

Leo Strauss's First Brush with Xenophon: "The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon"

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Abstract: Leo Strauss is most well known for his thesis on the philosophic practice of exotericism. One of the strangest aspects of his work is the amount of attention he devoted to Xenophon. This article attempts to explain how these two important facets of Strauss's thought are connected by examining their connection in his first published treatment of them both: "The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon."

"The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon" was the first writing Leo Strauss devoted completely to a classical author and the first in which he gave a fully developed account of his most famous and controversial claim: the existence and widespread practice of esotericism in the Western philosophic tradition.¹ In retrospect the choice to make his debut in classical studies with Xenophon might not appear surprising. By the end of his career Strauss had written more on Xenophon than on any other author.²

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¹The final chapter of Strauss's *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis*, written in 1936, contains a preliminary sketch of the classical approach to politics found in Plato and Aristotle and that was rejected by Hobbes. Strauss makes no mention of Xenophon there.

²Strauss published the following works devoted directly to the study of Xenophon: "The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon," *Social Research* 6 (1939): 502–36; *On Tyranny: An Interpretation of Xenophon's "Hiero"* (New York: Political Science Classics, 1947); "Restatement on Xenophon's *Hiero*," first published in French with the more revealing title "L'action politique des philosophes" in *Critique* (Oct.–Nov. 1950), expanded into "Mise au point" in *De la tyrannie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), then in English and revised slightly for *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1959), 95–133, and later editions of *On Tyranny*; "Greek Historians," *Review of Metaphysics* 21 (1968): 656–66, a review of W. P. Henry's *Greek Historical Writing* in which Strauss also gives a brief interpretation of Xenophon's *Hellenica*; *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse: An Interpretation of the "Oeconomicus"* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970); and *Xenophon's Socrates* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972). "Xenophon's *Anabasis*" was published posthumously in

But this retrospective view raises the question why such a despised and marginalized figure attracted Strauss in the first place. Indeed, understanding Strauss requires some account of why he considered Xenophon, and not Maimonides, Machiavelli, or even Plato, his “special *Liebling*.”³

Such affection or devotion would explain why Strauss concluded the 1939 article with the hope that it “will not have been written in vain if it induces some readers to reconsider the traditional and current view of Xenophon, which, while being understandable and even to a certain extent justifiable, is almost an insult to this truly royal soul.” But the “thesis” of the piece, not explicitly stated until the final paragraph, differs from or at least supplements this conclusion: “If it is true, as is sometimes asserted, that the restitution of a sound approach is bound up with the elimination of Rousseau’s influence, then the thesis of the present article can be summed up by saying that the teaching of men like Xenophon is precisely the antidote which we need.”⁴ Strauss’s procedure is strange. The normal place to state a thesis is in the first, not the last paragraph. Of course, he gives here a summation of his thesis and the end is an appropriate place for a summary. But this summary has no apparent antecedents and its contents are more peculiar than its placement. Strauss has made no mention of Rousseau, nor of his or anyone else’s poisonous influence on what seems to have been the earlier “sound approach.” Nor are we given the slightest idea as to the source or basis of this assertion.

The leading critic of Strauss’s approach to Xenophon has, however, opened up a path to a better understanding of Strauss’s “thesis” in the “Spirit of Sparta,” by casting doubt on whether the simple intention to rehabilitate Xenophon’s reputation can fully account for his interest in and treatment of Xenophon. In what follows I will show how Louis-André Dorion’s analysis leads one to identify Nietzsche as Strauss’s source for the need to eliminate Rousseau’s influence, and argue that Strauss’s turn to Xenophon is motivated by a desire to recover philosophy understood as a way of life in irresolvable tension not just with political life but also with modern systematic philosophy.

Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), chap. 5. In addition, an unpublished essay from 1938 on esotericism that takes Xenophon’s *Education of Cyrus* as its primary text has recently been transcribed and edited by Christopher Lynch, “On the Study of Classical Political Philosophy,” in *Toward “Natural Right and History”: Lectures and Essays by Leo Strauss, 1937–1946*, ed. J. A. Colen and Svetozar Minkov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), chap. 4.

³Strauss to Klein, February 16, 1939, quoted and translated in Laurence Lampert, “Strauss’s Recovery of Esotericism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, ed. Steven Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 69–70. The German original can be found in Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Heinrich Meier and Wiebke Meier, vol. 3 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2001), 567.

⁴Leo Strauss, “Spirit of Sparta,” 536. Parenthetical citations in the text are to this article.

1. Strauss and the Classicists

Strauss's more straightforward aim of reestablishing Xenophon's standing among scholars has had some success. Certainly the "higher criticism" approach that Strauss rejected in "The Spirit of Sparta"—an approach that resolves contradictions and other textual difficulties by means of positing corruptions and interpolations in the manuscripts—has been largely abandoned even by those who otherwise still find Xenophon's writings unusually clumsy.⁵ Strauss's presentation of Xenophon as a philosophically and rhetorically gifted author worthy of the high reputation afforded him in the classical and early modern epochs has changed the interpretive landscape. Today one can find both political theorists and classicists with a lively interest in Xenophon, many now even considering him a subtle writer capable of irony and other forms of humor.⁶

But has this change been wrought by Strauss? A study of Xenophon's *Hiero* published in 1986 dismissed Strauss's book *On Tyranny* with the simple statement, or rather unargued assertion, that it was "as perverse as one could be."⁷ And as late as 1995, the author of an extensive commentary on the *Oeconomicus* could with a straight face justify her refusal to engage with Strauss's work on the grounds that some of his "disciples," somehow unable to find employment in the academy, had gone to Washington and engaged in public service on the wrong side of the aisle.⁸ Still, if statements of this kind have become less common, their toxic residue makes it difficult to gauge Strauss's influence. It seems to have created an atmosphere in which those who may have read and profited from Strauss's interpretations of Xenophon may have also read and profited from his study of medieval political philosophy, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, and prudently

⁵Strauss, "Spirit of Sparta," 521–22; Vivienne Gray, editor's introduction to *Xenophon*, Oxford Readings in Classical Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4–5; Louis-André Dorion, "The Straussian Exegesis of Xenophon," in Gray, *Xenophon*, 310, 322. Dorion singles out this aspect of Strauss's work as particularly noteworthy: "Strauss' great merit with respect to these philological 'solutions' is his attempt to comprehend the text as it has come to us, as a coherent whole in spite of the [obvious] contradictions detected" (291). For an earlier version of Strauss's objections to the "higher criticism" approach, see Leo Strauss, "On the Study of Classical Political Philosophy," 128.

⁶See, e.g., W. E. Higgins, *Xenophon the Athenian: The Problem of the Individual and the Society of the Polis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977); Christopher Tuplin, *The Failings of Empire* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1993); Gabriel Danzig, "Why Socrates Was Not a Farmer: Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* as a Philosophical Dialogue," *Greece & Rome* 50, no. 1 (2006): 57–76.

⁷Vivienne Gray, "Xenophon's *Hiero* and the Meeting of the Wise Man and Tyrant in Greek Literature," *Classical Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1986): 116.

