**Interview With Laurence Berns**

*Laurence Berns was a student in all the courses Leo Strauss gave at the University of Chicago in the years between 1951 and 1959. After Strauss was appointed as a scholar-in-residence at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland in autumn 1969, Berns, who was on the faculty there, resumed attending his courses and continued until Strauss's death in October 1973. Berns was Strauss's research assistant for one year at the University of Chicago. In Chicago, Berns and Strauss "became friendly" and eventually Berns began dropping by Strauss's house about once every other week or so for long chats, a practice he resumed when Strauss came to St. John's. Both in Chicago and at St* John's *Berns would also on occasion spend time with Strauss when he drove Strauss around.*

*This interview[1] with Berns was taken up as a kind of experiment. He had come to Chicago to give a lecture to the University's Basic Program, a program in which Berns himself had taught in the late 1950s. Berns liked the idea of interviewing Strauss's former students, and agreed to sit as a guinea pig for a test interview. When we met on November 17, 2010, we both thought that we would meet again in Chicago to continue our conversation about Strauss because Berns was scheduled to speak in April at the Leo Strauss Center's conference, "Leo Strauss as Teacher." Regrettably, Berns died March 3, 2011. The interview has been edited for readability.*

*Stephen Gregory*

**Stephen Gregory:** Do you remember what courses you took from [Strauss]?

**Laurence Berns:** I don't remember the dates. I remember courses on Plato's *Republic*. I remember courses on the *Gorgias*. I remember a number of courses on Aristotle's *Politics*, courses on Montesquieu, on Hobbes, on Locke. And some rather interesting courses on Locke's—I'm forgetting the book. Do you remember the name of the book? On something like natural law. I mean, usually people know Locke's *Second Treatise* and they know Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*, but there is also this one on, I think, the laws of nature or something like that; and the course that Strauss gave [was] on that.[2]

But I'm sure I left out all sorts of things. He may have given a course on Leibniz; I'm not sure about that. Of course Machiavelli—quite a few courses on Machiavelli. There was a certain period, when he was writing his Machiavelli book, where he would one quarter give a course on the *Discourses*, the next quarter on *The Prince*, the quarter after that the *Discourses* again, and [then] the *Prince*. He simply followed with one after another for at least a year and a half, maybe two years, until that book on Machiavelli was written: *Thoughts on Machiavelli.*

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[1] Thanks to Carolyn Roundtree and Austin Walker for helping produce the transcript of this interview and to Mrs. Gisela Berns for her assistance in editing the interview and providing supplemental materials. [S. G.]

[2] Strauss's 1958 course on Locke focused in part on the *Essays on the Law of Nature.*

**SG:** You really had quite a lot of experience with Professor Strauss in the classroom and then also at St. John's. What was your first impression of Leo Strauss?

**LB:** Well, my first impression was I had seen that this man Leo Strauss was scheduled to give a lecture on natural right. By that time I had read enough Plato and Aristotle to be really excited by the idea of natural right. And I should also say Max Weber, because this lecture began with a discussion of Max Weber. When I was a student, Max Weber was regarded as the greatest man of social science and everybody had to read different things of Max Weber, which I did. I found him interesting, but I did not find him convincing. And Strauss, in the first three or four sentences of this lecture, summed up all the criticism that I had ever had about Max Weber, and I was right from the outset greatly impressed by that. By the way, it was somewhat of an uphill battle, to argue in classes against Max Weber, but I had been doing that.

Then of course Strauss expanded it to Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Hobbes, and so on. I just found the whole thing absolutely fascinating. It was perfectly clear to me after that that I had to study with this man. I was in the Committee on International Relations, and although they had accepted—for part of the Ph.D. requirements there were a number of sections—they had accepted a section on political theory from me to be a part of my doctoral preparation, I received a little bit of opposition when I told them that I wanted to study natural right with Leo Strauss. And one rather good and intelligent teacher[3] began to give me an argument about why is natural right at all relevant to international relations, so I was forced to drum up an argument about why natural right was important for international relations as a standard for right and wrong in all political thinking.

