

# Leo Strauss

## Historicism and Modern Relativism

A course offered in the winter quarter, 1956

Department of Political Science, The University of Chicago

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## Preface to “Historicism and Modern Relativism”

Nasser Behnegar

Historicism, Strauss asserts, is “the serious antagonist to political philosophy.”<sup>i</sup> It is akin to political philosophy because it articulates a comprehensive view of man’s situation, a view comprehending the history of political philosophy and more. It is opposed to political philosophy because it denies the reality or significance of human nature, the permanence of the problems facing man, and the propriety of political philosophy’s guiding question (at least as a question that could have a universal answer), the question of the good society, which it contends is not coeval with man but belongs to the societies that have not reached full self-consciousness, to societies that do not know that all thought is historical. Accordingly, Strauss makes critical comments about historicism in those of his books that were designed, as least in part, as introductions to political philosophy: books such as *On Tyranny*, *Natural Right and History*, *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*. These comments, however, have left curious effects. They appear to have bounced off many readers who do not see (or refuse to see) any problem with historicism. Others, it seems to me, have found them *too* persuasive, for there are few among Strauss’s admirers (especially those of the later generations) who regard historicism as a “serious antagonist,” that is, as a serious alternative.<sup>ii</sup>

Strauss’s clear opposition to historicism, his exposing of its moral and theoretical difficulties, and his use of this criticism as a springboard to the interesting waters of prehistorical thought make it possible for his sympathetic readers to consider historicism as a sort of rubbish that stands in the way of serious philosophizing—Strauss as a metaphysical street cleaner. The brevity of Strauss’s criticism of historicism (*Natural Right and History*, the only book by Strauss that has history as its theme, devotes only twenty-eight pages explicitly to historicism) suggests to some (contrary to the content of that chapter) that one need not spend much time on the subject. The relative paucity of references to the works of historicists (the chapter on historicism in *Natural Right and History* has the fewest footnotes, and it refuses to name a single unambiguous historicist) encourages this view. Nonetheless, in philosophical matters everyone has to take his garbage to the dump himself.

But there may be another factor at work here: we Americans do not have a good feel for history. While historicism has a universal character and reach, it is not accidental that the thought that all thought is historical first emerged among the Germans. Whatever changes American society has experienced, they are trivial in comparison to those experienced by the Germans: pagan

<sup>i</sup> Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 26. I would like to thank Daniel Burns for his assiduous help with the editing of the original text of Strauss’s seminar, and Robert Bartlett, David Bolotin, and Christopher Bruell for their constructive and critical comments on earlier drafts of this preface.

<sup>ii</sup> This is not to deny that there is a third group of nondoctrinaire readers, who, like the historian R. H. Tawney or Strauss’s student Allan Bloom, have found Strauss’s critique of historicism eye-opening.

Germany, Medieval (Christian) Germany, and Hegel's Prussia or Bismarck's Germany are hardly the same. For us, on the other hand, modernity is our antiquity. The principles of the American founding—equality, freedom, and the rights of man—remain largely the principles of Americans today. Moreover, in the nineteenth and the twentieth century (at least up to Hitler's defeat) Germany's past persisted in the present as its bad conscience. Among us, however, the present rules the past, which tends to become irrelevant if it does not disappear into oblivion. We are not in the habit of yearning for the Middle Ages, for Greece, or for primeval nature, but we also do not tend to push our modern hopes to their extremes: We too sing, but our songs are not those of a Wagner or a Mahler. If we are attracted to relativism, as many of us are, it is because we think it serves, better than our older creeds, some universal and transhistorical value: toleration and openness to others, or freedom from suffocating "Puritanism."<sup>iii</sup> We tend to think that with sufficient effort and good will we can understand other societies, because at bottom all human beings are alike. And if we think historically, we are apt to think of history's march simply in progressive terms, albeit with a few inexplicable twists and kinks. Remote from us is that experience of history that supports the conclusion that "the acquisition of new important insights necessarily leads to the forgetting of earlier important insights."<sup>iv</sup>

Now Strauss was surely aware of the incongruity between historicism and the moral and political sentiments of Americans, for he skillfully exploits it in the opening of *Natural Right and History* in order to cultivate in his readers' minds a skeptical, and even a hostile attitude toward the reigning relativism. He does not ridicule Americans for their lack of sophistication or depth; instead, he upbraids relativism for its moral obtuseness. His choice is defensible. For our lack of sense of history is not unconnected with our relatively more robust moral and political health. Besides, Strauss helps his readers see a real problem that many academic proponents of historical relativism do not face, and in so doing he awakens their moral sensibility, helping them examine moral and political questions without being haunted by positivism and historicism. Yet this rhetorical strategy is not without its drawbacks. Strauss counteracts these drawbacks by warning against moral indignation (it "is a bad counselor") and by noting that historicism has questioned the validity of the basic premises of philosophy, an impressive feat the importance of which he insists should not be denigrated.<sup>v</sup> His handling of Heidegger, whom he calls the most radical historicist, is illustrative of his complicated approach to historicism. It is also a case with no precedents, at least to my knowledge, in the whole history of intellectual controversy. He criticizes Heidegger sharply, showing how his embrace of historicism made him blind to his own historical situation, how his contempt for the common and superficial character of the permanent characteristics of humanity prevented him from keeping his distance from the errors of common men, or how in 1933 he was able to "welcome, as a dispensation of fate, the verdict of the least

<sup>iii</sup> Modern relativism maintains that all truth is relative to its historical situation. Accordingly, it is identical with historical relativism, though its historical character is sometimes forgotten. In such cases, the subjectivity of truth (the relativity of truth to the individual) is asserted as if the subject is independent of his or her historical situation.

<sup>iv</sup> Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 23.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, 31.

wise and least moderate part of his nation while it was in its least wise and least moderate mood, and at the same time to speak of wisdom and moderation.”<sup>vi</sup> Yet Strauss also humbles himself before Heidegger: “Heidegger,” he writes, “surpasses all his contemporaries by far.”<sup>vii</sup> He is so sensitive to Heidegger’s greatness as a thinker that he finds it necessary to justify even his right to take a stand toward him. Following Heidegger’s own reasoning, Strauss argues that we cannot avoid taking a stand toward him, and “in doing it explicitly, we run no greater risk than exposing ourselves to ridicule and perhaps receiving some needed instruction.”<sup>viii</sup> Reader, consider this shy cunning bird appearing so strangely in our world. Here we have a free man fully exercising his freedom without being blind to greatness, the greatness of others, even of an antagonist who supported a heinous political movement. Here we also have Strauss the instructor preventing the petrification of his school by making it at least difficult for his students to dismiss Heidegger.

All this is to show that Strauss’s treatment of historicism is peculiar. He exposes real and serious difficulties with historicism, but these discussions are punctuated by quieter yet still noticeable admissions of its intellectual weight and powerful formulations of historicist arguments. Whatever its disadvantages, his approach does allow, and even prepares, the serious reader to have a genuine confrontation with historicism—a comprehensive position that, in its most developed formulations, combines elements of philosophy with those of biblical faith while jettisoning their apparently untenable assertions or premises.

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Given the brevity or density of his published comments on historicism and their highly abstract character, we are lucky to have Strauss’s 1956 seminar on “Historicism and Modern Relativism.” The text before the reader is based on an electronic version of a typed transcript made (by an unknown typist) from the original audiofiles. The editor did not have the advantage of consulting the original tape recording of the seminar because those audiofiles did not survive. Though there are a few lacunae (many, when it comes to questions posed by students) and places where the written words are uncertain, Strauss’s main arguments and reflections are clear enough. The course, consisting of only ten sessions, is shorter than a typical Strauss seminar. The first two sessions introduce the matter; the next four discuss the thought of R. G. Collingwood, whom Strauss regards as the most thoughtful historicist in the English-speaking world; the last four are devoted to Nietzsche. He ends the course with Nietzsche because he was the first thinker who faced the problem posed by the view of history as an unending process and because “very few people have ever faced [this problem] as honestly and radically as he did” (session 5). There is no mention of Heidegger, though we may infer that he was among those who faced the problem at least as radically as Nietzsche did. Whereas large chunks of Strauss’s courses consist of

<sup>vi</sup> *WIPP?*, 26-27.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>viii</sup> Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 30.

readings from a text followed by Strauss's commentary, here Strauss simply focuses on the issue, the problem of history. This is especially true in his discussion of Nietzsche, in which *The Use and Abuse of History* is used as a kind of jumping board into Nietzsche's whole philosophy, including his doctrines of will to power and the eternal return of the same. It appears that in this course Strauss's intention was to articulate the position of historicism and to some extent his critique of historicism. And for this very reason this course is an invaluable supplement to his published writings on the subject.

In 1952, Strauss published an essay called "On Collingwood's Philosophy of History."<sup>ix</sup> It is a critical review of Collingwood's *The Idea of History* and contains no references to his *Autobiography*. It appears that in the time between this review and his seminar Strauss had read the latter work, which evidently impressed him. The seminar focuses more on the *Autobiography* than on *The Idea of History*, and its treatment of Collingwood is more appreciative than the essay. While Strauss does not take back any of his criticisms of Collingwood (including his glaring historical errors, which Strauss traces to his belief in the superiority of scientific history), he now sees in Collingwood a philosophic mind and recognizes his unmistakable superiority to the nonhistoricist contemporaries whom Collingwood criticizes in his autobiography. Accordingly, sessions three to six, the sessions devoted to Collingwood, are very helpful for understanding the case for historicism. We are disabused of the notion of philosophy or science as a system of propositions; we see the priority of the questions to the answers; we see that Collingwood's contemporaries who maintained that all philosophers are concerned with the same questions were wrong (compare *NRH*, 23-24), that the questions of philosophers are the result of past efforts, and thus that philosophical and scientific work ultimately depends on history and on the accomplishments of our predecessors. We thus see that the past is the depth of the present, and not something dead or finished, and that exacting historical inquiries are necessary in order to understand the concepts that inform our minds. In short, we see that the study of the history of thought is necessary for our self-consciousness.

Along the way, we learn that historical understanding necessarily requires interpretation. And among the valuable elements of this discussion is its exposition of the problems of interpretation. Strauss reminds us of the commonsense view that before criticizing a thinker one must first understand him, a view that implies that interpretation must precede criticism (session 6). But he also reminds us of the commonsense view that every understanding is from a certain perspective, a view that implies that interpretation cannot be separated from criticism. He reconciles these views by arguing that in one sense interpretation must precede criticism: we must not begin by judging a thinker in light of our problems; we must understand his problem as he understood it. (This Collingwood failed to do, and his historical writings suffered for it.) But this understanding is very limited. One does not fully understand Hobbes and Plato when one learns that Hobbes's question was X and Plato's Y. Rather, one must judge somehow the relative soundness of their questions, and we could make such judgments only if we had some access to the permanent

<sup>ix</sup> *The Review of Metaphysics* 5 (1952): 559-586.

questions that face man. By denying that there are such questions, historicism, paradoxically, implies the impossibility of historical understanding. In other words, the possibility of the history of political philosophy (in contrast to the history of astrology) depends on the possibility of political philosophy.

Perhaps the greatest value of this discussion is that it provides an occasion for Strauss to make a case for a more adequate version of nonhistoricist thought than the nonhistoricist thought that Collingwood justly criticized. While granting the priority of questions to answers, Strauss questions whether all questions are necessarily the result of previous questioning. One cannot formulate a question without knowing something about the subject. If human questioning had a beginning, then there must have been some primary awareness of things, of life with other human beings in the midst of nonhuman beings. At the deepest level, human thought does not depend on previous efforts of man but on something that is given to man or is coeval with man, something that is now obscured by layers over layers of thinking.<sup>x</sup> Strauss grants that there are no permanent problems in the sense of problems that each generation of thinkers faces, but he argues that there may be problems that are rooted in the permanent situation of man when this situation is revealed. He grants that we may not be able to possess an adequate understanding of these problems, but he argues that we can possess or recover the primary awareness of them. This would be enough to see that Plato's understanding of justice is more fundamental than Hobbes's, because by trying to derive justice from self-interest Hobbes obscures the primary question of justice, the question that recognizes that justice somehow is an expression of human kindness (to mention only one consideration). He thus opens the door to the thought, fundamental to his understanding of western history, that the founders of modernity had lost sight of or obscured some fundamental problems.<sup>xi</sup>

In session 7, Strauss moves to a thinker of a higher order—to Nietzsche. Collingwood had promised his readers that history can help them with their ethical dilemmas but Strauss shows that he could not deliver on that promise. He could make this promise because he did not face the problem of history understood as an unfinishable process. Nietzsche was the first thinker who drew the nihilistic consequences of neo-Hegelianism, that is, of accepting Hegel's notion of the historicity of all thought while rejecting his notion of the absolute moment. Strauss does not

<sup>x</sup> The reader will find here eye-opening observations from the Bible that show how this text can be used for the recovery of our primary awareness and therewith—analytical philosophers, hold on to your hats!—for the acquisition of conceptual clarity. Strauss observes that the Bible refers to the heavens and the earth but has no word for “the world.” It appears that something as obvious as the notion of the world does not belong to our primary awareness, because it implies a certain commonality or unity between the earth and the heavens. Strauss thus argues that in the idea of “the world” a problem is hidden that one does not see without the help of historical investigations.

<sup>xi</sup> I say “some fundamental problems” in order to acknowledge a tension present in Strauss's account of modernity. He suggests, for instance, that the founders of modernity were to an extraordinary degree aware of the fundamental problems facing philosophy or science, which include the problem of the relation between philosophy and society (*NRH*, 23-24, 169-77).

degrade Nietzsche (and Strauss's own accomplishment) by turning Nietzsche into a nonhistoricist Platonist.<sup>xii</sup> He presents Nietzsche as a thinker who accepted the truth of historical relativism while seeing the impossibility of dignified human life on the basis of relativism, a thinker who was thus driven to overcome relativism on the basis of relativism. For millennia, human beings governed their thoughts and actions by norms that were believed to be independent of human choice (god, nature, even reason), but we now know, Nietzsche maintains, that those norms themselves are the result of human thoughts and decisions. This knowledge, Nietzsche argues, destroys these norms because it undermines the rationale that gave them the right to govern our thoughts and actions. Accordingly, Nietzsche's relativism is different from the nineteenth-century relativism that considers relativism a progressive force for the good, and from the twentieth-century social scientific relativism that considers it as something neutral. For Nietzsche relativism is a deadly truth, a point that Strauss emphatically asserts. Yet this truth also offered an opportunity, so Nietzsche thought, of establishing a new kind of norms, norms that are not myths or ideals but projections of the self.

Nietzsche's main problem consisted in the difficulties involved in establishing these new norms. In particular, the objective claim of relativism (the claim that all horizons are the result of human acquisition) sabotages Nietzsche's attempt to turn his own self into the source of guidance. According to Strauss, Nietzsche never managed to solve the problem posed by the conflict between theoretical knowledge (objective relativism) and his subjective project, but he argues that Nietzsche's attempt is nonetheless instructive. We can only draw the reader's attention to some parts of Strauss's discussion. First, Nietzsche's effort to escape the nihilistic consequence of relativism, his effort to defend his project, forces him to radicalize relativism by criticizing the ideal of objectivity. Nietzsche's critique of human understanding reveals the perspectival character of all thought, in light of which "objective knowledge" only appears as a cruder form of subjective projection.<sup>xiii</sup> Nietzsche's abolition of the distinction between the apparent world and the true world also serves the same purpose, for it prevents our lack of knowledge of the true world from casting its shadow on the world constituted by our concerns. Second, Strauss helps the reader understand the meaning of Nietzsche's doctrine of will to power. This doctrine is not Nietzsche's equivalent of the physicists' quarks or atoms. It is not a theoretical hypothesis that is brought to explain the world but is itself the expression of Nietzsche's own will, a will that is the outcome of history. Strauss's exposition here thus helps explain his comment that Nietzsche's doctrine of will to power is an attempt to articulate "his understanding of the modern situation

<sup>xii</sup> Strauss treats Nietzsche's historicism as part of his virtue: Schopenhauer and existentialism (the non-Heideggerian variety) hold opinions similar to Nietzsche's but they compare, in Strauss's eyes, unfavorably to Nietzsche because they were unaware of the historical character of their doctrines.

<sup>xiii</sup> In *Natural Right and History* Strauss argued that historicism rests not merely on historical evidence but also on a critique of human thought (12). Here he shows that this critique, at least in the case of Nietzsche, does not belong to the initial acceptance of relativism but emerges only as part of an attempt to defend the possibility of the project from objective relativism. While in the earlier work Strauss entertains the possibility of Nietzsche accepting the esoteric character of the theoretical analysis of life (26), in the seminar he unambiguously presents Nietzsche as a critic of such an analysis.

and of human life as such.”<sup>xiv</sup> We learn, for instance, that this doctrine is a development of the modern notion of nature that makes possible an understanding of progress that is free from teleological assumptions, an understanding that allows for a nonarbitrary evaluation of the movements of history without devaluing such movements as mere means to preconceived ends. Third, if all thought is perspectival, then there could be an infinite variety of projects. If we are not to repeat the problem of the original relativism, we must find some way of ranking these projects, some way of determining the right project. Strauss argues that Nietzsche addressed this difficulty by observing that some perspectives are more comprehensive than others: perspectives that are informed by a rich understanding of the whole history of human experience are superior to those that are not. The more comprehensive view can show the narrowness of the less comprehensive view, and there is something in the latter that points to the superiority of the former. This powerful argument makes clear that Nietzsche’s project ultimately is defensible, if it is defensible, because it belongs to the peak of history, a peak that is not the end of history.<sup>xv</sup> Fourth, Strauss reads Nietzsche historically. He treats him as more than a great thinker but one who summarized and brought to perfection modern political philosophy, and its will to establish the sovereignty of man and to make him at home in his world. (He presents this view not as an established truth, but as something that justifies further reexamination.) Finally, one of the striking features of Strauss’s discussion is his argument that Nietzsche, who began as a critic of Hegel, ends as a kind of Hegelian, repeating in a modified form Hegel’s thought: he too conceives of history as a struggle between the masters and the slaves; he too in the final analysis admits the greater spiritual power of slaves; he too develops a notion of an absolute moment of history; and he too articulates the perspective of that moment as one that combines biblical elements with philosophic ones. But in Nietzsche the biblical element is more potent than in Hegel. Strauss thus reveals Nietzsche’s thought as the most extreme development of modern this-worldliness, which, paradoxically, incorporates much of the biblical outlook.

Although Strauss makes it clear that his own position is different from Nietzsche’s because he thinks that the proper response to relativism is to return to premodern philosophy, the tone in the whole discussion is highly appreciative of Nietzsche: in several places Nietzsche is compared to other thinkers—to Kant, Schopenhauer, Marx, existentialists (apparently excluding Heidegger), Montesquieu—and in all these cases, on the issues considered Nietzsche appears superior. This is not surprising given Strauss’s tentative judgment that Nietzsche’s thought is the culmination of modernity. It also seems that Nietzsche remains somewhat of a question mark for him. In response to a student, who was apparently perplexed by Strauss’s account of Nietzsche’s attempt to overcome the Bible, Strauss says: “I have myself great difficulty in understanding Nietzsche,

<sup>xiv</sup> *WIPP?*, 55.

<sup>xv</sup> In *Natural Right and History*, Strauss argues that historicism surreptitiously follows Hegel in asserting that it belongs to the absolute moment of history, but it conceives of that moment differently, one in which the insoluble character of the fundamental riddles has become manifest (29). In this course, he says that Nietzsche sometimes “expresses himself in this way. But this never satisfied him because the discovery of a problem would not show the way to values. It would only lead to the discovery of the principle of valuation without showing a way to the establishment of values” (session 10).

and I am really trying not to prevent the understanding of Nietzsche on my part or on your part by any premature criticism” (session 9).<sup>xvi</sup> Even when he criticizes Nietzsche for his irresponsible speech, a speech that by weakening his readers’ revulsion at cruelty fostered an intellectual atmosphere that made the rise of Hitler more possible, he is quick to point out that this error did not emerge from Nietzsche’s lack of humanity, directing his students to aphorism 295 of *Beyond Good and Evil* and challenging them to find in the entire nineteenth century another passage that equals this one in its humanity. (This is the aphorism in which a god who is beyond good and evil appreciates the beauty of the human awareness of evil, a god who, Nietzsche suggests, has something to learn from the humans. This is also the aphorism in which Nietzsche reveals his extraordinary understanding of what it means to be a teacher—teaching being perhaps the most humane of all human activities.)

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In the preface to the English edition of *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, Strauss writes that that early study was based on the premise that a return to premodern philosophy is impossible.<sup>xvii</sup> In this seminar, Strauss states that the difference between him and Nietzsche can be traced back to this premise, which premise Strauss eventually rejected. Why did Nietzsche think that a return to premodern philosophy was impossible? Strauss gives us a clue to this question in his discussion of Nietzsche’s doctrine of the eternal return. This doctrine is not a cosmological doctrine but a moral doctrine, which is meant to address a difficulty created by the modern notion of nature. According to Nietzsche, a high human life depends on inequality and the suffering it entails, but modernity has taught us that nature is such that we can abolish inequality and suffering. For instance, according to Nietzsche inequality between men and women is necessary for human nobility, but if nature is malleable we can make men and women equal. The doctrine of the eternal return is a response to such temptations. This extreme and questionable response, this decision to say yes to every non-sense, would not have been necessary if Nietzsche could have accepted the ancient notion of nature to which he was in fact attracted because it accepted inequality as a necessity. Nietzsche evidently did not take this way out of the problem of relativism because he believed that the modern notion of nature is truer. Similarly, Strauss emphatically acknowledges that the modern notion of nature, which understands nature in a

<sup>xvi</sup> In his last published work on Nietzsche, Strauss says that he does not have access to an important ingredient or perhaps even the nerve of Nietzsche’s “theology” (*SPPP*, 181). In his preface to the English edition of *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, Strauss criticizes Nietzsche’s critique of religion because its “basis is an act of will, of belief, and, being based on belief, is fatal to any philosophy” Leo Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 30. This critique, I note, could be sound and yet it is still possible that Nietzsche’s thought gives the best “understanding of the human roots of the belief in God.” In other words, this criticism alone does not undermine historicism but merely sharpens the opposition between philosophy and historicism, which sharpening fosters a desire for a mode of thinking that escapes Nietzsche’s predicament.

<sup>xvii</sup> *SCR*, 31.

nonteleological manner, poses a problem for a return to premodern thought.<sup>xviii</sup> Now the passage in question explicitly addresses the possibility of classical natural right, but it also addresses the question of history, for it puts the parties involved in the controversy over natural right (“liberals of various descriptions” and “the Catholic and non-Catholic disciples of Thomas Aquinas”) in the same boat or historical situation: “They all are modern men. We all are in the grip of the same difficulty.”<sup>xix</sup> Since modern natural science is hypothetical, we cannot be certain that its mechanical conception of the universe is true.<sup>xx</sup> Nonetheless, Strauss shows we are not free to hold the teleological conception of the universe if modern natural science can show, as it seems to do, the superiority of its conception of the universe to Aristotle’s conception by reference to the standards set by Aristotle himself.

To return to the course: At one point a student, dropping the whole historical aspect of the issue, asked Strauss whether one can proceed on the assumption that Aristotle was right. Strauss responds:

I have given that some thought. I don’t believe it can ever be as simple as that. I think *no* thinker of the past, whoever he may be, solves our problems. Let us assume that there was a thinker X who had established, in a way that will be always right, the fundamental principles. He doesn’t show you how they apply to us. And I am speaking now not only of the problems of social and economic and political thought, but also of course there are the problems—the theoretical problems—created by modern science (session 4).

By speaking of the theoretical problems (as opposed to the practical problems) created by modern science, Strauss suggests that the application of the true principles of ancient philosophy to the modern situation involves a rethinking of both ancient and modern thought. Does this then mean that there is no old philosophy to which we can return as the definitive and complete truth? At any rate, it seems to me that Strauss’s return to premodern philosophy must have been more complicated than it is sometimes assumed. Or to put it differently, Strauss was right to end his course the way he did: the problem of history does indeed confront us every day.

<sup>xviii</sup> *NRH*, 8.

<sup>xix</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>xx</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

## The Leo Strauss Transcript Project

Leo Strauss is well known as a thinker and writer, but he also had tremendous impact as a teacher. In the transcripts of his courses one can see Strauss comment on texts, including many he wrote little or nothing about, and respond generously to student questions and objections. The transcripts, amounting to more than twice the volume of Strauss's published work, will add immensely to the material available to scholars and students of Strauss's work.

In the early 1950s mimeographed typescripts of student notes of Strauss's courses were distributed among his students. In winter 1954, the first recording, of his course on Natural Right, was transcribed and distributed to students. Professor Herbert J. Storing obtained a grant from the Relm Foundation to support the taping and transcription, which resumed on a regular basis in the winter of 1956 with Strauss's course "Historicism and Modern Relativism." Of the 39 courses Strauss taught at the University of Chicago from 1958 until his departure in 1968, 34 were recorded and transcribed. After he retired from Chicago, recording of his courses continued at Claremont Men's College in the spring of 1968 and the fall and spring of 1969 (although the tapes for his last two courses there have not been located), and at St. John's College for the four years until his death in October 1973.

The surviving original audio recordings vary widely in quality and completeness, and after they had been transcribed, the audiotapes were sometimes reused, leaving the audio record very incomplete. Beginning in the late 1990s, Stephen Gregory, then the administrator of the University's John M. Olin Center for Inquiry into the Theory and Practice of Democracy funded by the John M. Olin Foundation, initiated the digital remastering of the surviving tapes by Craig Harding of September Media to ensure their preservation, improve their audibility, and make possible their eventual publication. This remastering received financial support from the Olin Center and from the Division of Preservation and Access of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The remastered audiofiles are available at the Strauss Center website: <https://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu/courses>.

Strauss permitted the taping and transcribing to go forward, but he did not check the transcripts or otherwise participate in the project. Accordingly, Strauss's close associate and colleague Joseph Cropsey originally put the copyright in his own name, though he assigned copyright to the Estate of Leo Strauss in 2008. Beginning in 1958 a headnote was placed at the beginning of each transcript, which read: "This transcription is a written record of essentially oral material, much of which developed spontaneously in the classroom and none of which was prepared with publication in mind. The transcription is made available to a limited number of interested persons, with the understanding that no use will be made of it that is inconsistent with the private and partly informal origin of the material. Recipients are emphatically requested not to seek to increase the circulation of the transcription. This transcription has not been checked, seen, or passed on by the lecturer." In 2008, Strauss's heir, his daughter Jenny Strauss, asked Nathan Tarcov to succeed Joseph Cropsey as Strauss's literary executor. They agreed that because of the

widespread circulation of the old, often inaccurate and incomplete transcripts and the continuing interest in Strauss's thought and teaching, it would be a service to interested scholars and students to proceed with publication of the remastered audiofiles and transcripts. They were encouraged by the fact that Strauss himself signed a contract with Bantam Books to publish four of the transcripts although in the end none were published.

The University's Leo Strauss Center, established in 2008, launched a project, presided over by its director Nathan Tarcov, and managed by Stephen Gregory, to correct the old transcripts on the basis of the remastered audiofiles as they became available, transcribe those audiofiles not previously transcribed, and annotate and edit for readability all the transcripts including those for which no audiofiles survived. This project was supported by grants from the Winiarski Family Foundation, Mr. Richard S. Shiffrin and Mrs. Barbara Z. Schiffrin, Earhart Foundation, and the Hertog Foundation, and contributions from numerous other donors. The Strauss Center was ably assisted in its fundraising efforts by Nina Botting-Herbst and Patrick McCusker, staff in the Office of the Dean of the Division of the Social Sciences at the University.

Senior scholars familiar with both Strauss's work and the texts he taught were commissioned as editors, with preliminary work done in most cases by student editorial assistants. The goal in editing the transcripts has been to preserve Strauss's original words as much as possible while making the transcripts easier to read. Strauss's impact (and indeed his charm) as a teacher is revealed in the sometimes informal character of his remarks. Readers should make allowance for the oral character of the transcripts. There are careless phrases, slips of the tongue, repetitions, and possible mistranscriptions. However enlightening the transcripts are, they cannot be regarded as the equivalent of works that Strauss himself wrote for publication.

Nathan Tarcov  
Editor-in-Chief

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August 2014

### **Editorial Headnote**

The course was taught in a seminar form. Strauss began class with general remarks; a student then read aloud portions of the text, followed by Strauss's comments and responses to student questions and comments. The texts assigned for this course were R. G. Collingwood's *Idea of History* and *Autobiography*; Nietzsche's *Use and Abuse of History*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and

*Beyond Good and Evil*. When the text was read aloud in class, this transcript records the words as they appear in the edition of the text assigned. Obvious mistranscriptions in these passages, however, have been corrected without notation. Original spelling has been retained. Citations are included for all passages.

There are no surviving audiotapes of this course. The transcript is based upon the original transcript, made by persons unknown to us, which can be consulted in the Leo Strauss archive in Special Collections at the University of Chicago Library. The transcriber would in some cases note in parentheses that an airplane flew over or that a student's question was inaudible. In other cases, he or she would leave a blank space in the transcript. The transcriber also inserted ellipses, which may or may not have meant that the tape was inaudible.

We have dealt with these difficulties in the following way. Ellipses original to the transcript have been retained. In cases when ellipses were inserted by the editor, they appear within square brackets. In some cases, the editor has supplied what he thought was the missing word or phrase. These insertions are in brackets and footnoted. When a student asked a question, the transcriber usually indicated this with "Question" surrounded by ellipses. This may or may not have meant that the question was inaudible. We have indicated the question in this way: "Student: . . ."

This transcript was edited by Nasser Behnegar, with assistance from Daniel Burns and Peter Walford.

**Session 1: January 25, 1956**  
**Historicism and Social Science Positivism**

**Leo Strauss:** — [in progress] [To avoid the danger of a parochial framework, social science must understand other cultures] as they understand themselves. Historical understanding becomes then the basis of the truly empirical science of society. Because the framework [. . .]<sup>i</sup> cannot be, must not be parochial, it is plainly admitted, and the question is how long one can avoid <sup>1</sup>[the] parochial. Now if one considers the infinity of the task of historical understanding, one begins to wonder if historical understanding will not simply take the place of the scientific study of society.

Furthermore, social science is presented as a body of true propositions about social phenomena. The true propositions are answers to questions, valid answers.<sup>2</sup> What objective and valid answers are may be determined by the rules and principles of logic, but the question depends on one's direction of interests and hence on one's values, which means on subjective principles. I follow [the implications of] logical positivism, you see, necessarily on subjective principles. Now if it is the direction of interests and not logic which supplies the fundamental concepts of a framework, it is therefore not possible to divorce from each other the subjective elements and the objective elements of social science. The objective answers receive their meaning from the subjective questions. Now one can of course say, as Max Weber still says, [that] there are timeless values. But that is rejected by social science positivism. The values are understood as values of a given society, and I would say consistently, that is, consistent of positivism. One therefore must conceive of the values<sup>3</sup> [embodied] in a given social science as dependent on the society to which the social science in question belongs, and that means the values depend on *history*. Not only is social science superseded, if it is to be empirical, by historical studies: social science itself proves to be historical. Reflection on social science as a historical phenomenon becomes inevitable, and this leads to a relativization of social science itself. Social science is a phenomenon which has occurred in the West with these-and-these conditions and is bound to these conditions and will perish with a change of these conditions.<sup>4</sup> A reflection on social science as a historical phenomenon leads eventually to the relativization of modern science or science as such. As a result, modern science comes to be<sup>5</sup> [viewed] as *one* historically relative way of understanding things which is not intrinsic in its superiority to alternative ways of understanding, and therewith positivism in its original claim to be *the* form of genuine knowledge of reality is abandoned.

One could say as well that positivism in its strict form is still an heir to Plato. One can state<sup>6</sup> a principle of Platonism very simply as follows: there is a pure mind in us which [. . .]<sup>ii</sup> pure mind grasps the pure truth. However much we may be involved in our opinions, in the accidents of

<sup>i</sup> The transcript has a lengthy blank space here, probably indicating inaudible words.

<sup>ii</sup> The transcript has a blank space here, perhaps indicating an inaudible word or words.

history, we have in us something which is above that: the pure mind. By making the necessary effort, we can actualize, activate, the pure mind. Then we can grasp the pure truth. Positivism has still something of that. The scientific method, the scientific procedure, is *the way to the objective truth*. But of course positivism rejects the notion of the pure mind; it rejects the notion even of the soul and of quite a few other things. How can it account for science as such? Ultimately, it is driven to conceive of science as essentially belonging to a historical context and relative to it, and therefore no longer *the way to the truth* but only the way in which a given society takes its bearing in the world as different from others. The extreme form is of course best known from Spengler's *Decline of the West*,<sup>iii</sup> where modern science appears as the specifically modern Western form of interpreting the world, which is different from the Greek form, Babylonian form, and so on and so on, and it is impossible to say one is superior to the other. In the positivist notion it goes without saying that modern mathematics marks the higher stage of the science of mathematics than Greek mathematics does. From the historicist point of view: No, just a different mathematics. The questions raised by modern mathematics are meaningless under the presuppositions of Greek mathematics and [. . .]<sup>iv</sup> vice versa. That would be the extreme assertion of historicism.

The practical decisive difference for our purposes between historicism and positivism can be stated as follows: historicism abandons this distinction between fact and value. Every understanding, scientific or prescientific, depends on a comprehensive view—what the Germans call *Weltanschauung*, under a comprehensive view—and this comprehensive view necessarily implies principles of preference or evaluation. But these principles of evaluation, of preference, differ in principle from historical epoch to historical epoch. So in other words, historicism admits that it is impossible to understand without evaluating, but it denies that there are timeless values. Positivism says it is possible to reach universally valid knowledge, objective knowledge, but only of facts, and it is possible to understand facts without evaluating. Now in actual practice, the two things which I distinguish as positivism and historicism overlap. Under the influence of German historicism, American social science has imbibed certain of these principles which came originally from Germany. You only have to read the preface of Benedict—I almost said Benedict Arnold—of Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture*<sup>v</sup> to see that she makes it clear. There is an American heritage of Dewey and there is Spengler. Only the marriage, the mating, of these very heterogeneous beings, Dewey and Spengler, produces this kind of anthropology. And in other occasions I think [. . .]<sup>vi</sup> would make similar experiences.

One could also state these conditions . . . I would like to illustrate this also by the following considerations. Modern science in general, and social science in particular, conceives of itself as progressive, if you take the primary and fundamental strata, which means it has in itself the

<sup>iii</sup> Oswald Spengler, *Decline of the West*, trans. C. F. Atkinson (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1932).

<sup>iv</sup> The transcript has a blank space here.

<sup>v</sup> Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934).

<sup>vi</sup> The transcript has a blank space here.

possibility of progress—not the necessity but the possibility of progress—and as a whole it came [in]to being by virtue of one fundamental progress beyond all<sup>7</sup> [naïve] thought and has in itself the potentiality of infinite further progress. But this notion of the possibility of progress is essential to modern science—and of course that does not belong to the logic of social science proper but it is an integral part of itself and of Spengler. Now this . . . therefore for this very reason social science is compelled to consider the question of the conditions of progress, scientific progress, which are partly naturally social conditions. It must see social science within a social context, and that social context is necessarily a changing context. Now there is this problem: If you look at any social science, you can speak perhaps of an intrinsic progress within society, meaning that just as physics or chemistry progresses, why should not social science progress as a science? Let us assume that this is so in fact. But then there is always something else. Political science in a given state and its conceptual framework of course depends never merely on<sup>8</sup> scientific progress alone; it also depends on the change[s] in political society.<sup>9</sup> [Positivistic] political science cannot possibly assume<sup>10</sup> that political life itself is progressing; it can only speak of a change in political life.

Now you see what happens then. We have then a change in the overall character of political science which is not due to scientific progress but to a change in the character of the society. Political science as a whole is dependent on something which is its matrix, society, which changes; and we cannot speak of progress or decay here according to these principles, and that means the fundamentally historical character of political science. One could illustrate this in various other ways. And now this historicist position is, it seems to me, of a much greater interest and importance because we are not confronted with this silly proposition that value judgments must be completely avoided, and this arbitrary limitation of the subject center of political science, of social science in general. You hear this quite frequently today. Of course, a social science which does not raise value questions or does not answer them is a meaningless thing, but these values are of course the values of our society. I think you must have heard that. That is the crudest form of this view, and we have to discuss it and deepen this position. I could really illustrate this by quotations from a book which I brought with me, but before turning to that I would like to know if you have any points relating to what we have discussed hitherto.<sup>vii</sup>

And I think we should now turn to a discussion of historicism, and I give you just one specimen, perhaps the best specimen I could even find. That is in *Masters of Political Thought*, volume 1, by Michael B. Foster of Christ Church, Oxford.<sup>viii</sup> Now<sup>11</sup> this book by Mr. Foster is one of the very, very few textbooks in political theory which one can recommend. There are chiefly selections from Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, up to Machiavelli, among which especially selections from Aristotle are very well chosen. If one is prevented by, I don't know what, illness or so, from reading the whole *Politics* and one would take only brief selections, one would get a not-

<sup>vii</sup> The transcriber notes that question period followed. It was not transcribed.

<sup>viii</sup> Michael B. Foster, *Masters of Political Thought*, vol. 1, *Plato to Machiavelli* (Cambridge, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1941).

misleading idea of Aristotle, and I think one could hardly improve on the selections. And<sup>12</sup> his comment also shows that he has some real understanding of Aristotle.<sup>13</sup> But Foster is a historicist nevertheless. I would like to read to you a few passages which may illustrate this better than what I could say.

[What, then,] is the advantage which we may hope to derive from a study of the political writers of the past? A view prevalent in earlier ages [which is of course the prehistoric view—LS] would have provided a simple answer to this question. A work of politics, it would have been said, is a handbook<sup>ix</sup> of an art, the art of governing. Just as a man of superior knowledge or skill in the art of carpentry may compile a work in which his knowledge is made available to those who aspire to be good carpenters, so a man of superior wisdom in the art of politics may set down his knowledge in a book for the instruction of those whose business it is to found, govern, or preserve states.<sup>x</sup>

That is a somewhat crude statement, but one could put it this way:<sup>14</sup> political philosophy in the original sense really was meant to be guidance for legislators, and not only legislators in the somewhat restricted sense that the term has taken on in modern legislative assemblies, but even<sup>15</sup> all authors of codes for whole societies. This is out.

This is certainly not the advantage which a modern reader can be promised from a study of their works [of the ancient thinkers—LS].<sup>xi</sup>

[Politics cannot be an art, because this—LS] historical situation in which the politician has to act is always unique. An art presupposes a material which does not vary [but the material on which the politician works does vary—LS] . . . situations in which the statesman has to act . . . are unique in a more thoroughgoing sense. They are not to be covered by a single, unchanging set of principles, requiring only to be differently applied. And if the would-be statesman were to succeed in eliciting a system from the works of a previous writer, it would inevitably be a system applicable only to an age already past.<sup>xii</sup>

That it is possible by reasoning to determine what end the state should fulfill, and to deduce in detail the means by which it can fulfill it best—that it is the task of political theory to conduct that<sup>xiii</sup> reasoning, and the

<sup>ix</sup> In original: “the handbook”

<sup>x</sup> *Masters of Political Thought*, vol. 1, 2.

<sup>xi</sup> *Masters*, 3.

<sup>xii</sup> *Masters*, 3. The ellipses indicate that Strauss has omitted part of the text.

<sup>xiii</sup> In original: “such”

duty of political practice to be guided by it—this notion is readily intelligible, straightforward, and congenial to common sense. We should be prone enough to accept it if the evidence permitted us to do so. But the evidence does not permit it. If it were so, the various political theories which occur at different epochs in the history of philosophy would be related to one another as various, more or less successful, attempts to solve an identical problem, and the solutions would agree with one another so far as they were successful in attaining<sup>16</sup> to the truth. [But that is exactly not the case—LS]<sup>xiv</sup>

[T]he great political theories which have appeared in the course of history are not related to one another in the way in which the attempts of students to solve an identical problem are related to one another. Each of them is individual (as a work of art is),<sup>xv</sup> not merely in respect of the accidents of its presentation . . . but through and through.<sup>xvi</sup>

The historical element penetrates to the very essence of the theory [which means the *questions* are always different, not only the answers—LS] . . . This is only to say that the theory which an age produces is an expression of the spirit of that age in the same sense in which its art, its political and social institutions, its religion are expressions of it.<sup>xvii</sup>

[But if that is true—LS], the question presents itself with hardly diminished force: What is the use of studying the political theories of the past if they all are dated through and through?<sup>xviii</sup> . . . [Answer—LS]: Only by help of the contrast with other civilizations can we become aware that the principles upon which our own is founded are peculiar and unique.<sup>xix</sup>

In other words, we learn<sup>17</sup> to know ourselves. More specifically (that is only an enlargement of this), the political theories of the past made modern society what it is. So if we want to understand ourselves as modern men, we must understand the genesis of modern men, and that means, among other things, the history of political–social thought. I think I can read it; I conclude only with this quotation:

<sup>xiv</sup> *Masters*, 6-7.

<sup>xv</sup> In the transcript: “of this theory,” not “(as a work of art is).”

<sup>xvi</sup> *Masters*, 7. The ellipses indicate that Strauss omitted part of the sentence.

<sup>xvii</sup> Foster, *Masters of Political Thought*, 8. The ellipsis indicates that Strauss omitted a portion of the text.

<sup>xviii</sup> In original: What is the use of studying the political theories of the past? If each is tied so closely to the conditions of the age from which it sprang, how can it be relevant to the conditions of our own?”

<sup>xix</sup> *Masters*, 9. The ellipses indicate that Strauss omitted a portion of the text.

to understand the “modern mentality” is to understand ourselves. If the study of past political theories contributes to this, it needs no further justification. “Know thyself” was the motto inscribed on the temple at Delphi, by the oracle of which Socrates was dispatched on the quest from which all subsequent European philosophy has sprung.<sup>xx</sup>

Well you see here,<sup>18</sup> [Socrates], of course, when he spoke of “know thyself” (or is there another word for it?) never thought for one moment of historical self-knowledge. Now that of course does not settle the issue; maybe the Delphian oracle and Socrates were naïve and we are not, and we have therefore to go into that question.

Now I will<sup>19</sup> begin with a coherent presentation of the issue. Let us go back to the beginning. Philosophy in its original sense, or political philosophy in particular, has led at all times to a variety of teachings. Think only of today. I mean, even if you counted only the schools which exercise an influence on public opinion you’ll find [them] at least far apart, and more or less of course [at] all times.<sup>20</sup> Now this variety of teachings gives rise and always gave rise to skepticism in regard to philosophy, and that led at a certain moment to a radical change in the character of philosophy. That moment was the beginning of modern philosophy. At that moment, some man or men made this suggestion: There must have been something fundamentally wrong with philosophy since it could never get rid of skepticism; let us make the most extreme skepticism the very basis of philosophy and build a perfectly safe and foolproof edifice on the very grounds of the most extreme skepticism. In a formula: Dogmatism—dogmatism not in the<sup>21</sup> [pejorative] sense [as] a positive teaching, dogmatism based on skepticism. That was the great idea of Descartes in particular, but not only of Descartes. But what happened? The same story again: a variety of teachings, yet [with] this one great change. In this process of the redefinition of philosophy there emerged science in the sense in which I defined it at the beginning, a philosophically neutral natural science. There had not been a philosophically neutral natural science prior to modern times. Mathematics, mathematical astronomy of course had existed, but not a philosophically neutral science. Now once this science had emerged, once it had been seen that people agree regarding cosmology and the other parts of natural science, they were struck by the contrast between science and philosophy. And this contrast, namely, science, safe, solid, sober, steadily progressing; philosophy, never settling its issues, always presenting the disgraceful spectacle of anarchy and chaos—and out of this grew then positivism as the self-consciousness of modern science conceived<sup>22</sup> of [resting on a decision of the modern man].

Now positivism would seem to be inadequate for the reasons which I have mentioned. Philosophy is then necessary, but philosophy must face this difficulty created by the fate of philosophy. Is there not something wrong with philosophy, that it never succeeded in bringing about agreement, unanimity? Is it not of the essence of philosophy that there is always the variety of philosophic doctrines and therefore that philosophy is always accompanied, as by its

<sup>xx</sup> *Masters*, 15.

shadow, by skepticism? Now the need for philosophy and at the same time the awareness of the fate of philosophy has given rise to a new kind of dogmatism based on skepticism, and that is historicism.

This thought can be stated as follows, provisionally. There is indeed a variety of philosophies and more particularly of political philosophies, but there is no reason to worry about that because there is order in that variety, not chaos, not anarchy. May I remind you of the simple scheme taught in every textbook? Plato of course says something entirely different from Machiavelli, and Machiavelli says something entirely different from Hobbes, and Hobbes again from Locke. Chaos. But the chaos, the appearance of chaos, [dis]appears once you see [the] four thinkers are all thinkers in their settings: Plato and the Greek city–state; Machiavelli and the Renaissance; Hobbes and the absolute state of the seventeenth century; Locke in the constitutional monarchy and the beginning of capitalist society of the seventeenth century. So the problem has disappeared, it seems. Philosophy depends on the historical situation, on its time. The variety of philosophies is perfectly legitimate and no reason for worrying because philosophies must vary just as historical situations vary. All philosophies are true, but true for their situations. That is the precise meaning of the word relativism: relativism means relative to something.<sup>23</sup> Relativism [in a sense means] there is truth, but the truth is always relative to something specific, not relative to man as man, but the specific man. The philosopher is the son of his times necessarily, and not only as regards his ties and trousers and style of furniture but regarding the innermost recesses of his mind.

Now this being the case, philosophy in the old sense of the term, quest for the truth, is altogether impossible. But philosophy in a modified sense is possible and necessary. Philosophy ought to be the philosophy of its time, the self-understanding of a time and its ideas. There is no time, there is no society,<sup>24</sup> people, period, or whatever unit you take, which is not constituted as what it is by its ideas. Can we speak of America without thinking of the American dream, as it has been called? And that applies to every society. So in other words, that is legitimate and necessary, that man tries to understand himself as a son of his time or his society and its ideas. Philosophy therefore cannot be separated from history, from historical understanding. Political philosophy in particular and historical studies must become completely fused to [. . .].<sup>xxi</sup> To understand myself means [to understand] myself as a product of the past, and therefore self-understanding, this philosophic pursuit, is in itself historical understanding because I am the product of the past. Philosophic questions rightly understood are historical questions; historical questions rightly understood are philosophic questions. This is a kind of definition of historicism.

Now in order to understand—and, well, it is represented in a tremendous literature<sup>25</sup> [from] all over the Western world. I mean, Foster is a good example. Collingwood is the most important Anglo–Saxon example, but you find it also in A. D. Lindsay’s *Modern Democratic State*.<sup>xxii26</sup>

<sup>xxi</sup> The transcript has a blank space here.

<sup>xxii</sup> A. D. Lindsey, *The Modern Democratic State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962).

But the root is for certain reasons in Germany, and therefore there are various ways in which it came to this country and to England from Germany, and of course Hegel and the whole Hegelian tradition of which I shall speak later. Spengler exercised a tremendous influence, and then also what is called sociology of knowledge is a kind of minor appendage of the German historical movement, and you know that this sociology of knowledge has had considerable effect on this very campus in the last generation.<sup>27</sup> So there is no doubt that we are talking about something in a system and not about a figment of my imagination.

Now let us first consider two things. How did prehistoric political philosophy conceive of its relation to history? And secondly, how did it understand the fact of variety of philosophic doctrines? Because this fact that there is a chaos or [anarchy in philosophy was obvious at all times in which philosophy existed].<sup>28</sup> When I speak of “prehistorical” political philosophy I mean at least all political philosophy up to 1800, but even through a large part of the nineteenth century this old quest for *the* political truth went on. But in the nineteenth century it always had a bit of bad conscience with a view to history, but this bad conscience did not exist<sup>29</sup> [clearly] until the year 1800. I would like to explain this. Now philosophy was traditionally understood as the quest for universal truth, the nature of political things, *the* best political order, and as such it was distinguished from history in every form, because history as history always deals with individuals, not only individual human beings but also individual societies, individual civilizations. In brief,<sup>30</sup> an historian always has to do with beings who have proper names. No history without them. Philosophy, even political philosophy, as such did not have proper names, except on the title page—the name of the author, maybe—and in footnotes, illustrations, but the body of philosophic teaching did not allow proper names. Philosophy was therefore understood as something radically different from history of philosophy. The question of the best political order is obviously different from the question of [how] Plato or Machiavelli or Locke has answered that question. Therefore, history of philosophy played a very subordinate role; it was generally left to<sup>31</sup> [antiquarians], philologists and this kind of people, and when a philosopher really spoke<sup>32</sup> quasi-historically, as Aristotle does for example at the beginning of his *Metaphysics*, it did not have a historical meaning. When Aristotle discusses in the first book of the *Metaphysics* the development of the philosophy up to his time, he did so only for this reason: in order to show [that] in all these varieties of doctrines nothing has been seen which has not been provided for in my (meaning Aristotle’s) doctrines. There have been people who have talked of water and fire and love and hatred, making these their fundamental principles. What they meant, the principles, are all there. In other words, it is a kind of checking on the truth of Aristotle. History of philosophy, this doesn’t exist. History of political philosophy didn’t exist at all. The first history of political philosophy came out of the nineteenth century. There are a few—I remember a paper on history of natural right in Latin in a German university in the late seventeenth century. But that was a kind of celebration of the birthday of the prince they had; and the man wanted to speak about something that would be of some interest to the broader public, and then he spoke about the history just as a mathematician might occasionally speak about the history of theory of functions instead of speaking about the propositions of theory of functions itself. But that did not mean that they were unhistorical, the old philosophers were unhistorical in a crude sense. It was understood that political philosophy presupposes history,

meaning this:<sup>33</sup> without the experience of the variety of social orders, the question of the best social order could not have been raised. Just as you see today, someone who never left his small valley will of course think that valley is the world and will not see that there are other possibilities of living. The question [of] which kind, which way of life is the best, cannot arise because it is simply settled by the narrowness of the horizon.

One can say generally regarding classical political philosophy that without the work of Herodotus, *The History*—at the same time anthropology or an equivalent—Plato and Aristotle are wholly unintelligible, it is presupposed. And if Foster and some other people say the Greeks knew only of one civilization and therefore there was no problem, whereas we know of many civilizations, he's grossly wrong. It is not true that the Greeks simply said there are Greeks and everyone else is a barbarian.<sup>xxiii</sup> Herodotus alone is a proof that the Greeks knew of a variety of what they regarded as high civilizations. And<sup>34</sup> you don't even have to go to Herodotus: you can only read Plato's *Timaeus*, for example, or the *Laws*, and see what he says about Egypt to see that the variety of civilizations, as we might call it, was known and was the very premise of it. But<sup>35</sup> history, however important as a presupposition and an introduction, as it were, to political philosophy, was in itself subphilosophic, not reaching the philosophic level. As Bacon put it later on but in a period of earlier time: the human faculty which corresponds to history is memory, and memory is not thinking. Thinking proper, that is philosophy. But this much very roughly about the old notion, the traditional notion of the relation of philosophy to history.

