David Lowenthal

January 2013

Stephen Gregory: I'm sitting in the study of Professor Emeritus David Lowenthal. This is Monday, January 21, 2013. David, thank you for having me here. How did you first come to know of Leo Strauss?

David Lowenthal: By complete accident. I was waiting to get into the Yale Graduate History Department and biding time, and I heard that the New School was an interesting place. So I registered there as a [graduate] student, not intending to stay; and by complete accident took a course with a man named Leo Strauss, whom I knew nothing about. And so I took my first course with him.

SG: And do you remember what class that was?

DL: I think it was a lecture course devoted to three small Platonic dialogues, including the *Apology* and *Euthyphro*. And it was run pretty much as a lecture course and had, by my memory, quite a few students in it. And that was the beginning of my study with Leo Strauss.

SG: And how did he teach that course?

DL: By reading through the dialogues, you know, line by line, and he had the English texts and Greek texts and he would correct the [English] text occasionally. And then having read a few lines, he would try to show what they meant and open up the argument; and it really became an argument, so he was reading Plato in the spirit of Plato or the Socratic spirit. And that was it. It was most impressive because, again, to me it was an entirely refreshing experience as a student. I had had some very fine teachers, particularly history teachers, at Brooklyn College, but this was more than teaching in the ordinary sense of conveying information and analyzing it. It was sort of thinking along with Plato, and reasoning, and I remember just being overwhelmed by the sense that for the first time I'm being introduced to reasoning, thinking out alternatives. And from that point on—well, naturally, I was going to take as much with Strauss as I could.

SG: This is a remarkable thing. You were waiting for admission to a graduate program; you'd had great teachers, but you'd never seen reasoning in the classroom before.

DL: That really is true. It sounds like a stupid thing to say because after all, what does education consist of except reasoning? But for the most part, normal education is exposition. It's giving you facts and thinking about them, the causes of things. But in this case, taking a human problem we all sense directly is an important human problem, and sort of laying open the possibilities bit by bit and step-by-step, and thinking about them using illustrations from ordinary life. Strauss was wonderful at that.

Occasionally, he used illustrations from movies. He liked to stay up late at night watching Westerns—I'm told this, naturally, by hearsay. And every so often he'd break into an expression that you'd find from the movies, but to illustrate something that was in the text. So Plato was coming alive. I mean, it was like sitting with Socrates. That would be probably the best way of putting it. So that just as an educational experience, in a way you said to yourself: Gee, your education is just beginning; and here you are, in a way an advanced graduate student, but your education just beginning.

SG: 19—what year, approximately, do you think this course was taken, your first course with him?

DL: That would have been in 1945, '46, somewhere in there. I had been with the Air Force on the Mariana Islands, on Tinian. I'd actually seen on the other end of the airfield, the Enola Gay[1] parked without our knowing it was the Enola Gay or knowing what it was there for. But the Japanese War was over, and our unit had transferred to the Philippines after that. And it was shortly after that I returned home, and shortly after that that I wanted to get into graduate school. And so probably 1946 would come closer to it; and I would guess that the records of the New School might still indicate what it was he was teaching at the time. But again, I didn't know him at all.

SG: Those are available, yeah. You know, in the transcripts of his courses at Chicago—I mean, the first one is from 1954, then '56. He began teaching in '49, but you can see in the transcript that he had a relatively standard approach: that typically he would have a general introduction about the significance of the work and its context, and then he would begin by having short passages read aloud and he would comment on each passage. And he would invite questions as he was going through the text. And it sounds like in this lecture—so-called lecture course in 1945 on the short Platonic dialogues, he was doing something very similar already.

DL: Well, I was too much of a beginner to fully appreciate what his approach was. But I know after that I took seminars with him, smaller groups and closer up, and I remember very well how he ran the seminars, which was pretty much the way you mentioned. Quite often a student would report on the reading for the day—you know, Spinoza or whatever it was. So the student would report, Strauss would make some comments on that report, and then he would turn to—he had scribbled out on some notes on some paper, pad—he'd have his own little notes which he would then refer to just to make sure they were covering things. And he'd go through things bit by bit, bringing up things not so much from the report but from the text. In a way, he would sort of start over again. The student would lay the thing out. He would comment and then he would start over again on the text and try to bring out its meaning, quoting from it whenever that was important.

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[1] The Enola Gay was the American airplane from which the first atomic bomb was dropped, on the Japanese city Hiroshima, on August 6, 1945.

And of course questions could be asked, and there was a lot of exchange. I remember asking some very foolish questions myself.

SG: How did he respond to your foolish questions?

DL: He was always very kind, and sometimes humorous. You might remember from Aristotle, the best age for the marriage of the man is rather advanced. You know, it's not in the twenties; it's actually, I think, at the end of his thirties that is the best age. So I once asked what he was expected to do before then, and I got an answer which I'm afraid I can't—which I remember, but I cannot tell you. [Laughs] And it wasn't a lewd answer but it was an answer which was rather humorous and, I thought at the time, rather shocking. But he'd sometimes, you know, you'd ask him a funny question—he'd never make fun of you. He never, never would make fun of the person asking. There was—even sometimes he would be faced with a militant relativist, a militant sort of modernist. And he would always keep at him, you know, the man would make some sort of rejoinder and Strauss would simply sort of keep going with him, and never in an overbearing way, which always very impressive to me. It was like his writings, where Strauss would make a better case for his opposition than the opposition could make for himself. You know, that was very common because he wasn't simply eager to win an argument over this person. He wanted to win *the* argument, the facing up to a certain opinion.

So once or twice over many courses, Strauss would come into class and say that he wanted to correct something from the previous time, that he had pushed a certain idea too hard and on reflection, wanted to go over it with us again. A correction of himself. Very rare, to my memory, and of course all the more impressive that he would have given consideration to it. We would never think that he had pushed something too hard, but in his own opinion he had pressed a point beyond what it really deserved.

And of course he would often begin, as you mentioned, by speaking of the two giant opinions that he had to cope with: historicism, relativism and, in a way, positivism. But—and of course to us, they were kind of living things. I mean, I came out of college as a relativist. You know, I remember citing the example of the Pacific Islanders, and they had different mores and so on. And Strauss, his response was so—afterwards, it was so obvious, but at time it was sort of shocking. He said: What conclusion do you draw from the fact that these mores are different? Isn't it possible that some are better than others, that some are more appropriate to human beings than others? Well, you know, how about cannibalism, would you want to consider that as a real possibility? No.

So pretty soon, the people who are capable of learning found that they could not defend their own ideas. But everybody who entered his course began as a historicist and a relativist, because that was the reigning opinion. And finding somebody who didn't accept that opinion and was willing to show you the weakness in that opinion, that was of course at first shocking. But on reflection, you couldn't do anything, you know, he kind of had you. So that—and I think that

experience: the refutation of historicism, certainly in its crude form, everybody felt when they heard that. You know, they asked themselves: Why have I believed this for so long, when there's this really sound answer to it?

But at any rate, he would often begin his courses—and I think you had mentioned that—with a laying out of the problems of the age, really, and then go into the thing itself.