⁸Sarah Pomeroy, *Oeconomicus: A Social and Historical Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 24n11.

decided to leave their debts unacknowledged. Such, at any rate, is the contention of Louis-André Dorion, a classicist who reads and criticizes Strauss in a more open and even liberal spirit.⁹ The virtue of engaging with Dorion's thesis is that it both shows the need to turn to Strauss's initial essay on Xenophon and indirectly casts light on its deeper if rather cryptic claim that "the teaching of men like Xenophon is precisely the antidote we need" for the "restitution of a sound approach."

According to Dorion, the influence of Strauss on publications devoted to Xenophon over the past three decades is "immense," even "omnipresent." But it is not always or even often acknowledged.¹⁰ Dorion regrets the failure to cite Strauss not as an injustice to Strauss or a violation of contemporary academic standards, but as a danger or threat to innocent readers who will perhaps be led astray without ever knowing the true source of their corruption. "Since the renewal of interest in Xenophon's Socratic writings owes so much to the works of Strauss, the question of what a modern interpreter of the *Memorabilia* can take from Strauss' work arises. It would certainly be a serious error to ignore his writings, as this would expose us to the risk of misinterpreting a great part of the work that has been published on Xenophon in the last three decades. In fact, although it is omnipresent, Strauss' influence is not always explicit or expressly asserted, so that any reader of these studies who is ignorant of Strauss runs a great risk of not correctly grasping the issues at stake in these interpretations."¹¹ Dorion is himself a scriptural literalist who believes Xenophon can and must be read according to "the letter of the text," which he thinks in fact contains no genuine or intentional contradictions that might lead one to suspect the kind of irony or deception seen by Strauss.

According to Dorion, to entertain the possibility of Xenophontic irony, and therefore the need to read between the lines, is to introduce an uncontrollable source of arbitrary assertions about what the author does or does not intend. Vivienne Gray, too, is concerned that belief in Xenophon's irony will lead to overly ingenious interpretations of his simple-minded texts.¹² But under pressure from the general drift of recent scholarship on Xenophon, Gray has recently come to accept subversive or ironical readings of Xenophon on the condition that we keep in mind that they reflect contemporary concerns and interests imported consciously or not into our reading of ancient texts, that is, on the condition that we recognize them as neither philosophically

⁹Dorion, "Straussian Exegesis," 283–323. This is a revised and much expanded version in English of an article that first appeared as "L'exégèse straussienne de Xénophon: Le cas paradigmatique de *Mémorables* IV 4," *Philosophie antique* 1 (2001): 87–118.

¹⁰Dorion "Straussian Exegesis," 285.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 283–84. See also 321.

¹²Vivienne Gray, "Xenophon's *Symposium*: The Display of Wisdom," *Hermes* 120, no. 1 (1992): 58.

nor historically sound.¹³ Gray's point that ironical readings should be understood as a modern or postmodern phenomenon that reveals more about ourselves than it does about Xenophon is obviously strengthened by the difficulty of finding any equivalent to the English word "irony" in the Attic Greek of Xenophon's day. And taken to their logical conclusions, Gray's and Dorion's objections imply that it is simply impossible to give a nonarbitrary interpretation of any author acknowledged to have deployed irony. As a case study of just such an arbitrary reading, Dorion focuses on Strauss's interpretation of *Memorabilia* 4.4.

Here Xenophon's Socrates identifies what is just with what is lawful, a position that Dorion, following Strauss, characterizes as "a form of 'legal positivism.'"¹⁴ In three separate treatments of this passage written over the course of thirty-three years, Strauss consistently maintained that neither Xenophon nor his Socrates accepted this teaching as ultimately true, even though it may prove to be a good political rule of thumb or maxim.¹⁵ Dorion himself admits that "the definition [of Xenophon's Socrates] can certainly leave us wanting," since he himself thinks that its inadequacy can be "immediately perceived" by a man of normal intelligence.¹⁶ But Dorion believes Xenophon falls short of even this minimal standard. To be sure, the mere intellectual inadequacy of a view expressed by Xenophon's Socrates by itself grants no warrant to dismiss it as less than genuine. And here Strauss would seem to agree. He does not reject the passages simply because they "leave us wanting." Rather, he provides a number of arguments based on other passages in Xenophon that he thinks stand in contradiction or tension with believing that what is legal is always just. Dorion considers this procedure forced because he does not think any of the passages Strauss cites are actually in contradiction with the equation of the just and the legal. In particular, he denies that there is any irony in either the character's or the author's mind when Xenophon has the young Cyrus reassure his concerned mother that he will receive just as good an education in justice from his grandfather, a tyrant, than from the laws of the Persian republic.¹⁷

It is not my intention here to settle the issue between Strauss and Dorion over Xenophon's legal positivism. Perhaps it would prove impossible ever to do so to the complete satisfaction of both.¹⁸ But it is worth noting that

¹³Gray, introduction to *Xenophon*, 5.

¹⁴Dorion, "Straussian Exegesis," 294–95, 316; Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 76.

¹⁵Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 101. Henceforward *WIPP*.

¹⁶Dorion "Straussian Exegesis," 294, 304.

¹⁷Xenophon, *Education of Cyrus* 1.3.18. See Strauss, "On the Study of Classical Political Philosophy," 145.

¹⁸For Strauss's understanding of the limits of his claim, see Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 30. Henceforward *PAW*. Strauss also addressed this difficulty in the first essay on Xenophon: "Since [Socrates and Xenophon] uttered their unbelief only in a manner that the large

Dorion himself acknowledges the possibility for a contemporary of Xenophon to have formulated an intellectually penetrating critique of Socrates's definition of justice. Indeed, according to Dorion, the evidence for the existence of such a critique comes from the *Memorabilia* itself in the dialogue between Alcibiades and Pericles that raises the Socratic "What is. . ." question with regard to the law (*Mem.* 1.2.40–46). Dorion concludes from this passage that "the questioning of Alcibiades begins where Socrates' reasoning ends: while Socrates contents himself with defining justice as honoring the laws, Alcibiades shows that the reputation for being *nomimos* is only merited if the law is legitimate." Thus, had Xenophon presented Alcibiades in conversation with Socrates, the "pupil" would have far outstripped his "teacher" in intellectual if not moral virtue.¹⁹ Moreover, Dorion also believes that Xenophon, too, still holds fast to his Socrates's identification of the just and the legal.²⁰ In other words, according to Dorion, Xenophon creates or portrays in Alcibiades a character superior in intellect to both Socrates and himself by giving him (unwittingly) an argument that crushes an opinion near and dear to them both. It is not for nothing that Dorion claims to value Xenophon most of all for his accidental clumsiness.²¹ But even if it is possible for an author to create a character more intelligent than himself and to endow that character with arguments manifestly superior to those taken to be his own, does not such a highly idiosyncratic method of resolving textual ambiguities and tensions prove to be as or even more arbitrary than entertaining the possibility of intentional irony in a student of Socrates?²²

Dorion's handling and reading Xenophon's texts make it necessary to take a closer look at his manner of handling and reading Strauss's texts. To get a sense of Dorion's skills as a close and careful reader, consider how he recasts one of Strauss's suggestions on how to read a text and then refutes Strauss by showing how he failed to adhere in all cases not to his own suggestions, but to Dorion's reformulation of those suggestions. Dorion claims that Strauss thought, "in the case of contradiction between two passages, it is the most allusive and the least repeated that corresponds to the point of view of the author." If one turns this into an iron law of interpretation, it is not

majority might in no circumstances become aware of it, proofs of their unbelief necessarily are of such a character that they will not convince the majority of readers" ("Spirit of Sparta," 532).

