strauss 1959, 304). We all fall short of this ideal, of course.

Clearly, this brief analysis of the early Strauss is not too damning. But it highlights two intellectual errors: overstating the certainty of inferences, and only citing evidence which fits a claim – two common problems in Strauss's later work. Critics often worry that Strauss's esoteric approach is 'an invitation to perverse ingenuity' (Sabine 1953, 220; see also Hallowell 1959, 300-1; Pocock 1975, 399). Revealingly, Strauss's pre-esoteric Hobbes book is also called 'overly ingenious' (Wolin 2004, 654) and 'more ingenious than sound' (Oakeshott 1975, 142). Oakeshott is sometimes said to have reviewed Strauss's book positively (Burns and Connelly 2010, 4). But while Oakeshott's review starts politely, writing that Strauss only 'occasionally' infers more than

his material reasonably implies, he then makes eight complaints about the thinness of Strauss's evidence and how far he pushes it (1975, 143, 149-51). Oakeshott worries about the book's 'conclusiveness' (1975, 143): Strauss is surprisingly confident despite his meagre evidence. This, I will suggest, is a profound, recurring and basic problem for Strauss. Even without an esoteric approach, Strauss's textual interpretations can be worryingly unreliable.

Persecution

I now turn to Strauss's esoteric interpretations. He discusses four reasons why authors write esoterically: to avoid their work being used for indoctrination (1946, 351), to educate readers (1939, 535; 1952, 36-7), to keep ideas from the masses (1939, 535; 1952, 34-6, 110-1, 121), and to avoid persecution (1939, 534-5; 1952, 17, 24-5). The examples in this paper relate to all four, but Strauss's own theorizing primarily addresses persecution. Strauss depicts the persecution/esotericism relationship in two ways, one plausible, one implausible. The plausible view is that we may 'wonder' if some writers have 'adapted their literary technique to the requirements of persecution, by presenting their views ... between the lines' (1952, 26). The implausible view is that persecution '*compels all writers* who hold heterodox views to develop a peculiar technique of ... writing between the lines' (1952, 24; emphasis added). Strauss does not and cannot justify the latter view. Nor does he prove that there is a 'necessary correlation between persecution and writing between the lines' (1952, 32; see Frazer 2006, 36). This phrase is also unclear. If a 'necessary correlation' means that persecution must make heterodox writers hide their thoughts, this is implausible. If it merely means 'necessarily, persecution and esotericism are correlated' – i.e. esoteric writing becomes more likely as persecution increases – then we are back to 'wondering' if a given heterodox writer is writing esoterically. Since Strauss implies that only 'a small group of writers' is esoteric (1939, 522; see also 1952, 33-4; 1986, 54-5), we should overlook the view that persecution 'compels' esotericism. How, then, can we spot and explain esotericism?

Finding esotericism

One good tip is to study an author's habits of reading and writing. For example, 'Spinoza has devoted a whole chapter of his *Treatise* to the question of how to read the Bible To ascertain how to read Spinoza, we shall do well to cast a glance at his rules for reading the Bible' (Strauss 1952, 144). This is sensible and not overstated. But the same page features bolder and weaker reasoning:

It is a general observation that people write as they read. As a rule, careful writers are careful readers and vice versa. A careful writer wants to be read carefully. He cannot know what it means to be read carefully but by having done careful reading himself. Reading precedes writing. We read before we write. We learn to write by reading. A man learns to write well by reading well good books, by reading most carefully books which are most carefully written. We may therefore acquire some previous knowledge of an author's habits of writing by studying his habits of reading. The task is simplified if the author in question explicitly discusses the right manner of reading books in general, or of reading a particular book which he has studied with a great deal of attention (Strauss 1952, 144).

I have three concerns here. First, Strauss makes his 'general observation' sound like a fact not a hypothesis. Second, knowing that someone wants to be read carefully does not show that she writes carefully: careless writers may also want to be read carefully. Third, and most important, the bulk of the argument rests on an implicit and false dichotomy, between careful and non-careful writers (see also Strauss 1952, 25). Strauss's comment implies that careful readers write carefully, and non-careful readers do not. But the world is not split into careful readers and non-careful readers: there are degrees and kinds of carefulness. Likewise careful writers. Perhaps a

fairly careful reader will sometimes write very carefully, sometimes quite carefully, sometimes sloppily. As soon as this fundamental conceptual point is accepted, doubts are cast on several other arguments of Strauss's, especially his views on errors, to which I now turn.

Errors

One plausible way of indicating esoteric ideas is through apparent errors, including contradiction and self-contradiction. Strauss is superb at spotting odd disparities, such as Machiavelli's conflicting comments about the relationship between Florence and Pistoia (Strauss 1958, 42-3). But Strauss overstates the likelihood that such disparities are intentional:

if an able writer who has a clear mind and a perfect knowledge of the orthodox view and all its ramifications, contradicts surreptitiously and as it were in passing one of its necessary presuppositions or consequences which he explicitly recognizes and maintains everywhere else, we can reasonably suspect that he was opposed to the orthodox system as such (1952, 32).