SG: And in the years, in the years that you took courses with him—that would be from approximately '45 to '49?

DL: To the point when he left.

SG: To Chicago—

DL: Yes, I accompanied his dog to the train.

SG: He had a dog?

DL: Schwulch.

SG: Is that right.

DL: Yes.

SG: In Chicago, I don't think—

DL: I think it means smoky or foggy, or—yeah, he had a dog. Schwulch.

SG: I see.

DL: Sure. By that point I'd gotten to know him better, naturally. But it was—my experience with him was only, what, only two or three years before he left. But I took all the courses I could.

SG: And in those courses in those days, would students who attended the courses regularly challenge him along these same lines that—you know, that students would speak up and say: Well, how can you say the thing, you know, that values are not relativistic or—?

DL: Oh, yes. The courses would consist of two sets of people: the newcomers and the old timers. And the old timers by that point had been convinced and would sort of look on this combat as something they had been through themselves. But the newcomers would always do that, often not in a martial way, you know, a bellicose way, but simply expressing their view. You know: Professor, how could you possibly believe that there's an absolute standard? And he would patiently try to convince them at least to start looking at something else. And usually—I mean, I

can only think of only one case where a student really took a long time. This happened to a friend of mine at Chicago, I'm told. Have you heard of Leo Weinstein?[2]

SG: No. I didn't know Leo Weinstein.

DL: I think Leo may have passed away a few years ago. He taught at Smith College. Leo was a crackerjack—first, I should say that I knew him from way back; he lived on Coney Island, which was right near Bensonhurst where I lived in Brooklyn—and he was a crackerjack biologist and a full believer in the full panoply of modern science. And I'm told that when he got to Chicago and Strauss had these doubts about modern science, Leo really regarded him as an enemy, you know, as somebody to be fought—and Jaffa,[3] who was sort of along with Strauss at the time and somebody equally to be fought. But finally, a couple of years maybe, or at least a full year, he [Weinstein] finally saw, you know, there was something to this. And at the end he became a full-fledged follower. He was a very strange character, maybe a more natural character. He didn't write. If you were going to look for articles and things, books by him, you're not going to find them. But he was one of the most thoughtful people you could meet, and very up in all of the important things to read, the texts, and wonderful to talk to, but there was something that stilled his writing hand. And as usually is the case, I think it was—and it's just a guess—but a sense of perfection; that he felt he didn't have it. If he could not fully understand something, then he wasn't going to write about it.

This reminds me of something in my relations with Strauss: I once wrote an essay on Nietzsche's work *The Use And Abuse of History*. And I sent it to Strauss and this is what he wrote back. He said: This is the best thing I've ever read on this subject, but don't publish it—meaning there were still things about it that I didn't understand. And I never did publish it. And I think that was Leo's native tendency.

So the native resistance: you asked whether this kept happening. In a few cases, the resistance lasted. But I don't know of a single case where a person sat in several Strauss classes and ended up not being convinced, you know, that he was right. I say, I personally don't know such a case.

SG: How did Strauss view his students at the New School? What were they like and how did he relate to them?

DL: Well, the New School could have older students and younger students. It was sort of a peculiar place. People would come back to graduate—now, we're talking about the graduate school and not the adult education center—they'd come back to graduate school after experience doing something else, and so they could be older people or people who were not immediately out of undergraduate college. I do remember that he liked and thought very highly of both Joe

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[2] Leo Weinstein: see "People Mentioned in the Interviews" [hereafter "People"].
[3] Harry V. Jaffa: see "People."

Cropsey[4] and Harry Jaffa. But you know, I was relatively young at the time myself and didn't know—I certainly didn't know much about *their* class, which was the class before me. But I didn't even know much about my own class because of this—incidentally, Dick Kennington[5] was a fellow student of mine.

SG: Oh, really?

DL: Yeah, we would sit in certain classes together and exchange views. But there was a sense in which the New School in a way didn't really exist. It existed only in its classes, but the whole group of people who were studying at a certain time, they didn't live together, there wasn't any common kind of locus that kept them steadily together where they can identify themselves and say, you know: I was a member of this class, the class of '47 or '48 or whatever. So we were in a way a bunch of individuals, and then you'd know a few of the individuals but not much else. I never did know how many people were in my own class—group, year. I still don't know. But I did know a few people I was friendly with, and Dick Kennington was one of them. And we had a course with Riezler[6] together and we had courses with Strauss together. So my impression was Strauss treated everybody just in a friendly, not intimate way. Nobody called him Strauss. Mr. Strauss. Nobody would *ever* think of calling him Leo. No one could conceive of his asking people to call, you know, like an American professor: "Call me Joe." No, he wouldn't do that. But friendly, and then on occasion—maybe with a few, just as a friendship might develop—he would come closer to certain students.

I know at Chicago, the letter they wrote about Faulkner and Bruehl[7] showed that they were particularly kids, students who he liked very, very much and was closer to. So I'm sure that would happen at the New School. I think it was harder to happen because it didn't have the coherence of the University of Chicago itself. So we hardly knew where people lived. I think I was at the Strauss apartment but only because I got to know him a little bit better. But you had no idea; people could sort of be living all over the city.

I did want to tell you about an institution that the New School had, where I saw Strauss also in action. And that was something called the General Seminar. It was a seminar only in a peculiar sense; it was a monthly meeting of the graduate faculty. The whole graduate faculty was invited and a talk would be given, either by a member of the faculty or by some outsider, some prominent person. And while not every member of the graduate faculty would attend these things, quite a few did. And outsiders were not only invited to talk, to give a talk, but the faculties of other institutions were invited. So you would often find somebody from NYU, from Columbia, sitting in the audience and sometimes participating. So there was one spectacular time when there was some speaker—I don't remember exactly who it was—and Strauss did not

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[4] Joseph Cropsey: see "People."

[5] Richard Kennington: see "People."

[6] Kurt Riezler: see "People."

[7] Robert Faulkner and Christopher Bruell: see "People."

normally say at lot at these sessions. But there would be a question and answer after the talk, and in this particular talk, Strauss got up and he was really very angry and very indignant. And he was correcting the speaker, trying to tell the speaker that he seems to have forgotten what the experience of Nazi—of the existence of Nazi Germany meant. And his words were really to that effect, something like: I didn't think it would be necessary for me to stand up and remind you of what the Nazis meant for Germany. He really poured himself into it. I don't recall the other occasions when he spoke because those would be sort of the normal give-and-take of kind of academic life. But his points—he didn't ever get up to just talk. If he thought a point was important, then he'd make it.

And as far as I can tell, his relations with the rest of the faculty were good but it's very hard to know that from the outside. So I know that Eric Hula[8] was a very good friend, and Kurt Riezler was a very good friend of his—you know, the sort of cluster of the Germans. But apart from that, it was hard to say. Strauss was a scholar, and you know, I mean a philosopher who sort of turned into a scholar, and spent most of his time really at home thinking and writing.

