Interview with Victor Gourevitch
April 25, 2011

Stephen Gregory: This is Stephen Gregory sitting with Victor Gourevitch, the William Griffin Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Wesleyan University. We're here at the Leo Strauss Center at the University of Chicago. Victor, welcome.

Victor Gourevitch: Thank you very much. Pleasure to be here.

SG: You must have been one of Leo Strauss's first students here at the University of Chicago.

VG: I think I was. Yes.

SG: He came here in 1949.

VG: That's right, and so did I.

SG: Yes, and what was your first experience with Professor Strauss?

VG: As I think I mentioned during the conference[1], I went to see him more or less within my first week on campus to ask him for a tutorial on Spinoza.

SG: So that would have been in autumn of 1949?

VG: Yes, that's what I remember. It's just barely possible that it might have been in winter. I think it was in the autumn of '49.

SG: Right, and he would have barely unpacked his bags at that time.

VC: That's exactly right.

SG: And what was his response?

VG: Yes, I'll do it. He was perfectly willing and enthusiastic. And it was material he of course knew and had thought about very carefully. We did the *Ethics* together, not the political writings. And I had done the *Ethics* in a course in the history of philosophy as an undergraduate in Wisconsin—I can't remember with whom—so I felt that it was not totally virgin territory. But Strauss pressed, almost right away, on what it really meant to equate God and nature and what the one essence would be. And I felt, how should I say, uncomfortable; but that's not entirely true. The thing is that, I guess, the teachers I had had, had gone at great figures in philosophy

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[1] "Leo Strauss as Teacher," held at the University of Chicago, April 22-23, 2011.

from the outside, as it were, and said: Here is this way of thinking about things. Whereas Strauss really invited you almost immediately to think about it from the inside. And for me, that was *very* new and in a way unfamiliar. It was difficult.

SG: Yes.

VG: Think along with Spinoza, keeping in mind all the alternatives, you know [laughs]. And also I think Strauss thought of me as, in a way, more sophisticated and more comfortable also in languages. Especially he expected me I think to read German fluently. I had stopped German at the age of 10 and I was as it were making myself relearn it. So I remember his giving me sources to consult, not in order to understand the text as much as sources he thought were really first-rate information: a biography of Spinoza by [Stanislaus] Dunin-Borkowski, in two volumes.[2] And I just simply didn't feel that I could devote the energy at the time to doing them justice. It was hard enough to do the Spinoza.

We moved along. I guess there are two things that stand out in my memory of that Spinoza [tutorial]. One of them was the insistence on the primacy of individual things, that Spinoza was not interested so much in the generic as in the individual. And the other is that his Spinoza was really a materialist. That was quite striking to me, and eye opening. But all this is truly very long ago, as you know.

SG: Right, right. When he conducted these meetings with you, how did he do that?

VG: I guess we met once a week, probably. And I don't remember for how long, but probably for an hour or two. And he assigned sections to me so that we moved through the text. And I don't *really* recall being asked to write papers—at least, I have no record of papers. So I would come in and report on my reading and he would sort of poke and probe and then would expound parts of it, revealing to me things unsuspected. [Laughs]

SG: Did you have the sense as he poked and probed that he was responding to your understanding—Victor Gourevitch's understanding?

VG: Oh, yes. I mean, I do think that he overestimated my understanding, but yes, he was very, always sensitive, I think, to the other person.

SG: Ralph Lerner, in his 1973 memorial remarks, suggests that when Strauss arrived here in 1949, he was not yet—he was not yet the master teacher that people think of him as.

VG: Yes.

SG: Is that what you observed?

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[2] Stanislaus Dunin-Borkowski, *Spinoza*, 4 vols. (Münster: Aschendorff, 1933-1936). Dunin-Borkowski also wrote *Der Junge Spinoza: Leben und Werdegang im Lichte der Weltphilosophie* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1910).

VG: No. I'm sure that that's true, but the stories that were told during the conference—let's say of his giving a test lecture and being told, or people judging, that he was not suited for teaching but for research.

SG: Right. Some unnamed history professor commenting: This man is a researcher and not a teacher.

VG: Something like that. No, there was always—this was a tutorial, but there was always something, if I may put it that way, personal. I don't mean that it was in fact personal, sort of this person that person, but rather we made contact with regard to the text or the issues. And he adjusted—I must say, gratefully—to the fact that I was at the level I was, since I couldn't adjust to the level at which he was.

SG: Why do you think that he—you say that he overestimated your background. Do you think this had something to do with him being a European émigré and his experience with American students, or—

VG: No, no. I don't think that. I was a little older than my classmates, and I had German and French and some Latin, and so he thought, well, probably he can handle this material. And he wasn't fully aware of how wobbly it was. Let me tell you an anecdote at that time. I had been told when I came that Chicago was very generous, especially the Committee, with tutorials. And I saw listed in this extraordinary catalog a course in the Oriental Institute on Gnosticism, and I thought: That sounds fabulous; I must do that. But the prerequisites were Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Aramaic and Coptic. And so I went to see the professor, I think his name was Marcus, and he was perched high on a stool in his study. And I said: May I audit, because, you know Greek and Latin, all right, but Aramaic and Coptic, Hebrew: No. He said: It's all right. Do you know French and German? I said yes. He said most of the relevant texts are translated. All right, thank you very much. Now when does the class meet? You tell me. No one else had had the nerve.