Now I turn to the second point. How did earlier philosophers conceive of the variety of philosophies? Were they not worried by the fact that there was a variety of schools at all times? They were not worried by this. They explained it as follows: the subject matter is of such a difficulty that this alone explains the variety of opinions. In the words of Aristotle: "Just as the eyes of night birds are related to the light of the day, so is the mind of our soul related to the highest principles."<sup>xxiv</sup> Now if that is so, why should there not be—it would be altogether impossible not to have variety of opinion. You can say, "Well, what about mathematics? Is mathematics not very difficult, and is there not unanimity?" Yes, but does not the question arise: Is not mathematics, in spite of all its great difficulties, of a radically different character? Plato has discussed the problem of mathematics, of the mathematical mind, in a series of dialogues which begins with the dialogue *Theaetetus*, which everyone who is interested in the problem of philosophy as distinguished from mathematics or science in general should read, and more than once. *Theaetetus*, but also the two sequels, the dialogues called the *Sophist* and *Statesman* dealing with the same theme. [LS writes on the blackboard] (Well, you can't see it, I'm sorry: *Theaetetus*.) Now in this dialogue *Theaetetus*, there is a so-called excursus in which Socrates describes, without saying so (without saying so quite clearly, at least), the mathematical mind.<sup>xxv</sup> It is a mind which loses itself completely in the beauty of mathematical objects, because

<sup>xxiii</sup> Cf. Foster, *Masters of Political Thought*, 9ff.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 993b9-11.

<sup>xxv</sup> *Theaetetus* 172c-177c.

exactness, stringency, clarity, that was for Plato the greatest of all beauties except the highest. And I think every one of you that has ever studied mathematics with some success will have<sup>36</sup> [had] the experience of this beauty. But the mathematician as mathematician forgets himself and his human situation in the contemplation of the mathematical objects. Socrates used the very strong term: he does not know whether his neighbor, his fellow man, is a human being or some other brute.<sup>xxvi</sup> You must understand that accidentally he may know it, but not as mathematician. What does it mean? Mathematics, in spite of all its great virtues, is partial: it deals with special kind[s] of objects. Philosophy is comprehensive. Above all, philosophy is self-comprehension, self-knowledge. Philosophy questions men's whole being, and therefore the difficulty is greater than in any other intellectual pursuit. From this very fact, from the very comprehensiveness of philosophy, there follows the desire of philosophers to master the whole by cutting off questions to simplify the things. In other words, philosophy necessarily generates its own worst enemy—necessarily—and this worst enemy we can call the charm of competence. That is fundamentally what Plato meant by the sophist in the highest sense of the term: a man who is very clever, who is very intelligent, but charmed by it in such a way that he does not realize the limits of his competence. It leads in practice to an absolutization of parts or pieces of the whole, and that explains the variety of philosophies. The variety of philosophies, in other words, is due to the fact that philosophy is philosophy, love of wisdom. Unanimity cannot even be expected because of the comprehensive, not partial, character of the question. There will always be people who prefer simple answers because of their simplicity, merely for that, and who therefore stop thinking at an arbitrary selected point.

Now, but that would have been the answer of men like Plato and Aristotle. The fact that there are also a variety of schools, and even a disagreement among *them*<sup>37</sup>, [although] they were not so definite and certain as, say, Democritus and the atomists were—<sup>xxvii</sup>—Cruelty and hatred are, for example, forms of meanness, of pettiness. And as for the superiority of philosophy over other human pursuits,<sup>38</sup> [the fact] appeared to them most simply<sup>39</sup> that not to philosophize means to believe to know what one does not know, and this is a form of boasting or pretending<sup>40</sup> which no one who can be taken seriously would allow. At any rate, whatever the difference, whatever the theoretical disagreements were, there was no anarchy regarding morality among the classical thinkers. To take some of which to me is most striking: when you study the history of Thucydides and the Platonic dialogues<sup>41</sup> and you understand—which does not mean that you read superficially, the crude and massive and politically important value judgments of Thucydides are not different from those of Plato: for example, that Pericles was infinitely superior to the crook-like Cleon.<sup>42</sup> And even, [to take the most massive example], that Pericles was very questionable from a very high point of view: no disagreement between Plato and Thucydides. The disagreements refer to other things which are not irrelevant for action.

<sup>xxvi</sup> *Theaetetus* 174b.

<sup>xxvii</sup> The tape was changed at this point.

Now this variety of<sup>43</sup> [philosophical] doctrines cannot be disposed of by anything. As you see today, for some of the technological positivists and their opponents, each group is certain that the other is wrong and yet no group can convince the others. Yet no group is not for a moment disturbed by this very fact. That was always so. It is then essential to philosophy that there is a variety of philosophies. Wasn't it this fact that took on such importance in the nineteenth century so that it led to a redefinition of the function and scope of philosophy? That was true no doubt partly to the success of science, physics, and the contrast between physics and philosophy, but this is altogether insufficient as an explanation. In order to prepare a better explanation, let us first consider<sup>44</sup> historicism itself on its most simple level. I repeat what I said before. Political philosophy must become self-understanding of a time, of a society and its ideas. That is the view which I read to you from Foster. Now it is also represented in A. D. Lindsay's *Modern Democratic State*, in which it is said<sup>45</sup> [that] the old-fashioned question of the right political order or of *the* state must be replaced by the question of the modern state or of the operative ideals of our civilization or of our values.<sup>xxviii</sup> Yes, well, I don't want to speak of the difficulty, how can you really speak of the modern state without<sup>46</sup> [clarifying] the state itself, which seems to me an important difficulty, but I quote Lindsay: "Any thorough discussion" of those ideals of our society "is bound to give some consideration to the absolute worth of such ideals"<sup>xxix</sup>—which means we are back where we were. We are again back to the old permanent questions, which of course prove to be the primary questions. You cannot judge, speak properly of the values of your society intelligently if you do not measure them by *the* ideals. It is—in other words, it seems to be impossible to abandon the old questions of political philosophies. But what could be the consequence if the historicist thesis were correct? The only consequence could be that the answer would be different, that ultimately the question of the absolute world of ideas, to use Lindsay's phrase, that the answers differ from<sup>47</sup> historical situation to historical situation. Yet how can an answer satisfy us regarding the absolute worth of our ideals which will prove to be provisional? How can anything satisfy us in these matters of which we know in advance that it is dated, which means that it has a flaw somewhere?<sup>48</sup>

One can express the historicist thesis as follows: the thought of every epoch is surrounded by walls which one cannot transcend. That is not a good simile, because there are limitations which you cannot overcome. If you know the limitations, you are already beyond them. Stated simply: If every age has a prejudice, a fundamental prejudice which will be discarded by the next age, in the moment you know that prejudice as a prejudice, you are already free from it in principle. So one would have to say then more precisely, and that is what I mean: the thought of every epoch is surrounded by invisible walls. We make assumptions which we regard as evidence, which we cannot help regarding as evidence and which, in a way which no one can foresee, will appear to be unevident to later generations. But if this is so and we are forced to raise the fundamental questions, we shall be as certain of our answer, of the answer which suggests itself to us, as earlier generations have been of theirs. What would be the difference? Some slight uneasiness

<sup>xxviii</sup> Lindsey, *Modern Democratic State*, 1-3, 37-38, 46-51.

<sup>xxix</sup> *Modern Democratic State*, 45.

that we know<sup>49</sup> that our insights believe[d] to be final will perish again. But that can be of no use to us because we can't help raising the question, because we can't help (to quote Lindsay again) giving "some consideration to the absolute worth of" the ideals of our society. And raising the question means looking for an answer, and the answer will appear to us as evident as it appeared to earlier man. And yet we divine without being able to make any use of it that it will prove to be a dated answer, as all answers have proved to be dated, and that is that.

Still a general uneasiness exists which did not exist in former times in regarding philosophic answers. Let us consider the historicist thesis by itself, then. I mean, one can state the thesis as follows, and one must state it to begin with as follows: All human thought, all thought, is historical. The highest principles of theory and practice are relative to specific situations. But what about this thought itself, that all thought is historical? Must this also not be historical, relative to the nineteenth and twentieth century, just as utilitarianism belongs to the eighteenth and nineteenth century? And we would simply have to look into this historical connection, and by this we would have to begin at historical explanation of historical relativism, and that would be the first and decisive step toward liberation from historical relativism. This difficulty is a serious one, no doubt, but it does not exhaust the issue. It is more important, it is equally important, I think, to consider the premises. Has the premise that all thought is historically relative and only historically relative ever been established? Or how can it possibly be established? You all remember the scheme from your college courses. And so you have here a series of doctrines—a system, we might call it—and you have here a series of periods, and the general idea is the doctrine is a function of the situation. [LS writes on the blackboard] How do we know that? I readdress it to you. What is the general answer given in these courses? How do we know this? Plato, the Greek city; Machiavelli, the Renaissance; Hobbes, the absolute monarchy of the seventeenth century; John Stuart Mill, nineteenth-century England after the Reform period. And so how do we know that? Excuse me if I ask you this question . . . It is a very simple question, that is the reason why I apologize.

**Student:** [. . .]<sup>xxx</sup>

**LS:** Yes, historical evidence. But what does historical evidence prove in these matters?<sup>xxxi</sup>

Let us assume all the thinkers have been studied and all have [been] found wanting, and we can then show that they have been found wanting because they have accepted the prejudices of their time. Aristotle accepted the prejudice that slavery is just, Hobbes accepted the prejudice that there must be some absolute Leviathan-like power, and so on and so on. But still that would strictly speaking prove<sup>50</sup> something only regarding political philosophy up to now, because history could not do more than that. It would not disprove<sup>51</sup> the possibility of political

<sup>xxx</sup> The transcriber notes: "Apparently an answer was given from the floor at this point."

<sup>xxxi</sup> The transcriber notes that a short question period followed. It was not transcribed.

philosophy. So there is something else which is implied.<sup>xxxiii</sup> But I would draw one conclusion from this rapid survey, and I think that would be confirmed by any more detailed analysis: that the historical evidence in itself proves absolutely nothing, and what is presupposed is a philosophic criticism of political philosophy. First you prove the impossibility of political philosophy—which means of course also the impossibility of moral philosophy, that is inseparable. You prove the impossibility of moral or political philosophy and then you can, if you wish, say: How could these geniuses be so benighted? And then you can say: Well, it has something to do with their times. But it is absolutely uninteresting. The crucial thing, the only important thing, is the philosophic truth of that impossibility of moral and political philosophy.

Now one can also state it as follows. [LS writes on the blackboard] Let us assume we have a perfect line here, two sets of data and one-to-one coordination. Doctrines are functions of time, and [of] that we are absolutely certain. It would be perfectly compatible with the possibility that one doctrine, any you can think of, is *the* true doctrine, and only this man was so fortunate as to live on a kind of peak in which there existed the greatest possibility of seeing *the* truth. And in other periods there were<sup>52</sup> various kinds of obfuscations. The historical evidence proves absolutely<sup>53</sup> [nothing], and therefore one has to consider the philosophic argument. We cannot do that now, it is too late, but I would only like to describe it in a very general way, formal way. We can say it is a critique of human reason. Now such critiques of human reason were made with such resounding effect by Hume and by Kant, but both Hume's and Kant's criticisms were limited, because they allowed for the possibility of a permanently true moral teaching and therefore of a permanently true political teaching. But it is too long. So it is not the critiques of human reason as we find them in the works of Hume and Kant, but an enlargement of that so that moral reason is included. Just as Kant and Hume believed the proven impossibility of metaphysics, some other people must have proven the impossibility of moral philosophy. That is one thing. But one other step was needed to establish what seems to be historicism, and that is the alleged or real proof that science rests on metaphysical foundations. Because if that is so and metaphysics is impossible as objective truth, science can only be, as a whole, radically hypothetical and favored by given types of societies. That indeed [is the basis of historicism]: a critique of reason enlarged so that it embraces moral reason as well as science.<sup>54</sup> And<sup>55</sup> we must try at least to get some notion of<sup>56</sup> [what] this critique of reason looked like, and also see how and why a critique of reason, which in itself has nothing to do with history, could become connected with history—that is to say, historical evidence. And we will try to do that next time.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> The transcriber notes that there were “more questions.” The discussion was not transcribed.

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<sup>1</sup> Deleted “this”

<sup>2</sup> Deleted “What valid answers are....”

<sup>3</sup> Deleted “and bodies.”

<sup>4</sup> Deleted “It eventually is.”

<sup>5</sup> Deleted “used.”

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- <sup>6</sup> Deleted “as.”
- <sup>7</sup> Deleted “area of.”
- <sup>8</sup> Deleted “the.”
- <sup>9</sup> Deleted “the.”
- <sup>10</sup> Deleted “as positivist.”
- <sup>11</sup> Deleted “Mr.”
- <sup>12</sup> Deleted “he really.”
- <sup>13</sup> Deleted “Now.”
- <sup>14</sup> Deleted “a.”
- <sup>15</sup> Deleted “of.”
- <sup>16</sup> Deleted “the truth.”
- <sup>17</sup> Deleted “that.”
- <sup>18</sup> Deleted “so that is.”
- <sup>19</sup> Deleted “then.”
- <sup>20</sup> Changed from “you’ll find, at least for a part, and more or less of course on all times.”
- <sup>21</sup> Deleted “value-free present.”
- <sup>22</sup> Deleted “out of skepticism of as self decision.”
- <sup>23</sup> Deleted “Relativism, if in a sense it means, there is truth, but the truth is always relative to something.”
- <sup>24</sup> Deleted “but.”
- <sup>25</sup> Deleted “of.”
- <sup>26</sup> Deleted “and it came.”
- <sup>27</sup> Deleted “Now before we.”
- <sup>28</sup> Changed from “anarchic philosophy was always not I mean because it is so obvious at all times there is philosophy.”
- <sup>29</sup> Deleted “act this graphic.”
- <sup>30</sup> Deleted “you cannot speak.”
- <sup>31</sup> Deleted “antiquarium, you know, antiquarium.”
- <sup>32</sup> Deleted “about.”
- <sup>33</sup> Deleted “If.”
- <sup>34</sup> Deleted “if.”
- <sup>35</sup> Deleted “political philosophy, but.”
- <sup>36</sup> Deleted “made.”
- <sup>37</sup> Deleted “as thought.”
- <sup>38</sup> Deleted “it.”

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<sup>39</sup> Moved “the fact.”

<sup>40</sup> Deleted “that is to say”

<sup>41</sup> Deleted “but.”

<sup>42</sup> Deleted “and;” moved “to take the most massive example;” deleted “must one question.”

<sup>43</sup> Deleted “political.”

<sup>44</sup> Deleted “the.”

<sup>45</sup> Deleted “the question.”

<sup>46</sup> Deleted “glorifying.”

<sup>47</sup> Deleted “the.”

<sup>48</sup> Deleted “The thought.”

<sup>49</sup> Deleted “or.”

<sup>50</sup> Deleted “only.”

<sup>51</sup> Deleted “of.”

<sup>52</sup> Deleted “some kind of obfuscations.”

<sup>53</sup> Deleted “not.”

<sup>54</sup> Deleted “that;” moved “is the basis of historicism.”

<sup>55</sup> Deleted “we must say first.”

<sup>56</sup> Deleted “how”

## Session 2: January 30, 1956

### Historicism and Materialist and Idealistic Views of History

**Leo Strauss:** [in progress] —these assumptions on which [a] society [in] an epoch is based legitimate for the situation in question simultaneously the understanding of facts and evaluation. Science, so far from being the highest form of human understanding, is derivative from a comprehensive view of a specific time<sup>1</sup> and can therefore never claim the highest status. The change from one comprehensive view to another does not have the character of a progress. This is what I believe to be historicism in contradistinction to positivism, according to which science is the perfection of man's natural understanding, and it is in principle progressive or cumulative. And furthermore, positivism implies the radical distinction between facts and values of which I have spoken. Now I said only last time that what is now being taught, especially in the social sciences, is something in between positivism and historicism. You find the pure form of positivism rather frequently, but you will find the pure form of historicism very rarely. But what you have is something in between, and therefore I am not sure whether you recognize historicism as easily<sup>2</sup> as you recognize positivism. I must make<sup>3</sup> [this clear], otherwise we<sup>4</sup> wouldn't understand each other.

Is<sup>5</sup> [the] notion of a comprehensive view—which is my translation of the German word *Weltanschauung*—intelligible to you? Well, let me take an example which is most familiar, perhaps, and that is Spengler. When Spengler speaks of a variety of cultures, and each culture has its peculiar overall understanding of all possible phenomena, a part of<sup>6</sup> [that] is its understanding of nature, which may then be developed into a science. But this science, say modern science, is not the perfection of our ordinary understanding of natural things but it is a specific form of an activity which existed in classical antiquity, or in Babylonia, or in Egypt, or wherever else we might be, and it is impossible to say one [form] is superior or truer than the other. Now<sup>7</sup> it doesn't make any great difference whether you understand these units in the Spenglerian way, as comprehensive cultures, or in a narrower way. The principles remain the same. I think even in the sociology of knowledge, as it is generally taught, there is some implication in this direction that knowledge, all knowledge—this means of course also scientific knowledge—rests on a certain social structure, and this social structure in itself is connected with other things. But science<sup>8</sup> derives ultimately from principles which are not rationally evident but imposed upon the human mind. Now do you have any difficulty which you are able to state so that I have<sup>9</sup> some possibility of clarifying it?<sup>i</sup>

Modern science in its . . . procedures is correct, and because, of course, while it is never completely correct, it is constantly changing. It has in itself its principles of correction. As long as this view is maintained I would speak of positivism, but at the moment science itself is drawn into this relativistic conception, science, modern science, is just one peculiar way of looking at

<sup>i</sup> The transcriber notes that a question period followed. It was not transcribed.

this; this is not intrinsically superior to any other way of looking at<sup>10</sup> [things]. In that moment it has ceased to be positivism. Do you see that? Now once this step is taken there is no longer any reason for distinguishing between facts and values as<sup>11</sup> was done by the positivists, because in the first place this distinction is based entirely on science and the understanding of the methods of science; and secondly,<sup>12</sup> these overall principles which guide human understanding of a specific time or a specific epoch or society are<sup>13</sup> [not evident in] themselves. You know? There is no difference<sup>14</sup> [in] cognitive status between the highest principles of theoretical scientific understanding and the highest principles of evaluation. Is this not clear? And that I call historicism.

Now the practical consequence is this. Whereas according to positivism political philosophy is just nonsense (astrology, alchemy or so), according to the historicist view political philosophy is legitimate and necessary. It is the self-consciousness of a specific historical situation, and that means also of the ideals belonging to that situation. This would not exclude the extreme possibility that within certain periods there might be a variety of ideas because this variety might belong together; in other words, a society or a period might be so constructed that it allows or calls for an opposition regarding ideals within itself. [The] historical situation in that case would be characterized by the opposition between two antagonistic ideas, but this antagonism would have its root in the same overall comprehensive view.

Now I tried to show last time that historicism cannot be established by historical evidence. Historical evidence cannot show more than [that] the different epochs of societies are characterized by<sup>15</sup> different comprehensive views. Historical evidence cannot show—I mean, for example, the Greeks had a different notion of a good society than, say, a medieval man had. Of course, everyone who can read historical books can<sup>16</sup> [know] that. But history itself cannot show that these ultimate presuppositions are unevident. Why should not one of the comprehensive views be the true view? History as history cannot show that; the less can history show that this will always be so because it is necessarily so. History has only to do with what has happened up to now. And [the utmost history could show],<sup>17</sup> which of course it cannot show, is that up to now all thought has rested [ultimately] on unevident presuppositions.<sup>18</sup> But this does not prove that this must be so; it may be: up to now there was not a real political philosophy, but it might come in the future. Historicism can be established only by philosophy, by a philosophical critique of human reason which shows especially that moral or political philosophy as quest for *the* right life or *the* good society is impossible.

Now we have to consider this philosophic critique and also where and why historical evidence somehow enters the philosophic arguments. Now to understand that, we have to remind ourselves first, again, of the original form of philosophy. I take as a simple example, a relatively simple example, Aristotle. Now let us start with Aristotle's analysis of the sacred cow, the sacred white cow. Now what does Aristotle say about that? He says the cow is white in itself, but what about its sacredness? Is a cow sacred in itself as it is white in itself? No. It is sacred for the Hindus. And that, fully developed, means it is sacred by virtue of a convention. This convention doesn't have to be an explicit decision, but it is not necessary. Some tacit agreement made it

sacred, and only by virtue of that tacit agreement is it sacred. In other words, Aristotle presupposes a distinction between convention and nature, and this distinction justifies the quest for what is by nature just as distinguished from what is merely just by human legislation or human custom: to justify the quest for that social order which is best according to nature. It allows [us] to examine what is actual in human societies in the light of natural standards. The Aristotelian view justifies a critical attitude towards the actual. Now these standards of the naturally just or the best society are discovered by thinking or figuring out—as one could say in Greek, *logismos*; in Latin, *ratiocinatio*—by figuring out what is most conducive to man’s excellence, or virtue as it is popularly called, which excellence is pointed to by man’s nature. That is to say, in other words, thought is here conceived as standing outside, as being capable of standing outside any particular society. Aristotle as a philosopher was not a Greek. As a human being he was a Greek, but he has something in himself, thinking, which allows himself not to look at things from a Greek point of view but from the human point of view. He is outside of any particular society, but of course he is within the cosmos, within the world, the universe.

Now this overall view which I sketched was attacked at the beginning of the modern era<sup>19</sup> [as utopian], we can say. Societies are not concerned with virtue but only with cruder things: security, prosperity, prestige, and freedom. Societies are concerned with virtue only as [a] means for these crude things. And that means ultimately, it was assumed, contrary to what Aristotle believed, that man is not by nature social. He is by nature selfish and nothing but selfish, and only calculation induces him to enter society. Now selfishness means, reduced to its principle, [that] man is by nature concerned primarily and chiefly with his self-preservation. But “self-preservation” thus understood<sup>20</sup> has a character of a passion. Reason is necessary, but reason [is nothing other than the means for satisfying the passions].<sup>21</sup> Reason then serves the passions. This was the first step which led to the view which I am trying to describe. Now in this view there is this difficulty. Man here is conceived of to be asocial by nature; or we could also say presocial, because we always enter<sup>22</sup> society. The technical expression for this is [that] man lives by nature in a state of nature, in the sense in which Hobbes and Locke speak of that. From this there arose a new understanding of natural right or natural justice. The principle of this new type of natural right is not virtue but self-preservation. But still, even here we have a natural standard which allows us to judge of what is actual anywhere. It is still true, to come back to the principle, that the cow is white in itself and sacred only for the Hindus. To that extent modern rationalism, if we may use that word, agrees with classical rationalism, but its content has entirely changed.

But now I remind you of something you all know. This . . . that the cow is white in itself becomes questionable. White—well, you know [. . .]<sup>ii</sup> white is, in every most elementary . . . physics beyond that, white is, as Locke called it, a secondary quality. The cow is not white in itself but only for man, indeed for all men. There are primary qualities; these are the qualities which belong to moved matter as such: spatial, impenetrable, and so on. Now everything must be understood as a modification of moved matter. I do not know this statement

<sup>ii</sup> The transcript has a blank space here.

is best if I know it really, if I understand the configuration of [its] moved matter, that is. But that means, in other words, to understand anything means to understand its genesis out of moved matter. Generally, to understand anything means to understand its genesis, to reproduce it, to repeat the process of its production out of moved matter. But how do we know that everything did in fact come into being out of moved matter? It is sufficient to answer that only this assumption will allow a perfectly lucid account, a clear and distinct account of everything. Then perhaps that is uninteresting and irrelevant. Moved matter is only a necessary hypothesis, that is to say a creation of the human understanding. But if that is so, it means [that] to understand means to make, to create. Of course it is not making with our hands but making . . . is to make intellectual models, as one could say. For simplicity's sake, let us disregard any distinction between understanding and reason and say [that] to reason means to create. Now in this stage we have a thought which is not only out[side] of any particular society but strictly speaking outside of this world, because by creating everything out of itself it is not within the world. Reason creates, and that means scientific understanding. Why does it do it? Ultimately, in order to serve self-preservation, that is to say, passion. The same is formulated at the beginning of<sup>23</sup> modern times: science is in the service of power. Now reason is here still a faculty which essentially belongs to man's nature, but one cannot leave it at that. If to understand something means at least to reproduce it, to understand its genesis, [then] to understand reason means to understand the genesis of reason. That is the point where we come somewhat closer to what we mean by the philosophic critique of reason. To understand reason means to understand the genesis of reason.

Now I would like to show how this originally was done. The crudity of the thought must not disturb you, because here you see much more clearly what in later stages is only<sup>24</sup> [concealed]. The premise was [that] man is by nature presocial. But reason presupposes society . . . so if man is by nature presocial, that means man by nature is prerational, orangutan. And doubtless, sense perceptions and desires<sup>25</sup> [served] their preservation,<sup>26</sup> [just] as any higher animals . . . Man became rational. Why and how? You see what I am now sketching is the argument developed by Rousseau in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* in about 1752,<sup>iii</sup> that is to say, more than a hundred years prior to Darwin. A theory of evolution is philosophically uninteresting for this reason: because the crucially important<sup>27</sup> [implication] of it antedates the theory of evolution by more than a hundred years, at least the Darwinian version. Now man became rational. How and why did this happen? Answer: he was compelled to become rational in order to survive. He had to invent, and by some strange accident he, [as] distinguished from other orangutans, could invent, and did not simply perish. Now the connection is very simple, but I indicate it briefly so you see how it works.<sup>28</sup> [These] extremely simple people, if we can call them already people, were very prolific—because they were healthy and there were no restraints whatever, of course, and so they were very prolific. Now overpopulation followed. Now this is assuming they live on an island . . . or anyway in a country surrounded by high mountains or large rivers, so they were forced by this situation, in order to survive, to invent something: ultimately, to work. And out of this<sup>29</sup> experience of work and so on there gradually arose higher forms of invention, of

<sup>iii</sup> 1755.

understanding. In other words, the environment and man's basic needs together brought about the rationality of man. It was a process of trial and error, naturally, but this means that men become ever more clever and ever more experienced. The process culminates at a certain point where man discovers the true principles of public law, of political philosophy, whatever you might call it. Man did not seek<sup>30</sup> them; he just tried to preserve himself under the circumstances for the time being but he learned something in the process.

At a certain moment, very late, the general notion of a natural right dawns upon him. But that was only vague and impossible. After a long stretch of time [. . .]<sup>iv</sup> by both efforts of philosophers and practical experiences with various kinds of government, [a] man discovered<sup>31</sup> the true public law. That man was, according to his own reputation, Rousseau. On the basis of that knowledge a radical revolution is possible, because man has now<sup>32</sup> for the first time the true knowledge of what is right. And this radical revolution did come: it is generally known as the French Revolution. The realm of darkness ends, the realm of reason begins: the most complete revolution which ever was, and one can say which ever will be, because what came later, however radical or brutal it may be, is only a continuation of this fundamental notion that man by his own understanding can draw such a line. But of course the argument can immediately be turned around. Reason has become, has been acquired. That is the crucial point. Man is not by nature rational: it has been acquired, and it has been acquired by an infinitely long and slow process. But since man's characteristic<sup>33</sup> [as] a human being, his humanity, consists in his rationality, we can also say man's humanity has been acquired. He has not been equipped by nature with it. And since this process is an altogether mechanical process, not a teleological process, not a process driving unconsciously toward the goal,<sup>34</sup> the humanity or reason was acquired in different ways in different places on the earth. The variety is due to the variety of circumstances. There becomes a<sup>35</sup> [grave] question: How can there be a unity of human nature in a meaningful way on this basis? I think in the work of Thomas Jefferson there are some traces of this difficulty. What I want to point out, however, is the fact that from this same view an antirevolutionary conclusion could equally be drawn . . . not the revolutionary, but a conservative attitude. Humanity has been acquired by a very long process [and] to this process, to this work of many, many generations, we owe everything of any value in us. Not remorse, but gratitude. There is nothing valuable, nothing human, which has not been inherited. So I'm not concerned whether you take the revolutionary or conservative interpretation of this point of view.<sup>36</sup> They have a common basis. The common basis is: humanity has been acquired. And two of these opposite conclusions can be drawn from it, and that is the reason why the issue "conservatism versus radicalism" does not go to the root of the matter. It all depends what kind of conservatism, what kind of radicalism.

Now the version which I sketched is the materialist version. I sketched it because it is more simple, it is older, and it also has a special importance because that is the version which in a more complicated way is Marxist doctrine. Everyone who wants to understand Marx's teaching

<sup>iv</sup> The transcript has a blank space here.

really must first read Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. There the foundation has been made, and the difficulties in Rousseau<sup>37</sup> led Marx, one could say, to integrate certain elements of Hegel, which gave<sup>38</sup> [Marx's thought] its peculiar form. Now I would like however to sketch the opposite version of philosophy<sup>39</sup> [becoming] history, and that is the idealistic version. We can state it as follows. The whole materialistic view, including the materialistic philosophy of history, is based on a hypothesis: Moved matter (or however we might call it), is posited by the human understanding, necessarily. But it is only posited. In other words, we arrive at the distinction between the phenomenal world, which can very well be construed materialistically, and the true world, or as Kant called it, the thing-in-itself. I think I shall use this Kantian expression. The phenomenal world can be understood perfectly in materialistic and deterministic terms, but there is the phenomenon of freedom which transcends that phenomenal world; and freedom, moral freedom, freedom under the moral world lets us divine the thing-in-itself as [a] spiritual realm of which we have no knowledge and can only believe. The phenomenal world is a construction or creation of the understanding,<sup>40</sup> [a] creation [of the] spontaneous activity of the subject. One can turn this thought around, and that is fundamentally what the successors of Kant did, the German philosophers Schelling and Hegel. But is this creative activity of the human mind not the real thing-in-itself? The human mind in its creativity, both theoretical and practical activities, is the thing-in-itself. But what about nature? Well, nature too is mind, dormant mind pointing toward the human mind as perfection.

Now the human mind is becoming, developing. This proves it is intelligible, orderly, teleological. The human mind is thinking itself. What does that mean? Generally speaking, the mind is thinking itself, it wants to become conscious of itself; and this, the conscious seeking itself, this is the human mind. In history, in this developing of the human mind the world–mind is seeking to arrive at consciousness of itself. The root of history is in the freedom, but the historical process is nevertheless a necessary process. I quote Schelling here: "History combines the appearance of freedom in the individual or in detail, with necessity in the whole, with absolute necessity."<sup>v</sup> And therefore,<sup>41</sup> since the historical process is wholly rational and orderly, one can construct or reconstruct the whole historical process fully. This rational construction of the whole historical process is indeed not the whole of philosophy but an integral part of philosophy. Just as in Rousseau's construction, which was fundamentally materialistic, the historical process culminates [in the] discovery of the true public law. The true public law. Public law does not mean here of course positive law, but it means a natural public law<sup>42</sup>, a notion alien to premodern thought which emerged in the seventeenth century. Do you understand what the term "natural public law" means? Well, have you ever read the beginning of the Declaration of Independence? In this case . . . there are certain fundamental rights of man, and these rights by themselves determine<sup>43</sup> what the right order of political society is in a universally valid way. This thought did not exist until modern times. But of course one must develop it, and

<sup>v</sup> F.W.J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, part 4. Strauss's translation. For an English translation, see *System of Transcendental Idealism (1800)*, trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 199.

the developments are given in Locke's *Civil Government*,<sup>vi</sup> in Hobbes's *Leviathan*, in Rousseau's *Social Contract*, and also in Hegel. So natural public law means a doctrine of public law which is based entirely on reason and not on positive law. These kind[s] of doctrines are the great works of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries<sup>44</sup>, and the last work of this kind is Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, which is still of the same type. I repeat: just as in Rousseau, in the materialistic tradition—because whatever Rousseau's private opinions may have been, this crucial work of his, the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, is based on materialistic foundations—just as the materialistic version, the idealistic version has the same character. There is an historical process in which man reaches maturity. This process has the character of a necessary process. In the materialistic version, it was merely mechanical necessity; in the Hegelian version, it was teleological necessity. But in both cases there is a separate intelligible necessity, and in both cases [man reaches maturity] in the discovery of the true public law.

What does it mean in the Hegelian version, which is more important for our purposes because the whole later development starts from Hegel and not from Rousseau? In the first place, the rights of man have been recognized as a basis for every society. Reason has recognized it. It is not important that every particular state has recognized it;<sup>45</sup> [that would be] only a sign that this state is backward. The dignity of every human being has been recognized, the freedom of the conscience, of science, and so on: no arbitrary punishment and all the other parts. But, and that is the difference between Hegel and Rousseau, the equal rights of men do not mean equal political rights. In other words, the culmination is not democracy in whatever form but the state, following after the abortive effort to establish democracy in Europe, namely, in France. Now what was this, what came after this democracy, especially the Jacobin efforts established after democracy had failed? You know the facts. You've read our history.<sup>46</sup> First there came Napoleon, which was not democracy; and then after Napoleon was defeated there came the reign of the Holy Alliance.<sup>vii</sup> But that meant, especially in Germany . . . what was then called constitutional monarchy. In what sense it was constitutional<sup>47</sup> was always controversial, because the liberals really did not regard it as constitutional. But the main point is this, for Hegel to decide this point: that this state is based on the recognition of the rights of man. And the construction would rather be this: that in order to have a successful guarantee for government, democracy is not adequate, and you must have a government of an independent origin or derivative from the people—hereditary monarchy, but hereditary monarchy which is conceived as a state of law, of a legal order. Now in other words, what Hegel said then is this. The Prussian monarchy of the 1820s, understood as a corporate state, [consisted of] three main groups: the peasants, below; the business and trading interests, second; and the highest, not the nobility but the intelligent. By "intelligent," Hegel means what is now called in this country bureaucracy, and what would be called by Hegel, if he had to speak in English, civil service—meaning the locus of intelligence or wisdom is and ought to be people actually concerned with the conduct of

<sup>vi</sup> Usually referred to as the *Second Treatise*.

<sup>vii</sup> A league consisting of Russia, Austria, and Prussia; it lasted from 1815 to roughly 1825.

business in a responsible way, and properly trained and educated,<sup>48</sup> not only by having taken a course in public administration but especially having taken courses in philosophy and history.

Now I would like to sketch briefly how Hegel saw that, because that is the starting point in a variation that arrives in later forms too. Now in Hegel's construction is this: the freedom of man, which means the freedom of every human being, was recognized first by Christianity. In the Orient, you find the freedom of one, namely, the despot; in classical antiquity, the freedom of few, of some, the citizens as distinguished from the slaves. In Christianity, we discover the infinite value of the individual soul: all men are equal before God, the transcendent God, with a view to life after death. But that does not mean rights of men in any political sense. What was needed for that was the secularization of Christianity, which from Hegel's point of view does not mean a derogation of Christianity but the perfection of Christianity. Christianity becomes real by becoming altogether at home in this world. The process according to Hegel began with the Reformation and reached its full culmination in the French Revolution, but the French Revolution properly corrected. The proper correction is the independence of government in regard to the popular will. Now the mind is essentially developing:<sup>49</sup> mind reveals itself in each epoch—in religion, art, morality, political life, science, and so on—in a specific way. You see, here you have the origin of Hegel. You have *gestalt*, as Hegel says it, *gestalt* of the mind which shows<sup>50</sup> [itself] equally in all the different parts of human activities. To be a human being, or to think, means to belong to a specific *gestalt* of the mind, to a specific order which this mind has taken. The individual, any individual, and therefore in particular the philosopher, is [radically] the son of his time.<sup>51</sup> He cannot move beyond the limits<sup>52</sup> [set] by the time unless something over which he has no control, the mind as whole, the world mind itself, changes. And therefore the true public law could not have become known prior to Christianity: more precisely, prior to the completed secularization of Christianity. It was not merely an intellectual process, as [though] some philosophers thought there is something official in Aristotle's *Politics* and then corrected that, and so on and so on, [but an] entirely different conception which has nothing whatever to do with philosophy. The eruption of Christianity, the Holy Roman Empire of the Middle Ages, the attempt to build a Christian society with a view to a transcendent God and life after death, the conflicts between the papacy and the Empire, which have nothing to do with philosophy (although they may have been accompanied by pamphlets written by philosophers), [all] lead then finally to the Reformation—again, wholly outside of philosophy itself. All these great changes of man, whether you call them social or political or what have you, and which could in no way have been anticipated by philosophy, they made the foundation for the completion of philosophy. Here you have the substance of this historization of thought already.

Now let me take again my example of the sacred cow. How does this look from Hegel's point of view? Now from Hegel's point of view, the sacredness of the cow has a much higher status than its whiteness, because what is essentially in its very nature for the human mind, sacredness, has a higher status than whatever is only in itself, like the whiteness. The sacredness of the cow is more real, one could say, than its whiteness. More real. There is more mind in it. There is no possibility of standing outside of the cosmos and outside of a specific historical world or a historical society. But there is this obvious difficulty: the cow is sacred only for the Hindus but

not for the human mind as such. But if everything of human importance is real only for a specific [part of] humanity, how can there be *the true* public law? Is Hegel too not only the son of his times, and therefore his philosophy the progeny of one time and bound to perish? Does the historical character of all thought,<sup>53</sup> the fact that all thought belongs to a specific historical world, not necessarily lead to relativism? To which Hegel's answer is: No, because there is a fullness of time, an absolute moment. Just as the last Judgment Day in the biblical notion, there is a fullness of time in Hegel here, only the fullness of time is now, meaning 1820 or so. History is completed, the possibilities of man have all been exhausted, and therefore man is now capable of full self-consciousness. Everything which has been in man, so to speak, has come out of him, has exteriorized itself essentially. Or in other words, all problems have been solved, theoretical and practical—now by which Hegel of course means all fundamental problems. He doesn't deny the problem of whether Mr. Miller will marry Miss Smith; this will always be a problem for Mr. Miller and Miss Smith<sup>54</sup> [in] whatever age. But the fundamental problems have all been solved. According to Hegel philosophy is the one aspect [of man] that is absolutely essential; and Hegel was protected against relativistic consequences by this assumption or this certainty: that the process of history has been completed. What can come from now on is only expansion, that he naturally admitted. In other words, you do not have this glory of the constitutional monarchy everywhere, but you can get it . . . and also, not everyone has seen the truth of Hegel's philosophy; [again, it is a matter of time before] it will take precedence.<sup>55</sup> But no radical change, no true change any more except an idiotic destruction. That is always possible, but no reasonable change is possible.

Now there is this difficulty in Hegel himself. According to him, philosophy is one aspect of the whole activity of man. Others are religion, art, political life, science, and so forth. Philosophy is the consciousness of the mind. In art, or in religion, or in political life, the mind is active but not conscious of what it is doing, of its own activity. Philosophy is the consciousness of the mind, and therefore the highest form of the mind. Philosophy does not stand above its time; it is a consciousness of its time, yet in a way, as thinking its time or understanding of its time, it does stand above its time. What does this mean? I quote Hegel: "Philosophy begins with the decline of a real world," meaning a real historical world. "Its youth, vitality, have already gone . . . Philosophy comes in after a rift has appeared in the world . . . Philosophy brings about a reconciliation between the reality of the world and destructive reflection. Yet this reconciliation takes place only in thought, not in the earthly world."<sup>viii</sup>

Now what Hegel means here is only a restatement of what Plato indicates in the *Republic*. Well, let us forget about Plato himself, but Hegel thinks of course of Plato. What you read in every textbook: there was once an integrated, healthy Greek life, say, the<sup>56</sup> [Greeks who] won the

<sup>viii</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Introduction, section A.2.a, "The Historical Relationship: Philosophy and the Spirit of the Age." Strauss's translation. The ellipses indicate that Strauss omitted portions of the text. See, e.g., *Lectures on the History of Philosophy 1825-6*, trans. Robert F. Brown and J. M. Stewart, ed. Robert F. Brown (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), §§239-40, 68-69.

Battle of Marathon and the other battles against the Persian Empire, and then a decay began, a disintegration, a dissolution of the preexisting unity of thought and faith. The sophists are the most famous manifestations of that. Now<sup>57</sup> Socrates rebels against this disintegration and wants to restore the original unity of Greek life, but he could not restore it in reality; he could restore it only in thought. That is Plato's *Republic*. Now that meant the ripest fruit of Greek thought became irrelevant for Greek actuality; it became relevant only for later humanity, because that migrated and went to other countries or whatever. It was appropriated by other nations and so on and so on. The strange thing is that this same statement about the fact that philosophy comes late, when decay sets in, applies according to Hegel to his own philosophy as well. In a very famous passage<sup>58</sup> [in] the preface to his *Philosophy of Right*, we read: "When philosophy paints its gray in gray, a form of life has grown old, and with gray in gray that world cannot be rejuvenated but only understood. The owl of Minerva," the goddess of wisdom, "commences its flight only with the beginning of dusk."<sup>ix</sup> The end of history is the completion or perfection of human life. No future<sup>59</sup> need for virtue, for heroism, but the beginning of the decay, not only of this civilization but of man, because<sup>60</sup> [this] civilization is the final, completing civilization. That is, by the way, exactly what you find<sup>61</sup> in Spengler. Because Spengler, of course, does not say as a last resort that all civilizations or cultures are equal. The [Faustian]<sup>x</sup> culture, as he calls Western modern culture, is essentially the last culture. It is the last because it alone<sup>62</sup> has succeeded in understanding culture, in understanding history or the historical process. The full understanding of the substance of reality, that is the completion of understanding and therewith the beginning of the end. This end can last millions of years as [. . .]<sup>xi</sup> but nothing can happen anymore except expansion, external expansion and so on. So Spengler only popularized in a way what Hegel had said a hundred years before. So that Hegel's attempt to save philosophy, [to] save human thought, to protect human thought against the danger of relativism, is bought at the price that he has to ascribe to his time an absolute character. And this leads to the consequence of an extreme despair, from the point of view of everyone else apart from Hegel, regarding the future.

But nevertheless, without reminding oneself of this teaching of Hegel (of which I could only give the barest sketch) one cannot understand anything which has happened since then, because Hegel determined all historical thought of the nineteenth century, even that of the anti-Hegelians. The common view, the common criticism of Hegel was this: Well, Hegel has been refuted by history; in other words, by his own goddess. The Prussian monarchy proved not to be the end of history, and many other things; and of course [there were] many objections to Hegel's philosophy proper, to his constructions of history and so on and so on. Out of this, out of the acceptance of Hegel's principles and the rejection of Hegel's doctrine, there arose historicism proper. Each philosophy indeed belongs to its time, and every philosopher is the son of his time. But there is no absolute time. The process is infinite, the meaningful process is infinite and unfinishable, except externally because of catastrophes and so on. Now this [is] characteristic of what is technically

<sup>ix</sup> Apparently Strauss's translation.

<sup>x</sup> The transcript has a blank space here.

<sup>xi</sup> The transcript has a blank space here.

called neo-Hegelianism, but neo-Hegelianism is something which goes much beyond the boundaries of what is academically known by that name. From here we have to understand whether this position, that every individual is the son of his time—and that applies to the highest thought of which any human being is capable, and there is no absolute time—whether this is a meaningful thought. That is the real problem of historicism.<sup>xii</sup> —I think Collingwood expressed this more clearly and courageously than anyone else I know. I hope I led you to the point where you can become interested.<sup>xiii</sup>

Now I know of very few people today—really only one person, but a very intelligent man who asserts that Hegel’s point of view has not really been refuted in any way, that this interpretation as I suggest it, as is generally given more or less, does not go to the root of the matter. Hegel’s system is true when it is rightly understood. Now to speak only of the political aspects, when Hegel accepted the Prussian monarchy of 1815 or after, he became disloyal to his primary intention. The real Hegel and his political intention has to be sought in his earlier writings, especially in his greatest book, the *Phenomenology of the Mind*, which he finished in 1806, at the same time when the Prussian state was crushed by Napoleon [in] the Battle of Jena. But now the great completer of history was not that poor Prussian king, of course, [but] Napoleon. Now what is Napoleon [but] precisely the heir and corrector and stabilizer of the French Revolution? And Napoleon not as the French figure in particular but the renovator of Europe and the completer of Europe, Europe as a radically nonfeudal Europe and egalitarian in this sense at least, that every soldier bears the baton of the field marshal in his knapsack, according to Napoleon’s own word.

Now if you enlarge that, you arrive at this notion. Since Europe is still too small, looking back from the twentieth century we arrive at the notion of what has been called the homogeneous and universal state—universal state, real world state—and “homogeneous” meaning no classes—the classes were the same. Now this position is of course a synthesis, as we can say, of Hegel and Marx, taking from Marx the universality and homogeneity, and taking from Hegel the state and not admitting the withering away of the state. It seems to me that would lead us too far; I mention it because the only really good book on Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Mind* has been written from this point of view by a<sup>63</sup> philosopher, [French] in origin: Alexandre Kojève.<sup>xiv</sup> *Phenomenology of the Mind* is extremely difficult to understand, but the only real commentary (at least on large parts of the book) where you can see what Hegel is talking about is that given by Kojève, and certain dubious and questionable assumptions he makes regarding Hegel do not affect the interpretation of the particular passage to any significant degree. But it seems to me the natural insight would in all cases be the same, and even where perfection of society and philosophy coincide fundamentally, there is only a difference of [a] hundred and fifty years, say,

<sup>xii</sup> The tape was changed at this point.

<sup>xiii</sup> The transcriber notes that a question period followed. It was not transcribed.

<sup>xiv</sup> Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr., ed. Allan Bloom (NY: Basic Books, 1969). (This work is a translation of *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel: leçons sur La Phenomenologie de l’Esprit, professées de 1933 à l’École des hautes-études . . .* [Paris: Gallimard, 1947]).

[or two hundred years] between Hegel and<sup>64</sup> [the] homogeneous and universal state, but it is that they belong together and for the same society. That is then the decay: universal philistinism, as we may call it, is the consequence of the perfection of mankind. But I do not have to discuss this here in this connection in greater detail.

I would rather go now to Collingwood, because Collingwood's position is a more common view,<sup>65</sup> [that] man's human thought is indeed radically historical, but there is no possible end of history. I read you how Collingwood interprets Hegel's notion of the end of time. A critic of Hegel has said

that a philosophy of history which traces the course of human life from its beginning to the end of the world and the last judgment, as medieval thinkers did, is a respectable and dignified thing: but Hegel's philosophy of history, which makes history end not with the last judgment but with the present day, only ends in glorifying and idealizing the present, denying that any further progress is possible, and providing a pseudo-philosophical justification for a policy of rigid and unintelligent conservatism.<sup>xv</sup>

But here Collingwood says:

Hegel . . . is surely in the right. The philosophy of history is, according to his idea of it, history itself philosophically considered, that is, seen from the inside. But the historian has no knowledge of the future; what documents, what evidence, has he from which to ascertain facts that that not yet happened? And the more philosophically he looks at history the more clearly he recognizes that the future is and always will be a closed book to him. History *must* end with the present, because nothing else has happened. But this does not mean glorifying the present or thinking that future progress is impossible. It only means recognizing the present as a fact and realizing that we do not know what future progress will be.<sup>xvi</sup>

In other words, he tries to take the whole thing out of Hegel's assertion and says that for us, for every generation, the present must be the end. But that is what Hegel said. We must see, however, how Collingwood tries to solve the problem.

I give you first a brief survey of what he is generally trying to do. He tries to build up a philosophy of history. This philosophy of history is of course ultimately indebted to Hegel, but the way in which Collingwood states his argument is not in every point and not very [ . . .]<sup>xvii</sup>

<sup>xv</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 120. The critic, named by Collingwood, is "the very able and sympathetic Swiss writer Eduard Fueter."

<sup>xvi</sup> *Idea of History*, 120. Emphasis in original. Ellipses indicate that Strauss omitted a few words in the passage.

<sup>xvii</sup> The transcript has a blank space here.

related to Hegel. Philosophy of history as Collingwood understands it emerges as [the] sequel to the rise of scientific history. Scientific history emerged according to Collingwood in the latter part of the nineteenth century, a new type of history. His first task is to understand the method of this history, of this scientific history: an epistemology of history. Now this is however a very serious point, because according to Collingwood all philosophy up to now (up to now, more or less) was based on the tacit premise that this historical knowledge, in the sense of scientific knowledge, is impossible. Traditional philosophy taught that the unique, the particular,<sup>66</sup> or the individual can ultimately be understood only in the light of the permanent or recurrent; and therefore<sup>67</sup> [it] necessarily conceived of history as the study of the individual, particular, transitory as inferior to philosophy of science. And this Collingwood wants to change radically. But that means however much more, because to think about historical thought means also to think about the objects of historical thought, about history itself. So philosophy of history must be both epistemology of history and metaphysics of history, but that means more than an addition to the traditional branches of philosophy. Philosophy as a whole must be conceived from a historical point of view. Simply, in former times people had said the question of what man is is a philosophic question, and the question of what men have done or thought is a historical question. But now we know that man is what he can do—there is no nature of man—and the only clue to what man can do is what he has done, because what he didn't do we cannot know. So the science of the human mind, or of human nature [as] Collingwood might call it, resolves itself into history. Philosophy is converted into history.

Now the basis of this view is that there is such a thing as scientific history. What precisely is that? How is it distinguished from earlier history, say, what Thucydides did, and so on? Knowledge of what men have done is knowledge of what men have thought, because as Collingwood asserts,<sup>68</sup> if you take, for example, economic history, which seems to be not human thought but [a] production of<sup>69</sup> [man], that ultimately means all his purposeful action: thinking, in a word. All history is therefore, rightly understood, history of thought, but not merely of philosophic thought, of course. Scientific history is therefore thought about thought. But thought can be known only by thinking and not by mere [reading]—when you read a document you don't know it, of course. The reading is thinking, if it is of any significance. So scientific history means to rethink the thought of the past: to reenact it, to relive it, not merely look at it as something alien to your mind but relive it in yourself. For the human past is not dead or outside of the mind; it is living in men's minds, [the living past].<sup>70</sup> In other words, by thinking about the past, I am really thinking about myself as a human being. History will take the place of reflection on human nature. Humanity has been acquired. All thinking, however, is critical thinking. The scientific historian is a critic of earlier thought necessarily, but does he not need a nonhistorical philosophy for criticizing the thought of the past? That is the difficulty. No, he is a critic of the past by virtue of being a man of the present, of his civilization. He criticizes necessarily the past. [To] criticize does not mean of course to just condemn or despise it, it may also mean [to] accept it. He criticizes the past from the point of view of the present, of the historian's own civilization; therefore scientific history is [the] self-knowledge of the present man, understanding of the coming-into-being of present man's thought, and the only adequate form of self-knowledge. But

philosophy was frequently understood in former times as self-knowledge. Collingwood says the only adequate form of self-knowledge is historical knowledge.

Now this much about the general thesis of Collingwood. The crucial point in contrast with Hegel is this: Is this necessarily an unending process, essentially an unending process? There is no question of an end of history. Now<sup>71</sup> next time we will discuss his autobiography, or at least a considerable part of it, and it would be very helpful if you were to read it . . .

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<sup>1</sup> Deleted “but is derivative from that.”

