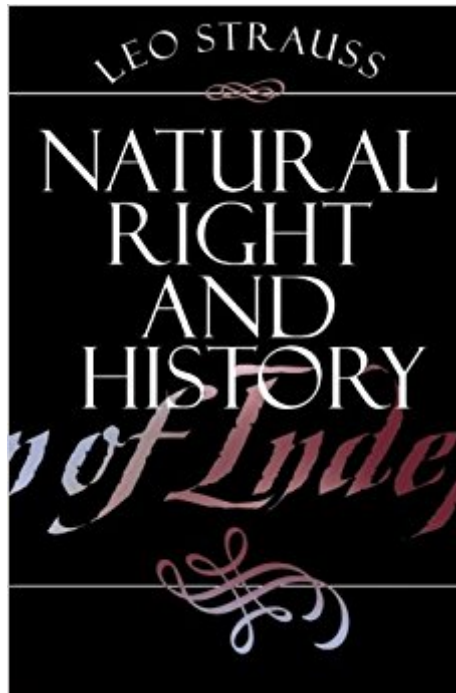




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Natural Right And History (Walgreen Foundation Lectures)



Synopsis

In this classic work, Leo Strauss examines the problem of natural right and argues that there is a firm foundation in reality for the distinction between right and wrong in ethics and politics. On the centenary of Strauss's birth, and the fiftieth anniversary of the Walgreen Lectures which spawned the work, *Natural Right and History* remains as controversial and essential as ever. "Strauss . . . makes a significant contribution towards an understanding of the intellectual crisis in which we find ourselves . . . [and] brings to his task an admirable scholarship and a brilliant, incisive mind." — John H. Hallowell, *American Political Science Review*

Leo Strauss (1899-1973) was the Robert Maynard Hutchins Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus in Political Science at the University of Chicago.

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Customer Reviews

The problem of natural right is one of the most controversial and significant issues in contemporary political and social philosophy. Leo Strauss, eminent author of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, examines the current status of this problem and shows that the reasons which have led to a rejection of natural right are not valid.

Leo Strauss (1899-1973) was the Robert Maynard Hutchins Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus in Political Science at the University of Chicago.

Excellent

An obviously brilliant mind, but such a dense profusion of leaves and branches , that I could not find that the book had any roots.

In NRH, Strauss recovers and valorizes philosophy as a way of life. Examination of the politically urgent question of what is right by nature discloses that natural right is only possible if philosophy in the original sense, as the quest to grasp what is eternal, is possible. Philosophy in this sense had been dismissed both by early (theoretical) historicism and then later by radical (existentialist) historicism. However, Strauss argues that radical historicism cannot disprove the possibility of philosophy and actually points the way to its recovery. Existentialist, delusion-dispelling insights into the insolubility of the "fundamental riddles" prove compatible with philosophy as originally understood, and Strauss questions why the radical historicists view these insights as being dependent on historical fate. Strauss sees radical (existentialist) historicism as but an inadequate articulation of trans-historical Socratic skepticism, which seeks to understand and articulate the permanent problems and alternatives inherent in human existence. In Strauss's hands, old, seemingly familiar thinkers emerge as strange and vital. The recovery of philosophy as originally understood is necessary but insufficient for recovering natural right. The positivistic notion that reason is incapable of solving value conflicts (reflected in the fact/value distinction) must also be overcome. Strauss thus critically assails the methodology of Max Weber. Because Philosophy is a way of life involving the intransigent search for truth, what unites philosophers is more important than their disagreements, and separates them from other men. This is true even when the disagreements are profound. Consider for instance the "Socratic turn," a momentous change marking the birth of classical political philosophy. Prior to Socrates, philosophers (who take Nature as their standard) had deprecated politics, understanding notions of right to be merely conventional. Socrates, on the other hand, affirmed natural right. He also gave political philosophy an expanded meaning: political philosophy was no longer simply what philosophers thought about the ultimate status of politics, it now became the ascent to philosophy through the serious study of political opinions. Because this new approach to philosophy is interdependent with the perspective of the citizen, philosophy now began taking on responsibility to help guide the city. Socrates, in opposition to the pre-Socratics, taught that man was a political and social animal, and in his behavior, Socrates practiced what he