**SG:** So you changed fields, in effect, in midstream?

**LB:** Well, I never officially changed fields. I got my Ph.D. in the Committee on International Relations. I thought it would be too much of a bother to really officially change fields. So I don't even know if my courses with Strauss are on my record. I suspect they are, because I did have a field in political theory. So some of them—but for many years afterward and certainly for all my years at St. John's, which were long past the Ph.D., I kept studying Strauss's works and kept talking to him whenever I had the chance. And we would see each other regularly, and I guess we sort of began to get used to one and another. We became friendly.

**SG:** Apart from this one professor of international relations who was skeptical about the relevance of natural right to your work, what other reactions did you get from faculty around the University to your work with Professor Strauss?

**LB**: Well, it turned out when I made some kind of a proposal to the Committee on International Relations to include a political theory section, and the one man who gave me a hard time was also the man I could really talk to most because in a way he gave everybody a hard time; and if you gave him a hard time back, he came to respect you. So when I made my proposal he was the only one who voted for it. As a matter of fact, I can tell you how I learned that. I went to his

[3] Professor Hoselitz, an economist.

office about a week after I submitted this proposal. I knew the faculty meeting had just happened earlier that day. I asked, "Did the people take up my proposal?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Well, how did I do?" He said: "They turned you down." I said, "Did anybody vote for me?" "Yeah." "Who?" "Me." That was the sort of man he was. Nice man, although he would frighten away a lot of students.

**SG:** What was Strauss like as a teacher?

**LB:** Strauss was—first of all you could just tell from Strauss's classes that Strauss loved learning. He got very excited about any new idea. He was beautifully articulate and he would discuss the most difficult issues but always in a beautifully simple language. And I know more than once, my first year as a student with him, I would go up to him with formulations and I wanted to be scientific. And they would be somewhat stilted in scientistic jargon and I would tell him my ideas. Then he would reformulate it in his own simple language, and I would always wonder—at first, I would wonder why his formulations [were] so much [more] powerful and clear than mine. And it took me, well, maybe some months of thinking about that before I realized that his language was altogether jargon free. It was the simple language of direct experience, and then if it was theoretical, it was properly theoretical. But even then the theoretical language would always kind of refer you back to the fundamental experiences from which the ideas were derived. And I certainly hoped that I changed the way I expressed myself after that. I certainly tried, and I think to a certain extent I succeeded. But I don't know how much.

**SG:** Beyond affirming your earlier criticism of Weber and extending that, what in terms of your understanding do you think changed from working with Strauss?

**LB:** Well, I had always favored a more or less commonsense approach to these things and that didn't change. But the thing that changed was a recognition that the great thinkers were much deeper and more complicated than I had ever realized that they were or that anyone ever told me they were. I mean, I had taken courses on Aristotle with Richard McKeon,[4] and he always put things in a kind of technical language of his own. And while I think if you asked him, he would say that everything was experientially based, he did not recur to ordinary experiences the way that Strauss did, and he did not formulate things in ordinary terms the way that Strauss did. They were more technical.

So I simply learned that I had to study much harder than I thought I had to, that I wasn't nearly as smart as I hoped I was, that the great thinkers were much smarter than I realized they were, and that I had to work much, much harder in order to get to them. So it meant that I had to take more time and I had to read them much more carefully. That, I think, is one of the things that everyone gets first from Strauss's classes: that you have to read much more carefully than you thought you had to at the beginning. So the biggest personal change was this recognition that you had bitten off more than you could chew and that you had to work a hell of a lot harder in order to even approach adequacy in dealing with these things. And while this doesn't sound altogether pleasant, that would be a mistake because the classes at the same time were very pleasant. He

[4] Richard McKeon: see "People Mentioned in the Interviews" [hereafter "People"].

obviously enjoyed the classes. He joked. He was very good at making sort of high-plane jokes. He sometimes missed low-plane jokes; I know one or two people who used to tell him low-plane jokes and he sometimes missed them. And he began every class by having a student read a paper on, say, a chapter or two of the book we were studying.

I was thinking of one of the things that I left out. I was thinking of Rousseau. I remember he asked me once he was getting ready to do Rousseau's *Discourse*—what is the political discourse?