I do remember a couple of things. I don't know if you would have any interest in these, but he once told me how he falls asleep. And I was interested because I knew it would never happen to me. He would fall asleep, he said, thinking of Plato's Cave and the Divided Line and trying to understand it fully, starting from his sense that he really didn't understand it and trying to work out the details, sort of. And then he would fall asleep doing it. [Laughs]

It was another occasion; again, this was because—just because it's so unusual, I'll mention it. We were going up the stairs at the New School. He didn't like to take the elevators because he said it was good for his heart to take the stairs. And he confessed to loving ice cream very much and he said he had to counteract the effect of the ice cream by going up the stairs physically. So we were about to mount some stairs and I asked him, because it was a matter that was on my mind, whether he believed in the theory of evolution, and of course expecting him to say that of course he did. Well, he said the opposite. He said: Of course not. And I remember being so shocked by that that I didn't follow up. I didn't say, well, you know: Why not? I was really staggered. He was the only person I ever met, you know, a person of advanced education, advanced knowledge, who said he didn't believe in the theory of evolution. I couldn't believe it, you know. I wanted to get his opinion but I didn't expect it. I expected he would say: Yes, of course I do. So now, in later years—you know, he never discussed things like that in my experience in class, things which in a way were sort of prominent examples of modern science that you might think that he would discuss in class. At least I don't remember; there might have been a remark or two about the difficulty of deriving the higher from the lower, and the human being from the ape, but not a general assessment. And I think that of course he wanted to make his points of a more general nature and so he avoided getting into the details. But I did learn that

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[8] Eric Hula (1900-1987), Austrian-born political theorist, professor at the New School from 1938.

he followed a lot of this. He had his favorite biologist. It was a German whose name will come to me as soon as you leave. But it was a German, a very well-known German, who had written a lot about animals[9] and had studied animals, and written about animals, and he was a favorite of his.

You could see that he followed certain kinds of issues without introducing them into, you know, in any prominent way into his discussions in class. But—and I think one can see that, I think he never regarded himself as sufficiently advanced in mathematics and in the things you do need to study modern science seriously. I think that he always relied on Jacob Klein[10] but didn't think that he himself could do that.

SG: How did you happen to become familiar with him over those four years? I mean, that you—

DL: Well, I should mention another occasion when he told me that he and Mrs. Strauss were going to be vacationing out on Cape Cod. And I forget the year; might have been '47, summer of '47. But Harvey Mansfield[11] and I went out to visit him and were treated very well. He referred to—you know his term of familiarity for Mrs. Strauss was "Mama."

SG: No, I didn't know that.

DL: Well, and of course he was always very, very nice to her. He never addressed her in any imperious way, you know, as a superior. My impression was that he was either an equal or an inferior when it came to his relation with Mrs. Strauss. And she was very nice and very quiet. Harvey and I, I think we took some pictures at that time and Harvey might actually have some of those. But his name for Harvey—he had a pet name for Harvey. It was Rabbit. In those days—he was a recipient of the Jefferson Award—but in those days, Harvey was *very* reticent and very quiet, and hence the name. But you know, when we got together, we were in a very friendly way and I remember their serving a little lunch. And on those occasions, Strauss could talk about anything. In other words, things that didn't enter into the classroom, like—he'd rarely talked about current events; he'd rarely talked about politics, including American politics. Very rarely. But at home in an informal atmosphere—anything. You could talk about other scholars, you know, he'd make fun of this and that. And almost anything could come up, and did. Jokes about colleagues and so on.

So I don't remember much beyond that. I couldn't even describe it to you—but sometimes I think the student has to sort of show a particular interest or kind of wanting to help out, or is available at a certain point; and bit by bit, you got to know him a little better, sort of personally. But apart from that, I'm not quite sure.

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[9] Adolf Portmann (d. 1982). Several of his works have been translated into English, e.g., *Animals as Social Beings* (NY: Viking Press, 1961).
[10] Jacob Klein: see "People."
[11] Harvey Mansfield: see "People."

And with respect to other scholars, he could sometimes be very biting. You know, I don't know if it was the German way or what, but he thought they, [some of them], were real fools. Again, this was said in a personal conversation. He didn't treat students that way, you know. No, I don't ever remember—there was nothing nasty in him when it came to his students, whereas I wouldn't say the same when it came to every human being. I mean, he had very high standards for personal conduct. If he thought that you were in violation of those standards, he would not have much patience with you. But apart from that, his students were his students, like his children. And some would be more brilliant than others. He was, in my experience—from my observations, I should say—and certainly, I should tell you, I didn't always do as well as I thought I should do in a course with Strauss. I did very well in most courses, but I think I did get either a B or a B+ in one course and I was kind of chagrined and wondered how I could possibly be so stupid. But nevertheless, he just had some brilliant students. Benardete, I mean[12]—

DG: Benardete was at Chicago.

DL: And came back to teach at the New School and NYU. But Benardete was—he had some students who were so outstanding, you know, such marvels. Jaffa revolutionized the study of American things, particularly Lincoln. He was kind of an idol of mine. And you know, you can go through just a bunch of things: Harvey and—so he attracted students who were at the very height of their abilities and who were in a way were looking for something and most of the time wouldn't have found it. And so then Strauss—that's why Chicago was really important: right in the center of the country, outstanding reputation as an institution generally, and by its nature attracting good students. And then starting to attract them from all parts of the country, and probably the world. I don't know if Strauss is worldwide; right now, I think it is worldwide.

But at the New School his students were mainly American, with an occasional variation on that, but the ones I remember anyhow were mainly American. And suddenly here, you know, in this little place in Manhattan, suddenly you find this sort of gem and without ever knowing it was there. At Chicago, it was already different: and their reputation, and the place, and everything else. And it was for him, I think, the ideal thing. It was lucky that he had somehow rather come to the attention of Robert Maynard Hutchins.[13] Then he got the kind of thing he deserved.

I want to mention for you a kind of reflection which undoubtedly has occurred to you as well. And that is: you know, in his writings, Strauss speaks of "the philosopher." The philosopher is this kind of person who says this, or does this. I think the fact of the matter is that there isn't anything like that, abstractedly considered. There is the Platonic-Aristotelian philosopher, but then there's Heidegger. And philosophy in the twentieth century can say this, I mean philosophy in the full and best sense of the term: it had one very great representative, and that was Leo Strauss. But think of the other guys: Heidegger, a Nazi; Kojève, a tool of the communists, of

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[12] Seth Benardete: see "People."

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

Stalin—proven to be. That's still philosophy; they were admired by Strauss for the depth of their intellect, but look what happened to them. And Strauss, I think, was the only one who really upheld philosophy in the sense where he himself would use the term the philosopher. He was the philosopher. These other people, whatever the depth of their knowledge in certain ways, turned out to be terribly faulty in other ways, and as advertisements for philosophy have to be found wanting. You know you want to be worried about them being admired and praised. So, a sideline.

SG: That's a very interesting thing, thank you. Do you think Strauss had—he worked very hard at his teaching. I mean, he spent a lot of time in the classroom. What was he about? What was he trying to accomplish through his teaching?