<sup>2</sup> Deleted “as you find.”

<sup>3</sup> Deleted “clarity about that.”

<sup>4</sup> Deleted “don’t.”

<sup>5</sup> Deleted “a.”

<sup>6</sup> Deleted “it.”

<sup>7</sup> Deleted “if.”

<sup>8</sup> Deleted “is not, it.”

<sup>9</sup> Deleted “some point.”

<sup>10</sup> Deleted “this.”

<sup>11</sup> Deleted “It.”

<sup>12</sup> Deleted “since.”

<sup>13</sup> Deleted “evidences.”

<sup>14</sup> Deleted “There is a.”

<sup>15</sup> Deleted “The.”

<sup>16</sup> Deleted “do.”

<sup>17</sup> Changed from “And if history could show, the utmost it could show.”

<sup>18</sup> Moved “ultimately.”

<sup>19</sup> Deleted “by Utopians.”

<sup>20</sup> Deleted “and ‘concerned with self-preservation’ thus understood.”

<sup>21</sup> Deleted “Reason is necessary, but reason mean, is nothing, but reason finds the means for satisfying the passions.”

<sup>22</sup> Deleted “the.”

<sup>23</sup> Deleted “the.”

<sup>24</sup> Deleted “conceived.”

<sup>25</sup> Deleted “was.”

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- 26 Deleted “such.”
- 27 Deleted “indication.”
- 28 Deleted “This.”
- 29 Deleted “work there arose, the.”
- 30 Deleted “of.”
- 31 Deleted “then.”
- 32 Deleted “thought
- 33 Deleted “of.”
- 34 Deleted “It was acquired.”
- 35 Deleted “trade.”
- 36 Deleted “They belong to.”
- 37 Deleted “lead then to” deleted.
- 38 Deleted “it.”
- 39 Deleted “the common.”
- 40 Moved “of the.”
- 41 Deleted “It is possible.”
- 42 Deleted “A natural public law.”
- 43 Deleted “In a universally valid way what the right order of rights by themselves determine in a universally valid way.”
- 44 Deleted “are mentioned.”
- 45 Deleted “if not it is.”
- 46 Deleted “There was.”
- 47 Deleted “it.”
- 48 Deleted “And.”
- 49 Deleted “One.”
- 50 Deleted “themselves.”
- 51 Changed from “is a radical, the son of his times.”
- 52 Deleted “left.”
- 53 Deleted “does.”
- 54 Deleted “at.”
- 55 Changed from “that again is a matter of time that it will take precedence.”
- 56 Deleted “Greek which.”
- 57 Deleted “what.”

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- <sup>58</sup> Deleted “to.”
- <sup>59</sup> Deleted “pasts, no future no.”
- <sup>60</sup> Deleted “that.”
- <sup>61</sup> Deleted “in Hegel.”
- <sup>62</sup> Deleted “is capable.”
- <sup>63</sup> Moved “French.”
- <sup>64</sup> Moved “or two hundred years;” deleted “between.”
- <sup>65</sup> Deleted “there is.”
- <sup>66</sup> Deleted “Unique.”
- <sup>67</sup> Deleted “he.”
- <sup>68</sup> Deleted “that.”
- <sup>69</sup> Deleted “one.”
- <sup>70</sup> Changed from “in men’s mind. So living is past.”
- <sup>71</sup> Deleted “we will see.”

**Session 3: February 1, 1956**  
**Collingwood: *Autobiography***

**Leo Strauss:** [in progress] [The truth of a philosophical theory or an historical narrative] consists of questioning and answering. This does not mean that the truth is relative to the questions. The truth resides in the answer, not in the question. The question cannot be true; it can only be good, reasonable, apt, and so on. However important the question may be, it is directed towards an answer, and an answer which must take the character of something like [a proposition or a sentence,<sup>1</sup> if you want to use any term loaded with traditional meaning]. But a more serious question has to be raised: Is it true that the process of knowing begins with serious questions? Collingwood says: “When Plato described thinking as a ‘dialogue of the soul with itself’, he meant (as we know from his own dialogues) that it was a process of question and answer, and that of these two elements the primacy belongs to the questioning activity, the Socrates within us.”<sup>i</sup>

Now if this is sufficient enough<sup>2</sup> [for] the Socratic understanding of thinking—I suppose some of you remember<sup>3</sup> some very<sup>4</sup> [simple things] which are mentioned in every textbook. What is the beginning of our knowledge, according to Plato? . . . A recollection. So in other words, we [always already know something].<sup>5</sup> And according to Plato we know even in a very inadequate way what is in Plato the most important thing. We have seen<sup>6</sup> [it] prior to our birth. That is a mythical expression which we cannot take literally but which we can perhaps state as follows: all questioning is necessarily preceded by a primary awareness. But we can see this very simply and critically. No questioning is possible without presuppositions of some kind, and before Socrates even starts there is some implicit agreement between him and any interlocutor. We somehow know the fact that there are human beings which are in Athens—and I don’t know what,<sup>7</sup> some other things too. Even “I know that I know nothing” means something, implies knowledge [of] at least this: that I know that I know nothing of the most important things.<sup>8</sup> As a matter of fact, Collingwood cannot help admitting this. I read to you a passage which occurs unfortunately not in the same context. He says: All questioning and answering rests on certain presuppositions and if we push their analysis back sufficiently we arrive at what we call absolute presuppositions, which are not questions nor answers, as he says but “only presuppositions of questions.”<sup>ii</sup> There are necessarily—as he admits—absolute presuppositions, presuppositions that are not questions.<sup>9</sup> These presuppositions and not the questions have true primacy.

How did Collingwood arrive at this logic, as we might call it? Because in all quests for knowledge, in all scientific knowledge in particular, the questions do have primacy; but we do

<sup>i</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 35.

<sup>ii</sup> Strauss seems to be paraphrasing a discussion in *An Autobiography* at 66-7. Absolute presuppositions are also discussed in R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (New York: University Press of America, 1972), 31-33.

not reflect then that our questions are preceded by presuppositions, by things which we take for granted, without which there could not be any questions. And that these presuppositions should have been acquired by answering previous questions is certainly not evident: it would have to be proven. In a way, Collingwood presupposes in a certain part of his argument that these presuppositions which precede all possible questioning have been acquired by serious questioning and answering—in other words, that all awareness which man has, has been acquired. I remind you here of what I said on a former occasion: that according to the strict historicist view, all humanity, all qualities characteristic of man as man have been acquired. Man does not have the natural equipment. Nevertheless, Collingwood's argument is of importance to us. It lays bare the weakness of positivism, because the people he calls realists are not technically positivists but they are the fathers of what we know now [as positivism]. Because one of these schools (that is also what I learned from Collingwood) of these realists is the school of Bertrand Russell, of whom you may have heard, and logical positivism appeared there in the form of Wittgenstein as the . . . But I'm not familiar with the details of Russell's philosophy; that's not important. But at any rate, what is of some importance for us is the relevance of Collingwood's argument in regard to positivism. I have stated this before. From the positivistic point of view, science is presented as a body of true propositions, yet it is overlooked or not sufficiently understood that these propositions are only the secondary part of science. The primary part is the questions.<sup>10</sup> [On] that point I think Collingwood is absolutely correct.

Now how does analysis go from here? The questions which a social scientist especially addresses to social phenomena depend on the direction of interests; and the direction of interests in its turn depends on values, and the values in their turn depend on the historical situation. From the positivistic point of view, one cannot speak therefore of *the* frame of reference which we must use in order to understand society. One cannot speak of *the* articulation of social reality. But we have to establish by our precreation an artificial frame of reference. We have to construct it. That is the meaning of ideal types in social science. Ideal types are preconstructs of the social scientist<sup>11</sup> which have their ultimate justification<sup>11</sup> in the direction of interests, and ultimately in these values. Now the values we know are not *the* values. They change; therefore the questions or the problems and the conceptual frameworks necessarily change. Now of course the more old-fashioned type of positivist would say that there is *the* problem of social science, the overriding problem which never changes, and that is the question of *the* laws of social behavior. But we forget a number of questions of which Collingwood is fully aware. In the first place, with what right is this question of the laws of social behavior regarded as *the* guiding question or even as a sound question? Does it not require a long, long study to find out whether it makes sense to speak of *the* laws of social behavior? And does the reflection that the quest for laws has appeared in the natural sciences, is this a sufficient reason for believing it can be successful in the social science itself? Secondly, these laws of social behavior are supposed to be discovered through induction. But this induction cannot be carried on only in our present, in our society, by interviewing and sample techniques and questionnaires, and so on and so on. You need, as it is admitted, cross-cultural research; and even that is not sufficient, because where do you find today societies completely unaffected by the West? So you have to engage in historical studies in order to make a good empirical induction. But scientific social science, or positivism, is

constitutionally unable to make any historical studies which deserve the name, and the reason is this: the faith in the supremacy of scientific thought blocks the access to radically different thought. They may describe overt acts, maybe, but they cannot really understand other thought because of their dogmatic belief in the supremacy of scientific thought.<sup>12</sup> Read what the positivists say about Plato and Aristotle: you see not the slightest ability to be patient and willing, even, to understand. Simply stated, positivism is unable to see a problem in science and therefore is unable to understand any other way of thinking in a way which deserves to be called adequate.

So all these things are familiar to Collingwood, and as you will see, he states them differently, but that is the meaning of his emphasis on the primacy of question, [which] is to that extent justified. But let me return to his thought now. Truth is relative to the questions, but the questions differ from historical situation to historical situation; hence truth is relative to the historical situation. This is not a perfectly correct syllogism. From time to time one must really do this simple checking which today is despised as too elementary.<sup>13</sup> Now if you look at it, you see [that] the major syllogism, truth is relative to the questions, is established by logic. But what about the minor syllogism, the questions differ from historical situation to historical situation? That is established by historical evidence. But I think we have a clear formulation of how this clear cooperation of philosophy and historical evidence works. Without the major premise established by philosophy, in this case by logic, the historical evidence would be wholly meaningless. Now therefore we have to see how Collingwood succeeds. Of course, needless to say the whole argument depends on the major premise, that truth is relative to the question. There is a corresponding minimizing of the absolute presupposition, which Collingwood himself admits.

But let us turn to the question of the minor premise,<sup>14</sup> that the questions differ from historical situation to historical situation. Now there are a number of remarks which are helpful for our purpose, because the main argument is based on political philosophy. I read to you the first . . . you will see Collingwood is stating here things which are<sup>15</sup> [trite], but he states them with a higher degree of sophistication than most people do. That is the reason for having them.

Take Plato's *Republic*, Hobbes's *Leviathan*, so far as they are concerned with politics. Obviously the political theories they set forth are not the same. But do they represent two different theories of the same thing? Can you say that the *Republic* gives one account of 'the nature of the State' and the *Leviathan* another? No; because Plato's 'State' is the Greek *polis* and Hobbes's is the absolutist State of the seventeenth century. The 'realist' answer is easy: certainly Plato's State is different from Hobbes's, but they are both States; so the theories are theories of the State. Indeed, what did

you mean by calling them both political, if not that they were theories of the same thing?<sup>iii</sup>

The last sentence is strictly Platonic. So . . . some other pages might be of interest in this same book. Well, what Collingwood says is this. Hobbes and Plato answer entirely different questions. They are not the same questions, but there is a certain kinship between them, and the kinship is due to historical connections.

The sameness is the sameness of an historical process, [and] the difference is the difference between one thing [the Greek city—LS] which in the course of that process has turned into something else, and the other thing into which it has turned. Plato's *polis* and Hobbes's absolutist State are related by a traceable historical process, whereby one has turned into the other; anyone who ignores that process, denies the difference between them, and argues that where Plato's political theory contradicts Hobbes's one of them must be wrong,<sup>16</sup> is saying the thing that is not.<sup>iv</sup>

In pursuing this line of inquiry he realizes, he says, that the history of political theory is “the history of a problem more or less constantly changing, whose solution was changing with it.”<sup>v</sup>

Let us consider this point first. The city and the state are something radically different. They are akin somehow. The problems are akin but not identical. Not only the answer has changed, the problems themselves change. Now one could say, of course, maybe there is a common core which does not change; and in a way Collingwood, I think, admits this, but he would say that the very core would be defined differently in different epochs. At no point can we leave the historical situation. In other words, our understanding of that core is different from that which men will have a hundred years from now. Man constantly tries to transcend historical relativity. He never succeeds in it, one can say so far. Now I would like to make only one point. Collingwood is unquestionably superior to his opponents. Many of his opponents obviously fail to reflect on the state. They took it for granted that political philosophy . . . is of the state. And one must not take such things for granted, and it was by no means necessary because in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century there were quite a few people who said there is something wrong with the state, this whole understanding of human society. It would have been their duty to reflect on it; thereupon they did do that. Now we must read another point which is very revealing.

The ‘form of the *polis*’ is not, as Plato seems to have thought, the one and only ideal of human society possible to intelligent men. It is not something

<sup>iii</sup> Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, 61. In the original, *polis* is in Greek letters.

<sup>iv</sup> *Autobiography*, 62.

<sup>v</sup> *Autobiography*, 62.

eternally laid up in heaven and eternally envisaged, as the goal of all their efforts, by all good statesmen of whatever age and country. It was the ideal of human society as that ideal was conceived by the Greeks of Plato's own time. By the time of Hobbes, people had changed their minds not only about what was possible in the way of social organization, but about what was desirable. Their ideals [I mean, the ideals of the people—LS] were different. And consequently the political philosophers whose business it was to give a reasoned statement of these ideals had a different task before them—<sup>vi</sup>

Now, but there are a number of points which come to mind immediately. Where did Hobbes express in the *Leviathan* the ideal of his contemporaries? That needs at least considerable qualification to come within even hailing distance of actual fact. Hobbes was extremely unpopular, because a large majority of his countrymen were convinced Christians and Hobbes was an atheist, to mention just one point. In addition, there were many people who on purely political grounds opposed<sup>17</sup> Hobbes's *Leviathan* and had some notion of a constitutional monarchy and so on. So that is certainly an impossible statement in a book of a man who claims to be a historian, and in a way, he doubtless was. But more important: Is it the philosophers' business to give a reasoned statement of the ideals of their society and not at least as much to question these ideals? Hegel had said (and he is a great writer in Collingwood) that the philosopher is the son of his time. He cannot transcend the ideals of his time. But Hegel had this reason which we must discuss: he believed in the fullness of time, and therefore there was no problem. But Nietzsche, who did not believe in the fullness of his time, called the philosopher, correcting Hegel, the stepson of his time, by which he meant the one who is historically conditioned insofar as his thought refers to a particular society<sup>18</sup>—not by accepting, but rather as a jumping-off place. This I think is the least one would have to say in connection<sup>19</sup> [with] Collingwood. But is there no possibility of raising the question: Which of the two ideals or epochs is superior, Hobbes's or Plato's? The principle of Hobbes is fear of violent death. Now the absolutists say that the consequence as derivative from the principle that fear of violent death is the root of every society. Is there not a difference between fear of violent death and (if I may translate the Greek word so) righteousness, [*dikaiosynē*],<sup>vii</sup> justice? And how can one treat these two things on the same level? Perhaps we cannot decide that question, but is it not a real question and the same question for us as it had been in Plato's time already and Hobbes's time? Is this crucial and fundamental question not permanent really, and in principle perhaps coeval with man as man?

Now Collingwood makes a similar observation, which to a certain extent is perfectly judicious, regarding another crucial Greek term,<sup>20</sup> *polis*. And the other one is more complicated, that is the Greek word *dei*. I will write it here. I don't know whether you would translate it just like

<sup>vi</sup> *Autobiography*, 62-63. In the original, *polis* is in Greek letters.

<sup>vii</sup> The transcript has a blank space here.

that . . . <sup>21</sup> [These realists] said that means “ought” and is therefore an expression of moral obligation, and they spoke of the theory of moral obligation of Plato and Aristotle,<sup>22</sup> to which Collingwood, with some justice, said: It’s nonsense, because how can you assume there is a theory of moral obligation in Plato? That [word] doesn’t mean “*ought*”; it means something different.<sup>viii</sup> And that’s perfectly correct. It can come to mean by a certain stretch “ought,” but it doesn’t mean it. It means originally simply [that] something is missing, lacking: this should be done now, it lacks. The civilization is not complete because it is not done.<sup>23</sup> In other words, it is not understood in the perspective of obligation but in the perspective of completion, which is a different perspective, and that is the direct problem here. The problem generally stated would be this: What is the proper interpretation of morality? Is it properly understood in terms of obligation or duty, or rather in terms of completion—perfection, to use a more common term? And a grave problem is buried in that, and you conceal that problem by simply speaking of moral obligation as if it were necessarily and inevitably the adequate formulation of philosophic thought. <sup>24</sup>In this point one can only agree with Collingwood’s analysis. And he goes even beyond that, and<sup>25</sup> he points out the possibility that in such cases like this crucial word it is perhaps not possible to understand fully what it means. Prior to investigation, we cannot know that. Of course we have translations; we have even Latin medieval translations, which in such matters are better than modern ones, but even they may have missed something important, naturally. In other words, in all these points Collingwood is simply more critical and more openminded than these men whom he attacked. I would say incidentally that in this particular case I do not regard the difficulty as insuperable, because<sup>26</sup> whatever<sup>27</sup> [this word] may have meant in Homer or in the poets, [the Greek philosophers] speak about it, but Aristotle especially speaks about it. He makes its meaning clear enough by the context in which he speaks, and I think it is possible to establish this necessary position<sup>28</sup>. But it could be different [. . .]<sup>ix</sup> and so there are problems here.

Now if I may summarize up this point: there are no permanent problems, there is some kinship of the problems of any one period with those of other periods. The common core, if we are to state it in the form in which Collingwood himself states it: *P1, P2 . . . [Pn]*.<sup>x</sup> What this simply means is that we say there are permanent problems. That’s P. We can’t get hold of P. What we find is *P1, P2, Pn*, and so on and so on. If we talk all the time of P we never see that no one, no philosopher ever dealt with P. They all dealt with either *P1, P2*, and so on. In other words, to speak of P means to be superficial and not [to] be aware of a decisive difference. Now<sup>29</sup> let us at least define P. And does that seem possible to do except in the way in which it’s already tinged by [the] index which you used? So P would be different, you see, from *P1, P2, Pn*. And therefore we never can get out of the historical formulation, [the] historically conditioned limited understanding of the core of the problem. The problems of other epochs may escape us so that we cannot even know the precise relation of their problems to our problems, of course. There are

<sup>viii</sup> *Autobiography*, 63.

<sup>ix</sup> The transcript has a blank space here.

<sup>x</sup> *Autobiography*, 69.

no permanent problems, and therefore<sup>30</sup> the old-fashioned traditional distinction between philosophic questions and historical questions has to be abandoned. Every philosophical question rightly understood becomes a historical question, and every historical question rightly understood becomes a philosophical question. All thought is historical: that is a kind of conclusion of this part of the argument; therefore there exists no possibility of criticizing the thought of other epochs.

I read to you this statement which makes this quite clear: Metaphysics, he says, “is no futile attempt at knowing what lies beyond the limits of experience, but is primarily at any given time an attempt to discover what the people of that time believe about the world’s general nature . . . ”<sup>xi</sup> I was surprised to find such a very educated man as Collingwood writing such a sentence. To repeat, “metaphysics is . . . primarily at any given time an attempt to discover what the people of that time believe about the world’s general nature.” Try to think of it in practical terms. Which people? The physicists? No, there wouldn’t be enough. What? But what does he finally mean? The business of the metaphysician is not to raise the question whether, among the various beliefs on this subject that various people hold and have held, this one or that one is true. This question when raised<sup>31</sup> would always have been found unanswerable, and that is so because the beliefs whose histories the metaphysician has to study are absolute presuppositions, the last premises, and they can only be codified as it were by the metaphysician.<sup>32</sup> Metaphysics is simply a historical inquiry in which, on the one hand, the beliefs of a given set of people at a given time concerning the nature of the world are exhibited as a single complex of contemporaneous facts, like, say, the British constitution as it stands today. So that means of course no possibility of a criticism. We just take the stock of the fact that these and these are our absolute presuppositions, and no rational argument is possible.

Now what Collingwood calls absolute presuppositions are what I call unevident assumptions. The ultimate assumptions on which our orientation rests are unevident and differ from historical situation to historical situation. But there is this great difficulty: the same Collingwood asserts that it is impossible to understand a thought without inquiring whether it is true. There is no understanding without criticism. In this respect, he makes some very helpful remarks for our problems. For example:

Whenever you find any object [say, as an archaeologist—LS] you must ask, ‘What was it for?’ [otherwise you can’t understand it—LS] and, arising out of that question, ‘Was it good or bad for it?’—<sup>xii</sup>

In other words, that it is impossible to understand this particular pot which you find without raising the question was it good or bad, or beautiful or clumsy—whatever you<sup>33</sup> may think, you

<sup>xi</sup> *Autobiography*, 66.

<sup>xii</sup> *Autobiography*, 128.

cannot understand without judging. He gives other examples of that. I would like to read you only one more passage:

the question ‘was Plato right to think as he did on such and such a question?’ was to be left unanswered. As well suggest that the question ‘was Phormio right to row round the Corinthians’ circle?’ must be left unanswered because it goes outside the province of naval history—<sup>xiii</sup>

In other words, all understanding of human things necessarily stands under the law to judge of these human things, provided you have the evidence. Otherwise, if you don’t have the evidence, you don’t understand them either. So understanding and criticism to that extent fully coincide.

Now Collingwood of course would say this: When I say I want to understand Plato, then I must criticize him and see whether he was right. But what do I mean by that? I mean only this. Plato raised this question, say, *P17*, and I investigate: Did he solve *P17*? I do not judge of the question whether the formulation *P17* is higher or preferable to the question *P11* or *P4*. In other words, we could say there is criticism, but the criticism never extends to the fundamental premises or what we call the absolute presuppositions. Yet he cannot leave it at that for the simple reason that he is a historicist—for the simple reason, rather, that he is still an intelligent and thinking man. Historicism itself, as Collingwood is aware in one part of his mind, stands and falls by the possibility of criticism of the absolute presuppositions. One little reminder from this book, the passage which I read before: “the ‘form of the *polis*’ is not, as Plato seems to have thought, the one and only ideal of human society possible . . .”<sup>xiv</sup> So Plato, in other words, thought that there is the truth—and not only Plato, every philosopher did up to [and including] Hegel<sup>34</sup>. And what did historicism do with that? Historicism said it’s wrong, untrue. In other words, historicism replaces the absolute presupposition common to all earlier thought by a new, contradictory, absolute presupposition. Again, some evidence:

eighteenth-century thinkers, when they saw the need for a science of human affairs, could not identify with history but tried to realize it in the shape of a ‘science of human nature’; which, as men like Hume conceived it, with its strictly empirical methods, was in effect a historical study of the contemporary European mind—<sup>xv</sup>

By the way, was the contemporary European mind characterized to be a bundle of perceptions, whereas people in South Africa are not bundles of perceptions? Or what does he mean? So as I say, Hume, in other words, did not analyze human nature, human mind, but only

<sup>xiii</sup> *Autobiography*, 72.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Autobiography*, 62-63.

<sup>xv</sup> *Autobiography*, 115.

the contemporary European mind, falsified by the assumption that human minds had everywhere and at all times worked like those of the eighteenth-century Europeans . . . But the revolution in historical method [in the late nineteenth century—LS] . . . had swept away these sham sciences and had brought into existence a genuine, actual, visibly and rapidly progressing form of knowledge which now for the first time was putting man into the position to obey the oracular precept ‘know thyself’—<sup>xvi</sup>

That means up to 1850 these actual presuppositions of all human thought up to that time were false. Now we know the true absolute presupposition, which is that all human thought is radically historical.

What Collingwood says in effect but never clearly—and that I think is a real indication of his thought—[is] that all thought is historical, all thought rests ultimately on assumptions which are unevident if not positively false, all thought with the exception of historicist thought [. . .]<sup>xvii</sup> because the fundamental premise of historicist thought is true. Collingwood does not solve the difficulty. I do not believe he faced it, really. The man who faced it was in the first place Hegel, who said: Yes, of course there is the truth of historicism (if I may call it this way), but that is seen in the absolute moment of history; and therefore the uniqueness of the situation allows for the uniqueness of the thought belonging to that situation. The other man who faced it really was Nietzsche, and I shall speak of Nietzsche later on. Hegel faced it on the basis of the assumption that he lived in the absolute moment himself, in the fullness of time. Nietzsche faced it on the basis of the assumption that the historical process is unfinishable, and he saw what this means. And Collingwood occupies a kind of middle position between Hegel and Nietzsche, as one could show by more detailed examinations which are not necessary for our purposes. But this does not do away with the fact that his criticism of realism is of some value, especially today. It is not of as great importance for the reason that what Collingwood calls realism survives in a modified and in a graver form in the logical positivism of our day.

It is not obvious that the problems are permanent or, more specifically, that different thinkers mean the same problems when they happen to use the same terms. We cannot possibly assume that all thinkers raise necessarily all fundamental problems, so that it would be possible according to the procedure laid down by Collingwood to say: Here is question P, and then write down how did Kant answer this, how did Hegel answer this, how did Berkeley answer this, how did Hume answer this, and so on. That is necessarily false, stupid, and superficial. On this<sup>35</sup> [point] I think he is just right. How does one know that these men really faced this problem even if they say something about it, whether they were not preoccupied with something else, without a very careful study? Also a thinker who built on a foundation of earlier thought may raise questions which were not raised by his predecessors, and so on and so on. It is a perfectly

<sup>xvi</sup> *Autobiography*, 115-16. Ellipses indicate that Strauss omitted a portion of the passage.

<sup>xvii</sup> The transcript has a lengthy blank space here.

legitimate problem which Collingwood raises: Are there permanent problems? One cannot brush this aside.

I read to you one passage where you will see there is also something in common between Collingwood and Dewey. You will see from this quotation:

People will speak of a savage as ‘confronted with the eternal problem of obtaining food’. But what really confronts him is the problem, quite transitory like all things human, of spearing this fish, or digging up this root, or finding these blackberries in this wood.<sup>xviii</sup>

Surely! What follows from that? Is it not nevertheless true that the need for food is coeval with man and is in every case, in all these three and in the infinite cases—that the need for food coeval with man is the very basis of any particular action tending toward the acquisition of food? What can we learn from the little example? That we can speak of a permanent problem only if there is a permanence of man’s fundamental situation. This is confirmed rather than refuted by Collingwood’s criticism of his opponents. These opponents were superficial people, from what I can see from this book. They mistook an accidental situation, the accidental way in which problems happen to present themselves to them, for the fundamental problem, and one has no right to assume that. Not all ages are necessarily equally aware of the fundamental problem. Traditions of various kinds may put men asleep so that they don’t any longer see the fundamental problems and only talk about them. That has happened more than once.

I think if we want to make this remark somewhat more concrete, we must add the historical observation and remind ourselves of the unique character of classic Greek thought, which Collingwood in his way recognizes because Plato comes up at every turn. What was that unique situation? There was not yet a tradition of philosophy. A tradition, strictly speaking, can be said to have been founded perhaps by Plato and Aristotle themselves in their schools, perhaps. And on the other hand, there was in this great period of the fifth and sixth centuries, as far as the philosophers were concerned, no longer a prephilosophic tradition of mythical beliefs and so on which in any way bound them. In classical thought, man became aware for the first time of his fundamental situation as pointing to fundamental questions which he must try to answer on the basis of what is accessible to a man as man. And he cannot assume to find the same directness and simplicity rightly understood as in classical Greece, because all later thought builds on that foundation even if it rejects it. That was the story which I think you learn in every textbook. Descartes begins with the radical break from tradition,<sup>36</sup> [with] a doubt of all theories and even more than of theories, but in fact he transplants into his philosophy a considerable number of propositions which were traditionally accepted and of which then his successors showed that Descartes had no longer a right to accept them. This process has been going on in variation since. So at any rate, the assumption that the permanent problems are permanently raised by philosophers is a wholly unwarranted assumption. One has to look at the philosopher in each

<sup>xviii</sup> *Autobiography*, 32-33.

case and see what problems does he raise. Maybe he doesn't come in sight at all of the true or real fundamental problems, or raises them in such [a] derivative and conventional way that it would be better if he did not speak about them at all.

Now I would like to turn to another aspect of the problem of history, and that concerns the question of moral principles, to which Collingwood devotes a considerable amount of space. Up to now I would like to say only this. Collingwood becomes entangled in the problem which almost all historicists neglect completely, namely, the universality of the historicist contention that all human thought is historical conflicts with the meaning of their proposition, namely, that this proposition, "all human thought is historical," is true. You know this difficulty in a cruder way: relativism, that all thought or truth is relative, which of course includes relativism itself.<sup>xix</sup>

**LS:** Is there not an enormous difference between saying all men, all philosophers, address themselves to the same problems, and<sup>37</sup> [saying] all men, [all] philosophers, *can* address themselves? The assertion that all men, all philosophers, *do* address themselves is a practical assertion which has to be established in each case. The other question is an entirely different one. In late antiquity, a branch of very stupid learning arose which was called doxography, the writing down of opinions. Now they made catalogues of what the great philosophers had said. They had schemata, say, logic, ethics, metaphysics, or whatever it might be, and then they had items. (By the way, Mr. Adler<sup>xx</sup> in his way has done the same thing. They have something in common.) Then you make subdivisions and bring it down as far as possible. For example, in physics there is one item, lightning, and then you insert what did Anaxagoras, Aristotle, or what have you, say about it. And if they could not find what<sup>38</sup> [he] said, they looked it up and said what must he have thought—you never know. But this of course was stupid, because he might have not given it any thought and so the entry would be of no value whatever. Now of course this doxographic tradition survives in a way in the present day. What did Berkeley, what did Plato, and so on, say about knowledge, without having established first that they really spoke about the same phenomenon of knowledge? That must be established. And examples given by Collingwood are revealing here: the great fight with the traditions of Oxford and Cambridge. They wrote books and gave lectures on method, on scientific thinking, and then he saw they never said a word about the things done by historians. In fact, the scientific thinking about which they thought was exclusively that practiced in natural sciences, and they couldn't believe that knowledge is knowledge, and whether it is done by historians or physicists makes no difference. And Collingwood, being a good historian, knew that it was nonsense, because the historian has to proceed in an entirely different way than the physicist has to do and the theory of knowledge that is good for the one is not good for the other. We speak here now generally of a theory of knowledge and forget what the precise meaning of the problem of knowledge in this case is.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>xix</sup> The transcriber notes that a question period followed. It was not transcribed.

<sup>xx</sup> Mortimer Adler (1902-2001), professor at the University of Chicago and an advocate of the "great books." Strauss is referring to his *Syntopicon, An Index to the Great Ideas* (1952).

[We] really don't say anything relevant.<sup>xxi</sup> That is a sound point, I think. In other words, it is much more difficult to identify the fundamental problem than the schematizers assumed, much more difficult. A child, an intelligent child, could perhaps do better than one of the learned who loses himself in some corner of a tradition whose meaning and origin is not understood.

**Student:** I was thinking that the example of the state, however, as understood by Plato and Hobbes—it would seem that there, at least, I would think that this means the same thing in the sense that, how are men going to live with each other whether they are in the fifth century of Greece or eighteenth century England?

**LS:** Sure, what you say is much better than what Collingwood says, because the common term which he uses is “social organization,” which is much too crude, you know. And one could do better, as you have shown. Yes, man is always a being living in society, and the question arises: How should the society be, and how should social life be in order to be good? The question in this broad way is permanent. It is not a meaningless question, as one can easily see. I give you an example of Collingwood himself, where he expresses this in his *Idea of History* in a certain place. I hope I find it—now where is that? He says: “If I now re-think a thought of Plato's, is my act of thought identical with Plato's or different from it?” A serious question indeed.

Unless it is identical, my alleged knowledge of Plato's philosophy is sheer error. But unless it is different, my knowledge of Plato's philosophy implies oblivion of my own. What is required, if I am to know Plato's philosophy, is both to re-think it in my own mind and also to think other things in the light of which I can judge it . . . When I read Plato's argument in the *Theaetetus* against the view that knowledge is merely sensation, I do not know what philosophic doctrines Plato was attacking;<sup>xxii</sup> I could not expound those doctrines and say in detail who made them and by what arguments . . . Yet if I not only read his argument but understand it . . . the process of argument which I go through is not a process resembling Plato's, it actually is Plato's, so far as I understand their sense<sup>xxiii</sup> rightly. . . . In Plato's mind, this [problem—LS] existed in a certain context of discussion and theory; in my mind, because I do not know that context [ancient context, it exists in a different context of discussion and theory—LS] . . . namely, that arising out of the discussions of modern sensationalism.<sup>xxiv</sup>

<sup>xxi</sup> *Autobiography*, 84-85.

<sup>xxii</sup> In original: “he was attacking”

<sup>xxiii</sup> In original: “understand him rightly”

<sup>xxiv</sup> *Idea of History*, 300-1. Ellipses indicate that Strauss omitted portions of the text.

What he admits here as a matter of course is this. The problem “Is knowledge sensation?” is the permanent problem. There may be a different interpretation of sensation. I assume that a modern sensationalist has a different understanding than an ancient sensationalist had, but still there is a very relevant common core which one can identify, and so on. Surely I have not the slightest doubt of this, but we must not assume that we have a proper formulation, a proper identification of *P* always at our disposal, and that is absolutely legitimate. Did I make myself clear?<sup>xxv</sup>

—This realization of the equality of all cultures distinguishes modern Western society from all other cultures. The superiority which is denied in the thesis is in fact asserted . . . It allows us to regard every society, every culture as equally high . . . But the point is that all other cultures and all other societies regarded themselves as superior to all others or to many others. The insight into the equality of all cultures is the outcome of modern science or however you might call it: modern history alone. Therefore, in the assertion of the equality of modern cultures there is implied the assertion of the superiority of modern scientific culture which made us see that. In other words . . . up to now all other cultures have been parochial; now we have become nonparochial.<sup>40</sup> [However], parochialism means to say the others are wrong, are narrow; but they make of course the same assertion. They say: The other cultures are all parochial, we are nonparochial; in the decisive respect, we are superior . . . we find this on the everyday level . . . An absolute truth is asserted, but the possibility of an absolute truth is denied. I have no doubt that there is a possibility of a more refined reflection which could then embody the historicist assertion in a subordinate way upon the basis of a much more elaborate philosophic treatment than we find in Collingwood. I shall speak of that . . .

<sup>xxv</sup> The tape was changed at this point. The transcriber notes that a discussion period followed. It was not transcribed.

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<sup>1</sup> Changed from “like an apprehension or thesis this is it.”

<sup>2</sup> Deleted “of.”

<sup>3</sup> Deleted “That

<sup>4</sup> Deleted “synthesis.”

<sup>5</sup> Changed from “we know always already something.”

<sup>6</sup> Deleted “that.”

<sup>7</sup> Deleted “and.”

<sup>8</sup> Deleted “are.”

<sup>9</sup> Deleted “they.”

<sup>10</sup> Deleted “From.”

<sup>11</sup> Deleted “and.”

<sup>12</sup> Deleted “Truth.”

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<sup>13</sup> Deleted “There is not a strict truth is relative to the question, but the questions differ from the historical situation to historical situation. Hence the truth is relative to the historical situation.”

<sup>14</sup> Deleted “the question.”

<sup>15</sup> Deleted “trivial to this.”

<sup>16</sup> Deleted “he.”

<sup>17</sup> Deleted “To.”

<sup>18</sup> Deleted “But.”

<sup>19</sup> Deleted “of.”

<sup>20</sup> Deleted “that was about.”

<sup>21</sup> Deleted “this realist.”

<sup>22</sup> Deleted “And.”

<sup>23</sup> Deleted “And in this meaning.”

<sup>24</sup> Deleted “and.”

<sup>25</sup> Deleted “he says.”

<sup>26</sup> Moved “the Greek philosophers.”

<sup>27</sup> Deleted “these words.”

<sup>28</sup> Deleted “but which I mean.”

<sup>29</sup> Deleted “What Collingwood says beyond that-now.”

<sup>30</sup> Deleted “the distinction.”

<sup>31</sup> Deleted “would always be found, it”

<sup>32</sup> Deleted “and he compares what he is doing-.”

<sup>33</sup> Deleted “may be.”

<sup>34</sup> Deleted “inclusive.”

<sup>35</sup> Deleted “part.”

<sup>36</sup> Deleted “from.”

<sup>37</sup> Deleted “to say.”

<sup>38</sup> Deleted “they.”

<sup>39</sup> Deleted “You.”

<sup>40</sup> Deleted “but.”

**Session 4: February 6, 1956**  
**Collingwood: Scientific history**

**Leo Strauss:** One may speak of a common core which is permanent, but the very common core will be seen or defined differently in different epochs, so at no point do we really lay hold on the permanent as permanent. Now in this context, Collingwood is right when he takes issue with the common brand of historians of political philosophy or philosophy in general who believe that the permanent problems are those which happen to be the problems that are at the center of discussion at a given time, and who generally believe that the permanent problems are seen with equal clarity and adequacy by all philosophers or by all ages. That is of course an absolutely dogmatic assumption, that permanent problems in this sense exist. Permanent problems in the serious meaning would be those which are rooted in the permanent situation of man when this situation is revealed as it is and not covered over by traditions of a sort. In this respect, the situation in classical Greece is unique because all prephilosophic traditions were shaken and there was not yet in existence a tradition of philosophy, so it is by no means certain that the permanent problems are really grasped at every time or by every philosopher. Yet however difficult it may be to identify the permanent problems in an adequate manner, Collingwood does not succeed in proving the nonexistence of permanent problems. Now as for the major [premise], it is not true, as Collingwood contends, that knowledge begins with questions. All questions are preceded by knowledge, and it is a mere unsupported assertion that the knowledge which is presupposed by our questions has all been acquired by former questions or by the answers to former questions. Before the first man would begin to raise the first question, he had to have some awareness, and that gives us an idea of what the situation always is. Collingwood himself admits that all thought rests ultimately on what we call absolute presuppositions, which are neither questions nor answers.

Now his contention is that these absolute presuppositions, which precede all possible questions, differ from historical situation to historical situation and cannot be criticized. They are neither true nor false; and this means, simply stated, in the last resort all thought is historical. All thought rests ultimately on unevident assumptions which differ from epoch to epoch or historical situation to historical situation. Yet Collingwood's own position stands or falls by the criticism of the absolute presupposition of all earlier thought, that absolute presupposition being that there is the unchangeable truth. Collingwood asserts that this absolute presupposition of all earlier thought is wrong, that it has been refuted, which means, in other words, that Collingwood's own absolute presupposition, namely, the historical character of all thought,<sup>1</sup> is no longer historical. It can no longer be relativized by any further historical changes. We can state this conclusion as follows: Collingwood is eventually driven to admit that the historicist thought, that is to say the

thought that all thought belongs to a comprehensive view, is itself a comprehensive view. More precisely, it is the true and final comprehensive view. I believe I came up to this point last time.<sup>i</sup>

Is the notion of a comprehensive view clear to you? The notion that in every society in every historical epoch there are certain fundamental premises which characterize that epoch.<sup>2</sup> I don't believe that, so I can only give you the examples which other people give and I can't really make it out better. For example, for the Greeks, that there is the cosmos, an ordered whole, the world in which we live, and within this cosmos there are human associations of various kinds and the *polis* is the highest: that would, in the popular notion, be part of the comprehensive view of Greek life. Or for the Middle Ages, we would say the truth of Christianity, the truth of the ecclesiastical order established in the Middle Ages, the peculiar relation of Church and Empire and the feudal order: this would be the comprehensive view keeping the society as a whole together. These things are open to all kinds of objections. If I take the Greek example, there are quite a few people who did not believe in the eternity of the visible universe. There were quite a few Greeks who regarded the *polis* as something very questionable.

And so they are very doubtful, these general remarks. It is very hard to lay one's finger on it . . . Spengler is of course the most famous example of a presentation of such "comprehensive views." In American literature, I know only of Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture*. If you say "patterns of culture," whatever that may mean, that is more or less the same as what I meant by "comprehensive view"; only when you speak of a comprehensive view, you emphasize those presuppositions which can be expressed in propositional form, but when you speak of patterns of culture that is not necessarily the case. Every culture, if there are such things, is based on certain ultimate premises which people do not question and which they cannot question without becoming completely lost. Now secondly, these absolute presuppositions differ from culture to culture, from epoch to epoch, but not in such a way that you can say one set of absolute presuppositions is true and the others are untrue. They just are unevident assumptions which cannot be criticized from any higher point of view . . .<sup>3</sup>

**Father Buckley:** When he says they are not true, or they can't be said to be true or not true, isn't he speaking there simply of the fact that they can't be proven, they can't be demonstrated, because they are the ground out of which we demonstrate everything else?

**LS:** Yes, but the point is . . . If there is only one set of premises which cannot be demonstrated because they are the principles of all demonstration, there is no problem. That is what the ancient philosophers fundamentally thought. But in the moment that you say there is not one set but *n* sets . . . [then the situation is fundamentally altered].<sup>ii</sup>

**Father Buckley:** But actually in practice he contradicts this.

<sup>i</sup> The transcriber notes that a question period followed. It was not transcribed.

<sup>ii</sup> Phrase in brackets is as it appears in the original transcript.

**LS:** He has to. If one argues the matter out on historicist grounds, one arrives at the conclusion that this insight into the variety of cultures, none of which can criticize legitimately<sup>4</sup> [another], this very insight is a criticism of all cultures except the historicist culture . . . Because these historicist men know the truth about cultures, whereas the people belonging to other cultures, even of course earlier Western culture, did not know themselves. They absolutized their principles.<sup>iii</sup>

I believe we should now turn to what Collingwood has to say about moral and political philosophy. Now Collingwood's work on archaeology—he was apparently an outstanding archaeologist—had taught him what historical method was. He saw that the contemporary British logicians or students of method did not pay any attention to the historical method. This set him to demand a reform not only of logic but of philosophy altogether, namely, a study of both the method and the subject matter of the historian, which he called epistemology of history and metaphysics dealing with the subject matter of the historian. In other words, a new branch of philosophy. We need a new kind of philosophy. The example which he used was the emergence of natural science in the seventeenth century, because that meant not merely an addition of a new branch of philosophy, say, scientific logic, to the preexisting sciences, but<sup>5</sup> [a] completely new understanding of all philosophic problems. In other words, the emergence of natural science in the seventeenth century has given rise to a new kind of philosophy: modern philosophy. According to Collingwood, a change comparable to the emergence of natural science in the seventeenth century had taken place or had been taking place since the middle of the nineteenth century. That is the emergence of what he calls scientific history. He is convinced that this is as great an event in the history of the human mind as the emergence of natural science in the seventeenth century.

Now we have first to identify what scientific history is. There are three points . . . I take the most convenient passages either from the *Idea of History* or the *Autobiography*. He speaks of Francis Bacon, who had said that the natural sciences must “put nature to the question,” must torture nature.

[What Bacon—LS] was asserting was two things at once: first, that the scientist must take the initiative, deciding for himself what he wants to know and formulating this in his own mind in the shape of a question; and secondly, that he must find means of compelling nature to answer, devising tortures under which she could<sup>iv</sup> no longer hold her tongue.<sup>v</sup>

<sup>iii</sup> The transcriber notes that a question period followed. It was not transcribed. The transcriber inserts, in square brackets: “Collingwood’s analysis largely based on use of vague terms like Renaissance, eighteenth century, etc., not completely meaningless.”

<sup>iv</sup> In original: “can”

<sup>v</sup> Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 269.

You see he has very telling expressions. Now the scientific historian does the same to history as<sup>6</sup> the natural scientist, the Baconian modern natural scientist, does to nature. For example, he does not<sup>7</sup> read Herodotus and Thucydides and so on as sources of authority<sup>8</sup>.

[The scissors-and-paste historian reads them] in a simply receptive spirit, to find out what they said. The scientific historian reads them with a question in his mind, having taken the initiative by deciding for himself what he wants to find out from them. The pre-scientific historian reads them<sup>vi</sup> with the understanding<sup>vii</sup> that what they did not tell him in so many words he would never find out from them at all; the scientific historian puts them to the torture, twisting a passage ostensibly about something quite different into an answer to the question he has decided to ask.<sup>viii</sup>

That is one aspect of<sup>9</sup> scientific history. And the second . . . concerns the fundamental difference between history and nature, about which full clarity has been reached now. Now what are events of the historian as distinguished from the natural scientist? Answer: The natural scientist can never penetrate to the inside of events. The natural scientist cannot “conceive of the event as an action and attempt to rediscover the thought of its agent, penetrating from the outside of the event to its inside.” But the historian, on the other hand, can and should “penetrate to the inside of events and detect the thought which they express.”<sup>ix</sup> On the other hand, the task of the historian is in one way also “simpler” than that of the scientist:

the historian need not and cannot . . . emulate the scientist in searching for the causes or laws of events. For science, the event is discovered by perceiving it, and the further search for its cause is conducted by assigning it to its class and determining the relation between that class and others. For history, the object to be discovered is not the mere event, but the thought expressed in it. To discover that thought is already to understand it. After the historian has ascertained the facts, there is no further process of inquiring into their causes. . . .

When a scientist asks ‘Why did that piece of litmus paper turn pink?’ he means ‘On what kind of occasions do pieces of litmus paper turn pink?’ When a historian asks ‘Why did Brutus stab Caesar?’ he means ‘What did Brutus think, which made him decide to stab Caesar?’<sup>x</sup>

<sup>vi</sup> In original: “Further, the scissors-and-paste historian reads them”

<sup>vii</sup> In original: “Further, the scissors-and-paste historian reads them on the understanding that”

<sup>viii</sup> *Idea of History*, 269-70.

<sup>ix</sup> A paraphrase of a passage in *Idea of History*, 214.

<sup>x</sup> *Idea of History*, 214. Ellipses indicate that Strauss omitted part of the passage.

The cause of the event, the assassination of Caesar, means for the historian the thought in the mind of the person by whose agency the event came about. And this is not something other than the event; it is the inside of the event itself. To say it in a word, according to Collingwood history means always history of thought, not necessarily of philosophic thought but the thought of the actors. That alone is the concern of the historian.

And the third point characteristic of scientific history as he conceives of it is stated in a passage of the *Autobiography* . . . That every understanding of thought means to reenact that thought, to repeat that thought in oneself . . . to relive it.<sup>xi</sup> And that means necessarily to criticize it. These are the three elements of the idea of scientific history as Collingwood understands it. Now why is the discovery of the scientific history so important—in fact of decisive importance, so much so that Collingwood can say “we might very well be standing on the threshold of an age in which history would be as important for the world as natural science had been between 1600 and 1900”?<sup>xii</sup> Now he mentions the experience of the First World War, the shocking contrast between the triumph of modern science and the complete absence of political wisdom, especially in the peace treaty,<sup>xiii</sup> and he states a contrast with which all are very familiar.

The contrast between the success of modern European minds in controlling almost any situation in which the elements are physical bodies and the forces physical forces, and their inability to control situations in which the elements are human beings and the forces mental forces, left an indelible mark on the memory of everyone who was concerned with it.<sup>xiv</sup>

Now of course<sup>10</sup> natural scientists themselves admit that, and everyone today speaks about it. But what do most people say when the suggestion is made: Look what power man has acquired over the forces of nature and look what a mess man has made of it? What is the remedy, what is the most common suggestion of a remedy? More science. What is that science called? Psychology. I would like to read to you what Collingwood says about this subject, because he states the difficulty in entirely different terms than I have stated it but it amounts ultimately to the same thing.

It was easy to see that any attempt to bring ethics within the field of psychology . . . or to do the same thing with politics, would necessarily and always result in failure. As I knew very well, the plea ‘do not criticize this science; it is in its infancy’, rested on a falsehood. Psychology was very far from being a young science; both word and thing had been in existence ever since the sixteenth century . . . It had been deliberately

<sup>xi</sup> Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, 112-14.

<sup>xii</sup> *Autobiography*, 88.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Autobiography*, 89-90. “Peace treaty” refers to the Treaty of Versailles.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Autobiography*, 90.

created, as any one might guess who knew enough Greek to understand its name, in order to study that which is neither mind in the proper traditional sense (consciousness, reason, will) nor yet body, but *psyche*, or such functions as sensation and appetite. It marched on the one hand with physiology, and on the other with the sciences of mind proper, logic and ethics, the sciences of reason and will. And it showed no desire to encroach on its neighbours' territories until, early in the nineteenth century, the dogma got about that reason and will were only concretions of sense and appetite. If that was so, it followed that logic and ethics would disappear, and [that] their functions could be taken over by psychology. For there was no such thing as 'mind'; what had been so called was only 'psyche'.

That is what underlies the modern pretence that psychology can deal with what once were called the problems of logic and ethics, and the modern claim of psychology to be a science of mind. People who make or admit that claim ought to know what it implies. It implies the systematic abolition of all those distinctions which, being valid for reason and will but not for sensation and appetite, constitute the special subject-matter of logic and ethics: distinctions like that between truth and error, knowledge and ignorance, science and sophistry, right and wrong, good and bad, expedient and inexpedient. Distinctions of this kind form the armature of every science; no one can abolish them and remain a scientist [because science is constituted obviously by the distinction between science and sophistry—LS]; psychology, therefore, regarded as the science of the mind, is not a science. It is what 'phrenology' was in the early nineteenth century, and astrology and alchemy in the Middle Ages and the sixteenth century: the fashionable scientific fraud of the age.

These observations implied no hostility towards psychology proper, the science of sensation, appetite, and the emotions connected with them, or towards the Freudian or other forms of treatment of certain ailments . . . At the time of which I am speaking Freud was only a name to me. But when I came to study his works I was not unprepared for the discovery that they reached a very high scientific level when dealing with problems in psychotherapy, but sank beneath contempt when they treated of ethics, politics, religion, or social structure. Nor was it strange that Freud's imitators and rivals, less intelligent and less conscientious writers whom I will not name, reached on these subjects an even lower level. [So psychology is out—LS]

Was it possible that men should come to a better understanding of human affairs by studying history? Was history the thing which in future might

play a part in civilized life analogous to that of natural science in the past?<sup>xv</sup>

And that is of course Collingwood's own contention. Now before I go into the criticism, I would say that up to a certain point it seems to me to be absolutely reasonable, because if we want to understand, for example, political matters, we really learn much more by studying political history or any other intelligent history than by studying psychology. But that of course is not the question; the question is whether scientific history can be the complement to natural science. How can we understand that? How can the study of the past give us guidance regarding what we ought to do? To which Collingwood answers as follows: The historian isn't the student of the mere past, of a past that is dead or gone. He cannot even begin if he does not have evidence, which means present evidence. And to generalize from that, he cannot even begin if he does not have access to the past on the basis of the present, of his thinking. The past must somehow be alive or it must become alive if it is to be understood. The historian studies a past which in some sense is still living in the present, otherwise he could not understand it. There is a continuity of the past and present. The past is, we might say, the depth of the present. And if we want to understand the present, we have to study the past. Collingwood uses<sup>11</sup> [then this] half-Hegelian formula which I shall mention. The present is not simply present, it is also past: past in the present, which means there is also non-present in the present, A and non-A. The present is a unity of opposites, a dialectical synthesis. But we can disregard that.