SG: [Laughs] But you had the nerve to approach Strauss when he first came?

VG: Yes.

SG: How did you know of him?

VG: I'd been told about him by Taubes.[3]

SG: The name Taubes doesn't mean anything to me.

VG: He was a very gifted, young, recently-minted doctor in philosophy. He was of a family that came from Vienna, but he had gotten his degree under someone called König in Switzerland—in

[3] Jacob Taubes (1923-1987) taught Jewish studies in the United States until the mid-1960s, when he became professor of Jewish studies and hermeneutics at Free University of Berlin. He is author of *Occidental Eschatology* (Stanford University Press, 2009) and *Political Theology of Paul* (Stanford University Press, 2004).

Zurich, I think. He was touring America, looking for a job. He had written a book called *Western Eschatology*, *Abendländische Eschatologie*. And it was a very bold history of, in a way, moral philosophy and theology, at least from Augustine through Marx. I think that he knew Strauss's Spinoza book. He had gone to look up Strauss and had attended Strauss's lectures on Maimonides at the Jewish Theological Seminary very soon after his arrival.

SG: "Progress and Return," I think.

VG: No, no, that came much later. No, it was on Maimonides. At the time, other student[s] there were [Arthur] Hayman and [Emil] Fackenheim. It's almost never mentioned in the biographies that he did this, and it wasn't for very long. He went on from there to some visiting appointments and then to the New School. And Taubes, Taubes was really very affected by this. He immediately recognized the brilliance and in a way the originality, the depth, the originality of the teaching. I think he probably first alerted me also to the existence of *Philosophy and Law*, that first volume.

It was he who invited me, Taubes—at that time I was, whatever I was, 21 or so—to a group, study group he was leading where Nat Glazer and Irv and Bea Kristol[4] were; a private study group. So that that was the introduction, their introduction to Strauss as well.

SG: And that would have been in 19—?

VG: That would have been in 19—probably 47.

SG: I see. And so you had known Strauss before he came to the University of Chicago?

VG: No, I didn't know him personally. I knew *of* him.

SG: You knew of him. Okay. Right, okay. This is a very interesting chronology.

VG: It's rarely mentioned.

SG: Okay.

VG: I think Bill Kristol[5] didn't quite know it.

SG: You would have taken, in addition to the tutorial you had with Strauss on Spinoza, you would have taken regular classes.

VG: Yes, I did. I took the—I seem to remember that the first class I took was a course on the *Republic*. And that's the course with which he made his mark first. We had really never witnessed this kind of detail and deriving so much out of small detail. You know: "Yesterday I

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[4] Irving Kristol and his wife, Gertrude Himmelfarb, known as "Bea."

[5] William Kristol, political commentator and founder and editor of *The Weekly Standard*. Son of Irving Kristol.

went down . . . ," and so on and so on. What is Piraeus? The sort of harbor pits, and so on. And then the definition of benefiting friends and harming enemies. Later we learned to read poems that way but—you know, with the new criticism—this kind of serious respect for the total integrity and unity of the text. So that was that. And I took another tutorial with him the second term, spring term, I guess, on Hegel's *Phenomenology*. And I didn't know at the time that he had just reread the *Phenomenology* because he had gotten the Kojève lectures and was replying to that. So that was really very rich.

SG: Did you find—well, your experience of him as a teacher in the classroom must've been in some ways very different from him as someone conducting a tutorial.

VG: Yes. But it seemed a total[ly] natural setting to him. By the way, it's not totally different. Let's just plunge into the text. The *Republic* became the richest text for at least that generation of his students. And this way of approaching the issue of justice was really totally novel for us. I hadn't gone to the College[6] and so I had not—how should say it—I had not been educated on the great books. So I would have approached or would have heard about these things as a systematic discussion of justice rather than this context. And when you say lectures would have been different from tutorials: yes, but since for him the texts that mattered were dialogues, he was continuing a dialogue also in a lecture.

SG: Right.

VG: I mean, that I think it affected his teaching? It's hard to say. Did it affect his teaching or did his teaching, so to speak, get influenced by his attitude toward class? But I suspect it affected his teaching.

SG: When you read the *Phenomenology* with him, was he discussing Kojève[7] at the same time?

VG: Not with me. But, did we? We may have. I had read Kojève before, so—but I don't know, I don't think it came up directly. And the criticism of Kojève that is contained in one of the letters to Kojève—I don't believe it came through.

SG: I see. Okay.

VG: Let me add one more thing. Quite early—I don't know, was it that the first year or a little later—quite early, his insistence on nature—human nature, essentially: that was really quite striking and distinctive. If you ask me now what he thought nature was I wouldn't be able to answer, but at the time it sounded convincing.

SG: [Laughs] So in several ways you've mentioned, Strauss appears as someone for whom in your experience there was no precedent. I don't want to put words in your mouth.

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[6] At the University of Chicago.

[7] Alexandre Kojève: see "People Mentioned in the Interviews" [hereafter "People"].

VG: No, you're perfectly right, but I'd had good teachers before and lively teachers. I don't know whether these names mean anything to you but, let's see, somebody like [Eliseo] Vivas[8] at Wisconsin who—and others.