**SG**: *Discourse on Inequality*.

**LB:** Yeah, the *Discourse On Inequality*, and he asked me whether I would give a report on Rousseau's *Discourse on the Arts and the Sciences* for the first meeting, just as kind of an introduction to the class. And it was just before a vacation. So I spent the whole vacation working on that. And it was by that time I had caught on to how hard I had to work. And I worked very, very hard on it and I was gratified by his saying something nice about my report.

There was another time when I remember giving a report in his class on Machiavelli, where I thought I may have discovered something that I never heard Strauss talk about—some intricate thing in Machiavelli, a rather nasty thing that Machiavelli had worked out. And I worked it into my paper without emphasizing it—just about two sentences of it, just so that Strauss would catch on to what it was. And I remember his comment was: "Mr. Berns, that was a good paper, but not a very good paper. However, it's the first paper that I've heard from which I learned something entirely new." So I was duly chastened but at the same time gratified. He was very subtle about—even in his personal comments—about being fair and helpful to the students. But also he could be critical.

**SG:** If someone would ask me, I would say that Laurence Berns learned something about speaking directly in the language of experience, about some modesty about himself and in relation to the great thinkers, and what a great thinker really is.

**LB:** Yeah, I think that would be a fair comment. And by the way, I think most of the students in his classes—there were a lot of bright people in those classes. And I think that all of us went through rather similar experiences. Allan Bloom[5] and I talked about this many times. We were in a lot of classes together. Hilail Gildin[6] [too]. That was true for all of us: people who had not been thought to be dull or weak-minded people. Most of us had a pretty good opinion of our own intelligence, but we all soon had to revise that when we started to compare ourselves to Strauss and to the great thinkers that he was explicating. It was never just coming to admire Strauss, it was coming to admire and appreciate the great thinkers that we were studying. Just seeing that our ordinarily intelligent efforts were not sufficient.

**SG:** What impact did you think Strauss has had through his teaching and his publications?

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[5] Allan Bloom: see "People."

[6] Hilail Gildin: see "People."

**LB:** Well, I gather, I think he's had an impact. I think it's never the sort of thing that becomes a mass impact. It can't be that. But I think now that he's gone personally that his books are still having a growing impact on reading people. And there simply have been more books written about Strauss than there ever were before, so that people all over the world it seems, at least from Europe—. Well, I'll give you another example: recently a young Chinese man from Singapore came to St. John's and he looked me up and he told me that he had been very much caught up by Leo Strauss's work and was a teacher in Singapore. And he had asked around the college: Well, who is it that knows something about Leo Strauss? And he was referred to me by a number of people and so he came to me, and we now have formed a small study group. And I gave them his basic training: a few chapters from *Natural Right and History*; then we've been reading very slowly and carefully "Progress or Return?"

And I think the first lesson that you get from reading Strauss—reading him carefully—is to learn to read carefully. What he writes is packed. And he had a very powerful gift for condensing his thought and for—and there were times, for instance, when he would have a class—say a class on Hobbes (I see Hobbes' picture there and I'm thinking of Hobbes when I'm talking to you)—but a class on Hobbes, and it would be a very good class. I would try to take as many notes as I could. But sometimes he spoke too quickly to adequately take notes in the old days—this is before his heart attack. After his heart attack, he spoke a little more slowly. The quality of the thought didn't change, but the speed of the delivery did. And I forget what I was going to say.

**SG:** That's ok.

**LB:** How did I get into that?

**SG:** Well, you were talking about the fellow from Singapore and the reading group.

**LB:** Oh. Yeah. Yeah. And so he came, and then we formed a little study group. We would spend two hours reading together. Someone reads the passage out loud, just as we used to do with the books of Hobbes and Locke and Plato and Aristotle. And since I know Strauss better than anybody else in that class, and since I've got about 60 years more experience than anybody in that class thinking about these things, I am the leader of the class. What we sometimes [do] in a two-hour period—we might do a page and a half; we might do two pages, it might be three pages. But wherever there is anything that is not clear, either I raise a question—and frequently the students would raise a question. I always like the students to raise a question first, but if they don't, then I do. And one can read him profitably that way, because there is a tremendous condensation of thought in all the things that he writes.