'Reasonably suspect' is right: there is no certainty here. However, Strauss again assumes an implicit false dichotomy, between able and unable writers. But ability is a matter of degree. The less able a writer, the less we can suspect opposition to orthodoxy; Strauss's conclusion becomes less certain.

The same false dichotomy undermines the statement that '[i]f a master of the art of writing commits such blunders as would shame an intelligent highschool boy, it is reasonable to assume that they are intentional, especially if the author discusses, however incidentally, the possibility of intentional blunders in writing' (1952, 30). 'Reasonable to assume' is too strong; 'reasonably suspect' would again have been better. More importantly, this claim assumes that we are reading 'a master of the art of writing.' But that too is a matter of degree, and kind.

Unfortunately, Strauss's esoteric interpretations require a writer to be totally careful in every way. Strauss implies that Plato 'has written his works with unsurpassed care' (1946, 352), and that Machiavelli has crafted the 'perfect book or speech,' which has 'no loose threads' and is 'not marred by errors due to faulty memory or ... carelessness' (1958, 121). But perfection is a matter of degree. *To the extent that* a book is perfect, it contains nothing slipshod. If Machiavelli's book is not perfectly perfect then he was not 'a man who must be assumed to have known what he was doing' (1953, 441). Once we see the false dichotomy, the only 'must' is that we *must not* assume that he knew exactly what he was doing, all of the time. Crucially, this reopens the hypothesis that, in any given instance, Machiavelli may not have known exactly what he was doing, which immediately requires Strauss to consider explanations other than his own; he usually does not, as we will see. This is an absolutely critical, basic failing, reflecting a common intellectual error: the false dichotomy.

I do not think Strauss's position is salvageable here. Once we accept degrees of imperfection, we cannot assume everything is intended, and for any given 'discovery' we should consider both intentionality and unintentionality. If my interpretation of Strauss is right, he rarely considers such alternative hypotheses *because* he thinks dichotomously: a writer either intends every detail or is deeply inept. Implicit false dichotomies are a fundamental buttress of Strauss's interpretations, and they are untenable.

Strauss could well be right that Maimonides hinted about his esotericism (Strauss 1952, 61-2, 69-70, 73; though compare Lorberbaum 2002). But Strauss is again too dichotomous and too rhetorical here: great writers can make great errors without us calling this 'scandalous incompetence' – or without us doing their intelligence an 'injustice' (1947, 463), or without us disparaging them as making 'blunders as would shame an intelligent high school boy' (1952, 30), blunders 'which every ten-year-old child now knows how to avoid' (1964, 52). Compare Hobbes: even 'the ablest ... may deceive themselves, and inferre false Conclusions' (*Leviathan* chapter 5, 32).

More importantly, the possibility that Maimonides overlooked the contradictions is not 'refuted' by his explicit advice on investigating apparent contradictions (Strauss 1952, 69). Strauss is too trusting: Maimonides's comments refute nothing, they merely strengthen the case that his contradictions are intentional. Similarly, Strauss thinks that Maimonides's 'emphatic declaration concerning the extreme care with which he had written every single word of his book' means that 'the duty of the interpreter' is not 'to explain the contradictions' but to gauge which of two contradictory statements was true and which hid the truth (Strauss 1952, 69-70). I see this as a dereliction of the interpreter's duty. Maimonides may or may not be right that he wrote every word with great care; excluding one of these two plausible hypotheses is risky.

Strauss then tries to deduce a methodological rule for interpreting contradictions:

we are certainly in need of a general answer to the general question; which of the two contradictory statements is in each instance considered by Maimonides as the true statement? That answer ... is provided by his identification of the true teaching with some secret teaching. Consequently, of two contradictory statements made by him, that statement which is most secret must have been considered by him to be true. Secrecy is to a certain extent identical with rarity; what all people say all the time is the opposite of a secret. We may therefore establish the rule that of two contradictory statements in the *Guide* or in any other work of Maimonides that statement which occurs least frequently, or even which occurs only once, was considered by him to be true. He himself alludes to this rule in his *Treatise on Resurrection*, the most authentic commentary on the *Guide*, when he stresses the fact that resurrection, through a basic principle of the law, is contradicted by many scriptural passages, and asserted only in two verses of the Book of Daniel. He almost pronounces that rule by declaring, in the treatise mentioned, that the truth of a statement is not increased by repetition nor is it diminished by the author's failure to

repeat it: “you know that the mention of the basic principle of unity, i.e., His word ‘The Lord is one,’ is not repeated in the Torah.” (Strauss 1952, 73).

This argument runs as follows. (1) True teachings are secret teachings. (2) Secrecy is ‘to a certain extent identical’ with rarity. (3) The rarer an idea, the more secret it is. Therefore, (4) when two ideas contradict each other, whichever is rarer is true. (5) This has a textual justification: Maimonides notes that a basic Jewish principle, the unity of God, is stated just once.