Now let us assume that this is the correct analysis of the present. Why does it answer the question of whether history can be a school of moral and political wisdom, as Collingwood claims? Traditional history, meaning prescientific history, cannot be such a school. Regarding traditional history, Hegel is always right that "the only thing to be learnt from history is that nobody ever learns anything from history."<sup>xvi</sup> This is true and necessarily so, because history never exactly repeats itself. Our problems are not the problems of any past. But if the past is the depth of the present, and therefore of course different from the present, our problem, our situation, cannot be understood properly without the study of the past.

Yet still, understanding of our situation does not tell us how to act in the situation. Do we not need rules of action in addition to the analysis of the situation? Can history give us rules of action? I read to you Collingwood's answer, which I believe is evasive. He gives this example: "Nothing here but trees and grass', thinks the traveller, and marches on. 'Look,' says the woodsman, 'there is a tiger in that grass.'"<sup>xvii</sup> And of course the traveler is that man without historical understanding and the woodsman sees the tiger hidden. The historian's business is to reveal the less obvious features hidden from a careless eye in the present situation. "This may

<sup>xv</sup> *Autobiography*, 93-95. Ellipses indicate that Strauss omitted portions of the passage. "*Psyche*" appears in the original in Greek letters.

<sup>xvi</sup> *Autobiography*, 96. Collingwood's paraphrase of Hegel's remark.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Autobiography*, 100.

seem to be a small difference<sup>xviii</sup>. Surely, some one would<sup>xix</sup> say, we are entitled to ask for more than that. There is not much use in showing us the tiger unless you also give us a rifle with which to shoot him.<sup>xx</sup> I read to you two answers.

You want a rifle? Then go where rifles are to be had. Go to the gunsmith's. But do not expect the gunsmith to sell you a rifle which can see tigers as well as shoot them. [But he had already seen them as well—LS] For that, you must learn woodcraft.<sup>xxi</sup>

The second answer is this:

If you are sure that the thing you are going to see in the grass is going to be a tiger, and if your only idea about tigers is that they are things to shoot, take a rifle with you. But are you sure? What if it turns out to be your own child playing Indians?<sup>xxii</sup>

Now what does he want to say by these somewhat strange remarks? The question is, then, where do we get the rules for action going beyond the analysis of situation? That the analysis of the situation cannot be given without understanding the past, without deep historical understanding, we may very well grant; but the question is whether that is enough. Now he referred in the passage about the gunsmith . . . “In other words: if ready-made rules for dealing with situations of specific types are what we<sup>xxiii</sup> want, natural science is the kind of thing which can provide them.”<sup>xxiv</sup> But this doesn't answer the question at all. Where does natural science give us even ready-made rules of action regarding good or bad properly [speaking]? Where do we get them from? I read to you a passage.

everybody has certain rules according to which he acts in dealing with his tailor. These rules are . . . soundly based on genuine experience [not on scientific experience—LS]; and by acting on them a man will deal fairly with his tailor and help his tailor to deal fairly by him. But so far as he acts according to<sup>12</sup> [these rules], he is dealing with his tailor only in his capacity as a tailor, not as John Robinson, aged sixty, with a weak heart and a consumptive daughter, a passion for gardening and an overdraft at the bank. The rules for dealing with tailors no doubt enable you to cope with the tailor in John Robinson, but they prevent you from getting to grips with whatever else there may be in him. Of course, if you know that he has a weak heart, you will manage your dealings with him by

<sup>xviii</sup> In original: “seem a small gift”

<sup>xix</sup> In original: “will say”

<sup>xx</sup> *Autobiography*, 100.

<sup>xxi</sup> *Autobiography*, 101.

<sup>xxii</sup> *Autobiography*, 101.

<sup>xxiii</sup> In original: “you”

<sup>xxiv</sup> *Autobiography*, 101.

modifying the rules for tailor-situations in the light of the rules for situations involving people with weak hearts. But at this rate the modifications soon become so complicated that the rules are no longer of any practical use to you. You have got beyond the stage in which rules can guide action, and you go back to improvising, as best as you can, a method of handling the situation in which you will find yourself.<sup>xxv</sup>

In other words, what Collingwood is driving at is this: our question is somehow wrong, [or] at least insufficient: rules of action, ready-made rules of action, are not enough. Now we may grant that, but I repeat, where are we as far as the question of history as the school of moral and political wisdom is concerned? Take the example of the tailor. I think we all understand this simple problem.<sup>13</sup> Maybe there is no rule of action—we don't have to go into that—but is there not something which he knows, which Collingwood knows and which he has not learned by diagnosing the situation of the tailor? Is he not guided here by something which is not expressed either by consumptive daughter or by the overdraft at the bank and by tailor and whatnot? What is there in this situation apart from an analysis of the situation? I can see  $n$  men being in the same situation as Robinson, knowing all these facts and not acting or being urged to act like Robinson did.<sup>xxvi</sup> What is that  $X$ ? . . . Some notion of decency and kindness. That obviously doesn't stem from historical studies. Where does it come from? Or to take another example, in order to act as good or reasonable or wise men should, we have to know our situations—by God, we have to—but our situation doesn't tell us what good, reasonable, and wise in themselves mean. Where does he get this from? Is Collingwood trying to shirk the question of principle by referring to limitations of ready-made rules of action? That seems to be the case.

Now in this context he makes a remark to which I referred before, that there are situations in which ready-made rules do not help. In<sup>14</sup> [these situations], where no ready-made rules help, that is to say in entirely new situations, men's moral possibilities come to their highest level. He distinguished three motivations which we all have at almost all times: the lowest is desire, the second-lowest is self-interest, and the highest—and in a way the most dangerous seducer—is right conduct. Was that formerly called virtue? But right conduct expresses itself in precepts and customs and the “morality of custom and precept” is “low-grade.”<sup>xxvii</sup> Now what does this mean? Collingwood really did not clarify<sup>15</sup> the relevance of this point as far as his argument is concerned. Is there a hidden connection between history and the doubt of the adequacy of rules of action? One could perhaps say this: All rules of action presuppose a specific horizon, a specific historical horizon. [They] belong to a specific comprehensive view. Within a new horizon, the old rules of action become meaningless. But this cannot be quite [. . .]<sup>xxviii</sup> of Collingwood because this hierarchy—desire, interest, right conduct, insight—does not seem to

<sup>xxv</sup> *Autobiography*, 104-5. Ellipses indicate that Strauss omitted part of the passage.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Here Strauss seems to use “Robinson” to refer to the person dealing with the tailor instead of the tailor himself.

<sup>xxvii</sup> *Autobiography*, 106.

<sup>xxviii</sup> In the transcript: “[the opinion?]”

be historically variable. And certainly it has not changed since the days of the *Antigone* and of Plato, because you can easily say that Ismene in the *Antigone* represents right conduct. She is a sensible girl. And Antigone, the higher human being, transcends that; she does things<sup>16</sup> [that] all reasonable nice men say young girls shouldn't do, and yet she does<sup>17</sup> [them]. That would be perhaps an example of what he means. What Collingwood seems to presuppose is what I could call a formal ethics: the content of right conduct and of insight changes. In simple language, there exists a possibility of honesty in all ages, but honest action will always mean something very different. In other words, in all societies you find honest men, but that doesn't mean that they do the same actions, actions which are regarded as dishonest elsewhere. Still, why should history be connected precisely with situations in which the rules of action or rules of the society do not suffice? Collingwood must be thinking of revolutionary situations, of situations [in] which one society changes into another and where the rules of action belonging to society one can no longer guide action. Perhaps he means this: as human beings, we are under an obligation to act reasonably, considerately, kindly and so on. Yet this doesn't help us very much. It is merely formal: the content changes from society to society. The nonhistoricist, absolutist moralities freeze the specific contents of previous epochs without seeing that in the changed circumstances, the<sup>18</sup> [contents] of action which were formerly moral or kind are no longer so. And even this common core, for example, the hierarchy—ravid desire, self-interest, right conduct, free moral action—even this common core cannot be formulated in a permanently valid manner. This is the only way in which I can make head and tail of Collingwood's argument.

Is this thought at least intelligible to you? Because it has been expressed quite a few times; people have spoken, for example, of a natural law with changing content. I don't remember these books, but what can they possibly have meant [other] than that certain institutions, for example, which were fair and reasonable in one kind of society ceased to be fair and reasonable when the circumstances radically changed, so that what you can indicate as stable principles of justice can be only of a very formal kind—by no means irrelevant for this reason, but indeed never sufficient. Let us try to understand this a bit better by taking an example. Men can live reasonably, honestly, honorably with every kind of substantive ethics. By substantive ethics I mean an ethics which is not merely formal. If that is so, we have to take the consequences. For example, cannibalism, human sacrifice, burning of widows: I'm sure that these things have been done many times honestly and honorably, meaning not in order to satisfy mean desires and appetites but really by people who thought they were doing their duty. Even in this situation, there exists of course a possibility of transcending the ready-made rules of action in favor of a higher insight. The law prescribes that all widows should be burned, but I happen to be a priest<sup>19</sup> [on] this occasion [and] say this widow shall not be burned, because for some reason I know, being a kind man, that this would do irreparable damage to many other things. It is very easy to camouflage this insight by an oracle or so, but still this would be possible in all societies. But there is this difference, of course: in such a society there is no notion of a future abolition of the law and of its becoming replaced by another law, by a law forbidding, for example, the burning of the widows. Now it is all very well to say that a formal ethics—be honest, honorable, be kind—dictates that we should become immersed into a specific culture, a specific historical substance. The insight into the relativity of that substance—burning of widows is not absolutely

holy; that may be replaced—this insight cannot help breeding indifference to any substance. We cannot identify ourselves with any ethic after we have understood this principle of a formal ethics if the substance of that ethic itself does not appear to us to be final. I will try to explain this by speaking of Collingwood's notion of democracy, but I must first prepare this by a general reflection.

Let us make a distinction between the formal principles and the concrete ideal. The formal principle means "be honest, be reasonable, be considerate, be kind." But the content necessarily depends to a considerable extent upon the substantive ethics of a given society. Let us take a concrete example which is accessible to us on the basis of our own experience. The concrete ideal implies monogamy. There have been long devastating wars: the manhood of the country's concern has been depleted; there is an abundance of war widows and potential old maids. The concrete ideal, the high and noble ideal of monogamy, is in this situation, so it seems, productive of immorality. We change the ready-made rules and allow polygamy. That I think would be an example of what he means.<sup>20</sup> By the way, such a law had existed for some time in Athens, for example. There is a story (it may be true, it may be not) that Socrates took a second wife under such a condition. That is at least a story. At any rate, this is thinkable. You can also take property relations . . . It would be the same thing. If we would introduce polygamy for these reasons, we would allow it only for the duration, which means the deviation from the ideal would be a temporary concession to particularly unfavorable circumstances. The ideal would remain unaltered.

This of course is not the type of thing of which Collingwood thinks—rather, the following type. We have the traditional understanding of monogamy: the old patriarchal family, the wife has to obey the husband . . . and you know, with all the implications. Now a change: women have been shown to have as great ability as men—the great theme of George Bernard Shaw and many others. It appears that the traditional understanding of monogamy has rested on prejudices, on a false estimate of the respective capacities of the two sexes. Or more precisely, it was not exactly a prejudice; it had something to do with the fact that former societies were warlike societies and the men had of course to do the fighting, and whoever does the most important services gets more power than the other. The old ideal at any rate has proved to be too narrow; not merely inapplicable to particularly unfavorable conditions, but too narrow in more favorable conditions. In a word, progress. What Collingwood is thinking of is not a mere variability of ideals but the possibility of progress beyond any previously known ideal. Man can outgrow any possible ideal; that is the reason why Collingwood is so distrustful of ready-made rules. Ready-made rules would always freeze previous experience. And this idea is of course very familiar to all of us—the whole nineteenth century and part of the twentieth century was guided by this notion. In other words, progress, not only to identically the same ideal, but the ideal itself was thought to be progressive. And then under these conditions there cannot be any ready-made rules, any final rules. Collingwood unfortunately does not elaborate that. He would probably say that does not lead to a chronic condition, because we have a concrete ideal that is superior to any known alternative. So let us take the example of monogamy. The men in the nineteenth and early twentieth century would say there can be refinements of monogamy—perfect equality of the two

sexes within marriage, much greater freedom of dissolution of marriage, and whatnot—but monogamy retains the superiority to polygamy, polyandry, and so on . . . No temptation in this direction. Therefore, since we do not know any ideal that is superior to that which we have or cherish, we can identify ourselves wholeheartedly with that ideal. In the light of that ideal belonging to our world, we correct the ready-made rules as the situation requires it, yet we know that a higher ideal than ours is possible. Now this of course is of such a generality that we cannot come to grips with the problem; therefore we have to take the concrete example, and that is democracy. So we have something of which we all know something.

My attitude towards politics has always been what in England has always been called democratic and on the Continent liberal. I regarded myself as a unit in a political system where every citizen possesses<sup>xxix</sup> . . . the duty of voting for a representative to parliament. I thought that the government of my country, owing to the wide franchise, the free press, and the universally recognized right of free speech,<sup>xxx</sup> was such as to make it impossible that any considerable section should be oppressed by government action, or that their grievances should be hushed up, even if a remedy for them could not be found. I thought that the democratic system was not only a form of government but a school of political experience coextensive with the nation, and I thought that no authoritarian government, however strong, could be so strong as one which rested on a politically educated public opinion. . . .

These I thought very great merits; greater than those of any other political system yet devised, and worth defending at all costs against people who, because they wished to hoodwink the citizen and enforce upon him ready-made policies devised by some irresponsible cabal, untruthfully accused it of being ‘cumbrous’ and ‘inefficient’.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Of course that requires certain conditions to be fulfilled:

so long as the individual voters did their political duty by keeping themselves adequately informed on public questions, and voting in according with their judgement as to where on any given occasion the good of the nation as a whole was to be sought, there was little danger that [they or—LS] their representatives would be insufficiently informed, or insufficiently endowed with public spirit, to do their work—

<sup>xxix</sup> In original: “possessing the franchise had”

<sup>xxx</sup> In original: “a wide franchise, a free press, and a universally recognized”

<sup>xxxi</sup> *Autobiography*, 153-54. Ellipses indicate that Strauss omitted portions of the text.

The whole system . . . would break down if a majority of the electorate should become either ill informed on public questions or corrupt in their attitude towards them: by which I mean, capable of adopting towards them a policy directed not to the good of the nation as a whole, but to the good of their own class or section or of themselves. [But then a change occurred—LS] . . .

The newspapers of the Victorian Age made it their first business to give their readers full and accurate information about matters of public concern. Then came the *Daily Mail*, the first English newspaper for which the word ‘news’ had lost its old meaning of facts which the reader ought to know if he wants to vote intelligently, and acquired the new meaning of facts, or fictions, which it might amuse him to read.<sup>xxxii</sup>

And the second great event was Lloyd George’s demagoguery—<sup>xxxiii</sup>

We are then not confronted with radically different problems in different epochs, but with the same problems differently solved with a view to the difference of the circumstances. To refer in the general way in which Collingwood does to the Greek *polis* is not illuminating, but we have to spell it out in precise terms, and it would mean the *polis* as Plato and Aristotle understood it is the solution of the problem—strong government plus freedom—in one set of conditions, and the modern democratic state is the solution of the problem—strong government and freedom—in another set of conditions. And we have to identify the difference of these circumstances. Very briefly: scarcity on the one hand, and plenty on the other. Scarcity: there is not enough leisure for all in a society of scarcity. Anyone who has ever lived in a backward country—for example, in<sup>21</sup> the country in which I was brought up, I could see that . . . for the poor people, it was a great sacrifice to send their children to school until they were fourteen. A great sacrifice. If they would have had their own will, they would never have gone to school. They needed them. And that applies of course infinitely more to the poorer mankind of former ages. So in scarcity<sup>22</sup> there is not enough to go around for all to acquire education in the significant sense of the word. But no one in his sense[s] would wish to be governed by uneducated people; and therefore the rule of the educated, which always meant people that had some means, was not the wicked wish of damned reactionaries but was a dictate of sanity, given these conditions. In the moment it becomes possible to have something which we call, with a somewhat misleading term, universal education on the basis of plenty, the situation is different and the demands, the concrete demands of justice differ; the principles have not been affected. This has ultimately something to do with the fact that in former times (let me speak of Greece, where it is particularly clear to see), the

<sup>xxxii</sup> *Autobiography*, 154-55. Ellipses indicate portions omitted by Strauss.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> The tape was changed at this point. The transcriber inserts in brackets: “Some people were much more interested in their aggrandizement than the common good, but wise and good men always recognize that.”

notion prevails that there are very definite limits to human power, so much so that man can never abolish or significantly reduce scarcity. In modern times, man has a higher notion of what he can do in regard to nature, in regard to the conquest of nature, [so] the abolition of scarcity becomes increasingly possible. That is an important correction we have to make in Collingwood precisely on the basis of his analysis: there are permanent standards, but we can also see that permanent standards might lead to very different practical conclusions if the circumstance is radically different.

Now let me turn to this question: the best political system yet devised. That means, if it means anything, that a better political system may be devised. This cannot mean such a little thing as the still-lower voting age, perhaps proportional representation all over the globe, complete abolition of discrimination, and so on, because these are only further consequences of the same democratic ideal. All these changes do not amount to a fundamental change. Even socialism might not necessarily be a fundamental change. A better political system, meaning in this context only one thing: a nondemocratic system . . . Another system different from democracy means contradictory to democracy. Now I would argue as follows. Either democracy is the best political system on the basis of Collingwood's principles—then there is the end of radical changes; there may be only so to speak an intrademocratic process, while the ideal itself does no longer change—or democracy is not the best political system, and then it means a doubt of democracy, an uneasiness regarding democracy, perhaps without seeing one's way. And that Collingwood did have some uneasiness is shown by what he says about the decay of the press and the emergence of different kinds of demagogues.

Now let us see in concrete terms and not abstractly what this means, nondemocratic. It could only mean, on the basis of a philosophy of progress [such] as Collingwood has, transdemocratic, meaning not going back to an earlier stage of social organization but beyond democracy. And there are exactly two of them in Collingwood's time and in our time: the one is called communism, and the other is called fascism. Collingwood has a slightly greater sympathy for communism than for fascism, but that is irrelevant as far as our argument goes, I think. But however this may be, let us look at these two alternatives, how they understand themselves. Communism, of course, as you now from Stalin and other men, also has in mind the end of all fundamental changes. Not now, that's only socialism now, but<sup>23</sup> the prospect of a final period of universal communism as the final thing is absolutely essential to communism. Similarly, in fascism there is a corresponding though less clearly pronounced notion of a prospect of an end of radical changes. What I'm driving at is this: it is impossible, once one accepts the modern premise, to live without a prospect of the end of radical change. Collingwood has accused the realists—that is, more or less the same as [those] we know now<sup>24</sup> [as] logical<sup>25</sup> [positivists]—of having paved the way for fascism by their complete corrosion of all principles. I think he was absolutely right. But the trouble is that Collingwood, by his historicism, paves the way either for communism or for a noble equivalent, if any, of fascism. In other words, Collingwood can distinguish between beastliness and nobility. But that is not the point . . . But there is really no democratic commitment possible on this basis, it seems to me. Either an end of radical changes, meaning changes regarding the ideal itself, or there is a prospect of an end of radical change. In a

word, historicism is necessarily eschatological, because the term comes from theology: eschatology means the speech about the last things, the last stage, judgment day or whatever it might be, the end of days. Historicism necessarily has this implication. I repeat: The thought that all thought is historical, which means that all thought belongs to a specific comprehensive view, is itself historical. I mean, I hate these symbols which really don't explain. Is this simple thought clear? All thought is historical. That includes this thought itself, and the more intelligent historicist would already admit that. All thought is historical, and that means that historicism itself belongs to the final comprehensive view. Or in other words, realization of the variety of ideals, of the historical variety of ideals, if it understands itself supplies the final ideal or the end of variability.

Collingwood got into difficulties because he did not have the courage to say that modern liberal democracy is the best political system, whereas Aristotle, for example, did not hesitate to say that aristocracy is the best political system; and Collingwood thought he was more sophisticated than Aristotle. Yet there would still be this difference of which I will speak, and this difference partly explains Collingwood's hesitation: Aristotle's political philosophy, or that of any other premodern thinker stands in an entirely different relation to history than any present-day, typically modern political philosophy does. I will explain that. I take Aristotle really only because in a way he is *the* philosopher, in the sense that he is the classic . . . There is no book in existence<sup>26</sup> [like] Aristotle's *Politics*, as I don't have to explain to you because it is the official opinion of my department, and as you can see from the announcement, I fully share [that view]. One could easily elaborate that. Now how does Aristotle conceive of the relation of philosophy of politics to history? Very simply: reasonable action necessarily requires knowledge of the circumstances. Necessarily. Otherwise you are a fool. Sufficient knowledge of the circumstances may require knowledge of the causes of the circumstances and therefore what they now call a historical analysis. A simple example is that given by Edmund Burke in one of his America speeches. He says he wants to proceed historically, and he means this very simple thought. The British had come into a mess. Burke wanted to show a way out of the mess, and therefore he says: We must first look to how we came into that mess in order to find a way out of it.<sup>xxxiv</sup> That is common sense, reasonable. That is the political use of history in the Aristotelian and commonsensical sense of the term. Or take another example: laws which have ceased to make sense. Now it is stupid to say they were such old fools in former times and made such foolish laws, because in many cases these laws proved to be eminently reasonable at the time when they were established, only the circumstances have changed so radically that it would be foolish not to<sup>27</sup> [abrogate] them. Or let us take another example nearer to my field. There was a notion abroad, or it was abroad that there is such a thing as the absolute right of property, and this view always referred to the authority of Locke, who was the prophet of that right according to once-common opinion. But then let us look at the authority, because [in] the present-day discussion (say, about 1930 or so) people deferred to John Locke, naturally. Did Locke then assert an

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Edmund Burke, Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies, 22 Mar 1775, *Works* 1:464-71. Burke's speech begins with a historical account, though he does not explicitly say that he will proceed historically.

absolute right of property? And we can easily see: No, he did not; because what Locke meant was that the greatest possible freedom of acquisition is the condition of expanding wealth and comfort. In other words, the right of property is conditioned on its being the condition of expanding wealth and comfort. This reflection is perfectly unobjectionable, evidently meaningful. People deferred to a certain authority with a view to a certain kind of policy; one naturally looks into that authority. There is no problem here. This is what history meant in the Aristotelian tradition. You make inquiries into the past—of institutions, of thoughts, of measures, what have you—if there is a need for it, if it is evidently so that you cannot clarify the situation without going into the causes or the origins of the situation.

But the interesting point is this. All these are specific cases, maybe important cases. But here in Collingwood and other contemporaries we have a fundamentally different attitude to what history is as a whole. Today it is assumed that historical studies are not needed only here and there. But we believe, and perhaps we are not without good reason, that it is impossible to diagnose our situation without historical studies, and that is really a novel thing. For example, can you imagine what kind of historical studies accompanied, say, the Peloponnesian War or the Punic War? Certainly not historical studies in the way that we mean them. Naturally, people had to know a bit about the past of themselves and their enemies, but that, the old experienced men or the memories of old experienced men contained. The notion of a systematic study of the past as a prerequisite for an adequate understanding of the situation is a very recent thing, nineteenth-century but not earlier.

Now let us see why that is so. I think the consequence, [the] conclusion which Collingwood and his contemporaries draw is correct, but it needs clarification. Let us look at Collingwood's remark on the emergence of demagogues in modern democracy and the decay of the public spirit, the decay of a certain severity of manners contrasted with a time when someone who had some understanding of these things said: "The principle of democracy is virtue." Today the term "virtue" is almost taboo in such discussions. So it seems that the best political system is accompanied by perils of its own. We try to diagnose these evils by measuring our society against its contemporary ideal. We hear in every Fourth of July speech what democracy should be. We measure the reality against it. There is no history. Yet there is this difficulty that we all know: the ideal, the promise, the aspiration, the dream, is not exactly contemporary with present-day democratic society. That this is so can very easily be shown because there was a certain moment . . . maybe it was 1906, when people became suddenly aware of the difference between the promise and the ideal on the one hand, and the reality on the other. If my information is correct, that was the situation in which Graham Wallas<sup>xxxv</sup> emerged, and this led to this kind of hard-boiled political science<sup>28</sup> with which we are familiar—in other words, to the abandonment of all claims for democracy. We just describe it, which of course is only escapism. So therefore, if the promise antedates in a way the fulfillment, we cannot understand the promise if we do not

<sup>xxxv</sup> English political theorist (1858-1932) and the author of *Human Nature in Politics* (1920). Wallas was critical of the notion that voters in democracies act rationally.

return to the past. And that of course is done everywhere, for which reason people read in the College here *The People Shall Judge*,<sup>xxxvi</sup> with the classic statements that all stem from the past: the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address, and so on and so on. Then we find something called “Jeffersonian Democracy,” and what is that? It’s a rural democracy. And we are led to another great expounder of democracy in the nineteenth century, an unforgettable man, Tocqueville, and his notion of self-government, of decentralization as the condition of a healthy and virile democracy going together with the notion that the national government should be relatively weak. In a word, democracy emerged, the promise came out in a society of a different time, a society which was smaller and simpler: still more precisely, a society which was in accordance with man’s natural capacity. There is a strange contemporaneity between Jefferson, Tocqueville, Rousseau, Aristotle, and Plato as regards this point: their notion of the conditions for a good society. The condition of a good society is that the society is somehow in accordance with the nature of man, with man’s macroscopic capacities of knowledge, if I may say so. We still use this when we speak of anonymity and the dangers of big cities and all this kind of thing—we all have some such model in mind. This was really that model notion, wholly independent now of the question of what the right kind of government is, but that these are certain limits to a society in which men can still be fellows in an effective way. And that was developed by Plato and Aristotle theoretically, but not only by them; it was restored in modern times by quite a few writers in between.

But let us now see. If we want to understand the ideal of democracy as it was originally understood, we have to make historical studies, and at the end we reach something like Aristotle. But what about Aristotle himself? Was Aristotle compelled to engage in historical studies to understand the promise of what he regarded as the good society? Or was it only stupidity or primitivity which prevented him from thinking of historical studies? Now Aristotle did not go back to history for the very simple reason that he lived in a society of this kind, if in a society of this kind which he regarded as very imperfect, namely, the decayed *polis* of Athens or so. The principle of modern democracy, and the same applies to all other modern regimes, is essentially a modification of the *polis* and can only be understood as such. We modern men certainly need history in order to understand our society. All modern concepts are essentially derivative concepts: we need history. That is the strong point of Collingwood’s books. But Collingwood draws from this the conclusion that we are wiser than the past books, and that conclusion is not warranted. Historical understanding does not in itself and not in any way prove a progress of thought. Historical understanding may very well have to serve the function that we should ascend to a level of human understanding which was more natural, [the level found] in more simple societies, namely, in the past. I would suggest that what I indicated here seems to me to be a historical understanding of historicism, to give tit for tat (is that the proper expression?). Well, surely historicism must be understood historically. We can easily see from the peculiar

<sup>xxxvi</sup> *The People Shall Judge: Readings in the Formation of American Policy* (2 vols.), ed. The Staff, Social Sciences 1, The College of the University of Chicago (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

predicament of modern man and the peculiar situation of modern man why we need history, but no further conclusion can be drawn from this.

One can also state this point more simply in the following way, turning back to the definition of political philosophy which I presented at the beginning of the course. Political philosophy, I said, is the attempt to replace opinions regarding the political fundamentals by knowledge regarding them. How does it work in practice? You cannot possibly transcend your opinions if you do not know your opinions. The first thing to do, therefore, is to state them. But if you make the attempt to state your opinions, you will see that it is infinitely more difficult than the positivist thinks, who believes that men state their values by simply saying, "I believe in freedom." If you want to state your opinions in a serious way, you will see that it is very difficult. But the difficulty is more precisely this: our opinions are not simply our opinions; they are to a considerable extent, to the greatest extent, a heritage. What we have the nerve to call our opinions are pieces, some pieces of what were once consistent and coherent reports. We have to go back to their origins, to the time when some great thinker or thinkers thought these thoughts for the first time, to understand our opinions. So the clarification of our opinions, which is absolutely necessary, insensibly changes into historical study. I always regarded this as a convincing truth of historicism, and the one which I knew in my bones, as it were, that *is* so, whenever [some]one tries to ask you that. Otherwise one is superficial, that's true.

But the question is: Is this necessarily so? Some historical information suffices to show that it is not always. I gave one simple example. Take a medieval political thinker studying Aristotle. Was it a historical study? No, no, no. Why not? Because Aristotle was a contemporary. I mean, that he lived some hundreds of years ago is uninteresting. The thought was contemporary. Now he was not always right, naturally, but just as for a mathematician other mathematicians are contemporaries with others when they wrote, [so] to the medieval man Aristotle was a contemporary.<sup>29</sup> Just as today we can take a mathematical textbook for, say, algebra . . . if there were such an absolute textbook, which in our time is probably not the case, but in the Middle Ages it was absolute. So in other words, the difference is this: our authorities . . . are not contemporary with us. They are really nineteenth, eighteenth century, and so on. How come? Answer: Because of the belief in progress. They laid the foundations, yes; they were great men. But then we build on it and we don't need them anymore. We live on a higher level, you see, and therefore the idea of progress means of course that later men are not contemporaries with those who laid the foundations. And therefore if we want . . . if we become a little bit insecure in this more-than-Empire State Building, so high, and therefore we have to go down to the foundation and look: there they are safe. That is the only respectable meaning, it seems to me, of history of ideas, of history of thought. It's really a dead serious business, and not just the fun of getting some out-of-the-way wisdom.

**Student:** Can't you proceed on the assumption that Aristotle might be right? Can't you just drop [the historical aspect]?<sup>xxxvii</sup>

**LS:** I would say this. I have given that some thought. I don't believe it can ever be as simple as that. I think *no* thinker of the past, whoever he may be, solves our problems. Let us assume that there was a thinker X who had established, in a way that will be always right, the fundamental principles. He doesn't show you how they apply to us. And I am speaking now not only of the problems of social and economic and political thought, but also of course there are the problems—the theoretical problems—created by modern science. We have to do some thinking of our own under all conditions . . . But the very beginning, the very beginning, I would say, is to remind ourselves of the fact that we are living on foundations which we do not know, really. Of course in a textual way we know; everyone knows the names of Newton and Descartes and the other great names, but that of course does not mean really to know that. And of course political philosophy is the same. But that is absolutely unsettled. What some people suggest . . . forget about the foundations—we just define a term in an unambiguous way: political power means that, or authority means that. You might have read a book by Lasswell and Kaplan<sup>xxxviii</sup> in which they do that. These people say, “We can forget about all fundamental problems; we only have to use unambiguous terms,” as if these terms did not contain concealed within themselves this tremendous intellectual world molded by many generations and which they think they can just use without really having made [them] their own by such a study.

So if I may summarize this part of the argument, there is not the slightest doubt that first of all, political history is an infinitely more important preliminary study for the understanding of political situations than psychology is; and more immediately relevant to us, it is absolutely indispensable from every point of view that we study the origins, the intellectual origins of our thought, and as carefully as possible if we are conscientious and have the time, in addition. But that does in no way<sup>30</sup> [settle] the issue raised by historicism, namely, that all ideals or all principles are necessarily variable. On the contrary, I have tried to show that the notion of always-variable standards as the historicist understands them leads to impossible consequences, that historicism must become eschatological in order to become defensible.

Next time I will discuss briefly<sup>31</sup> what we can<sup>32</sup> say about historical understanding in the narrow sense, [and by that I will conclude my discussion of Collingwood]. After all, if it is true that we must engage in historical studies, the question arises . . . how can one conduct historical studies properly on the basis of historicism.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Bracketed words appear in parentheses in the transcript. The transcriber notes that the question is “mostly inaudible.”

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Harold Lasswell (1902-1978) and Abraham Kaplan (1918-1993), American professors of political science and philosophy, respectively. Lasswell would later be criticized in the volume *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics*, written by Strauss and four of his students. Strauss is referring here to their coauthored *Power and Society: A Framework for Political Inquiry* (1950).

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- <sup>1</sup> Deleted “this.”
  - <sup>2</sup> Deleted “for example-.”
  - <sup>3</sup> Deleted “question.”
  - <sup>4</sup> Deleted “the other.”
  - <sup>5</sup> Deleted “to.”
  - <sup>6</sup> Deleted “what.”
  - <sup>7</sup> Deleted “he does not.”
  - <sup>8</sup> Changed from “as sources or authorities”; deleted “He does not read them.”
  - <sup>9</sup> Deleted “the”
  - <sup>10</sup> Deleted “that.”
  - <sup>11</sup> Deleted “them to use.”
  - <sup>12</sup> Deleted “this rule.”
  - <sup>13</sup> Deleted “But is there not.”
  - <sup>14</sup> Deleted “this situation.”
  - <sup>15</sup> Deleted “This.”
  - <sup>16</sup> Deleted “where.”
  - <sup>17</sup> Deleted “it.”
  - <sup>18</sup> Deleted “causes.”
  - <sup>19</sup> Deleted “in.”
  - <sup>20</sup> Deleted “But of course we would allow....”
  - <sup>21</sup> Deleted “a.”
  - <sup>22</sup> Deleted “when.”
  - <sup>23</sup> Deleted “then.”
  - <sup>24</sup> Deleted “by.”
  - <sup>25</sup> Deleted “positivism.”
  - <sup>26</sup> Deleted “as.”
  - <sup>27</sup> Deleted “antiquate.”
  - <sup>28</sup> Deleted “And.”
  - <sup>29</sup> Deleted “And therefore the study of Aristotle was.”
  - <sup>30</sup> Deleted “imply.”
  - <sup>31</sup> Moved “and by that I will conclude my discussion of Collingwood.”
  - <sup>32</sup> Changed from “can...we.”

## Session 5: February 8, 1956

### Collingwood: The Problem of Historical Understanding

**Leo Strauss:** I should like to discuss now a seemingly more elementary and limited subject, and that is the problem of historical understanding with which everyone doing any kind of historical work is confronted. Now I take the word “historical understanding” in a wide sense, but in a legitimately large sense: any understanding of the thinking of other people. But first let us take the question as stated by Collingwood. He contends that our way, our kind of historical understanding, is superior to that which was available in the past. For, as he puts it, scientific history, a thing which emerged only in the second half of the nineteenth century, is superior to all other types of history. We are in a better position to understand the thought of the past than earlier generations have been. Now why is this issue important? Why is it important to understand the thought of the past as thought of the past? You see, for example, I may read Aristotle and try to understand him, and it is a mere accident to me that he is a thinker of the past. Historical understanding in the more precise sense means to understand the thought of the past as thought of the past.

Now Collingwood argues as follows. We have our problems. For example (and it is a little bit more than an example), the great increase in human power due to technology [is] an increase in power not accompanied by an increase in wisdom. That’s what we are confronted with. This problem arises out of earlier solutions or answers. In our case, the solution was that natural science in the modern sense was possible. This solution or answer was an answer to earlier problems, and that goes on and on in the past. To understand our problem we have to understand its genesis, and that means we have to understand earlier thought “as it really has been.” That’s a famous phrase of Ranke’s,<sup>i</sup> the German historian. The task of the historian is that he has to understand the past as it really has been, in contradistinction to mythical notions, mere popular guesses and so on. Historical knowledge means, then, self-knowledge. We understand ourselves by understanding the genesis of our problems. Now the result of such an understanding of the past as it really has been would be, to take an example of Collingwood’s, that Plato’s *Republic* represents an ideal of the Greeks. That is scientific understanding because primarily people would say: Well, that is just a utopia of a best social order as Plato imagined it. Or maybe some people would say it was the true notion. But scientific history tells us: No, that is just an exposition of the ideal of the Greeks. And that is important to know—important to know if we want to understand ourselves properly.

<sup>i</sup> The phrase, “*wie es eigentlich gewesen*,” is found in the introduction to Leopold von Ranke’s first work, *Geschichte der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514* (1824) [History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations, 1494 to 1514, trans. G. R. Dennis (London: G. Bell, 1915)].

I would like to illustrate this by an example which is a bit closer down to earth but fundamentally the same. You all remember the French Revolution, or for that matter the American Revolution. How did the authors of the Federalist Papers sign? Do you remember that? Publius. Now that's a Roman name. So in the eighteenth century, even in the United States (by the way, the many Roman and Greek place names in upstate New York and so on are also very interesting) but more visibly perhaps in France [with] the French Revolution: restoration of antiquity, of ancient citizenship to abolish the spirit of the bourgeois—that did not yet quite mean what it means in Marxism, but also [the] subject of the modern monarch—and to become again *citoyen*, citizen, *cives*, *politēs*. In other words, in this important period of Western history the attempt was made to return to something and to restore something, namely, the spirit of the ancient republics. And there certain difficulties arose, into which I do not have to go. I am only concerned with the theoretical problems.

So in the middle of the nineteenth century a very wise, very thoughtful, rather conservative man called Fustel de Coulanges, a Frenchman, wrote a book called *The Ancient City*,<sup>ii</sup> and by the way, every one of you should really have read that book. It is one of the most beautiful books written in the nineteenth century, and among historical books it certainly belongs to the top five, however you might pick them. Now this was a historical book about the ancient city. No later book on the ancient city can compare with that, even if these later books are more correct and informative on secondary matters. So this is a purely historical work, but a historical book with an eminently *political* message: to show that it is impossible to restore the ancient city in the Western world because, Fustel de Coulanges contended, the ancient city rested on pagan religion *essentially*. And he showed how the institutions of Greece as well as of Rome, the distinctions between patricians and plebeians in Rome, all the fights between patricians and plebeians, and so on and so on, can only be understood as part of a religious struggle on this pagan basis. And therefore, for this reason every thought of restoring ancient institutions is meaningless. And Fustel de Coulanges wrote this book because this dream of restoring ancient republicanism still played a very great part in Europe around the middle of the nineteenth century. In other words, what is the political meaning of such a historical study, then? The liberation from earlier notions and aspirations, the truth that these earlier notions and aspirations cannot possibly have a meaning for us anymore, that is the implication of this kind of study. Our thoughts are always partly belonging to periods which have long passed and therefore prevent the clear and adequate grasp of the situation at hand. The alleged proof that Plato's *Republic* stands and falls by the Greek *polis* and becomes fundamentally meaningless beyond that would of course be a liberation from the influence of that book, not because it is wicked or fascist but because it belongs to a completely different period of mankind. This is the general way in which Collingwood understands the significance of historical studies.

<sup>ii</sup> Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City: A Study on the Religion, Laws, and Institutions of Greece and Rome*, with a new forward by A. Momigliano and S. C. Humphreys (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980). Originally published as *La Cité Antique* (Paris: Durand, 1864).

Now we have to raise this question: What is it that enables us modern scientific historians to understand the thought of the past as it really has been? Or in other words: What is the essence of scientific history? We have seen last time two elements are crucial. First, the primacy of the question: the historian begins with a question of his own; and secondly, history means in all cases history of thought, and to understand thought means to reenact it and therewith to criticize it. These two notions—the primacy of the question, and understanding means criticism—explain the crucial thing, namely, that the scientific historian is sovereign. *He* determines which question is to be raised, and he is fundamentally the judge. There is no question of a [. . .]<sup>iii</sup> receptivity, of a fundamentally receptive attitude on the part of the historian. Now let us consider that, and especially the primacy of the question. The question, it is said, in all historical studies originates in us. It is our question. A present question compels us to engage in historical studies. For example, take a branch of studies called economic history. Why do people study economic history? That field of studies didn't exist, say, a hundred years ago. Why do they do it? Because we know from our own society the importance of the so-called economic factor, and we want to see how this factor was operative in earlier societies. We don't find books on economics, so to speak, in earlier times (I may exaggerate a tiny bit, but it's only a small exaggeration). We have to address to the writers the question which they never raised. We take the initiative. Or take another example emphasized by Collingwood: studies about population figures. Population figures in earlier writers, Collingwood contends, probably rightly, are very unreliable. People simply said there were thousands and thousands of people: that's not counting. And we have to do some very boring work, but we get really exact figures because sometimes they did count, so and so many households in a village, and a man had so and so many children, and then we make a statistical average and figure out how many people lived in that village, and then we figure out on the basis of some other things how many villages existed at that time, say, in medieval France, and then you get a probable population figure. In this way Collingwood himself says he figured out that the population of Roman Britain was half a million, and regarding the population of Roman Gaul, there were estimates based on the old writers: between five millions and thirty millions. You see, if you want really to know the population of Roman Gaul it seems you have to do some work of your own. So there are quite a few questions which have never been raised by former historians, and where the whole initiative, the whole set-up obviously depends on the modern historian, not on the source.

Let us look a little more closely. Our question is the beginning, because our question leads to the selection of our theme, to the conscious selection of the theme. For if we do not consciously select our theme we act thoughtlessly, in a way not befitting scientific man, by which I do not mean to say that a student might not come to a professor and say, "Please give me a theme or subject." That is another matter; that is still a sign that he is very much a young student. But one should finally arrive at a stage where one can choose freely and considerately a reasonable subject. So our question determines the selection of the theme; therefore we are the ones who address questions of our own to old authors. So for example, when we raise the question "What

<sup>iii</sup> The transcript has a blank space here.

does this statement mean?” we mean primarily: What does this statement mean in the light of our question? We do not merely mean, “What did the author mean by it?” For example, say it was a statement about population figures. The author wasn’t concerned with the population figures; he just mentioned it in passing. He was concerned with something else,<sup>iv</sup> but in passing he mentions the figure. It was a<sup>1</sup> [case] where the author perhaps didn’t pay any attention as to the exact population figure of that city. I think I must read to you a few remarks by Collingwood so you will see how this works in actual practice, and these points are really very helpful for understanding the problem of history. I have read already something concerning this question last time, so I will read only one passage now.

As natural science finds its proper method when the scientist, in Bacon’s metaphor, puts Nature to the question, tortures her by experiment in order to wring from her answers to his own questions, so history finds its proper method when the historian puts his authorities in the witness-box, and by cross-questioning extorts from them information which in their original statements they have withheld, either because they did not wish to give it or because they did not possess it. Thus, a commander’s dispatches may claim a victory; the historian, reading them in a critical spirit, will ask: ‘If it was a victory, why was it not followed up in this or that way?’ and may thus convict the writer of concealing the truth. Or, by using the same method, he may convict of ignorance a less critical predecessor who has accepted the version of a<sup>v</sup> battle given him by the same dispatches.

The historian’s autonomy is here manifested in its extremest form, because it is here evident that somehow, in virtue of his activity as a historian, he has it in his power to reject something explicitly told him by his authorities and to substitute something else. If that is possible, the criterion of historical truth cannot be the fact that a statement is made by an authority. It is the truthfulness and information of the so-called authority that are in question; and this question the historian has to answer for himself, on his own authority. Even if he accepts what his authorities tell him, therefore, he accepts it not on their authority but on his own; not because they say it, but because it satisfies his criterion of historical truth.<sup>vi</sup>

So we raise then this question: What did the author mean by it, say, Thucydides by a remark about a battle or a siege? But we do not mean by that merely “What did Thucydides mean by it?” but “What fact can we learn from that statement?”—which fact Thucydides did not even notice,

<sup>iv</sup> The transcript has a lengthy blank space between this word and the next.

<sup>v</sup> In original: “the”

<sup>vi</sup> *Idea of History*, 237-38.

perhaps. That is perfectly possible and legitimate. But of course the case of economic history and such branches is entirely different for the history of thought proper. I, the modern historian, have a question of my own, and prompted by this question I turn to an old author. Again an example. I am concerned by this problem of modern technology, of the increase in human power brought about by modern science and the lacking development of human wisdom. I naturally turn, if I have some information, to Francis Bacon, because Francis Bacon was the hero of such a development, and see how did Bacon, who wanted such a tremendous technological development, conceived of the relation of what we now call science to human wisdom. Or take another example. We have today this problem of relativism, and in all these discussions one name turns up invariably: that is the name of David Hume, naturally. Since Hume is a kind of authority here, we are compelled to investigate Humean thought and see what does *he* say about moral principles: Was David Hume a relativist? and so on. So we turn then to an old author, instigated primarily by *our* question. Relativism was not a question of the eighteenth century. The disproportion of wisdom and power in the way in which we have it before us was not a problem of Bacon. Our problem, but we turn to an old author to help us clarify our problem. That means of course we address this question to the author. What question did, say, Bacon try to solve? Now I raise this question contrary to what Collingwood says about the independence of the historian in regard to the authorities. Am I not entirely dependent, in order to answer the question “What did Bacon mean?” on what Bacon explicitly says? Am I not entirely dependent on the authorities? Must I not raise the question “What does this statement of Bacon mean?” in the sense “What did *Bacon* mean by it?” Or is there a problem? Now there are at least two strata of the problem. One is fairly simple, and that has been stated very beautifully I think by Collingwood. The example which he takes is from political history, but that does not affect the situation very much.

Julius Caesar, we are told, invaded Britain in two successive years. What did he do it for? The question is hardly ever asked by historians; and I can remember none who has tried to answer it scientifically, that is, by means of evidence. There is, of course, no evidence to speak of except that contained in Julius Caesar’s own narrative. There he never says what he meant to effect by his invasions of Britain. It is the fact of his silence that constitutes our chief evidence as to what his intention was. Whatever he wanted<sup>vii</sup> to bring about, his intention was one which he decided to conceal from his readers. In the light of a general acquaintance with the *Commentaries* [Caesar’s narrative—LS], the likeliest explanation for this concealment was that whatever his purpose had been he had failed to achieve it. I then compared the strength of his expeditionary force with that of the army sent over by Claudius, nearly a century later, and this settled it. Caesar must have intended no mere punitive expedition or demonstration of force . . . but the complete conquest of the country. . . .

<sup>vii</sup> In original: “meant”

People who do not understand historical thinking . . . will say: ‘It is useless to raise the question, because if your only information comes from Caesar, and Caesar has not told you his plans, you cannot possibly know<sup>viii</sup> what they were.’ These are the people who, if they met you one Saturday afternoon with a fishing-rod, creel, and camp-stool, walking towards the river, would ask: ‘Going fishing?’ And I suppose that if they were serving on a jury when some one was tried for attempted murder because he had put arsenic in his wife’s tea on Monday, and cyanide of potassium in her coffee on Tuesday, and on Wednesday broke her spectacles with a revolver-bullet, and knocked a piece out of her right ear with another on Thursday, and now pleaded not guilty, they would press for his acquittal because as he never admitted that he meant to murder her there could be no evidence that he did mean to.<sup>ix</sup>

Now that is a very nice argument, and I must say I fully agree with that. But only one little point (of course I know Caesar much less than Collingwood must have done): I look at the passage in the *Commentary* and<sup>2</sup> I have the feeling that Caesar says why he invaded Britain, namely, because the Britons had helped the Gauls in the previous war with Gauls, and he wanted to get rid of the [. . .]<sup>x</sup> nuisance stemming from Britain, and that I would regard as an explicit statement of Caesar’s. But maybe I misunderstood something in Caesar. But however this may be, even in such a case of course there is only one thing, surely: the explicit evidence. To regard only explicit evidence as reliable means to commit this folly which Collingwood so nicely describes. But of course all reasonable guesses and probabilities of the highest order which you can have are necessarily arrived at on the basis of what the author explicitly says: if you do not begin with a careful consideration of what he explicitly says, everything else is just impossible. So while we cannot possibly be limited by what an author explicitly says—because he really might wish to conceal something, if not from us, if not from everyone, at least from some readers—we must begin with that. We must begin, I also could put it this way, with the question, in the case of a theoretical writer, philosopher, or however you might call him: What was the question which he raised, which he explicitly raised? Here Collingwood again has a very strange notion. He says we only know what the problem was by arguing back from the solution, meaning we have never any evidence as to what the problem was from the author’s own mouth, we only can infer the problem from the solution. And then he goes on. I will give you this example.

If anyone<sup>xi</sup> chooses to deny this, I will not try to convince him. Everyone<sup>xii</sup> who has learnt to think historically knows it already [I don’t—LS]; and no

<sup>viii</sup> In original: “ever know”

<sup>ix</sup> *Autobiography*, 131-32.

<sup>x</sup> The transcript has a blank space here.

<sup>xi</sup> In original: “anybody”

<sup>xii</sup> In original: “everybody”

amount of argument could teach it to a person who had not learnt to think historically. How can we discover what the tactical problem was that Nelson set himself at Trafalgar? Only by studying the tactics he pursued in the battle. We argue back from the solution to the problem. What else could we do? Even if we had the original typescript of the coded orders issued by wireless [to his captains] two hours<sup>xiii</sup> before the battle began, this would not tell us that he had not changed his mind at the last moment, extemporized a new plan on seeing some new factor in the situation, and trusted his captains to understand what he was doing and to back him up.<sup>xiv</sup>

But what would be the equivalent of that in the case of a philosopher, for example? Because after all, the great hurry in which an admiral or a general must make changes, extemporize a new solution, does not exist for a man who has some time . . . What can he possibly mean by that in the history of thought? Well, he would argue as follows, I believe. An author might set out to answer a certain problem which he identifies, but in trying to solve that problem he comes into a greater depth than he had known in the beginning, and so in fact the problem which he tackles and which he solves is not the one which he set out to solve. Theoretically that is possible, although I would assume that a man of reasonable care would go over his book in which he presents that and see whether the initial formulation would not have to be restated on the basis of his findings. Do you see the possibility that this could happen? Theoretically it is of course possible, but even this cannot possibly be established if I do not know the initial question, the initial problem, that is to say, the explicit problem.

I would therefore formulate the problem of historical understanding in this stage as follows. Naturally we must start with our question; otherwise there is nothing which will open up to us the historical phenomena. Guided by a question which animates us, we turn to an author. We choose this author rather than that. But then from that moment on, there has to be a rigorous subordination of our question to his question because we have to try to understand his question and his answer as he meant them. That is certainly not the last word. For example, if you take the example of Bacon: If we want to reach clarity about the problem of wisdom and science and we turn to Bacon because Bacon had given it much thought at the beginning of this period, our understanding of Bacon will be only a part of our thinking processes, and only this part can be called strictly speaking historical. But with this part there is no question of what we have to do. Here we have to listen to Bacon and not to interfere with that, and we have to see what is Bacon's full message. If it is of any importance to us to know what Bacon's thought was, we have to get the whole story—from him. So in other words, in this crucial part of the study, the historical part of the study, there cannot be any question of the sovereignty of the historian but only of the submissiveness rather of the historian.

<sup>xiii</sup> In original: "a few hours"

<sup>xiv</sup> *Autobiography*, 70.