SG: I was thinking of Strauss's use of the word nature, his teaching about nature, the detail you mentioned—the way in which he unfolded the drama of the *Republic* that—

VG: Sure. I mean, as so many people have said, he did in a unique way approach these texts as if they were teaching the truth. And that if we interrogate them thoughtfully, they will yield something like the truth.

SG: From the inside, as you said.

VG: Yes, yes. That's very different, let's say, from McKeon[9] saying: This is how Aristotle divides knowledge, and you can do that in a tidy outline. I guess the best form in which the traditional academic approach went would be what you find in something like—I don't want to sound as if I were putting it down, but Thomism, a very thorough and thoughtful outline.

SG: That comes as a structure almost from outside the—

VG: Absolutely.

SG: Right, right.

VG: That's exactly right.

SG: What did Strauss think of his students here at Chicago?

VG: Later he thought *very* highly of them, *very* highly of them. He certainly thought very highly of his young students from the first, and the ones that come to mind are Seth from the very first, I think.

SG: Benardete.[10]

VG: Benardete and Allan Bloom,[11] I think from the very first. I'm trying to remember who some of the others were at the very first. For instance, people like Kennington[12] came later, but he had known Kennington at the New School or vice versa. And it was a generation—he was, after all, in political science; I think it was not a fluke—but they were veterans, they had a maturity he

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[8] Eliseo Vivas (1901-1993), John Evans Professor of Moral and Intellectual Philosophy at Northwestern University, 1951-1969, author of books on philosophy (primarily aesthetics and values) and literary criticism.
[9] Richard McKeon: see "People."
[10] Seth Benardete: see "People."
[11] Allan Bloom: see "People."
[12] Richard Kennington: see "People."

was unprepared for and a seriousness he was unprepared for, and he thought he was immensely lucky to have such a group of diverse, mature—humanly mature—students who had done some studying, then had been on the battlefield or in one way or another involved in war, and came back now on the GI Bill or something like that at a level at which one commonly does not get students—and threw themselves into with an enthusiasm that he found that admirable. He often said that he couldn't have imagined better students than those he had at Chicago. And that would be different from the students who spoke of knowing him in Claremont.[13]

SG: How's that?

VG: Well they were younger, just that simple.

SG: I see, I see. Do you think Strauss learned something from the American students he had that he would not have—this is a very complicated counterfactual question—but do you think he learned something from his experience with his American students he had here that he might not have learned if he had had the opportunity to remain in Europe and had European students exclusively? Is there, was there something significant about his being a European coming to teach in America and being exposed to the United States?

VG: I would imagine. I do not presume to know, but I would imagine that the possibility of easy relations with students he found very congenial. And he took to that quite easily. I mean, he would invite students, I think I said before that I believe that he was closer to his students and took more time with them than with his colleagues, with whom he was not very close.

I came from the Committee.[14] After my first year on the Committee, I got the fellowship to Paris for a year (when someone had interrupted his fellowship). And I was taking course with Jean Wahl,[15] who had taught here, as a matter of fact, during the war. And Wahl would lecture and then he would ask for questions from the students and they would sit silent. And he would say: I mean, you must have some responses to what has been going on. And they would be reverentially silent. And he would say: My God, I miss American students. And this is surely something which Strauss would have missed and which he encountered not just in Chicago but probably at the New School also. That I think he found genuinely congenial and stimulating. Did he learn anything? Yeah, they are nice guys.

SG: [Laughs] That's something.

VG: But this other stuff—I don't want to get into these political discussions—but, I mean, virtue and capitalism don't go hand in hand.

SG: [Laughs] What do you think Strauss was—how do you think he understood his role as a teacher here? What was he attempting to do?

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[13] That is, spoke at the conference "Leo Strauss as Teacher."

[14] The Committee on Social Thought.

[15] Jean Wahl (1888-1974), French philosopher and professor at the Sorbonne from 1936 to 1967. He headed the *Revue of Métaphysique et de Morale*.

VG: [Pause] You're pushing me to the incline plane about forming a school. I don't think he *was* trying to form a school.

SG: There're other answers.

VG: Am I, am I—you'll edit this one if you want to: I think he found it comfortable before long to be taken over by what I would call viziers. And it became a sultanate with greater and lesser access, and greater and fewer favors and so on, and jealousies and in-fights. And I thought it was terrible that he allowed that to happen. And I believe he *allowed* it to happen, not that he fostered it, but it was convenient to be driven across the Midway, and to have somebody take dictation, and so on. You know the trappings better than I. I had nothing to do with that, but it was a way of currying favor with him to be his assistant. I mean, people would bear that as a badge of honor, more or less. I don't want to talk [inaudible]. That's clear. But I don't believe that that was a school.

The other question: Did he direct, in some sense at least, students' interests in one way or the other for dissertations and so? Probably to some extent, the way it was described by Ralph Lerner[16] yesterday or the day before:[17] you know Hebrew; you're interested in constitutional law; you're a patriot, do something like the Founding. It became engrossing to a great many people. Did he come with a view to teaching or encouraging the study of the founding? I'd be surprised. Maybe the least little bit, only in the sense of showing that the progressive liberalism of the '30s and '40s, let's say, which these students had been brought up in, is not how it all arose and that it's good to look to the roots. That's how I see it, but I may be wrong and others may see it differently.