Oh, I know what I was about to tell you before. Yeah. Sometimes you take one class and then, for instance, I'll go see him in the afternoon in his office and I'd ask him questions about the class. Then we would have another discussion for an hour, maybe an hour and a half. If it would go late, I'd walk him home and we would continue the discussion on the way home. He had a way: whenever a really interesting thought came to him, he would stop walking. No matter where he was going, he would stop walking and we would sort of just be standing still in the street or on a corner or something and he'd finish. And then we'd get to his house and then,

standing in the vestibule to the house, we'd probably talk for another 20 minutes. Then we'd say good night. And he never got tired. And in his classes I never got tired either, I just found him so terribly interesting and exciting.

**SG**: These long conversations in his office and the walk home, was this in Chicago or St. John's?

**LB:** Both. I remember actually more in Chicago because he lived within walking distance of the college. He lived a block just before Ellis, that way; I forget the name of the street. I've been away from Chicago a long time, though I used to know all these streets very well.

There is another story that I think you might find of some interest. It's a funny story. Once he was living on Woodlawn Avenue, and he was moving. So he had regular movers but he wouldn't let the movers touch his books; he said he didn't trust them touching his books. He wanted his students to move his books. So he asked me to organize a bunch of students to move all his books, and that meant we got a few cars, and I think someone had a van. And after we moved the books, he invited all of us to a little bar around the corner. I think it was on 61st Street. That bar had a special room, a rather large room that was almost never used, where people could order food and things like that. And so we all went into that room and had hamburgers and things of that sort, and shakes. If anyone wanted a beer, they could certainly have a beer. And then on the way out—since I had arranged that for him, as that was a bar I would occasionally go to and I knew the owner and I knew the chief bartender—and as we were going out, Strauss, as was usual in those days (that was before the heart attack) was having a very rapid conversation with about four different people. And the conversation kept up as we were going out for him to pay his bill.

And we came to the place where you pay the bill, and Strauss kept talking. He reached in his pocket. He never folded his money, he simply had masses of mixed up bills and just pulled out a large number of green bills, kept talking, and glanced quickly and threw them on this counter. And the owner of the bar looked at me. Strauss never heard him because he was talking. He said, "Jesus, he treats that stuff like it's lettuce." He was absolutely—if he were absorbed in a conversation, he simply—he really treated it like it was lettuce and simply threw this mound of bills, this mound of green bills, and the guy slowly sorted them out. There were some tens and some fives; there might have been a couple of twenties in there, and a lot of singles and five dollar bills. And he sort of took them out and then he said, "Thank you," and then Strauss turned and saw that there were still some bills left. He just put his hand on top of them, bunched them all together and shoved them into his pocket again and said, "Thank you very much," and left. He was always polite, but he paid very little attention to practical affairs. I can say this: he was the most—in ordinary things, he was the most impractical man I've ever met, which is not that he was stupid about it. He simply did not—

Well, I'll give you another story that maybe illustrates this. Once he asked me to walk with him to a dentist that lived somewhat far from where he lived, and it was a very pleasant walk. And he had scheduled it so that we started out a good forty minutes before we had to get there. And again, many times when he'd get interested in a point, he'd simply stop and he would explicate the point and wouldn't move until he was finished. Then we'd walk some more. We'd still keep talking so long as the difficult point was over. And so we finally got to the dentist office. I sat out

in the waiting room. And Strauss was the only one in there with the dentist, and I heard the following conversation.

The dentist would go, "Oh, oh, Mr. Strauss I told you that you should—" "I'm so stupid," said Strauss. "I'm so stupid. I'm so stupid. I'm so stupid." Silence. And then: "Oh, I also told you about that." "I'm so stupid. I'm so stupid." Well, the third time this big "Oh" again, and "I'm so stupid" again. And the dentist finally said, "No, Mr. Strauss, you're not stupid, you just don't care." And I think that was it, about everything that did not pertain to his studies and his thinking—I shouldn't say that he was careless about personal matters; he was not careless about it. I mean, he really treated everybody with respect and was quite friendly with all kinds of students, not just the good students. He would sometimes take time with students who weren't so good, take the time to really try and clarify things for them. He was rather a nice man to be around. There were all sorts of people who were so intimidated by his intelligence that they kind of made him into a very formidable character, but I don't think that he was very formidable with all of the—most of the people that he knew.