Now when I say this, I make a distinction which can be stated as follows. To try to understand a teaching, an author, a book, a newspaper article—let me call this interpretation, so that interpretation would mean the attempt to understand what an author consciously intends. It doesn't have to be explicit—he may only have intimated it—but what the author himself meant, consciously meant. Let us distinguish this from criticism, namely, afterward, after we know what Bacon thought about it, after we have really understood it, then we have to find out whether it is true. That is a distinction which Collingwood discusses at some length. The one question is, say, what Plato thought. Another question is whether what Plato thought is true. This distinction, I think, is most familiar to all of us because it is just common sense, and I don't believe I have to explain it any further. Every one of you who has read a newspaper article and discussed it later on with someone else knows the difference. What did, say, Walter Lippmann<sup>xv</sup> say? That is one question. Is it sound, true?—another question. Obviously, you cannot answer the question whether it is sound or true before you know what he meant; that seems to be really elementary. But one can go one step further, and then we come into deeper water and say this: This distinction between the question of what Bacon taught or thought and whether what he thought is true allows us to distinguish between history of philosophy, which is only interested in establishing what the old thinkers thought, and philosophy, which is interested in finding out whether it is true.

Now Collingwood rejects this distinction altogether. He finds the realists, of whom he has so much to say, confronted with this problem. According to this view, which he attacks, the history of philosophy was an inquiry which had nothing to do with the question whether, say, Plato's theory of ideas was true or false, but only with the question [of] what it was. And this view led to the conclusion that the history of philosophy was a subject without any philosophical interest. Now fundamentally these so-called realistic views of his enemies (it doesn't matter how they are called) are a decayed version of the older view, because that was exactly the older view: the history of philosophy is of no philosophical interest. Now the same distinction between the history of philosophy and philosophy could be suggested also on the opposite grounds, on the directly opposite grounds: philosophy is impossible. Let us say political philosophy in particular is impossible. But history of political philosophy is possible and necessary; and so history of political philosophy would be objective, because that this and this is what Plato taught you can prove by quoting chapter and verse. But the question whether it is true or not doesn't arise, because this is a dimension . . . in which there is no truth or untruth. Philosophy is purely subjective.

Now we have to consider this question, this distinction between philosophy and the history of philosophy as totally unrelated or separated disciplines. Is this possible? I think one can show in many ways that Collingwood is absolutely right in rejecting this separation. The historian of philosophy, to take the broadest case, must start from an understanding of what philosophy is.

<sup>xv</sup> American Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, author of *Public Opinion* (1922).

And let me illustrate this as simply as I can. Let us say that philosophy is the quest for knowledge of all things: of God, and world, and man. The question arises immediately, if we are unbiased: Is there direct experience of God, mystical experience of God? Well, obviously everything will depend on how we decide the question. Philosophy will look entirely differently if we say yes than if we say no. Now the answer to this question is admittedly “quote subjective”; therefore every definition of philosophy is subjective and the whole history of philosophy rests on this subjective basis. But let us limit ourselves to political philosophy, an admittedly nonmystic discipline. We turn, say, to John Stuart Mill or to Plato. Our turning to Plato precedes our study of Plato. Our question is primary. We have to reflect on our question, which means on the reason why we turn to Plato. This primary step, the selection of the theme, cannot be justified on the basis of historical evidence, say, by Plato. Here the so-called subjective element necessarily enters. We try to understand, then, but we cannot understand without judging. To understand means to criticize. The conclusion: To find out what Plato thought is identical with the inquiry whether what Plato thought was true. The separation between the history of philosophy and philosophy breaks down.

Now let us examine that. Collingwood says criticism is criticism from a certain point of view. Naturally. But the point of view is that which gave rise to our question, and our question was a present question; therefore the point of view from which we criticize will be the point of view of the present. Now this would necessarily mean in the case of any older thinker rejection of him, because what he thought cannot possibly agree with what people today think. And Collingwood sometimes inclines to this foolish suggestion, but it does not follow from his principle; and there are also passages in his books where he admits that criticism, say, of Plato may very well mean rejection of present-day thought in favor of Plato. Criticism may very well mean assent to earlier thought *en bloc* or in one particular part. Criticism does not mean rejection; assent is also criticism. But precisely because we have either to assent or to reject, and both are criticisms, that means criticism is coextensive with interpretation or understanding. Yet common sense seems to dictate a distinction between interpretation and criticism. Look at the simple example of the newspaper which you first have to read and understand, and then you judge.

Now we can perhaps take another passage from Collingwood to explain this point. He says his “logic of question and answer,” of which I have spoken before,

committed me to the view that any one can understand any philosopher’s doctrines if he can grasp the questions which they are intended to answer. Those questions need not be his own; they may belong to a thought-complex very different from any that is spontaneously going on in his own mind; but this ought not to prevent him from understanding them and judging whether the persons interested in them are answering them rightly or wrongly.<sup>xvi</sup>

<sup>xvi</sup> *Autobiography*, 55.

In other words, Collingwood says here the distinction between interpretation and criticism is possible. We take a question and follow up this question and see how the author handles this question, how he tried to answer it, without raising the question in this stage whether these questions are really good questions or the most adequate questions. Is this intelligible? I mean, on this basis the distinction between interpretation and criticism is perfectly possible, and one can also say on this basis [that] the task of the historian (and that is indeed what Collingwood himself says in another passage) to think in that way about philosophies not your own is to think about them historically, meaning to understand them on their own terms in answering fair questions and not trying to interfere at this stage with their questioning and answering process, only following it even further. So this then means historical understanding: to understand an author as he understood himself.

Yes, but if this then is really the essence of historical understanding, as I would say and as Collingwood also says—but not always—then I raise this question: Is this most important part of historical understanding, to understand the older thinkers as they understood themselves? Is this an achievement of scientific history? And I would answer with an emphatic “No.” Proof: Collingwood’s own history of historiography.<sup>3</sup> I have criticized that in an article in the *Review of Metaphysics*, 1952;<sup>xvii</sup> it is not necessary for our purposes to repeat that. I might want to give you an example of what Collingwood is sometimes doing, and [one] that I think is very revealing. He speaks of the classical and ancient conception of history,<sup>4</sup> and he quotes Aristotle saying that poetry is more scientific than history.

History tells us that Croesus fell and Polycrates fell; poetry, according to Aristotle’s idea of it, makes not these singular judgments [about Croesus and Polycrates—LS] but the universal judgement that very rich men [tyrants—LS], as such, fall. Even this is, in Aristotle’s view, only a partially scientific judgment—

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Namely, that very rich men as such fall. Why is it partially scientific? Well, you know, everyone knows who has a bit of experience, there are sometimes rich men who do not fall. Yes? Well, don’t call it “fall,” say: “Who do not have a miserable end.” There are such people. “Even this is, in Aristotle’s view, only a partially scientific judgment, for no one can see why rich men should fall.”<sup>xix</sup> Now this statement is of course absolutely fantastic. Aristotle never said such a thing. What Aristotle means is this: that there is no necessity of rich men to fall. Strictly speaking, only rich men or powerful men can fall. Why? That’s an analytical judgment. You have to go up first. A poor man cannot fall. But now, why do not all rich men fall? Well, there are two different reasons. One, they may be very clever, or to use a wider and more noble term, they may be virtuous; and the other is they may be lucky. Now this simple thought, which is still valid, was

<sup>xvii</sup> Leo Strauss, “On Collingwood’s Philosophy of History,” *Review of Metaphysics* 5 (1952): 559-86.

<sup>xviii</sup> Collingwood, *Idea of History*, 24.

<sup>xix</sup> *Idea of History*, 24.

not recognized by Mr. Collingwood because he simply did not read and understand carefully enough. That's all.

I venture to say no man of Collingwood's competence in an earlier age could have made such blunders. Why did he make these blunders? Because he was a scientific historian. Does this make sense? I will try to elaborate. Historical understanding in this sense, say, to understand what Aristotle meant, or what Plato meant, or Epicurus meant, or the Bible meant, or whatever you take was much better understood . . . in former ages than it has been understood since the nineteenth century—much more so, because no one was interested in finding out the relation of, say, a certain biblical teaching and the sociology of that time. You see, the moment you are interested in that sociology, you don't read that biblical passage so carefully, as you are really not interested in the Bible as an important book. And the same applies to Plato and Aristotle and so on. But I will develop this more precisely. Historical understanding in the precise sense was much more natural in former ages than in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Why is the scientific historian a bad historian? In the first place, the scientific historian assumes as a matter of course the superiority of our thought, meaning that if we today are at the height of our time, we understand better than earlier men could think. Now once we believe that, we do not have an incentive to understand older thinkers exactly as they meant it. Now this fact is very well known among historians and circles of historians, and there is a topic which recurs time and again, and that is the observation that the older type of historian (say, in the eighteenth century), they were very bad historians (say, Voltaire and so on) because they measured the past by the standard of the reasonableness of the eighteenth century. Generally stated, if you are sure [that] after the wise Locke and Newton we have reached the pinnacle of wisdom, why should you be particularly interested in earlier "quote wisdom"? You couldn't [be]. In other words, all this kind of historiography, which we may call progressivist historiography, makes it impossible to be seriously interested in the past. The only interest can be—and that is of course the way in which many books are written—what did X in the fourteenth century contribute to our wisdom? Well, that's a matter of idle curiosity of no real importance, because the important point is our wisdom, and whoever contributed his mite deserves of course a monument somewhere, but that is really not a very serious question.

But the fantastic thing is this: that this same attitude of the eighteenth-century historians, for which they are so much blamed by Collingwood, is repeated by Collingwood himself, only Collingwood does not measure older writers by the standard of sweet eighteenth-century reasonableness but by the standard of scientific history. The contempt for the past has remained unchanged. Writing a history of historiography, he does not use that single opportunity for reconsidering scientific history. Maybe the fact that Thucydides was not a scientific historian was not an objection to Thucydides but an objection to scientific history. Might be. You might even say that the scientific historian has to learn something which is forgotten by scientific history. So in other words, the progressivist historian, the one who is sure we are on the pinnacle of wisdom, doesn't have the incentive to [have] a real concern with what older thinkers thought.

Now let us therefore turn to the alternative, because the scientific historian is not merely progressivistic; he has at least two other elements. The second<sup>xx</sup> is that which goes back to the historical movement of the early nineteenth century, and that was characterized by the opposite of progressivism, namely, that<sup>5</sup> after the French Revolution<sup>6</sup> a certain dissatisfaction, disappointment existed. And in this situation there arose a doubt of modernity as such and a longing for the past as past, or maybe for a particular past—say, the Middle Ages, but generally speaking for some past. It was in this situation that the concern with the past as past emerged for the first time. The historical movement, in other words, meant a self-criticism of the modern mind. We have forgotten something of the utmost importance. We have to go back and sit at the feet of older men and learn something from them. But this historical movement, that is only half of it. The other half is practically more important. The notion which these people had can be stated more precisely as follows. Of course this extreme historical movement came from the country of reaction, from Germany, that goes without saying, so you don't know it as well, but you know it a bit in Walter Scott and also in other figures of the Anglo-Saxon world. The precise notion is this: The past is superior to the present in regard to culture or to social life, or life in general, or to religion in particular, but we nineteenth-century men are superior as regards the *understanding* of culture, of social life, or religion, and whatever it may be. For it is precisely understanding, intellectual sophistication, reflectiveness which has destroyed the naiveté of creativity, of faith, and so on. So the crucial point is this. In spite of all admiration for the past and longing for the past, there was a certainty of the superiority of modern *thought*. These wonderful heroes of arms or faith did not really know or understand what they were doing: we understand. So in other words, in the decisive respect nothing was changed here. There was only a greater interest in and sympathy for the past, but there was no real willingness to learn with the mind.

Now the third position, which is the most common one today, perhaps, is a median position between the progressivist and romantic views. The classic formulation of that median position was given by Ranke, one of the best-known and greatest historians of the nineteenth century. He said: Every epoch is equally immediate to God. Now what does he mean? That is directed primarily against the belief in progress. There are not ages which are superior to others. "Immediate"—of course the term is taken from German constitutional law. People were either immediate to the empire, meaning that the emperor was directly their lord, or they were mediate, mediated by some intermediate lord. So every epoch is immediate to God; no epoch is superior to any other. Equality of all epochs: now say "equality of all cultures" and you are in the middle of present-day American anthropology. You see how much Ranke has won. So here the notion is: We do not understand other nations, other peoples, other cultures better than they understand themselves, but we necessarily understand them differently. It is impossible and meaningless to try to understand them as they understand themselves. Yet that is a deceptive formula, because no other epoch or culture realized the equality of all epochs. No other culture realized the

<sup>xx</sup> Strauss gives three views characteristic of the scientific historian: progressivism, romanticism, and Ranke's "median position." The latter two will turn out to contain a hidden element of progressivism.

equality of all cultures. All earlier cultures, or other cultures, were parochial. Ours, as represented by our anthropology, is the only one which is nonparochial. Therefore the insight into the equality of all ages or cultures marks a progress beyond all earlier thought. We are back again at the superiority of modern thought and the necessary implication that we can and must understand earlier thought better than it understood itself.

So I would draw this conclusion. If it is in any way meaningful to understand earlier thinkers exactly as they understood themselves, one must develop within oneself a certain doubt of the superiority of modern thought. This doubt is excluded by the cocksureness regarding scientific history which we find in Collingwood, and related cocksurenesses in that field which Collingwood called (how did he call psychology?) a fraud. Yes, sure, or take any other thing. In other words, in this respect Collingwood is, I believe, not superior to his enemies. Collingwood never saw a problem in scientific history. So Collingwood is right, then, when he asserts against his opponents that history of philosophy or history of political philosophy cannot be separated from philosophy or political philosophy, or that if philosophy is impossible, history of philosophy is impossible too. That may sound paradoxical, because is not astrology impossible and yet we have a history of astrology? But there is, I think, a difference, because astrology is a very partial thing, a very limited thing, however great claims it may have raised, but philosophy cannot be a partial thing. It determines necessarily the whole of our thought. It is comprehensive. History of philosophy rests on philosophic foundations and it must be animated by a philosophic impulse.

If I may state then the issue between Collingwood and his opponents and between Collingwood and myself in a simple way, I would say as follows. The view attacked by Collingwood is that interpretation is something different from criticism and precedes it. But the interpreter, the historian, must be guided by the permanent questions. Collingwood says, sometimes, interpretation is identical with criticism from the point of view of the present time; but in other passages he says, just as his opponents do and as common sense seems to require, interpretation precedes criticism, but interpretation must be guided by the *author's* question. Otherwise it is not historical—<sup>xxi</sup>—Ultimately of course we must understand an author's question in the light of something deeper than [what is] explicitly raised by him. We must understand his question in the light of the truly permanent questions. And that is of some importance, as I will indicate very briefly now, because not all authors, and not all great authors, begin with the fundamental and permanent questions. You only have to contrast Hobbes with Plato and Aristotle. Hobbes really abandons the plane of the fundamental questions, whereas these fundamental questions come to sight much more directly in Plato and Aristotle. But this I will develop a little more fully later.

Now let me turn to another stratum of the problem. There are certain hesitations in Collingwood's doctrine regarding historical understanding, and they are connected with the difficulty which he never brings out clearly but which he obviously felt. We have not yet

<sup>xxi</sup> There was a break in the tape at this point.

sufficiently discussed the distinction between interpretation and criticism. Is this distinction, as understood by common sense, adequate? I will try to explain this. You know, common sense contradicts itself; that is the difficulty in this case. Common sense says you have to first understand the article by Walter Lippmann before you can judge of it. Absolutely true. But common sense also tells us that every understanding is understanding from a certain point of view. Shall I prove that to you in a commonsensical way? It's very simple. An American writes a book on Australia and a Japanese writes a book on Australia. Will not the books be greatly different, because the American interprets the Australia to Americans and the Japanese interprets Australia—the same object—to Japanese? It seems to be obvious. Or another example. You all know people say [that] every interpretation is addressed to specific people, and there cannot be therefore *the* true or *the* definitive interpretation. Well, the proofs ordinarily given are: Look at the variety of interpretations of the Bible, of Plato, of Shakespeare, of whatever you have.<sup>7</sup> But here this argument is not decisive<sup>8</sup> because one can very well raise these questions: Did all the men who interpreted Shakespeare, or the particular plays or the particular scenes, really intend to bring out what Shakespeare deliberately meant? I would say very few interpreters ever had<sup>9</sup> [that] intention. Are not these interpretations in most cases responses which do not claim to be interpretations proper? Or maybe you can speak of creative transformations or creative interpretations, but they are simply not interpretations. Or take another common example, say, the Civil War. Lincoln's policy looks different now from the way it looked fifty years ago, quite independently of the discovery of new source material, of course. But again, that of course is very uninteresting because we all know the distinction between hindsight and fair judgment. The unintended, unforeseen consequences of Lincoln's policy are not Lincoln's policy, obviously. Lincoln's policy does not change after his death; to that extent, it is finished and in principle there is no impossibility to understand that policy as Lincoln had understood it. It may be accidentally impossible because the most important information may have been destroyed; we don't know. But in principle, why should this not be: that this policy appears in a different light in different generations because of the unintended consequences of Lincoln's policy? It may change and change; that has nothing to do with Lincoln's policy itself.

But let us turn to the more illuminating example of the American writing a book on Australia and the Japanese writing a book on Australia. The first interprets Australia to Americans, the Japanese interprets Australia to Japanese. The emphasis will be strikingly different, meaning, for example, the American would not write very much about those things in Australia which he knows from home. He will say—well, in many ways he will stress those which differ from America. The Japanese will stress those which differ from Japan. The picture will be obviously quite different. Now this is perfectly all right and inevitable. I merely remind you of what I said at the beginning of this course of the difference between prescientific or prephilosophic knowledge and philosophic or scientific knowledge. The center of reference is in such cases absolutely legitimately the here and now. The American citizen informing his fellow citizens takes America, and especially<sup>10</sup> America in 1956 as the center of reference, just as the Japanese takes Japan [in] 1956. But the question arises only when the claim is raised: We want to do more than just give exciting and relevant information to our fellow citizens now. In other words, the difficulty comes in only when the claim is raised that this is scientific or philosophic. I would

raise this question: Since when do Japanese write books on foreign countries? Is there something like Herodotus's travels in Japan? I do not know the answer, but I am only trying to raise a question. What I mean is this: Is there not something very specific implied in this kind of curiosity? Is it not a matter of course that people travel to other countries and report about these countries? There is a problem in that which we cannot take for granted. And I raise these further questions: Does this specific thing implied in curiosity of this kind not imply a permanent frame of reference different from the here and now, meaning not relative to the Greeks or whoever it may be in particular? Does it not imply such a reference at least as a problem or an obligation?

Allow me to develop this. Is it really essentially necessary, as distinguished from merely convenient, in understanding other societies, other countries, to take your own country or your own society as your frame of reference? Is it really necessary? I look back for one moment at good old Herodotus, the oldest traveler of this kind and anthropologist. Now when you read him, you see there are certain questions which he always raises, a very limited number of questions. He can be said to be interested in the nature of the people whom he visits and the nature of their country, in their arts and crafts, their laws and customs, and their beliefs. Now what is the connection, and why is this enumeration complete? What did Herodotus think by that scheme? He assumed, it seems, that every society is a group of men which in effect says: We, living here in this way, we—this people here, this country—live<sup>11</sup> (and “live” also means to develop all the arts in the widest sense) in this way: laws, customs, or whatever you might call it. And then of course the crucial question was: Why do we live here in this way? And this question can only be answered by accounts. The accounts may be what we now call mythical; they may be historical. That does not alter their fundamental function, that they give an account of the way [in] which people live. I fail to see how such a scheme can ever become antiquated, can ever fail to be relevant.

Of course one cannot leave it at that. I was told by a student of Chinese that the Chinese began to write books on foreign nations, on barbarians as they called them, only fairly late, in the eleventh or twelfth century, at a time when there was already contact with Arabian merchants, and the Arabians had a kind of description of all nations ultimately due to the Greek tradition. Now<sup>12</sup> these Chinese travelers, what were they chiefly and primarily concerned with? How do the people whom they visited approach their prince? What are the ceremonies on such occasions? It seems to be a very strange question, but I think rightly understood it is a very helpful question. How do they approach the highest? To what do these people look up? What do they regard as the highest, or the most venerable, or the best? But more generally, how do they answer the question of what is good? Ultimately only such an interpretation can be studied factually as is guided by these questions, meaning by the questions which actually motivate the peoples in question because they motivate all men. The variety of historical perspectives has ultimately to be taken back into the common perspective of all men, with the understanding that this common perspective is not one of which we are immediately aware, of which we are aware without taking some trouble, and very great trouble. In other words, scientific or philosophic interpretation can ultimately only be such an interpretation as is an interpretation from the point of view of the philosopher, that is to say, of a man who has recovered for himself the fundamental or the

permanent questions. But<sup>13</sup> [that is] an obligation that I think is imposed on all of us if we have any inkling of the idea of science. The convenience of describing a foreign country or the content of an old book to our contemporaries in the language that they can understand is undeniable, but that is not yet sufficient. We must go deeper than that.

The second difficulty which I would like to mention, at least, is this. When we try to understand a great thinker—or any thinker for that matter, [even one who is] not a great thinker—the problem is very rarely, if ever, his reasoning proper. That is very, very rare, and I don't know offhand a single example. That goes too far: I know very few examples. That a great thinker would, for example, contradict himself without being aware of it: I know quite a few writers, for example Plato, who so very frequently contradict themselves<sup>14</sup> [while] being aware of it. That has something [to do] with his pedagogic interest. But a man who does not have such pedagogic intentions . . . is a great thinker does not contradict himself so frequently as some historians think. So they could very well argue clearly and . . . and not make mistakes of this kind. The problem is not the problem of reasoning proper. Take the example of Hobbes. Hobbes in his works lays down certain axioms, and given the axioms he develops his political philosophy proper, with a certain doctrine of the rights and duties of man and of the proper organization of civil societies. Now here are the axioms<sup>xxii</sup> . . . leading to the full-fledged *Leviathan* of Hobbes . . . I think the argument is absolutely flawless. His only trouble is here . . . The problem is always in the premises. Now how can we state the problem of the premises? These premises were evident to Hobbes; they are not evident to anyone today. Now if I establish this fact—well, [if I] notice that these premises of Hobbes are not evident, I criticize him, of course. In fact, I have already refuted him, because the whole *Leviathan* is what it means to be only if the premises are sound, because everything else follows from them. Is not in this case the interpretation absolutely identical with the criticism? You see a chain of reasoning that is obvious; [it] cannot possibly be understood without being criticized. Is it not obvious<sup>15</sup> that you cannot understand it without seeing whether it is correct or not correct? What about the premises? Is the question regarding the premises simply this: The others say they are evident, and I say that for the life of myself I can't see that they are evident? Does not the whole thing break down in its claim to be the rational, demonstrated truth? One cannot possibly understand the premises as premises without raising the question whether they are evident or necessary.

Yet one can make this objection which does not dispose of this part of the argument but simply leads into a different stratum. Are the premises really what I call a priori premises the basic presuppositions? Let me read to you the passage from Hobbes's *On the Citizen* and the . . .

When I had turned my reflections to the inquiry about natural justice, I was<sup>16</sup> [advertised] by the very definition of justice, by which a constant will to give everyone his right is

<sup>xxii</sup> Strauss perhaps writes on the blackboard at this point.

meant, that one would have to ask first how it comes that someone can call one thing his rather than that of someone else.<sup>xxiii</sup>

I'm sorry that didn't come out in my translation. The definition of justice is a constant will to give everyone his, what belongs to him, his right, and therefore we have to raise first the question: How does it come [to be] that anyone has something which he calls his?

Since it was obvious that this distinction did not come from nature but from the agreement of men (for what nature threw out into the midst was afterwards distributed by men), I was driven from here to the further question: namely, for what purpose and compelled by what necessity, since everything belonged to all, men wished rather that each one should have what is his own.<sup>xxiv</sup>

And so on. And after these questions he reaches the result, these two axioms to which I referred and which are not interesting for our present purpose.

So in other words, the premises of Hobbes, to take this example, have been arrived at through raising a question. Now what kind of question is that? Hobbes knows what justice is. Justice means the constant will to give everyone what belongs to him, what is his due. And furthermore, he knows there cannot be mine and thine by nature; therefore it must have been . . . And then the question arises: Since the human will is always guided by some good or apparent good, what good or apparent good did men have in mind when establishing the distinction between mine and thine? And then we reach the axioms. But all problems are here in this first sentence. What comes later is relatively uninteresting. Is this question remarkably narrow? Or even, quite superficially stated, Hobbes knows<sup>17</sup> [what] justice [is], because every textbook says this. Are there not, for example, things which are—is it true that all mine and thine has been established by law, by human agreement? Does not every one of us have his ears as his property independently of any conventions, and his life, and some other things too, perhaps? In other words, in this very question which Hobbes formulates there is implied that justice has to do only with property relations in the narrowest sense. And that of course has very bad consequences.<sup>18</sup> [You] can see the narrowness of Hobbes's argument immediately when you compare it with the argument in Plato's *Republic*, because this traditional definition—which of course is not a meaningless definition but which is [a] crude definition—how narrow it is you can see only when you read the first pages of Plato's *Republic*, because the definition given at the beginning of Plato's *Republic*, in the first book, is exactly this: What does old Cephalus say when he says . . . justice consists in paying one's debts.<sup>xxv</sup> I mean, he gives only a special example, but

<sup>xxiii</sup> A translation of this passage can be found in Hobbes's Epistle Dedicatory to *On the Citizen*, trans. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (New York: Oxford University, 1998), 5.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, 5-6.

<sup>xxv</sup> Cephalus refers to "unjust deeds" and says that money "contributes a great deal to not having to cheat or lie to any man against one's will, and, moreover, to not having to depart for that other places frightened

what he means is of course to give to everyone what is due to him, what belongs to him. And the difficulty with a madman arises immediately, you know: If the thing which you have borrowed was a sword, or maybe heroin and the fellow has become an addict in the meantime, must you give it back to him? And so on and so on. And then we see we have to go back into a much deeper stratum where we have to consider, for example, the relation of justice to human kindness—justice is meant to be a form of doing good to other human beings—some still further questions which are developed if we want to claim that we have a notion of the breadth and complexity of the problem of justice. Needless to say that Hobbes's question from the very beginning excludes already, prior to any investigation, such possibilities as fair wages or fair prices, as would appear from his reflections.

What I want to show by these very sketchy remarks about the meaning of Hobbes's argument is this, and something which applies in all such cases. We try to understand an author historically in the sense in which Collingwood also means it sometimes, meaning we try to understand his question, his problem, and then to see how he solved it. Very well. But we see in this case we can't leave it at that. We have to examine this question itself. We have to criticize it. We have to appeal from the explicit question of the author to something higher which is not necessarily supplied by the author. The question arises: What is the standard of that criticism? Because that is what is now implied when criticizing Hobbes's question. Well, a tremendous claim is implied in that, and that is that we somehow understand the permanent questions adequately. Now can we seriously claim to possess such an adequate understanding? Can we claim to possess an adequate understanding of man's fundamental situation in which these permanent questions are rooted? Will, therefore, not every interpretation be incomplete and therefore "subjective"? In other words, will the historical truth not be as elusive as the philosophical truth? And we certainly must face this<sup>19</sup> [difficulty]. I can give in this connection only the following very inadequate answer. Perhaps we must distinguish between an adequate understanding of the permanent questions, which we will probably be prudent enough not to claim, and a primary yet indispensable understanding of these permanent questions. I wonder, can we go back behind the fact that we live in the world together with other human beings, that we know or divine somehow that there is a right way and a wrong way of behaving toward our fellows—I think that is what we mean primarily by justice; that without this awareness of a common world and other human beings with whom we are somehow united in a society and some awareness of right and wrong, that without this awareness common to all men and permanent, no thought and no speech is possible? And that out of this awareness or knowledge of ignorance, all philosophy, all questioning of any kind, scientific or nonscientific, arises? We would understand a doctrine truly only to the extent to which we understand that doctrine in the light of the primary, indispensable understanding of the human situation.

because one owes some sacrifices to a god or money to a human being." *Plato's Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 330d-331b.

I could illustrate this difficulty by one example, and that is for me the most instructive example, and that is the first chapter of Genesis. Here you have a very amazing document from every point of view. We would say the creation of the world is described here, and I use myself the term “world” in speaking of the fundamental situation of man. Now the interesting thing of course is that it is never called “creation of the world” in the Bible. The Hebrew word<sup>20</sup> which is today used in the sense of “world” never meant “world” in the Bible. It is called there “heaven and earth,” and that is very important, because we speak of a unity which contains a problem. How do we know there is such a unity? The problem: the Bible does not make that assumption. But there is more to that. When you look at the created things in the sixth day of creation, there is not a single created thing which we would now call mythical. All the things which were created are things which we all can point to: sun . . . earth, men, and so on. There is only one seeming objection: light at the first stage is obviously not symbolic of the sun. The sun was there on the fourth day. But that does not necessarily mean there is anything mythical or theoretical. There is, after all, perhaps light, the world . . . things accessible to all of us which is not the light of the sun.<sup>xxvi</sup> . . . But there is at least one phenomenon, lightning, and I think that one would have to consider that. What I am driving at is that the men who wrote this story obviously saw what we see, fundamentally as we see it. We live somehow within something, and this something, which we now call the world and which<sup>21</sup> [they] call heaven and earth, we articulate, we divide it into parts which are perfectly intelligible, so much so that even the greatest mystery which these stories seem to have—that plants are said to be created prior to the sun . . . becomes immediately intelligible once you are not [. . .]<sup>xxvii</sup> and try to consider other alternatives, and if you consider the facts, the undeniable facts, that the plants belong to the earth and they can very well be viewed as a cover of the earth inseparable from the earth. Now when you understand [and] put the emphasis on the fact that the plants (all kinds of plants and trees, of course) are fixed and do not have this very great privilege of locomotion—<sup>22</sup>sun, moon, and stars according to the primary notion are thought to have this great privilege—plants legitimately precede the sun, moon, and stars.

So what I’m driving at is this.<sup>23</sup> We are accustomed to the views that the plants are higher than sun, moon, and stars because we have seen [that] sun, moon, and stars are inanimate, whereas plants are animate. But that presupposes long questions. I mean, that sun, moon, and stars are not animate is by no means self-evident; some very great men have thought they are animate. Did you not know? This primarily is already an answer to a long question. But precisely this kind of reasoning, it seems to me, shows that we can disinter the primary, where no questions are yet answered, but there is only this awareness without which no question of any kind can be answered. Without the awareness of the evident earth, and men and sun and brutes—and of course it means also that there are many men and there are all kinds of relations of human beings . . . without that no question can possibly begin. But to understand that stratum beyond the mere enumeration of these things which I mention, that is indeed a very difficult task. But we

<sup>xxvi</sup> The transcriber notes that a student asked a question at this point. The question was not transcribed.

<sup>xxvii</sup> The transcript has “cul” followed by a blank space here.

all can have a general awareness, at least an elementary thing beyond which we cannot go back, whereas we can go back behind everything else we believe to know. If we take this . . . to that extent are we able to understand also other human beings, other societies, all of us. So I don't say this historical understanding is very easy—very far from that—but I say only that it is not intrinsically impossible for these reasons. That is at least as far as I can say up to now, the best answer I can give.

Now I will leave it at this remark and turn next time to a<sup>24</sup> somewhat broader consideration of the problem of historicism. And I will base this on an analysis of some work of Nietzsche, because Nietzsche has seen a problem which Collingwood has not seen. I conclude with this remark. Collingwood comes into hopeless difficulties which I tried to show, and they can be stated in historical terms as follows: the position for Collingwood is a kind of half-hearted Hegelianism. He does no longer have the courage of Hegel to say: I know the final truth. It's a half-hearted Hegelianism, and [a] Hegelianism [that] has given up the view that the end of history, the fullness of time has come; history is unfinishable. But he has not faced the problem implied in this seemingly unproblematic belief that we live in the stream of history and cannot in any way get out of it and look at it from the outside.<sup>25</sup> The earliest man who faced this problem, and I think very few people have ever faced it as honestly and radically as he, that was Nietzsche. That is the reason I want to take him up in the rest of this course.

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<sup>1</sup> Deleted "question."

<sup>2</sup> Deleted "I think"

<sup>3</sup> Deleted "I do not have to repeat-."

<sup>4</sup> Deleted "and says-."

<sup>5</sup> Deleted "was."

<sup>6</sup> Deleted "and."

<sup>7</sup> Deleted "you know?"

<sup>8</sup> Deleted "in this impression."

<sup>9</sup> Deleted "the."

<sup>10</sup> Deleted "the."

<sup>11</sup> Deleted "from once."

<sup>12</sup> Deleted "what did"

<sup>13</sup> Deleted "as."

<sup>14</sup> Deleted "by"

<sup>15</sup> Deleted "that you cannot understand . . ."

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<sup>16</sup> Deleted “admonished.”

<sup>17</sup> Deleted “for.”

<sup>18</sup> Deleted “one.”

<sup>19</sup> Deleted “difference.”

<sup>20</sup> Deleted “for.”

<sup>21</sup> Deleted “we.”

<sup>22</sup> Deleted “there is”

<sup>23</sup> Deleted “we have here.”

<sup>24</sup> Deleted “more.”

<sup>25</sup> Deleted “The man who faced this”

## Session 6: February 13, 1956

### Collingwood: Historical Objectivity and the Question of Permanent Problems

**Leo Strauss:** [in progress] —and criticism means to find out whether what Plato meant is true. Now this vulgar historicism is impossible for this reason: the great thinkers disclosed their thought only through sympathetic understanding, as one says. But what does sympathetic understanding mean? Sympathetic understanding is that which takes the questions of the great thinkers seriously, which tries to relive their thought; and that means to think it, and that is to judge of it. The second position which has to be distinguished from Collingwood's<sup>1</sup> is the one which he constantly attacks, and he calls that realism, which is, as I said before, a decayed version of the premodern traditional view. Here also a separation is made of philosophy and history of philosophy, and it is said that all philosophers answer the same questions. But these questions are identified with those with which contemporary philosophy is concerned. And against this Collingwood rightly stresses the manifest difference between the questions raised by earlier philosophies. In other words, these realists dogmatically deny the possibility of radical change regarding the questions. Now Collingwood cuts a knot by declaring that there are no permanent questions whatever, which is a very problematic assertion but, to begin with, a genuine liberation from<sup>2</sup> [the] scholasticism (in the bad sense of the word) of these realists, or "minute philosophers,"<sup>3</sup> as he calls them.

Now to turn to historical political philosophy as Collingwood understands it: each epoch raises the fundamental questions in its own way and it must raise them in its own way. These questions are always connected with earlier forms of these questions, but different from them. We need, therefore, historical studies in order to understand our own questions. Clarification of our own questions is historical clarification. Philosophy and history of philosophy are therefore inseparable, undistinguishable. Self-knowledge is history—intelligent history, of course—and this according to Collingwood is a new insight. When earlier men spoke of self-knowledge, they did not dream of historical self-knowledge. Because we are now compelled to engage in historical studies in order to understand ourselves, we are able to conduct historical studies in an adequate manner. We are the first epoch, generation,<sup>3</sup> capable of historical understanding. So in other words, to repeat: We are the first to comply, to engage in historical studies, and we are the first capable of doing that.

But what does historical understanding mean? And I limit myself to the only aspect of the question which is immediately important to us here: What does historical understanding mean in the case of the history of theory proper? In the first place, historical understanding means to understand thought as historically relative, meaning, for example, I understand Hobbes's *Leviathan* historically if I understand it as a document of seventeenth-century absolutism in its English form. But Hobbes himself regarded his political philosophy as the true political

<sup>1</sup> Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, 64.

philosophy and not as an expression of seventeenth-century England. There is then a disproportion between this kind of historical understanding and the way in which the great thinkers understood themselves, or<sup>4</sup> their self-interpretation, as we might say. Yet what is primarily given to us when we study, say, Hobbes, is of course Hobbes's self-interpretation, and we can only ascend from the *Leviathan* to this kind of historical interpretation. Historical understanding in this sense is necessarily preceded by understanding Hobbes as he understood his thought. I think that is very trivial, although we constantly sin against this principle. For example, take a psychoanalytical or sociological interpretation of political philosophy. Before you can give a psychoanalytical or sociological or whatnot interpretation of thought, you must first have understood that thought as it presents itself. I believe when they took these people out of their cultures they also listened to what they said . . . regarded only as neurotic. So in this sense we must first listen to Hobbes, what he says, and then if it is wholly unintelligible in itself, we may raise the question [whether] maybe his father punished him too much or too little—I don't know. And we gave some examples of that in other places. From every point of view, the first thing to do if we want to understand [the] thought of human beings is to listen to what these people say. And therefore there appears to be a more simple and more primary meaning of historical understanding, and that<sup>5</sup> [is] to understand the thought of the past as it understood itself. Or to give the example of Hobbes again: to understand the thought of Hobbes as Hobbes understood it. Now this implies . . . that is a very old-fashioned way of looking at this, but I think absolutely indispensable if we want to talk not about figments of our imagination but about things which are all there. Now this means historical understanding, and<sup>6</sup> I suggest that this is really the primary meaning.

Then<sup>7</sup> [there] is one consequence which is today deplored but which I regard as absolutely necessary. For there can be only one true interpretation—only one true interpretation—because, assuming that Hobbes is a coherent thinker and not schizophrenic, he will have had one interpretation of his thought, which is perfectly compatible with the fact, of course, that he may have changed his mind from his first book to his second book. All right, but then we have two separate interpretations and we have to see how they fit. But in principle there is only one true interpretation. Now of course people say this is impossible, as is shown by the fact of variety of interpretations—Shakespeare, Bible, Plato, the infinite number of interpretations—but this fact does not prove that all—<sup>ii</sup>—more than one interpretation are equally legitimate of course. If the thought in question is infinitely significant and meant to be infinitely significant, that is another matter, but that one could not say of human thought but only of divine thought. In the case of human thought, there can only be a finiteness or variety of meanings, and this variety of meanings would then form part of one whole which the author had in mind.<sup>8</sup> I mean, there are books with deliberate ambiguities, of course, but the deliberate ambiguities form part of the conscious plan, one such idea. As for the factual variety of interpretations, one has to raise this question: Did the majority of interpretations even intend to understand the authors as they understood themselves? Did they not rather try to appropriate, to incorporate the thought of the

<sup>ii</sup> It is likely that there was a break in the tape at this point.

older thinker, or to respond to it, rather than to understand it as he meant it? Now I believe most interpretations do not have this character of being concerned [with the question, for example], “What did Shakespeare mean by *Macbeth*?” as distinguished from “How does the knocking at the gates<sup>iii</sup> appear to me?”—which is an entirely different principle.

Now there is this difficulty which I would briefly like to mention. Some people would say: Well, is not interpretation in this severe sense, does it not amount to a simple repetition [of] what the great thinkers themselves said and said better than any interpreter can say? To which I would answer “No!” for the following reasons. In the first place, precisely among the greatest books we find great difficulties, great obscurities. Take just one or two examples out of an infinite number. I don’t know whether any one of you has ever looked at Spinoza’s *Ethics*. That book looks like Euclid; it begins with definitions and axioms and so on. These definitions are absolutely unintelligible. I mean, you can understand the verbal meaning of them, but you don’t know why Spinoza arbitrarily laid down these definitions. Complete problem. No one who ever takes this book up for the first and for the second and maybe for the third and fourth time will be able to make head and tail of it. Very long and extensive studies are necessary to understand that. Or take<sup>9</sup> the case of Hobbes, for example. Hobbes is absolutely ambiguous as regards one very important point: Is his political teaching dependent on or independent of natural science as he understood natural science? He is absolutely ambiguous about it. He says contradictory things. What one has to say is that Hobbes was hesitant regarding this important subject. Now the interpreter is not allowed merely to reproduce Hobbes’s hesitation: he must try to understand that hesitation, which is not simply repeating what Hobbes says.

A second point which I would like to mention is this: that every philosopher or every thinker who ever wrote has in mind primarily, or is opposing primarily the views prevalent in his time. That cannot be helped. And connected with this is that he uses more or less the language common to his time—the terminology, for example. Now after some generations, [and even] more after some centuries, this is no longer intelligible: the issues, they are no longer the same; the terminology has changed; the state of discussion has changed. It is necessary to the interpreter—the interpreter has to act as a bridge, as it were. And the third point which I would like to mention, and [the] last, is one which I can here only indicate. I have discussed it at some length in the last quarter’s seminar,<sup>iv</sup> and that is an author may very well, for a variety of reasons, conceal the full impact of his teachings. And of course the problem of interpretation is one which has to be solved by every reader and also by [every] interpreter and is not done by merely reading the text.

But to come back to the main point.<sup>10</sup> I would say, and Collingwood also says so sometimes, historical understanding proper means to understand the thought of the past exactly as the

<sup>iii</sup>Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 2.3.

<sup>iv</sup> Neither audiotapes nor a transcript of Strauss’s autumn 1955 seminar in political philosophy have survived.

thinkers of the past understood it themselves. Now Collingwood is very inadequate as regards this point, not only in his ambiguity as to the meaning of historical understanding but especially as to what he does as a historian of thought. I mention the fact that I could not prove in this class that in his history of historiography, which is a part of the history of thought, he is amazingly and shockingly defective. I do not regard this as an accident; I think it is a necessary consequence of the following fact: he presupposes the superiority of modern thought and therefore he cannot have a real concern with the thought of the past as the past itself understood it. And this belief in the fundamental superiority of modern thought is necessarily implied in the so-called historicist insight. So I would say historicism is self-defeating in that very realm in which it claims to have brought about a fundamental progress of thought, namely, in the understanding of the past. Yet this does not exhaust the difficulty. I have said that when we speak of understanding the thought of the past as it understood itself, we make use of that commonsense distinction between understanding or interpretation on the one hand and criticism on the other. To understand a philosopher is one thing, to judge of the truth of his philosophy is another. Is this distinction tenable? That was an important motivation of Collingwood.

Now let us see a few points here. First, of course in every historical study there comes the selection of the theme, and this is always the interpreter's own initiative or the initiative of his advisor or professor, but this is certainly a present-day choice. Our problem determines the choice, not the problem which was motivating the other. To take an example from political history that is more obvious: If someone studies Lincoln's policy, the interest motivating the historian is obviously not Lincoln's own interest. Obviously not. Well, but to begin with you can also say, if you make a study, say, of Hobbes, the interest motivating us in studying Hobbes is not the same as that which motivated Hobbes himself. That is quite true. Yet that is necessarily true. But this does not do away with the following fact. In the moment you have made your choice and you become interested—whether it is Lincoln's policy, or Machiavelli's political theory, or whatever you take—after you have made your choice, your primary task is [to understand] what question or what problem motivated the historical actor or writer. In other words, from the moment you have made your choice, you must subordinate rigorously your question to the question of the historical actor or writer.

Now the second point stressed very much by Collingwood: that to understand a thought means to examine it and therewith to criticize it. To criticize does not necessarily mean, of course, to reject; it may also mean to assent. Let us take the example of Hobbes again. Hobbes raises a certain question and he gives an answer to that. To understand this whole complex, [whether] Hobbes's question is answered, means to inquire whether Hobbes solves his problem. It does not merely mean to take cognizance of the individual steps of this argument, but [that] you understand the question, Hobbes's question; and then you look at his solution and see: Did he solve it or did he not solve it? That is the same as interpretation of Hobbes. But I would say, precisely because it is so it does make sense to distinguish between understanding and criticism, because as long as we remain within the range of Hobbes's own question and study his answer in the light of his question we are merely interpreters. Of course you must use your head in that. But we are not, strictly speaking, critics. We do not raise the question in this stage: Is Hobbes's

question adequate? As long as we do not raise this question we are still justified in saying we are interpreting and not yet criticizing. But of course this distinction can only be provisional. We stop at the point where the real issue begins, because that is a relatively secondary question: Did the thinker solve his problem? The more important question is: What about the problem itself? But still the work up to this point, where the question of the adequacy of his problem is not yet raised, is the one necessarily primary and has its nonarbitrary limitation, namely, what the author himself understood of his thought. This and this alone is the dimension of what one could call historical objectivity. In this whole work, the ultimate criterion of truth and untruth is reference to [the] text: Did he say that or did he not say that?

But we have to go beyond this stage. We have to examine the author's question. We have to criticize that question. And here the real difficulty begins. What is our standard for judging, for example, the problem raised by Aristotle on the one hand and Hobbes on the other? Collingwood answers: Our standard is our problem, for there are no permanent problems. Now if this is so, there is no possibility of historical objectivity beyond this very limited range where we remain within the context of the author's question and his answer. History of political philosophy as an objective scientific study is possible only if there are permanent problems, which means, in other words, that the conditions of an objective history of political philosophy are the conditions of political philosophy itself, namely, the permanence of the questions. Historical objectivity presupposes that there are permanent problems or, in other words, that there exists a horizon which is not affected by historical change, a horizon coeval with man's being confronted always by the same fundamental riddles.

Now the nonarbitrary standard for judging of the questions raised by an author can only be the permanent questions. Collingwood says the questions are preceded by absolute presuppositions, and we have seen in criticizing his view [that] he says: Of course the absolute presuppositions change from epoch to epoch; [they] cannot be the true absolute presuppositions. But in analyzing his thought we have seen that there is necessarily the problem of the true absolute presupposition as a permanent problem. But do we possess adequate knowledge, adequate understanding of the permanent problems? Can we presuppose this? But there is something else which we may call not an adequate understanding of the permanent problems but a primary and indispensable understanding of the permanent problems, that understanding which is necessarily implied in man's wondering about the whole and about the wholeness of his life. That alone I think is a manageable or practical standard of historical analysis which goes beyond the acceptance of the problems as stated by the authors themselves.

Now this was essentially what I said last time, and we must now see whether and how far we can understand each other and agree with each other or not. So who wants to have the floor?

**Student:** Would you say some more about the statement that historical objectivity assumes the permanence of problems?

**LS:** In order to avoid all ambiguity, I must remind you of a distinction which I made. There is one kind of historical inquiry, which [is] for all practical purposes the most frequent and the most important, in which this difficulty I think does not arise, and that is as long as we remain within the horizon of the problems raised by author. For example, take Hobbes's question as he raises it in the *De Cive* and elsewhere. Now if I take this question and do not go beyond it and see how he solves the problem of politics as formulated there, I don't see how any fundamental difficulty arises. It's only a matter of careful and conscientious reading. There may be some complications, but the difficulties that come in here do not offer a fundamental problem. The fundamental problem arises when I raise the question: What about the problem of Hobbes itself? Is it right or wise or adequate to formulate the problem of political philosophy in the way in which Hobbes did it? That is more interesting and the fundamental question. Now in the moment I raise this question, there are two alternatives.<sup>v</sup> Either there are no permanent problems—well, what then is my standard of judging of Hobbes's problem? My standard necessarily differs from that of other generations or other men, doesn't it? You cannot speak of an objectivity there, except in this very dubious sense [in which] there is a kind of objectivity, maybe, of a given generation. But even that doesn't work, because the generation is never united, of course. But therefore, if the raising of these fundamental questions regarding the adequacy of the problems as stated themselves cannot be objective in any sense, if there are not permanent problems with a view to which we look at Hobbes [. . .]<sup>vi</sup> Did he really take in that question or did he not arbitrarily limit [himself] in this [. . .].<sup>vii</sup> But I did not wish to minimize the difficulty of these permanent problems. They are not to be found in any filing cabinet where we just put a nickel in and get these questions out.

**Student:** . . . You said that of necessity your questions cannot be the same as those of previous generations. Now I wonder whether . . . then you are not a historicist.

**LS:** . . . If the permanent problems were permanently known to all men of normal intelligence, no problem of history would ever have been raised. So there must really be something which justifies the contention that men of normal intelligence in different generations or different cultures have a primary understanding which differs. That is, by the way, nothing new. For example, Bacon, who antedates this historical consciousness by two centuries: [look at] what he calls "idols of the marketplace," if I remember well, prejudices of the marketplace.<sup>viii</sup> They differ from country to country and from age to age. When Plato speaks of the cave, which is the Platonic expression of the world of prejudice, Plato speaks of the cave in the singular because he is sure that these caves, the prejudices of society, have a certain fundamental character in

<sup>v</sup> Strauss never seems to state the second alternative.

<sup>vi</sup> The transcript has a short blank space; there might have been an inaudible word or phrase.

<sup>vii</sup> In the transcript: "(context?)"

<sup>viii</sup> See Francis Bacon, *New Organon*, book 1, aphorism xliii: "There are also Idols formed by the intercourse and association of men with each other, which I call Idols of the Market Place, on account of the commerce and consort of men there. For it is by discourse that men associate, and words are imposed according to the apprehension of the vulgar. And therefore the ill and unfit choice of words wonderfully obstructs the understanding . . ."

common. And he is concerned with their fundamental character, but when you study that a bit more carefully, you see that it is essential to the cave, to the world of prejudice, always to be different in . . . Just consider the prejudices with which political theorists started or had to contend with thirty years ago in this country, sixty years ago, hundred years ago . . . But if there were not this massive variety, the problem of history could never have been raised. There is something of this kind. The question is: What is the relevance of our age and society? Is this decisive? Are we bound one hundred percent to these prejudices of our age and society, as historicists would say, or are we not? But that there are such prejudices which are very powerful and which were . . . and an effort is needed to liberate the mind from them . . . In the modern era, there has been an amazingly fast change almost from generation to generation in the dominating view, and this change has increased in speed in the last hundred years still more and I think it's still increasing. You would admit this difficulty is true of modern man . . . You might say—and that is a very good point—you might say that this is an interesting or relevant proposition, the historicist proposition, only for the modern period . . . Then it is of some practical importance. . . In other words, the truth is unchangeable and error is infinitely changeable. That is what you say . . . You would say this. The broad principles, the fundamental principles are unchangeable; the circumstances are infinitely changeable; and therefore the conclusions,<sup>11</sup> remote conclusions, from the principles<sup>12</sup> will vary almost constantly. And that is of no fundamental importance, because the principles are . . . But it does not completely dispose of these difficulties, because you presuppose fundamentally one thing: that the political truth in its fundamental character is known, which means that the fundamental questions are properly formulated and known to us in their proper formulation, and even the answers to them.

But that is today exposed to an enormous doubt, as you know, and a long argument is needed to establish that. Let me take an example from outside of political philosophy. I mentioned the example of Genesis last time. We would regard such a concept of “world” as an inevitable concept for our orientation, and since the days of the Greeks, *cosmos* . . . cosmology . . . is taken for granted. Is it absolutely irrelevant that in the Old Testament there is no word for world? Now the phenomenon which we call the world is of course known there,<sup>ix</sup> but that is not called the “world,” but in a complicated way<sup>x</sup> heaven and earth and what is between them. Do we not learn something important from that, that a very special step has to be taken to see this—what we call the visible whole, heaven and earth and what is between them—as a whole in that way, a more radical way . . . There is a problem there. And that is, I think, the most important use of historical study, that it helps us to see which assumptions presuppose already some great steps of thought. Whereas, for example, the assumption that there is heaven and earth, I would regard as unproblematic. We can't go behind it without becoming confronted with artificial and irrelevant problems. But if I raise this question, “With what right do I assume unity?,” I think I do not raise an illegitimate question . . .

<sup>ix</sup> “there” is suggested by the transcriber.

<sup>x</sup> In the transcript: “(way?)”