SG: It is striking that with the American Founding and the study of Jewish and Arabic texts, you had students of his who've done really remarkable work on texts and subjects he never taught.

VG: Yes, that's right.

SG: He never taught the Founding. He never taught Maimonides. He never taught Al-Farabi.

VG: That's right, that's exactly right. But he encouraged such things to some extent. Yes. I mean, I will say this, I've said this before and I'll take this occasion to repeat it. He was an exemplar in many ways to many students, but preeminently to Jewish students in the sense that he was the only person who bore being Jewish and Jewish learning with great dignity and absolutely no apology. I was—I didn't say this in my prepared notes, but, I mean, since we are doing this and you can edit it—I remember the Rabbi at the Hillel House, [Maurice] Pekarsky, who was a most remarkable man, once saying: Let's get the Jewish faculty together and involved in the activities of the Hillel House, and gathering some people together. By this time I'd gotten a job in the College and so was included as faculty, otherwise I wouldn't have known about this. There was, I guess, Singer in sociology and somebody from philosophy, and we were in one of

[16] Ralph Lerner: see "People."
[17] At the conference "Leo Strauss as Teacher."

the back rooms of the Hillel House and Strauss was there, and they were *acutely* uncomfortable. They were acutely uncomfortable, a little bit as if they had been seen entering a whore house—I mean: I don't want to be seen even coming into the Hillel House. And I mean, what is there to be done here? You will hold seders or something like that, but I mean, that's it, isn't it? And I mean "Jewish" for them meant small business and Lower East side and mean, mean lives. And Strauss said: Hallelujah, it's also Jewish. And then they just snuck out. But the fact that he did that, and that it was natural to him to do that, was very powerful.

SG: As you know, he gave a remarkable series of lectures at Hillel House.

VG: Well, sure. Yes.

SG: And that's an important part of his teaching here at the University, although it was—

VG: Turned out to be. That's right. And that is both he and Pekarsky, it's to the credit of both of them together. Yes.

SG: Regarding Strauss, how Strauss thought of his role as a teacher, leaving aside the question of school, I mean, there are other ways—

VG: You mean a Straussian school. Yes, yes. All right.

SG: You know, Strauss took with great seriousness the idea of a philosopher: who a philosopher is, what a philosopher is. Did he imagine, did he imagine that he might—well, this is becoming a complicated question. Was he teaching possible philosophers, was he? Did he understand himself to be providing service for philosophy, keeping it alive, but perhaps not by, you know, not by necessarily finding that very rare individual whom he considered to be a philosopher. How did he understand himself with regard to philosophy and his teaching? What was he trying to do?

VG: Yes, surely keeping it alive, surely. I've often wondered about just the question you're asking, and I'm not sure that I can speak to it really very well. He in fact, if I'm not mistaken, at one point in a letter that Meier[18] had published—a late-ish letter, I think—said: I think of myself, I'd like to think of myself as a philosopher but I see that Jonas[19] calls himself a philosopher and so I'm not so sure. That was the private Strauss.

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[18] Heinrich Meier: see "People." The letter was to Gershom Scholem, dated September 30, 1973: "In former times I would have said I am more of a philosopher than you are . . . but since I have heard that your friend . . . Jonas has embarked on a self-advertisement campaign of his being a philosopher, I prefer being a shoemaker or a pants cutter." Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 3, hrsg. Heinrich Meier (Stuttgart: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 2001/2008), 771.

[19] Hans Jonas (d. 1993), Alvin Johnson Professor of Philosophy at the New School for Social Research, 1955-1976.

And Pines speaks of him in a very touching memorial as a philosopher.[20] I do think that—was he teaching philosophy? He was teaching the respect for and the utter importance of philosophers, of philosophy, and that one ought not to give in to the temptation of believing that so to speak a homogenized culture, or social science, or so eliminates that. I think that in the beginning of *Persecution and the Art of Writing* he says something like he's very critical of—I can't even remember his name—sociology of knowledge, [Karl Mannheim][21], and he says that they never even consider the possibility of philosophy. And that I think is true; and that I think to him was a terrible danger.

And did he think it was particularly that America or Chicago was a good soil to cultivate a philosophy? It's the soil he had. It was okay. It was okay. Would elsewhere have been better? I'm not at all sure he ever considered that seriously, except in the sense that, for instance, that it was more important—when he was invited to take the chair in Jerusalem, he didn't because he didn't want to move. Not because he loved Chicago, but because it would disturb the continuity of his work. That mattered more than anything at a certain stage, what's the best way to do it, to do his work. I think that, you know, in an odd sense at a certain age that totally naturally takes over.

SG: I understand.

VG: I think. I hope that speaks to your question.

SG: Very much so. I've heard, I heard one of Strauss's later students claim that in his first decade at Chicago that he really threw himself into his teaching, that the classes would often go four hours long.

VG: Absolutely.

SG: He would answer every question.

VG: Absolutely, absolutely. That's true.

SG: And then at some point he pulled back. That might have been because of the heart attacks he had.

VG: Yes.

SG: Or it might have been a change in his understanding about what he was trying to do, or a sense he had devote his—save his energies, and devote himself to his own work more than his teaching.

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[20] "Shlomo Pines, "On Leo Strauss," *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 5/6 (1988): 169-71. Translated from the Hebrew by Aryeh Leo Motzkin.

