

## Is There a “Straussian” Plato?

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Mark Blitz: *Plato's Political Philosophy*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. Pp. 326. \$60.00.)

Jacob Howland: *Plato and the Talmud*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. 282. \$85.00.)

Laurence Lampert: *How Philosophy Became Socratic: A Study of Plato's "Protagoras," "Charmides," and "Republic."* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Pp. 441. \$55.00.)

David Leibowitz: *The Ironic Defense of Socrates: Plato's "Apology."* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. 194. \$80.00.)

The four books reviewed here illustrate the pervasive influence of Leo Strauss on contemporary studies of Plato. However, although the authors all acknowledge their debt to Strauss, they produce remarkably different views of Plato. Reading these books in conjunction with one another cannot help but make one wonder whether there is any longer, if there ever was, a “Straussian” sect or school.

Mark Blitz's account of Platonic political philosophy is the most comprehensive, covering most, although not all, of the dialogues. Blitz seeks primarily to fill out Strauss's claim that Plato gives his readers a fresh look at politics, undistorted by later theory, rather than to give detailed analyses of the dialogues themselves. Nor does he address other readings of the dialogues in the enormous scholarship on Plato. (That, he notes [277n10], would require another book.) His book does not appear to be addressed to Plato scholars, therefore, as much as to undergraduate students and generally educated adult readers.

Blitz organizes his book thematically into three parts, each of which concludes with a discussion of one of the three Platonic dialogues obviously devoted to politics: *Laws*, *Republic*, and *Statesman*. The first part, devoted to “virtue,” begins with a description of “the world of the dialogues,” which consists of a list of various politically related topics taken up in the dialogues—fathers' concerns about the education of their sons, political ambition, love, compulsion, pleasure, sophists, arts, and knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Blitz

<sup>1</sup>His depiction of the “world” of the dialogues thus stands in marked contrast to Lampert's detailed account of the historical conditions, political and intellectual, in Athens at the time at which Socrates is shown to be conversing as well as of the individuals with whom he talks.

then presents brief summaries of each of the five dialogues devoted to specific virtues: *Theages* (wisdom), *Laches* (courage), *Euthyphro* (piety), *Charmides* (moderation), and *Gorgias* (justice), as well as the two dialogues devoted to the question whether virtue can be taught, *Protagoras* and *Meno*. The reason we want to know what virtue is and whether it can be taught comes out in the *Laws* when the Athenian Stranger and his old Dorian interlocutors agree (770c–e) that the goal of a political community should be to make each and every citizen, female as well as male, as virtuous as possible, even if that attempt results in the destruction of the city itself. The problem that emerges at the end of the *Laws* is that the members of the “Nocturnal Council” who are supposed to establish and maintain the laws may not understand the unity and diversity of the virtues.

Rather than expand on the political need for philosophical investigations of the problem of virtue implicit in his account of the conclusion of the *Laws*, Blitz begins his account of the relation between politics and philosophy in part 2 with an account of four apparently apolitical phenomena or experiences out of which philosophy arises—nature, wonder, perplexity, and laughter—even though Plato did not devote a dialogue to any of them. He then turns to the two dialogues that concern, respectively, the noble and the good (the characteristics of an ancient Greek “gentleman” or, one might argue, a truly virtuous life), the *Greater Hippias* and *Republic*. Because the search for a definition of the noble or beautiful (*kalon*) undertaken by Socrates with the sophist Hippias does not produce a positive result, Blitz seeks to formulate a composite definition for himself from parts taken from other dialogues. Emphasizing that the beautiful is neither simply reducible to nor completely separable from the good, Blitz proceeds to investigate what Plato has to say about what is truly good in the *Republic*. He argues that

the *Republic's* subject is justice, and the subject is oriented thematically to the literal title, the regime (or form of government). What is the most just form of government? Plato shows what would need to be true for justice to be fully encapsulated within politics and why this is impossible. He then examines the way of life, philosophy, that comes closest to justice. The political community's bodily existence and the necessities with which it deals, however virtuously, restrict its excellence. (176)

Plato shows that the survival of individuals, communities, and the species requires human beings to join together and adopt a division of labor. However, since no individual human being has only one clear capacity—as the one person, one job principle of the “true city” requires—in order to make the division of labor rest on a natural rather than an imposed allocation of effort, no individual will ever develop fully in a city that subordinates individuals completely to the

requirements of the common good. Philosophers come closest to developing their individual potential, but philosophical courage is not the same as political or military courage. Blitz concludes that “philosophy and politics are, nonetheless, inseparable, because thought depends on the leisure, and explores the opinions, that are present in (some) political communities, and because every community is governed by an understanding of what is good” (167).

Having defined justice “as the virtue that forms a whole community, regulates our participation in it, and directs the order of priority of various ends and the arts that serve them” (168), in part 3 Blitz seeks to articulate Plato’s understanding of the knowledge that would enable a human statesman to found and rule a just city. That knowledge consists in an understanding of the mixed character of “the human good,” as that is defined in the *Philebus*, and an understanding of the character and grounds of the knowledge needed to establish and maintain a just city, as articulated in the *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman*.

