STRAUSS AND GADAMER:

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY, HERMENEUTICS, AND HISTORICISM

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This dissertation investigates the problem of historicism from the perspectives of Leo Strauss’s political philosophy and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics. Both present historicism as a crisis that undermines our ability to properly interpret eras other than our own. Consequently, they develop distinct applications of interpretative theory to explain both how to understand others and—more importantly—how to consider truth itself. On the one hand, Strauss treats historicism as the manifestation of the inherent problems of modernity. By denying the possibility of understanding fundamental questions in the manner that Socrates approaches them, Strauss argues that modernity has abandoned the quest for truth. He thus posits that we can “return” to the fundamental questions of the ancient philosophers themselves as proof that the modern abandonment of classical philosophy was a mistake. Instead of searching for a “new dispensation of Being” or novel tools to understand the world, we can think like the ancients did. In contrast,
Gadamer treats the discovery of “historical consciousness” [geschichtliches Bewußtsein] as a serious break between the ancients and moderns. Because we have learned how history “always already” prefigures who we are, this recognition requires us to design new tools for interpreting reality. Fortunately, Gadamer argues that through hermeneutics we can properly interpret truth as an endless conversation that—while always changing—represents a real set of understandings that enable discourse. Although Gadamer and Strauss have many serious disagreements about the nature of historicism, they both agree that interpretive discourse is the one thing needful for approaching the political problems that undermine the possibility of practicing philosophy.
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INTRODUCTION—
WHAT IS HISTORICISM?

This then, I thought, as I looked round about me, is the representation of history. It requires a falsification of perspective. We, the survivors, see everything from above, see everything at once, and still we do not know how it was.

- W.G. Sebald, The Rings of Saturn

This dissertation is an investigation into the nature of historicism as an obstacle to the healthy practice of philosophy. Insofar as historicism—in its variety of Straussian and Gadamerian definitions—denies the possibility of properly interpreting other eras on their own terms, it corrodes the preconditions of understanding beyond our particular contexts. Since, according to historicism, all truth claims are bounded by time and place, there are no trans-historical understandings capable of grounding cross-societal judgment. There is no such thing as unchanging truth. And if such truth did exist, there is no way for us to consider it. Instead, we are so entangled in our own experiences that our only access to truth is the relative truth of our own society.

Even as historicism enables us to observe other eras and cultures, it denies that we can apply these observations to ourselves. It treats the diversity of societies

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as a set of abstract snapshots worth appreciating, but not as real possibilities for
how we should live. This is why Leo Strauss observes that “without the experience of
the variety of political institutions and convictions in different countries and at
different times, the questions of the nature of political things and of the best, or the
just, political order could never have been raised.”\(^3\) Even if “political philosophy is
fundamentally different from the history of political philosophy itself,” we are only
able to ask what we want our politics to be when we consider our relationship to
history.\(^4\) This extra step enables us to overcome the relativism that views every
society as a unique entity immune to comparative analysis.

Once we learn to ask questions about how we want to live and what form our
society should take, we can recognize Hans-Georg Gadamer’s “hermeneutical
Urphänomen: No assertion is possible that cannot be understood as an answer to a
question and assertions can only be understood in this way.”\(^5\) By reintroducing the
primacy of dialogue, we can learn how to participate in politics as a form of living
together. We do not have to accept the world as it first discloses itself to us. Rather,
we can learn how to improve ourselves and our societies through a proper
appreciation of history.

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3 See Leo Strauss, “Political Philosophy and History” (1949), What is Political
Philosophy? And Other Studies, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 56-77, 57. All
further references will be to PPH.

4 Ibid, 56.

5 Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem” (1966),
Philosophical Hermeneutics, Trans. David E. Linge, (Berkeley: University of California
Press, 1976), pp. 3-17, 11. Gadamer’s understanding of the interplay of question and answer
is adapted from R.G. Collingwood. See R.G. Collingwood, An Autobiography, (Oxford and
Since I am primarily interested in restoring the connections that historicism— as a denial of trans-historical truth—severs, I treat the act of interpretation as a vital preparation for practicing political philosophy. To the extent that Gadamer is correct that today “understanding as such becomes a problem,” interpretation emerges as a means to moderate the radicalism of political actors who do not understand, or even try to understand, others. This is why he develops hermeneutics as both “the phenomenon of understanding and of the correct interpretation of what has been understood.” Whether called hermeneutics, dialogue, or simply conversation, we can only have a politics that is more than a justification of the status quo if we can forge a set of shared concerns.

I thus turn to Hans-Georg Gadamer and Leo Strauss as interlocutors in an experiment in overcoming historicism. They are aligned in part because of their “community of background.” Both came of age in the unstable world of post-World War One Weimar Germany. More importantly, both were deeply influenced by Martin Heidegger’s novel philosophical project. Gadamer writes that “the compactness and energy of Heidegger’s teaching made everything else I had experienced, ..., appear to be flat.” In the same vein Strauss, upon first hearing Heidegger lecture, told Franz Rosenzweig that “compared to Heidegger, Max Weber, ...

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7 Ibid., xx.


till then regarded by me as the incarnation of the spirit of science and scholarship, was an orphan child.”

Although Gadamer and Strauss develop their own critiques and appropriations of Heidegger, his thinking is crucial for both. Heidegger forced them to reconsider the apparently settled question of what exactly philosophy is. Because of this challenge, neither can take their initial philosophical perspectives for granted. Yet—rather than simply following Heidegger—they instead develop distinct approaches to overcoming our preconditions. Perhaps we are, as Heidegger insists, “thrown” [Geworfen] into a world we could not have chosen for ourselves. But we can still orient ourselves within this world and thus reshape our surroundings.

Still, even within the Heidegger orbit—Hannah Arendt, Hans Jonas, Emmanuel Levinas, Herbert Marcuse, Karl Löwith, and Jacques Derrida—


11 Michael and Catherine Zuckert capture the need for this reevaluation when they suggest that “modern thinkers assume that they can build on foundations that have already been laid without going back and reexamining the validity of those foundations.” See Michael P. Zuckert and Catherine H. Zuckert, Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 46.


Strauss and Gadamer are particularly cautious. They recognize that a doctrine like historicism can destabilize communities, even as it provides rich new focal points for contemplation. Since both believe, as Catherine Zuckert observes regarding Gadamer, that “the philosophic life represented by Socrates revealed the fundamental character of human existence as a whole,” they are disinclined to pursue radical utopian projects. They instead contend that we need to secure some kind of stability in order to protect and foster the practice of philosophy. This is how Strauss can develop a harsh critique of historicism even as Nathan Tarcov correctly notes that “Strauss’s presentation of classical political philosophy is indebted to radical historicism.”

For Strauss, historicism is the crisis that threatens to destroy our faith in the West if not the West itself. He categorizes three forms of historicism—naïve, theoretical, and radical—as related but distinct risks. The most serious strain, the radical historicism of Heidegger, asserts that “all understanding, all knowledge, however limited and ‘scientific,’ presupposes a frame of reference; it presupposes a horizon, a comprehensive view within which understanding and knowing take

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17 Richard Velkley articulates the tension between philosophy and politics when he writes that “the center of Strauss’s reflection is the extraordinary nature of philosophical questioning, whose radicality he contrasted with the moderation of required by political action.” See Richard L. Velkley, Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy: On Original Forgetting, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 11.