[21] Karl Mannheim (1893-1947), sociologist; his influential publications include *Structures of Thinking* (Routledge Kegan Paul, 1980) and *Ideology and Utopia* (Routledge, 1936).

VG: I think it's the latter, and perhaps the health. But it's true, there was simply—yes, he was notorious: his classes would go over an hour or two. His Hillel lectures. He would invite a group of us over to his apartment and we would sit on the floor and he would continue talking. There's no question about that, yes. And that he probably cut back—probably, yes: his health, time, Mrs. Strauss.

SG: I won't ask about the last. [Laughs]

VG: No, solicitously: What would a solicitous wife under the circumstances urge?

SG: Sure. Why do you think he conducted his classes this way? The accounts I've heard is that after—once he opened the discussion to questions, he would literally take every question until there were no questions to answer—discuss, you know, as you say, for an hour over-time. Why do you think he conducted his class this way? What—

VG: That's his respect of students and of their interests. I do believe that's certainly what it conveyed. He very seldom, almost *never* put anyone down. He was sometimes very severe; he was a tough grader. But he didn't say: That's silly or stupid. Respect: I mean, in that sense almost Kantian respect of the other person.

SG: And so—

VG: And the students felt it.

SG: Yes. So the students who came to his class: that Professor Strauss felt a deep respect for their choosing to come to his class and study this thing he was teaching.

VG: You always put it in terms of his taking, how should I say, pleasure in their taking pleasure in his teaching. That's not how it came across. *He* was not at stake.

SG: Yeah, I was thinking that they were—respect for their, respect for their choosing not to hear him teach but for their choosing to study this book.

VG: Their interest in the subject. Okay. Their interest in the subject. The difference, once again, with McKeon could not be greater, just to take McKeon as an example. I think by the way that the question that came up this past weekend several times about why does he do political philosophy and not philosophy proper, which I remember feeling very acutely and I know others also. I mean, this man who knows the whole history of philosophy and there he is teaching, occasionally teaching maybe something like Hegel's *Philosophy of History*. But what about the *Encyclopedia*? What about the *Logic*? What about the *Critique of Pure Reason*? I mean, why not? I think there was the genuine feeling that he was not entitled to trespass on the territory of the philosophy department. And his relations with McKeon were tense. Let me say a word about that. You probably—I mean, most people know about this, but anyway it's worth going on the record with it. McKeon was also a medievalist and a well-trained medievalist.

SG: Right:

VG: He was encyclopedic in learning in a certain way, but he was a Latinist. Greek and Latin. He didn't have Hebrew or Arabic or anything like that; that was outside his ken. That somebody who would be able to do both and is sitting there across the quadrangle was acutely uncomfortable. McKeon had headed the Committee on the History of Ideas.

SG: Right:

VG: I don't think he ever involved Strauss. Strauss minded that. At a certain level, Strauss probably expected that he would be welcomed in a "quote neo-Aristotelian setting." He soon recognized that university politics takes precedence. But I'm sure that was part of his reason for finding an offer from Chicago tempting. McKeon's highest aim, as it were, was a philosophical ordering of the systems, which would in some sense be neutral, but a system of alternative systems. That's just like Strauss at a certain very general level. The enterprise is not that alien. And so that intellectual—let us say suspicions, if not clashes, and warinesses would be much more manifest than if it were about—I don't know, the reading of a particular passage in Thomas Aquinas or so.

SG: Because so much is at stake. You have an entire system. And so—

VG: Your whole view of philosophy and how you put it together. And there they were, hardly in agreement. I mean McKeon's system was, for instance, such that he put Dewey and Aristotle into the same bag.

SG: But you know on Strauss's side, one recognizes that he sought out the highest, what he considered to be the highest interlocutors. You mentioned his study of the *Phenomenology* in response to Kojève. He and Kojève had very different views of philosophy and Strauss did not avoid him, he sought him out.

VG: Well, there are two things to be said that I will say—there are many more than two things to be said. I think Strauss and Kojève found each other just congenial. And one of the things that they found congenial is that both of them were superlatively intelligent and both of them were ruthlessly radical. And that aroused sympathy. I mean just simply, I mean—okay, why piddle around. The second thing is, I think, which Pippin[22] once said—that he thinks that Strauss chose a public debate with Kojève because it's a somewhat easier surrogate for Heidegger. And I believe that is also true. I think that is very shrewd of Pippin. It's as if that was a trial run, you know?

SG: Right.

VG: He—it was not important that you agree; it was important that you are matched equally, that you are equals, or then it's really, it's really tough. In that sense, it's clear that he held Heidegger in higher—philosophically, in higher regard than anyone else of his contemporaries.

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[22] Robert Pippin, philosopher and Distinguished Service Professor in the Committee on Social Thought, the Department of Philosophy and the College, The University of Chicago.

SG: I'm going to take a step back from those heights to the University of Chicago, and you had mentioned his relations with McKeon, and how there was this unfortunate University politics that perhaps, and—you know, perhaps bad feelings, or—

VG: I'm not sure. But sure, turf wars.

SG: Yeah. When one thinks of Strauss's friends, one thinks mainly of Germans and maybe old friends of his.

VG: Yes, absolutely right.