¹⁹Dorion, "Straussian Exegesis," 304, 305n62.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 294n34, 320.

²¹*Ibid.*, 322.

²²Strauss deals with this passage in a much less complicated way in "The Spirit of Sparta": "The argument that the interlocutor [Hippias] advances against Socrates' assertion that justice is identical with the obedience to the laws misses the point, as is shown by a parallel argumentation used by a more intelligent and franker man [Alcibiades] which occurs within the same work [the *Memorabilia*]" (520–21). Dorion neglects this account.

difficult to find many instances where Strauss fails to obey it.²³ But if instead one looks up the passage that Dorion cites as the basis for his claim, one finds Strauss making a rather more limited and sensible statement: "The real opinion of an author is not necessarily identical with that which he expresses in the largest number of pages."²⁴ For those who may have missed this particular sleight of hand or who prefer to ascribe it to a momentary slip, Dorion repeats his procedure elsewhere. He first claims that "Strauss frequently affirms that *all* important teachings are found in the centre of an account," and then finds that Strauss fails to apply this hermeneutic device to book 3 of the *Memorabilia*.²⁵ Yet here is the passage in Strauss from which Dorion extracts his "universal rule" or law:

We have noted more than once in the *Memorabilia* and elsewhere that the item which is literally in the center is of special importance. . . . This statement about the crucial importance of what is in the center is very general; it must be read in the light of the examples; those examples are of great variety. As Socrates puts it to the young companion: *there are many cases in which one ought not to arrange or lead (speak) in the same manner*. The *Memorabilia* as a whole offers a conspicuous example of an exception.²⁶

For Dorion to cite Strauss making the *Memorabilia* an important exception to a rule he thinks should in any case never be strictly followed as "proof" that Strauss had formulated a method to be followed in *all* cases, including the *Memorabilia* itself, is to commit a blunder, as Strauss was fond of saying, "that would shame an intelligent high school boy."²⁷ If done unintentionally, it would demonstrate its author to be "a worse writer than the most hurried reporter could possibly be" ("Spirit of Sparta," 505). Interpretive charity compels one to wonder whether Dorion has perhaps borrowed a page from Strauss's interpretation of the *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians* and in fact penned not a genuine critique of Strauss, but rather a self-conscious and "most ably disguised satire" of a classicist's critique of Strauss (531).

Yet even if Dorion really does believe Xenophon and his Socrates are in fact legal positivists, and that Strauss's interpretations of Xenophon are implausible and wide of the mark, he does not conclude from this that Strauss is as clumsy and lacking in intelligence as Xenophon. What holds him back from this conclusion is his suspicion that Strauss never intended to give an accurate representation and assessment of Xenophon in the first place. According to Dorion, "Strauss belongs to a category of thinkers whose reading teaches us much more about their own thought than of the authors and works they claim to comment on and analyze, but which serve instead as covers for

²³Dorion, "Straussian Exegesis," 306.

²⁴Strauss, *PAW*, 30.

²⁵Dorion, "Straussian Exegesis," 309–10 (emphasis added).

²⁶Strauss, *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse*, 92; *Xenophon's Socrates*, 58 (emphasis added).

²⁷Strauss, *PAW*, 30.

the exposition of their own ideas."²⁸ Xenophon is simply a mouthpiece for Strauss's own views, especially the view that there is an irreconcilable conflict between the demands of political life and philosophy.²⁹ This provocative thesis raises questions not addressed by Dorion: Why would Strauss need a mouthpiece for this view, one which he is willing to state elsewhere quite openly and in his own name; and why choose Xenophon in particular as his puppet? There is, after all, a long and well-documented tradition going back at least to Aristotle that finds a radical tension between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*. Even Dorion, who thinks both the historical and Platonic Socrates were "less conformist and [less] inoffensive" than Xenophon's, would have to admit that Strauss could have made a better or more fitting choice. For while the "legal positivism" of Dorion's Xenophon implicitly denies any deep conflict between the demands of thinking and the demands of society,³⁰ surely no one thinks Plato or his Socrates, to say nothing of any number of other classical philosophers, were all legal positivists.

Dorion resolves these difficulties by postulating a belief that Strauss misuses Xenophon to hide the true source of his philosophic elitism, an elitism that derives not from the classics, but from Nietzsche.

Strauss' elitism *corresponds exactly* to that expressed by Nietzsche in these terms: "One does not only wish to be understood when one writes; one wishes just as surely not to be understood. . . . All the nobler spirits and tastes select their audience when they wish to communicate; and choosing that, one at the same time erects barriers against 'the other.' All the more subtle laws of any style have their origin at this point: they want at the same time to keep away, create a distance, forbid 'entrance,' understanding, as said above—while they open the ears of those whose ears are related to ours" (*The Gay Science*).³¹

Of course, simply to show that an author shared a view expressed by Nietzsche in no way constitutes either an acceptable refutation of that view or of that author. Nor does it rule out that the same view may well have been shared by some third party, say, Rousseau,³² or perhaps even Xenophon.³³ In any case, as Dorion's own description of Strauss's understanding of the reasons for philosophic exotericism shows,³⁴ Strauss's "elitism" was motivated in large part by political responsibility and therefore does *not*, as Dorion also claims, "correspond exactly" to that expressed by Nietzsche.

²⁸Dorion, "Straussian Exegesis," 320.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 291, 293, 299.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 308, 319–20.

³¹*Ibid.*, 292n29 (emphasis added).

³²Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Second Discourse*, in *The First and Second Discourses*, trans. Roger D. Masters and Judith R. Masters (New York: St. Martin's, 1964), 103.

³³See Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 4.6.14–15 and *Cynegeticus* 13.6.

³⁴Dorion, "Straussian Exegesis," 292.

Yet Dorion's belief in some connection between Strauss, Nietzsche, and Xenophon is not without merit. Had Dorion cast his net more widely, he would have discovered that Strauss made his own intellectual debt to Nietzsche rather clear. As a young man living in an orthodox household, Strauss read Schopenhauer and Nietzsche "furtively."³⁵ In a 1935 letter to Karl Löwith, he wrote that between the age of twenty-two and thirty, he was "dominated and bewitched" by Nietzsche: "I believed literally every word I understood in him."³⁶ He taught seminars on Nietzsche in the 1950s and 1960s in which he continued to find him a source of insights. More important for our purpose, Strauss links the thesis of "The Spirit of Sparta" to Nietzsche via Nietzsche's critique of Rousseau and appears there to adopt Nietzsche's position as his own, even if conditionally.