18 C.H. Zuckert, Postmodern Platos, 72.


20 Leo Strauss, The City and Man, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), 3. All further references will be to CM.
place.”21 Under this doctrine, there is no way to understand what it is to be a
Fifteenth Century Florentine, a Fifth Century Athenian, or a Tenth Century Arabic
scholar. Rather than accepting the possibility of a general frame of reference that
enables us to understand all of these perspectives in addition to our own, historicism
implies an atomizing inability to think beyond our local frameworks.

Gadamer is similarly concerned with the immoderate ramifications of
historicism, but he views the breakdown in our communicative capabilities as a
result of overvaluing the natural sciences. He is a profound critic of how “modern
science is following the rule of Cartesian doubt, accepting nothing as certain that
can be in any way be doubted, and adopting the idea of method that follows from
this rule.”22 Even as he recognizes the value of the scientific method, Gadamer’s
complaint is that “the whole reality of historical experience does not find expression
in the mastery of historical method.”23 By overvaluing objective science we have
accidentally devalued the ways Shakespearean dramas, cave paintings, surrealist
novels, and ancient architecture provide windows into the internal experiences of
other peoples, times, and cultures.24

Insofar as Gadamer and Strauss agree that historicism is a problem, they
share two vital methodological agreements. First, both are profoundly skeptical of

21 Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago
Press, 1953), 26. All further references will be to NRH.


24 Jean Grondin’s understanding of this problem is that “historicism’s delusion
consisted in trying to displace our prejudices with methods in order to make something like
certainty and objectivity possible in the human sciences.” See Jean Grondin, *Introduction to
Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer, (New Haven: Yale University Press,
1994), 111.
methodology. Gadamer insists that “hermeneutics is an art and not a mechanical process.” Much like Strauss’s own critique of the fact/value distinction, Gadamer cautions that “historical objectivism resembles statistics, which are such excellent means of propaganda because they let the ‘facts’ speak and hence simulate an objectivity that in reality depends on the legitimacy of the questions asked.” Any attempt to create a method for making sense of the ideas we encounter can potentially cover over those ideas.

This is why Strauss, even as he criticizes Gadamer for being too methodological, is “doubtful whether a universal hermeneutic which is more than ‘formal’ or external is possible.” His point is that “an author who wishes to address only thoughtful men has but to write in such a way that only a careful reader can detect the meaning of his book.” Because careful, talented authors purposefully structure their works as part of their teaching, we need to learn from the author herself how to read. If we apply our own hermeneutic to a text before letting it speak to us on its own terms, we risk badly misunderstanding it.

In this skepticism, neither Strauss nor Gadamer adhere to what Paul Ricoeur calls a “hermeneutics of suspicion” because both are still invested in the possibility of understanding truth. See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 32-36.


Leo Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?,” *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies*, 9-55, 21. All further references will be cited as WIPP.


Second, Strauss and Gadamer both stress the priority of questions over answers. Much of Strauss’s critique of historicism is predicated on his claim that “if the fundamental problems persist in all historical change, human thought is capable of transcending its historical limitation or of grasping something trans-historical.” Since historicism contends that all ideas are so tied to their context that we cannot hope to understand another moment, Strauss capitalizes on how the emergence of irresolvable questions across cultures proves that we at least have some shared concerns. Even if I cannot understand the everyday life of an Athenian citizen, a Tang dynasty bureaucrat, or an Egyptian pharaoh, there are questions that transcend our particularities: How should I live? What is politics? How do I protect myself or others important to me? We can ignore these questions or insist that they are in fact reflections of specific contexts, but Strauss’s response is that “the denial of the existence of a riddle is a kind of solution of the riddle.”

Instead of denying, ignoring, or minimizing real questions that we can share with others, Strauss argues that “genuine knowledge of a fundamental question, thorough understanding of it, is better than blindness to it, or indifference to it, be that indifference or blindness accompanied by knowledge of the answers to a vast number of ephemeral questions of not.” Although it can be difficult to understand a serious question, we can properly articulate such questions if we make this task a central pursuit. This is why Strauss returns to the Socratic foundations of political

31 Strauss, NRH, 24.


33 Strauss, WIPP, 22.
philosophy. He wants to teach us that “Socrates was so far from being committed to a specific cosmology that his knowledge was knowledge of ignorance.”34 Not only does Strauss champion “Socratic doubt” as a distinct approach to making sense of the world, he uses this insight to propose questioning as the central task of political philosophy.35

It is this classical, Socratic insight that aligns Gadamer with Strauss’s focus on fundamental questions. Like Strauss, Gadamer argues that “among the greatest insights that Plato’s account of Socrates affords us is that, contrary to the general opinion, it is more difficult to ask questions than to answer them.”36 By recognizing “the priority of the question over the answer,” Gadamer challenges the notion that philosophy is a task that can be completed.37 He instead argues that “there is no such thing as a method of learning to ask questions, of learning to see what is questionable.”38 When we encounter alien ideas in conversation with others or in reading texts, we have to grapple with this difference as it emerges. We must recognize the shortcomings of our previous interpretations of the world and expand our perspectives in the process.

Yet, even though Gadamer and Strauss agree about the primacy of questions, their approach to understanding them differs. Strauss argues that “an adequate interpretation is such an interpretation as understands the thought of a philosopher

34 Ibid., 38.


36 Gadamer, TM, 371.

37 Ibid., 373.

38 Ibid., 374.
exactly as he understood it himself.” Even if a philosopher does not present a solution to the problems she articulates, we can still understand her as she understood herself if we can understand how these questions the motivated her investigations. This is why Strauss argues that “no more is needed to legitimize philosophy in its original Socratic sense: philosophy is knowledge that one does not know, or awareness of the fundamental problems.” By focusing on the most important questions that philosophers ask, we can understand them across the boundaries of time and place. We can break the spell of historicism.

Gadamer partially agrees with Strauss when he acknowledges that “only a person who has questions can have knowledge.” Because questions reveal the limitations of our understanding, they force us to moderate our goals. They teach us that our knowledge is inherently incomplete and in need of constant reevaluation. But, Gadamer departs from Strauss when he argues that “interpretation always involves a relation to the question that is asked of the interpreter. To understand a text means to understand this question.” By focusing on the questions that the interpreter poses to a work, Gadamer aligns himself with the reader response theory of Roland Barthes. Instead of trying to understand a text from the author’s perspective, Gadamer argues that “the sense of a text in general reaches far beyond what its author originally intended.” The problem is not that the author is “dead,”

40 Strauss, *NRH*, 32.
42 Ibid., 378. Emphasis added.
43 Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” *Aspen*, no. 5+6, item 3.
but that interpreters add something to a text—their own “productivity”—in order to appropriate its meaning and thus understand it.45

Insofar as Gadamer and Strauss approach questioning from the perspective of the interpreter and the author respectively, they present different mechanisms for overcoming historicism. Gadamer’s approach is based upon his claim that “it is part of the historical finitude of our being that we are aware that others after us will understand in a different way.”46 This finitude—the recognition that times change and that all individuals are fated to die—implies that historicism as Strauss understands it is a brute fact. There is no way to understand Plato’s Athens as it actually was because human nature has fundamentally changed between that era and now.