Looking back on Blitz’s account of Platonic political philosophy we see that the central, defining problem in all three parts—concerning virtue, the relation between philosophy and politics, and political knowledge—consists in the relation of the parts to the whole. In no case are the parts simply reducible to one common denominator; in no case can they exist entirely independently of one another. How then are, can, or should they be related so that they constitute a coherent whole rather than remain contradictory or opposed forces? If Blitz had made the central concern or question of his account of Platonic political philosophy explicit from the beginning, he might have been able to explain why Plato presented the three major parts of his political philosophy, in the three dialogues most obviously and directly concerned with politics, in the mouths of three different philosophers—the Athenian Stranger in the *Laws*, Socrates in the *Republic*, and the Eleatic Stranger in the *Statesman*. Blitz ignores the question in the case of the Athenian Stranger, and slides back and forth with regard to the similarities and differences between Socrates and the Eleatic. Although he argues that “Plato’s approach sets the course of political philosophy, for its central question is the question of natural justice or right,” and that “it is, thus, especially useful to consider what Plato has in mind by nature” (116–17), Blitz also remains curiously silent about the *Timaeus*, in which Timaeus (if not Plato himself) is often thought to have presented the cosmological foundations of the city in speech described in the *Republic* (and on which Aristotle drew in writing his *Physics*). Blitz might respond that modern natural science has made the view of nature presented in the *Timaeus* incredible. But if that is the case, we are confronted with a serious problem. Why should we accept a view of human nature not merely separate from but in apparent opposition to our view of nature as a whole? When we come to the conclusion of *Platonic Political Philosophy* we are also somewhat taken

aback by the realization that Blitz has not included any consideration of the two dialogues with which many studies of “Platonic political philosophy” begin—the *Apology of Socrates* and *Crito*. Does Blitz distinguish these supposedly “early” works depicting the “historical” Socrates from the mature thought of Plato? In concluding that Plato shows us “the importance of the life devoted to the continuing attempt to understand” (269), Blitz does not make the problems that require more thought or the way in which Plato presents them as explicit as he could. Why don’t the parts ever simply cohere in a whole—in virtue, the city, or nature? The examples of the imperfect coherence between the parts and the whole that Blitz discusses all seem to point to the problematic relation between the sensible realm of things that become (including preeminently the human body) and the intelligible realm of being or the beings (accessible only to the mind), but Blitz does not address this central question of Platonic philosophy.

Laurence Lampert would probably dismiss Blitz as a member of “the school that Strauss founded, preoccupied in its beginnings with mere politics except in its greatest exemplar, Seth Benardete.” In *How Philosophy Became Socratic: A Study of Plato’s “Protagoras,” “Charmides,” and “Republic”* Lampert seeks to convince the many students of Strauss along with their students, among others, that they “can have a future as a new scholarly tradition that recovers old masters for the philosophy of the future for which Nietzsche wrote the preludes” (415).

Lampert adopts Strauss’s “hermeneutics,” but not his conclusions. In his own study of Plato’s *Republic* Strauss concluded that “the just city is not possible because of the philosophers’ unwillingness to rule.” They are unwilling to rule because

dominated by the desire, the *eros*, for knowledge as the one thing needful ... the philosophers have no leisure for looking down at human affairs. ... Their very justice—their abstaining from wronging their fellow human beings—flows from contempt for the things for which the non-philosophers hotly contest. They know that the life not dedicated to philosophy and therefore even political life at its best is like life in a cave. ... The cave-dwellers ... are passionately attached to [their] opinions and therefore passionately opposed to philosophy (517a) which is the attempt to go beyond opinion toward knowledge: the multitude is not as persuadable by the philosophers as we sanguinely assumed in an earlier part of the argument. This is the true reason why the coincidence of philosophy and political power is extremely improbable: philosophy and the city tend away from one another in opposite directions.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), 124–25.

Lampert not merely grants but emphasizes the opposition between philosophers and nonphilosophers. He admits that philosophers do not want to rule directly in the usual sense. He insists, however, that philosophers seek to rule indirectly by “making new gods.” Plato did essentially what Homer did for earlier generations and Nietzsche wanted to do for the future. Whereas Strauss argued that the conflict between reason and revelation constitutes the vital core of the Western tradition,<sup>3</sup> Lampert contends that religion is and ought to be understood as an instrument of philosophic rule. Strictly speaking, Lampert does not say that he agrees with Strauss about Plato; he writes only that “for a Nietzschean history of philosophy Leo Strauss is a virtually indispensable resource” (15). Lampert claims merely to be employing the method of reading through which Strauss distinguishes the exoteric moral teachings to be found in the works of past philosophers from their esoteric wisdom. Lampert nevertheless obscures the difference between his and Strauss’s readings of Plato by citing Strauss when Strauss supports his claims, but never pointing out the places and respects in which he differs from Strauss.<sup>4</sup>

What, then, are the “great politics” Lampert attributes to Plato’s Socrates? In the *Protagoras*, the *Charmides*, and the *Republic*, Lampert argues, Plato shows the three stages in which Socrates learned how to exercise indirect rule by shaping the opinions of those who actually rule and their subjects. In the *Protagoras* (and related dialogues), Plato shows that Socrates first tried to persuade Alcibiades to conquer the world in order to make it safe for Socratic philosophy, but that Socrates failed. In the *Charmides* Plato then shows that Socrates rushed back from Potidaea to find out whether Critias had learned the lessons he had tried to teach before the war better than Alcibiades had. Finding that Critias had not, Socrates immediately sought to administer the “charm” he had learned from the doctor of Zalmoxis to Plato’s brothers. By teaching Glaucon and Adeimantus his “theory of the ideas” in the *Republic*, Socrates convinced these young Athenian aristocrats that they were philosophers who deserved to rule, thus convincing them to strive to see to it that philosophy was not merely protected but taught

<sup>3</sup>Leo Strauss, “Progress or Return?,” in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 249–310.