However, claim (1) is wrong: not all true teachings are secret, as point (5) unwittingly shows: the unity of God is upheld by ‘all [Jewish] people all the time.’ Claim (2) is deeply unclear. Claim (3) is overstated: if everyone in the world hides something from me, it is a secret to me. Most importantly, claim (4) does not follow from Strauss’s argument, and relies on a false dichotomy: it could only fit ‘perfect’ writers who make no mistakes. If even great writers can err, the rule becomes less certain. We also need more guidance on whether this ‘rule’ is a rule of thumb or a strict law. My impression is that Strauss means the latter; but only the former is plausible. Even if Strauss’s logic were valid, he would have to consider not only the hypothesis of rarest statements being true, but also the hypothesis of errors being unintentional.

Worryingly, Strauss sometimes treats things as contradictions when they can plausibly be explained more simply, as Dorion (2010, 296-322) and Leaman (2002, 218-23) suggest for Strauss’s interpretations of Xenophon and al-Fārābī, respectively. The following example also shows how easily Strauss gets carried away. In *Discourses* 1.58, says Strauss, Machiavelli writes first that the Roman people hated the name of kings, and yet ‘in the same context’ Machiavelli writes that people always speak of princes ‘with a thousand fears and a thousand respects.’ The contradiction ‘cannot be resolved unless one assumes that “princes” does not always designate monarchs or even human government in general. We suspect that Machiavelli sometimes uses “princes” in order to designate superhuman powers’ (Strauss 1958, 130).

I do not see a contradiction. The two comments are not ‘in the same context’: the first is about the Roman people’s dislike of kings, the second involves popular governments being criticized more often than princely governments, where fear of punishment is greater. This probably explains why no one but Strauss translates *rispetti* as ‘respects,’ or anything similarly positive. It is ‘cautions’ in Gilbert’s translation, ‘reserve’ in Walker’s translation, ‘reservations’ in Bondanella and Bondanella’s translation, ‘apprehensions’ in Neville’s 1675 translation, ‘apprehension’ in Detmold’s 1882 translation, and ‘a constant eye to consequences’ in Thomson’s 1883 translation. Even the Mansfield and Tarcov translation has ‘hesitations.’ The contradiction disappears.

Centrality

Strauss thinks that hidden arguments are often central – the middle example, or an idea in the center of a chapter, for instance (e.g. Strauss 1952, 131). But fallaciously, he cites evidence which supports this view and ignores evidence which does not: he says when important ideas are central, but rarely does so when important ideas are not central, or when central ideas are not important (one exception being Strauss 1959, 166). Centers turn out not to be so special. Consider Strauss’s account of peaks and troughs in the four parts of *The Prince*. Chapter 19, the ‘peak’ of *The Prince*, is ‘literally the center of the third part’ (chapters 15-23), which is ‘the most important part.’ But as there are four parts, the third part is not the center, and as there are 26 chapters, chapter 19 is not the center. (Strauss does actually say that it is at the center, ‘[r]oughly speaking.’ But you need to speak *very* roughly to see 19 as the center of 26.) The ‘peak of the first part [chapters 1-11] is literally its center (ch. 6),’ but Strauss does not mention a central peak in the second or fourth parts, chapters 12-14 and 24-26 respectively (Strauss 1958, 55-62). So, two parts of the book peak in their central chapters, one of which is ‘roughly’ central to the book (where ‘roughly central’ means ‘three-quarters of the way through’); two parts of the book have

no central peak, rough or otherwise; the most important part of the book is not the central part; and the book as a whole has no central peak. None of this is surprising.

Indeed, even by chance, many important things will be central in one way or another – especially if one has a sufficiently flexible approach to the ‘center.’ For example, Strauss measures the center of the *Discourses* in two different ways. In one place he measures the center on the basis of its 142 chapters, and finds something important near this center (1958, 30). In another place he treats the center as the ‘center of the central Book (II 10-24)’ (Strauss 1958, 158). Note too that with each different way of measuring the center, there are multiple different centers. On the former approach, the center could be chapters 2.11 to 2.12 (which are the 71st and 72nd chapters of 142), or chapters 2.10-2.13 (which are the 70th to 73rd chapters), and so on. If we focus on the center of the central book, which has 33 chapters, the center could be chapter 2.17, or chapters 2.16 to 2.18, or chapters 2.15 to 2.19, and so on. So, Strauss’s focus on 2.10 to 2.24 is one of many possible centers; it is *a* center, not *the* center. I do not think that Strauss is being intentionally disingenuous by interpreting the center so flexibly. But he does seem to have fooled himself.

Strauss’s center is not always a center at all. Two examples have already been mentioned: the ‘roughly’ central peak of the *Prince* (Strauss 1958, 56), and *Discourses* 2.10, ‘[a]lmost exactly in the center’ of the book (Strauss 1958, 30). Another case involves Machiavelli’s *Life of Castruccio Castracani*, which has 34 sayings heard or said by Castruccio. Strauss refers to the ‘five central sayings (nos. 17-21)’ (1958, 224), but these ‘central’ sayings merely *start* halfway through; they are not actually central.