But Gadamer’s understanding of understanding is more sophisticated than the notion that we cannot really understand other historical moments. His point is that “just as the individual is never simply an individual because he is always in understanding with others, so to the closed horizon that is supposed to enclose a culture is an abstraction.”47 Insofar as the actual crisis of historicism is that we live within a closed horizon that blocks us from ever understanding other worlds, Gadamer counters that “in the process of understanding a real fusion of horizons occurs—which means that as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded.”48 It is this fusion of horizons [Horizontverschmelzung] that allows

46 Gadamer, TM, 381.
47 Ibid., 315.
48 Ibid., 317.
Gadamer to overcome historicism by applying his doctrine of hermeneutics to the task of understanding others. Since we, as interpreters, change or ask different questions based upon what concerns us the most at any given era, our interpretations will always be different. But this difference in no way implies that we have failed to understand each other. It simply means that the attempt to methodize our interactions debilitates the discourse that is hermeneutics.

In contrast, Strauss attempts to overcome historical finitude as the most significant barrier to understanding truth as unchanging. He recognizes that Heidegger’s radical historicism culminates in the assertion that “a solution cannot lie in a return to the supratemporal or eternal but only in something ‘historical.’” But he maintains that insofar as we can grapple with fundamental questions, we can return to the ideas that transcend their context. Truth can speak across the boundaries of time and reveal itself as something immune to decay. This is the essence of Strauss’s claim that “return” is a return “to Western civilization in its pre-modern integrity, to the principles of Western civilization.”

Even so, Strauss’s doctrine of return is not a literal attempt to return to the ways that people in the past lived. He is clear that “only we living today can possibly find a solution to the problems of today.” Instead, his point is that truth does not distort or become obsolete over time. A true doctrine expressed thousands of years ago will be as true today as it was when it was first articulated. Truth is true in any

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50 Leo Strauss, “Progress or Return?: The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization,” *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, 249-310, 272.

and every context, even if historical developments cover over our access to it. Strauss thus focuses on the fundamental questions that (re)appear in different times and places as evidence that we can overcome historicism. Since “the question of the utmost urgency, the question which does not permit suspense, is the question of how one should live,” Strauss contends that we can bridge any historical fissure by grasping this trans-historical question. Once we realize that everyone, in principle, wants to live a good life, we can use this recognition as the entryway into a discursive politics of mutual understanding.

Although there are serious disagreements separating Strauss from Gadamer, it is not my intention to declare a victor in their encounter. If even Thrasymachus and Socrates have “become friends, though [they] weren’t even enemies before,” then there is no reason to treat the dialogue between Gadamer and Strauss as a contest. Insofar as both are dedicated to overcoming the barriers to mutual understanding that historicism represents, their dueling hermeneutic and political-philosophic approaches are in fact aligned. We are able to overcome historicism as long as we are willing to engage each other in serious conversation.

**Structure of the Investigation**

In the pages that follow, I present my investigation in five chapters. Each chapter forms a part of my larger attempt to explain what historicism is, why it is a problem, and how we can address it. Instead of treating this project as a solution to

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52 Strauss, “Progress or Return?,” 296.

historicism, it is more accurate to approach it as a meditation on how to practice politics as a communal quest to live a good life with others. Because understanding requires real effort, there is no simple way to solve our dilemmas even though we can, for a time, address them.

In the first chapter, I articulate Strauss’s understanding of historicism. I begin with Strauss not simply because historicism is more central to his wider project, but also because he explicitly defines historicism clearly and directly on multiple occasions. Even though he treats historicism as a general inability to understand other eras, Strauss actually presents three different variants of historicism—naïve, theoretical, and radical—in addition to the related problem of positivism. Whereas positivism is the assertion that “only scientific knowledge is genuine knowledge,”54 the variations of historicism are more important because they “[reject] the question of the good society.”55 That is, they challenge the possibility of practicing political philosophy as Strauss understands it.

In the second chapter, I define Gadamer’s understanding of historicism as an attempt to achieve certain knowledge of the “objectivity of society” in the human sciences [Geisteswissenschaften], history in particular.56 Historicism is still a problem, though less serious than Strauss’s, because it prevents us from approaching the humanities dialectically. Insofar as Gadamer differs from Strauss, he contends that we have made some real progress in considering our relationship to other eras. Specifically, Gadamer develops historical consciousness [geschichtliches


55 Strauss, WIPP, 25.

56 Gadamer, TM, 240.
Bewußtsein] as “the privilege of modern man to have a full awareness of the historicity of everything present and the relativity of all opinions.” Even if we cannot understand the past exactly as it was, we can use our shared temporality as the spur to understanding other eras discursively.

In the third chapter, I discuss Gadamer’s theory of hermeneutics as a response to historicism as he understands it. Because he treats the natural sciences as the major obstacle to understanding, Gadamer develops hermeneutics both as an attempt to restore the humanities to equal status with science and to understand the scientific perspective. That is, he overcomes the aporias of historicism by rejecting the desire for objective, final knowledge of history. He instead presents dialogue as a definitionally permeable exchange of perspectives that inform and expand each other. This is the essence of Gadamer’s fusion of horizons.

In the fourth chapter, I turn to Strauss’s concept of return as his major response to historicism. Rather than presenting a method or even an explicit approach to understanding another as she understands herself, Strauss tries to show that we can still contemplate the meaning of natural right. Even if we cannot present a final, solid definition of the concept, he argues that “the very idea of natural right presupposes the possibility of philosophy in the full and original meaning of the term.” Although the doctrine of return is ultimately a preparation for the practice of political philosophy as Socrates and Plato understood it, this possibility serves as proof that truth is in fact unchanging. We do not need to

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58 Gadamer, TM, 317.

59 Strauss, NRH, 31.
construct novel experiments like historical consciousness if we can contemplate the ideas themselves.

In the final chapter, I enter into Gadamer and Strauss’s explicit correspondence concerning *Truth and Method*. This chapter serves as a conclusion to my whole project both because it allows me to measure Strauss and Gadamer against each other and because it reveals the promise and the peril of conversation. Even though both thinkers share many practical and interpretive understandings, they do not completely agree with each other. Rather than treating such miscommunication as proof that we cannot even understand each other, I instead focus on how this recognition serves to motivate dialogue for its own sake. I thus conclude that we overcome historicism by opening ourselves to the difficult back and forth of dialogue, especially when it reveals how much we cannot hope to know about Strauss, Gadamer, political philosophy, and academics generally.
CHAPTER 1—

THE PROBLEM OF HISTORICISM: STRAUSS

For nonhistorical philosophers, all the answers suggested in former ages are potentially true until proven otherwise; historicist philosophers dogmatically exclude all the answers suggested in former ages before examining them.


Historicism is perhaps *the* central concern of Leo Strauss’s political philosophy. For Strauss, this apparently obscure, academic re-description of the word “history” is the heart of the crisis of the West. More than a reflection on what history means for us, historicism closes off our ability to consider truth as *the* truth.

In Strauss’s most comprehensive description:

Historicism rejects the question of the good society, that is to say, of *the* good society, because of the essentially historical character of society and of human thought: there is no essential necessity for raising the question of the good society; this question is not in principle coeval with man; its very possibility is a mysterious dispensation of fate.

Historicism is not only a rejection of the quest for truth, it is the claim that philosophy itself is historical and contingent. Our societies exist as a matter of pure fate that we cannot hope to elucidate.

Whereas Hans-Georg Gadamer defines historicism as the recognition that “the whole reality of historical experience does not find expression in the mastery of

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60 Zuckert and Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy*, 43.

historical method,” Strauss’s concern is existential. Because “historical study had come to be closer to philosophy and therefore also a greater danger to it than natural science,” history threatens to replace philosophy. If this happened, then the only “objective” knowledge we could access is that nothing is trans-historically true. We cannot know anything, let alone know that we do not know.