And not just with students but with secretaries, for instance. While I was his graduate student, Doreen Herlihy was the secretary of the Political Science Department, and she was very good. He always treated her with the highest respect and, as far as I could tell, they got along beautifully. She was very efficient. She also had some organizing ability.

**SG:** I'm surprised to hear how much time Strauss had to spend with students in his office or taking walks. One is accustomed these days to university professors being too pressed for time to really spend so much time with students.

**LB:** I don't think he felt he was wasting his time when he was conversing because he was always working over things that he enjoyed working over. And frequently—I know what I wanted to say, and maybe this is the clue to the answer to your question. You would take a class with him. Then I'd go to his office in the afternoon and talk about what we had just done in class, and we'd continue talking. And then I'd walk him home, and then we would talk about 20 minutes before his door at his home—mostly him talking; mostly me, occasionally, asking questions and maybe saying something, but rarely. And then the following day, he would give a "quote summary unquote" of what he had said the previous class. It was never exactly the same. It was always deepened and expanded, it was never exactly the same. He had always learned more during the conversation. He had learned more during his study at home at night. It always had a slightly different sense and a deeper sense than we had, than he had left it in class.

He really had a way of going deeper and deeper and deeper. The extent of his reading and knowledge was very great but it was clear that his chief aim was not extending the length and breadth of what he had read, but in deepening what he had read and really concentrating on those authors that were most important and deepening his understanding and the understanding of his students about those authors.

**SG:** Strauss moved to St. John's, I think, in 1970[7]. This would have been many years from when you first met him. Seeing him as a professor at St. John's—

**LB:** Well, he was never on the faculty at St. John's. He was appointed the Scott Buchanan distinguished something or other[8] of something; I forget what. But he was never incorporated into the teaching faculty of St. John's. And every Wednesday afternoon, I think from about 3 or 3:30 on, he would give a two-hour course. And as far as I was concerned, there was no difference in the quality of those courses [from] the courses at Chicago. The only difference was this. When he was at Chicago in a regular political science department, he frequently thought it was incumbent on him to give a kind of explanation of why we're reading old books, why we are going to those old books. And why—and when that became spelled out, it turned out to be why modern books were not adequate, and so frequently you got very deep and interesting critiques of modern philosophy, especially modern political and ethical philosophy, from those apologies. You know why we were reading those books. Well, when he came to St. John's, he said: Since I'm at St. John's, which is known as the great books college, I don't have to give an apology, say, for reading Xenophon or Plato. And in a way I was a little disappointed because I used to find those apologies for why we're reading these old books fascinating, because they usually involved very deep and interesting critiques of modern philosophy and modern political philosophy. But that was a minor disappointment because the classes were pretty much the same thing.

**SG:** Seeing him with your position in life changed: you were no longer a graduate student—you're now on your own in the world—and I assume you had not seen him for several years when he moved to St. John's, did you have a different impression of him than from when you had known him in Chicago?

**LB:** No [laughing]. He was still the same in a funny way, an impractical man. By the way, he knew that he was impractical. Once he did something that, as a hypercritical youngster, I thought really gave the wrong idea to those of his students who found out about it, and I said something to him—you know, not very directly, but you didn't have to be direct with him; he would pick up any kind of intimation. And he said "No, Mr. Berns." He said, "After all, I am a very funny man." You know, he thought it would be very strange if anyone really followed him in his personal practices. He said, "I'm a very funny man."

**SG:** Did Strauss reflect on himself with you in other ways?

**LB:** Well, most of our conversations were about other people. Well, I'll tell you one. I'll put it in the form of a story because I remember those best. Once he was giving a course on Rousseau. And I remember this student—it was a student I knew. He said—he was a foreign student—he said, "Mr. Strauss, what would you say if someone were to say that Rousseau—" and some statement about Rousseau, three or four sentences. And Strauss said, "I would say he was an idiot. The one who said that was an idiot." And this man, who was a foreigner, answered: "Those

[7] Strauss first taught at St. John's in the autumn of 1969.