One response to my criticism is to see the center more broadly: esoteric writers merely avoid putting key ideas at the start and end of texts, where inattentive readers will not notice them (Cantor 1991, 273); see perhaps Strauss 1952, 24-5). But this objection will not work, because Strauss often finds esoteric ideas in the first or last words of texts (Strauss 1952, 77-8, 90; 1958, 305; 1990, 17), the first words of speeches (1964, 174), the titles of chapters (Strauss

1958, 65; 1973, 104), phrases ‘at or near the end of the chapter’ (Strauss 1958, 312), or ideas at the start and end of chapters (e.g. Strauss 1958, 314 notes 32-3, and in many other notes). Especially in a text with many chapters, like the *Discourses*, there will thus be so many beginnings, centers and ends that it is utterly unsurprising that Strauss manages to find lots of esoteric hints in such places. I suspect this is what Pocock has in mind when he accuses Straussian interpretation of being ‘undisciplined’ (Pocock 1975, 397). If I develop a theory that esoteric ideas are hidden in long paragraphs, but also find esoteric ideas in short paragraphs, you will accuse me of using a method that can show anything.

A final problem is that the centrality thesis is implausible. A writer exercising perfect speech would not use centers mechanically: this code is too easily cracked, as Strauss himself implies in another context (1958, 53). Perhaps key ideas are only central in certain conditions, say in chapters with seven paragraphs. Unless such a code is found, we are left with the following conclusion: important ideas are sometimes central and sometimes not central, which means that unimportant ideas are sometimes central and sometimes not central, which means that if an idea is central we have no idea if it is important, and if something is not central we have no idea if it is important. But I think we knew that already.

Density

Strauss occasionally mentions an unusually high or low density of things like proper names or Latin quotations. Sometimes his reason for noting such details is unclear (e.g. Strauss 1958, 314, 333), but sometimes his inferences are more significant. For example, *Discourses* 1.52, where Machiavelli discusses Piero Soderini’s possible change of allegiance, ‘is located in the middle between the two chapters of the *Discourses* which open with “I believe” Reflection on the fact that [this chapter] contains the only density of “Piero” ever occurring in the book will show that it makes sense to describe that chapter as the most important chapter of the *Discourses*’ (1958, 344). This is not Strauss’s only justification for that claim (see Strauss 1958, 103-4, 263,

and *Discourses* 1.9), but this particular reason is tenuous. I agree that 1.52 is important: it indicates Machiavelli's opposition to the Medici, as does *Discourses* 3.3. But the density of the word 'Piero' would be a bizarre way of showing this. I would speculate – or as Strauss might say, 'one is compelled to conclude' – that this unusual density reflects Soderini being a key figure in just one chapter. Elsewhere, as in 1.56, he needs only a single mention. Strauss would have spotted this by taking under-determination seriously and asking: what else could explain this?

As with centrality, moreover, Strauss notes when things are dense, and says nothing otherwise. Yet texts are bound to be 'lumpy,' sometimes with high densities of things, sometimes with moderate densities, and sometimes with low densities. We would not expect the word 'Piero' to be evenly spread through the book. It is thus unsurprising that important ideas sometimes coincide with high densities – and unsurprising that this is usually not the case, and that Strauss does not mention densities most of the time. But it is worrying that he uses this principle even occasionally; this is further evidence of the epistemological weaknesses undermining his whole approach.

Silence

One of Strauss's interpretative tactics is entirely right: we should ask not only 'why does a writer say *P*?' but also 'why does she not say *Q*?'. No textual interpreter asks this key question as often as Strauss (e.g. Strauss 1958, 211; 1971, 167-8). However, he overstates intentionality here. For example, he says that we should scrutinize 'Spinoza's silence about a fact or a teaching with which he must have been familiar, and whose mention or discussion would have been essential to his argument,' because 'the suppression of something is a *deliberate* action' (1952, 161-2; emphasis added). But silence is not necessarily deliberate. Machiavelli's curious silences indicate esotericism, Strauss suggests, because '[t]he silence of a wise man is always meaningful. It cannot be explained by forgetfulness' (Strauss 1958, 30). This assumes that a writer is 'wise.' Wisdom is not dichotomous, though. If someone can be fairly but not perfectly wise, a given silence may be

unintentional. Strauss's assertion only works with a false dichotomy. And even if his interpretation is right, it only shows that silence is important for Machiavelli here, not that he *always* sees it as meaningful – an unwarranted extrapolation.

Under-determination means that we should ask: what else could explain this finding? There is another plausible interpretation of the meaningful-silence passage just discussed, for example (Gunn 1981, 182). Saunders, too, criticizes Strauss's claims about two points in Plato's *Laws* where the Stranger 'does not mention the soul explicitly.' Yet each time the Stranger talks about the soul as 'it.' Saunders sees this as merely stylistic: 'one would hardly go on using the noun [soul] over and over again.' Saunders derides Strauss's 'overinterpretation of nonsignificant detail in defiance of simple common sense' (Saunders 1976, 241). But we can all make such errors by not asking: what else could explain this?