Stanley Rosen captures Strauss’s apprehensiveness when he defines historicism as “a pejorative term for the repudiation of the paradigm of a stable nature on behalf of the changing philosophical perspectives of human subjectivity.” But Strauss is not a Buckleyesque figure “standing athwart history, yelling Stop,” against the perfidious forces of post-modernity. More to the point, he is, as Michael and Catherine Zuckert observe, an advocate for philosophy attempting to restore our recognition of the fundamental questions that supersede historical moments. Rather than making what he elsewhere describes as the conservative fallacy—“taking a defensive stand [that] looks like admitting defeat”—Strauss is grappling with philosophical problems so intractable that when they, inevitably, emerge in societies we cannot hope to solve them.

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66 See Zuckert and Zuckert, Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy, 34.

The reason why it is so difficult to understand Strauss’s concept of historicism is that it is a multivalent phenomenon. It is Gadamer’s objective science of history but it is also a deep critique of the possibility of unchanging truth. What for Gadamer is a problem that we can solve by making space for the humanities [Geisteswissenschaften], is for Strauss a crisis that threatens both to destroy philosophy as a way of life and to embroil Western regimes in a socially acidic nihilism. Thus, to navigate the different aspects of historicism, I deploy two distinctions. The first is the distinction between positivism and historicism. The second is the distinction within historicism between what I call the naïve, theoretical, and radical strains.

Therefore, my goal in this chapter is to draw out the implications of Strauss’s distinct, but intertwined historicisms. While Strauss and Gadamer share many critiques of the excesses of modernity, particularly regarding positivism, I draw attention to their differences by asking what it means to view historicism as a crisis of the West. Against modern critics like Mark Bevir—who agrees with Gadamer that the notion of crisis is overstated—I consider why Strauss is so convinced that a crisis in the philosophic study of history poses an existential threat for the perpetuation of the commonsense world that is politics.

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68 See Leo Strauss, PPH, 59.


70 Melzer’s three historicisms are “historical, theoretical, and experimental.” While I agree that there are three major instantiations, my focus is on how they disrupt communication. See Arthur Melzer, “Esotericism and the Critique of Historicism,” The American Political Science Review, (May, 2006), Vol. 100, No. 2, 279-295, 282.


I argue, in agreement with the young Strauss, that “the inability of modern science or philosophy to give man an evident teaching as regards the fundamental question, the question of the right life, led people to turn from science or reason to authority.”73 That is, historicism leads to a crisis because it robs us of our faith in our own culture. Where past philosophies helped us to grapple with our inherent incompleteness, modernity is predicated on solving problems that it cannot actually solve. It tells us, in Immanuel Kant’s words, that “establishing a state, as difficult as it may sound, is a problem that can be solved even for a nation of devils.”74 With enough economic growth, a better jobs report, or a more ingenious constitutional design, we can have good government without asking what would make us, or our society, good. By forgetting to ask this fundamental question, modernity treats politics like a machine instead of a community.

To structure my investigation, I begin with an articulation of what positivism is and how it fosters the spread of historicism. Here, I base my analysis of Strauss’s development of the concept in “What is Political Philosophy?” Next I draw out Strauss’s definitions of naïve and theoretical historicism as the most common strains of the problem in “Political Philosophy and History.” Finally, I grapple with Strauss’s most important concept—radical historicism—as a final manifestation of the crisis of modernity as he depicts it in both “Natural Right and the Historical Approach” and “The Problem of Socrates.”

73 Leo Strauss, “The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy” (1940), Heinrich Meier, Leo Strauss and the Theological-Political Problem, trans. Marcus Brainard, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 115-139, 129. All further references will be to LIGPP.

In a later chapter, I will argue that return—more than esotericism—represents Strauss's “unhistorical” response to historicism. But first, I use this chapter to develop a typology of historicisms that implicitly contends that we can understand past moments as they were. Although Strauss agrees with Gadamer that philosophy is an endless discourse with the great thoughts of the past, Strauss’s key distinction from Gadamer is his belief that we can, or should at least attempt, first to understand the great thinkers as they understood themselves.

### Positivism

Positivism, along with historicism, is one of the two great challenges to the classical understanding of the West. Although Strauss is clear that positivism necessarily becomes historicism, they are not the same. In Strauss’s telling, “positivism surpasses existentialism by far in academic influence and existentialism surpasses positivism by far in popular influence.” Since Strauss contends that “existentialism must reject political philosophy as radically unhistorical,” he equates existential philosophy—Heidegger, but also Jean-Paul Sartre—with historicism.

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76 Smith writes that Strauss “believes that the dialogue is the teaching itself.” See Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 90.

77 Leo Strauss, “On a Forgotten Kind of Writing,” *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Writings*, 221-232, 228.


80 Ibid.
This articulation implies that positivism is the more intellectual problem, but Strauss challenges this supposition by arguing that positivism, particularly in the social sciences, “fosters not so much nihilism as conformism and philistinism.” In this telling, positivism is an uncritical assertion of modern values more than it is a proof of their worth.

Although positivism presents several problems for modernity, the most important is that it delegitimizes that classical, non-historicist approaches to philosophy that could counter historicism. Strauss most explicitly develops this critique in four steps in “What is Political Philosophy?” In the first step, Strauss argues that “it is impossible to study social phenomena, i.e., all important phenomena, without making value judgments.” Not only does our choice to study a phenomenon imply that we believe it is important. Any investigation into a regime, such as American democracy or Russian oligarchy, entails judging those regimes. We can collect facts and figures about employment rates, free speech indexes, voter turnout, and gross domestic products, but these facts are only important because we have decided that they are indicators of effective States. They are already determined by our values. They allow us to judge whether Russia or the United States is the superior regime.

Strauss’s complaint is that we cannot distinguish facts from values. The relationship between the two is dialectical. We use facts to discover what is valuable and we seek certain facts because we already believe they are valuable. But positivism is defined by the fact/value distinction:

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82 Ibid., 20.
In about the last decade of the 19th century, social science positivism reached its final form by realizing or decreeing that there is a fundamental difference between facts and values, and that only factual judgments are within the competence of social science: scientific social science is incompetent to pronounce value judgments, and must avoid value judgments altogether.  

Since “science” is predicated on the notion that it can only deal in facts, it abandons the questions of value that philosophy is supposed to consider and politics is supposed to adjudicate. Although this abstention from judgment apparently gives space for the humanities to decide upon values, positivism delegitimizes these endeavors by declaring that “only scientific knowledge is genuine knowledge.”

This leads to Strauss’s second critique of positivism, that “the rejection of value judgments is based on the assumption that the conflicts between different values or value-systems are essentially insoluble for human reason.” Inherent in this description is a critique of pluralism, one of Isaiah Berlin’s central concepts:

That there are many different ends that men may seek and still be fully rational, fully men, capable of understanding each other and sympathizing and deriving light from each other, as we derive it from reading Plato or the novels of medieval Japan—worlds, outlooks, very remote from our own.

Although this kind of openness represents an implicit value in many values flourishing, Strauss suggests that, at least for the positivists, this openness is a façade. The reality is that “all science presupposes that science is valuable.” Indeed, positivists are such fervent partisans for science that they believe we can

83 Ibid., 18.
85 Strauss, WIPP, 22.
87 Leo Strauss, NRH, 39.
improve any field of study by imposing methods that filter out our subjectivity.

Rather than treating politics as a pragmatic attempt to make the best decisions possible when governing, the positivist transforms politics into an exact science that we can observe with polling, questionnaires, and economic data.