<sup>4</sup>A particularly important example of this practice concerns the ideas. Lampert quotes Strauss’s statement that “the doctrine of ideas which Socrates expounds to his interlocutors is very hard to understand; to begin with, it is utterly incredible” (*City and Man*, 119). He does not quote Strauss’s concluding qualification of his explanation of the reasons Glaucon and Adeimantus accept the doctrine with relative ease: “This is not to deny that there is a profound difference between the gods as understood in the theology of the *Republic* and the ideas” (*ibid.*, 121), because that observation goes against Lampert’s argument.

as a new form of religion to others. In making this argument Lampert puts great emphasis on the dramatic dates of the dialogues (which Blitz completely ignores).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>In a footnote (15n22), Lampert observes that in *Plato's Philosophers: On the Coherence of the Dialogues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), I also argue for "a chronological" reading of Plato's dialogues, but he does not state either the extent of the overlap or the differences as sharply as they could be stated. I treat the "dramatic dates," i.e., the indications Plato gives of the time at which each conversation occurred, as merely that, indications or hints, and on the basis of those hints sketch an overarching narrative in the dialogues. Lampert argues that the dates of the dialogues can be precisely determined (despite apparent anachronisms and contradictions). We both agree, however, that the significance of the dates lies in the "story" that can be constructed by reading the dialogues in the order indicated by the dates. Despite our differences with regard to the dramatic date of the *Republic*, the first steps or stages of the story of the development of Socratic philosophy Lampert and I tell on the basis of the dramatic dates are similar. We both observe that Plato presents Socrates's account of his own becoming retrospectively in the only three narrated dialogues not recounted by Socrates himself. We both observe that in the *Protagoras* Plato gives his readers their first view of Socrates after his instruction by "Diotima" in the *Symposium*, and that in the *Protagoras* and *Charmides* Plato shows how Socrates initially attracted his two most notorious associates, Alcibiades and Critias, although neither remained one of his regular companions. From these early encounters Lampert and I both argue that Socrates learned that he had to change the way in which he presented his philosophy. Lampert and I disagree markedly, however, about what Socrates was trying to do in these early encounters and what he learned from them, because we derive very different understandings of the content and character of Socratic philosophy from the *Phaedo*, *Parmenides*, and *Symposium*. I argue that Socrates sought young companions because he had discovered that he could respond to the problems Parmenides had raised about the relation between the eternally unchanging intelligible ideas and changing sensible existence only by persuading other young men to join him in a life of philosophical endeavor and so show how intelligible concepts shape and can shape sensible existence. Lampert promises to give a detailed analysis of Plato's account of the development of Socratic philosophy in the *Phaedo*, *Parmenides*, and *Symposium* in a second book, but he nevertheless ends up making assertions about the true content of Socratic philosophy in this one. As part of the explicitly Nietzschean understanding of the history of philosophy he has been elaborating in all his books, Lampert contends that all of the "wise"—Homer, Socrates, Plato, Protagoras, Descartes, Bacon (i.e., all major poets, philosophers, and sophists)—share the same understanding: everything is in flux. Although in the *Symposium* Socrates-cum-Diotima characterizes eros as the desire to possess the good forever and so as a lack that can never entirely be remedied by a mortal, Lampert concludes that "philosophy is eros for *eros*, being as fecund becoming that allows itself to be glimpsed in what it is: eros or will to power" (417). According to Lampert, the wise have all known that intelligible distinctions among kinds of things are human constructions, i.e., there is nothing distinctively modern about this understanding. To avoid the dangerous consequences of the popular dissemination of that "knowledge," which flies in the face of a popular desire for a world in which justice reigns, the wise



Like most other commentators Lampert begins by observing that Plato presents his readers with their earliest view of Socrates’s characteristic examinations of the opinions of others in the *Protagoras*, a conversation that occurred in 433, just before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. In that dialogue Plato depicts Socrates showing the preeminent exemplar of the “Greek enlightenment” that he is imprudent to proclaim himself openly to be a “sophist,” or wise man. In the course of the conversation, Socrates makes Alcibiades, the obviously most talented and ambitious Athenian of his generation, his ally. Lampert goes far beyond other scholars, however, by suggesting that Socrates left his encounter with the famous sophist not with Hippocrates, the foolish young man for whose sake Socrates tells an anonymous interlocutor at the beginning of the *Protagoras* he went to meet the sophist, but with Alcibiades. Indeed, Lampert argues that the conversation between Socrates and Alcibiades related in the *Alcibiades I* should be imagined to have taken place immediately after Socrates’s refutation of the sophist but before Socrates relates the story of his victory to the anonymous “comrade” who asks him whether he has just been with Alcibiades at the beginning of the *Protagoras*. Lampert gives a marvelously detailed account of the arguments in the *Protagoras*, in which he illustrates the ways in which Socrates’s arguments should be read as addressing concerns he shares with his interlocutor in nonexplicit as well as explicit ways. But the textual evidence for in effect inserting the *Alcibiades I* into the *Protagoras* between the conversation and its retelling is slim to nonexistent. The same can be said even more emphatically of the speculative conclusion Lampert

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devised a variety of public teachings to protect philosophy from irrational popular antagonism and political order from the corrosive effect of the truth. Lampert thus argues that Socrates learned from his failures with Alcibiades and Critias that he had to articulate a new public teaching and did so in the *Republic* by convincing Glaucon, Adeimantus, and Thrasymachus to serve new gods, i.e., the ideas. Although I point out that Socrates never presented a consistent or comprehensive list of the ideas and argue that his conception of the ideas is significantly different from those employed by Timaeus and the Eleatic Stranger, I do not agree with Lampert that Socrates’s argument about the ideas was merely a public teaching that became, as Nietzsche says, popularized by Christianity as “Platonism for the people.” I follow Strauss in thinking that “the ‘what is’ questions for which Socrates was famous ... point to ‘essences,’ to ‘essential’ differences—to the fact that the whole consists of parts which are heterogeneous, not merely sensibly (like fire, air, water, and earth) but noetically; to understand the whole means to understand the ‘What’ of each of these parts, of these classes of beings, and how they are linked with one another.” Strauss concludes, moreover, that “it also remains true that human wisdom is knowledge of ignorance: there is no knowledge of the whole but only knowledge of parts, hence only partial knowledge of parts, hence no unqualified transcending, even by the wisest man as such, of the sphere of opinion” (*City and Man*, 19–21).

draws from his incorporation of the *Alcibiades* into the *Protagoras*: Socrates's initial plan was to attract Alcibiades, not in order to persuade him to join in a philosophical search for the truth, but rather to establish a relation with the potential world-emperor of a kind Alexandre Kojève suggested existed between Aristotle and Alexander.<sup>6</sup> As a result of his tutelage Socrates hoped not merely that Alcibiades would make the world safe for philosophy, but that he, the philosopher, would rule the world indirectly by shaping the opinions of the emperor (and thus of his subjects).