DL: Well, to find, if he could, philosophers or young philosophers, and to cultivate the intellect and the sensibilities and the character of all the others to the greatest degree possible. I think he put himself—he was pretty much in the position of Socrates with the young people around him, with this exception: that Strauss had women in his classes where Socrates did not have any women surrounding him. Although I guess in the Xenophon *Symposium*, he goes out and visits some women; but still, he didn't have women students. And I think Strauss really approached things that way, to help them become practitioners to the degree possible of a very thoughtful life, you know, a life devoted to serious things, which included devotion to their country. Okay. That was never included. I mean, the study of political life—I remember there was such a flood of students who wanted to become, get into political philosophy. And his warning was always: Don't do it. Follow your natural bent. If it's American politics, that's your field. Bring in political philosophy where it's appropriate to your field, but don't abandon your field. Stick to the things that you in a way know natively and are most interested in. Don't all try to become students of the texts as your livelihood. And I think that was very important for him.

But to encourage—it was sort of the old object of the liberal arts: he wanted to make thoughtful people—philosophers, in the best case—but thoughtful people who were also gentlemen. I mean, there was not an intentional cultivation of gentlemanliness, but the byproduct of what he wanted people to do and of the works that we were studying was to cultivate a kind of high-mindedness. You're not really won over by the usual attractions of money or prestige. But again, I never heard him talk about it, but I've seen his writings on liberal education, and it's that kind of thing: in the best case, the Great Books. I kind of made fun of that in a way by saying: Well, what about the not-so-great books? And I'm sure that Strauss would agree that not everybody can appreciate Kant's works on metaphysics, but everybody should have a better appreciation of Dostoyevsky. Incidentally, things that Strauss would mention in lectures: the works of great writers, I mean, he didn't make a practice of it but they would simply come up, and so—the great works are for the minds most capable of following them. He was a great admirer of Shakespeare, of course. And he had his favorites among all of these, the modern authors. And I think some of his students followed hints that we got from him.

I mentioned the General Seminar before at the New School. And one time I heard a lecture by Howard White,[14] who was a student of Strauss's, on Shakespeare's—I think it was *Henry V*. It was one of the greatest lectures I'd ever heard because it was performed from beginning to end without a single note: [a] continuous flow of words and thought for an hour. And in a way, that sort of made me a student of Shakespeare. But White—and of course Strauss had mentioned Shakespeare in class here and there—but White had followed some suggestions from Strauss and enlarged on them and had sort of made them a substantial part of his studies. And I think in that way Jaffa probably heard some hints, or might have heard some hints about Lincoln from Strauss that sort of developed, sort of kindled something in Harry and off he went.

But it was that kind of thing that—works which he would not consider to be works of the very highest intellectual order were still important works, and that's why I jokingly said the not-so great-works. But they're important too. And in the average really good education, you would expect that the not-so-great works would be a very formidable part. You know, Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*—well, everybody can absorb those, but Heidegger's *Being and Time*, how many people can really read that, you know, and understand it? And for such people to go down a notch may be the best they can do, but it's still very, very good. I don't want to sort of demean the writers—Goethe was a person that Strauss admired. Of course, Lessing was one of his great, great teachers.

But there were—what was amazing—I don't know whether to mention this as a public thing but I'll make it public through you. But you be careful with it or treat it tenderly.

SG: Okay. We can consult about it later. Let's go ahead and get it out.

DL: But this is a funny story. At Harvard, C. J. Friedrich[15] was another German refugee and very well known in the field of political theory, maybe; not philosophy. And when I was hired at Chicago,[16] he knew that I had a background with Strauss, and he would often make slighting remarks about Strauss in my presence and I would not try to correct him. But one of the things he said about Strauss was that he was a person of very limited experience and very limited interests—in other words, that he was just studying the great texts and doing nothing but that. Now, that is just not true. Strauss had a *very* extensive knowledge of literature and a *very* extensive knowledge of history. With respect to the Second World War, he used to recommend books that he thought were really first-rate treatments of the military aspects of the war. It's very hard for me to think of somebody who had interests as extensive as Strauss's. And yet this professor at Harvard could say, speak about how narrow his interests were and how far from ordinary experience. If there was ever a teacher who dwelled on ordinary experience and made them [i.e., students] come to see their importance, it was Leo Strauss and nobody else.

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[14] Howard White: see "People."
[15] Carl J. Friedrich: see "People."
[16] Lowenthal meant "Harvard."

SG: That his bringing ordinary experience to life in that way, that might strike many auditors as somehow as not fitting in with your picture of him as a philosopher. Philosophers talk about difficult abstruse things and he's talking about ordinary things in a compelling way.

DL: Yeah, it's because we've inherited this narrow view of philosophy, allowing the social sciences to sort of take over this whole domain, but people forget the great tradition of philosophy or political philosophy going back to Socrates. And a great example would be Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*. In the *Ethics*, there are so many examples from ordinary life of the virtue and the vices, and what to do and what not to do. The very same man wrote the *Metaphysics*. He wrote *De Caelo*, On the Heavens. He wrote on the logics; he wrote on all these abstract subjects, but he wrote on human subjects. He wrote on the *Poetics*. So we've forgotten or kind of shunted to the side the fact that philosophy had some of its great roots, perhaps its most central root, in moral and political philosophy. That was the area where it first showed itself. And to the degree that Socrates is the beginner of this sort of whole development which today is taken up by things like social sciences, and history, and all the rest—but it began as an element or as a vital, perhaps central, element of philosophy. So it's just a mistake—and thinking about ordinary things, Strauss used to say the surface of things is what you have to look at, and that's where you're going to find the deepest elements of the thing.

I know that this has been true of my own work, that just sort of getting your impression of the thing and the appearance of the thing is the way in which you get started looking into the thing. So ordinary life—I mean, this is why Strauss was so interested in—well, for relaxation he would be watching Westerns. Well, why? Well, Westerns, because they're kind of testing people. You know, there're the bad guys and the good guys; and the characters of people are sort of displayed, displayed rather openly. Today in the movies, you have so much violence that everybody gets engulfed in this killing, but in the Western [there] was sort of a build-up: the bad guys have taken over, what are the good guys gonna do, and how are they going to cope with 'em?

And just from this experience, in a way it's sort of a basic human experience—the camaraderie but the hostility, the combination of the two. So right in front of our eyes, I mean, you might say the American public has—in a way, the movies have given us a false image of what life is like by nature, sort of naturally. And we've become so bound in by our own images that we don't know what life we're leading, whether it's a life in terms of the movies or life itself. And you might say that savoring life itself—the pre-movies, pre-technological life is always very, very important, particularly as we make inroads; and all over the Caribbean and elsewhere in the world, in the most remote parts you see these skyscrapers and ads for commodities. You know, things like that. They're kind of Americanized. And preserving that sense of the beginnings of the simple elements of life is really important, and I think Strauss did that all the time.

So his courses, even if they rose to elements where you have to explain the Divided Line in Plato or the full metaphor of the Cave in Plato, it becomes difficult, more abstract, but it begins from

the simple experience that we all have. And you can understand why we're prisoners in that cave and in what cave we are prisoners: you can understand that. So he caused a rebirth of moral and political philosophy by going through the same process that the originators of that philosophy went through in thinking about things, and so Strauss kind of relives, and everything he does is a reliving of the original experience of life, of ordinary things in life.