Indeed, Strauss's third critique of positivism is that “the belief that scientific knowledge, i.e., the kind of knowledge possessed or aspired to by modern science, is the highest form of human knowledge, implies a depreciation of pre-scientific knowledge.” Although the goal of prioritizing scientific knowledge is to prevent us from entangling ourselves in the values that the scientific method cannot objectively adjudicate, the effect is to discredit our pre-scientific perceptions. That is, positivism comes to view itself as the arbiter of knowledge without understanding how it developed from our commonsense experiences of the world. While it is true that concepts like Celsius and Fahrenheit help me to understand temperature and the weather, they are actually developments from my pre-scientific understanding that some things are hot and others are cold.

This critique most closely resonates with Gadamer's. Strauss agrees with Gadamer that “modern science itself is seen as the dogmatics of a quantifying worldview.” Because positivism forgets that its own perspective is partial, it fails to account for how its own observations fit within a larger, non-scientific framework.

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88 Strauss, WIPP, 23.


91 This is less of a problem in post-Kuhnian understandings of science. These forms of science recognize that we can undergo profound shifts in how we interpret reality. A major
While it is possible to make a philosophic case for the value of positivism, a positivistic case for positivism is inherently flawed. Since science is supposed to be neutral, it cannot validate itself based only upon its own standards.\(^{92}\) The scientist must choose to value the fact/value distinction independent of this distinction.

Rather than upholding science as the arbiter of understanding the world, Strauss’s point is that science is only justified by the choice to value it over other perspectives.

Even so, Strauss’s concern is not to reopen space for the humanities generally. Instead, he intends to revive classic political philosophy as a more complete, open investigation into the meaning of human life.\(^{93}\) Although “the scientific approach tends to lead to the neglect of the primary or fundamental questions and therewith to the thoughtless acceptance of received opinion,” political philosophy is explicitly the quest to grapple with the fundamental question of “what is political.”\(^{94}\) As Strauss elaborates, “this question cannot be dealt with scientifically but only dialectically. And dialectical treatment necessarily begins from pre-scientific knowledge and takes it most seriously.”\(^{95}\) In effect, Strauss’s complaint is that positivism is a derivative phenomenon that misunderstands its role in the quest for understanding the world. Since Strauss recognizes that we first discovery can cause us to reevaluate our entire framework of understanding. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 39.

\(^{92}\) Strauss, *NRH*, 55.


\(^{94}\) Strauss, *WIPP*, 24-25.

\(^{95}\) Ibid., 25.
experience life in our communities before we ever learn scientific methods, he contends that the common good is “molded, nay, constituted, by the political order or regime within which [the political things] occur.”

Politics is the key to Strauss’s response to positivism because it begins from the pre-scientific experiences that teach us our values. In Michael and Catherine Zuckert’s terms, “the culminating crisis is a crisis for politics, because politics is, above all, about ‘values’—justice, equality, rights, the common good, and so on.” Against positivism’s definitional distinction between facts and values, Strauss counters that “it is impossible to understand thought or action or work without evaluating it.” To make evaluations is to enable reasonable decision making. This is why our choices do not have to rest upon a Schmittean decisionism if valid value judgments are possible. Although we are fundamentally limited, we are not fated to accept the morals or societies in which we are entangled. Using our philosophical capacities, we can collectively make real decisions about who we are and what we value.


98 Strauss, WIPP, 21.


100 This is what John McCormick overlooks when he reads Strauss as a follower of Schmitt. Although both thinkers posit that the political as the architectonic social phenomenon, Strauss sees more space for reason and change than McCormick admits. See John P. McCormick, “Fear, Technology, and the State: Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss, and the Revival of Hobbes in Weimar and National Socialist Germany,” Political Theory, Nov. 1994, Vol. 22, No. 4, 619-652, 628.
Still, Strauss’s first three critiques of positivism pale in comparison to the final and most important critique: “positivism necessarily transforms itself into historicism.” In Strauss’s telling, “social science is in danger of mistaking peculiarities of, say, mid-twentieth century United States, or more generally of modern western society, for the essential character of human society.” This mistake aligns closely with what I call naïve historicism. If social scientists uncritically believe that their perspective captures how people have always encountered the world, then they are in danger of projecting their values onto other societies without actually engaging with them.

For this reason, sophisticated social scientists attempt to correct for their subjectivity by applying historical methods to their investigations. In Strauss’s terms:

To avoid this danger, [social science] is compelled to engage in ‘cross-cultural research,’ in the study of other cultures, both past in present. But in making this effort, it misses the meaning of those other cultures, because it interprets them through a conceptual scheme which originates in modern western society, which reflects that particular society, and which fits at best only that particular society.

This fusion of social science with history echoes Strauss’s own call for “the fusion of philosophy and history.” But the concern with methodology, in opposition to dialectics, poisons the investigation. Although “social science must attempt to understand those cultures as they understand or understood themselves,” it instead

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102 Ibid.
103 Ibid.
104 Strauss, *PPH*, 57.
applies its own methodological schema to what it studies. Like the bed of Procrustes, social science positivism mutilates its perception of the societies it studies because it does not take their concerns seriously. While free speech indexes and employment rates may be the metrics of our society, they might not be for feudal Japan or modern Lichtenstein.

Yet, the transformation of positivism into historicism runs deeper than a misapprehension of other cultures. The most serious problem with positivism is that it believes it is dispositive even as “modern science comes to be viewed as one historically relative way of understanding things which is not in principle superior to alternative ways of understanding.” As Strauss observes elsewhere, positivism transforms into historicism when its own quest for truth reveals that “modern science or philosophy is no more true than, say, the Chinese system of administration.” Since positivism only asserts its authority and methods, it undercuts itself the moment other perspectives emerge with their own truth claims. We have no reason to believe that the positivistic perspective has a better claim to truth than Taoism, quantum mechanics, or palm reading. This is how positivism introduces us to “the serious antagonist of political philosophy: historicism.” No longer concerned with the positivistic value placed in the fact/value distinction, historicism—especially in its radical variant—argues that all understanding breaks down under critical investigation.

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106 Ibid.

107 Strauss, *LIGPP*, 118.

Historicisms

Historicism is “the serious antagonist of political philosophy” because it challenges the idea that there are “permanent characteristics of humanity.”\(^\text{109}\) Even so, it is easy to overlook the mechanics of historicism, in part because Strauss often talks about it as both a general and as a multi-headed problem. In one of his earliest articulations, in 1941, Strauss presents this definition: “historicism is the doctrine that ‘everything is historical,’ i.e., that it is not possible to make a clear-cut distinction between the invariable (‘eternal’) and the variable elements of human things.”\(^\text{110}\)

This early description captures how historicism diminishes our ability to make vital distinctions. Strauss later responds by asking, “if we cannot decide which of two mountains whose peaks are hidden by clouds is higher than the other, cannot we decide that a mountain is higher than a molehill?”\(^\text{111}\) But the point of historicism is to challenge even our ability to make this obvious distinction. Once we rule out the faculty of judgment, we lose both the ability to distinguish between mountains and molehills and to differentiate the forms of historicism.

I thus distinguish between the strains of historicism by articulating the specific reasons why each concludes that understanding is impossible. Naïve historicism is an uncritical rejection of the duty to understand others. Theoretical historicism is the assertion that because we have become conscious of historical

\(^{109}\) Ibid., 26.