As Alcibiades's exposé of Socrates in the *Symposium* indicates, Socrates's attempt to attract Alcibiades had failed by the time they both went off to fight at Potidaea. In the *Charmides*, Lampert thus argues, Plato shows that Socrates rushed home from Potidaea in May 429 not only to determine whether any particularly beautiful youth had emerged in his absence but also and more importantly to see what the state of philosophy was in Athens. In particular, he wanted to know whether Critias had understood, appropriated, and disseminated the arguments Socrates had made before he left for Potidaea better than Alcibiades had. At the suggestion of Critias, Plato reports, Socrates agrees to pretend to be a doctor who could cure Charmides's headache by means of a charm (*pharmakon*) he learned while he was with the army from one of the Thracian doctors of Zalmoxis. Socrates clearly uses his examination of Charmides, however, to draw Critias into the conversation, and the central question becomes the adequacy of Critias's definition of moderation as self-knowledge and of self-knowledge as knowledge of knowledge. Lampert maintains that in reinterpreting the famous saying associated with Delphi, "Know thyself," as a greeting from the god to someone entering the place in lieu of the usual "Hail," rather than in conjunction with "nothing in excess" as an admonition to "know you are not a god, know your place as a mortal" (187), Critias was restating lessons he learned from Socrates before the philosopher left for Potidaea.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>See Alexandre Kojève, "Tyranny and Wisdom," in *On Tyranny*, by Leo Strauss, ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (New York: Free Press, 1991), 169–72. However, in the introduction to his translation of Aristotle's *Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), Carnes Lord explains that there is no historical evidence of a close association between Aristotle and Alexander.

<sup>7</sup>Lampert observes in a footnote (180n60) that "Socrates' pre-Potidaean private instruction for Alcibiades also included 'doing one's own things,' [and that] Socrates there connected it with justice and made it one of the occasions on which he reduced Alcibiades to saying he did not know what he meant (*Alcibiades I* 127a–d)." In other words, Socrates's instruction of Alcibiades did not consist in the "knowledge of knowledge" that would enable a man to rule. Lampert notes that "Socrates went on to show Alcibiades the difficulty of knowing oneself, of knowing one's own things (129a), and that knowing oneself is knowing one's soul (130e). Knowing oneself is explicitly said to be *sōphrosunē* at 131b and 133c. Socrates' final explanation of the words used the image of an eye looking into another eye; for Alcibiades 'know



Those lessons were, first, that one rules by putting up one's own thoughts on tablets for public consumption as words deriving from a god, and, second, that the knowledge that enabled one to put up effective statements is knowledge of knowledge. The problem with Critias's appropriation of the lessons he learned from Socrates was not that he failed to take account of the difference between a human being and god, pointed to in the Delphic statements (and emphasized by Socrates in his earlier conversation with Alcibiades). According to Lampert, Critias misunderstood Socrates, because he took knowledge of knowledge to be practical knowledge of what is good and evil, especially of what is good for oneself, whereas Socrates claimed to possess theoretical knowledge of knowledge (and so, unlike Critias, to know what he did not know as well as what he did).<sup>8</sup>

thyself' becomes the intimate but shared experience of looking into the eye of the other, of Socrates, that other who just demonstrated his indispensability to Alcibiades (132d–133b)" (186n71). Lampert does not conclude, as this reader does, that Socrates thus shows Alcibiades in the only example we have of his pre-Potidaean teaching that self-knowledge cannot be acquired by oneself alone, but only by someone in conversation with another also seeking knowledge, i.e., philosophizing (rather than ruling). Lampert explains the apparent difference between what Plato shows Socrates teaching Alcibiades before Potidaea and what Critias appropriated from Socrates by suggesting that "the two *Alcibiades* dialogues intimate that the differences between the political man Alcibiades and the intellectual Critias dictated the different ways in which Socrates attempted to teach them." Admitting that Socrates says different things to different interlocutors, one is still confronted by the fact that Critias was also an ambitious political man. Opposing commentators who present Critias as tyrannical, greedy, and cruel, Lampert argues that "Critias is not the victim of an evil nature, nor did Socrates corrupt him by an evil doctrine. Instead, Socrates corrupted Critias by opening a path to the natural human dream of an enlightened human community founded and administered by enlightened knowers" (220). In contrast to Xenophon (*Memorabilia* 1.2.12–16), who defends Socrates from such charges, Lampert maintains that Socrates corrupted both Alcibiades and Critias, even though he admits that Alcibiades did not succumb to Socrates's teaching and that Critias distorted it in a way a man seeking to become a tyrant would. Lampert does not note the similarity between Critias's reinterpretation of the Delphic sayings and the actions Plato attributes to the tyrant in the *Hipparchus* who is said to have put up Hermae explicitly in competition with those of Delphi.