Now we of course are the heirs to the Greek tradition in which, I think, all the fundamental problems were identified in a specific way. That makes very much sense to us, and I am inclined to embrace this fully, but I must also admit that there is a problem there and we must face that problem. That seems to me the only positive merit which this kind of historical reflection has: that it makes us aware of the problem inherent in our fundamental concepts. We cannot simply accept them unexamined . . . If one does not have a feeling that one has to learn something from the thinkers of the past, one simply will not have the incentive for reading them very carefully.<sup>xi</sup>

All absolute presuppositions, these varying absolute presuppositions, are projected by the human mind. One crucial constant for Collingwood which does not change, namely, the projective capacity of the human mind, and that becomes his absolute. But there . . . Collingwood . . . would, for example, say this: There is no notion of “world” in the Old Testament and there is one in Greece; and therefore, after Greece everyone is the heir of the Greeks. That shows the absence of . . . the basic awareness.<sup>xii</sup> I think<sup>13</sup> [this argument] is by no means conclusive because it simply shows that “world” does not belong yet to the basic stratum . . .

Our ignorance is never absent of opinion or mere *tabula rasa*. Our ignorance means that we take certain things for granted without knowing that they cannot be taken for granted. And self-examination would merely mean to go behind these things which we take for granted and which . . . not have to be taken for granted . . .

The variety of philosophic opinions . . . Now where does history in the more precise sense come in? . . . This strange fact . . . that at a certain moment a kind of philosophy emerged which was consciously a second-story philosophy, which meant that it presupposed the existence of philosophy and the disappointment from philosophy, and said: Now we have learned something from this experiment of centuries, that philosophy as originally intended does not deliver the goods; therefore we must revolutionize philosophy radically on the basis of this alleged experience. This type of philosophy is necessarily second-story, also temporal, and that happened exactly in the sixteenth century. One can develop this much more precisely than I do it now, but do you get the general idea? In other words, Machiavelli, Descartes, Hobbes and such people really could not have been prior to Plato, Aristotle, [the] Stoics, and so on, because they presupposed according to their own understanding the existence of that first-story philosophy and its alleged failure . . . They didn’t speak of history at that time, of course. But they used another term; they said “progress.” “We are the dwarfs,” they said if they were in their modest moods, “we are the dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of the giants and therefore looking farther afield.” In other words, this “progress” idea is of course the indispensable premise of that notion of history. It emerged out of that . . . The reason why the problem of historicism is so much more

<sup>xi</sup> The transcriber notes in parentheses here: “Comment on Collingwood’s specific studies in the history of ideas.”

<sup>xii</sup> “the basic awareness” is in parentheses in the transcript.

complex and also much more interesting than that of positivism is because<sup>14</sup> [it] really reaches into a deeper stratum of the philosophic problem. There are some great facts<sup>15</sup> [about] what has happened to human thought especially in the last three centuries which lend themselves easily to the historicist interpretation . . . That makes it complicated . . .

**Student:** Aristotle, if [he were] alive today, might be more interested in the problem of pluralism, might make the separation of society and state, [might] talk about individual liberty more than he did. He was addressing himself to a city-state which is historically impossible now.<sup>xiii</sup>

**LS:** Sure, but of course that is not so simple. That today a city is absolutely impossible, I fully grant, of course. I don't know what would be the case after a series of atomic wars, but as of today, it's impossible. That of course is not decisive, because maybe the *polis* has represented a kind of model of human society which we still have before our mind's eye in order to take our bearings. I will give you an example. When they discuss, for instance, today in sociology—that is all second-hand knowledge which is chiefly supplied by students—when they discuss a face-to-face society, you see there is a certain awareness that this tremendous society where you don't know anyone is not a hundred percent [desirable] society, and one turns therefore to the most intensive, or at least a much more intensive society to understand what society really is or should be. Can you see that these face-to-face societies, at least the examples which were given to me, have one characteristic: they were absolutely non-political associations . . . To develop a truly empirical social science, one must have a model of a quasi-face-to-face society which is political in order to understand an amorphous, non-face-to-face society which is political. That is of practical importance not only for understanding [politics]—you know the great difficulties which arise in these tremendous urban centers . . . And all the tendencies towards regionalism . . . are still a reminder of the problem of the *polis* . . . But some awareness of the importance of change is indispensable. Change goes somewhat deeper. I don't think that change affects truth . . . Change affects the problem of understanding truth.<sup>16</sup>

**Student:** Before, you spoke of progress and that we are like dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of giants . . .

**LS:** As for the giants and dwarfs, I would say this—and of course I'm a dwarf, but to say that I, for instance, am a dwarf sitting on the shoulders of giants would mean in nonmetaphorical language [that] I have, say, fully understood Aristotle and know in addition something about modern society which Aristotle of course did not know. But the trouble is that I have not fully understood Aristotle, so I could at most say I am a dwarf sitting on Aristotle's back . . . To say that we are dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of giants means we know everything of what the old men knew and we have fully understood it, and we know something in addition. And that is a very high praise . . .

<sup>xiii</sup> Presumably summarized by the transcriber. The statement appears in parentheses in the transcript.

What happened at the beginning of modern times was not a simple and unambiguous progress, but a great process of oblivion which very strangely and almost miraculously opened a new vista: the vista of modern mathematical physics, which proved to be not a little [. . .]<sup>xiv</sup> but still whose philosophical relevance of course is the darkest question, I believe, for everyone today. That it is not irrelevant is obvious, but how relevant, I don't believe anyone has ever given a satisfactory answer . . . To repeat, an oblivion of the most elementary questions, but an oblivion redeemed by a tremendous and overwhelming development in one direction, and no one had anticipated that . . . And whatever Plato may have thought about geometrical physics, that was not modern mathematical physics, which worked and works perhaps to our destruction. But some aspect of reality has here been revealed with which we have to live henceforth and see how we can integrate it into an intelligible framework.<sup>17</sup> This tremendous revelation of the seventeenth century made excusable the belief that these great heroes thought that they had made unambiguous progress. But we know now that it was not an unambiguous progress. Proof: social science positivism. That is interesting only for this reason: not in itself, but as a symptom of the inadequacy of modern science when applied to the problem most important to humans, the problem of man. [It] shows that this progress of modern natural science is not the solution but it is a tremendous problem which no one can minimize.

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<sup>1</sup> Deleted "one."

<sup>2</sup> Deleted "this."

<sup>3</sup> Deleted "who are"

<sup>4</sup> Deleted "between."

<sup>5</sup> Deleted "means."

<sup>6</sup> Deleted "I think"

<sup>7</sup> Deleted "that."

<sup>8</sup> Deleted "In other words."

<sup>9</sup> Deleted "in."

<sup>10</sup> Deleted "Historical understanding proper."

<sup>11</sup> Deleted "are."

<sup>12</sup> Deleted "they."

<sup>13</sup> Deleted "it."

<sup>14</sup> Deleted "that."

<sup>xiv</sup> In the transcript: "(affair?)"

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<sup>15</sup> Deleted “of.”

<sup>16</sup> Deleted “Question.”

<sup>17</sup> Deleted “It was intelligible-.”

**Session 7: February 15, 1956**

**Nietzsche's Relativism: *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life***

**Leo Strauss:** [in progress] —But in modern philosophy, it seems to me . . . because modern philosophy is based on an accidental . . . which appears most clearly, most frequently in Descartes . . . Absolute certainty must be gotten by hook and by crook . . .

As I also said on a former occasion,<sup>1</sup> [which] is more simple perhaps, that historical analysis is a necessary corrective for the kind of thought which conceives of itself as progressive—as progressive, that is to say, the fundamental questions are solved, the basic questions . . . built higher and higher. Now that requires in itself a corrective, namely, a return from the higher stories to the foundations. That is historical. Well, I have to leave it at that and continue with my argument.

In discussing Collingwood, I suggested that Collingwood takes an intermediate position between Hegel and Nietzsche. I mean of course not in<sup>2</sup> [temporal] terms, because Nietzsche was dead long before Collingwood began to reflect, but as far as the inner order is concerned. Hegel asserted that the end of history<sup>3</sup> [has] come . . . and therefore the difficulties do not arise because no further change [is possible]. But the common nineteenth-century view was [that] man is, the philosopher is the son of his time, and yet there is no end of time. Nietzsche was<sup>4</sup> the only thinker of the nineteenth century who saw the great problem involved in that, and that is the reason why he is of such importance to us. Now I will try to show what his problem is and you will see it has very much to do with our most immediate problems today. I discuss first Nietzsche's most famous statement on history, which is the truly epochmaking critique of historicism in his essay *On the Use and Abuse of History*. This forms part of a larger work called [*Untimely Meditations*]. The second one<sup>i</sup> is *Use and Abuse of History*.

Now in this work Nietzsche criticizes historicism. But what does he mean by that? He calls it the historical trend, the historical sense, the historical consciousness, which he says has become<sup>5</sup> powerful in the nineteenth century, especially in Germany, and which is something novel. Now what is it, what is it for him? According to Nietzsche it grows out of the veneration for one's past, [out] of man's need and desire to know himself as heir, as the result of a growth. This in itself is salutary. But it may become as it were an end in itself, and then it becomes fatal; and then it is no longer a use of history but an abuse of history, namely, it becomes fatal because then it implies forgetting about the future: you see yourself only as an heir and not as someone who has a task of your own. Now this veneration for the past is the first element of historicism. The second is that this concern with one's past, the respect of the ancestors, the cultivation of their memory and so on, that this concern with one's past becomes pure science. And that itself

<sup>i</sup> The work is made up of four "meditations."

consists of two elements. In the first place, the concern with one's past, with one's own past, becomes universal. It becomes veneration for all past, not only for one's own past, so a man is interested not only in George Washington in America, the past of one's own society, but, say, equally in the Incas, the Chinese, and so on. And the second<sup>6</sup> [element] is that this universal concern with the past becomes divorced from reverence and every other motivation except the desire to know . . . the form in which<sup>7</sup> history has become a universal spectacle<sup>8</sup> which men look at with curiosity, or as someone has put it more recently: A history as a very big film or TV effect . . . It is only exciting, stimulating, interesting because of its unusualness; always different from what it is today. But it has no longer a serious meaning . . . History as a universal spectacle has an important root, and this root is the following, and that is the third element of<sup>9</sup> historicism: universal history as a science, as a purely theoretical pursuit, becomes central because it takes the place of philosophy. And this has happened in the nineteenth century, and that is the consequence of the decay of Hegel's philosophy. The historical process is completed, the real has become rational, and therefore philosophy becomes the theoretical understanding of the completed historical process. And that now takes the place of philosophy.

Now this is the position which Nietzsche attacks, on the following grounds. In the first place, he questions the assertion that history is completed, or in other words, that all theoretical and practical problems have been solved, or that life has ceased to be an enigma, or that life has ceased to be a task. If life has ceased to be a task, it has lost its seriousness. Men have become like gods, the Homeric gods: life is<sup>10</sup> living. Are present-day men gods? Nietzsche finds they are as human, all too human, as men in former times. Yet what about their thoughts and their institutions: maybe they are perfect? But Nietzsche argues [that] the thoughts and institutions would not be sufficient, because perfection of man means the perfection of human beings, of individuals. One cannot call an age perfect if it does not abound in great individuals. But that is not all. There is a connection between the specific imperfection of the nineteenth century, with the thought and institution[s] of the age. The specific imperfection of the nineteenth century, just to mention [one] of many points<sup>11</sup>: the obvious decay of [taste].<sup>ii</sup> You know what people say about the way people built houses and post offices in 1870 or so. That is of course only a sign of a deeper decay and the decay of higher education, and so on. There is a connection between this specific imperfection of the nineteenth century and the thoughts and institutions of that age, and therefore one may very well doubt [the] perfection of these thoughts and institutions. But more generally, if history is completed, men can only reproduce the perfect thought and the perfect institutions. There is [then] no possibility of productivity and creativity, but only of reproduction and epigonism, if I may use this term. You know what [*epigonos*] means? One too late. The perfection of history, in other words, leads to a decline of man, to a degradation of man. The conclusion: history is essentially unfinishable. Human life can be finished accidentally by cosmic catastrophes and so forth, but in itself it cannot be finished. Human life is an eternal imperfection

<sup>ii</sup> The transcript has a blank space here; a handwritten entry in the margin (made by Joseph Cropsey) proposes that Strauss said "taste."

which can never be made perfect. An end of history is not even possible. Man eternally tends beyond himself. So history is not complete and cannot be complete.

And the second point which Nietzsche makes against Hegel and Hegelianism: history is not rational. The historical process is stupid. Senseless suffering abounds.<sup>12</sup> We cannot recognize providence; no plan of history, only no rules of the . . . mind of which Hegel had spoken, only plans of human beings which rarely if ever come to their fruition. But everything else, and which means most [things], is confusion, chaos, meaningless. So the historical process is deprived of all the dignity which it had acquired in Hegel's doctrine. But what is the significance of that? All this would have been said by all philosophers up to 1800, roughly speaking; for even the religious thinkers who spoke of Providence admitted that the providential plan was inscrutable, and therefore for the unarmed human eye there is this mystery of unreason. Therefore the relevance of<sup>13</sup> [the] critique [of Hegel] seems to be limited to this: that the critique lays bare a great effect of nineteenth-century thought, especially of German nineteenth-century thought. And this might account for the fact that Nietzsche, in a late survey of his work, in [*Ecce Homo*],<sup>iii</sup> barely mentions this essay on *Use and Abuse of History*, although strangely it was this essay which was the first to make any impact on academic thought.

Yet there is something radically novel in Nietzsche's critique of historicism and which distinguishes Nietzsche from the very beginning from all earlier philosophers, for Nietzsche accepts the crucial thesis of historicism. And I must explain this. The crucial thesis of historicism is *not* that history is completed or that history is rational, but that history is all-powerful: that man cannot transcend history, that the philosopher is the son of his time, that there are no absolute truths, that the values of a society are relative to the living forces of the society, that man's horizon is limited by his time—or that there is not the absolute horizon, namely, the horizon of man as man, nor the final horizon as Hegel had thought. All truth, all values perish and deserve to perish. The basic premises of all thought are imposed by chance. There is no explanation of<sup>14</sup> [the fact] that Plato looked at them in this way and Descartes in that way, because if you say, "Well, Plato was a Greek and Descartes was a modern Frenchman," then you only push the problem back. Why did the Greeks look at it that way? Why do modern Frenchmen look at it that way? And so on. Or in other words, the very concept "man" is becoming, changeable. There is no human nature. Humanity has been acquired by a nonteleological process.

Now what then does Nietzsche do on this basis, when he teaches<sup>15</sup> perhaps more emphatically than most people said at [that] time<sup>16</sup> but still fundamentally<sup>17</sup> what most people said? We can state it in our language. Nietzsche accepts the thesis: Relativism is true. But all relativists with the exception of Nietzsche make this addition: Since relativism is true, it is good or salutary. Relativism makes man free, objective, nonparochial, fair, impartial, tolerant and so on. Here is the point where Nietzsche really<sup>18</sup> [shows] the status of the problem.<sup>19</sup> Relativism is indeed true

<sup>iii</sup> Only in section 1 of the chapter entitled "The Untimely Ones."

but deadly, for it relativizes our own morality; or to make it more specific, it relativizes our own tolerance. Well, today that has become trivial, this kind of second-story relativism, but I don't think that the second-story relativists fully understand the impact of Nietzsche's question. Do you see this difference? The first say relativism is true and salutary. You know that . . . The others say, today, relativism is true but it is neither salutary nor deadly. That<sup>20</sup> is only a concealment of the problem. If it is true and not salutary, it is really deadly. Take the example of tolerance. Relativism is said to make men tolerant, but if that is so, then tolerance is exempted from the relativity; and that can't work in the long run, so tolerance itself becomes relative. That leads in effect not necessarily to intolerance but to an impossibility<sup>21</sup> [of making] up one's mind between tolerance and intolerance, which is simply . . . the inability of men to will anything.

So Nietzsche's crucial thesis: Historicism is true but deadly; man cannot live if he does not believe in the absolute character of his principles and values. Every living being needs, as he puts it, a horizon, a protecting atmosphere, a closed horizon beyond which [one] can no longer<sup>22</sup> [question] and which is not evidently true. Therefore Nietzsche compares it to a dusk cloud, darkness. The horizon, the darkness, is primary. Only within the horizon can there be light, understanding, clarity, lightening . . . illumination. Man is man only by virtue of light, which would mean by mind, intellectuality or so. But this light rests on a foundation which is dark, which is unevident. And this horizon differs from epoch to epoch: there is no true horizon. Historicism is deadly or deadening because it dissolves the horizon, because it makes clear the unevident and fundamentally arbitrary character of our basic assumptions. Historicism destroys the belief in these assumptions. It destroys the possibility of full devotion to a cause. It opens up, as Nietzsche says, the hopeless skeptical infinity.

Is the argument clear up to this point? Relativism, as we might say today, is true, but that is easy to understand because everyone says so today. But the next point is that it is deadly, because men cannot live as full human beings on the basis of relativity. Let me perhaps add another point and it may become clearer to argue<sup>23</sup> [these things]. There is then a fundamental conflict between truth and life. Truth: relativism. Life requires absolutism. How do we settle that conflict? Nietzsche says there can be no doubt: we must settle the conflict in favor of life against truth, for by denying life we deny the very possibility of truth or knowledge of history. [We must prefer the salutary to the truthful, life to truth.]<sup>24</sup> Or to use a less obnoxious language, we must limit our historical curiosity in particular. Or still more radically stated, we must turn away from history . . . There is a fundamental conflict between truth and life. To speak the truth means to negate life; or in other words, life is based on delusions, falsehoods, or error. Or from the point of view of truth, life is altogether evil because life is inseparable from delusions. Or the desire for knowledge or the quest for truth leads to destruction and insanity. Hamlet is for Nietzsche the symbol of what that means. But the conclusion is: we must set limits to our historical curiosity; we must turn away from history. And you can easily see how all the aberrations like the myth of

Arthur Rosenberg,<sup>iv</sup> or whoever he was called, in this country, grow easily out of this . . . Or [. . .] to mention a more respectable name. The myth of the class struggle, of the general strike, is a myth that makes men good, whereas the truth—namely, the fact, the objective fact leading to it, the struggles between management and labor—is dull, uninspiring. Or to see it in the eyes of . . . or trade union official means of course to say: Let us make a compromise. And that means to degrade both labor and management . . . That is only at the very beginning of Nietzsche’s argument. But is it clear up to this point? I think that if you put down the sentence: relativism is true but deadly. Now is there any . . .

**Student:** . . .

**LS:** When we say truth is deadly, Nietzsche means any truth . . . There are no absolute truths. Nietzsche would say absolute truths are not only nonexistent but they would not even be desired . . . Nietzsche calls it [i.e., the idea of absolute truth]<sup>v</sup> delusion, so let us not call it truth . . . Certain successors of Nietzsche have introduced the term “subjective truth” for what Nietzsche calls falsehood. Still, it is not merely ridiculous; there is a real problem here. We may take this up later. Let us not make things complicated.

**Student:** What is the truth, then, for Nietzsche?

**LS:** There is no horizon . . . Let me put it this way. In every healthy society there is a horizon. People are united by agreement regarding fundamentals. You can do this. But Nietzsche would say this agreement doesn’t mean truth . . . The horizon is darkness. The horizon is the same as what Collingwood calls the absolute presuppositions, or almost. There are fundamental premises in the light of which people find their bearings. To find one’s bearings means to have some light of this . . . Nietzsche only articulates what all historicism really means: that every society, every epoch, rests on certain fundamental assumptions which are not true, which are not evident, but which are indispensable for them if they are to live. Now there are ages in which this horizon is felt: [the] nineteenth century. But that means disorganization, chaos, and waiting for other horizons. I come to that later . . .

<sup>iv</sup> German Marxist historian of ancient Rome and of twentieth-century Germany. Rosenberg was a member of the Communist Party of Germany and served in the Reichstag. After leaving politics and Germany, he taught at Liverpool University, and was professor of history at Brooklyn College from 1937 until his death in 1943. The “myth” to which Strauss alludes had to do with Rosenberg’s political allegiances. Rosenberg’s obituary in *The New York Times* observed: “Although Dr. Rosenberg was at one time a leading figure in the German Communist party, he became one of its severest critics after breaking with it in 1927 and toward the end of his life had come to favor many of the democratic processes of the United States and England that he formerly had denounced.” *The New York Times*, February 9, 1943. Cf. e.g., Francis L. Carsten, “Arthur Rosenberg: Ancient Historian into Leading Communist,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 8 (1973): 63-75. There are biographies of Rosenberg in German and in Italian.

<sup>v</sup> In the transcript: “(absolute truth)”

**Student:** Is<sup>25</sup> not everything possible, provided it has fulfilled only the conditions of making possible life?

**LS:** I come to that question later. Surely Nietzsche has given that some thought.

Now we have reached only this conclusion: If the truth of historicism is deadly, we must take the side of life against truth. The next step: This is impossible. It is impossible to accept the horizon which one knows to be merely [a] horizon. To give the most common present-day example: if you know certain values to be the values of your society and you accept them on no other grounds than that they are the values of your society, you are a stupid, self-deceiving man. To know a horizon as horizon means to doubt it, to transcend it. The acceptance of horizon as mere horizon is possible only at the price of willful self-deception or of intellectual dishonesty. That is the statement of the problem. How then can we get out of the impasse that is created by the fact that historicism is true but deadly? Answer: We must make another travel, [a] trip. We must question the truth of historicism, the truth of that kind of history which culminates in historicism. The question is this: Is historicist, scientific, theoretical, objective history true? Does the objective, scientific, theoretical historian understand history? And Nietzsche answers, "No." There is a disproportion between the objectivity of the historian and the subjectivity of the historical actor, between the objectivity of the historian and the subjectivity of life. This disproportion prevents understanding. The objective historian stands outside the stream of history, is a mere onlooker. The historian must be akin to the actors in order to understand them. According to an old adage of Greek philosophy: The same can be known only by the same.

What is the character of the life with which the historian is concerned? The historical actors—now "actor" is taken as a wide word, including of course thinkers themselves—the historical actors were committed to something. They believed in something, they had dedicated themselves to ideals. Only if we are committed to something, if we believe in something, if we are dedicated to an ideal can we understand the historical actor. But there is this great difficulty: there are no absolute ideals or values. All ideals or values are human creations, projections, projects. And Nietzsche concludes from this that only by virtue of a free project, by projecting our future, really can we understand the past. Only as architects of the future can you understand the past, for the actors themselves were architects of the future. Our projects cannot be derived from history; history does not teach us the goal of our life, nor does nature teach us it. That is absolutely settled for Nietzsche. We must form, produce, the goal of our life. Once we have done this we can use history, we can understand history. It is the free project, the project of our future, which creates the horizon. The project is the horizon-forming project. Only men who live within a horizon can understand other men living within a horizon, not the horizonless, distracted, theoretical, objective historian.

The fundamental error of historicism consists in men not realizing the primacy of the future, or, which is only another expression, in believing that the future can be figured out from the past or from the trends. The trends are [as] such past, naturally. The project cannot be demonstrated. It cannot be supported by evidence supplied by the past, for the past, the mere facts, do not lead to

any “ought.” Through the free formation of the future we [are] enabled and compelled to set ourselves against our times, against the trends, [against] the present history. The philosopher is then not, as Hegel said, the son of his times, but the stepson of his times. Up to now men lived within horizons formed by free projects without being aware of them. They traced the ideas to nature, or to God, or to reason. The historical consciousness is the realization of the fact that the horizon originated in man’s creative ability. Once man realizes this, that the ideas are not supported by God or reason, the first consequence is disillusionment, relativism, nihilism, deadliness. But this conclusion is based on one’s forgetting the decisive fact, namely, man’s creativity, man’s capacity to form a horizon-forming project. Man can consciously form a free project. The new project would presuppose the historicist’s insight, but it would transcend it. So the conclusion is then this: historicism in the usual sense, theoretical historicism, is untrue because it is only half true. The true historicism, if we may say so, is one which is guided by a free project and not by objective theoretical knowledge.

Now here the question arises immediately which I will mention lest you think I forget it, but I will postpone it now: Will there not be a variety of such projects? How can we protect ourselves against mere chaos and arbitrariness? I will take that up immediately. But is the argument clear up to this point?

**Student:** In the end of the *Use and Abuse of History*, Nietzsche speaks of a harmony between life and truth. Only the truth must now be differently understood . . .

**LS:** I don’t understand you . . . You seem to make a distinction between historical relativism and other kinds of relativism. It would be irrelevant because the other relativism would simply become part of the historical relativism, which is the more comprehensive one. So that would be irrelevant, I think . . . But one point is of course implied in what Nietzsche says: that true understanding of the past cannot be objective understanding because—here comes in something which is today very common—that for example it depends very much on the project of men, of the ideas of a man, how he will read and interpret, say, Shakespeare. So there is a variety of such interpretations, and it is in principle not possible to say one of these is true and the others are not true [or are] interpretations. In other words, historical objectivity in the simple sense<sup>26</sup> is nonexistent for Nietzsche, or uninteresting to the extent to which it exists in a limited way . . . In other words, you mean to say the root cannot be knowledge, but of course must be will. Therefore Nietzsche, later on when he develops it, speaks of the will to power as<sup>27</sup> [the basis] of everything . . .

But the question which immediately arises is: Will there not be a variety of projects? Or is not one and only one project implied in the very notion of the horizon-forming project, or in the very notion of creativity? And Nietzsche is tending towards this later on, although it took some time until he finally arrived at that . . . And I discussed this already when I discussed Collingwood, because if the historicist’s insight, which concerns naturally all human thought, is the decisive insight regarding human thought, is the absolute insight, then it in principle implies the possibility of one and only one project. But that I develop later.

I would like to indicate very briefly now how Nietzsche conceived of that ideal, his image of man as he called it, in his early period when he wrote *Use and Abuse of History*. Now he developed this image of man on the basis of Schopenhauer, his teacher, by contrasting Schopenhauer's image of man with those of Goethe and Rousseau. It is best for us to understand Nietzsche's image of man as a modification of Rousseau's image of man. I will explain this, and going beyond what Nietzsche explicitly says about Rousseau, which is not sufficient for understanding. Rousseau's image of man, to use this Nietzschean term, is characterized by a tension between radical individualism (forgive me for that word) and total subjection of the individual to society. This total subjection of the individual to society is expressed by the notion of the general will, which means for Rousseau the will of the last majority. Now why this tension? Man needs society, and he needs freedom in society: this is possible only through rule of law. But Rousseau argues [that] rule of law must be all-comprehensive; otherwise there exists the danger of what was called private government, dependence of the individual on other individuals. Therefore everything must in principle be subject to social control, and that is to say the rule of law. But this complete subjection of everyone and everything to society, social control, by being the condition of freedom in society is only the legitimate or just form of bondage. It is not true freedom. True freedom is possible only beyond the boundaries of a society in a kind of life which you may call the bohemian, to give you just an idea of what Rousseau is driving at: men who live at the fringes of society and who are not truly citizens. This was very crudely Rousseau's theme.

Why this tension? What is the root of this tension between the individual and society? Now civil society is ultimately grounded in the desire for self-preservation. But self-preservation—and here is the point which Rousseau makes and which is more subtle than Hobbes's and Locke's notion of self-preservation—self-preservation presupposes that life itself is good. And this is according to Rousseau indeed true and proven by an experience which he calls the feeling of existence. He means the feeling of mere being: that I am now, without thought of the past and the future. This is perfect satisfaction and perfect happiness. But this feeling of existence, which is very rarely had but which is the basis of everything, gives rise to a concern for existence, for the preservation of existence, and therefore it gives rise to unrest, dissatisfaction, and unhappiness. The tension between the feeling of existence and the desire for self-preservation is coeval with human life, and that is the root of that tension which can never be resolved. And Rousseau left it at this tension. It is not a contradiction, because a contradiction would be that he simply had been unaware of it, but he knew it. The German idealistic philosophers tried to solve that contradiction by abandoning the radical individualism which Rousseau had maintained as one pole of the difficulty. Let us take Hegel. Hegel's assertion [is] that in the postrevolutionary state the conflict between individual and society is resolved. Goodness consists in life in this postrevolutionary state . . . act as<sup>28</sup> [citizens] in the postrevolutionary state, servants to that state. Independently of Hegel there arose and came to power the democratic movement of the nineteenth century, which also had its roots in Rousseau and [in] which we find the assertion: the matrix of the general will is public opinion. Rousseau sees this. But if you draw the ultimate conclusion, and it was drawn in practice perhaps earlier than in theory, to be good means to live in accordance with public

opinion. Today that is a very well-known view, I mean in practice. It is the theoretical formulation for conformism, for other-directedness,<sup>vi</sup> or what have you. But it is a possible decay of Rousseau's doctrine of the general will.

If you have this in mind you understand the beginning of Nietzsche's moral argument. Nietzsche returns, as it were, to Rousseau. Goodness is something radically different from service to the state, from full citizenship; and goodness is of course something radically different from subservience to public opinion, which means always the opinion of other men. Public opinion is nothing but private laziness or insincerity. To be good means to be oneself—the crucial Rousseauian thesis. What does that mean? To be oneself, to be guided by oneself, to be sincere, to be natural—<sup>vii</sup> . . . To be oneself and not to be oneself replaces the old distinction between to be good and to be bad. So we have here a parallel phenomenon to the distinction between progressive and reactionary. Just as in the nineteenth century “progressive” tended to take the place of good and “reactionary” the place of bad, there is also the possibility: to identify “to be good” with “to be oneself,” and to be bad with “not to be oneself.” It is not necessary for my purpose to follow the details of Rousseau's argument. I would only say this is the fundamental restoration of Rousseau's notion that to be good means to be oneself. [There is] this decisive difference for Nietzsche: the fundamental feeling of existence is not a feeling of happiness. But in this respect he follows Schopenhauer: the fundamental experience is an experience of suffering. It is not necessary also to follow the details; what is important is this. Nietzsche's full image of man . . . is then in the end not greatly different from the classical notion that the true goodness of man consists in a heightened nature of man. That could not be the ultimate formula for Nietzsche because of the problem of nature, as I shall show later.

The question with which I am concerned here is this: Where does history come in, in this project of the image of man? What is the historical character of this argument? The whole argument is a criticism of [the] time, [the] nineteenth century, an analysis of that time. What he finds is rule of public opinion . . . But there was a specific character of nineteenth-century public opinion as Nietzsche saw it. The public opinion was characterized by a lazy mixture of half-hearted Christianity and pale classicism. Nietzsche says: If one takes seriously either Christianity or classical antiquity, one is already beyond this synthesis; this accepted idea is impossible. So we have then either Christianity or classical antiquity. Christianity is foreign to Nietzsche; he doesn't speak about it in his writings. Hence the Greeks, but the Greeks themselves are insufficient. Why? Because Nietzsche gives one example that is particularly important to him, and that was modern music. But if this example does not appeal to you, you can replace it by another one, because . . . Modern music is a new educative power which has disclosed a new dimension in man that transcends the earlier work. This change in man, in the soul of man, was unforeseeable before it happened. Nietzsche's ideal is historical because it is based on specific experiences made by men of a particular society of a particular time.<sup>29</sup> Its justification is that this

<sup>vi</sup> See David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd* (1950).

<sup>vii</sup> The tape was changed at this point.

new image as he developed it embodies everything noble the old ideas had and adds something which was missing in the older images of man. The new ideal is not arbitrary; it is known to be superior to any known alternative. And no superior alternative can become known except if man lives that ideal, if man becomes changed or deepened by living that new ideal. To exemplify that, what was for Nietzsche the most important earlier example: the need for a post-Christian ideal arises out of the fact that men molded by Christianity develop needs which cannot be satisfied by Christianity. These examples, I hope, make clear both the historical character of the ideal as Nietzsche understood it—it is not the perfection of the nature of man—and also why it is not arbitrary. I will not now go into the question of the truth or untruth of what Nietzsche says. I am only concerned now with the formal character; in other words, that which cannot be derived or deduced from history or from what is actual now, yet it is by this very fact not arbitrary. Is this part of the argument intelligible?

**Student:** . . .

**LS:** Every argument of this kind starts, if you really go back to the beginnings, from a certain understanding of noble or good which it presupposed. I mean, if one is completely impervious to any understanding of what is noble or good . . . I mean, all moral arguments start from such an understanding. It is no different in Plato than in Nietzsche, only Nietzsche's difference is this. Nietzsche would say all the primary understanding of good or noble differed from society to society, from epoch to epoch. He starts with understanding now and shows the inadequacy of that understanding because it is an impossible hodgepodge of Christian [and] classical ideas. And then he goes back to the origin, to the classical Greeks or to the New Testament itself, and then he sees that there are certain needs in him and in other men he knows . . . which are not satisfied by either the Greek or the Christian ideal, and of which he can show—he believes he can show—that which would seem superior to what either classical Greece or Christianity meant. Since classical Greece and the Bible were the rule of European society, there is no arbitrariness . . .

**Student:** . . .

**LS:** I give you one example which comes in his later writings, but it is good. He says this: The notion that God should take punishment upon himself—the New Testament—is more subtle, more refined than that of God as merely exercising . . . justice. Now Nietzsche says: No, that is not subtle enough; it is possible to have a notion of God who takes not only punishment but guilt . . . So in other words, that is the crucial point. The criterion Nietzsche admits and to which he subjects his image of man is that which embodies the highest ideals of the past and transcends them . . . If someone thinks out some arbitrary image . . . that is merely arbitrary. It must have its root in the very root of Europe, especially in this case.

But this much in a very general way about Nietzsche's starting point. But we have now to consider one difficulty to which I think someone alluded already in the discussion, and that is this. If we consider the argument of *Use and Abuse of History*, we are driven to this conclusion. The condition of any possible understanding of knowledge or life is a horizon, as Nietzsche says,

and this horizon is rooted in human creativity, in the horizon-forming project. Therefore Nietzsche seems to assert the primacy of the horizon-forming project. But does this project not presuppose the historical consciousness? And that means theoretical objective knowledge regarding the root of human creativity. In other words, there seems to be this conflict, and this goes through the work of Nietzsche as a whole: primacy of the horizon-forming project or primacy of theoretical objective knowledge. To make it quite clear: Nietzsche's notion of the horizon-forming project, the future as the principle giving light and meaning to human life and to human understanding, is derivative from the historical consciousness in the sense defined, from men having become aware of the fact that all values or ideas have their root not in nature or in God or in reason, but in human creativity. This conflict is, one can say, the life of Nietzsche. I will try to pursue it. I cannot finish it today; I can only indicate a few points here which are these.

When you take the program which . . . Nietzsche developed in the first essay out of this, you find the following view. Of course the basis<sup>30</sup> [is] atheism: The world and history are purposeless, unreasonable; man must be understood as a purely natural being on the basis of Darwin and so on, or maybe of Hobbes. And yet in spite of this origin there exists kindness, love, the possibility of genuine culture, meaning of true self, of man in the highest order. The question arises: How did this come about? The formulation of the problem is indicated by a later book titled *A Genealogy of Morals*, but with this crucial understanding: there<sup>31</sup> [cannot be a pure or original nobility because] the higher is derivative from the lower. That was the program of Nietzsche as stated very early. But you see here also this: What is presupposed? Something like Darwinism, something like historical relativity in the wider sense. A purely theoretical, objective assertion. Now if you take another work, *Human, All Too Human*, it begins as follows: A new kind of philosophy is necessary. Up to now philosophy was metaphysical: that is wrong; philosophy must now become historical. But this historical philosophizing is inseparable from natural science. The idea of evolution bridges the gulf between nature and history. Man does not have a nature; man has come into being and gradually has taken on the form of contemporary man. Thinking has come into being. So we need not only a genealogy of morals but a genealogy of thinking as well. There is no pure mind but only a mind in a body and in various ways affected by the body. There is no difference of origin between the good and bad, between the high and low. All this is objectively known.

So in Nietzsche's philosophy there seem to be then two heterogeneous elements. One is [what] you may call scientific and historical knowledge, and the other is his experience of himself, of his needs, his possibilities, and where "his" does not merely mean individual Nietzsche but the modern man on his highest level. The question is: How is this cooperation of scientific historical knowledge and Nietzsche's experience of himself and his possibilities to be understood? It seems that scientific historical knowledge is the basis, and this scientific historical knowledge is sufficient for destroying the older ideals which prove to be based on a lower level of scientific and historical knowledge. But this scientific historical knowledge proves to be insufficient for a new project. The new project must be rooted in the experience of the exemplary individual alone. That seems simple, but here the difficulty arises. This whole argument<sup>32</sup> would be a kind of modified positivism, but that is what Nietzsche denies. The scientific historical knowledge is not

a rock on which we can build but it is itself a problem. And this criticism of scientific historical knowledge, or what is more generally stated, of objective knowledge, leads to the result and is meant to lead to the result<sup>33</sup> [of the] self-destruction of objective knowledge, so that only the other thought—the experience of the exemplary individual and his project—remains. And again, Nietzsche never solved this difficulty, but he made many observations which are crucial for us. To repeat, the problem which we have to discuss is this: primacy of the project or primacy of objective knowledge. And especially we have to consider Nietzsche's attempt to suppress the one half of this tension, namely, theoretical objective knowledge, and we must see how he does it and what the difficulties are which arise from this way.

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<sup>1</sup> Deleted "that."

<sup>2</sup> Deleted "contemporary."

<sup>3</sup> Deleted "is"

<sup>4</sup> Deleted "the only one."

<sup>5</sup> Deleted "the."

<sup>6</sup> Deleted "point."

<sup>7</sup> Deleted "the."

<sup>8</sup> Deleted "in."

<sup>9</sup> Deleted "the."

<sup>10</sup> Deleted "the."

<sup>11</sup> Deleted "but I mention only one"

<sup>12</sup> Deleted "That."

<sup>13</sup> Deleted "Hegel's."

<sup>14</sup> Deleted "that."

<sup>15</sup> Deleted "only."

<sup>16</sup> Changed from "said it at this time."

<sup>17</sup> Deleted "that was."

<sup>18</sup> Deleted "shares."

<sup>19</sup> Deleted "but that."

<sup>20</sup> Deleted "does not, that."

<sup>21</sup> Deleted "to make."

<sup>22</sup> Deleted "be questioned."

<sup>23</sup> Deleted "this thing"

<sup>24</sup> Changed from "We must preserve the truthful, salutary life to truth."

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<sup>25</sup> Deleted “there.”

<sup>26</sup> Deleted “it.”

<sup>27</sup> Deleted “a base.”

<sup>28</sup> Deleted “citizenship.”

<sup>29</sup> Deleted “and is based on them.”

<sup>30</sup> Deleted “of.”

<sup>31</sup> Deleted “must not be the higher, why.”

<sup>32</sup> Deleted “that.”

<sup>33</sup> Deleted “that.”

## Session 8: February 20, 1956

### Nietzsche: Objective Truth vs. Free Project

**Leo Strauss:** . . . In connection with the problem of historicism, we have turned to Nietzsche. Now Nietzsche himself was aware of the fact that what he called the historical sense or the historical consciousness was that which distinguishes us, as he says, from all earlier thought. The historical sense as Nietzsche understands it comes to its maturity through opposition to Hegel, and the crucial points in the opposition to Hegel are these. First, history is essentially unfinishable: man is the eternal imperfection, as Nietzsche put it; and secondly, history is not rational: there is no plan of history, no providence. What then does the historicist assertion mean <sup>1</sup>[in light of] these premises? The philosopher is the son of his time. Even if he is only the stepson of his time, he has still the essential relation to his time. There are no absolute truths. The values of a society are relative to the leading forces of the society. Man necessarily lives and thinks within a specific horizon, that is to say on the basis of unevident assumptions which differ from epoch to epoch. The basic premises of thought are imposed on us by chance. The very notion, man, is becoming and changing. There is no human nature. Humanity has been acquired through a nonteleological process. The truth is neither known nor knowable. There are no permanent problems. There is no permanent situation of man. Everything which comes into being deserves to perish. These assertions should suffice to characterize historicism as Nietzsche understood it.

Now the crucial assertion with which Nietzsche begins his own thinking on the subject is, in his formula: Historicism is true, but deadly. I will explain that again. The historicist result is reached by the cooperation of historical evidence and a philosophic critique of the older kind of philosophy. The philosophic critique we can call a critique of reason, only we must understand that is no longer the Kantian critique of reason but . . . a larger [one]. The result, to repeat, is true but deadly. It is deadly because it depreciates or destroys any possible images of man or ideals. It terrorizes the will. By dissolving all horizons, it destroys the protective atmosphere within which man can lead a human life. It opens up the hopeless skeptical infinity, as Nietzsche puts it. There is then a radical antagonism between truth and life, and confronted with this antagonism, Nietzsche says we have no choice but to prefer the fruitful salutary delusion to truth. In other words, myth. And I mention<sup>2</sup> [here] the name of Sorel,<sup>i</sup> who elaborated this part of Nietzsche's thinking. But this is impossible: to know a horizon as horizon means to transcend it. To accept a horizon which is known to be a horizon is possible only at the price of willful self-deception, of intellectual dishonesty. In other words, a myth which is known to be a myth is powerless to fulfill its function.

<sup>i</sup> Strauss refers to Georges Sorel's myth of the general strike, set out in *Reflections on Violence*, trans. T. E. Hulme and J. Roth (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1950). In the context of Sorel's discussion of Xenophon's Socrates, one commentator writes that for Sorel, the myth of the general strike "would be the new Homeric social poetry." John Stanley, *The Sociology of Virtue: The Political & Social Theories of George Sorel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 48.

Let us then reconsider the thesis. Historicism or relativism is true but deadly: deadly, fatal to life. This thesis presupposes that we know life, that we know the truth about life, the truth as to what constitutes the excellence of life or as to what constitutes virtue. This true knowledge is not fatal to life but salutary to life. Following up this point, Nietzsche reaches the conclusion that there is ultimately a harmony between truth and life. The truth which is fatal to life, the relativistic truth, is only a partial truth which has been isolated and absolutized, which means it is an untruth. So everything seems to be all right. But this question arises: What is the status of that truth which is salutary? In what way do we know what constitutes the excellence of life?

In order to understand, let us look at objective scientific history. The problem is in no way changed if we replace objective scientific history by objective scientific social science as we know it now. Does objective scientific history grasp the historical truth? Does it understand the historical phenomena? Nietzsche says no, for there is a disproportion between objective scientific history and the historical phenomena. Objective scientific history is alienated from life, merely looking on from the outside, and therefore it cannot understand its pretended object. The same can only be known by the same. The historical actors were architects of the future; therefore only as architects of the future can we understand the past. Only by virtue of an ideal, of an image of human greatness, of a goal, can we understand the past, and this goal cannot be derived from history. We must form, or produce, or project, or create an ideal, as men have always done, without knowing it, however. We must do it consciously, that is to say, conscious of the fact that there is no support for any ideals, no support by either history, or nature, or reason, or God. It is the free project, the project of our future, which creates the horizon within which life and understanding are possible. Such a project liberates us from the power of the present. It enables us to set ourselves against our present, our time, the trend, history—that is to say, the past. This then is Nietzsche's answer to our question, In what way do we know what constitutes human excellence? The answer is: The truth in the light of which we see human excellence is our project. It is not objective truth. We may call it subjective truth, but Nietzsche thinks it is clearer not to call it truth at all, not to call it lie or delusion but to speak of a project or a creation as distinguished from truth. Now I think I came up to this point last time.

I would like to know whether this point has become clear, because the whole further argument is based upon it. Do you see the problem on the basis of your own experience and knowledge, the problem posed by relativism? The fundamental situation from which Nietzsche starts is, I believe, known to you: it is that which you know as social science relativism, for example. So Nietzsche as it were accepts the thesis of that relativism, but he says this relativism means nihilism. This relativism is true, but it is destructive of life. What can be done, how can we live on this basis? And Nietzsche's answer—well, you know what the answers are today, the usual answers are simply crude: the values of our society, or just personal attitudes, and anything is as good as anything else—answers which are manifestly impossible. [But] Nietzsche's general answer, which of course needs more comment, is: Only the free project of the individual who knows what he is doing can give human life dignity and direction. But this project has not and cannot have any support. Today of course existentialism has in a way popularized this notion, so

some of you may know [it] from this source. But I still would like to see whether the thesis itself is intelligible. Perhaps I add another point, and stop then for discussion.

The difficulty which for all questioning people like myself arises immediately, and I think also for most of you, is this: Will there not be a variety of such projects? A complete chaos, in other words. Or does the very notion of the horizon-forming project imply that there is ultimately only one project possible? Now let us look at Nietzsche's image of man; and I don't develop his full notion of man as he developed it in his later writings, I take the first version of that image which is presented by him in his book *Meditations out of Season*.<sup>ii</sup> Now how does this image appear here? Nietzsche starts from the implicit<sup>3</sup> [position] that to be good means to be oneself, to be oneself as distinguished from being merely a member of a herd, of society, or on the other hand, to be an actor, meaning of course to be an actor means not to be yourself. To be oneself, to be sincere, presupposes this . . . isolation, suffering. To be open to the abyss of the question, "From where, and whither?" Only in the fact of this abyss am I, can I become truly myself and project my future. There is indeed a variety of projects, because I myself am different from any other than myself; but all such projects have fundamentally the same character because they are all based on this fundamental situation of man, on this fundamental abyss, the question of where and whither, and the unanswerable character of this question. We must then make a distinction between the project of the true individuals themselves, between [that of] any one of us and Nietzsche's, the philosopher's, project of true individuals. There is an infinite variety, so to say, of such projects of true individuals, but there is one overall character of the true individual and of the project, and therefore there is not chaos. The basis of this image is a certain understanding of man: Man is not a being directed by his nature to such and such ends (that was the older view), nor is man compelled by his nature to project an end, but man is so constituted that he may either freely project an end or else accept ends imposed on him by others, or, which is only a variation of the second alternative, merely to drift.

By the way, what Mr. Riesman<sup>iii</sup> means by his distinction between self-directed and other-directed, that is a kind of social science version, if I may say so, of this thought. Man is so constituted, in other words, that he may either be himself or lose himself. This is the present existentialist view, and this is up to a certain point what Nietzsche really suggests. But the crucial difference between Nietzsche and at least the common version of existentialism is this. Nietzsche says somewhere in his *Zarathustra*, in his section "Of One Thousand and One Goals," I quote: "Creators were, first, the people, and only lately the individuals. Truly the individual himself is still the most recent creation."<sup>iv</sup> The individual is itself a creation or a project. That means the very distinction between self and loss of self is not a permanent structure of human life but an acquisition. Man has now become a being who is confronted with a choice between utter

<sup>ii</sup> Now usually translated as *Untimely Meditations*.

<sup>iii</sup> David Riesman (1909-2002), American sociologist and author, with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, of *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), was Strauss's colleague at the University of Chicago.

<sup>iv</sup> *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (Viking Penguin, 1954), 171.

degradation, loss of self, and the free project. But the fact that this is now the situation of man can be seen only on the basis of Nietzsche's project, because otherwise we see only loss of self, relativism, and nihilism. But only on the basis of the project can an alternative be seen. So the project seems to be the absolute basis of understanding. Now I stop for a moment and see whether I have made myself understood.<sup>4</sup>

**Student:** I don't see where Nietzsche's philosophy differs from the existentialist . . .

**LS:** Because in the ordinary presentations, this notion of morality is taken to be the truth about morality.<sup>5</sup> For example, if you are confronted with any earlier man outstanding<sup>6</sup> [in] virtue, he obviously doesn't live up to existentialist standards because the concern with being a self in [earlier] situation[s] didn't exist. People always depended very much on some kind of what they regarded as objective or absolute law. For Nietzsche it is important to add to this image of man the realization of his historical character. I give you another example. Take Dewey in *Human Nature and Conduct*.<sup>v</sup> This is of course very different from Nietzsche's, but Dewey develops a certain doctrine of the good human life, the good life, and this consists in a certain balance, habitual balance we can say, between impulse and habit. I'm not concerned now with the truth or untruth, or adequacy or inadequacy of Dewey's doctrine, but what is so strange in Dewey's doctrine is this: What about the status of this ethical teaching? There is, as far as I can see, no reflection in Dewey on the historical character of his own doctrine. Now when he speaks of habit or custom as distinguished from impulse, he implies this, of course: that a good act or a good life will look very different in different societies, and even in the case of different individuals, because the habit or custom is different. And the impulses which are themselves created by the reaction to custom and habit will also be different . . . So in other words, the good life will differ from individual to individual and from society to society. That is Dewey's conception of historical varieties. Earlier thinkers were not concerned with that problem. I mean, they allowed of course that there was a reasonable variety, but there is not this extreme individualization.<sup>vi</sup> But up to this point Dewey accepts the so-called historicist insight, but what about his own overall doctrine: Does this not belong to a particular historical situation, or is it the final doctrine? This question, as far as I can see, never faced him . . . And I think existentialism is in the same boat as Dewey is . . . you see, because once you assign to history such a crucial importance, you must apply it to your own teaching. The older philosophers were not under this conflict . . .

**Student:** [ . . . ]

**LS:** Up to, say, 1800 all men and all philosophers believed that there are in one way or the other absolute, or objective, or natural norms. I mean, all variety of opinion did prevail. But now it has been realized that there are no such norms. There is no norm which has an objective support . . . and therefore the first reaction to that is, once people see what they talk about, once

<sup>v</sup> John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (1922).

<sup>vi</sup> In the transcript: "individualization (?)"

people cease to be self-complacent fools, they realize that this is nihilism. And Nietzsche's attempt is first of all to clarify, to make fully clear<sup>7</sup> these nihilistic implications of what was generally believed in the nineteenth century without people being aware of it. To that extent he can say of himself [that] he is the first real nihilist. But he does it with this intention: to overcome nihilism, and the way of overcoming it is the free project. Of course, what I said does not solve all the problems; it is only the beginning of it. So Nietzsche would say: No, this situation never existed before. He makes a remark somewhere [that] we are the first generation who do not possess the truth; all earlier generations, including the skeptics, possessed the truth. You know this is a somewhat simplistic comment, but you understand what I mean. There was a kind of certainty. It has always existed up to now and<sup>8</sup> [it] no longer exists. And this certainty reverts to complete despair, to nihilism, and [to counteract that we need the exertion of freedom],<sup>9</sup> of an unsupported freedom.

**Student:** . . .<sup>vii</sup>

**LS:** Why should not a man, say, adopt the Platonic image of man, but on a non-Platonic basis? In Plato, that image of man was meant to correspond with the nature of man and . . . Let us forget about that basis. That is wonderful; that simply does not work . . . These older images of man were bound up with their supports. In other words, this talk about values today—you know: There are values, God knows how they come, but to speak of values is an <sup>10</sup>[abstraction]. The values belong always to a larger whole. You cannot choose the values without choosing also many other things—theoretical assertions, if you please—with which they are connected. So Nietzsche would say no older image can be restored because they all rest on specific, say, metaphysical foundations from which they cannot be divorced. And that of course simplifies in a way the question of chaos. These older ideas are destroyed by this relativism and . . .