\(^{111}\) Strauss, WIPP, 23.
change, there is no way to bridge the relative differences between cultures and
times.\footnote{This is an important part of why Pangle discusses historicism in terms of
relativism. See Thomas L. Pangle, \textit{Leo Strauss: An Introduction to His Thought and Legacy},
(Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 14.} Finally, radical historicism is the philosophically serious assertion that,
because there is no eternity, there is no such thing as a fundamental question
capable of transcending the horizons of time and place. Whereas each form of
historicism represents a rejection of the possibility of philosophy as the quest for \textit{the}
truth, they have distinct logics. They must be understood on their own terms if we
are to overcome the aporias which they represent.

\textit{Naïve Historicism}

The first historicism, the naïve variety, is a direct result of the positivistic
challenge to our prescientific grappling with the world. Because this historicism
devalues the commonsense experiences that we share with others when we grow
up—our “natural awareness”—it suggests that our lives are radically particular.\footnote{Strauss, “An Epilogue,” 129.}
That is, naïve historicism “rejects the question of the good society” because it denies
that any of our experiences are universal enough to generalize.\footnote{Strauss, \textit{WIPP}, 26.}
In practice, this means that the naïve historicist accepts the world that she is born into as the only
world that matters. She does not try to grapple with other societies or eras as they
were in part because she denies that there are “permanent characteristics of
humanity” that would enable real exchanges.\footnote{Ibid.}
In Strauss’s articulation of the problem, “the typical historicism of the twentieth century demands that each generation reinterpret the past on the basis of its own experience and with a view to its own future.” Rather than attempting to understand what the past meant on its own terms, this historicism—to the extent that it engages with the past—tries to use it to justify its own experiences. Perhaps the most illustrative example of this phenomenon is judging other times or cultures by our current values. Under this schema, Aristotle is evil because he endorsed slavery and Immanuel Kant is immoral because he was anti-Semitic. While these assessments capture troubling views that these philosophers actually held, naïve historicists treat these beliefs—which were widely accepted at the time—as sufficient justification to ignore the substantive positions that these thinkers developed. They thus refuse to grapple with alien perspectives that might enable us to discover permanent characteristics that transcend our society.

In contradistinction to philosophy as the quest for unchanging truth, naïve historicism contends that “the question of the best, or the just, political order has been superseded by the question of the probable or desirable future.” Insofar as this historicism is intertwined with positivism, both believe that the only problems worth addressing are technical questions of how to actuate their preferred future. Instead of asking whether stability, prosperity, equality, or greatness should define our society, they instead ask how to maximize soy bean production or reduce healthcare costs. Although these questions are vital to the functioning of our society, they prevent us from considering what the best society would be and how we should


117 Ibid.
adjust our political order to become more like that ideal. By casually denying that such fundamental questions exist, we in fact decide that what we already have is valuable without considering why.

Naïve historicism is thus the uncritical rejection of the possibility of trans-historical truth. It is not philosophically serious because it rejects other perspectives before it tries to grapple with them. This is why, when a naïve historicist picks up Aristotle’s Politics or Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason, she fails to contextualize it as a text that speaks both to, but also beyond, its own time.¹¹⁸ It is in this vein that Strauss argues that “only historical knowledge can prevent one from mistaking the specific features of the political life of one’s time and one’s country for the nature of political things.”¹¹⁹ Where the naïve historicist fails to take history properly into account, Strauss commits himself to serious philosophical studies of past thinkers like Machiavelli and Plato in the hope of discovering how to think like them.¹²⁰ The problem with naïve historicism is that it fails to consider what it would mean for the past to teach us something true.

Therefore, the fatal flaw of naïve historicism for Strauss is its unreflective inability to consider the grounds of its values. To the degree that we stop trying to understand other perspectives of what truth is, we lose the ability to defend our own ideas of truth and justice. Our abilities decline to the point that “what were once certainly explicit ideas passionately discussed, although not necessarily lucid ideas,

¹¹⁸ This critique of interpretation with no regard for history is the closest that Strauss comes to Quentin Skinner’s Cambridge School of interpretation. See Ian Ward, “Helping the Dead to Speak: Leo Strauss, Quentin Skinner, and the Arts of Interpretation in Political Thought,” Polity, April 2009, Vol. 41, No. 3, 235-253, 238.

¹¹⁹ Strauss, PPH, 56-57.

¹²⁰ See Zuckert and Zuckert, Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy, 2.
have now degenerated into mere implications and tacit presuppositions.”¹²¹ Although a return to our fundamental questions is unlikely to uncover the answers we seek, it serves to reawaken our discursive faculties. Instead of uncritically accepting the views that we encounter in our everyday lives, Strauss attempts to unsettle us. This is why he insists that “we cannot maintain that the victorious cause is necessarily the cause of truth.”¹²² The point of historical investigation is to show us that there are other ways to live our lives. Against naïve contentment with our world, Strauss hopes to spur us on to the quest for the best world.

Theoretical Historicism

Theoretical historicism is a more serious form of historicism, because it is more philosophical than its naïve cousin. In Strauss’s terms, “the more thoughtful forms of historicism admit that the universal questions of traditional philosophy cannot be abandoned.”¹²³ That is, theoretical historicism recognizes that philosophy is an important resource for understanding history. Even so, it still subordinates philosophy to history. Although Strauss argues that “a political philosophy does not become obsolete merely because the historical situation, and in particular the political situation to which it was related has ceased to exist,” this is precisely the thesis of theoretical historicism.¹²⁴ Since times change and civilizations rise and fall,

¹²¹ Strauss, PPH, 73.
¹²² Ibid., 61.
¹²³ Ibid., 59.
¹²⁴ Ibid., 64.
the theoretical historicist believes that she can learn some things from the past even if a complete return is impossible.

Strauss thus defines historicism, particularly in its theoretical variation, as “the assumption that restorations of earlier teachings are impossible, or that every intended restoration necessarily leads to an essential modification of the restored teaching.”¹²⁵ Whereas Strauss’s goal in restoring apparently obsolete teachings is to shake our assumptions about what the past means, the theoretical historicist maintains her assumptions by suggesting that our particularities will invariably infect and thus transform our subject matter. Although we cannot understand the past exactly as it was, the theoretical historicist argues that “new experience seems to shed new light on old texts.”¹²⁶ With these novel experiences we can reinterpret both our past and our present.

For this purpose, the most important development within modernity is the discovery of historical consciousness \[ \text{geschichtliches Bewußtsein} \], which Gadamer defines as “the privilege of modern man to have a full awareness of the historicity of everything present and the relativity of all opinions.”¹²⁷ Not only is this historical consciousness a kind of knowledge which the ancients could not have known, it is an assertion that the only solid truth is that intercultural understanding is untenable. We can only understand within the context of our historical context. In Strauss’s language, this means that “all human thought is historical and hence unable to

¹²⁵ Ibid., 60.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 67.

grasp anything eternal.”

Since the theoretical historicist subscribes to the notion that we cannot overcome historical change, the only way to make the past relevant for her is to transform it into something useful for the present.

Even so, theoretical historicism is in part defined by its self-reflective capacity. Although the naïve historicist is uncritical in her assumptions, the theoretical historicist agrees with Strauss’s dictum that “historicism is not a cab out of which one can stop at his convenience: historicism must be applied to itself.” Strauss’s point is that “we can assert that the spirit of our time is historicism” such that other times, past and future, could be non-historicist. But when the theoretical historicist reflects upon herself she learns that, in Gadamer’s words, “historical knowledge cannot be described according to the model of objectivist knowledge because it is itself a process which has all the characteristics of an historical event.” Insofar as she learns that “objectivism is an illusion,” it is impossible to “[understand] the thought of a philosopher exactly as he understood it himself.” Such an exact understanding would represent the objectivity that the theoretical historicist—upon reflection—denies.