<sup>8</sup>The philosophical issue raised by Critias's definition of moderation is whether self-knowledge can be completely and internally self-reflexive in the way his "knowledge of knowledge" suggests or whether, as Socrates argues, knowledge must always be of something else, i.e., it requires an interaction with things and people outside the knower. The understanding of "knowledge of knowledge" as knowledge of what other forms of knowledge are useful and should be allowed in a community that Lampert attributes to Critias is like the knowledge of the way to use and coordinate all other arts and sciences that the Eleatic Stranger attributes to the statesman; but

Because Socrates narrates the *Charmides* at some undisclosed time later to a single auditor, addressed as comrade, friend, and member of a noble family, whom he deemed capable of following the complex argument, Lampert concludes that the anonymous auditor must be Plato. (Lampert admits that Plato had not even been born at the time the *Charmides* is supposed to have occurred; but he apparently supposes that Socrates remembered what was said and repeated it many years later, word for word, to Plato who then transcribed it. He suggests that Plato was a particularly receptive student who understood what Socrates said and left unsaid, but did not add anything of his own in relating his master's speeches and deeds.) In the *Charmides*, Lampert emphasizes, Plato shows Socrates testing members of his own family, especially Critias, to see whether he needed to administer the "charm" he had learned from the doctor of Zalmoxis in order to make them "moderate" (i.e., to teach them what they should and should not say in public). On the basis of what Herodotus reports about Zalmoxis—that he was a slave of Pythagoras who made the Getae courageous and law-abiding by convincing them that he was the one god who could make them immortal—Lampert suggests that the "charm" consisted in beautiful speeches that made people virtuous by convincing them that they (or their souls) would become immortal if they served the one true god. And in the *Republic* Plato shows Socrates delivering such speeches to his brothers, Glaucon and Adeimantus.

The third and concluding act of the drama Lampert describes thus depends on his showing that the conversation related in Plato's *Republic* occurred a week or two after the conversation related in the *Charmides*, on the night of the first Athenian celebration of the festival of the Thracian god Bendis. In the wake of the plague and Spartan incursions into Attica, Lampert points out, in late spring 429 Athens opened its doors (or port) to a new goddess for the first time in many years. More generally stated, conditions in Athens were ripe for the introduction of new gods; and Socrates took the opportunity offered by his walk down to the Piraeus to witness the procession with Plato's brother Glaucon to do just that. Because faith in the old gods had decayed, Socrates had to criticize his wise kin, Homer, at both the beginning and the end of the dialogue. But, Lampert argues, Plato shows Socrates doing exactly what Odysseus did when he arrived back in Ithaca: establishing a new regime by instituting a new set of beliefs. More specifically, the day after he arrives back in Athens after his night in the Piraeus Socrates tells an anonymous auditor how he persuaded Plato's two brothers that they could realize their passionate desire for justice by instituting a regime ruled by philosophers with knowledge of the ideas—particularly the idea of the Good. By

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that knowledge obviously requires knowledge of both human beings and the other arts. To be supreme is not the same as to be self-reflexive or self-contained.

showing the sophist Thrasymachus how he could benefit himself by presenting his art of persuasion as a means of obtaining justice, rather than injustice, Socrates also succeeded in showing this “wise” man, as he had not succeeded earlier in persuading the equally wise Protagoras, how he could not merely protect but benefit himself by appearing to serve the interests of others while serving himself. Socrates did not make Plato’s brothers into philosophers, of course; he merely persuaded them by means of his famous sun, line, and cave images that they were among the philosophers who ought to rule. Socrates’s own understanding was, of course, very different from the new images he brought down to the cave. “In his *Attainment of Happiness*, Alfarabi, another of Socrates’ philosophers of the future, expressed this with arresting clarity. After showing why philosophy must rule, he showed how it ruled: philosophy rules by ruling religion, where ‘religion is an imitation of philosophy’” (372).<sup>9</sup>

Lampert tells an exciting story, based on a great deal of historical scholarship and careful readings of the original Greek texts. One cannot help but ask, however, whether he has not gone too far in erasing the lines between history, philosophy, and poetry. Did Socrates actually persuade Plato’s brothers of the desirability of the rule of philosopher kings that night in the Piraeus by making them think that they were philosophers? Socrates tells them they would not be able to follow an account merely of his opinion about the idea of the Good, much less engage in a dialectical argument to reach knowledge of the ideas. Nor does Plato provide us with evidence that his brothers pursued philosophical studies; on the contrary, he suggests in the *Parmenides* that they did not. Does Lampert think that Plato merely wrote down what Socrates told him? In adopting a Straussian hermeneutic, Lampert presumably believes that there is such a thing as the “art of writing”; Nietzsche also distinguished Socrates from Plato partly because Socrates did not write. But if Plato did not merely transcribe Socrates’s reports of his own conversations the way Euclides is said to have transcribed the conversation related in the *Theaetetus*, is Lampert justified in equating Plato’s understanding and presentation of things with that of his chief, but not sole, philosophical protagonist? Lampert’s reading of the *Protagoras* and *Charmides* as presenting the reasons Socrates found it necessary to deliver a public teaching (later known, ironically, as “Platonism”) in the *Republic* might seem to entail an understanding of the dialogues as historical reports: Plato shows how Socrates learned both the need for and the character of a public teaching that would preserve philosophy from public outrage and public life from the negative effects of

<sup>9</sup>Lampert does not note Leo Strauss’s observation that in the central section of his account of *The Aims of the Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* Farabi makes it “absolutely clear” that philosophers can not merely survive but flourish in an imperfect regime; i.e., he does not need to rule, directly or indirectly, in order to live happily as a philosopher (Strauss, “Farabi’s Plato,” in *Louis Ginzburg: Jubilee Volume*, ed. Saul Lieberman [New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1945], 381).