SG: Yeah. Did he have—who here at Chicago would you have considered to be his friends or his close colleagues?

VG: You know, I daren't say. I was after all a young man—

SG: We can edit this question out.

VG: You know there were limits to how much I participated in his life. I was not as close to him as any number of others. His—I believe that his closest friends were indeed Blanckenhagen,[23] David Grene,[24] and Ed Banfield.[25] There must have been others, I wouldn't have known. I remember dinner once with him and Morganthau,[26] but it's just that we happened to have been invited to the same dinner. I don't think he was particularly close to Morganthau. And what he had in common with both Blanckenhagen and David Grene is both Europe and this very profound classical culture. Finally, I think that that wore thin.

VG: That wore thin. Blanckenhagen found it difficult, if not impossible, to swallow Strauss's sympathy for, let us say conservatism, and especially things like censorship. And he was not moralistic or so, but—I mean, Strauss wasn't—but he certainly found censorship something worth considering. And Blanckenhagen found it totally unacceptable. And then Blanckenhagen moved to New York and they really hardly saw each other. But, I think that created tensions. And David Grene. Did you know him?

SG: Yes.

VG: You probably didn't know Blanckenhagen.

SG: I didn't know Blanckenhagen. I studied with David Grene for several years.

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[23] Peter von Blanckenhagen: see "People."
[24] David Grene: see "People."
[25] Edward Banfield: see "People."
[26] Hans Morgenthau: see "People."

VG: Oh, there you are. So David felt what counts is the free spirit and allowing humanity to express itself lyrically, poetically. And he called Strauss "a ruthless rationalist," and he was perfectly right [laughs] from his point of view. And that was eventually just incompatible.

SG: Inside the Political Science Department—by the time that Strauss left Chicago it seemed the department was eager to show him the door.

VG: That may be; that was much after my time.

SG: This is what has been reported to me; obviously I wasn't here then.

VG: I wasn't here, either. There was a certain rivalry, probably, within the department even in my time. You must remember that I'm talking really about a period, let's say, that goes at most let's say through '55. I mean a little longer, but essentially '55. At that time the Committee had come into existence quite recently. It was a very strange combination of people. Strauss was after all not on the Committee and made himself available, in part probably—to go back to the earlier question—to do philosophy in a context in which it was not at issue. The relationships between the Committee and philosophy department were *awful* because of David and other reasons. But you know the story of how David was fired from the philosophy department and Hutchins[27] had made a note in his file saying: If anything happens, let me know, and so Hutchins placed him in the Committee, but—

SG: The classics department, right?

VG: Maybe the classics department. Maybe classics. My impression was he also had an appointment in philosophy. But maybe I'm wrong.

SG: In the end his only appointment was the Committee.

VG: Yeah, I know. Yeah. Why do I mention this? Allan [Bloom]. Well, there was a very powerful secretary in the Political Science Department; I don't know about the faculty. I mean, I know about some of them—and God, you make me think about things that I hadn't thought about for such a long time! And it was a Mrs. Herlihy. You know the name?

SG: I've heard the name.

VG: She was a sergeant major. And Allan saw, quite rightly, that the prospects of getting a job or a professorial affiliation with a degree from the Committee were very slim. So he cultivated the political science people and eventually went to one of the political science conventions, and one of his friends managed to get him signed up there. And suddenly he came back from the political science convention as a political scientist, and Mrs. Herlihy was *furious* that this interloper was trespassing on this sacred ground.

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[27] Robert Maynard Hutchins: see "People."

And this is not a direct answer to your question whether the department as such was glad to see him go, but they saw that it was an empire within an empire; whether he wanted to create it or not, it grew that way. And they probably thought: Enough, already. That I can see.

SG: But Strauss had several students from the Committee: you, Seth Benardete, Allan Bloom. You see any differences between his Committee students and his political science students?

VG: Well, the Committee students—the ones that I can think of—did go essentially into philosophy in one way or another, which is something we had no hope of achieving, really, at the time. Rosen[28] was the first. Rosen got a job for Kennington; he got me a job.

VG: The only other one was [Muhsin] Mahdi[29]. Mahdi is now praised and stroked as a very great scholar and so on, and it is said to his credit that he dedicated his major book on Farabi to Strauss, as I pointed out the other evening. He dedicated it to L.S.; he didn't mention the name. And the book, so far as I can tell, is Strauss in English. Many students simply lived off Strauss's teaching and his—the transcripts. You might once put somebody on that track just to see how much of this is what in other circles would be called plagiarism. It's really quite astonishing: simply paraphrases of the lecture notes. And that's one of the reasons why I have very mixed feelings about putting these lectures in public circulation. I mean, it's, it's worse than term papers on the Internet. It's, so to speak, faculty getting their term papers on the Internet. Anyway, that's a different story.

Was there any difference with the other students on the Committee? Kennington came to the Committee. He had been a student of Strauss's at the New School and he was a fanatical Straussian, if I may put it that way. He had a difficult life: he was a tortured soul and a very fine man. Who else? Butterworth[30]; I think he was on the Committee. Who else was on the Committee as a student of Strauss? Was Masters[31] on the Committee? I don't know, he may have been.

SG: I don't think so. I don't think he was on the Committee.