Strauss’s response to the reflexivity of the theoretical historicist is to observe that “historicism merely replaced one kind of finality by another kind of finality, by the final conviction that all human answers are essentially and radically

128 Strauss, NRH, 12.
129 Strauss, PPH, 72-73.
130 Ibid., 57.
132 Ibid.
133 Strauss, PPH, 66.
While the theoretical historicist is more thoughtful than her naïve cousin, her position ultimately rests on its own unprovable assertion: that it is impossible to understand others as they understand themselves. This position is insufficiently reflexive because it forgets that “historicism itself is a human thought; hence historicism can be of only temporary validity, or it cannot simply be true.” If the theoretical historicist truly believes that all knowledge is trapped within its own historical context, then this knowledge is itself a passing perspective that will be replaced by another, perhaps non-historicist, paradigm.

As far as Strauss is concerned, he can challenge both the naïve and the theoretical historicist by observing that neither is serious about understanding texts as texts. Even if we cannot be certain that we have reached the correct interpretation of a thinker, Strauss’s hermeneutic is predicated on the notion that “to understand a serious teaching, we must be seriously interested in it, we must take it seriously, i.e., we must be willing to consider the possibility that it is simply true.” Since the first two forms of historicism fail to engage with the “ministerial element of interpretation proper,” they have not proven that real understanding across temporal horizons is impossible. However, radical historicism is a different matter. Because it questions the possibility of unchanging truth itself, Strauss recognizes it as a serious, even philosophic, challenge.

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134 Ibid., 72.
136 Strauss, *PPH*, 68.
Radical Historicism

Radical historicism is the strain of historicism with which Strauss is most concerned. It is also the best publicized strain because it is central to Strauss’s most famous book, Natural Right and History. By now, it is well-documented that the chapter, “Natural Right and the Historical Approach,” is a critique of an unnamed Martin Heidegger.\textsuperscript{138} In his correspondence with Alexandre Kojève, Strauss explicitly calls Heidegger “the only radical historicist.”\textsuperscript{139} This final strain is so entangled with Heidegger because the Heideggerian phenomenological project categorically rules out philosophy as Strauss wants to practice it. Whereas Strauss treats philosophy as the quest for unchanging truth,\textsuperscript{140} Heidegger contends that “the claim that there are ‘eternal truths,’ … [belongs] to the remnants of Christian theology” as opposed to a solid philosophy.\textsuperscript{141}

In Strauss’s terms, Heidegger represents a serious challenge—more serious than both naïve and theoretical historicism—because for him “there is no longer eternity in any sense or even sempiternity in any relevant sense.”\textsuperscript{142} Because, as Heidegger argues, “all truth is relative to the being [Sein] of Dasein,” it is impossible to understand realities foreign to our perspective.\textsuperscript{143} Not only do we understand

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{138} See Velkley, Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy, 122.
\item \textsuperscript{140} Strauss, WIPP, 12.
\item \textsuperscript{141} Heidegger, Being and Time, 220.
\item \textsuperscript{142} Strauss, “The Problem of Socrates,” 324.
\item \textsuperscript{143} Heidegger, Being and Time, 217.
\end{itemize}
other individuals and cultures relative to what we are, we understand the cosmos itself in our own terms. As Strauss translates Heidegger’s jargon, “one cannot speak of anything being prior to man in time; for time is or happens only while man is.”

Under this schema, truth is not an unchanging thing that we can discover, but it is a revealing of the world as it appears to us in our particularity. Truth as aletheia [uncovering] is radically historical, because it reveals itself differently to different people living in different times.

Strauss’s project rests on the possibility that “if the fundamental problems persist in all historical change, human thought is capable of transcending its historical limitation or of grasping something trans-historical.” While the naïve and theoretical historicisms simply deny that this kind of understanding is possible, Heidegger’s radical historicism is unique. It is “based not on history but on philosophy: on a philosophic analysis proving that all human thought depends ultimately on fickle and dark fate and not on evident principles accessible to man as man.”

If this view is correct, then we cannot hope to understand past philosophers as they understood themselves because our historical context has placed real limits on what we can perceive. Our context is so determinative of who and what we are that there is no possible transcendence from it. Instead, “strictly speaking, we

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146 Strauss, NRH, 24.
147 Ibid., 19.
148 Heidegger, Being and Time, 139.
cannot choose among different views” because “a single comprehensive view is imposed on us by fate.”\textsuperscript{149}

The most important distinction between theoretical and radical historicism rests in Strauss’s observation that “thought that recognizes the relativity of all comprehensive views has a different character from thought which is under the spell of, or which adopts, a comprehensive view.”\textsuperscript{150} Whereas the theoretical historicist presents “a theoretical insight that transcends history,” the radical historicist contends that any view we hold is, at best, “the outcome of a fateful dispensation.”\textsuperscript{151} Since, according to the radical historicist, we are thrown into lives we could not have chosen, there is no way to judge or even consider a world beyond our perceptions. Our contexts so thoroughly determine who and what we are that it is impossible to theorize what an actual trans-historical consideration would be.

Strauss thus claims that “the thesis of radical historicism can be stated as follows: All understanding, all knowledge, however limited and ‘scientific,’ presupposes a frame of reference; it presupposes a horizon, a comprehensive view within which understanding and knowing take place.”\textsuperscript{152} The immediate result of this unbridgeable horizon is that “the comprehensive view of the whole cannot be validated by reasoning, since it is the basis of all reasoning.”\textsuperscript{153} Even reason and nature, the supposed manifestations of the unchanging things, are only projections.

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 27.

\textsuperscript{150} Strauss, \textit{NRH}, 25.

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 26.

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 27.
that allow us to delude ourselves into the vulgar belief that time is infinite.\textsuperscript{154} This is why Strauss reasons that “for [Heidegger] a solution cannot lie in a return to the supratemporal or eternal but only in something ‘historical.’”\textsuperscript{155} Since we all live within history, there is no way to think beyond this limit.

In response to this apparently impermeable barrier, Strauss returns to natural right because “all natural right doctrines claim that the fundamentals of justice are, in principle, accessible to man as man.”\textsuperscript{156} Where the radical historicist views natural right as another vulgar attempt to escape from the fact that we all must die, Strauss counters that the eternal return of the “quest for knowledge, for knowledge of the whole” proves that our concerns can and do transcend our individual lives.\textsuperscript{157} Although we—as humans—are doomed to die, this does not mean that our concerns are invalidated. Even though “philosophy is necessarily preceded by opinions about the whole,” this does not invalidate philosophy as “the attempt to replace opinions about the whole with knowledge of the whole.”\textsuperscript{158} As long as we can take part in this practice, philosophy is still possible.

Even if our lives are the result of a fate beyond our control, Strauss contends that “every philosopher \textit{belongs essentially to this or that ethnos} but as [a] philosopher he must transcend it.”\textsuperscript{159} For Strauss, philosophy is not the attempt to understand what \textit{existence—Dasein}— is. It is a way of life that allows us to

\textsuperscript{154} Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 403.


\textsuperscript{156} Strauss, \textit{NRH} 28.

\textsuperscript{157} Strauss, \textit{WIPP}, 11.