According to Nietzsche, Kant "had been bitten by the moral tarantula, Rousseau; he, too, harbored in the depths of his soul the idea of that moral fanaticism whose executer another disciple of Rousseau felt and confessed himself to be, namely Robespierre: *'de fonder sur la terre l'empire de la sagesse, de la justice et de la vertu.'*"³⁷ According to Strauss, the malign influence of Rousseau consisted in propagating the belief "in a political solution to the problem of civilization," that is, that wisdom could rule on earth.³⁸ If true, the conflict between philosophy and politics would disappear, and with it the need for philosophic exotericism. It is Nietzsche's metaphor and view of Rousseau that Strauss borrows in the final paragraph of "The Spirit of Sparta."

One cannot study Xenophon, who seems to have been one of the greatest classical admirers of Sparta, without being constantly reminded of that greatest of all modern admirers of Sparta, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. If it is true, as is sometimes asserted, that the restitution of a sound approach

³⁵Leo Strauss, "A Giving of Accounts," in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 460.

³⁶Leo Strauss, "Correspondence: Karl Löwith and Leo Strauss," *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 5–6 (1988): 182–84.

³⁷Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, trans. Maudemarie Clark (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 3.

³⁸For Strauss's view of Rousseau at this time, see Leo Strauss, "Exoteric Teaching," in *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s*, ed. Martin D. Yaffe and Richard S. Ruderman (New York: State University of New York Press, 2014), 285. This text, written around the time Strauss completed "The Spirit of Sparta," also demonstrates Strauss's familiarity with and debt to the passage from Nietzsche's *Daybreak* quoted above. It is important to note that Strauss subsequently changed his understanding of Rousseau and even ascribed to him the view that prevents one from believing in a political solution to the problem of civilization: "We may therefore express the thesis of the *Discours* [the first *Discourse*] as follows: since the element of society is opinion, science, being the attempt to replace opinion by knowledge, essentially endangers society because it dissolves opinion" (Leo Strauss, "On the Intention of Rousseau," *Social Research* 14 [1947]: 274).

is bound up with the elimination of Rousseau's influence, then the thesis of the present article can be summed up by saying that the teaching of men like Xenophon is precisely the antidote we need. (536)

Indeed, not only does Strauss adopt Nietzsche's diagnosis, he seems to have been guided by him more broadly in the selection of the cure. For if we follow Dorion's suspicions and consider what Nietzsche himself had to say about Xenophon, we find a remarkable passage, one that perhaps led Strauss to Xenophon in the first place and perhaps contributed to his understanding of the philosophic life as a combination of "gravity and levity."³⁹ It also suggests how Strauss's turn to Xenophon and his Socrates could be understood as a response to being "in the grips of the theological-political problem," a problem that he claimed was "the theme of my investigations" from the 1930s on.⁴⁰

Socrates—If all goes well, the time will come when one will take the *Memorabilia* of Socrates rather than the Bible as a guide to morals and reason, and when Montaigne and Horace will be employed as forerunners and signposts to an understanding of this simplest and most imperishable of intercessors. In him converge the pathways of the most different modes of life, crystallized by reason and habit and all ultimately directed toward the joy in living and in one's own self. . . . Socrates excels the founder of Christianity in being able to be serious cheerfully and in possessing that wisdom full of roguishness that constitutes the finest state of the human soul. And he also possessed the finer intellect.⁴¹

Strauss's turn to Xenophon reflects a conscious response to the political and philosophic conditions of 1939, when "the spirit of Sparta, or the conviction that man belongs, or ought to belong, entirely to the city" found concrete expression across the globe (531). A well-known political figure gave a contemporary and relevant restatement of what Strauss describes as "the spirit of Sparta."

The Fascist State, the highest and most powerful form of personality, is a force, but a spiritual force, which takes over all the forms of the moral and intellectual life of man. It cannot therefore confine itself simply to the functions of order and supervision as Liberalism desired. It is not simply a mechanism which limits the sphere of the supposed liberties of the individual. It is the form, the inner standard and the discipline of the whole person; it saturates the will as well as the intelligence. Its principle, the

³⁹Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 290, 294; Leo Strauss, *On Nietzsche's "Thus Spoke Zarathustra,"* ed. Richard Velkley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 46.

⁴⁰Leo Strauss, "Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion,*" in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basis Books, 1968), 224; Leo Strauss, "Preface to *Hobbes politische Wissenschaft,*" *Interpretation* 8, no. 1 (1979): 1.

⁴¹Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human,* trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 332.

central inspiration of the human personality living in the civil community, pierces into the depths and makes its home in the heart of the man of action as well as of the thinker, of the artist as well as of the scientist: it is the soul of the soul.⁴²

Although Xenophon could have known nothing about the particulars of this situation, Strauss maintains that his teaching, or that of “men like him,” is the cure. Dorion is therefore correct to think that there is much more at stake in “The Spirit of Sparta” than simply rehabilitating Xenophon. And he is correct to discern the influence of Nietzsche on Strauss’s turn to Xenophon. Lest we push this line of thinking too far too quickly, however, and conclude with Dorion that Strauss’s real or sole interest in Xenophon is only as a mouthpiece for a Nietzschean elitism, it is worthwhile to recall that genuine interest in an author is not necessarily at odds with using that author, even, if not only, as a mouthpiece. Learning from an author and adapting him to one’s own purposes are not incompatible.⁴³ That Strauss in fact approached Xenophon in a humbler spirit, treating him as a potential source of insight and wisdom, can be shown most easily by retracing some of the steps by which he rediscovered Xenophon in the first place. This has now been made possible with the publication of Strauss’s correspondence with Jacob Klein in volume 3 of *Leo Strauss: Gesammelte Schriften*.

2. Strauss’s Rediscovery of Xenophon

Looking back from the perspective of 1965, Strauss wrote that his thinking underwent a “change in orientation” that found its first expression in 1932 with his “Comments on *The Concept of the Political* by Carl Schmitt.” This change, which led him to question “the powerful prejudice that a return to premodern philosophy is impossible,” also compelled him “to engage in a number of studies in the course of which [he] became ever more attentive to the manner in which heterodox thinkers of earlier ages wrote their books.”⁴⁴ The very first of those studies published was “The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon.” An attentive reader of Strauss in the 1930s would not, I think, have been altogether surprised by his turn to a classical author. In the final chapter of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis* (written in 1934–35), Strauss claimed that to understand the new political science one needs to compare it with the old, and therefore “an examination of Hobbes’ conception of Plato is indispensable.” But Hobbes did not consider “an unbiased study of the sources necessary,” and

⁴²Benito Mussolini, in *The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe*, by Michael Oakeshott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), 167–68.

⁴³Strauss, *WIPP*, 126–27.