Numbers

Strauss's best-known tactic is numerology, finding hidden ideas by examining things like chapter numbers. He knows that one numerical clue is not enough (Strauss 1959, 166; see also 1952, 62), but is struck by how many he finds in Machiavelli. Features which 'seem to indicate that numbers are an important device used by him' include the 20-chapter gaps between the only three chapters in the *Discourses* which start with Livy quotations, and the fact that the only chapters with wholly modern examples are the 27th and 54th chapters, 54 being two times 27 (Strauss 1958, 52).

What else could explain this? Chance! Examples like this are statistically very likely in a 142-chapter book. Strauss does not see how easily such numerical regularities arise by chance, and thus overstates the plausibility of esoteric claims based on numerology. Strauss was not trained statistically, which may explain his comment about necessary correlations (see above), his confusion on statistical averages (1953, 443), and his flawed account of the link between historical understanding and interest (1946, 329; 1959, 67; 1996, 323).

Consider too Strauss's naive comment that when one of Machiavelli's chapters is hard to understand, 'one will sometimes derive help by simply turning to a chapter which carries the same number either in another Book of the *Discourses* or in the *Prince*' (1958, 52-3). The fatal word is 'sometimes.' Of course we can *sometimes* understand a chapter better in this way – even when using books by different authors. Chapter 8 of the *Prince* asks if rulers who get power through wicked means can still have *virtù*. Chapter 8 of a recent book on *Presidential Power* (Rockman 2000) discusses an idea of power which will interest many Machiavelli scholars. Chapter 8 of A.C. Grayling's (2007) *Among The Dead Cities* discusses whether good ends justify murderous means. And chapter 8 of Matthew Stover's (2005) novel of the Star Wars film *Revenge of the Sith* discusses more insidious ways of getting power.

Strauss's numerology sometimes tells us things which are very obvious (Pocock 1975, 395, 397; Drury 2005, 115). But his inferences are often far flimsier, as exemplified by his discussion of Machiavelli's alleged use of the number 26. I cannot analyse all of Strauss's claims, which he himself accepts are incomplete (Strauss 1987, 311). But he suggests that in the *Prince*, 'Machiavelli's theology can be expressed by the formula *Deus sive fortuna*, i.e. 'that God is fortuna as [sic] supposed to be subject to human influence.' The *Prince* has 26 chapters, so Strauss turns to *Discourses* 1.26. 'At the end of the preceding chapter Machiavelli had said: he who wishes to establish an absolute power, which the writers call tyranny, must renew everything. The subject of our chapter then is tyranny, but the term "tyranny" never occurs in that chapter: "tyranny" is avoided in the 26th chapter of the *Discourses* just as it is avoided in the *Prince*, which consists of 26 chapters.' A new prince seeking absolute power must thus act tyrannically, even making the rich poor and the poor rich, as King David had done; this implicitly depicts David as a tyrant. Strauss notes that Machiavelli attributes a Latin phrase to David not to God, unlike the New Testament original. By this deliberate error, Machiavelli implies the 'horrible blasphemy' that 'God is a tyrant' (Strauss 1958, 48-9; 1970, 17; 1987, 311-2).

This is seriously questionable. Saying that the term ‘tyrants’ is ‘strictly avoided’ makes it sound intentional; Strauss’s evidence does not warrant this. I agree that the term’s absence is probably intentional, but not for Strauss’s reasons. 1.26 and the end of 1.25 are about new princes renovating everything in a city or province; they are not about tyrants, indeed Machiavelli seems to distance himself from the view that such people are necessarily tyrants. Moreover, Machiavelli’s text does not imply that David committed inhumane acts aside from making the rich poor and the poor rich (Germino 1991, 150-1). If 1.26 is not about tyranny, then Machiavelli is not calling David a tyrant. Applying the Latin words to David rather than God may not be comparing David to God: Machiavelli could simply be quoting a pertinent Bible verse, or misunderstanding words he would often have heard sung in the *Magnificat* (Walker 1950, 53). ‘We must note that this is the sole New Testament quotation occurring in the *Discourses* or in the *Prince*,’ writes the eagle-eyed Strauss (1987, 312). But this fact is only evidence of Machiavelli’s blasphemous intentions if Strauss’s other claims hold up, which they do not. Overall, this material gives us little reason to think that *Deus sive fortuna* summarizes Machiavelli’s theology.

Strauss’s numerology can be plausible. The recurrence of sevens in Maimonides’s *Guide* is probably intentional, although even Strauss does not infer deeper messages here (Strauss 1959, 165-6). And both Livy’s *Histories* and Machiavelli’s *Discourses* have 142 books (Strauss 1958, 48), which is probably not chance. But Machiavelli may simply be paying silent homage to Livy. Strauss’s tendency to read far too much into other numerical coincidences devalues his claims about hidden messages. I understand why he usually makes numerological claims with such certainty: he has found so many numerical connections that he is convinced they are intentional. But he would think this, because he only sees one side of the issue. We can assess Strauss’s claims better than he can, because we can see how easily most of these numerical connections could arise by chance. And Strauss’s tendency to get carried away with weak numerological analysis is one more indication that we are not in safe hands.