[8] Strauss's official title was the Scott Buchanan Distinguished Scholar in Residence.

very words were said by your colleague, Professor (and I'm going to say X at this point) Professor X two hours ago in this very building." Actually it was probably this building—no, this is not the old Social Science building.

**SG**: The Social Science building is next door.

**LB:** Well, no; that's the new Social Science building. I forget where it was. It could have been here. Well, I don't know where it was. And as I said, he said, "Those very things were said by your colleague, Professor So and So, in this very building." And Strauss immediately said, "You must have misunderstood my colleague." Years later, actually when we were back at St. John's, I told Strauss the story. He'd forgotten all about it. And when I told him the story, he said: "Oh, I didn't know I could be so prudent." Which I thought was nice. You must have misunderstood my colleague—immediately.

**SG**: He has a reputation—he gained a reputation in the '50s for a bluntness of speech about the discipline of political science and the foundation of social sciences that others might have considered imprudent. Did he—what is your view of those controversies now looking back?

**LB:** I don't think they're important at all. He had a very carefully worked out critique of modern social science. When I was a student during those days the ruling dogma of the social sciences was no value judgments, factual judgments, using the distinction of Max, of Max Weber. And that ruled the roost. And probably before I met Strauss, I was probably less politic in my own critique of those things. And I always thought that he was fairly reasonable about that. I mean, once in a while he would get a kind of flourish, like: they fiddled while Rome burned.[9] You know, things of that sort. But he was a very careful writer and he didn't use things like that. They may have expressed deep passion, which I think he honestly felt, but he was never overcome by passion. His wife would sometimes be vexed by his logicality—and she was a very intelligent woman, too, it's not that she was stupid, but just vexed by his persistent logicality. He was a very clear-headed man.

**SG**: One has the impression that in the 1950s, his critiques of social science, as well worked out as they were, caused a rather harsh response from social scientists and political scientists.

**LB:** Yeah, I think that's perfectly understandable because for those who felt they were following a tradition, if you violate the canons of the tradition there must be something wrong with you—unless they themselves have the courage themselves to question the foundations and the traditions. And he was certainly questioning the foundations of a lot of traditional studies. I don't

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[9] The chapter "An Epilogue" by Leo Strauss in *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics,* ed. Herbert J. Storing (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), concludes: "Only a great fool would call the new political science diabolic: it has no attributes peculiar to fallen angels. It is not even Machiavellian, for Machiavelli's teaching was graceful, subtle, and colorful. Nor is it Neronian. Nevertheless, one may say of it that it fiddles while Rome burns. It is excused by two facts: it does not know that it fiddles, and it does not know that Rome burns."

think that he was ever intemperate in his criticisms. They were sometimes strong, but of course if you take even the foundations of theoretical positions as holy writ, you are bound to be offended. And I think that sometimes you had people who had worked very hard to fit themselves into this pattern. And here was a man who was telling them that they in effect were wasting their time, so they were bound to be somewhat bothered by it.

But I don't think he was really concerned about it. And besides, everyone who knew him personally, including his colleagues and I'm sure quite a few who never read a word of his books, but they knew him from faculty meetings, in discussion with students, the sort of things that faculty people have to do. And he evidently got along with almost everybody. If I think of all the people who were around at that time, he was—I remember even David Riesman[10], whose views were quite different from Strauss's. Riesman had an office not too far from Strauss. I remember Riesman walking down the hall once and Riesman sort of burst out of his office and he saw Strauss and he said: "Hello, Leo!" And Strauss went: "Hello, Dave!" And he turned to me and said: "That's Dave." He could more or less be one of the boys. But he didn't take any funny business about serious matters, the serious theoretical matters. But in all other things, he was kind of relaxed and easy going except, as I've said—and I think I could say it a dozen times, and very few Americans could appreciate how impractical he was about all of the things that just about almost any American just takes for granted. Can I give you a story to illustrate that? Do you still have time?