⁴⁴Leo Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, trans. E. M. Sinclair (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 31.

his conception of Plato is a caricature “that fundamentally misunderstands him” with potentially disastrous results.⁴⁵ It would therefore make sense for Strauss to wish to remedy this defect. But Plato, not Xenophon, would be seem to be the figure of interest.

Of course, Strauss’s reconsideration of the possibility of a return to premodern philosophy did not necessarily mean a return to the classics. In *Philosophy and Law* (1935), he declared that “Maimonides’ rationalism is the truly natural model, the standard to be carefully protected from any distortion, and thus the stumbling block on which modern rationalism fails.”⁴⁶ But Strauss qualified this statement with his 1937 article “On Abravanel’s Philosophic Tendency and Political Teaching.” There he maintained that what Maimonides had done or attempted was “to harmonize the teachings of the Jewish tradition with the teachings of the philosophical tradition, i.e., of the Aristotelian tradition.” But, according to Strauss, the assumptions or premises that allowed Maimonides to do this were “borrowed from Plato, from Plato’s political philosophy,” not from Aristotle or his *Politics*. Medieval thought was in general “determined by belief in Revelation.” But, according to Strauss, “the Islamic philosophers” — who were also the teachers of Maimonides — “did not believe in Revelation properly speaking.” For Jews and Muslims, as opposed to Christians, Revelation took the form of law. For the Jewish and Muslim philosophers, this meant having to justify philosophy before the law, that is, to show that the law obliged them to devote themselves to philosophy. Strauss argued that Plato’s *Laws* was the primary source for Maimonides’s views on the relation between philosophy and law; and “only the full understanding of the *Laws*’ true meaning would enable us to understand adequately the medieval philosophy of which I am speaking.”⁴⁷ In this way Strauss’s investigations led him back to the classics. But, again, we would expect him to turn to Plato, not Xenophon, and in particular now to Plato’s *Laws*.

The letters that Strauss wrote to Jacob Klein between 1938–39 and that document his full-fledged discovery of esotericism trace a similar trajectory. Writing from New York in January and February of 1938, Strauss tells Klein that “Maimonides is getting more and more exciting” now that he has seen that far from a believing Jew, Maimonides is “a truly free mind,” indeed, an Averroist who handles religion with “infinite refinement and irony.”⁴⁸

⁴⁵Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis*, trans. Elsa Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 141, 145.

⁴⁶Leo Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, trans. Eve Adler (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 21.

⁴⁷Leo Strauss, “On Abravanel’s Philosophic Tendency,” in *Leo Strauss on Maimonides: The Complete Writings*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 582–84.

⁴⁸Strauss to Klein, January 20 and February 16, 1938, quoted and translated by Laurence Lampert, in *Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, 63–64. The German original can be found in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 3:545, 550. Hereafter GS.

Guided by this discovery and encouraged by a passage in Avicenna—"the treatment of prophecy and the Divine law is contained in [Plato's] *Laws*"—Strauss turned to study the *Laws* with particular attention to Plato's use of *polynoiia* or "ambiguous speech." At the same time he drew confirmation of the existence of esotericism in the classical tradition from other quarters: "I am now reading Herodotus, who—I swear it as a Catholic Christian—is also an esoteric writer, and one in perfection. In short," Strauss concludes, "it is happening . . . again." A fortnight later, he writes, "I find myself in a state of frenzy that is consuming me: after Herodotus, now Thucydides too." And always Strauss is thinking of how these other writers contribute to his understanding of Plato, and, again, most especially of Plato's *Laws*, a book he now declares to be "Plato's greatest work of art."⁴⁹ So, the line he was tracing seems to go from Maimonides to the Islamic philosophers and finally back to Plato's *Laws*. Strauss did in fact turn to the *Laws*, but as his last completed and posthumously published work. Where in this is Xenophon and why turn to him in the first place?

Xenophon makes his first appearance in Strauss's correspondence with Klein on November 27, 1938, some ten months after his first letter on Maimonides. "Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon are not historians, but authors of exoteric protreptic writings." Strauss is particularly taken with the *Education of Cyrus*, which he understands as "a wholly great book of sublime irony" in which "what Socrates is, is shown through his caricature of Cyrus. Only through that medium does Xenophon show the true, hidden Socrates, whereas he shows the manifest Socrates in his *Memorabilia*. His Socrates image is therefore *not fundamentally* different from that of Plato."⁵⁰ Within two months Strauss forms the determination to write the essay that would become "The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon": "I plan to prove in it that his [Xenophon's] apparent praise of Sparta is in truth a satire on Sparta and Athenian Laconism."⁵¹ The similarity of Plato and Xenophon is the theme of another letter, from August 18, 1939: "The agreements [of Xenophon] with Plato are simply astounding, at times so astounding that one asks oneself astounded: are Xenophon and Plato at all different people?"⁵² But these remarks do little to resolve the issue of Strauss's apparent preference for Xenophon. For if Plato and Xenophon are identical, why substitute the one for the other? Why write on Xenophon's taste rather than that of Plato? This problem is also raised by a passage in "Spirit of Sparta" itself:

Considering that briefness of expression is one of the most ordinary devices for not disclosing the truth, we may assume that the famous

⁴⁹Strauss to Klein, October 15 and November 2, 1938, in *Cambridge Companion*, 66–67; *GS*, 3:556, 558.

⁵⁰Strauss to Klein, November 27, 1938, in *Cambridge Companion*, 68; *GS*, 3:559.

⁵¹Strauss to Klein, February 16, 1939, in *Cambridge Companion*, 69.

⁵²Strauss to Klein, August 18, 1939, in *Cambridge Companion*, 73; *GS*, 3:579–80.

brachology of the Spartans had something to do with their desire to conceal the shortcoming of their mode of life. Such a desire may be called bashfulness. By expressing himself most briefly when discussing the Spartan vices, and by thus writing a disguised satire on Sparta, Xenophon adapts himself to the peculiar character of his subject and thus achieves a feat in the art of writing which is surpassed only by Plato's *Laws*. For whereas Xenophon and Plato in their other works, as well as Herodotus and Thucydides and perhaps other writers before them, teach the truth according to the rule of moderation, the *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians* as well as the *Laws* deviate somewhat from this established principle by teaching the truth according to the rule of bashfulness: both works are most bashful speeches about the most bashful of men. (529–30)

This passage explains in part how an article on Xenophon could take the place of one on Plato: the *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians* is the Xenophontic equivalent of Plato's *Laws*. But we are still left uncertain as to why Strauss preferred to write on the *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians* rather than the *Laws*, especially as Strauss even here asserts the superiority of Plato's work. It could well be that as a second-rater Xenophon was just easier to handle.⁵³ Or perhaps Strauss simply indulged his own tastes and sympathy for Xenophon. Again, it is Xenophon, and not Plato, whom he calls his "special *Liebling*," in no small part for having had "the courage to clothe himself as an idiot," to say nothing of Xenophon's having developed "a whole system of secret words exactly as in Maimonides," strategies both very much to Strauss's own bent.⁵⁴

The most straightforward account Strauss ever gave for his turn to Xenophon comes from a letter to Julius Guttman dated May 20, 1949. Guttman did not share Strauss's interest in either Xenophon or the classics. Their point of contact centered on Maimonides, although, as we have just seen, in Strauss's mind there was a special affinity between the rabbi and the general. Here is Strauss's tactful explanation to Guttman as to why he selected Xenophon to be the focus of *On Tyranny*.