VG: I didn't think so either, but I don't know. It was a comparatively small group. And one of the differences is [that] for the most part we did not take courses in political science. Not on principle—we would take Strauss courses or so; we regarded those as not courses in political science. I mean that's really—but courses on constitutional law or, I don't know, the governmental structure and so on. We did not do that kind of thing.

SG: Right, right.

VG: And we thought that was worth the price we had to pay for it.

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[28] Stanley Rosen: see "People."
[29] Muhsin Mahdi: see "People."
[30] Charles Butterworth: see "People."
[31] Roger Masters: see "People."

SG: As you mentioned, Strauss arrived at Chicago right around the time the Committee was starting.

VG: That's right.

SG: And it's an interesting question: Why didn't John Nef[32] ask Leo Strauss to join? Excuse me—

VG: He didn't like Jews—I mean, just for starters. I understand that he wanted, preferred Bertrand de Jouvenal. The one person who was in philosophy on the Committee was Yves Simon, who was a disciple of Maritain; I mean a real disciple: if there's an expression "Straussian," there's an expression "Maritainiste." He was a Maritainiste much more than a Thomist, even. And a very nice man, a very nice man and a thoughtful man. A deadly teacher as far as I was concerned. Some others thought he was really very—even an interesting teacher. He was certainly genial, and that's what Nef wanted.

Strauss was not well known at the time. Why would Nef have invited him? Nef invited celebrities. Strauss became a celebrity here. He had been known by a group of students and young professionals in Germany and so on, and he was known as a medievalist in France, but that really didn't cut much ice. I don't think for instance that Massignon, who thought well of him, would have intervened with Nef. That would have made a difference to Nef. Or Gilson, with whom Strauss, I think, was on fairly good terms. But these things didn't quite make it. I don't know how Otto Simpson[33] got appointed to the Committee, but he was *von* Simpson, and his very good friend and classmate Blanckenhagen was *von* Blanckenhagen.

SG: Right. Was Strauss on your dissertation committee?

VG: No. He—I guess he read my dissertation and he recommended a reader. But officially I did my dissertation with Simson. And [Joachim] Wach in a way was involved at the time.

SG: Did Strauss give you comments on your dissertation?

VG: No, not that I know of. You know, my dissertation came about in the following way. I had studied with Redfield, who was a really great gentleman.

SG: Robert Redfield.[34]

VG: Yes, yes. *The* Redfield. And then summer came and I was short of funds, and Redfield said: I'll give you a research project. Write me during the summer an essay about Dilthey, who was

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[32] John U. Nef (d. 1988), economic historian, one of the founders in 1941 of the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago.
[33] Otto von Simson (d. 1993), scholar of medieval and renaissance architectural and art history; professor at the University of Chicago, 1945-1957.
[34] Robert Redfield (d. 1958), anthropologist, professor at the University of Chicago from 1927-1958.

mentioned in Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture*, and so on; I'd been curious about it. So I settled down and started reading and studying Dilthey, and I found it absorbing. And a couple of years later, I handed in my report to Redfield and it was a dissertation.

SG: He must have been pleased.

VG: I think he was relieved for me. [Laughs] Yes, and that I hadn't simply forgotten it.

SG: In 1968 you published your essay in the *Review of Metaphysics*: "Philosophy and Politics."[35] That is, I believe, the first treatment of Strauss as a thinker?

VG: Yes.

SG: And the first treatment of Strauss as a thinker by one of his former students.

VG: Yes.

SG: Why did you write that?

VG: Why?

SG: Why, yeah.

VG: Dick Bernstein, who was the editor of the *Review of Metaphysics* said: Do a review of *On Tyranny*.

SG: Okay. And?

VG: And I did. And I worked on it very hard for a long time. And I think I was the first person to have read Strauss's publications, in contrast to my classmates and friends who had heard Strauss in class but hadn't really read the books and so thought of him in terms of what had come through in class and didn't know what had come through in the writing. And to me that was a dramatic contrast. To put it most simply: *infinitely* more cautious in the writing; more radical in some ways, but also much more cautious. And a much wider horizon.

And then when I finished, finally, the final draft, I just didn't know. Is it faithful to Strauss or is it in a way too detached at this point? And I felt really very awkward towards my old teacher. And I sent him a copy, a draft, before it was printed, just—not to approve of it so much as to say: If there are unfairnesses or inaccuracies, please alert me to them. And he very generously said that it was the best thing he'd seen and the best thing there was. He approved of it completely. The only thing he said is: Occasionally you attribute to me views that are other people's views.

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[35] The review was published in two parts: "Philosophy and Politics, I," *The Review of Metaphysics* 22 (1968): 58-84; "Philosophy and Politics II," *The Review of Metaphysics* 22 (1969): 281-328.

But clearly, that was not very serious. And he knew that he was at fault in something like that. [Laughs] But that— yes.

SG: That essay I think had some—my impression is that essay had something of a liberating effect on other students of Strauss in terms of how they began thinking about Strauss. Do you think that's fair?

VG: Oh, I think that's fair, yes. I mean Tarcov,[36] for instance, has said very nice things about it. The people who were in Claremont—the article came out, as it happens, just when Strauss arrived at Claremont or just about, so the people who were there at that time really were hit by it. And yes, there hadn't been anything like that. I think it continues to be surprisingly interesting. Many different readings of Strauss have come in but I would stand behind this. The main thing, by the way, is this, really: the zeteticism, a stress on zeteticism that many people before simply never had perceived.