SG: And so by this account, if he had some type of project or goal for his teaching, it would emerge out of this rediscovery of the natural order of things, the natural?

DL: Yes. I think to keep human life in its fullness preserved, and continuing, and vigorous to the greatest degree that he could, was what his object was. And that could take the form of citizenship, of being an active person, of helping your own country, but still to have all the ingredients of a sort of full human life and to preserve in it an age when it can almost disappear before your eyes. How long did it take the Nazis to convert this most cultured nation? Four years, then a mass army thinking of nothing but war. It didn't take very long. So in a way, there's certain fragility in civilization that you have to be aware of, and I think Strauss was fully conscious of this, and just by nature of being a philosopher who loved philosophy and loved to convey it; loved to see the eyes light up in his students. I wouldn't simply say he did his share: he did more than any other writer that I know of, any other thinker to accomplish that.

That's why it's so cruel to have things written about him that are so entirely false: that he's a follower of Hitler, and he's greatest enemy of Hitler. That he's the follower of Hitler and he's this and he's that. And he's against democracy and all the rest. He's a fascist. These are so cruel and in a way a sign of how low our intellectual life has sunk that we are willing to—just because he's a critic. You see, for all our talk about openness and all the rest, down deep is the fanatic, and that fanatic is still around. So, but it is a terrible fate for a man you could say rescued Western civilization, and rescued its religious part as well. We haven't said a word about that, and in class it wasn't always in the forefront of his teaching, but still, he in a way made greater arguments for the religious point of view than anyone else, really.

SG: But in your view, Strauss succeeded in rescuing Western civilization?

DL: To the degree that somebody can. It's hard to know whether to be a full pessimist, partial pessimist, a neutral with respect to the destiny of mankind. I think he himself must have been very worried about our destiny, not only because of the atom bomb, which is still a very, very active problem with us, but culturally what happens in a mass society. And he must have sensed very much the dangers that are involved and did what a great man would do. He was going to do his best to keep alive the flame of human excellence, really. And I kind of share that same kind of doubt; you don't like to think that we're entering a kind of Dark Age, and maybe we're not. Maybe something will save us, but things don't look great that way. And despite momentary victories, here and there—and they're very important victories and you have to fight those things, but still.

I saw a recent example in this country. We have a massacre down in Newtown, Connecticut,[17] and one of the things mentioned is the effect of videos and movies on certain kinds of young people. And in ordinary common sense, if you ask yourself: Well, is this really possible? And you look to the stuff that we expose young people to—older people, too—but constantly, on a regular basis. And you ask: Well, is it obvious this is having a bad effect? Well, no. It's not obvious, and it's not even part of what the present recommends. There's a shying way from the deeper problem and the treating of the superficial ones. And as you do that and you don't realize that things are getting worse in certain respects, they are getting worse. So you don't realize that they are getting worse. [Whether] by attending to them you could sort of improve them a lot is anybody's guess, but still, you can't—. It's very hard to be a complete optimist in the sense in which you could be in the nineteenth century where things really did look as if life was improving in so many ways. And today it's very hard to have that same confidence.

And I think Strauss understood that probably better than anyone, and worried about it and always had in mind just keeping the idea of human excellence alive; you know, keeping it going. And I think that we don't appreciate how difficult it was for him to do what he did, the sort of redoing of the entire history of philosophy, the redoing of it.

I still have textbooks in political theory. There's an old one by George Sabine.[18] And you look at those textbooks and they tell you what every thinker thought, but in the most superficial way and always with the caveat that: Well, that guy was under the influence of his own time, of his own day. And Strauss sort of undid that entire opinion and sort of made the whole thing come alive with studies of each thinker. If you want to know why: I was once talking to a student of Strauss's and I said: Oh, what was Strauss? And he said: He was a historian and a scholar. And I said: No, he was a philosopher. No, he was a historian and scholar: look at his works. Well, they all look like historical works, and that's about all they are. But why did he do it? Well, every thinker had to be made to come alive. Every thinker had to be made to cope with serious problems and giving his answer to it. And Strauss was able to do that. And with one thinker—and not just with one but with one, two, three, four, five of the greatest minds. And he knew that's what he had to do in order to accomplish what he wanted to accomplish, which was, sort of in a way, to get people thinking again. That what it amounted to.

SG: Was Strauss your thesis advisor?

DL: He would have been but, as it turned out, it was a combination of Howard White and Kurt Riezler, and I had the fortune or misfortune of having my first draft entirely rejected by Riezler. And I remember what he wrote. He said: Strauss would not have approved of this. Strauss I don't think ever saw it, but Strauss would not have approved of it. And I could see why: that I had

[17] In December 2012, a 20-year old man shot and killed 20 children and 6 adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut.
[18] George Sabine, *A History of Political Theory* (1937). There have been several subsequent editions.

made Montesquieu into more of a classical thinker than he was, using certain things in him that did sound as if he was a classical thinker. And then I kind of thought it out again, and then it got accepted. But he would have been, but wasn't.

SG: I see, I see. In your career, you've published a book on Shakespeare, a book on the First Amendment, your translation of Montesquieu's Decadence, *Greatness and Decadence of the Romans*. Were you in touch with Strauss when you worked on those projects?

DL: Let's see. Then last February the Lincoln book came out: this is *The Mind and Art of Abraham Lincoln: Philosopher Statesman*,[19] and it's a treatment of twenty speeches of Lincoln's, one after the other, with the text of the speech and a commentary on the speech. And that was all inspired by Jaffa, even though I don't think he's going to like some of it. But still.

Now, as for being in touch with Strauss. On the First Amendment book, he knew I was interested in this question and I had written something earlier that had to do with *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the D. H. Lawrence book. And the D. H. Lawrence book was tried in England as obscene literature, and I compared it with the trial of *Madame Bovary* in France. And he knew of that and he liked it, but that isn't what ultimately got published on the First Amendment. It became an ingredient of that, in treating what the First Amendment was—you know, what it really covered and didn't cover. So he was aware of my interest in it and liked my approach, but as to the book, no, he didn't know about it. The Shakespeare was sort of largely conceived after Strauss's death, and so was Lincoln, so that he didn't know about those at all. He knew about the translation. He may have suggested my name to Allan Bloom[20] because Allan was the editor of the series—

SG: The Agora series.

DL: Yes, and Allan was very helpful to me; he knew French really better that I did. So he was aware of that. But of the first two, he was somewhat aware, but of the last two, he was not.

SG: It's a remarkable thing among Strauss's students that many of his students went on to concentrate in and do remarkable work in subjects and fields and authors that Strauss never taught. And I guess the question is: When you have done your work on Shakespeare, or Lincoln, or the First Amendment, did you have the feeling that you were acting out of an impulse somehow that came from your studying with Strauss?

DL: Absolutely. Absolutely.

SG: How does that work? An impulse to write on Shakespeare, when Strauss respectfully referred [to him], but he never taught on Shakespeare.

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[19] *The Mind and Art of Abraham Lincoln: Philosopher Statesman. Texts and Interpretations of Twenty Great Speeches* (Lexington Books, 2012).

[20] Allan Bloom: see "People."