As far as Maimonides is concerned, there is a still more profound difficulty here. If my hunch is right, then Maimonides was a "philosopher" in a far more radical sense than is usually assumed today and really was almost always assumed, or at least was said. Here the question arises immediately of the extent to which one may responsibly expound this possibility publicly—a question that certainly makes the problem of esotericism immediately a timely or, as one says these days, an

⁵³Consider Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 26: "Xenophon uses far fewer devices than Plato uses even in his simplest works. By understanding the art of Xenophon, one will realize certain minimum requirements that one must fulfill when interpreting any Platonic dialogue, requirements which today are so little fulfilled they are hardly known."

⁵⁴Strauss to Klein, February 16, 1939, in *Cambridge Companion*, 69–70; *GS*, 3:567.

"existential" one. This was one of the reasons why I wanted to present the problem in principle of esotericism—or the problem of the relationship between thought and society—in *corpore vili*, thus with respect to some strategically favorable, non-Jewish object. I chose Xenophon, partly due to the connection with the problem of Socrates, partly because the assumption is that if *even* Xenophon, this seemingly harmless writer, then all the more. . .⁵⁵

Here we find something that seems to be actual evidence for Dorion's view that Strauss used Xenophon as a kind of mouthpiece for his own views. Xenophon is certainly presented instrumentally as a convenient *corpus vile*, a strategically favorable stand-in for someone else, an analogy Strauss returned to in *Thoughts on Machiavelli* where he claimed that "Machiavelli uses Livy as a *corpus vile* by means of which he can demonstrate how he has tacitly proceeded in regard to the *corpus nobilissimum*," that is, the Bible.⁵⁶ Indeed, the correspondence with Klein shows that Strauss did in fact discover exotericism first in Maimonides and not Xenophon or the classics. And "The Literary Character of the *Guide for the Perplexed*" was completed, if not published, before "The Spirit of Sparta." But that same correspondence also shows that Strauss considered Xenophon of more than instrumental interest, as does even the conclusion of the letter to Guttman: "The little writing [*On Tyranny*] is a preliminary study. At some point I should like to finish the interpretation of Xenophon's four Socratic writings." A purely instrumental use of an author would not likely lead one to return to him in order to conduct a complete study. But, again, Strauss's explanation of why he preferred to present his thesis on exotericism with reference to Xenophon rather than Maimonides still leaves us with the question of why Strauss devoted so much attention to Xenophon and not Plato.

In the correspondence Strauss does note at least one striking difference between Plato and Xenophon, even in the midst of his amazement at the similarity of their presentations of Socrates.

There is no question anymore that Xenophon's Socrates is *identical* to the Platonic—only Xenophon shows Socrates *still* more disguised, *still* more *as he visibly was* than Plato. And besides, he's far more Aristophantic (= more obscene) than Plato. I think you will laugh a lot when you read

⁵⁵Leo Strauss Papers, Box 4, Folder 8, quoted in Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 24n32. What Strauss says here of *On Tyranny* may well apply to "The Spirit of Sparta," his first article on Xenophon, which he wrote at the same time he was working on "The Literary Character of the *Guide for the Perplexed*." Strauss's sensitivity to the place Maimonides holds for Jews is reflected in his correspondence with Nahum Norbert Glatzer from 1937–38 (see Suzanne Klingenstein, "Of Greeks and Jews," *Weekly Standard*, Oct. 25, 2010). In any case, the two articles, each subdivided into six sections, should be read as companion pieces.

⁵⁶Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 142.

my essay ["The Spirit of Sparta"] and see it in the text (the filth, of course I will not translate). The philologists are indescribable idiots.⁵⁷

Strauss was much more restrained when it came to diagnosing the shortcomings of the philologists in print. Here is how he discreetly glosses their "indescribable" idiocy in the published essay: the philologists "reject the MSS readings in this as well as a number of similar cases in favor either of variants supplied by the indirect tradition or of conjectural readings, for no other reason than they do not take into consideration the Aristophanean inclinations of Xenophon" (511n5).⁵⁸ The inclination, and perhaps also necessity, to blunt his criticisms of contemporary classicists reminds us that in 1938, as a recent Jewish immigrant without a permanent position and living on the edge of insolvency, Strauss could little afford to offend too much the status quo even as regards a minor figure such as Xenophon. How much greater anger and opposition would Strauss have aroused had he first elaborated his views on exotericism directly with regard to Plato.⁵⁹ This is not to deny the obvious fact of Strauss's moral and intellectual courage. But he seems to have thought that genuine courage does not require one to embrace certain punishment, especially if undeserved.⁶⁰ More to the point, Strauss does characterize Xenophon here in respect of his difference from Plato. He is "far more Aristophanic (=more obscene) than Plato." Any reader of the final chapter of Xenophon's *Symposium* would be hard pressed to deny the obscenity charge. But it is more difficult to know just what Strauss meant with the claim that Xenophon was "far more Aristophanic." An autobiographical passage from the transcript of a course on Xenophon Strauss gave in 1963 might offer some insight into the distinction he had in mind. There he draws attention to the different ways that Plato and Xenophon recast the official charges against Socrates.

Now if you compare these three versions, the authentic version, Plato's version, and Xenophon's version, you see that Plato takes much greater

⁵⁷Strauss to Klein, February 28, 1939, in *Cambridge Companion*, 72; *GS*, 3:569. Lampert's translation contains a transcription error. He reads "aristocratic" rather than "Aristophanic," which is found in both the handwritten letter and Meier's transcription.

⁵⁸For the potentially liberating effect of humor, particularly from the opinion that identifies justice with the law, consider Xenophon, *Apology*, 28.

⁵⁹See Laurence Lampert, *The Enduring Importance of Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 15–16.

⁶⁰"As Faust put it to Wagner, 'the few who understood something of the world and of men's heart and mind, who were foolish enough not to restrain their full heart but to reveal their feeling and their vision to the vulgar, have ever been crucified and burned'; not everyone belonging to those few failed to restrain his full heart. Goethe was the last great man who rediscovered or remembered this, especially after he had returned from the storm and stress of sentiment and whatever goes with those dynamic forces united in order to destroy the last vestiges of the recollection of what philosophy originally meant" (Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, 174–75).

liberties with the text of the indictment than Xenophon does. Xenophon takes a very small liberty. That reveals the character of the writings of the two men. Plato is in a crude way, crudely spoken, infinitely more obvious than Xenophon is. I myself have gone through a time after Xenophon's way of writing dawned upon me, where for quite some time I couldn't stand Plato anymore, because that was too loud compared with the still voice of Xenophon, who speaks like a man of the people to men of the people; only those who listen will hear something of a higher order.⁶¹

The advantage given to Xenophon here is as much or more for the "Platonic" defects he lacks than for some specific virtue. But the absence of such defects might prove essential. Now it is both well-known and widely acknowledged that Xenophon's writings in general, and his presentations of Socrates in particular, are remarkably free from doctrines or systematic explanations of "the whole." Yet what most scholars consider a philosophic defect might well have constituted one of Xenophon's primary attractions, at least for Strauss.