**SG:** Sure. If you have time, I have time.

**LB:** Okay. Once he invited a bunch of us to a restaurant, Le Mix, which I think was on 51st Street, and he asked me to drive him. Well, I didn't have a car at the time but I borrowed a car from a friend of mine who also was a sometime student of Strauss. And I drove him, and I think Allan Bloom was in the car and two other people in the back with Allan. Strauss was in the front and I was driving. And it was a very old car and it was the middle of winter, January or February. And we'd all had this nice meal; we had a great time at the meal. We got a big table. We're talking, Strauss doing most of it. And we got into the car and the car wouldn't start—never turned over. Strauss was in the middle of this conversation. After about two or three minutes, he suddenly noticed the car. The car wasn't moving; it was doing it over and over again. And I just sort of made a motion to him: I'm sorry but it'll be all right eventually (I was hoping). So finally he turned to me and said: "Gentlemen, this is serious. I think we should be silent." And so silence prevailed, and all you heard was the turning of the motor but never really cutting in. And then finally Strauss began to hunch—hunched forward tensely. Well, we were all a little tense by that time because he had helped make us more tense. And so finally the motor turned over. Well, all of us, with one exception, relaxed and stopped being tense. Strauss was still sitting there with that same tensed expression. And only when we started to move, he relaxed. For him, he had no sense of how the automobile worked. If it moved—only until it moved, not when it turned over—did he relax like the rest of us. It was a rather interesting event.

**SG:** Are you getting tired?

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[10] David Riesman: see "People."

**LB:** I can go on, if you want to go on.

**SG**: Well, let's just talk for a little while. When Strauss came to teach at the University of Chicago, do you think he had any particular ambitions for his teaching?

**LB:** That's hard to say. I think that being at a prominent university like Chicago, where there obviously are a lot of intelligent people and a lot of intelligent students—that, I think that he expected; he hoped and expected that he would get good students. And I think that he may have had long-range hopes for turning around political science a little bit, having an influence on political science so that it would become more philosophical and less simply bowing to conventional notions of science that very few people ever examined carefully—in other words, a kind of scientistic tradition. I avoid the word scientific because I don't think it deserves it.

So I think he thought that perhaps he would have some kind of influence in turning political science around, and if not that—if not that, at least having some kind of influence on how political and social things are studied. But I think he was keenly aware that the sort of influence that a good teacher has is always the influence on an individual: to get someone to think more carefully, and more deeply, and more adequately. I think that was always his aim. He used to say, he said it a couple of times: before he enters any classroom, he always imagines that there's one student in that class with a mind and soul far superior to his own, and he tries to couch the class to what would be adequate to that student. So he always tried his best, and his best was really very good.

**SG:** I've heard at least one other student of his suggest that in his early years in Chicago, he really poured himself into his classes in a way that in the last half dozen years or so he didn't. But it seems his attitude—according to this former student, that he thought his attitude toward his classes had changed. Do you see anything like that?

**LB:** I did not see anything like that. He did have a heart attack, and after the heart attack, he didn't have the same kind of physical strength that he had before. But in our personal conversations, I don't think it ever changed, except as I was getting older, especially in his later years, I realized he expected me to do a little more talking than I did when I was a young student. And so I would oblige. That was no problem.

There was another man who was very much like Strauss, and that was Strauss' very good friend Jacob Klein[11]. And I noticed that with him too in his later years, but of course I was getting older too. Klein lived a little longer than Strauss. In the early years, Klein was the only scholar that Strauss really spoke of with full respect and who he regarded as an authority on Plato. That was similar with Klein, too. When I first knew Klein, I would start with a question, and he would start talking and usually it was very similar to what would happen with Strauss. We would talk for an hour, a couple of hours, with him doing most of the talking. But then as I got older and he got older, I could tell that he also expected me to do a little more talking.

[11] Jacob Klein: see "People."

**SG:** In his last years at St. John's, did Strauss to your knowledge reflect at all on his own impact or any legacy he might have left?

**LB:** Well, I think it's clear that he thought about it, and it is also clear that he had always had hopes for at least bringing a change in political philosophy and maybe even contributing to some kind of a change in philosophy itself. But he really did not—at least to me, and we had all sorts of occasions for talking—he seemed to be always, always more concerned with what he was learning at the time, no matter how old he was. So that, for instance, when he was giving courses on Xenophon, we'd talk a little bit more about Xenophon. When he was giving courses on Nietzsche, we would talk a little bit more about Nietzsche. Giving courses on Plato or Aristotle, talk more about them. It was clear that he thought the most important thing for real thinkers would be—that the most important, not the only important thing, would be for them to understand that there is more depth in the classics, Plato and Aristotle, than most people had ever heard of or learned about.