DL: That's true. But in studying—well, the first Strauss students to write on Shakespeare were Harry Jaffa and Allan Bloom. And at almost the same time, Howard White came out with a whole book on Shakespeare of his own. And the Jaffa and Bloom book, *Shakespeare's Politics*,[21] they did jointly. But I think only one chapter might have been from Jaffa, and—

SG: Right, on *King Lear*.

DL: And most of it from Allan. And the notion that you had such a thing as a philosopher-poet, whereas in the *Republic* the philosophers [and poets] were sort of opposed to each other, and here you have philosopher-poets. Well, that was the whole point of Allan's introduction to his joint work with Harry. And Harry had approached *King Lear* in the same way. So I was sort of inspired by Strauss through people who were already inspired by him in their work. But I did think of myself—because Shakespeare conceals his thought, you know, I wouldn't say much in the same way that the great philosophers concealed their thought, but it's an act of concealment, anyhow, and you sort of have to think about it and worry about it. But I was always thinking of Strauss in the background, and so with respect to the First Amendment, while Strauss to the best of my knowledge never said anything about the First Amendment, nevertheless I thought to myself: Well, what do these guys really mean? What do they really mean by saying "Congress shall make no law"? So the inspiration was: What did they really mean? Just as his inspiration was: What did this philosopher mean? So I always was thinking; in that respect, I sort of pictured myself as thinking as Strauss would have wanted me to think about this kind of thing. So while the inspiration wasn't direct, it certainly was indirect.

And the same held with Lincoln. But there the way had been cleared by Harry Jaffa with his *Crisis of the House Divided*. But I wanted to sort of continue that work and in a way correct certain things in Jaffa. But the pioneer work had been done by Jaffa and I kind of considered myself as continuing or plodding behind Jaffa, but in the same direction. So Jaffa's inspiration for that? Well, whether that came from Strauss, I don't know. But the same thing: What did Lincoln really mean by the Gettysburg Address? You know, you read it all the way through, try to figure out the meaning, and then it turns out the things that Jaffa had studied—the first two Addresses, first, the Perpetuation Speech and then the Temperance Address—it turns out that they really are philosophic documents. I mean, they're very thoughtful, very complicated and deep, really deep. And so in the sense that this is what Strauss would have wanted you to do was always present; once you see the importance of that point of view, you never lose it.

I feel the same way: I read the Constitution and I see that the oath of the President is to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States. It doesn't say the United States, it says the Constitution of the United States. Why "preserve, protect and defend"? These different words, you know: that kind of interest, just in the words, I feel came from Strauss and it always

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[21] Allan Bloom, *Shakespeare's Politics*, with an essay by Harry V. Jaffa (University of Chicago Press, 1996).

pays off, because then you take them seriously rather than just read them. I think the Congress and everyone else, according to the Constitution, they just take an oath to defend and support. You see, it's an entirely different oath to protect, preserve, and defend. And why?

So it's funny that in ordinary life sometimes I'll read something and instead of reading it carefully, I don't read it carefully, so it doesn't always pull over into ordinary life. But when you are doing something serious, that's what you want to do and you want to try to be thoughtful about it. So if you're reading somebody like Hawthorne, or Melville, or Twain, when you're reading them you want to think about them and sort of piece them together, and you start with the surface meaning. So that idea, that general idea, once you can grasp it from Strauss, that stays with you all the time.

SG: Well, in hearing you give this account, you're taking me back to your account of your first class with him: that you never seen anyone reason in a class before.

DL: Yeah.

SG: And if I were to summarize—if someone were to ask me what's the connection between David Lowenthal's book on Shakespeare and Strauss, if someone was to ask me that question, now having heard this answer, I would say: Well, Professor Lowenthal learned from Strauss that it was possible to understand things; that he was given this, he was given an example and he wanted to live up that example and he had the desire to do that. And so when he picks up something, he's been given by Strauss the forms and the means and he wants to apply those things.

DL: Yes, I think that's perfectly true. And there're so many things to apply it to. Everybody's heard of the Big Bang Theory of the origin of the universe. Naturally, you've studied with Strauss but you would want to do this anyhow, but you sort of wonder: What is this big bang and how did they come to it? And you sort of see the evidence, and the evidence goes all the way back about fourteen—they say twelve or fourteen billion years to the beginning of the universe. And that's how they talk. *The* Universe.

SG: Right.

DL: Well, what happened before then? They won't say. It all began at that point. But how is it possible? Again, you remember Strauss used to like to quote "Ex nihil, nihil fit," this old Latin proverb: From nothing, nothing comes or nothing is made. And they seem to have forgotten it. So they're willing to say the universe began fourteen [billion] years ago, *the whole universe*. Well, what happened before then? Did it come out of nothing? No. I mean, I came out across one scientist who said it did come out of nothing, so they're kind of driven back by that. Okay. What preceded it? Well, something, but what kind of something? Why did it just start there? If it had all that time to develop, why then? There are questions that you would start putting, not just out of your natural curiosity, but you want to know what is the meaning of this Big Bang. And so the

application of the idea: take the words seriously and see what they mean. That's just sort of a general thing. But you would be absolutely right: you want to understand and understand as deeply as possible, but you would just begin with the world as it appears.

SG: And this desire to understand, in your account of Strauss, is something that had to be recovered and made possible again?

DL: Yeah.

SG: Through Strauss's teaching and through his writing.

DL: Yeah, I think so. Let's say you open up Heidegger's *Being and Time*. You have all these strange words and these strange experiences that are very general. But where are the trees? Where are the animals? Where are the things of ordinary life? Well, they're not there. You know, there's sort of no accounting for them: you start from human experience in an abstract way. So the human experience gets developed in such a manner that what we ordinarily see around us sort of disappears. It's not there. And I think that's the very great virtue of the ancients. And while Heidegger tries to get under that and go deeper than sense perception, but in order to see what we experience, but in the process the whole world disappears. Everything that's out there: nature, the nature that's out there is no longer a subject. So not only in Heidegger is ethics and politics not a subject, but nature itself isn't a subject; it disappears. You have a kind of generalized human experience. So yes, you start from what you ordinarily see in the world, but with the different kinds of things that you see in the world. And that's your beginning point. So once you see that frogs, and trees, and things like that—they're out there and then you never give it up.

You know that's rather important. The beginning of giving it up, I think, starts with Descartes, where you sort of look inside: I think; therefore, I am. And the whole world—you have to build up the whole world from that. Well, if you start that way, then it's very hard to build up the world, you know, because you're starting just from the inner context of human experience. And the classical way is so much better: you really don't start by looking within; there's a world out there and you're part of it. That's a simple beginning and that's [not] where you stay, but you don't forget that. And so the line from Descartes to Heidegger is fairly direct. And I think they knew that; you know, they sense that.

SG: Strauss came to the United States, as you told me over lunch, as a rescue project by this remarkable president of the New School. I'd forgotten this. What was his name?

DL: Alvin Johnson.