In his posthumously published *Hobbes's Critique of Religion* from 1933/34, he describes Hobbes's motive for elaborating a new political science.

If order and peace were finally to come about, what was required, as it seemed, was a politics resting solely on the self-sufficient reflection of man. Such a politics had been elaborated by classical philosophy. But the philosophic politics that rested on the foundation conceived by Socrates had not only not refused an association with theology; it had also not *been able* to refuse this; in any case it had provided theological politics with some of its most dangerous weapons. Hence, a *new* politics was required that would not merely be independent of theology but also make any relapse into theological politics impossible for all future time.⁶²

Unlike Plato, Xenophon gives us no best regime, no theory of the parts of the soul, no arguments for the immortality of the soul, no appeals to the after-life,⁶³ no doctrine of "the ideas" and hence, perhaps most importantly, no "idea of the good."⁶⁴ Always the perfect general, Xenophon refrained from providing the most intransigent enemy with arms that could be turned against him and his friends. Might not this refusal or reticence be what made Xenophon such a valuable and attractive ally for Strauss in his own efforts, after his "reorientation" in the early 1930s, to recall "what philosophy originally meant," that is, philosophy understood not as systematic doctrine

⁶¹Leo Strauss, transcript of "Xenophon," University of Chicago, Winter 1963, Session 1 (no date), <http://leostraustranscripts.uchicago.edu/navigate/8/2/>.

⁶²Leo Strauss, *Hobbes's Critique of Religion*, trans. Gabriel Bartlett and Svetozar Minkov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 28.

⁶³Cf. Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* 21.12.

⁶⁴Cf. Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 3.8. For Strauss's understanding of the connection between the idea of the good, the best regime, and the actualization of that regime, see Leo Strauss, "On a New Interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy," *Social Research* 13, no. 3 (Sept. 1946): 362–63.

but as a way of life? In a letter to Klein from 1938, Strauss claims that “what is nearest my heart about Plato is independent of the specifically Platonic philosophy.”⁶⁵ Xenophon’s writings, having never given rise to “Xenophonism,” might for that reason have proved to be nearer still.⁶⁶ Such a nonmetaphysical justification for and presentation of philosophy corresponds to what Strauss considers to be the core of philosophy in “The Spirit of Sparta.”

3. Philosophy and the Spirit of Sparta

Again, the thesis of “The Spirit of Sparta or the Taste of Xenophon” is that “the teaching of men like Xenophon is precisely the antidote we need” in order to “eliminate Rousseau’s influence” and restore “a sound approach” (536). But what kind of man is Xenophon in Strauss’s view? Strauss suggests an answer to that question as early as the epigraph from Quintilian that he placed at the head of the essay: “Xenophon non excidit mihi, sed inter philosophos reddendus est” (I don’t leave Xenophon out [of my ranking of the great historians], but he is to be placed among the philosophers). Xenophon was widely read and admired in the ancient world. Yet, as the passage from Quintilian indicates, some controversy persisted as to whether he should be considered a historian or a philosopher. Quintilian placed him squarely among the philosophers. Strauss does this himself, if somewhat playfully, with the misleading or ambiguous title of the article. At first glance, one takes it to be an endorsement of the conventional opinion that holds Xenophon to be a partisan and apologist for Sparta. The “or” of the title appears to be conjunctive: the “spirit of Sparta” is indistinguishable from or very much to Xenophon’s taste.⁶⁷ But over the course of the essay Strauss makes clear that the “or” is disjunctive. “The true name of the taste which permeates Xenophon’s writings is, not education, but philosophy.” And “Sparta and philosophy are incompatible” (531). Strauss’s conception of philosophy, and not his Nietzschean elitism per se, as Dorion would have it, is what accounts for his interest in exotericism.

Apart from the epigraph, the words “philosophy” and “philosopher” make their appearance only in the sixth and final section of the article. Yet their presence and Strauss’s unorthodox conception of them permeate the work and can be found, if indirectly, even in the rather bland and inauspicious opening sentence. “Xenophon’s treatise *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians* appears to be devoted to praise of the Spartan constitution, or, which amounts to the same

⁶⁵Strauss to Klein, October 20, 1939, quoted in Lampert, *Enduring Importance*, 13.

⁶⁶See Christopher Nadon, “Philosophic Politics and Theology: Strauss’s ‘Restatement,’” in *Leo Strauss’s Defense of the Philosophic Life: Reading “What Is Political Philosophy?”*, ed. Rafael Major (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2013), 94.

⁶⁷Consider the mistranslation of the title in the French edition of the work: “L’esprit de Sparte et le goût de Xénophon,” in *Le Discours socratique de Xénophon: Suivi de Le Socrate de Xénophon* (Paris: Éditions de l’éclat, 1992).

thing, of the Spartan mode of life." Strauss begins from the surface, from the accepted but "superficial reading" that Xenophon's "admiration of Sparta is unreserved" (502). But he notes that if one takes the *Constitution of the Lacedemonians* for a treatment of the "constitution proper" of the Spartans, one finds it "very scanty" and its title "inadequate" (525–26). Yet "constitution" (*politeia*) more broadly construed means "mode" or "way of life" (502, 529).⁶⁸

Taking the term in this sense, the text becomes more revealing and particularly revealing of the shortcomings and defects of the Spartan way of life and education.⁶⁹ Strauss spends the bulk of the article arguing that Xenophon, far from being a laconophile, understood the Spartan constitution to aim at producing illiterate soldiers habituated by severe beatings and shame to submit to political authority without question. In light of this analysis, it is more than a little surprising that Strauss more or less repeats the opening sentence towards the end of the article: "The *Constitution of the Lacedemonians* appears to be a praise of an admirable constitution." Of course, a good author never simply repeats himself. Given that Strauss identifies "constitution" with "way of life," we are authorized to read the second sentence to mean, "The *Constitution of the Lacedemonians* appears to be a praise of an admirable way of life." And Strauss does introduce some changes. The "admirable constitution is no longer qualified by the adjective "Spartan." He also drops the designation of the *Constitution of the Lacedemonians* as a "treatise" and eliminates any notion of "devotion" from the restatement. He does this because he has moved to an understanding of Xenophon's text as "a most ably disguised satire" on the Spartan way of life. As such, it constitutes "a most graceful recommendation" of another way of life, Xenophon's way or "philosophic life" (531). Yet, according to Strauss, "political life, if taken seriously, meant belief in the gods of the city, and philosophy is the denial of the gods of the city" (532). Piety, if essential to political life and the full acceptance of political authority, "plays no role in education" (534). This is the admirable constitution praised in the *Constitution of the Lacedemonians*.⁷⁰

Exotericism appears at first glance, not as an expression of elitism or an aristocratic taste for sophisticated irony, but as a means to protect philosophers from the charge of impiety. Strauss invokes the historical context of exotericism to explain its emergence. "In the time of Xenophon, impiety constituted a criminal offense." In order to avoid the fate of Socrates,

⁶⁸See Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 136: "The American Constitution is not the same thing as the American way of life. *Politeia* means the way of life of a society rather than its constitution." Cf. *Natural Right and History*, 84; WIPP, 91; *Xenophon's Socratic Discourse*, 201; *Xenophon's Socrates*, 38.