philosophical criticism. According to Lampert, however, all the great philosophers, poets, and historians—Socrates, Plato, Homer, Descartes, Nietzsche, Herodotus, and Thucydides—shared the same basic understanding; the differences in presentation reflect their different historical circumstances. Lampert would happily concede that Plato is a poet. But we readers have to ask: Are there really no significant differences in content and form between Homer's poetry and Plato's philosophy? Or, for that matter, between Thucydides's history and Plato's philosophy? Lampert does not quote Socrates's statement in the *Republic* (393d) that he will speak without meter; he is not poetic. In contrast to Homer, Socrates does not use rhythm and harmony that insinuate themselves into the inmost part of the souls of his interlocutors, while they are unaware, nor does he (in contrast to Plato) present imitative dialogues or dramas. Socrates appeals to the passions of his interlocutors as well as their reason, but Socrates's speech is prosaic: most of the time he presents arguments, but occasionally he narrates, presents images, and retells stories he has supposedly heard from others.<sup>10</sup> And in contrast to the Platonist Plutarch, who relates many of the same events, Thucydides never mentions philosophy or philosophers as having effects on the events he reports. Lampert's reading of the dialogues would preclude accounts of the *Republic* (such as those of Strauss, Bloom, and Benardete) according to which it shows the nature and limitations of politics, because Lampert denies that there are, fundamentally, different kinds of things to be defined or delimited.

*The Ironic Defense of Socrates* focuses on one dialogue, Plato's *Apology of Socrates*, which David Leibowitz contends is "the key to the Platonic corpus" (1). Leibowitz begins his analysis of the *Apology* by criticizing both the more common view that in making his defense to the Athenian jury Socrates presents himself as a tragic hero who would rather die than compromise his lifelong search for the truth, and Thomas West's contention that Socrates gives a speech intended to provoke the jury to condemn him. Rather than telling "the whole truth," as he explicitly claims at the beginning of his defense, Leibowitz provocatively argues, Socrates lies. Socrates lies when he says that he is not familiar with the way people ordinarily speak in court and that he will speak "haphazardly" (*atechnōs*); as many commentators have observed, Socrates's speech is extremely well ordered and his words carefully chosen. Moreover, at the conclusion of his defense and in the speech he gives after he is condemned to death, Socrates explicitly says that he knows full well how people usually conduct themselves under such circumstances and that he refuses to do and say such shameful things. Leibowitz agrees

<sup>10</sup>In presenting his Nietzschean history of philosophy Lampert quotes Nietzsche's early praise of Socrates as the "vortex of human history" in the *Birth of Tragedy*, but never mentions or cites Nietzsche's later critique of the decadent, pessimistic Socrates in "The Problem of Socrates" in *Twilight of the Idols*.

with West that Socrates’s presentation of the charges leveled against him not merely by one but by two sets of accusers and the philosopher’s responses to them appear to be designed to provoke the jurors into condemning him. Socrates seems to be bragging when he reports that in response to a question posed by one of his known companions, the Delphic oracle proclaimed that no one was wiser than Socrates. And Socrates’s demonstration of the way in which he examined and refuted others in his cross-examination of Meletus not only makes him look like a “wise guy” or sophist but also obviously fails to respond to the capital charge that he does not believe in the gods of the city but has introduced a new form of divinity. In opposition to West, however, Leibowitz argues that the second part of Socrates’s defense, in which the philosopher emphasizes the way in which he has exhorted his fellow citizens to become virtuous, is designed not only to make the Athenians later regret that they had condemned him but also to remind the potential philosophers present (who include, preeminently, Plato himself) of the attractions of the philosophic life. According to Leibowitz, the “irony” of Socrates’s defense thus arises from and consists in his attempt simultaneously to address the nonphilosophic majority, who would immediately decide his fate, and the few youths with the potential to become philosophers in the future.

Leibowitz expressly acknowledges his debt to Christopher Bruell and Leo Strauss; and many of the specific interpretive points he makes are drawn from their respective essays on the *Apology*.<sup>11</sup> Following Bruell, Leibowitz emphasizes the fact that the *Apology* is the only dialogue in which Plato explicitly tells his readers that he was present. Like Bruell, Leibowitz thus suggests that there may have been something Socrates thought that he needed to tell Plato under these particular circumstances. Unlike Bruell, however, Leibowitz specifies what he thinks that was: “At the time of the trial, Plato himself may have belonged to a sub-class of those who had not been persuaded that it was impossible for Socrates to be, if not silent, at least quiet (discreet) (37e3). This sub-class might have approved of philosophy but failed to see the need for self-endangering examinations. ... Socrates points to the explanation ... by quietly acknowledging that the Delphic oracle story was, as they supposed, ironic” (163–64). The examinations not merely attracted the young men who witnessed them to a life of philosophy; the examinations of self and others were what was good (both pleasant and beneficial) in that life.

Following Strauss, Leibowitz suggests that, being old and near death as he repeatedly reminds us, Socrates decided to stand trial and provoke the

<sup>11</sup>Christopher Bruell, “Apology of Socrates,” in *On the Socratic Education* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 135–56; and Leo Strauss, “On Plato’s *Apology of Socrates and Crito*,” in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 38–66.

Athenians to condemn him to death rather than to go into exile in order to protect his younger companions and philosophy by convincing later generations that it was a noble and virtuous endeavor. Although Socrates says that good men should not give any thought to the danger of death, because that would be contemptible, as Leibowitz points out, Socrates also makes it clear that he took account of the danger of death by staying out of politics, “knowing that if he ‘acted in a manner worthy of a good man, coming to the aid of the just things,’ he would soon perish” (177). He stands trial and accepts the death penalty, because he knows that the evils associated with old age are worse than death. Socrates claims to know what the “greatest good” for a human being is, and that is to spend his days discussing what virtue is, but, Leibowitz emphasizes, discussing virtue is not the same as actually being virtuous or noble. Socrates does not claim to know anything “noble and good,” because he does not think that there is anything truly “noble,” that is, anything that will entirely free human beings from their fear of death.