SG: Alvin Johnson. That he—he, Strauss and Riezler and other émigrés were rescued from the terrible darkness descending on Europe. Strauss—you could imagine another history in which Strauss could have, say, remained in Germany, you know, been a German professor at a German

university. I wonder if Strauss, if such a thing had been possible—if there would have been any significant differences between that Strauss and the Strauss we know? Did his experience of the United States change anything for him? Did it matter to him that he was here in the United States, besides the fact that it was a safe place and a place where he could flourish and prosper? Those are wonderful things, but did the experience in the United States change anything for him?

DL: That's an excellent question. Let's just sort of begin from a loose observation that in class he rarely commented on anything going on in the country, politics particularly. Very, very rarely: he might do it in a private conversation, but in class, no. Not only that, in class he rarely drew on his own experiences in Europe—you know, what life was like under the Nazis as he experienced it, or when he went to England, and what things were. I never heard anything like that. You know, the American professor blurts everything out. He tells you all about himself and his experiences. That isn't true of Strauss. It was a very disciplined approach to the text as a kind of eternal text where *you* don't matter. You're not going to say much about your own kind of narrow personal experience.

Whether he learned something about or experienced something about things that—from his coming to America, that's really a very good question. There's always a difference between reading about a place and experiencing it first-hand. My impression is that he enjoyed life in America with all of its pitfalls and its problems. As for pitfalls, you had to be worried about people trying to sell things to you. So his wife—according to one story, Mrs. Strauss came home with a dress, saying how much the salesman thought it looked well on her. And Strauss's rejoinder was: Don't you realize that the salesman is your natural enemy, not your friend? But there's this other story about Strauss himself. Do you know the story about Strauss and the Zoot suit?

SG: No.

DL: Again, it's just a story that I've been told. Strauss goes out by himself to buy a suit. And [laughs] unbeknownst to him, actually ends up buying a Zoot suit. You know what a Zoot suit is? You know they're tailored in a certain way.

SG: I've seen pictures long ago. I mean, there was no such thing when I came up.

DL: No, of course. Right, right. They had sort of narrowly tailored pants. I mean, there were certain flairs about a Zoot suit that made it unmistakably a Zoot suit. And without realizing it, he had actually fallen prey to a salesman himself. [Laughs] And came home—he of course had to return it.

But oh, there's so many stories about Strauss and the difficulties of living in America. Harry Jaffa's loaded with them. You know the stories of Strauss being in a motel. And I guess Harry must have been in a room in the same hotel; and Harry gets a phone call from Strauss, saying: Come over, Mr. Jaffa, come over, I need your help. And it was exceedingly hot in the place and a

window needed to be raised, and Strauss didn't know how to raise that window. Did you hear that story?

SG: I've heard other versions of it, but go ahead.

DL: A lot of—then changing light bulbs and things like that. Talk about the perplexities of American life. Things that wouldn't be difficult for the ordinary American, for Strauss, who wasn't handy in any way, they did pose difficulties. Apart from that, I don't know how to answer your question, because it's a very good question; and I'd have to know something better about what he thought of us beforehand, and then how life here had an effect on him, and I don't quite know how to do it. That he appreciated—for all of its turmoil and so on, but that he appreciated being in a democracy, I don't think there is any question about that. But just how it affected his thinking about us, I have to think more about it.

SG: But generally, his thinking about us or generally?

DL: Yeah. You know, he had to experience life. Academic life, for one, was very different in this country from Germany or Europe. And then, you know, not having had enough sort of daily conversation where you find out what he thinks of this and that as these things transpire. Appreciative—you mentioned before and we're kind of assuming that, but appreciative, very much so. And unlike so many refugees who come here and then spout off about American life, he didn't feel entitled to do that. He didn't feel entitled to speak publicly about any problems that he thought might exist in this country.

SG: Well, in my—I mean, in what I've read, what's striking is that when he does mention the United States or democracy, it's to express gratitude.

DL: Oh, absolutely. Oh, he was saved and so many others were saved. And I think he appreciated the history of the country as being a place of refuge, which it really was.

And particularly at this time, he was a great admirer—I don't know if you knew this—a great admirer of Dwight Eisenhower. He admired him for harnessing together the energies of the Allies in World War II. Not so much for his own military capacity, but for getting the Americans and the British, particularly, to work together in a harmonious way, with help from the French. But still, that he was so—and he expressed that openly, that kind of admiration. He was critical of every effort, including some by Roosevelt, to compromise with Stalinist Russia—but again, not openly, not publicly. You know, he might say that in private.

But again, I was just a student. I was not an equal, so there were undoubtedly all kinds of subjects that he felt that he couldn't really express to me or in my presence, so I find it hard to answer that question. A very good question, though.

SG: During Strauss's lifetime, toward the end of his life he would have had the remarkable experience of seeing his name become a category, that there was such a thing as a Straussian.

DL: Yeah.

SG: And not only that, but he would have seen the beginnings of controversies among his students about who is and who isn't a Straussian, controversy about who is the best heir of the legacy, and those types of things. What do you think he made of that? Do you have any sense of that?

DL: Very good question. You've run across the name of Ernest Fortin?[22]

SG: Sure.

DL: Okay. Well, Ernest was a good friend of mine, and he taught at Assumption College down in Worcester, and got me involved in the affairs of Assumption College on the Board of Trustees, so he kind of inveigled me to join the Board, which I was really glad of. And Ernest has this wonderful passage in one of his books, a collection where he speaks about the variety of Straussians. Are you acquainted with this passage? The East Coast, the West Coast and then there—

SG: Ralph Lerner[23] is an admirer of this passage: 114 varieties of Straussians—[24]

DL: Strauss—he speaks of sectarianism himself. When you get—you certainly had a solution rather than the problem. I don't know. First I have to say directly: first, that I have no firsthand information whatsoever as to any remarks by Strauss about this kind of thing. He must have thought it likely that there would be—you know, since he had written so much on difficult subjects—that there would be some divergence of opinion among his students. Whether he realized that these divergences could have become as sharp as they sometimes did, occasionally did, I don't know. But he must have realized that.

But the question is: Could he have avoided it? Was there anything in his writings that would naturally draw people into sectarianism? And the one thing, the one outstanding thing is that it was a superior thing: that it was better than all present approaches put together, this sort of approach to philosophy and to the texts of philosophy. And it *was* better; and that sense of superiority is what engendered some of those—they want to be heir of the right interpretation of this superior approach and they want to exemplify it. So, and that caused some nasty feuds to break out. You see, the thing that submerged those feuds to some extent and kind of lessened their impact was the general admiration for Strauss expressed by all sides; you know, all of his direct students were great admirers. The only question was: What were they admiring? And if you look at the general picture, I would say some of this was to be expected, but there isn't that

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[22] Ernest Fortin: see "People."
[23] Ralph Lerner: see "People."
[24] Ernest Fortin, "Between the Lines: Was Leo Strauss a Secret Enemy of Morality?" in *Collected Essays*, vol. 2, *Classical Christianity and the Political Order: Reflections on the Theologico-Political Problem*, ed. J. Brian Benested (Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).

much of it. You know, the Western Straussians hold against the Eastern Straussians that they're not political enough. But is it really true? You know, some of these are kind of—some the antagonism—and then some are rather personal. So as a general matter, I don't know whether Strauss, looking back, if he were sort of smiling down on us, would say: Gee, what I started has been riven with a —I don't think you really do find a heavily contesting kind of sectarianism.