SG: . . . that's surprising to hear.

VG: Now. That's right.

SG: It's hard to imagine the other way.

VG: I mean, he made it seem as though there were nature. And by the way, he continued to do that, nature, and that was unquestionable, and teleological, and all kinds of other things, and the reservations that he builds especially into all of his written work had not come through in class. That was no accident. [Laughs]

SG: That's an interesting remark. Why do you think that was no accident? What do you think the difference there is, between his presentation in class and what he was doing as a teacher, and his presentation as a writer?

VG: He was undermining much-received pieties—I mean, what nowadays would be called "PC-ness."

SG: And you say this was in his activity as a teacher or his activity as a writer?

VG: I think I was saying as a teacher. I mean, you know, as a writer there was just much greater caution.

SG: Right.

VG: That's what I mean. And justification of caution. I don't mean that he was not cautious. For instance, one of the consequences of the things that you are going to be doing now, I suspect, is that a number of old timers will re-read these transcripts or notes and will say: Heh! It was there but we didn't hear it. You know? That I consider perfectly possible.

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[36] Nathan Tarcov: see "People."

SG: But Strauss presented a teleological nature in order to, perhaps to disabuse his students of a too easy embrace of historicism that he was—

VG: Oh, yes. Sure. Sure, sure.

SG: It was almost a dramatic choice.

VG: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I mean, it's not that easily dismissed. These are, these are sort of sophomoric arguments. They may be right but they're sophomoric.

SG: Looking back now, and perhaps this weekend may have sparked some reflection or reminiscence, but looking back now on Leo Strauss, how do you see him?

VG: [Laughs] Well, a great teacher. Surely a great mind. We don't know each other. I surely learned much if not most of what I know about philosophy or the permanent problems from Strauss. I learned a great deal from him about being a teacher. I learned nothing about—from him—about how political choices or wise political choices are made. And when I see the political uses to which his name has been put by presumably distinguished students, and the political personalities that they embrace, I suspect that I just never understood what he was doing. And that I find disturbing.

SG: Which—if I can press you on this—which students, which of his distinguished students do you see having used Strauss in a political way?

VG: Oh, you are really pressing. [Laughs]

SG: You don't have to answer.

VG: Well, the way that [Abram] Shulsky spoke yesterday is one way. I think Harvey Mansfield. And, you know, fortunately I don't know about any of the others, really.

SG: All right. Well, I hope, sometime in the next year or two, I'll have a chance to interview Harvey Mansfield about his memories of Strauss as a teacher, although Harvey did not study with him.

VG: Exactly.

SG: But Harvey learned a great deal from him.

VG: Yes, yes.

SG: Professor Mansfield, I should say.

VG: Oh, heavens.

SG: But anyhow, if I get the chance to do so, I'll ask him about the appropriate and inappropriate uses of Strauss.

VG: All right, all right, that's fair.

SG: We've covered a lot of ground. Are there questions or topics you'd like to touch on that we that you think you'd like to speak to?

VG: No. I think you've really covered a great deal of ground. You know, maybe I should say this: I didn't read this in my comments, but the prologue to Goethe's *Faust* talks about reminiscences from long ago washing to the surface of the mind yet again, and do you try this time to hang on to them. And that kept coming back to my mind. All of this made me think about things over half a century ago, you know. It made me think differently. I think—I mean, that's just silly—I get annoyed at times and distressed with things said by people who claim they are students and/or disciples of Strauss, and I made some of that clear the other day at dinner. But Strauss did his thing, that's fine. He's not responsible for that. I mean, he's responsible to some extent, okay. But he did his thing in his time. I was *astounded* that nobody said, for instance, that this is a man who started all over again as a fully-formed adult, became in a way master of a new idiom. His English is not perfect, but in fact he's quite a remarkable writer in English.

SG: He's an extraordinary writer in English.

VG: I mean, and he's the man who wrote to Klein or so: I can't imagine ever thinking or writing in a different language than German. German remained in his blood and that whole life naturally remained in his blood. And in a way, people who now say: Well, he changed his mind in the middle of his life or later—let's say, in his 50s and 60s, he saw the merits of America. Yeah, he saw them, but in his perspective.

SG: And as a place that was perhaps not inhospitable to philosophy.

VG: Oh, of course. Absolutely, absolutely. Yes, absolutely.

SG: Right. America is a land of second chances and reinvention, and I think it would be a mistake to say that Strauss reinvented himself; but it is remarkable, as you point out, that he acquired a whole new idiom and acquired a new home.

VG: Absolutely, absolutely. Though I don't remember, and I may be wrong about that, I don't remember his saying he was ever grateful that he was forced to learn it. He said it was probably a fortunate destiny that washed him here. But that's somewhat different; whereas I remember—I think it was Carnap[37] and some of the others who said they are genuinely grateful to have been forced to learn and think English, that that cleaned up their thinking. You can see how it might.

SG: All right. Well, thank you very much.

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[37] Rudolf Carnap (d. 1970), German philosopher who emigrated to the United States in the 1930s.

VG: Thank you very much. I hope that I spoke to the issues that you would have wished me to.

SG: You, you—I think I and many others will be grateful for your conversation.

VG: You're very kind.