Leibowitz thus reduces Socrates’s evident concern with justice merely to a means of defending philosophy from the hostility of others and attracting promising youths who “are likely to be great lovers of justice, although for some strange reason they often do not recognize their love” (145). Yet in the *Republic* Socrates rather explicitly recognizes the just as a necessary condition for the preservation of human life (to say nothing of philosophy). In contrast to the Platonic philosopher Blitz describes, Leibowitz’s Socrates would apparently not perceive a need to acquire knowledge about the political things or to advise the city. Rather than seeking to communicate his knowledge to others, not only in return for the services they provide him but also out of “a natural attachment of man to man which is prior to any calculation of mutual benefit,” Leibowitz’s Socrates shows merely “that clear-sighted pursuit of one’s own good is compatible with [a] concern for others and generosity ... visible in his constant irony” (183).<sup>12</sup> On the basis of Leibowitz’s analysis, it is difficult to understand why Plato (as opposed to Xenophon) showed that Socrates risked his life by serving in the Athenian army. Perhaps because he concentrates solely on the *Apology*, Leibowitz does not conclude, as Strauss does, that in the *Apology* and *Crito* Plato shows that Socrates thought that it is generally, although not unqualifiedly, best for people to obey the law.<sup>13</sup>

Jacob Howland’s depiction of Socrates in *Plato and the Talmud* appears to be the polar opposite of the ironic figure Leibowitz describes. According to Howland, “Socrates humbles others in argument in order that they may come to share his knowledge of ignorance and his humility in relation to the wisdom of ‘the god,’ and so turn in earnest to the quest for truth and the care of their souls” (10). Howland observes that “Socrates takes the

<sup>12</sup>See Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 199–200.

<sup>13</sup>Strauss, “On Plato’s *Apology*,” 66.



Delphic oracle seriously because he presupposes that it is the mouthpiece of a god, and that this god must be speaking the truth. *Why* he believes these things, he does not say” (112). Acknowledging that many scholars have dismissed his story about the Delphic oracle as an instance of his habitual irony, Howland characterizes Socrates’s conviction that the god speaks the truth as a basic tenet of “Socrates’ faith” (111–15). Although Socrates’s attempt to refute the oracle might appear to be impious, Howland reminds his readers that “Greek oracles were notoriously ambiguous, and several famous legends spelled out the dire consequences for those who failed to inquire into their meaning. In fact, the admonition ‘Know Thyself’ was inscribed in or on the temple at Delphi, as if to underscore that an oracle from the Pythia was to be received as a provocation to thought” (113). Howland thus concludes that “in the *Apology*, Socrates presents philosophy as an activity to which he is called by religious faith” (114).

In comparing Socratic philosophy to the Talmud Howland explicitly recognizes the difference Strauss emphasized between “Athens” and “Jerusalem.” Although both Greek philosophers and Hebrew sages seek wisdom, they have fundamentally incompatible understandings of what they are seeking. According to the Hebrew Bible, the “beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord,” whereas for Greek philosophy, “the beginning of wisdom is wonder” (2).<sup>14</sup> Howland admits that “in the Jewish tradition, the quest for truth takes place within the horizon of a revealed Law,” whereas “Greek philosophy implicitly calls into question the teachings of ancestral law, custom, or convention (*nomos*),” but, he contends, “this difference should not be allowed to obscure a deeper similarity. For it is nature or *phusis* that is for the philosophers, as the Torah is for the Jews, the ultimate beginning and measure of thought and action, and it enjoys this status precisely because it presents itself as ‘given’ independently of human activity” (5). Both Greek philosophers and the rabbis who wrote the Talmud recognize a higher authority or “divine law” in the light of which they attempt to discover how human beings should live. Because that higher law is recognized, but not entirely known by them, they seek to understand what it means by employing their reason.

Howland suggests that “readers who come to the Talmud after a long acquaintance with Plato cannot fail to be struck by the dialectical character of rabbinic thought, by the text’s preference for raising questions rather than furnishing answers, and by its open-ended, conversational form” (11). Howland thus finds a further affinity between the Platonic dialogues and the Talmud in the pedagogical aims of the texts. “While the dialogues and the Talmud articulate and defend certain philosophical or religious accounts of the truth, they are equally concerned to teach readers how to learn—as well as what it means, in human terms, to do so” (19). Both suggest that the

<sup>14</sup>Strauss, “Jerusalem and Athens,” in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, 149.

unexamined life is deplorable; and both show as well as tell their readers how to learn by means of example, through their drama or narrative, as well as by precept and argument.

Howland's reflections on the pedagogical aims of the two in so many ways disparate texts lead him not only to distinguish Plato from Socrates, but also to emphasize the complex character of Plato's pedagogy. Although "the historical Socrates philosophized in the medium of spoken discourse," Howland emphasizes, Plato's "Socrates now speaks to us in and through written documents. ... He is present in the dialogues as a character in a series of stories that recreate the world of Athenian life in the fifth century BCE, all of which ... must be presumed at least to some degree to be Platonic inventions." The content or arguments of the dialogues respond "to the moral and political disintegration of Athens by attempting to turn the minds of their readers toward an intellectual world of goodness and wholeness—an intrinsically knowable order of stable, self-subsistent entities (the Ideas or Forms) that derive their being and intelligibility from the Good, which Socrates describes [in the *Republic*] as the ultimate object not only of philosophic aspiration but of human longing as a whole" (56–57). Howland suggests that Plato's "larger accomplishment," however, "was to rehabilitate desire as such. Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* notably identifies the passionate longings that the Greeks associated with *erōs* ... as the source of the Athenians' futile and destructive quest for power and glory. But the speeches and deeds of Plato's Socrates teach that the problem of erotic longing lies in its orientation, not its amplitude: human desire is properly directed toward the achievement of wisdom, conceived as the philosophical understanding of the nature and goodness of what is" (57).