⁶⁹For the connection between *politeia* and education, see Strauss, *City and Man*, 113.

⁷⁰Strauss prepared the way for this recommendation by contrasting first "political life" with "theoretical life" (519), and then "the life of the city" with "the life of the individual" (424).

“philosophers had therefore to conceal if not the fact that they were philosophers, at least the fact that they were unbelievers” (534). Yet Strauss’s public exposure of the art of exoteric writing would seem to undermine its efficacy. And, much like Socrates’s apparent foe Aristophanes, Strauss openly declares, “Socrates did not believe in the gods of the city, nor did his pupil Xenophon” (532). But perhaps Socrates and his students were not so much at odds with Aristophanes (511n5). And Strauss can justify his outing of past philosophers on the grounds that such dark times have come and gone. Is exoteric writing then no longer necessary in liberal regimes?

While fear of persecution is the most obvious and easily grasped motive for the practice of exotericism, it is not the most important one. According to Strauss, “It would betray too low a view of the philosophic writers of the past if one assumed that they concealed their thoughts merely for fear of persecution or of violent death.” Rather, their “concern for the majority of men” provides a second or deeper motive to practice exotericism. This concern makes it “a matter of duty to hide the truth” because “the large majority of men, the philosophers of the past thought, would be deprived of the very basis of their morality if they were to lose their beliefs” (535). What is striking about this claim is that, like the first, it comes with a qualification. Strauss does not assert that the vast majority of men will lose the basis of their morality if exposed to philosophic thought, but only that this is what “the philosophers of the past” thought would happen. Might a philosopher of the future know better?⁷¹ Perhaps the Enlightenment experiment has shown “the basis of morality” to have been different or more robust than previously known. Again, exotericism may no longer be necessary.

Strauss seems to have made a similar qualification or concession in his initial account of the grounds for the conflict (that gives rise to the need for concealment) between “the spirit of Sparta” and the “taste of Xenophon.” “Philosophic life *was considered by the classical thinkers* as fundamentally different from political life” (531, emphasis added). But this consideration seems to have been based not so much on the nature of philosophic life as on the kind of political life “the classical thinkers” confronted: “As far as political life raised a universal claim, i.e., as far as the city left no room for a private life that was more than economic, philosophic life, which of necessity is private, *became* opposed to political life” (531, emphasis added). This means, as Strauss emphasizes, that “Sparta and philosophy are incompatible,” and it would be “an overstatement to say that philosophy was compatible with Athens” (531). But would the classical thinkers still hold to this view when confronted by a modern liberal political order, brought into being in part through the political action of fellow philosophers, one that prioritized the private over the public and that considered the proper end of political power to be in the service of securing individual rights?

⁷¹Strauss, *WIPP*, 77.

There is, however, a third if somewhat hidden ground for the continued practice of exoteric writing that Strauss presents almost as an unexpected but happy consequence of the duty to hide the truth. And this reason might still hold true even, or perhaps especially, within the most liberal regime:

By making the discovered truth almost as inaccessible as it was before it had been discovered, they prevented—to call a vulgar thing by a vulgar name—the cheap sale of formulations of the truth: nobody should know even the formulations of the truth who had not rediscovered the truth by his own exertions, if aided by subtle suggestions from a superior teacher. It is in this way that the classical authors became the most efficient teachers of independent thinking. (535)

If philosophy as a way of life means thinking for oneself, if it means taking only reason and what we can see as our guide, rather than political authority and what is believed or enacted (518n1), then exoteric writing will remain a necessity “in all epochs” in which philosophy is “understood in its full and challenging meaning” as a way to preserve that understanding without lapsing into doctrinaire or simply traditional ways of thought (535).

From this perspective, Xenophon's teaching “that justice is identical to the laws, to any laws” is an almost perfect response to the three different demands placed on exoteric writing. First, it protects the philosophers from persecution by convincing the city that “they reverence what the city reverences.”⁷² Second, it protects the majority of men from being deprived of the basis of their morality. Indeed, it encourages the identification of morality with selflessness. Third, it proves to be a particularly useful means of leading those capable of independent thinking away from a powerful source of reverence for collective thought and authority by encouraging a closer examination of its most respectable mouthpiece: the laws. By starting from the laws, political philosophy “maintains its direct connection to political life,” a connection that that can help it to formulate nonpartisan or rational political guidance or counsel.⁷³ But the more important result of this “direct relation” is that it compels “the philosopher” to abandon generally held opinions. For however politically salutary it may be to subscribe to “the maxim (which must be reasonably understood and applied) that justice is identical with the legal,”⁷⁴ that maxim cannot be true if only because the law necessarily contradicts itself and thus undermines its own intellectual, if not political, authority, at least for those willing to push arguments “to the last analysis” (532).⁷⁵ Xenophon's formulation may no longer

⁷²Ibid., 136.

⁷³Ibid., 89–90.

⁷⁴Ibid., 101.

⁷⁵Consider Strauss's intrusive “editorializing” when he remarks that “*Xenophon is very anxious for us to realize*” that Lycurgus, i.e., the authority of the city, teaches that stealing is both good and bad (“Spirit of Sparta,” 507, 527, emphasis added).

suffice in modern political regimes that deploy sincere “systems of philosophy” to replace reverence for the law with devotion to natural rights, the general will, or other transcendent concepts. And in doing so such regimes may even make “independent thinking” more difficult by encouraging a belief in “a political solution to the problem of civilization.”⁷⁶ Yet a philosopher of the future, not Xenophon but perhaps a man like him, might still turn to Xenophon as part of an effort to free himself and us from the tyranny of the present.⁷⁷ Strauss values Xenophon most as a potential source of liberation.

Cf. the discussion of “the aim of the life of the city” compared to “the aim of the life of the individual” (524–25).

⁷⁶In his own name, Strauss will oppose this belief with his own declaration, “There is no adequate solution to the problem of virtue or happiness on the political or social plane” (*WIPP*, 100). This premise also justifies the description of the task of political philosophy that Strauss gave in a public lecture at the New School in 1942: “As long as philosophy was living up to its own innate standard, philosophers as such, by their merely being philosophers, prevented those who were willing to listen to them from identifying any actual order, however satisfactory in many respects, with the Perfect order: political philosophy is the eternal challenge to the philistine” (Leo Strauss, “What Can We Learn from Political Theory?,” *Review of Politics* 69, no. 4 [2007]: 521).

⁷⁷Strauss, *WIPP*, 70.