Over-certainty

I now return to the principles of good interpretation discussed at the start of this paper, to highlight Strauss's deeper intellectual problems.

Taking uncertainty seriously reminds us that we are not telling our readers what happened: we are telling them how strong we think our evidence is – a vital shift of emphasis. We all overstate the plausibility of some inferences, of course, and reporting uncertainty for every claim would be tedious. But there is a difference between saying 'Spinoza wrote the *Theologico-Political Treatise*,' which there is no good reason to doubt, and 'Spinoza wrote the *Theologico-Political Treatise* esoterically.' The second claim needs an honest appraisal of how strong the evidence is, what evidence is ambiguous, and what an esoteric explanation cannot explain (Blau 2011).

Obviously, Strauss does not always overstate certainty. For example, *The Prince* has 26 chapters; 26 is the numerical value of God's name in Hebrew; but did Machiavelli know this? 'I do not know,' writes Strauss (1987, 311). Too often, though, he presents his claims as if they are certain when an impartial reader would have good reasons for doubt. Such over-certainty was seen in the sections on pre-esoteric writing, errors, silence, and numbers. In another telling example, Strauss says it can be 'proved' that he has the right interpretation of Rousseau (Strauss 1947, 464). Yet elsewhere Strauss claims that it is his (unnamed) historicist opponents who talk of proof while his own approach is inherently uncertain (Strauss 1952, 30; 1959, 231-2; 1971, 22). No approach gives certainty, of course. And some historians explicitly reject certainty: R.G. Collingwood (1993, 487), in Strauss's day, and more recently David Wootton (1983, 7, 145), Quentin Skinner (2002, 121), and Noel Malcolm (2002, 105-6).

Of course, we all overstate the certainty of our claims. My point is thus less important as a criticism of Strauss and more important as a warning to readers: however sure an author sounds, we should not assume she is right. Pangle (2006, 60) thinks that Strauss's evidence 'proves' that certain writers wrote esoterically. But textual interpretations are not provable.

Lampert (2010, 15) writes that Strauss was ‘the first thinker ... to list explicitly the many devices of esoteric practice.’ But strictly speaking, Strauss has merely *suggested* esoteric practices. And I have argued that these alleged practices are not as plausible as Strauss implies, except perhaps for writers like Maimonides.

Under-determination

Strauss’s naive epistemology usually involves taking one hypothesis, finding evidence which fits it, and accepting the hypothesis without addressing evidence against it and without considering other hypotheses. Strauss is not always one-sided (e.g. Strauss 1939, 509-10, 521). And his assessments of the alternatives may have gone unpublished. But in print, the naive epistemology is widespread, as exemplified in the sections on pre-esoteric writing, errors, centrality, density, silence, and numbers. Centrality and numbers are the most obvious overstatements: Strauss infers that his discoveries were left intentionally, without seeing that they could mostly arise by chance.

Of course, we all make such mistakes, to greater or lesser extents. And non-Straussians usually ignore Straussian hypotheses. But this does not absolve Strauss, because these errors are fundamental to his enterprise. He writes that it is ‘wise to assume, *at least to begin with*, that Machiavelli’s lucid and orderly mind did not forsake him when he laid down the plan of the *Discourses*’ (Strauss 1970, 14-15, emphasis added; see also 1983, 197). But Strauss seems to have this assumption not only ‘to begin with’ but all the way through. He writes that ‘it is safer to believe that [Machiavelli] has given careful thought to every word he uses than to make allowance for human weakness’ (Strauss 1958, 47). But it is *safer* to consider both hypotheses, even if one is the default option. Strauss writes that it is ‘a rule of common prudence to “believe” that all these blunders [in Machiavelli] are intentional and in each case to raise the question as to what the blunder might be meant to signify’ (Strauss 1958, 36). But it is much more prudent to ask what else could explain this, otherwise it is too easy to ‘believe’ that one’s answer must be

right. Strauss himself urges us to consider ‘all reasonable possibilities’ in interpreting a passage (Strauss 1952, 30). Mansfield (1975, 403) describes Strauss’s assumption of perfect speech as a ‘hypothesis to be tested.’ But you cannot test a hypothesis properly if you only look at evidence which fits it.

Strauss underplays other explanations for several reasons, including over-certainty, which probably means he feels little need to examine alternatives, and inadequate probabilistic thinking, which means he sees regularities as intentional. Like all of us, he overlooks evidence which implies different conclusions, as Gourevitch (1968, 68-84) and Williams (2007, 68-9) suggest for his interpretations of Xenophon and Rousseau respectively. His disdain for historicism (e.g. Strauss 1952, 26-32), which I do not have space to consider, allows him to ignore historians’ explanations. And his false dichotomies and logical errors lead him to overstate the plausibility of his initial theoretical expectations – a profound problem to which I now turn.

How plausible are Strauss’s claims about esoteric techniques?