Like Lampert, Howland thus presents eros as the core of Socratic philosophy, but unlike Lampert, he associates it with the passionate human desire to discover and acquire what is truly good rather than a celebration of the fecundity of becoming. Like Lampert, Howland also presents Socratic philosophy, as depicted by Plato, not merely as a response to the moral and political corruption of Athens but as a kind of religious reform. In contrast to Lampert, however, Howland distinguishes Socrates's argument about the ideas from his statements about "the god" or "gods." Instead of replacing the stories Homer told about the Olympian gods with new philosophical deities, Howland argues on the basis of the *Euthyphro*, Plato shows that Socrates tried to make customary Greek religion more rational by insisting that the gods are truthful and just. As Plato reminds his readers in the *Euthyphro*, the stories the poets told about the gods pointed in two directions: doing as the gods say or doing as the gods do. These gods were also shown to disagree with one another. Forcing Euthyphro to admit that he does not know what the gods want as a result of a direct communication or inspiration, Socrates tries to persuade Euthyphro that he should not imitate Zeus by prosecuting his father for impiety, but abide by the customary respect due to

fathers. Plato indicates that neither Socrates’s accuser Meletus nor Euthyphro was motivated by concern for the gods so much as by anger and ambition.

According to Howland, “Plato’s representation of Socrates as a new sort of hero points in two different directions. ... On the one hand, Socratic philosophizing is an independent endeavor that regards *nomos* with a critical eye. ... On the other hand, Plato’s dialogues evince the same sort of cautious complexity that characterizes the Talmud’s pedagogical rhetoric” (66–67). Although Plato clearly celebrates Socrates’s bringing philosophy into the public square, he “implicitly corrects the Socratic model of philosophizing in two basic ways. First, some dialogues feature other philosophers whose conceptions of the nature of philosophy and its proper relation to the political community differ from Socrates’ in significant respects. ... Second, Plato himself departs from Socrates’ example in declining publicly to interrogate others, employing instead the less confrontational and more indirect educational medium of writing” (68). As an example of both ways in which Plato implicitly corrects Socrates, Howland points out that in the *Statesman* the Eleatic Stranger “criticizes Socrates’ public antinomianism,” but “nevertheless acknowledges the inadequacy of law ... to deal with the unique circumstances of particular human situations. ... The Stranger thus calls attention to the living wisdom and judgment about the whole of human life (*phronēsis*) that is both the object of philosophical inquiry (272c) and the source of good laws” (68–9).

Howland compares Plato’s *Apology* and *Euthyphro* with the Talmud primarily to emphasize the pedagogical function of the incorporation of a variety of “voices” or positions along with drama and narrative in both texts. Some readers will want to be reassured by the reaffirmation of a traditional moral teaching. Others, however, can be provoked by the contradictions on the surface of the text to begin thinking about the issues for themselves. Like Blitz, Lampert, and Leibowitz, Howland thus argues that the Platonic dialogues are designed to speak differently to different kinds of readers. Although in characterizing Socrates as a “prophet” Howland explicitly disagrees with Strauss, he admits that there are at least two important differences between the philosopher and the prophets.<sup>15</sup> First and foremost, Plato’s Socrates does not claim to have had a direct revelation from God nor does he expect miracles. Second, whereas the moral teaching contained in the Talmud is aimed at the entire Jewish community, Greek philosophers never expected more than a few to be attracted to a life of philosophy. Whereas the rabbis could expect to receive a sympathetic response to their stories about the lives of the sages, both Socrates and Plato had to defend philosophy before a hostile audience.

<sup>15</sup>Leo Strauss, “Jerusalem and Athens,” 167–73, distinguishes Socrates from the prophets fundamentally on the grounds that believing in an omnipotent God, the prophets could hope for peace on earth, whereas Socrates, not thinking that human nature could be changed, did not expect war to cease.

Is there a consistent understanding of Plato, his writing or his philosophy, to be found in these “Straussian” studies? The answer to that question, I believe, has to be no. Howland insists that Plato’s Socrates believed in some kind of god or gods and found the world to be fundamentally mysterious, whereas Leibowitz argues that Socrates sought to free himself and philosophy from any dependency on faith. Blitz and Lampert both emphasize Plato’s concern with politics, but they characterize the content and the character of that concern very differently. Not agreeing on the content, do these “Straussian” commentators nevertheless employ the same hermeneutic? All the readings of the Platonic dialogues featured here combine analyses of the “action” with the “arguments,” but in insisting that the Platonic dialogues are literary as well as philosophical texts, these “Straussians” do not differ from well-known analytical commentators such as Myles Burnyeat and Michael Frede. Do the “Straussians” emphasize the difference between the few and the many and so attribute a “secret teaching” to Plato? To say nothing of the fact that such commentators would be revealing the secret in stating it (as Lampert admits that he is doing), both Blitz and Howland emphasize the relevance of the questions raised in the Platonic dialogues to ordinary human life. What these commentators seem to have in common is simply that they acknowledge a debt to Strauss in formulating and pursuing questions raised by the dialogues. Perhaps it is time to drop the label, to admit that Strauss has exercised a broad and varied influence on Platonic studies, and to concentrate on the issues—philosophical, political, religious, literary, and interpretive—the dialogues raise.