So. But as to direct expressions by him, I don't know of any. He may have expressed something. How great his concern was, again, I don't know. I have never worried about it. I sort of thought: He's a great man, there's going to be some difference of opinion. I would sometimes not have expressed those differences in the way in which they were expressed, you know, in a kind of too strongly personal manner. But nevertheless, as a general matter, I would say, overall it isn't bad: as a matter of fact, I think it's pretty good that they—and, in a way, why not? Aren't there different versions of Hegel? And different versions of this or that philosopher? So I don't think—this is sort of a conclusion to the matter—I don't think Strauss would have thought 1) that it was avoidable, or 2) that it was terrible. And I still don't know, since I don't try to keep track of these things—who's not talking to who. I have no idea. But they're all good people.

I once wrote a report, I wrote an article for a book, and it was *Studies in Political Philosophy*. It was Strauss's own stuff. And I had to take up the antagonism that had sprung up between Tom Pangle[25] and Harry Jaffa. And I tried to kind of conciliate them, you know, and show how much they had in common. And then on one point, I took the side of one; on another point, I took up the side of the other. And I ended up with something like what King Edward was saying to his family before he died, which is not quite getting everybody to kiss each other, but to treat each other in a friendly way. And I don't know whether I had much good effect, but then this was after Strauss death. So I was aware of these things but never did take them so seriously. Every so often I'd hear that Harry had had been insulting to this or that person. So many of these stories, I'm afraid, revolve around Harry. But you know then finally even Harvey Mansfield[26] was not treated properly by Harry and so on. But to me they weren't kind of major things.

SG: Well, the other side of this story about the emergence of a Straussian or Straussianism is that certainly in the beginning, sometime in the '60s there was—maybe as early as the '50s there was skepticism, if not outright hostility, among many in the political science profession towards what was identified as Straussianism.

DL: Yeah.

SG: And so on the one hand were students of Strauss who began referring to themselves as Straussians; on the other hand, the profession began referring to the students of Strauss as Straussians. Do you have any inkling about whether Strauss thought this was a good or a bad thing? Necessary?

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[25] Thomas Pangle: see "People."
[26] Harvey C. Mansfield: see "People."

DL: That's a very good question. You know, that's a very nice question. First of all, I don't. I myself have not done it. I've not done it for a lot of reasons. First, I didn't want to float on somebody else's reputation; but secondly, I didn't want to tarnish that reputation in case, you know, I wasn't very good. I didn't want people to think: Well, he's from Strauss and he stinks, so Strauss must stink. So. But there were several reasons.

Now on the other side, I do know where a lot of friends of mine who not only didn't hide the fact that they studied with Strauss but used, spoke of it openly several times. And I must say, I always felt a little misgiving as to the degree to which one should do that. Avoiding doing it looks as if you're hiding, so it looks as if you're either ashamed or you're hiding, and that certainly is a consideration; but doing it also has the other tendency, that you are resting on his supposed greatness, and you don't want to do that either. So it's a very good question because it is something which varies very much in the practice of Straussians.

The word Straussian itself, I hardly ever use. I refer to Strauss often when I'm teaching—you know, great benefactor of us all. You had to do that. But in the writings, again, I've favored the quiet side. I worry about the other side only because it just seems slightly pretentious to say, well: I studied with Strauss. And at the same time that whatever defect you have could easily be rubbed off on him or attributed to him. So leave it at that. I hate to decide: after all, they're all friends of mine one way or the other, and to say that the one is doing well and the other side not doing well, it's a little hard to say. But you can't help but have kind of a little feeling about it, and my feeling is to understate it, to kind of go easy on it and to make your reputation on your own. Let it stand. And there were times when I was totally tempted to do it—in the introduction to the Shakespeare book, particularly, since I trace Shakespeare's general philosophy back to Plato and Aristotle, which was astounding to present-day scholars. But at that point I was sorely tempted to speak of the person who knows that better than anyone else, you know, about that kind of thing. But I didn't do it, and so I'm one side of that, and—

SG: Okay. Good.

DL: It's not. It's a terrible answer. I have to see what this looks like in print. But, you know, throw it away.

SG: We can do that, too.

DL: Yeah.

SG: When you were a young man, Strauss took a shine to you to some extent.

DL: Yes, I guess that's true, yeah. And sometimes it took the form of kind of offering to help, you know, even carry books or do some special thing, and I remember I was not a very outgoing person and became better at that as I grew older. So in graduate school I was not terribly outgoing, but I do remember even in college there were certain teachers I just took a liking to,

and I'd kind of hang around more with them and just, you know, try to talk to them. I think that happened with Strauss as well, and somehow other it clicked. I liked dogs, he liked dogs. So there were a lot of things in common. He liked my family, and I liked his to the degree that I knew it. And he'd always sign his letters with: "Affectionate regards to your family," because I also signed my letters that way. And I didn't know Mrs. Strauss that well by any means, but still, what I knew about her, I did like very much. And she was very solicitous and very quiet. Have you heard much about Mrs. Strauss?

SG: Well, only a few scattered remarks.

DL: Yes. And that's about all I could really give you, either, except for his nickname for her, which was really in a way very touching. [Laughs] Here's a very great man, and it wasn't like Socrates in relation to his wife, you remember, which was quite the opposite because Ms. Strauss was really not that way at all. But it was really very endearing.

SG: Did you consider, do you consider Strauss to be your friend?

DL: When he was alive, yes, I would say so. He did write—I was always sort of looking for help from a foundation or in improving my position and he was always very helpful, and said: Of course, you could use my name, and of course you could do this and that. And so while I wasn't a friend on the level of a Riezler or Hula, these intellectual giants, but considered in my limited role, yes, I did consider myself a friend. And I was given the privilege of leading his dog at the railroad station. You must look him up. Schwulch. I hesitate to try to spell it for you, but Schwulch.

SG: You said it means smoky?

DL: I think it did, yeah.

SG: Looking back now—it's been, oh, forty years since Strauss died—looking back now, what are your thoughts of Leo Strauss in retrospect?

DL: [Pause] You know it is said at the end of the *Phaedo* about Socrates: the best and the wisest. I think it would be something like that. And I think if history and events unfold as they should unfold, that Strauss will be, should be regarded as the greatest thinker of the twentieth century. And I hate to even limit it that way because he's a very great man.

Incidentally, in his practical judgments, I thought he was very good. We haven't spoken about that at all. But his practical judgments, his political judgments, from the degree to which I knew them, even military judgments—he was very, very wise. You know, he was very—well, he was really the best. And the best in thought and, I thought, as a human being. From what I knew, he was the best. He was a great husband. To the degree to which he was my friend, he was a fine friend. And as a teacher, by far. Nobody—they just weren't in the same league. It just wasn't just

that he was better than they were in a certain progression. So he was just absolutely excellent. He was just an extraordinary human being.

SG: Well, I think it's wonderful that you recalled that line from the *Phaedo* with regards to Strauss. Okay, well, we've covered a lot of ground. I want to thank you.

DL: You're very welcome. I hope some of this is useful to you, and your project, I think, is a wonderful project.