Strauss has successfully shown the plausibility of the *general* theory that some writers might write esoterically; recent scholarship makes this theory effectively undeniable (Patterson 1984; Bagley 1992). Crucially, though, Strauss is far weaker at justifying his theories about the *particular* esoteric techniques used, as seen in the sections on finding esotericism, errors, centrality, density, silence, and numbers. And – a point of absolutely central importance – Strauss is in effect telling us that writers like Plato, Machiavelli and Spinoza tried to hide messages using techniques which, as far as we know, no one spotted until Leo Strauss himself (Germino 1966, 815; Gunn 1981, 181; Pocock 1975, 388-90). If so, then either Plato, Machiavelli and Spinoza made staggering misjudgements, or Strauss is using techniques which these authors did not.

So, let us ask: how much evidence is there that people used these particular techniques and uncovered these particular messages before Strauss? No answer to this question will be definitive or non-circular. Indeed, if others had cracked the code before Strauss, they might not

have written it down (Kendall 1966, 252). But this will not save Strauss, as his theory has many ‘observable implications’ (see King, Keohane and Verba 1994, 11-12, 24, 29-31). In other words, to avoid being slaves to a theory, we should ask how plausible it is, and one way of doing this is to ask what else we would expect to see if our theory is right.

Relevant questions for Strauss include the following: Did other readers interpret texts using centers, density, numbers, and the like? Were there enough such interpreters for these techniques to have been sensible choices for esoterically-minded philosophers who expected some intelligent readers to grasp their ideas? Medieval kabbalists used some of these techniques: are there links between Machiavelli, or those in his circle, and Christian kabbalists living in Florence, like Ficino and Mirandola? Bacon, Toland and Lessing explicitly discuss esotericism: is there evidence that they used the same techniques as Strauss when reading Machiavelli, Plato/Locke, and Spinoza, respectively – and did they reach the same conclusions about these authors’ ideas? Did anyone’s views change in a ‘Straussian’ way after close reading of an author who Strauss depicts as esoteric?

Such evidence will be hard to find, but if Strauss’s claims about particular esoteric techniques are right, the answers to all of these questions should be ‘yes.’ Yet as far as I know, neither Strauss nor the first two generations of his followers have even asked such questions. Sadly, 70 years after Strauss’s esoteric interpretations first appeared, the empirical basis of his claims remains narrow, primarily involving textual interpretations of particular authors without support from the indirect evidence that we could also expect to see. Excessive respect for Strauss’s writings has damaged the cause of Straussian textual interpretation. Even Marxists have been better at critically building on their master’s work. The new generation of Straussians needs a different approach. They should read Strauss as Rawlsians read Rawls and Hayekians read Hayek – clever and far-sighted scholars whose work nonetheless has ambiguities, omissions, overstatements and errors, maybe even fundamental errors that need correcting if the arguments are to work. (Stanley Rosen is one example of a Straussian in this vein: see Rosen 2005, vii, 167,

243, 402.) Strauss's interpretations have too many gaps and slips to stand up by themselves. The new generation of Straussians needs to plug the gaps and fix the slips. To find observable implications, more Straussians should move beyond 'careful reading' (Storing 1973, 1349) and engage in historical scholarship, perhaps along the lines of Wootton's (1992, 34-7) efforts to produce a robust 'reading between the lines.' If there is little or no evidence for Strauss's claims about the particular esoteric techniques allegedly being used, Straussians should say so.

(Satirical) Thoughts On Hobbes

We begin by wondering what we want to know about Hobbes. Those who seek knowledge about Hobbes must first ask how Hobbes understood knowledge. We turn therefore to Hobbes's account of knowledge in *Leviathan* chapter 9, and its table of different kinds of knowledge. Men of noble simplicity think this diagram is an error. We are compelled to wonder whether a master of the art of drawing would make such an error. The table is divided into two parts. Hobbes's plan can be seen by examining the bottom part, separated from the top at the center, roughly speaking. The bottom part is divided into seven kinds of knowledge: optics, music, ethics, poetry, rhetoric, logic, and the science of justice. Hobbes wrote texts on six of these: on optics, the *Short Tract* (one cannot deny that the handwriting is his); on ethics, *De Homine*; on poetry, the *Answer to Davenant*; on rhetoric, *A Brief of the Art of Rhetorick*; on logic, *De Corpore*; and on justice, the *Leviathan*.

Why does Hobbes write no book on music? It would be scandalous to say that this was an oversight. But what shall we make of Hobbes's silence about music? An author may reveal his intentions by the title of his books. Two of Hobbes's books, and only two, have titles consisting of one word only: *Leviathan* and *Behemoth*. The number of books in the *Leviathan* is five, if we include the 'Review and Conclusion'; the number of books in *Behemoth* is four. Five letters in the word 'Leviathan,' and four in 'Behemoth,' combine to produce the word 'Beethoven.' It is of the essence of devices of this kind that they are merely hints. But one is compelled to look for other