**Student:** . . .

**LS:** What Nietzsche wants to do is to appeal to everyone to be himself. He cannot free anyone who does not<sup>11</sup> [take] the decisive step himself. He can only appeal to him and tell him that if he understands himself correctly, he has no choice except to choose himself freedom or else to be a kind of . . . to be just a member of a herd without a being of his own . . . I don't know whether it is clear that I do not believe in these things; I am only trying to present to you Nietzsche's view, because Nietzsche faced this issue. You see the problem of relativism, you know what that means. I think relativism is an impossible thing . . . and there are fundamentally two ways out. The one is the return to an older view, and that is what I believe is the sound thing to do. But there are other people who also see the impossibility and the degrading character of relativism, and they [believe that] a return to older views is not possible; and the most famous of these men was Nietzsche, [most famous] of the men who took that problem more seriously. I just wanted to avoid a misunderstanding.

<sup>vii</sup> In the transcript it is not clear where the question ends and Strauss's response begins.

The position is, I think, impossible, but it is very popular and not only among the relativists but among a much more high-minded race, and these are the idealists, as I would call them. Now in a very specific sense, did you not sometimes hear this view: Well, I don't believe in that ideal and I would fight it tooth and nail, but I must admit their integrity . . . people who have always an ideal opposite to your own. But they are idealists. So in other words, the notion is this. There is a variety of ideals, and these ideals are opposed to each other, not necessarily in all points but certainly in many points; and yet all these men who are dedicated to an ideal, devoted to a cause, have something important in common: they are idealists. Do you know that position? You must, you come across it every day. Something of this belongs to the better type of liberalism, I believe. Not to<sup>12</sup> [those] who say any value will do . . . For example, the notion of political crimes as distinguished from common crimes implies such an ideal: that there are things indeed which must be punished, but which have a certain nobility of character which has to be considered by the legislator or the judge. You have here a kind of chaos, surely; you can even say pandemonium<sup>13</sup>. But still, is this not a part of our modern situation? And does not existentialism, and Nietzsche in a way, do they not just try to give a philosophic formula of these actions for the respectable idealistic men who rise above the desire of their stomach and of their petty vanity and all this kind of thing? But I would put it this way: If there is not the true moral law, the true revelation, or the true natural order of human ends, if that does not exist, what else can you have except a variety of ideals, regarding which human reason is incapable<sup>14</sup> [of saying] which of these ideals is higher than the other? And what follows that? A kind of chaos, surely. I believe what people would say [is that] no harm is done with that chaos, provided this goes with a kind of natural respect. Haven't you heard that? Is it not then possible to live together, for these people, and even with an additional argument to live together with nonidealistic people on certain very simple principles? But of course you could say this, and that would be my objection: To the extent to which there is [a] real possibility of living together, we have to make a distinction between the ideal and the principle of idealism. The principle of idealism is common to all, with this very important implication, for example, of mutual respect. And so there would be a common but formal value or ideal which allows for considerable variety regarding the content of the ideal. I only want to show that these things which Nietzsche explicated have very much to do with what is now<sup>15</sup> more or less generally believed . . .

**Student:** . . .

**LS:** The only distinction which Nietzsche makes is this. If I state the argument now in this way—the variety of ideals—then he would simply say: But what is the root of these ideals? And then he would say: Really, what is it? Are these not ultimately projects, creations of man, of the human mind, or however you might phrase it? I mean, what else could these ideals be? . . . Sometimes Nietzsche puts the emphasis on the wish element in [. . .]<sup>viii</sup> You know what I mean by that, but equally frequently and perhaps more emphatically on the other . . . You can put

<sup>viii</sup> The transcript has a blank space enclosed by parentheses here.

it this way: the problem of the variety of ideals is really the problem of liberalism . . . That brings us a bit nearer to the way in which [in] this country the problem is viewed. But that is the real problem . . . Tolerance means of course variety, and variety in important respects; otherwise variety is of no value<sup>16</sup>. But then there is a constant danger. If the emphasis shifts<sup>17</sup> entirely to tolerance, the other things, the variety, become irrelevant, take on the significance of . . . which means they are of no grave importance. Or on the other hand, in the moment you put the emphasis on the variety, tolerance becomes weakened. That is, I think, the real problem of liberalism, to remain in this balance.

**Student:** . . .

**LS:** I think one must make a distinction between the project of Nietzsche the philosopher—Nietzsche the philosopher has a project of the man of the future, and he sometimes uses the term “superman.” If you don’t think of the comic strips, I can use that term. But then of course “superman” means individuals of the highest order; therefore the specific character of the individual superman has to be established by the individual superman. So we must make a distinction between Nietzsche’s project and the real project to be made by individuals appealed to by Nietzsche. But the point which I must emphasize is this: that Nietzsche’s view of this free individual is not meant to be a theoretical truth arrived at by an analysis of men’s fundamental situations; this view is interpreted itself as a creation, as a free project. Do you see that difference?

**Student:** . . .

**LS:** What makes a human being truly human is that he is devoted to an ideal regardless of the content of the ideal . . . Does this not colloquially make sense? . . . The point is this: a myth would be something which you know to be untrue but which you think to be valuable . . . What Nietzsche says is this. Nietzsche does not say anything which is not really possible, as he knows from his experience, namely, to be oneself: it is not an objective truth in the sense that it does not exist without our doing something, without creating it. And secondly, which is perhaps more important, it is something which exists only by virtue of a human creation. Primarily man was just a member of a society . . . member of a group, of a nation. But then under certain conditions in the past . . . when individuals, individuals as distinguished from just members of a society, emerged with this notion. But now the situation is this . . . man is now compelled to be an individual . . . Subjective truth means the same as full sincerity. You know that this has no support except your own choice. You don’t create an ideology or rationalization . . . because the trends of history or human nature support it; therefore it is subjective truth.<sup>18</sup>

**Student:** (What is the unifying effect of Nietzsche, the philosopher’s project?)<sup>ix</sup>

<sup>ix</sup> This is as it appears in the transcript. The transcriber was probably summarizing the question.

**LS:** But that is not his primary concern, for Nietzsche himself. Nietzsche would say [that] if you have such a class of superior men, of very pronounced individuals, there would be of course clashes and conflicts, and maybe even insecurities. He would not mind that . . . What I mean is this. In spite of the conflicts and the clashes, there is still the possibility of mutual respect, just as we think of medieval knights who fight each other, not the different armies, and still recognize mutually their ranks, their higher ranks. In other words, Nietzsche is not particularly concerned with peacefulness, if you want to use that [term]. That was also the point which Mr. Pickus made. But there is a not complete absence of orientation; there is something which they all respect, these men: namely, to be a true self, whatever that may mean. To me it means very little, but they say it means a lot . . . Nietzsche denies a permanent nature of man, a permanent situation of man. What else can it be except a creation . . . Nietzsche says this situation which has now arisen allows only of this alternative: nihilism, degradation, or free projects.<sup>19</sup> All other possibilities in between have been disposed of . . . There is no alternative, according to Nietzsche. Given this situation, there is no alternative except self-less persons on the one hand, or true individuals on the other. These true individuals are, by being true individuals, different from each other, are in conflict with each other, and there may be a kind of insecurity among them. That would not be an objection to Nietzsche because Nietzsche does not regard peaceableness as very important; and when I meant chaos I didn't speak of peacefulness, but of the opposite of any light. Nietzsche denies that. He says the light is given by the situation.

**Student:** . . .

**LS:** The very fact that you face the abyss . . . I mean, in other words, you can be confronted in an extreme situation where the lack of objective support becomes clear to you, could become clear to you, but what he implies is [that] most men would . . . So in other words, to see the abyss implies already a willingness to see the abyss . . . It is a moral act, an act of courage . . . If you think through the cowardly possibility, you reach a conclusion which is absolutely incompatible with self-respect, and—in other words, that is what I think I explained on another former occasion, that Nietzsche admits this as a matter of course: that [with] someone who is incapable of self-respect or self-contempt (it is the same thing), you can't talk to him, he wouldn't understand. And there is a real problem there . . . I think Nietzsche would simply say that in the light of any human being or society, man has to have self-respect . . . There was a primary stage of development of the half-gorillas, where no shame, where nothing of this kind existed . . . And Nietzsche argues from this point on the basis of a moral heritage. A moral heritage, we can say, takes in Nietzsche the place of human nature. Now in Nietzsche, a right for people who have been brought up<sup>20</sup> in a certain heritage, the biblical and Greek heritage, and he appeals and tries to convince them on that basis. If they were not heirs to that heritage, Nietzsche could not talk to them, and that is of course perfectly legitimate from his point of view because he has made this radical historicity. But the problem exists also in another way that Aristotle says, for example, in his *Ethics*: that people who have not been decently brought up can of course not understand his ethics, and also can't observe them. There is a difficulty.

**Student:** . . .

**LS:** Nietzsche says that the Platonic notion of excellence . . . is based on a fundamental cowardice, in other words, measured by the standards which Plato himself admitted . . . I come to that later.

**Student:** . . .

**LS:** Yes, in other words,<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche appeals to decent men brought up in the older ideals and tries to convince them that the very noblest in them cannot be satisfied any more by the old ideals for these and these reasons. You know, the direction as it were is already in them and therefore<sup>x</sup>— . . . in this respect I think Nietzsche is superior to Marx, because for Marx the question of the end is of relatively little importance because he knows what is good. He has learned it from the German philosophies, you know, from the fully harmonic and developed personality . . . because this fully developed personality will of course not be [a] patrician . . . For Marx it is simply more important to show, to represent, the direction of the historical movement . . . And for Nietzsche there is no necessity of the historical process whatever; there is a certain limitation. I mean, not everything is possible at all times.

**Student:** . . .

**LS:** Nietzsche is very much concerned with social and political problems. I will only say this much now. These free individuals . . . they are supposed to form a new ruling class. One historical analogy, and that was the historical nobility of the French nobility of the sixteenth and seventeenth century . . . These were members of a class but rugged individualists at the same time . . . Nietzsche's thought can perhaps be described as follows. There is an appeal to the individual in Nietzsche—in principle to every human being, but he knows that this appeal will find very few followers—an appeal to the individuals to be themselves. And on the other hand there is a political or social analysis of modern Europe pointing to one solution—not necessarily, but there is a cleavage. One is commoner, one is the solution preferred by Nietzsche; and what Nietzsche hopes or dreams (however you might call it) is that this development of the free individual and the need of the new ruling class will converge sometime in the twentieth century. So in other words, Nietzsche's overall view is in this way of course much vaguer than Marx's, and the practical consequence was, not undeservedly, fascism . . . which would of course be horrible to Nietzsche. But it is not a complete accident;<sup>22</sup> Nietzsche is not altogether free from responsibility that there is fascism. There is of course a view that . . . That is something very different from fascism, very much of a higher dignity. And therefore there exists another interpretation of Nietzsche which we can call the liberal interpretation of Nietzsche, which is more or less silent about Nietzsche's political and social views, and this is<sup>23</sup> only [the] appeal to the individuals<sup>24</sup> [to] be themselves. The full Nietzsche is both. And from this liberal

<sup>x</sup> The tape was changed at this point.

interpretation—I think the translation of the *Zarathustra* in the Viking *Portable Nietzsche*,<sup>xi</sup> in the introduction to that there are certain points which are fairly correct but [there is] a simple suppression of the other part of Nietzsche, of the political part . . . but I come back to that later. So that social and political element is then in Nietzsche very powerful—but I come to that later because I’m now concerned with the philosophic nerve of his thought.

**Student:** . . .

**LS:** Now let me first finish this part of the argument. Prior to the project there is only relativism or nihilism. And Nietzsche’s formula for nihilism is: Nothing is true, everything is permitted. Now if you say “Nothing that matters is true, everything is permitted,” that fits relativism perfectly as we know it. The project allows an alternative interpretation of the same state of things, namely, of the fact that all goals are unsupported. The project allows, in other words, a non-nihilistic interpretation of those facts which normally lead to the nihilistic interpretation. That fact that all goals are unsupported is objectively known, and so objective knowledge seems to be the basis of the project. Nietzsche’s philosophy would then consist of two heterogeneous elements: the one is scientific and historical knowledge, culminating in nihilism; and the other element is his project; in other words, his experience of himself, of his needs, of his possibilities. Scientific and historical knowledge is the basis. Scientific historical knowledge is sufficient for destroying the older ideals but insufficient for the new project, yet since the scientific and historical knowledge is the basis, it has a higher dignity. That is the point which Mrs. Tovey,<sup>xii</sup> I believe, wanted to make. It is universally valid and certain, and one could easily draw the conclusion that we, being reasonable men who don’t gamble, limit ourselves to theoretical knowledge, to the theoretical life, and do not gamble on an unsupported project. This being the case, Nietzsche’s philosophy requires that this possibility of theoretical knowledge be destroyed, because theoretical knowledge would somehow relativize the project. In a word, scientific and historical knowledge must be shown to be not a rock but a problem.

I will now sketch Nietzsche’s critique of theoretical knowledge, [of] objective knowledge of reality. Nietzsche’s thesis is: There is no objective thought whatever. All thought is perspectival; it belongs to a specific perspective. I explain this with the necessary brevity. Now the basis of any theory, of any theoretical understanding, is this: that we live in the world and that we see things as they are, the things and their qualities. But what happens? As is discovered by means of sense perception itself, our sense perception is relative to the human organization. Well, you know all the facts: that dogs see colors very differently from human beings; it is hard to say whether any animal sees things as things. So our sense perception is relative to the human organization, to the human organism and its needs. Sense perception is not mere perception but an activity, a transforming activity by the senses. We see things as they are. That means, in fact,

<sup>xi</sup> *The Portable Nietzsche*, edited and translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), 103-11.

<sup>xii</sup> A member of the class.

we see things as they are in the perspective of human beings. And this would seem to lead to the question: Well, how are the things in themselves, meaning differently from the human perception? This, it was thought, was discovered by reason or the understanding, or by science, which operates according to certain principles. Nietzsche says and tries to show that these principles, which were called by Kant synthetic judgments a priori—I cannot explain that now, but at any rate, the principles of reason or understanding or science are only fundamental fictions imposed on man by his organization. Or take logic: the principle of identity. Nietzsche says there are no identities; the assertion of identities is an arbitrary conventional simplification, a fiction. We may also put it this way: Science rests ultimately on constructs or on fundamental hypotheses. Conclusion of all these arguments: Reason and understanding disclose reality in the perspective of human beings, not reality as it is. This difficulty arises, of course: How can one say that? How can one say “only in the human perspective” unless one has a glimpse of reality as it is in itself? And that has created a difficulty for Nietzsche for some time, which he disposed of in the way which I shall show now.

Now both commonsense understanding and scientific understanding are essentially fragmentary. They are insufficient for guiding human life. We turn therefore to philosophy. Compared with philosophic thought, commonsense thought and scientific thought are poorer. What then is philosophy? What about the philosophic system? The striking fact for Nietzsche as well as for all people of his persuasion is the variety of philosophic systems. Dogmatic philosophy has become incredible for Nietzsche, as it has for many of his contemporaries. Nietzsche notes a connection between the philosophic systems and the individuality of their originators. The philosophic systems seem to be expressions of the great individualities of the philosophers. In other words, the philosophic systems are a kind of poetry which claims to be truth. Now there is skepticism, and Nietzsche says the skeptics are the only decent types among the philosophers up to now because they do not cheat or pretend. But Nietzsche says skepticism is nevertheless not acceptable and not superior to its alternatives, because to leave it at doubt is as much a choice as to risk something, and Nietzsche finally tries to diagnose skepticism as a kind of inability to choose, as a kind of weakness, a paralysis of the will. The details are not important; the conclusion I state as follows. In all these efforts Nietzsche seems to criticize objective knowledge, regardless [of] where he finds it, by measuring all alleged objective knowledge of reality by reality. Does he not then presuppose objective knowledge of reality? The answer which Nietzsche gives is this: the reality against which any objective knowledge of reality is measured is complete chaos or meaninglessness. All meaning, all articulation originates in living beings and especially in man. Reality in itself—or to use a Kantian expression, the thing in itself—the true world, is meaningless and chaotic. On the other hand, the world of meaning is fictitious. Nature, as Nietzsche put it, is valueless, meaningless, chaotic. Meaning and articulation are our making, our poetry, because the Greek word poetry means making.

You see here the point. What Nietzsche starts from, the premise, is of course one which he was not the first to introduce: that what is given is a mere chaos, inarticulate and meaningless, and all meaning is imposed upon it by the human mind. But if the true world is meaningless, so much so that we cannot say anything about it, why not simply dismiss it or abolish it? And this is indeed

what Nietzsche suggests. And if we abolish the notion of a true world, we abolish at the same time the fictitious world, namely, we take away from our world the stigma of fictitiousness. In brief, we know only one world: the world in which we live, the world which is of concern to us. There is no without. But this one world, the world of concern to us, the world which we can understand, is relative to our concern. And that implies there is no concern-less, completely detached, merely perceptive or receptive understanding of the world. All understanding is creative, active. And furthermore, there is an infinite variety of concerns. We may speak of a concern common to all men, the concern implied in the fact that all human beings are living beings of a certain kind, of a certain physical organization. Therefore certain<sup>25</sup> [things] are equally accessible to all men. But what is equally accessible to all men is only the poorest, crudest surface of things which man, as a mere brute of a certain kind, needs to know. What is equally accessible to all men is what we can see even on the lowest level of our existence. In other words, if we are merely the most stupid pointer-readers with no discrimination, no subtlety of understanding [in] any way is required. Everything which goes beyond that is accessible only in specific perspectives, in the perspectives of specific groups, and above all in the perspectives of the richest or most profound individuals.

So the whole argument of Nietzsche tends to this. We can say the whole philosophic tradition was based on a distinction between objective and subjective. That would be . . . intolerably inadequate, but let me leave it at this remark. True knowledge is objective knowledge . . .<sup>xiii</sup> which may or may not be true, but which has no real status. Nietzsche tries to replace this [old] distinction [between] objective<sup>26</sup> [and subjective]. And Nietzsche doesn't deny that he sees the snow, for example, that is common in both senses of the term . . . common, superficial . . . Objective knowledge, in a certain sense common to all men and which can easily be communicated, exists, but it is much lower in dignity than [the] other knowledge which does not have this character. So-called objective knowledge is as perspectival as the project, it is only poorer. There is only the world of concern to us, the world constituted by our concern, [and] this world is a product of the creative activity of an infinite number of human generations. We may say this world consists of a sedimentation of human creation. That we see the snow as snow . . . is not given with the nature of man, but a long experience of man is required to do that, to call it snow with all the variety of connotations and implications. That is a cultural heritage . . . The world therefore has depth, and therefore it is illusive. Man can understand the world only in proportion to his own depths. Only our whole being, Nietzsche says, can conceive reality [. . .]<sup>xiv</sup> only our whole being, not merely our understanding and our sense perception. But the deeper a man, the more he is he himself—a true individual, unique—and therefore there exists an infinite variety of perspectives. There is an infinite variety of perspectives, and of course then the question arises—we are back again to the question of the [tale]<sup>xv</sup> . . .

<sup>xiii</sup> Strauss probably refers to the notion of “subjective knowledge” at this point.

<sup>xiv</sup> The transcript is illegible at this point.

<sup>xv</sup> In the transcript: “tail”

But what I tried to show in this part of the argument was only this: how Nietzsche disposes of the threat to the project by objective knowledge. Answer: objective knowledge is merely thought, perspectivic thought, on the lowest and crudest level . . .

**Student:** . . .

**LS:** Nietzsche's whole philosophy implies a complete reinterpretation of what "world" means. When we speak of "world," we speak of a totality of beings which are [. . .]<sup>xvi</sup> But for Nietzsche, what we mean by "world" is really the product of a long and infinitely long cultural activity. But Nietzsche means something much more comprehensive and deeper. What we see is already based on a productive activity of man<sup>27</sup> [through an] infinity of generations.

**Student:** . . .

**LS:** What we call objective knowledge is merely knowledge in the perspective of mere man.<sup>28</sup> Much more human creativity is implied in seeing the cow as sacred than in seeing it as white . . . Nietzsche's whole analysis is pointing to this assertion: Man is, that is to say can be or should be, fully at home in the world or in his world . . . the whole argument really leads up to this point, and I will try to explain next time that, by making this assertion, Nietzsche is really leading to a culmination of what has been going on in modern thought for some centuries. In other words, following the logic of modern thought . . . It is not the world . . . but it is his creation. Try to think that over.

<sup>xvi</sup> In the transcript: "(independent)," evidently the transcriber's guess as to what Strauss said.

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<sup>1</sup> Deleted "on"

<sup>2</sup> Deleted "this concept."

<sup>3</sup> Deleted "question."

<sup>4</sup> Deleted "Question..."

<sup>5</sup> Deleted "and."

<sup>6</sup> Deleted "by."

<sup>7</sup> Deleted "that."

<sup>8</sup> Deleted "which."

<sup>9</sup> Changed from "and that to the counteract of the exertion of freedom."

<sup>10</sup> Deleted "attraction"

<sup>11</sup> Deleted "do."

<sup>12</sup> Deleted "them."

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- <sup>13</sup> Moved “you have.”
- <sup>14</sup> Deleted “to say.”
- <sup>15</sup> Deleted “a.”
- <sup>16</sup> Deleted “variety in important respects.”
- <sup>17</sup> Deleted “and.”
- <sup>18</sup> Deleted “Question....”
- <sup>19</sup> Deleted “This situation—.”
- <sup>20</sup> Deleted “for people.”
- <sup>21</sup> Deleted “Nietzsche would say this: I take a decent man-.”
- <sup>22</sup> Deleted “from which.”
- <sup>23</sup> Moved “the.”
- <sup>24</sup> Deleted “would.”
- <sup>25</sup> Deleted “hints.”
- <sup>26</sup> Deleted “perspective.”
- <sup>27</sup> Deleted “throughout.”
- <sup>28</sup> Deleted “In understanding the cow as sacred much more human creativity is involved than”

## Session 9: March 22, 1956

### Nietzsche: Perspectivism and the Will to Power

**Leo Strauss:** [in progress] —I use the stronger and clearer Nietzschean term, nihilism, but what we ordinarily mean by relativism is of course what Nietzsche has in mind. The difficulty seems to be this: that the project or image is preceded by objective knowledge. This objective knowledge leads to nihilism. But yet it has retained, it seems, the higher dignity which certain knowledge cannot help possessing, and Nietzsche cannot establish fully the dignity of the project if he does not destroy the validity of objective knowledge. One can state the difficulty with which Nietzsche is confronted also as follows, going back to that simple difficulty of which we have spoken before: that historicism seems to become involved in a fundamental absurdity by saying that all thought is historical, and yet exempting the historicist thought itself from this verdict. I believe I do not have to repeat this difficulty; we have discussed it before. All thought is historical: this thought seems to be self-contradictory because this thought itself, I mean the thought that all thought is historical, seems to be transhistorical, and this seems to show that one cannot possibly escape from transhistorical or objective thought.

Now for all these reasons Nietzsche is trying to abolish the dignity of objective thought. And the conclusion is this: all thought is historical. In Nietzsche's formulation, all thought is perspectivity. The variety of historical perspectives is only one part of the variety of perspectives, but the most important, the most interesting part. So-called objective thought is not objective; it is merely perspectival thought on the lowest level. Now Nietzsche has expressed this idea in many passages of his works, but I believe the clearest is the following one<sup>1</sup>—I don't know whether it is accessible in English translation. In a posthumous work called the *Will to Power*, aphorism 560, I find this note.

That things have a character or quality in themselves, that is to say, independently of interpretation and subjectivity, is a wholly arbitrary hypothesis. This hypothesis would presuppose that interpreting and subjectivity are not essential, that a thing divorced from all relations [to the knower—LS] is still a thing. Just the reverse. The seemingly objective character of things: could this not be understood as a gradual difference within the subjective?<sup>i</sup>

In other words, what we call objectivity is only one kind of subjectivity. Nietzsche illustrates this as follows: “For example that which changes slowly appears to us as objective, that is to say, as permanent, as being, as in itself, so that the objective would only be a false genus of species

<sup>i</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1968), 302-3.

within the subjective.”<sup>ii</sup> I have tried to state this as follows: that Nietzsche is trying to replace the old and time-honored distinction between the objective and the subjective by a distinction between the surface and the depth. What is traditionally called objective is the surface of things, and what is traditionally depreciated as subjective is at least partly the depth—partly, because we disregard mere delusions and mere madness, like “I am the emperor of China” (I used the example last time). Now the surface knowledge, the surface perspective, is the common: the common, what is accessible to every man on the lowest level of his creativity, of perceptivity; the vulgar. On the other hand, the depth of things is recognized in a more personal way; and the deeper, the more personal. So to the vulgarity of the surface knowledge there corresponds the depth or genuineness of the knowledge of the depth of things.

In other words, the objective knowledge presupposes the loss of self. Only in what would traditionally be called the subjective knowledge would the self be as self the actor. I will come back to that; let me first finish this part of the argument. There is this difficulty. When we say that all thought is perspectivity, everything is seen in a specific perspective, does this thought not imply something like the Kantian thing in itself, something which is presupposed in any perspectival seeing, something which can be seen in infinite variety of perspectives but which as it were precedes any perspectival perception? Nietzsche is trying to get rid of that. This presupposition of one’s perspectival seeing is a mere *x* which can never be gotten hold of, because whenever it is gotten hold of it is gotten hold of in a specific perspective. This so-called thing in itself is complete meaninglessness or chaos. And Nietzsche draws the final conclusion and says: Let us drop this notion of the thing in itself altogether. There is not a true world, there is only the world constituted by human creativity. But this world is as it were multicolored, and that is of course [a] gross understatement. It is accessible and reveals itself in an infinite variety of perspectives and each of these perspectives is true, reveals something.

I think we have reached this point last time, and I will first conclude this part of the argument before we have a discussion. Now there is one very obvious difficulty: there is an infinite variety of perspectives. That seems to mean mere chaos. And the second difficulty: Is not the insight into the perspectival character of all thought, is this insight not transperspectival? Do I not stand outside any specific perspectives when I realized that all thought is perspectival? And if that would be the case,<sup>2</sup> we would be compelled to reintroduce the Kantian distinction between the things in itself and appearances, because the transperspectival thought would be aware of the thing in itself, whereas in all perspectival thought we would be under the spell of appearances.

Now how does Nietzsche try to solve this difficulty? There is a variety of perspectives—an infinite variety, surely. But Nietzsche adds there is a hierarchy of these perspectives. There is a different degree of comprehensiveness or of justice. As Nietzsche himself puts it, assuming the perspectival character of all thought, the problem of hierarchy, of order of rank, becomes *the* central problem. This hierarchy, as well as any other hierarchy, points to a summit. There must

<sup>ii</sup> *Will to Power*, 303.

be the most comprehensive perspective, a perspective in which man is in principle open to everything. In other words, the absolute perspective. And that is indeed the conclusion<sup>3</sup> [at] which Nietzsche eventually arrives. The absolute perspective is the perspective in which the perspectivic character of all thought is seen. So in other words, Nietzsche's final solution of this difficulty is then different from that of Hegel, [for whom] the historical character of all thought, the fact that every thinker is the son of his time, is realized in the fullness of time; so that while Hegel, for example, is the son of his time and that seems to relativize Hegel's thought, <sup>4</sup>it does not, because that time to which Hegel's belongs is the absolute time, the fullness of time. Fundamentally in the same way Nietzsche has to solve the difficulty. His thought is located at the peak of history. There are great differences between Hegel and Nietzsche also regarding this very point, but that I will take up later. To repeat, Nietzsche tried to solve the difficulty created by the variety of perspectives by asserting that there is a hierarchy of such perspectives, pointing to a most comprehensive or absolute perspective. Of course there is some empirical evidence for that. We know this all the time: we say of a man he is very narrow. So in other words, that he denies certain phenomena or is blind to them, we are not particularly impressed by that, because we say, "Well, he has a narrow perspective." And if you enlarge and radicalize this idea, you can arrive at the notion that there might be, at least theoretically there is, a possibility of an all-comprehensive perspective.

Now in order to understand Nietzsche's views somewhat better and also [to make] another attempt to explain the necessity of restudying these things, I would like to make this suggestion: that Nietzsche's doctrine—which is by no means shared by many people—that Nietzsche's doctrine is a culmination of modern thought as such. I will first try to formulate the result of these reflections of Nietzsche and then link it up. Nietzsche's abolition of the thing in itself and his assertion of the infinite variety of perspectives, that all thought is perspectivic, means this: that man is fully at home in the world, which is his—man's—world. Man is fully at home. That must be intelligently understood: man can be and should be fully at home, but most people are not. But man as man can be and should be. Now let me explain this first. Man is fully at home in the world. There is no without; there is no other world; there is no other life. As Nietzsche put it in the strongest expression: God is dead. All ascetic ideas are fatal to life, fatal to man. Nietzsche uses the old formula of Rousseau: We return to nature—which cannot mean the same thing in Nietzsche as it meant in Rousseau, obviously, but as an indication also of the connection [between them]. We return to nature. Nietzsche's formula is, in the *Zarathustra*, "remain loyal to the earth," to the body.<sup>iii</sup> There are no absolute unchangeable standards of human perfection. Or to state it a little more clearly: there are no transcendent standards. The very notion of an ideal becomes problematic. As Nietzsche sometimes puts it, ideals are wishes. But Nietzsche himself has what he would call an ideal, an image of man. But the image of man, as Nietzsche conceives of it, is conceived, is understood by him not as an ideal but as a potentiality, a projection of what

<sup>iii</sup> *Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Kaufmann, part 1, "On the Gift-Giving Virtue," sec. 2, 188. The translation reads: "remain faithful to the earth"; "remain loyal" is apparently Strauss's translation.

man *can* [be] and therefore already is, whereas an ideal would seem to be a mere postulate. This much about the meaning of “man can be fully at home in the world.”

Now to the second part of this proposition: the world is his world. Is man not radically different from everything in the world? Nature is valueless—as Nietzsche puts it, meaningless. How can man be at home in such a world? Is he not a complete stranger in it? Nietzsche’s answer is this: the world of which he is speaking is not nature or the natural world, the valueless world, but man’s world, the world which has become thoroughly imbued with human meaning by man, by man’s creativity. The world thus understood is of course historical, because its being imbued with human meaning is the historical process. Now this is then what Nietzsche means by that, and why is this so important to us independently of the question of truth or falsehood, because as I said, in this view the modern tendencies, the tendencies of modern thought, seem to have come to a culmination. And you will see that immediately or almost immediately if I use now two slogans. For the first part of my proposition, man is fully at home in the world: let us call that “realism” or “this-worldliness.” “This-worldliness” is indeed translated from the German, if I am well informed, but it is immediately intelligible in English, I take it. And the second part of the proposition, the world is his world: “the sovereignty of man.”

Now let us have a look at the prehistory. I begin with Machiavelli, because as far as I can see modern thought really begins with Machiavelli. In trying to describe Machiavelli’s thought, we cannot help using the term “realism,” a term which is of course never used by Machiavelli himself. When Machiavelli makes his famous remark, in the fifteenth chapter of *The Prince*, that one should take one’s bearings not by how man *ought* to live but by how men *do* live, that is a crucial and an epochmaking statement. Or to express it differently, the standards which Machiavelli recognizes (from which he begins, at least) are the standards actually accepted by all societies: not the standards of what societies *should* aspire to, but that towards which all societies *actually* aspire. [There are] no standards transcending those aspired to by societies themselves. Now this means, contrasted with the pre-Machiavellian notion, a lowering of the standards. Something higher is simply cut off and denied. But this lowering of the standards leads to the following result. There is from the traditional point of view a high improbability of ever actualizing or realizing the high and lofty standards, these utopian standards. The standards which Machiavelli recognizes are<sup>5</sup> [such] that their actualization is at least possible, if not probable; and that means man’s power becomes much greater. Man’s dependence on chance, which was so crucial for classical political philosophy, ceases to be as great as it was. In Machiavelli’s telling expression: chance is a woman.<sup>iv</sup> Chance is not something elusive which cannot be grasped, but chance is a woman who can be forced by the right kind of men. In other words,<sup>6</sup> for earlier political thought, especially clearly in Aristotle and Plato, there were different social orders required for different types of men. Freedom is not the fruit of every climate, as it was said by Rousseau.<sup>v</sup> So there are nations fit by nature for despotic rule, nations fit by nature

<sup>iv</sup> Machiavelli, *Prince*, chapter 25.

<sup>v</sup> Rousseau, *Social Contract*, book 3, chapter 8.

for royal rule, nations fit by nature for republican government, and so on and so on. Surely, empirically that is so, but that is very unimportant [for Machiavelli]. If you apply the necessary pressure or heat, as it were, you can transform any nation into anything you want. Well, of course it is not a matter of one or two days, it may take a couple of generations; but there are no natural limitations to human power, that is the crucial point. Nature is only something tentative, as it were provisional, of which man is a master. To repeat, in Machiavelli we have already in a much more limited and much more intelligible form this unity of realism on the one hand, and the sovereignty of man on the other hand. These notions seem to belong to entirely different families, as it were, but they have the same parents from the very beginning.

Now if we take a much later stage, say, in the seventeenth century when modern philosophy in the more technical sense of the term develops, there we have this new kind of philosophy which is most clearly seen in Descartes and Hobbes, and which I suggested we should call dogmatism based on radical skepticism. That is a novelty. That had not existed before, absolute skepticism or radical skepticism, the beginning of Descartes's *Meditations* with the universal<sup>7</sup> [doubt]. Now on the basis of this dogmatism based on skepticism, the fundamental phenomenon is the ego, the I—the consciousness, as it came to be called later. Now this discovery of the ego means . . . the discovery of the sphere of the sovereignty of man. In Descartes's argument, the first thing of which man is absolutely sure, and which is only in man's power,<sup>8</sup> is the fact that he is thinking. And Descartes makes it . . . Even if there were a vicious God, [an] omnipotent vicious God who is always trying to deceive us, that would presuppose that we have a mind; otherwise he couldn't deceive us. But [since] this mind<sup>9</sup> has in itself as mind the possibility of doubting, by actualizing this doubt I am freed from the omnipotent God, from such a hypothetically assumed omnipotent God who is trying to deceive me. Here is the sphere and the home of man's sovereignty.<sup>vi</sup> But this ego with its ideas in the Descartes–Lockean sense of the word is of course cut off from what we would call the real world. This is a world outside of consciousness, and the great question became then for many generations of Western thought: How can the ego in its box of the consciousness, in its dark box, how can it ever come out of that to the real world? That is the problem of the unknowable thing in itself. Strictly speaking, it cannot get out; but it doesn't have to get out, because it can do better on the basis of the data which are supplied to it from without. We don't know how, but there are just some bangs on that box from outside and we don't know where the bangs come from. But we can organize these bangs: we can interpret them, we can give them sense, human sense. That is the meaning of understanding the world and the meaning of science. In other words, we construct a clear and distinct world, a perfectly intelligible world, the world of the universal mechanism.

Now here we have the sovereignty of man: the constructive freedom of the human mind. [In] the Kantian formula, the understanding prescribes nature its laws. The fundamental laws of nature are not the laws belonging to nature as a thing in itself, but they have their origin in the

<sup>vi</sup> In the transcript: “[or—Here is this fear in the home of man's sovereignty. (Tape unclear)] [or—the whole of man's sovereignty.]”

understanding which prescribes nature its laws. And the realism, the complete dropping—[that is], the only world which we know, to which we have access, which can be of any meaning to us, is our world, this world. Now this is developed, this scheme as it came out through the common efforts of men like Descartes and Hobbes, the universal mechanism.<sup>10</sup>[The world of universal mechanism was] of course taken by most of the physicists and most men to be just the true world, that goes without saying; but the more sophisticated men like Hobbes knew that this was wrong. Now this universal mechanism produces men. Man's humanity comes into being by this nonteleological mechanical process. But that means, again, the higher man's humanity originates in the lower: out of matter or [out] of mere brutish life the humanity emerges. In the course of the process, man, the product of nature, becomes the master of nature. Nature has become, at the end, man's property, man's world. I leave it at these remarks just to indicate to you that Nietzsche's formulation is based on a long effort of more than about three centuries of modern thought, and in a way summarizes it and<sup>11</sup> [brings] it to its perfection. Now before I go on to my next theme, I would like to know whether I have made myself understood.

**Student:** [ . . . ]

**LS:** One could give this formula for the absolute perspective: the absolute perspective is that in which what was previously unknown has become known. Something of utmost importance . . . Up to now people believed . . . that these ideals had an objective support: nature, reason, God; and now it has been realized that all these ideas were human creation. In other words, the absolute moment is the moment in which the creator reaches full self-consciousness . . . Your difficulty can be stated as follows: Does not an absolute perspective require an absolute? Yes. But the absolute does not have to be outside of the subject, outside of the thinker. It can be he, himself—not this arbitrary and contingent individual, but man. In the moment in which man becomes fully aware of the fact that *he* is the origin of all meaning and all value, that is the absolute moment.

**Student:** . . .

**LS:** The question of the horizon arises only in an intermediate stage. You have the closed horizons prior to modern historical consciousness, prior to relativism. Then relativism emerges, and that means the destruction of horizons. But that is nihilism. Nietzsche, by overcoming nihilism, restores the horizon, which however can no longer be one of these partial horizons within which man could live a human life, but it will be a new horizon. We'll take this up later.

**Student:** [ . . . ]<sup>vii</sup>

**LS:** Originally there was only opposition to Hegel, Nietzsche having been trained or corrupted (or however you might call it) by Schopenhauer, who was a violent sworn enemy of Hegel. But

<sup>vii</sup> The transcriber notes: "Nietzsche and Hegel?"

the more Nietzsche became himself, the more his position became a modified Hegelianism . . . Superficially stated, Schopenhauer rejected the so-called historical consciousness, and Nietzsche never rejected [it], not even in his early period, of course, and that connected him with Hegel. His final position is really a restatement of the Hegelian view with considerable modification . . .

Up to now man was directed by ideals which he thought had an objective foundation: nature or God or reason. So there was not a question of being a self, but of being good. These ideals have been destroyed. We have seen that they are all human creations. What is the situation? Either complete degradation, abandoning all aspirations; all aspirations which up to now were aspirations towards goodness or nobility are abandoned because we have seen the groundless character of nobility and goodness. But the alternative is to set projects, goals, in a sovereign and in a free manner, to be yourself . . . When you read in the present-day existentialist literature, you get the impression (and that is probably what some of them mean) that this distinction between self and loss of self<sup>12</sup> is rooted in the fundamental situation of man. Therefore there is a kind of equivalent of the nature of man . . . Nietzsche does not do that. Nietzsche is in this respect much more radically historical by saying [that] even this alternative, as our moral alternative, is *our* moral alternative, not *the* moral alternative . . . Nietzsche regarded himself as the man who brought the antiteleological tendency of modern thought to its culmination.

I would like first to treat this part, and perhaps some difficulties will disappear [while] others will emerge. Now in spite of Nietzsche's abolition of the true world or the thing in itself, in spite of his denial of the very possibility of absolute truth, Nietzsche continues to speak of the erroneous character of the world, of the one world. Why does he do this? The world is dead, meaningless, if we are not motivated by some interest, that is to say by desires and passions. If this is so, interest/desires<sup>13</sup>/passions is that behind which we cannot go. Interest/desires<sup>14</sup>/passions—that is *the* reality. But interest/desire<sup>15</sup>/passion is not directed towards *the* truth; therefore the world created by our desires, passions, interests is [a] fiction. It obviously is an exaggerated expression in order to make clear that there is no primary direction [in us] to<sup>16</sup> [the] truth. What Nietzsche indicates can be stated as follows. The world which we can understand, which can be of any concern to us, which has meaning for us, must be grounded in concern. Being grounded in concern and being opened up to us by concern, it is not accessible to concern-less looking-at, to detached looking-at, to objective knowledge. The question arises: What is that concern which builds up the world, our world?

Let us go back to the beginning, to Nietzsche's primary assumption—and everything depends on this—that primary assumption being that all meaning and all articulation is our making, our fiction, our poetry. I mentioned last time that the Greek word for poetry is *poiēsis*. It has a meaning of “making,” and [of] “fiction” as well. All understanding is simplification, ordering, articulation, putting a stamp on whatever is given. What in us does this making? Kant said [it is] reason or understanding which organizes the sense data; more generally, the consciousness organizes what is given to us. Yet Nietzsche says consciousness is only a surface phenomenon. True, thoughts occur to us, which means we, our consciousness, is not the master of our

thoughts. Not “I think,” but “it thinks in me.” That is, by the way, the root of the Freudian notion of the id. Our thoughts arise out of the depth which is beneath<sup>17</sup> the consciousness. That depth is called by Nietzsche the self. But that self is inseparable from the body. I quote: “Degree and kind of the sexuality of the human being reaches up into the highest summit of his mind.”<sup>viii</sup> So the self is then the whole man, the whole fact “man,” as Nietzsche calls it. Man, not the consciousness, is the creator, the maker of the world, the giver of meaning. What then is it which makes man man? What is the essence of man? Nietzsche says man cannot be defined. Man is an animal which has not yet been—in German, *festgestellt*, which means man is an animal which has not yet been defined or identified or established. Man has come into being, but he is not yet completed. This being the case, we need a formula which comprised the lowest as well as the highest in man, which comprises the highest man, who might be more than just man, as well as the lowest man, who would be subhuman. Therefore no idealistic or spiritualistic definition will do. We shall not think the mind is in any way essential. Nietzsche says it is much better to listen to the cynics who find the root of human life, of human activity in such things as hunger, sex, or vanity. But these suggestions of these people, whom Nietzsche in many ways despises but of whom he says they can be very clever and shrewd, these suggestions are unacceptable as they stand because they cannot account for the creativity. Hunger, sex, and vanity are not creative; we can never understand man’s building up the world from hunger, sex, or vanity. Thus, in other words, they do not explain why man is putting the stamp of meaning on the given. And therefore Nietzsche suggests as an alternative to hunger, sex, or vanity, the will to power. That is his formula.

The will to power<sup>18</sup> means, in the first place, the fundamental fact in man, and therefore (I come to Nietzsche’s hypothesis) in all beings. [The fundamental fact]<sup>ix</sup> is action, not something reactive. For example, adaptation or adjustment: they are secondary, derivative. The fundamental fact is an active, you can say aggressive, thing: the will to power. Nietzsche distinguishes the will to power from another famous principle: self-preservation. Self-preservation, he says, is still teleological, and that is very strange because we know that the principle of self-preservation as it came to be understood since the seventeenth century . . . Hobbes [it] was meant to be a substitute for teleology, as I have explained on a number of occasions—I can’t go into that now. Nietzsche seems to mean this (he doesn’t develop the thesis): When you speak of self-preservation, you’ve still an end in view: life, the preservation of life. You are still, to use an awful word, a rationalist; you have an end in view. The will to power is nonteleological. That has much more the character of letting off steam; there is no end in view. That is the crucial point for Nietzsche. Nietzsche also uses another term for will to power, namely, growth, almost in the sense in which John Dewey uses the term—contrary of course to what we all know about growth: if we look at a puppy or at a tree, there is always an end to growth. I mean, puppies don’t grow infinitely, trees don’t grow infinitely, but here the notion of growth without a term of growth. The only difference between Nietzsche and Dewey, I believe, in this respect is this: that Dewey thinks that

<sup>viii</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, part 4, aphorism 75. Presumably Strauss’s translation.

<sup>ix</sup> The transcriber inserted the phrase in brackets, presumably a guess as to what Strauss said.

if everyone grows, just grows indefinitely, no one will be hurt by the process, whereas Nietzsche is sure that if everyone grows, quite a few people will be hurt, naturally. In this respect Nietzsche is more realistic, I believe, than Dewey is. The will to live is for Nietzsche only the lowest form of the will to power.

Now it is then this will to power which animates our desires and passions and is active in all of them in various ways, and especially of course as regards thoughts. The thoughts are, says Nietzsche, only a behavior or relation of the desires and passions towards each other. These things are now very familiar from Freud. Freud developed this part of Nietzsche's thought. Thought is derivative: thought is moved and directed by the will, the will to power, and this leads to the consequence that the highest activities of men have to be understood as modifications of the will to power. For example, philosophy is, as Nietzsche puts it, the most spiritualized will to power. True love is also a modification of the will to power, and so on and so on. So what does Nietzsche have in mind when he speaks of will to power? There are various levels, and of course there is the famous psychology of Nietzsche in which he lays bare *en masse* the seamy elements in many things which are generally regarded as very pure and noble, and he finds there the element of power and the will to power. A famous example is love, generally regarded as the most altruistic of all feelings, and Nietzsche tries to show how much of will to power there is in love. I refer especially to the possessiveness implied in much of what we call love. But of course all these things would in no way be decisive. I mention them only in passing; they are not the root of Nietzsche's thought.

The phenomenon with which Nietzsche is primarily concerned is the phenomenon of knowledge, and here Nietzsche has an old and respectable ancestry. I'll mention only two names. Hobbes: we understand only what we make; to know is to make. Kant: the understanding prescribes nature its laws; knowledge is a constructive organizing activity. That has an old history long before Nietzsche. What Nietzsche adds is only this: this constructive organizing activity must be understood as an activity of a living being—of an organism, as people say. And then Nietzsche says, as it were: Show me, give me a formula of that activity of an organism which makes intelligible an organizing and constructive activity. And he thinks the only answer is the will to power. But there is another phenomenon apart from that of knowledge of which Nietzsche was thinking, or at least [a] so-called apparent phenomenon: the phenomenon of history. Starting from the surface, there is . . . the struggle for power among states, and within states among various groups. The expansionism of states, what is that but the will to power? Here it seems to be just a statement of an obvious fact. More precisely and somewhat more deeply, history is not a teleological process . . . But on the other hand, Nietzsche says it is not an absolutely accidental process, a completely senseless process. It is not a completely senseless process if it is conceived in terms of the will to power. Why [is] that? History cannot be understood teleologically. For Nietzsche this is obvious. On the other hand, if we understand it as a purely accidental process, meaningless, just the outcome . . . of human actions . . . without any rhyme or reason, [there cannot be any progress]. Now if neither teleological nor mere[ly] accidental [accounts] are sufficient, Nietzsche says then we have to fall back on the will to power. Only on the basis of the will to power, Nietzsche seems to contend,<sup>19</sup> can [history] be conceived of as a progressive

process, a progress which does not require transcendent goals. But, well, how can you speak of progress if there are no transcendent goals towards which the process takes place . . . You do not have to look toward transcendent goals; you merely compare them among themselves. More precisely, [progress is the] overcoming of the given or [of] the preceding. By that he means the will to power, the will to overcome. The will to power . . . is a necessary implication of the idea of progress. It is the formula for progress.

I will try to explain this a bit. Progress might mean, and that is doubtless meant originally, progress toward fixed, unchangeable goals: say, the perfection of man's nature, knowledge of *the* truth, establishment of *the* just society. That is a simple and very tangible notion of progress. But let us look at it more closely. In this notion of progress, *the* good thing is the end, not the way, not the progress, not the movement. In other words, this old-fashioned notion of progress depreciates the progressive movement. The end alone counts, not the movement. Therefore there is a tendency in modern times to get rid of these ends in order to enjoy the movement. The perfection of man [was] traditionally called<sup>20</sup> happiness, and happiness means a state of perfection, of completion: no movement. And that was disliked from the very beginning.<sup>x</sup> — And Hobbes says human life can be compared to [a] race; and, for example, to see the other fall means to laugh. And he gives the formula for each passion in terms of [this] race situation. But then felicity: what is felicity, if human life is just a race . . .

But a number of other parts of this process can be indicated briefly. For example, it was argued [that] the end cannot transcend the process or precede the process because progressive knowledge modifies the end. So the end itself must be progressive, and therefore the end itself changes or moves. And needless to say, if knowledge is not perception of something given but [is] creation, the ends must be human creations. And therefore, being human creations, the ends themselves belong to the movement, to the flux, to the progress. Progress must be understood in a radically different way, not in reference to any preceding or transcendent ends. But in what way? How can we speak of progress? You see, in a certain stage of this development . . . When you speak of a progress, a way, a progressive moment, you must have a term; otherwise you cannot speak of a progressive movement. Now the simple notion of course is to say we know the end, so we move in this way . . .<sup>xi</sup> But that has these difficulties from the modern point of view. What can you do? Now let us make the opposite premise, the beginning, and let us assume the beginning is absolutely evil. Could we not then say that every removal from this absolutely evil [beginning] is progressive by virtue of its going away from that? Now that this is not just a joke you see<sup>21</sup> [if you] think only of what Hobbes meant by the state of nature. If the state of nature—the only thing natural, the only (firm) given—is something absolutely bad, then this can act as a negative standard. In other words, you can speak of progress if you have a negative standard. Men's ever-increasing control of hostile nature—that is, progress—within these limits becomes possible.

<sup>x</sup> The tape was changed at this point.

<sup>xi</sup> Strauss might be writing on the blackboard.

Now Nietzsche cannot accept this very simple scheme for other reasons, but the thought which Nietzsche seems to have had is this. While there are no transcendent, fixed, eternal ends, there may nevertheless be superiority. You have a certain stage of civilization, and then suddenly a creative man appears and opens up a new possibility. [That] this possibility is superior to what already is can be understood on the basis of what people understand already now. There is a new creative . . . a new possibility which then proves to be higher . . . In other words, if you conceive of every given creation, of every perceiving creation, there is something which can be overcome . . . And I think that was a very important motive in Nietzsche, to retain the meaningfulness of history while radically abandoning any teleology. Nietzsche seems to say that the will to power alone makes intelligible the possibility of progress as an essential character of human life, as a possibility only.

But here there is one apparent difficulty, and that is . . . I will mention that and then make another stop. So Nietzsche's philosophic doctrine then is a doctrine of the will to power. The will to power is said to be that by virtue of which the world, man's world, is. The philosophy or the doctrine of the will to power cannot be a philosophical or metaphysical doctrine old-style. Naturally Nietzsche has rejected the possibility of objective and theoretical philosophy. How can his own doctrine of the will to power be an objective doctrine? The doctrine of the will to power must be itself a work of the will to power, of Nietzsche's will to power, a project or projection of Nietzsche's self, an expression of Nietzsche's "fundamental will." And that is what Nietzsche himself was honest enough to say. What then does Nietzsche will when teaching the will to power? I read to you a passage from *Beyond Good and Evil*, aphorism 6. "One will do well and wisely, if one wishes to understand how on earth the more subtle, metaphysical assertions of a philosopher ever arose, to ask each time what sort of morality is he aiming at."<sup>xii</sup> So the question which we raised, as follows: What does Nietzsche will when teaching the will to power? What is the morality which Nietzsche wants to teach? Now Nietzsche in another passage of *Beyond Good and Evil* uses occasionally this expression: "the political (moral)."<sup>xiii</sup> So political and moral are inseparable; one throws light on the other. What then, I say, is the moral-political conception of Nietzsche? That alone can give a clue to his doctrine of the will to power and therefore retroactively on these very reasonings which lead up to the doctrine of the will to power. Now given the historicist premises of Nietzsche, our question reads: How did Nietzsche understand the moral and political problem of his time? Only by understanding Nietzsche's analysis of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—because he gave a prospective analysis of the twentieth century—can we understand Nietzsche's seemingly purely theoretical philosophy.