But at the same time, for instance, he gave some courses on Kant. If he gave a course on Kant, you had to try to think like Kant in those classes. If he gave a course on Hobbes, you had to try to think like Hobbes. Aristotle, Plato, the same thing, you had to try to think the way they did. And so he was always caught up in trying to articulate those things, which is not to say that—I think it's clear from his writing as well as from his conversations that he regarded the ancients as paradigms, as paramount paradigms for thinking people. But he never pushed it. It was the sort of thing that you just let the evidence speak for itself. He was a very skillful speaker but he was not—and if the art of rhetoric is somehow the art of communicating most adequately, he was a superb communicator. And he was not averse to noble or intelligent rhetoric, but he never propagandized. That was totally alien to his being. Some people complained about that without realizing that they were—once his wife complained to me about him being *so rational*.

**SG:** They complained about him not being sufficiently propagandistic?

**LB:** Now that, of course—if you put it that way, that sounds absurd. But he did not really insist on anything. He tried to make everything that he said evident from its inherent evidence: that it has to make sense; it has to be clear; and people have to be able to relate it to their own experience. And I think some people seem to complain because he did not sort of push what he thought to be right, what he thought to be wrong, in the most clear terms.

I think that's a mistake, because in his writings he sometimes will present the argument of someone that he is really criticizing. And very intelligent people read that same paragraph and say: This is Strauss's view; that that was Strauss's view on that. But it really was a view he was criticizing, because he presented the arguments and they did not realize that after two or three pages later he gave an argument that really showed what was wrong with *that* argument. But while he was making that argument, he presented it in the argument's best possible terms. And sometimes it was difficult to see what he was presenting as what he was [saying as] correct and what he was criticizing as incorrect.

**SG:** I'm familiar with that misreading of Strauss. It's very common.

**LB:** Yeah. Yeah, it is.

**SG:** I feel that in one sense this afternoon I've been asking the wrong kind of question about Strauss, asking how he regarded himself, when he seemed not to spend a lot of time regarding himself. But let me ask one more question like that. Did he ever reflect when he was with you on what in his life led him to become the kind of funny man that he did become—the genesis of Strauss?

**LB:** I don't think so. I really don't think so. I mean, well, there's some—I heard him say, not many times but especially in the earlier years: there are three men in the world. I think that he wrote this in personal letters, probably to Kojève[12]: himself, Kojève and Klein. Sometimes it sounded as if they were the only real human beings in the world. But it was never put in such a crude way as I just said it. If it were so, it was by implication. Kojève he disagreed with, but obviously respected his intelligence very highly and engaged in long arguments with him, which I think is, for anyone who knows Strauss—that this is a tribute.

And from early on, as I said, Klein was about the only person that he would sometimes defer to as an authority on Plato. Allan Bloom used to tell [a] story [about] Kojève. Now Kojève was a very different man from Strauss. Allan Bloom told the story that while he was in Paris for a year or so, Kojève was giving some lectures, and a group of his students felt that they would like to take him out to a really fancy dinner. And they took him to a very fancy restaurant. And nobody said anything about paying, and as they were on their way out, Kojève observed how much tip they were giving and simply said to the one who was sort of leading, "Do you think that's enough?"

But then I want to tell you another story about Kojève. Evidently he[13] once said (and this involves Strauss and Klein): "Mr. Kojève, how do you compare yourself with Mr. Strauss and Mr. Klein?" And I think he said: "'Ah, Strauss, *il est le philosophe*.' He's the philosopher." "And Klein?" *"'Le sage*.' He is the sage" "And yourself, Mr. Kojève, and yourself?" "'*Moi? Moi? Je suis Dieu*.' I'm God." Strauss would never say things like that.

**SG:** You've been very generous this afternoon.

**LB:** Well, It's been a pleasure. I always like talking about Strauss.

**SG:** I hope we can do this again.

**LB:** Sure, Sure. Fine.

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[12] Alexandre Kojève: see "People."

[13] That is, Allan Bloom.