hints that Hobbes was writing about Beethoven. Hobbes's manifest blunders reveal his homage to Beethoven. Hobbes writes that Aristotle's *Politics* depicts ants and bees as political animals (*De Cive* 5.5, 71). But Aristotle does not mention ants (*Politics* 1253a). It would be an injustice to deny that Hobbes has a perfect memory. It is a rule of common prudence to ask what Hobbes intended by this error. Later in the same paragraph, Hobbes uses a sentence with the words 'trumpet' and 'thunder and lightning.' We do not think it is coincidence that in the only sentence in the *Leviathan* where 'trumpet' occurs, Hobbes again mentions thunder and lightning (*Leviathan* 40, 324). Yet the intelligent reader will see that the context of these words is entirely different in the two books. Why then does Hobbes identify trumpets with thunder and lightning? Beethoven used an ear trumpet to hear, and it is well known that on his death-bed, Beethoven stirred from his slumber after a burst of thunder and lightning. Hobbes's intention becomes evident when we read without modern presuppositions. Nor do we believe it to be accidental that the four chapters of *De Cive* which have the highest density of biblical citations (chapters 4, 11, 16, and 18) add up to 49 (7x7). The number 7 has long had a mystical significance. Might Beethoven too have thought so? I do not know. But the earliest keyboard sonatas that Beethoven chose to publish, the purest expression of his musical ideas, were not published until 14 (7x2) years after they were first written, when Beethoven could deliberately give them the opus number 49 (7x7). Beethoven wrote only one septet (featuring 7 instruments), but he wrote 7 piano trios, and the first of his opus 70 piano trios (7x10) was nicknamed the 'Ghost' trio, a mystical term. It is curious that both Hobbes and Beethoven made sure they stayed alive until the ages of 91 (7x13) and 56 (7x8), respectively.

In the manuscript of his last complete string quartet, Beethoven wrote 'Muß es sein? Es muß sein' ('Must it be? It must be'). Hobbes too was a determinist who believed that everything must be for a reason: all things 'have a necessary cause; so that all the effects that have been, or shall be produced, have their necessity in things antecedent' (*De Corpore* 9.5, 123). Must it be? It must be. This is in the fifth section of the ninth chapter. 5 plus 9 is 14 (7x2). *Leviathan* chapter 7

has 7 paragraphs, and the central paragraph says that in a good argument, conclusions follow necessarily from premises. Must it be? It must be. But Hobbes also makes one, and only one, admission about political conclusions which do not follow necessarily from his premises: the superiority of monarchy, he wrote in the center of a paragraph, is ‘the only thing in this book which I admit is not demonstrated [by logical proof] but put with probability’ (*De Cive* Preface, 14). As Hobbes elsewhere implies that his conclusions are necessary, and only here implies the opposite, one is compelled to read this as his true opinion: for what is most secret is most rare, and what is most secret is most true, therefore what is most rare is most true, and what is said only once is also true, especially if it is in the center, and also when it is not. Let us recall that there are only two references to music in *De Corpore*, one of which is in the center of the final paragraph of the final section before a chapter with the heading ‘Of the centre of equiponderation’ (*De Corpore* 22.20, 349; 23, 350). Hobbes then is telling us to ponder the center of texts or passages. The other reference to music in *De Corpore* distinguishes between necessary propositions, like ‘Socrates is a man,’ and contingent proportions, like ‘Socrates is a musician’ (*De Corpore* 5.9, 60). This is in the ninth section of the fifth chapter. 9 plus 5 is 14 (7x2), and this section discusses the last of the 7 ways in which definitions can be combined to produce faulty conclusions. Hobbes is hinting that ‘Socrates is a musician’ is also a faulty conclusion: Socrates, the greatest of philosophers, was a musician, like Beethoven. We shall not shock anyone if we subscribe to the old-fashioned opinion according to which Hobbes was a teacher of music. But we still have to explain why Hobbes intimates that monarchy is inferior to other forms of commonwealth. One should recall Hobbes’s view that only three kinds of government are possible: monarchy, aristocracy, democracy (*Leviathan* 19, 129-30). He proves that democracy is impossible (*Elements of Law* 21.5, 120). Hobbes then is defending aristocracy. Beethoven claimed to be aristocratic, and dedicated many pieces of music to aristocrats. The careful reader can see that Hobbes is defending Beethoven’s aristocratic links.

Why was Hobbes not explicit about Beethoven? Was it because Hobbes lived in an era of persecution? Or was it because Beethoven would not be born until 91 years (7x13) after Hobbes died, such that if Hobbes had talked openly of Beethoven, Hobbes's contemporaries would have tried to find his time machine? I do not know.

Conclusion

This paper has made Strauss's epistemological errors explicit, but I suspect that most readers of Strauss already have at least an implicit sense of some of these problems. Most people who read Strauss, I would speculate, find his methodological arguments and substantive claims unconvincing, and feel no need to offer deeper reasons. But I am not aware of a previous writer who has offered so many criticisms of Strauss's epistemological weaknesses. Many critics object to Strauss's assumption of perfect speech, but I do not know anyone who relates this to his deeper reliance on false dichotomies more generally. I do not recall seeing an analysis of how just porous Strauss's emphasis on centers is. Nor have I read a critique which explicitly places uncertainty and under-determination at its core. Nonetheless, I suspect that most people who read Strauss are at least intuitively aware of his epistemological simplicity. It is time to make this explicit.

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