Now before I turn to that, I would like to make sure that this intermediate step has been . . . In other words, we cannot leave it yet at Nietzsche's doctrine of the will to power. We have to look deeper and see what is he driving at in order to understand his theoretical teaching. But still the

<sup>xii</sup> *Beyond Good and Evil*, part 1, aphorism 6. Presumably Strauss's translation.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Beyond Good and Evil*, part 6, aphorism 211. Presumably Strauss's translation.

very terms of the seemingly theoretical teaching—the will to power—should at least be clear, otherwise there is no use in continuing. Is there any difficulty, any specific formula[ta]ble difficulty?

**Student:** . . .

**LS:** If you speak of progress of knowledge—for example, why is modern physics a progress beyond Newtonian physics? That would be then established according to what<sup>22</sup> the objective of physics [is], and [one would] see that modern physics comes closer to that. But still, I don't want to pass the buck.<sup>23</sup> How does Nietzsche mean that? One would have to give an example where objective knowledge would not seem to be necessary. To anticipate an example which I have to mention in another connection, when Nietzsche thinks the biblical God and the morality demanded by the biblical God is too crude, what kind of knowledge is here presupposed, letting alone the question of the truth?<sup>24</sup> Nietzsche simply finds that this belief and the content of this belief do not impress him as holy. But how can he call it progress? He conceives of that as progress. Answer: Because he knows that his immunity to the biblical faith is due to the fact that he and his ancestors have gone through a process of Christianization. Is it objective? I ask you, really, is it objective knowledge . . .

**Student:** . . .

**LS:** I have myself great difficulty in understanding Nietzsche, and I am really trying not to prevent the understanding of Nietzsche on my part or on your part by any premature criticism. What Nietzsche seems to think is this. Let us take any state of affairs, any society, and then there are of course always people who remain below the level which has been achieved,<sup>25</sup> [who] on the basis of the standards of their society are lower. Surely. But there also is a possibility that someone comes up to deviate, but in a way which appears [as higher] on this basis of a higher way of understanding<sup>26</sup>. The standard for saying “higher” is really then not the truth, the absolute truth, but what is already admitted. In other words, is this not possible? Look at the Marxist concept, which is only a modification of Hegel. You have a certain state of society characterized by contradictions, and this is an impossible situation. There are fundamentally two ways,<sup>27</sup> if you radicalize the problem, of getting rid of the contradictions. The one is a movement back and the other is a new movement which has not yet existed. The movement back is impossible, because we already know it will lead again into the same contradictions, so there is no prospect in itself. In this part of the argument there is no reflection on *the end*. What I'm driving at is this. I don't say this disposes of the difficulty; we only show that this way of thinking is not specifically Nietzschean. It belongs to the . . . and to the historical consciousness, the belief that you can do without transcendent goals. Ultimately, I believe the difficulty comes back, but within a certain level of the argument the difficulty doesn't seem to appear. And what Nietzsche seems to have in mind is this. As an individual, you are on a certain stage; and sometime later, you know that you have grown out of that, you have reached a higher degree of maturity or whatever you might call it. Do you need for that a vision of the fully mature man? You see the difficulty . . .

I would say generally this. I think that in the nineteenth century generally the notion of an end preconceived, apprehended in advance, with a view to which we may speak of progress and make actual progress, gradually disappears. And people still wanted to preserve the notion of progress. Perhaps something of this kind is already implied in Hegel and this aspect of the so-called dialectic. You have a certain state of things, and this state of things points to another state of things. It only points to another state of things; the movement is this way . . . You know you cannot help moving in this direction given this state of affairs. And the end, since this is a meaningful process, can appear only at the end when the whole problem is completed and we see: Oh, yes, the outcome of it is that man has become fully conscious of himself. And then the whole process appears as a meaningful process. In other words, wasn't the dialectic to begin with an attempt to get rid of the strict and simple teleology implied in the earlier views?

**Student:** . . .

**LS:** In other words, only if there is an absolute determination in one direction—as it is, for example, according to the Marxist doctrine—[does] the question of ends become meaningless. But in fact, even in Marxism this is not so . . . because there always remains the alternative of a destruction of civilization, and therefore the question is really this: Is the destruction of civilization better or worse than the world society as Marx conceived of it? So there is really an alternative, only the Marxists realize that no sane person would consider destruction of civilization. But that is not so simple. For Nietzsche there is an alternative, a real alternative. Why does he prefer the one to the other? Does he not prefer it on rational grounds? That is what you were saying . . . But he would say this: this alternative with which he, a modern man, is confronted is the unforeseen and unforeseeable outcome of a nonteleological process. It is the outcome of creations, of free creations which were in no way directed toward it. So I think the difficulties which arise would, I believe, have to be stated somewhat differently.

I would like then, if there is still some time—oh no, there isn't. Well, I have to postpone that. Next time I would like to indicate briefly, because that is of some importance, Nietzsche's political-moral view of the future of mankind, his project, his image of man. And I hope to find the time to indicate what was, I believe, the problem—even if one grants Nietzsche quite a few things which one cannot grant—and that is connected with his doctrine of the eternal return. To state this only with a few words:<sup>28</sup> the doctrine of the will to power is linked up with a certain understanding of the situation of modern man, and modern man according to Nietzsche is confronted with this choice. In the language which I used before, [it is the choice between] the other-directed man and the completely self-directed man. In Nietzsche's language, [it is] the last man, the man who has lost all possibility of self-contempt and is perfectly self-satisfied on the lowest level of human existence, and the other alternative is what is called by Nietzsche the superman. Now this is for Nietzsche indeed the final alternative, but when he says man has not yet been defined or established, he means it has not yet been decided which way man will go. And that is entirely undecided and depends on what man is actually doing. So that is the final choice, and being the final choice it means Nietzsche's vision of the possibility belongs to the

final moment in the sense that the highest knowledge, the highest possible knowledge of what is, has been achieved by Nietzsche.

So in other words, Nietzsche too, as I said before, ends as Hegel ended: there is a culminating moment, a peak, which is a historical moment, but the absolute moment in history. Nietzsche's term for that is noon. Contrary to Hegel, he does not call it the dusk, and I will explain what that means. You know Hegel's formula: the owl of Minerva begins its flight at dusk. And this, for certain reasons which we will try to explain, this notion of the will to power and the superman as the man of the highest power is linked up with the doctrine of eternal return. Eternal return<sup>29</sup> is in a way of course the denial of history, because what we call the historical process is not a unique process of this planet by beginning many millions of years ago and ending many of millions of years from now, but this process has occurred and will occur an infinite number of times. Whereas all other historicism assumes the uniqueness of the historical process, Nietzsche ends with the assertion that this is an infinitely repeated process. And meanwhile [we will] try to understand this doctrine. So the strange thing in Nietzsche's thought, [which] was the most radical historicism of the nineteenth century, is that he ends in a return to a very old and certainly nonhistorical notion of reality. I will try, if the time is sufficient, to explain this.

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<sup>1</sup> Deleted "which."

<sup>2</sup> Deleted "when."

<sup>3</sup> Deleted "to."

<sup>4</sup> Deleted "but"

<sup>5</sup> Deleted "so"

<sup>6</sup> Deleted "whereas."

<sup>7</sup> Deleted "doctrine."

<sup>8</sup> Deleted "that."

<sup>9</sup> Deleted "which."

<sup>10</sup> Deleted "which"

<sup>11</sup> Deleted "pinning."

<sup>12</sup> Deleted "that."

<sup>13</sup> Deleted "of."

<sup>14</sup> Deleted "of."

<sup>15</sup> Deleted "of."

<sup>16</sup> Deleted "our"

<sup>17</sup> Deleted "of."

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- <sup>18</sup> Deleted “that.”
- <sup>19</sup> Deleted “progress-;” moved “history.”
- <sup>20</sup> Deleted “the.”
- <sup>21</sup> Deleted “from the fact—think.”
- <sup>22</sup> Moved “is.”
- <sup>23</sup> Deleted “But what.”
- <sup>24</sup> Deleted “But what-.”
- <sup>25</sup> Deleted “which.”
- <sup>26</sup> Moved “as higher.”
- <sup>27</sup> Deleted “of.”
- <sup>28</sup> Deleted “in.”
- <sup>29</sup> Deleted “which.”

**Session 10: March 27, 1956**

**Nietzsche and Hegel: The Absolute Moment, the Eternal Return of the Same, Aristocratic Politics**

**Leo Strauss:** . . . We are discussing Nietzsche's doctrine in the context of a discussion of historicism. May I remind you again of the alternative: the classical view. According to the classical view, man can transcend time and history. There is a without, something imperishable and permanent. Against this, Nietzsche asserts [that] man cannot transcend time and history. This insight taken by itself is deadly, which means it is deadly if it is understood in the light of the traditional concept of truth. If we seek truth in the traditional sense of the term, we find nothing but meaninglessness. Truth as divine is deadly. In Nietzsche's formula, which means also some other things, "God is dead." But if we understand truth as creation, creative, as perspectivic, as due to human projects, if we realize that meaning and value have no other origin and can have no other origin than human creation, the situation changes radically. Man is, can be, should be fully at home in *the* world, which is his world and which discloses itself in an infinite variety of perspectives. So-called objective thought is only perspectivic thought on the lowest level. There is nothing imperishable and permanent; there is no without.

In other words, what Nietzsche means can be stated as follows. The death of God, as Nietzsche calls it, is ultimately not the setting of *the* sun but the liberation. Primarily it is only the setting of the sun, of *the* sun, of all orientation, but fully understood it is *the* liberation. Now once the perspectivic character of all thought is seen, *the* problem becomes the problem of the hierarchy, namely, of the hierarchy of perspectives. If there is no such hierarchy there would be mere chaos; and this hierarchy necessarily culminates in one highest perspective which we call the absolute perspective. Man has reached full self-consciousness about himself as the creator. Now the way is open to the definition of man, to the establishment of the character of man. Prior to that, there was only becoming. The way is open to a goal of mankind, the whole human race, a goal which is not [. . .]<sup>i</sup> to life but which is compatible with loyalty to the earth and to the body. The absolute perspective belongs to the absolute moment in history, to what Nietzsche calls noon, noontime.

Now here the similarity and the difference between Hegel and Nietzsche is clear, because for Hegel the absolute moment is the beginning of dusk: at dusk, in which the owl of Minerva, the Goddess of wisdom, begins its flight. In other words, the full self-consciousness is the end. For Nietzsche, it is the middle of the way. In this respect Nietzsche agrees with Marx: the famous formula that up to the beginning of the realm of freedom everything has been prehistory, and only with the beginning of the realm of freedom, of the communist world society, will there be true history. But that of course means that nevertheless Marx is the first to see the true character of human life and its true possibilities both in the past and in the future. But with this

<sup>i</sup> The transcript has blank space here, which might mean an inaudible word or words.

understanding Marx's materialistic philosophy of history is the revelation of the situation of man, and therefore it is a final insight in the most important respect, because at least the outlines of the new order can now be seen. Something comparable to that we find in Nietzsche. Nietzsche also claims to live in the absolute moment, but not in the absolute moment of realization—the realization is a matter of the future—but in the absolute moment of anticipation, if I may say so. In other words, Nietzsche and Marx, against Hegel, assert that there is a future of mankind, but a future whose possibilities and whose essential character can now be understood. Yet there is this difference. For Marx, there is one and only one way, the dictatorship of the proletariat; for Nietzsche, however, the future is undecided. Man is now at the crossroads: there is a possibility of an ultimate degradation; and on the other hand, the highest peak. The ultimate degradation is what Nietzsche calls the last man, the man who has lost the very possibility of self-contempt; and the highest peak is called by Nietzsche superman or overman. That is developed at the beginning of the *Zarathustra*. Man is confronted with a choice, we may say, between communist world society or else a new nobility ruling the planet. In other words, in the Marxist notion, withering away of the state; in Nietzsche, not only not withering away of the state but a new kind of political regime, a new nobility ruling the planet. Now the peak of understanding is then the moment in which the root of creativity is understood, and that root is not reason, mind, consciousness, but the self. And the self is inseparable from the body. So we can also say, as Nietzsche sometimes says, the root of creativity is man as a whole, the whole man. But what is the essence of man as a whole man? Man cannot yet be defined, or has not yet been defined. Therefore the formula must comprise sub-man as well as superman. The conclusion is: the essence is the will to power. And this will to power has a very great range, reaching from the will to overpower or exploit others to the will to overpower and overcome oneself, and on the highest level, the will to overcome the human-all-too-human altogether: and that means superman, the man who overcomes man. The doctrine of the will to power must be understood according to Nietzsche's principle as a historical doctrine, as a doctrine belonging to a specific historical situation, and that means, even more precisely, belonging to a specific political situation. I will speak of Nietzsche's political analysis a little bit later; first follow the fundamental thought. Now the doctrine of the will to power is a historical doctrine also in the sense that it must be according to Nietzsche's own opinion an expression of Nietzsche's own "fundamental will." It must be an expression of Nietzsche's self. Or more radically, the doctrine of the will to power must be an expression of Nietzsche's own will to power. Can it be true, that doctrine?

Now the statements about the true character of the doctrine of the will to power are contradictory in Nietzsche, and [this is] not accidental. We find statements in which Nietzsche says the doctrine of the will to power is a hypothesis, a project or an invention guiding future discoveries or leading to future discoveries; in other words, a hypothesis which may be validated or invalidated in the future. But that is a very superficial understanding of what Nietzsche means. Playing on the ambiguity of the German words *versuch* (experiment) and *versuchung* (temptation), Nietzsche describes his doctrine as such an experiment—temptation. Now that is a more precise formulation of what he means by hypothesis. The doctrine of the will to power can be validated or invalidated only by being acted upon, by being accepted by human beings, by human life. It can never be validated or invalidated by objective observation. Yet the insight into

the perspectivic character of all thought or into the historical character of all thought is final: the principle of meaning and value has now been discovered for the first time, and that means that now there is a possibility, a necessity of establishing *the* final values. In other words, there is noontime. Yet according to this very insight into the perspectivic character of all thought, the final insight must be rooted in Nietzsche's perspective, in Nietzsche's project, in his fundamental will. The doctrine must be [a] radically personal and hence incommunicable insight. In the last aphorism of *Beyond Good and Evil* you find perhaps the strongest statement to this effect, when Nietzsche describes the whole content of the book as "my thoughts" as distinguished from communicable, and [as] a truth acceptable to others.<sup>ii</sup> And this is necessary because the root of all meaning and truth is the self, and full self-consciousness is impossible according to Nietzsche, for<sup>1</sup> if full self-consciousness were possible there would not be the possibility of productive delusion. This is the most manifest difficulty which we find when we study Nietzsche. On the one hand we are confronted with a metaphysical doctrine old-style, which asserts that the principle of everything is the will to power as a true doctrine, but on the other hand there is a constant questioning of the very possibility of *the* true doctrine, and this questioning is expressed by words [such] as hypothesis, temptation or "my thought"—the English form,<sup>2</sup> [my] truth.

Full self-consciousness is impossible; therefore full knowledge of the principle, of *the* creator of meaning and value is impossible. If the self or being were intelligible, fully intelligible, history would be rational, which according to Nietzsche it is not. And therefore Nietzsche's doctrine cannot claim to be final; it cannot claim more than [that] it is the best available now. You see the dialectics of Nietzsche's thought in the following way. History is not rational. Nietzsche's project is based on the accidental experience of an accidental culture, Western culture. More specifically, Nietzsche's project is based in an indirect way on Christianity, on a contingent event; therefore Nietzsche's project itself must be contingent. But being contingent, how can it be *the* peak of human thought? But on the other hand it must be *the* peak because of the absolute character into the insight of the perspectivic character of all thought. And therefore, since it must be *the* peak, the development leading up to it, history, cannot be contingent. Christianity itself must be construed as necessary, which Nietzsche as a matter of fact does, for example, in the *Genealogy of Morals*, where he tries to show that there is a fundamental cleavage among men between the strong and the weak . . . and Christianity is a perfect development of the slave morality, which is in fact an attempt to show the necessity and therewith the rationality of Christianity.

Nietzsche's irrationalism makes the Hegelian solution, an absolute moment in which full consciousness is reached, impossible. The only way out which would be possible for Nietzsche would be this: that the historicist insight is the discovery of a problem as distinguished from a solution. Then there could be absoluteness and at the same time openness, and sometimes Nietzsche expresses himself in this way. But this never satisfied him, because the discovery of a

<sup>ii</sup> *Beyond Good and Evil*, part 9, aphorism 296.

problem would not show the way to values; it would only lead to the discovery of the principle of valuation without showing a way to the establishment of values.

Yet cannot both things exist, that the doctrine is most personal, Nietzsche's personal thought, and at the same time the most universal insight? The book which Nietzsche regarded as his most important work was *Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*. For everyone: universal; for no one because of its personal character: only Nietzsche's thought. How is this possible? If the doctrine of the will to power is the personal thought of the absolute individual—if Nietzsche is the providential individual, if one may say so—and that is the thought which . . . so there would be nothing accidental about Nietzsche. In other words, what Plato did ironically in his dialogues, that he presented Socrates as the absolute individual in which nothing is accidental: that Socrates has this particular kind of wife, and that this mother was called [Phaenarete] and his father [Sophroniscus], and [that] he had the protruding eyes and other purely accidental qualities becomes meaningful by virtue of Plato's poetry or noble lie. But in Plato that is of course a conscious lie: this remarkable individual could have been an entirely different man. But the fiction on which the Platonic dialogue is based is that nothing in Socrates's life is accidental. But, as I said, what in Plato is fiction in Nietzsche must become serious. The accidents of his life must become fateful dispensations. The most emphatic development of that is Nietzsche's writing [. . .]<sup>iii</sup> in which he tries to describe such things as [that] his father died when he was six years old, whereas his mother lived to a very old age. That is all<sup>3</sup> [far from superfluous]. Yet of course it is not a very good solution, because does this not make Nietzsche dependent on something higher than himself or his will? Is not this absolute, Nietzsche's creative act, necessarily conditional and derivative? We can state the difficulty as follows: the doctrine of the will to power is an expression of Nietzsche's self, [is] a creation of Nietzsche, has been posited by Nietzsche. But the root of that doctrine is Nietzsche's self. Nietzsche's self is the absolute, yet this absolute is obviously conditioned and derivative.

Let me try to explain this by starting from the most crude and superficial aspect of the problem. Nietzsche's premise is, as you know, evolution plus the historical process, as probably Hegel wanted at that time. Man is a product of a blind process and certainly the very opposite of an absolute, yet this whole process, leading from the amoeba or beyond, via the gorilla, to man and to the nineteenth century, this whole process is accessible only in human perspectives. The process as it was or is in itself cannot be known; it can only be known perspectively. Nothing can be known as it is in itself. All understanding is based on human creation. Therefore we cannot go back behind human creativity to the Darwinian evolution or something of this kind. The world that we can understand, that can be of concern to us, has been build up by human creativity in the historical process. Nietzsche is dependent on history, on heritage. But all these meanings built up in the historical process are now endangered, for these meanings were unconsciously created and now they are seen to be merely human creations. There is therefore a

<sup>iii</sup> The transcript has a blank space here.

need for a new creation, for a creation which establishes the endangered meanings, the endangered heritage. But this new creation is, in a way, the creation of the world.

How can the absolute be conditioned? That would seem to be the question. There is a traditional term stemming from the seventeenth century for that. If an absolute conditions itself, there must be something which was called [*causa sui*], a cause of itself. Nietzsche regards the concept of a cause of itself as absurd, yet he is compelled in a way to regard himself as the cause of himself. I read to you a passage from the *Zarathustra* in which not indeed Zarathustra himself but this animal speaks, whatever that may mean. It occurs in the third part, in the section on “The Convalescent” (in the Viking Portable edition, page 333). “The soul is as mortal as the body. But the knot of causes in which I am entangled recurs and will create me again. I myself belong to the causes of the eternal recurrence.” And therefore I am in a way the cause of myself. Nietzsche is somehow compelled to regard himself as the author of his fate.

I have indicated by these remarks that Nietzsche is compelled by the difficulty in which he gets entangled to come to the adoption of eternal return or eternal recurrence, which he regarded as the peak of his doctrine. I will say only a few words about this doctrine and why it is necessary apart from what I have indicated before. The conception of the eternal return, meaning that we—as we are sitting here now with all these accidental things, the pen in the right hand and the ladies with earrings and so on—have been sitting here in this room an infinite number of times in the past, and this will happen an infinite number of times in the future—with this difficulty. This *is* so, in the nature of things; but on the other hand its happening is due to our acts, just as according to the older Christian doctrine our eternal pleasantness or misery depends on what we do now in this short life, so that our eternal fate depends on what we do now here. According to Nietzsche’s doctrine, our eternal fate, but an eternal fate not in heaven or hell but on earth, depends decisively on what we are doing now.

Now this conception of the eternal return belongs to the highest moment, to the peak of the will to power. Nietzsche sees in the possibility and willingness to believe in the eternal return the highest act of man’s culture. Why is he compelled to teach the eternal return? Now the highest moment of the will to power is primarily [that] man has become the master of his fate. Up to now chance has been in control; now chance can be abolished. History can now be made rational, although up to now it was irrational. At the highest moment, in other words, we can say “no” to the past as past. Man is now the master. He is now responsible for the very condition of his existence because of his mastery, and this leads to the great result that Nietzsche must become what we may call an active immoralist. In other words, Nietzsche or the superman (we don’t make this distinction now) is now in principle capable of abolishing evil. But if . . . evil and the bad. But if the evil and the bad are needed in a way for nobility—for example, man’s courage requires that he has an opportunity for courage: there must be danger. Previously, nature and the circumstances always took care of the . . . But what if man has become the master? Must he not create the danger so that he can be compelled to be courageous, and so on?

At this peak of the will to power, everything seems to be possible; especially it seems to be possible to create a race of perfectly good men. We don't have to go into the meaning of what good means in any sense, in the Nietzschean or any other sense. Nietzsche refuses to consider that. Why? History taught him that men reached their highest stature only in a certain kind of society, in aristocratic–oligarchic society, where there was a rule of the nobility. The conclusion which Nietzsche draws is: The only salvation for modern man is the development of a new nobility. A nobility by its very definition requires [a] class of villains; it requires inequality. This problem did not exist for earlier thinkers, for the very simple reason that they thought men are by nature unequal . . . But what if there is no nature, if there is no nature to speak of? Then inequality and the nobility to which it belongs can owe their being only to an act of the human will. Or in different words: nature itself must be willed, must be posited in order to exist. From this point of view, it seems that the doctrine of eternal return is a kind of fictitious substitute for a creation of nature. It is easy to reject the doctrine of eternal return as Nietzsche taught it, but that does not dispose of the problem. The problem is the very serious one that has been haunting modern thought for quite some time. It becomes particularly clear in the eighteenth century. I will explain this briefly, so that you see it is not a special [. . .].<sup>iv</sup>

In the seventeenth century there developed a kind of political doctrine which we may call doctrinairism, meaning there is one and only one<sup>4</sup> just solution to the problem of human society, and this solution can be applied everywhere regardless of the circumstances. There was a reaction to that, and the most important representative of that reaction was the famous thinker Montesquieu. Montesquieu's teaching can be expressed in the formulation of Rousseau as follows: Liberty or freedom is not a fruit of all climates—climate in the widest sense, not only physical climates. In other words, the right or just political order is not possible under all conditions; there are natural resistances to it. The consequence was that Montesquieu was capable of restoring very much of the old traditional doctrines. When you look more deeply into Montesquieu, you think that Montesquieu has no longer a right to this conscious, sober, conservative view because in the seventeenth century, in the development of modern natural science, it had become clear that nature is not a fixed obstacle. Very simple things: According to the Aristotelian doctrine it would have been impossible to imagine free societies or republican societies, say, in the north of Europe, the idea being that the highest development of man is limited to such climates like that of the Mediterranean basin. When you go beyond that, deeper into the continent of Asia or Europe, you have natural obstacles to the highest development of man's capacities. This had become ever more incredible. Nature does not give us fixed, permanent obstacles to improvement.

If we radicalize the thought, there are no known limits to human power. This is exactly the problem of Nietzsche. There are no fixed limits to human power; there is no nature which can give us any guidance. Still, Nietzsche constantly refers to nature, as when he speaks of the relation between the two sexes. He starts from the difference of their natural function: the woman

<sup>iv</sup> In the transcript: “[hobby of me]”

who has to bear children has another function than man, and the fundamental difference between the two sexes can be understood from this natural difference. But what is the significance of this natural difference if nature is something which can be overcome, so that, God knows, perhaps one can have artificial pregnancy and even . . . and so on? Think it through. Where is the limit? Where is the limit to human power? There is no assignable limit, from the modern position; and therefore, if we have to have recourse to nature as Nietzsche did, nature must itself be willed or posited. Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal return as he understood it (the doctrine has also a variety of other meanings) seems to be a substitute for the recognition of nature, which recognition is no longer possible on this basis.

I would like to add a few words before we turn to our final discussion. I hope we have time for that, to say a few words about the political views of Nietzsche. That is perfectly necessary and legitimate to regard as part of his teaching proper, because according to Nietzsche's own principle one must understand every philosophic doctrine with [a] primary view to the moral and political teaching it implies—necessarily, because if the rule of any philosophy is the fundamental will and therefore a fundamental moral taste, then the moral–political teaching becomes the primary clue to its meaning. But given Nietzsche's historicist premises, the question means: How did Nietzsche understand the moral–political problem of his time? A few very scanty remarks must suffice. The later part of his life as a writer belonged to the Germany of Bismarck, [a] strong monarchy, yet which had introduced a very universal suffrage. The other characteristic of this monarchy, as it was of very many other monarchies, was the notion that the monarch or prince is the first servant of the state—as the Prussian King, Frederick II, had said in contradistinction to the absolutist notion of Louis XIV, according to which “the state, that's me” (if that's the proper English, which I never know). So in other words, the monarchic ruler is understood as a servant and at the same time allowed the universal suffrage, so there was a democratic proclivity belonging to his strong monarchy. The system of radical proclivity was also shown by the connection with nationalism—nationalism is a democratic movement. German national unity was established throughout Bismarck's wars, and this led to the decay of German thought and taste, national self-complacency, and [a] return to politics, to power politics. Germany<sup>5</sup> was a monarchy and France at that time was a republic, [but] these national differences ceased to be as important as they were before because the general European progressive movement affected all European countries independently of the regimes.

This progressive moment—political and technological at the same time, and of course economic—is characterized by Nietzsche along the following lines: the morning prayer has been replaced by the morning paper. I suppose you understand the meaning of that. It is not clear, or do I have to insult your intelligence by laboring the point? Well, what he means is this: there is a lack of concentration characteristic of this modern world which also shows itself in the specialization which is compensated by a sham universality. Well, if you listen to the radio or the television, I don't have to say a word about that. You get information about absolutely everything—of course [it is] very superficial; you don't understand a thing, but you have a sham universality, whereas as living human beings with any competence, we are ever more specialists. These remarks show already that Nietzsche did not expect salvation from the liberal, democratic,

antimonarchist movement. He saw around himself nothing but decay. Nationalism in particular, that became ever more impossible because of the hidden unity of Europe in spite of the conflict, and most of that was political conflict. The [fratricidal]<sup>v</sup> struggle between most of the European nations became ever more dangerous because of the danger to Europe as a whole stemming from Russia, which at that time was of course not communist Russia . . .

So Nietzsche was a conservative, one could say, but the point is that he saw the impossibility of conservatism. And there was one particularly striking remark about this subject, I hope I can find it, in an aphorism entitled “*Whispered to the conservatives.*”

What was not known formerly, what is known, or might be known today: a reversion, a return in any sense or degree is simply not possible. We physiologists [and ironically, he says that—LS] know that. [Yet] all priests and moralists have believed the opposite—they wanted to take mankind back, to screw it back, to a former measure of virtue. Morality was always a bed of Procrustes. Even the politicians have aped the preachers of virtue at this point: today too there are still parties whose dream it is that all things might walk backwards like crabs. But no one is free to be a crab. Nothing avails: one *must* go forward—step by step further into decadence (that is *my* definition of modern “progress”). One can *check* this development and thus dam up degeneration, gather it and make it more vehement and *sudden*: one can do no more.<sup>vi</sup>

In other words, conservatism is from Nietzsche’s point of view no solution. But most important for Nietzsche was this: What was the basis of conservatism in his time? Well, in the strongest conservative part of Germany there was Prussia. Prussia was regarded by the Prussian conservative party as a Christian state, and we can say generally that European conservatism of the nineteenth century was or claimed to be based on Christianity. Now according to Nietzsche’s analysis, which does not stem from Nietzsche but from Tocqueville, Christianity is the very root of democracy. So if democracy is the decay, a return to Christianity would not help a bit. What is necessary is a radical break with Christianity, that which Nietzsche called candid atheism. And this is, I think, the root of the political importance of Nietzsche. I believe we can say Nietzsche is the founder of the atheism of the political right. Up to Nietzsche’s time the political atheism had always been one of the left: Karl Marx is the most famous example, but the prehistory [of Marxism] and the French Revolution already shows this same thing. Nietzsche’s teacher, Schopenhauer, also was an atheist of the right but he was just a kind of political philistine, one could say, who wanted to preserve his property and to be left alone, and therefore he sided with the forces of order against those of progress. That was not a politically impressive thing. But Nietzsche really founded a political atheism of the right.

<sup>v</sup> “[fratricidal]” inserted by the transcriber.

<sup>vi</sup> *Twilight of the Idols*, aphorism 43, in *Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Kaufmann, 546-47.

What then is the alternative to conservatism as well as the democratic–liberal–socialist–communist movement? For Nietzsche, just as for all conservatives of the European continent, the difference between liberalism [and] communism was only a difference of generation, so to speak. This modern movement of liberation has various stages. One was represented, say, by Adam Smith or Herbert Spencer, but that necessarily led beyond itself to radical democracy, socialism, maybe communism. Now what is the alternative? I do not remember at the moment whether Nietzsche ever quotes de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, but it seems to me wholly impossible to understand Nietzsche’s political thought without thinking constantly of Tocqueville. Nietzsche might have known of course Tocqueville’s ideas from Taine<sup>vii</sup> and other French writers whom he frequently quotes—that is only a philological question. Now what did Tocqueville in his great work on *Democracy in America* do? This was an attempt to convince the European conservatives that they should not resist the democratic trend and repeat the mistakes of the French nobility of 1815. Tocqueville sided with democracy, but in a very qualified way because the whole world is permeated by a contrast between two alternatives: the new democracy, whose most promising features appeared in the United States; and the aristocracy of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, and especially the French aristocracy. Tocqueville could not decide unqualifiedly in favor of democracy. The decision was made for him, as it were, by history. In other words, Tocqueville’s decision in favor of democracy is not a rational but a providential decision. God, as it were, has shown by the course of events democracy is coming.

But if Nietzsche rejected democracy, he learned the alternative from Tocqueville: nobility, aristocracy; but a new nobility, because the old nobility was decrepit and hopeless. The necessity of such a new nobility appeared to Nietzsche from the dangers in which Europe found itself, the dangers which were at the same time potentialities. Europe was confronted with the possibility of ever-increasing decay or degeneration, or else a revitalization by the prospect of planetary rule. Therefore the Marxist diagnosis of Nietzsche is of course [that] he is the philosopher of imperialism in the Marxist sense of the term imperialism. There is some element of truth in that, naturally. Europe is confronted with a transcendent task, a transcendent possibility, a task transcending the possibilities of earlier men, the very ideals of earlier men; the earlier ideals of nobility are insufficient. In other words, not only is a new nobility needed, but even a new idea of a nobility. Nietzsche’s term for that is superman. True, we can say the supermen as Nietzsche understood them are true individuals, true selves. That is a most important characteristic of the superman as Nietzsche understood it, and Nietzsche’s whole work can be said to be an appeal to these true individuals who might come forward. But [beyond] that, [beyond]<sup>6</sup> the superman and above him, there appears a most important figure for Nietzsche, and that [figure] we call sometimes the philosopher of the future. And this philosopher of the future is meant to be superior as a human being in his human power and might to the philosopher of the past, even to the ideal of the philosopher of the past.

<sup>vii</sup> Hippolyte Taine (1828-1893), historicist French critic.

I can speak about that in the discussion if you want to, but I would like to point out only one thing now. Nietzsche reflected on this question: How is it possible for him to surpass the traditional notion of the philosopher? And Nietzsche's answer was: That is possible because he is an heir to the Bible. The new notion of the superman, and especially of the <sup>7</sup> philosopher of the future, is a synthesis transcending both the Platonic notion of the philosopher and the biblical notion of the highest man. I leave it at that. It is impossible now to go into this question which otherwise would be quite interesting: how [. . .]<sup>viii</sup> imperial fascism grew out of Nietzsche with a kind of complicated necessity. That is in itself an important question, but I will not go into that now. It is sufficient now to indicate these points, because my purpose now in this discussion is to concentrate on the philosophic problem involved, and this problem is fundamentally the problem of history, the problem of the possibility of the permanent or trans . . .

**Student:** . . .

**LS:** That is a very complicated question, how freedom and necessity can coexist. Let me try to state the difficulty somewhat better. The doctrine of eternal recurrence is in Nietzsche not primarily a cosmological doctrine . . . that the will of the universe which we know, in which we live, has come into being . . . And eternal recurrence is then an assertion as to what has happened before and after the [visible]<sup>ix</sup> universe . . . This in itself is a doctrine which was quite common in Greek philosophy. But for Nietzsche the doctrine of eternal recurrence is not primarily a cosmological doctrine, although he also tried to base it on cosmological grounds. The primary point is that eternal return is a moral doctrine, if I may say so. Why is it necessary? Man believes to have reached the peak of his power or to be close to it. He can mold everything, including man himself, as he sees fit. So . . . he can abolish evil and the bad. That would be the conclusion which you and I would arrive at. But here Nietzsche stops. The bad and the evil must not be abolished. In other words, we must accept the bad and the evil. We must accept it without grudges. We must say "yes" to it, and the most emphatic and unqualified way to say "yes" to bad and evil is to will its eternal return. That, I think, is the starting point of the doctrine. When you read in *Zarathustra*, in the section on "The Convalescent,"<sup>x</sup> Zarathustra<sup>8</sup> sees a deformed human being, a cripple, a hunchback of some sort. That leads to a general reflection that all has to do with the existence of bad and evil. The answer to the problem of bad and evil is eternal recurrence. That I think is the root of the doctrine. And if one interprets it . . . one could simply say this: Nietzsche tries to restore a hierarchic society . . . A hierarchic society is no problem if men are by nature unequal, because then we can say all social inequalities reflect more or less [. . .]<sup>xi</sup> natural inequalities. That is fundamentally what Plato and Aristotle meant; there is no problem there. But if man is the master of nature, all inequality, even natural inequality, is only provisional. How can we take our standards from nature? The only possibility is the act of will.

<sup>viii</sup> The transcript has a blank space here, enclosed in square brackets.

<sup>ix</sup> "Visible" is enclosed in square brackets in the transcript.

<sup>x</sup> *Portable Nietzsche*, 327-33.

<sup>xi</sup> The transcriber proposes "loyally" here.

To state it very crudely: freeze the progress towards a fully egalitarian society. That is the way in which it would look from a modern point of view. More deeply . . . the problem . . . nature has ceased to be of any significance. Nature is valueless for Nietzsche, and yet all the time he is compelled to have recourse to nature. There is one aphorism in *Beyond Good and Evil*, I believe it is 188, which is highly characteristic in this respect, in which the term nature occurs very frequently, and in all cases except the last one he gives quotation marks. But at the end he drops them.<sup>xii</sup> Why does he do that? Nature has become a problem for . . . He must have recourse to nature, and yet he cannot do it . . . Think of the problem of the two sexes. Nietzsche was absolutely opposed to equality of the two sexes . . . political equality of the two sexes. The root of his argument is the natural difference of the two sexes . . . But if nature . . . it does not have an inherent articulation which is in any way binding . . . Why [can we not]<sup>xiii</sup> change that . . . The problem exists for Marx, too. Marx finds the root for the division of labor in the difference of the two sexes. Now Marx says the final society . . .<sup>xiv</sup> abolish the division of the sexes. Don't laugh . . . The division of labor will have been abandoned. Yes, but what about the root of the division of labor? Will men bear children . . . or God knows . . . Ultimately, it seems to me, the problem of history is the problem of nature, because by "nature" people always meant, especially in regard to man, that permanence, that which belongs to man as man and cannot be changed. That has become so problematic to modern man for many reasons, [and] we have alluded to some of these reasons on former occasions . . . Up to now I don't know a better explanation of Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal return except to say that it is an expression of the difficulty to which modern thought comes by the denial of nature, of the meaningfulness and relevance of nature.

**Student:** . . .

**LS:** So when Nietzsche says "God is dead," he does not refer only to what he calls the death of the biblical God but to the fact that the traditional notion of *the* truth has become impossible . . .

**Student:** [Question on the necessity of Christianity]<sup>xv</sup>

**LS:** If Nietzsche teaches *the* truth or if Nietzsche's perspective is the absolute perspective, then the process leading up to that culmination point becomes justified for the end, rationally necessary. The strange thing is that Nietzsche is almost compelled to return to Hegel . . . where it was perfectly clear [that] the whole historical process is rational, although its rationality could be seen only at the end of the process. There is an amazing involuntary parallel between Nietzsche's thought and that of Hegel, but Nietzsche cannot afford it because that would mean abandoning

<sup>xii</sup> *Beyond Good and Evil*, part 5, aphorism 188.

<sup>xiii</sup> In the transcript: "(cannot we)"

<sup>xiv</sup> In the transcript, following the ellipsis: "(will even?)"

<sup>xv</sup> As noted by the transcriber.

his very principles . . . That is a very late thing, Nietzsche thought, and yet at the same time there is an indefinitely long future, and the simple expression of that is noon. Many hours have passed since the sun rose, in the summer especially . . . and an equally long period will follow.

**Student:** The real historical process exists only in the light of Nietzsche's insight [and so] takes place after . . .

**LS:** Yes and no. One could say, if it is true that the most important thing is to know, to understand, then this process is finished. But as far as life is concerned, action, there is always the future . . . Just as in Marx. The real insight is the character . . . and the general character of the realm of freedom. This is crucial . . . But the actualization of the realm of freedom: just as in Nietzsche, the actualization of the superman, that is the future . . . You can say that from now [on], men are able to consciously lead their lives, just as in Marx. But of course there is also—in fairness to Nietzsche's project, one has to say this. There is one point of view from Nietzsche's . . . which is absolutely superior to the Marxist point of view: that is the Marxist complete disregard of the end of mankind, whereas for Nietzsche the inevitability of the end of mankind is crucial. There is a remark by Engels in which he says: Well, we have to admit that, but<sup>9</sup> [after] the realm of freedom there will be again a decay, because the earth will perish and therefore mankind also will too. But that is a long way off. Now that is a very sound statement for a businessman, you know, but for a philosopher it is of course ridiculous. You know there is this joke about the businessman who was shocked because he understood the earth will last only four millions of years, or two millions. And then he asked an astronomer, and he said: No, there are two billions. Ah.

**Student:** . . .

**LS:** Zarathustra or Nietzsche has taught this an infinite number of times. This teaching of Zarathustra in former epochs, say, in epoch *m*, is one cause of Zarathustra teaching it in epoch *n*, and so on. That is what I meant by . . .

**Student:** . . .

**LS:** One could perhaps say this: the future is fully determined, but we do not know how. Also, the common forms of determinism. In other words, for practical purposes there exists freedom and chance. Even Spinoza says that. But nevertheless we know that this is ultimately an illusion, but we can't show it in detail because of our insufficient knowledge. I do not know how Nietzsche would look at the problem. I could not tell you. Is there no other problem?

**Student:** . . .

**LS:** Now for Hegel, one can say the beginning of history is the Hobbean state of nature, really. In the later writings of<sup>10</sup> [Hegel] that is not so clear, but if one goes back to his earlier writings one sees how much this beautiful, simple Hobbean solution, which is reduced for our benefit

every night in the Western movies—two men shooting it out—that is really the beginning . . . Hobbes says that: War [of] everybody against everybody, what is the outcome of that?<sup>xvi</sup> One possibility is that A just kills B: no future. But there is always the possibility that one of these two [. . .]<sup>xvii</sup> This man will then submit to the other. In technical terms, B becomes his slave and A will become the master. So the master–slave relation is the fundamental relation of political–historical significance. The important point is this—and you see how democratic Hegel is; whereas for Aristotle and Plato the slave and master relation is based on nature, if it is not just an unjust thing. In other words, a fellow who can’t take care of himself becomes a slave and the man who is prudent and has sense becomes the master; this is the natural thing, and nature in her goodness takes care that there are always sufficient persons who can’t take care of themselves and must be sold. But for Hegel it is entirely a matter of freedom: Which of the two in that crucial situation musters the nerve and the power to fight it out . . . So we have master–slave. But what happens next? The development is the master . . . the slave or slaves work of themselves, and<sup>11</sup> [the master] wages war of course from time to time, but for the most part in his life he is just enjoying the fruits of the labor of the slaves. What that means for Hegel [is that] the real future is not with the master but with the slaves, because they do the work, they transform nature, and that is the beginning of the science of nature. And in a more radicalized way that repeated itself at the end of classical antiquity, because classical society at the fullest was of course a society of masters and slaves. But that culminated in the super-*polis*, Rome, in which all were equal, namely, equally subject to the emperor, so there was not<sup>12</sup> public freedom but there was equality. And in this moment Christianity emerged—and Christianity means primarily this, in Hegel’s rational construction: the equality of all men with a view to the transcendent God. But that is submission, fear of God. That is a most sublimated and profound slave-morality, even in Hegel. And all the later development comes from that.

If I try to contrast it with Nietzsche, one can say Nietzsche had the tendency to assert that the higher development, excepting . . . but saying that the higher development of the man begins really with the master and is located . . . That was Nietzsche’s vision, you could say. But if you look at the execution, you see that Nietzsche too finds, just as Hegel, the real spiritual life of mankind emanating from the weak. He calls the weak not the slaves, he calls them the priests. That is somewhat more complicated . . . And he has said terrible things about the priests, but it is also clear [that] all spirituality, all refinement . . . stems from the slaves–priests. Now how does this work out in Nietzsche’s scheme? He of course rejects the Bible altogether, but he regards himself as an heir to certain biblical notions which don’t exist or . . . in classical notions. He calls the conception of a holy God the invention of the Jews. Nietzsche does not recognize . . . of a holy God. But the notion of the holy, that he tries to preserve and as it were to ascribe to man on his highest level this holiness which the Bible has ascribed to God. There is a very famous formula of Nietzsche in which he expresses that. He says somewhere in the *Will to Power*: the

<sup>xvi</sup> Here the transcriber notes: “[The difference between the Hobbean and Hegelian solutions.]”

<sup>xvii</sup> The transcript has a lengthy blank space here.

superman is Caesar with the soul of Christ. Caesar, that means the earthly power and health, wealth. But the soul is not Caesar's soul; the soul is the soul of Christ.

That perhaps gives me the occasion of restating very simply and perhaps . . . that relation of Nietzsche to Hegel. For Hegel, that synthesis of Bible and classical antiquity was Napoleon—Napoleon I, of course. Why? Naturally, every man who had practically united Europe was important, but in what spirit? And there is one great document of Napoleonic spirit, and that is the *Code Civil*, the Civil Code of France. Now what is that? The Civil Code of France recognizes the rights of man and equality of opportunity. In other words, it recognizes [the] equality of all men, the dignity, the equal dignity of all men. Where does this come from? From the Bible, especially Christianity, according to Hegel's interpretation. The French Revolution and its consequences, culminating in the Napoleonic Empire, means the complete secularization and therewith the completion, the complete fulfillment of this right; and therefore not so much the person of Napoleon as the word of Napoleon, the Civil Code, is the prime synthesis of biblical and classical thought.

For Nietzsche it is not any code but a human being, a living human being, the superman, the overman, the highest man, who . . . this synthesis . . . <sup>xviii</sup> greater emphasis on the biblical element than on the classical element, as is shown by the remark "Caesar with the soul of Christ" . . . I can also state it as follows. Nietzsche has said his greatest work according to his opinion is his *Zarathustra*. But *Zarathustra* is obviously molded not on philosophy . . . There are very large numbers of biblical [allusions], both Old and New Testaments<sup>13</sup>. *Zarathustra* is of course a parody of the Bible, but at the same time he gives also imitations of the Bible, an imitation not only in the sense in which every parody is an imitation but in a much more positive sense. In other words, there is a kind of, let us say, religiousness in Nietzsche which is not to be found in the philosophers in classical antiquity. The number of [. . .]<sup>xix</sup> in which Nietzsche reflects on mysticism, on mystical experience, and obviously not in the attitude of a . . . psychologist but with the attitude of someone who understands . . . But still Nietzsche primarily is a man who is "religious," atheistic but religious, if this word makes any sense to you, meaning that [a] certain state of the soul, which up to him has always been directed toward God, survives the abandoned belief in God. And that is wholly new to classical philosophers, of course.

**Student:** [Question about the connection of Nietzsche with Fascism.]<sup>xx</sup>

**LS:** I'll try to state it in "psychological" manifest, but which is not wholly unjustified in the case of Nietzsche because he himself applied this way of looking at things very frequently, you know, and as a matter of principle. Now Nietzsche discredited or tried to discredit completely all liberal

<sup>xviii</sup> Strauss probably says "Nietzsche puts" here.

<sup>xix</sup> In the transcript: "[remarks]"

<sup>xx</sup> As noted by the transcriber.

movements, say, everything left of center whether it is moderate or extreme. And he said that was one thing, but at the same time he discredited also all conservative political thought. What remained except an extremism of the right? To which I add another point. Marxism is of course immoralism: the end justifies the means and no holds are barred. You know that. But in Nietzsche that goes much deeper. You see, when you find expressions like “merciless extinction of all degenerates”<sup>xxi</sup> in Nietzsche, you find an equivalent to that in Marxist thought. The merciless extinction of all degenerates in Nietzsche, you find an equivalent to that in Marxist thought: the merciless extinction of the capitalists and the hangers-on, which is in both cases mass murder. But on the other hand, you do not find this in Marxist literature, this glorification of what Nietzsche calls the blond Germanic beast who engages in rape, torture, murder, and regards his life a costume prank of great fun. That goes a bit beyond that.

That is, I believe, a point which one has cause to consider in the case of Rousseau if one wants to understand what the effects of such writings are. In every society I suppose there are things which one cannot say in decent society, or in public in a political speech, without discrediting himself completely. There are certain words, certain phrases which ruin a man. Now when a great writer like Rousseau on the one hand and Nietzsche on the other hand [has the kind of effect I am talking about], the effect consists precisely in this: that they make certain thoughts possible for public expression. After Nietzsche had said these things about the blond beast, [a] man did not in the same way disqualify himself after Nietzsche by suggesting policies in . . . mind than before. Regarding Rousseau, that is very beautifully stated by Tocqueville in his book on the *Ancien Régime*.<sup>xxii</sup> He finds in the documents of the French administration of the 1780s remarks about—well, one bureaucrat writes to another, “Show compassion,” meaning, in other words, he should not only take everything out . . . bridges rebuilt, but he should also show tenderness of heart . . . In other words, a bureaucrat a generation before would have regarded this as an impossible proposition, that he should shed tears and have pity with these poor . . . people, but Rousseau made it possible and in a way necessary.

Now of course Rousseau’s effect was in the direction of sentimentality and Nietzsche’s in the direction of cruelty, without any question. You cannot say hatred, envy, revenge and all these things are salutary, and as salutary as<sup>14</sup> [their opposites], without educating a generation that way—I mean, especially if you are a writer like Nietzsche . . . In Germany now, when talking to people . . . there is one word which expresses the highest degree of contempt, and that is the word “harmless.” Someone has thought, “Oh, yes, that’s harmless” . . . that’s interesting; that shows contempt . . . Don’t forget this word. By the way, the links can be shown—if one wants to read this kind of literature, one can show this very easily . . . to Mussolini. “Living dangerously,”<sup>xxiii</sup> who invented that? Nietzsche. And then of course in Abyssinia they try to live

<sup>xxi</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, “The Birth of Tragedy,” §4, in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 274.

<sup>xxii</sup> *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*, book 3, chap. 5.

<sup>xxiii</sup> “Live dangerously” (*Vivere pericolosamente*) was a motto of Mussolini’s. Mussolini (1883-1945) was leader of the National Fascist Party and Prime Minister of Italy from 1922-1943.

it, and in Germany too. All these men who formed, say, my generation in Germany, where I was brought up, were all pupils of Nietzsche; and most of them of course mitigated Nietzsche by the survival of the classical German tradition, whether it was Kant or Goethe or so. Like Thomas Mann, like Max Weber, they're all already carriers of Nietzsche; and in the next generation, [men] like Spengler<sup>xxiv</sup> became much more immoderate, not to say vicious.

You see, in other words, that Nietzsche's superman was meant to be the finest flower of humanity. It would be idiotic to minimize that. I advise those of you who have any doubt of this to read aphorism 295 of *Beyond Good and Evil* and show me any other statement in the nineteenth century which can be equaled to that in humanity. But it is connected, and necessarily connected, with this cruel aspect of it.

**Student:** [. . .]

**LS:** Homer in a way said, "Live dangerously," but he didn't say cruelty. Well, he showed it. Homer showed the crudity and cruelty of human life, especially of war, without any sentimental fuss. That is not comparable to such a preaching, to say nothing of the work of a poet, and of an epic poet in this case, [where] you always have to make a distinction between what his character says and what he says. If someone would say "Shakespeare said, 'Life is a tale told by an idiot'"—Shakespeare doesn't say that; Macbeth says it in a certain situation in which probably most people would say it.<sup>xxv</sup> So that makes an enormous difference. Nietzsche spoke all the time of the necessity of reticence and silence, but Nietzsche was never silent regarding some truths or non-truths which were bound to be misused by the most bestial of men. In other words, there is a kind of irresponsibility in Nietzsche, an extremism which is completely absent from Homer and others . . .

But I hope you keep this in mind. It was necessary of us to discuss Nietzsche, especially in the last meeting, because of the very pressing task for us in our humble capacities as social scientists of the problem of history. If you have some difficulties in understanding certain of the more extreme and out-of-the-way suggestions of Nietzsche, then don't bother too much about them in the present stage and stick to the problem with which you are really confronted every day: the problem of history, of historicism.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Oswald Spengler (1880-1936), German historian and author of *Decline of the West*, 2 vols. (1918-1922).

<sup>xxv</sup> Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 5.5. Macbeth's wife, who had gone mad, has just died as his own political reign is collapsing.

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<sup>1</sup> Deleted "Otherwise there would be-."

<sup>2</sup> Deleted "the."

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<sup>3</sup> Deleted “very superfluent.”

<sup>4</sup> Deleted “Solution.”

<sup>5</sup> Moved “although;” deleted “it.”

<sup>6</sup> Changed from “behind that, behind.”

<sup>7</sup> Deleted “philosophy of the future.”

<sup>8</sup> Deleted “begins by—he”

<sup>9</sup> Deleted “up to.”

<sup>10</sup> Deleted “Hobbes.”

<sup>11</sup> Deleted “he.”

<sup>12</sup> Deleted “over.”

<sup>13</sup> Moved “allusions.”

<sup>14</sup> Deleted “the opposite.”