preached. Yet even with this profound change in philosophical teaching and behavior, the classical political philosophers still shared with the pre-Socratics the notion that philosophical contemplation, the questing search for truth that disturbed and undermined society and for which only a tiny minority of individuals were by nature qualified, was man's highest end. Philosophy still involved an ultimate transcendence of the political realm. Classical political philosophy thus responsibly coupled intransigence with moderation: Philosophy was communicated to the few, the many were supported in their salutary beliefs, and society was intelligently guided through principled yet flexible statecraft to the extent this was possible. Because political philosophy since Socrates has accepted the task of guiding society both for the sake of philosophy and for the general good, what emerges for Strauss is a history of political philosophy, where different teachings can be understood as responses to different historical circumstances, and as supplying adjustments to situations brought about in part by philosophical predecessors. The contrast between classical political philosophy and modern political philosophy looms large for Strauss. This theme in his work is often called "the Ancients vs. the Moderns." Strauss has a decided preference for classical political philosophy, which he seeks to recover, and in some sense he treats the rebellion against the classics as a giant decline. The moderns rebelled against the Great Tradition of classical political philosophy and the Bible. They did so with great political success, but in the process much was lost. Following Hobbes, the Moderns rejected the classical notion of man as naturally a political and social animal, positing the primacy of rights over duties. Jettisoning the classical concern with character formation and the humanizing focus on "the best regime" as transcending politics, they "realistically" decided to embrace and manipulate human passions in order to guarantee results. This approach has proved socially corrosive over time. Also, in various ways, modern political philosophy has adversely affected the practice of statesmanship. Modern political philosophy has proceeded in 3 waves. (Strauss does not employ the 3 wave terminology in this book, but he later used this terminology and it helps explain what he is talking about in NRH.) The first wave of modernity culminated with John Locke and has had its greatest practical success in America. The second and third waves involved attempted correctives to problems inherent in modernity, but these attempts have been rooted in modern premises and have served to radicalize modernity, making it even more problematic. The second wave of modernity emerged in the work of Rousseau, involved historicism, and produced among other phenomena the Soviet Union. The third wave of modernity emerged with Nietzsche, involved radical (existentialist) historicism, and produced the Third Reich. In America, Strauss considered himself to be living in a first wave Lockean regime

that was susceptible to the corrosions of modernity but which was relatively healthy because the second and third waves had yet to play themselves out to the extent they had in Europe and Russia. His return to classical political philosophy can be viewed as a paradoxical attempt to discern and apply ways to fortify modern America against internal decline and external threats. (Even so, many people who have written studies on Strauss point to his ultimate pessimism regarding the eventual fate of all modern regimes.) It should be mentioned that for Strauss, the emergence of modern political philosophy, though highly problematic, was entirely understandable. A profound change had happened with the triumph of Christianity in the Middle Ages. Philosophy was made the handmaiden of Theology. This not only stifled the true nature of philosophy, it also meant that because of the political influence of priests, classical political philosophy lost its ability to promote moderation and flexible statesmanship. Much political turbulence and religious warfare helps explain the rise of modern political philosophy. Here I'll make mention of a second major theme for Strauss, the so called "theological-political problem," which I take to mean that philosophy must find a way to accommodate itself to religious belief without being ruled by it. Modern political philosophy emerged because classical political philosophy was no longer effectively handling this problem. The moderns, in their attempt to restore philosophical guidance and moderation to society, worked to radically undermine the influence of religion. (But of course, Modern political philosophy, from the perspective of Strauss's "theological political problem, leaves itself open to the charge of failing to accommodate itself to religious belief.) This brings us to another major theme for Strauss, "Athens vs. Jerusalem." Some of Strauss's students tend to treat Athens vs. Jerusalem (reason vs. biblical faith) as simply an example of what they consider the more basic theological political problem that stretches back to the world of the classical polis. That is, they think that religion is but a salutary and ultimately necessary opium for the masses, and they think that Strauss's intellectual defense of biblical religion against modern rationalism (which in effect argues that all alleged refutations of revelation presuppose unbelief and points out how modern rationalism has actually proceeded against religion by way of mockery), is merely an attempt to prop up an ailing superstition. However, though Strauss does view religion as socially salutary and necessary, I think it does not do justice to Strauss to collapse Athens vs. Jerusalem into the theological-political problem. Looking at NRH, especially the chapter on Max Weber, I get the sense that Strauss viewed Biblical faith (the life of obedient love) as truly the great and viable alternative to Philosophy (the life of free insight.) The tension between reason and revelation is a field of rich reflection for Strauss. Though Strauss insists that Athens and

Jerusalem are irreducible alternatives, I agree with interpreters of Strauss who contend that in his writings he manages to give his full allegiance to both. I have used this review to try to articulate Strauss's perspective rather than critique it. I'm just trying to come to grips with the thought of this influential yet elusive figure. I hope this effort at comprehension proves helpful to other readers. Any comments/ critiques are welcome!

Strauss first deals with the reigning historicist (Hegelian and Heideggerian) and Weberian dogma because if he does not cast doubt upon such dogma, the discussion of natural right is only interesting as an intellectual relic, but of no real relevance to the reader who likely is closed-minded to its modern usefulness. Having raised doubt in the reader's modern assumptions, Strauss has then prepared the reader to open-mindedly return to the very origins of political philosophy. Strauss shows that natural right originates from an intellectually rigorous foundation, that is, the distinction between hearsay and first-hand knowledge. He then takes the reader through the development of natural right in its various forms: Socratic-Platonic, Aristotelian, Ciceronean, and Thomistic. Next, he walks the reader through the origin of modernity and the modern expressions of conventional right in Machiavelli, Hobbes and Locke, who is simply Hobbes in "sheep's clothing." Strauss deals with the objections to conventional right in Rousseau and Burke. Strauss's study challenges the very foundations of American society and he writes for the few.

"Nature was discovered when man embarked on the fundamental distinctions between hearsay and seeing with one's own eyes, on the one hand, and between things made by man and things not made by man, on the other." Strauss provides a powerful and scholarly work in his tracing the idea of natural right. Strauss explains the origins of natural right, classical natural right, modern natural right and more. He includes arguments against Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Burke, and Weber. The depth of thought may be too much for the common reader, I found it difficult to fully grasp all of Strauss's ideas myself, but it is well worth reading for anyone interested in natural law or the history of ideas.

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