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{159} Strauss, “The Problem of Socrates,” 326.
overcome our particularities in the quest for something greater than ourselves. Just because we begin in partial, limited worlds does not mean that we are trapped within them. In contrast to historicism’s discovery of “the superiority of the local and temporal to the universal,” Strauss returns to the quest for the universal.\textsuperscript{160}

Richard Velkley captures the divergence between Heidegger and Strauss by highlighting how Heidegger’s main distinction is between Being \([\textit{Sein}]\) and beings \([\textit{Seiende}]\) while Strauss’s is between the city and man.\textsuperscript{161} The essence of this split is that “there is no room for political philosophy in Heidegger’s work,” while Strauss’s whole career is an attempt to revivify the practice as \textit{the} entryway into philosophy.\textsuperscript{162} That is, radical historicism loses its way because it forgets about the primacy of politics as the anchor that attaches us to the world in which we live. Without politics to ground thinking in the everyday experiences of life, philosophy becomes a baroque obsession with language as opposed to an approach to grappling with our everyday problems.\textsuperscript{163}

By recognizing the political dimension of philosophy, we can learn to judge between ways of life. We can decide upon values, at least for our specific societies. In this sense, Strauss’s major critique of Heideggerian radical historicism is, as Dana Villa suggests, “Heidegger’s contempt for such ‘permanencies’ as the distinction between the noble and the base.”\textsuperscript{164} If radical historicism posits that distinctions are

\textsuperscript{160} Strauss, \textit{NRH}, 14.

\textsuperscript{161} Velkley, \textit{Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy}, 17.

\textsuperscript{162} Strauss, “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy,” 1-2.

\textsuperscript{163} Strauss, “June 26, 1950,” The Strauss-Kojève Correspondence, 251.

unimportant, then Strauss counters that they are, and remain, our only hope of understanding each other.

**Reconnections**

The problem of historicism for Strauss is ultimately a denial of the possibility of understanding others. Whereas positivism asserts that all understanding is a form of scientific certainty that distinguishes between facts and values, each form of historicism presents its own explanation, or lack thereof, for why understanding invariably breaks down. The naïve historicist simply asserts that we cannot understand other eras. The theoretical historicist asserts that historical change itself proves that we cannot understand other eras. The radical historicist asserts philosophically that we cannot understand other eras because we are creatures of our unchosen contexts. In all three cases, “no objective criterion henceforth allowed the distinction between good and bad choices. Historicism culminated in nihilism.”

That is, as far as politics is concerned, each variation defines itself as the denial of the connections that enable us to recognize each other as humans bestowed with dignity.

Understanding thus emerges as a kind of political responsibility. Although Strauss recognizes the difficulties inherent in truly understanding others, this difficulty in fact obliges us “to look for a standard with reference to which we can judge of the ideals of our own as well as any society.” Even if we are unlikely to discover natural right—the standard by which we can judge values and thus

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165 Strauss, *NRH*, 17.

166 Ibid., 3.
communicate with others—this does not free us from the quest for such knowledge.

Strauss paints a dire picture of what happens when the greatest thinkers abandon the quest for unchanging truth:

It was contempt for these permanencies which permitted the most radical historicist in 1933 to submit to, or rather to welcome, as a dispensation of fate, the verdict of the least wise and least moderate part of his nation while it was in its least wise and least moderate mood, and at the same time to speak of wisdom and moderation. The biggest event of 1933 would rather seem to have proved, if such proof was necessary, that man cannot abandon the question of the good society, and that he cannot free himself from the responsibility for answering it by deferring to History or to any other power different from his own reason.\(^\text{167}\)

At least in Strauss’s mind there is a direct connection between the denial of the possibility of unchanging truth and the pursuit of the kinds of political projects that Heidegger, as the radical historicist, championed. Insofar as Nazi fascism tried to create a new world order with new values, Strauss resisted by attempting to grasp what remains unchanging in the face of this project.

Nevertheless, Strauss’s response to historicism, especially the radical variant, cannot be a blithe rejection of Heidegger’s assumptions. Strauss cannot simply assert that the classics of political philosophy still speak to us. In order to overcome the crisis of historicism, Strauss needs to show what classical political philosophy has to offer to our modern condition. Although return is only a propaedeutic, it is necessary if we hope to overcome nihilism.

Even so, Strauss’s “return to classical political philosophy is ... experimental.”\(^\text{168}\) It is possible that return will be insufficient to reestablish meaning in a historicist age. But if we still value the attempt to understand others, then we

\(^{167}\) Strauss, \textit{WIPP}, 27.

\(^{168}\) Strauss, \textit{CM}, 11.
are obliged to follow Strauss back into the past. We are obliged to take his project seriously. Still, before we make this journey, we need to acknowledge a second path to reestablishing understanding. This path is Gadamer's modern project of hermeneutics.
CHAPTER 2—
THE PROBLEM OF HISTORICISM: GADAMER

But the certainty of science is very different from the certainty acquired in life. Scientific certainty always has something Cartesian about it.


What does historicism [*Historismus*] mean for Hans-Georg Gadamer? Is he talking about the same concept as Leo Strauss, or do the two thinkers merely use the same term for radically different, perhaps incommensurate concepts? In this chapter, I answer these questions by explaining how Gadamer views historicism to be a scientific method of obtaining certain knowledge of the “objectivity of society” in the human sciences [*Geisteswissenschaften*], history in particular.\(^{170}\) Gadamer agrees with Strauss that historicism limits our ability to understand other times and places since it “rejects the question of the good society.”\(^{171}\) But he provides a different explanation for how historicism functions when he contends that it defines itself as a method “seeking protection and certainty” by molding itself in the model of “scientific understanding.”\(^{172}\) By seeking what

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\(^{169}\) Gadamer, *TM*, 240.

\(^{170}\) Ibid.


Richard Palmer calls “a standpoint above history from which history can be looked upon,” historicism misunderstands how we relate to historical events.\textsuperscript{173}

Gadamer recognizes that historicism began as a Nineteenth Century Romantic response to the rigidness of the Enlightenment, particularly in the work of Leopold von Ranke, Friedrich Schleiermacher, J.G. Droysen, and Wilhelm Dilthey. Yet, he contends that the “attempt to determine how objectivity is possible in relativity and how we are to conceive the relation of the finite to the absolute” entangled historicism in “unresolved Cartesianism.”\textsuperscript{174} In Joel Weinsheimer’s terms, “the surprising conclusion that Gadamer draws is that historical reconstruction of the past as past—that is, reconstruction as opposed to mediation with the present—is the falsification of history.”\textsuperscript{175} Any effort to construct an objective picture of the past in fact disconnects us from its effect upon us.

Hence, for Gadamer, historicism emerges as an overreliance on the Enlightenment, Cartesian methods it was meant to correct. The problem with these methods is that they attempt to import the practices of the natural sciences into humanistic studies without understanding how science first emerged from the hermeneutical experience of “life [interpreting] itself.”\textsuperscript{176} Rather than opening us to an inexhaustible philosophical dialogue about the nature of truth,\textsuperscript{177} historicism


\textsuperscript{174} Gadamer, \textit{TM}, 239.

\textsuperscript{175} Joel C. Weinsheimer, \textit{Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method}, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 134.

\textsuperscript{176} Gadamer, \textit{TM}, 229.

\textsuperscript{177} Gadamer, “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem,” 15.
closes us off from persuasive interpretations of life by treating other times and cultures as mere objects for scientific study. This is why historicism—as a science of history—is so problematic for Gadamer.

In response to historicism, Gadamer develops his own theory of hermeneutics as means to grapple with historical consciousness [geschichtliches Bewußtsein], “the privilege of modern man to have a full awareness of the historicity [Geschichtlichkeit] of everything present and the relativity of all opinions.”178 This awareness of the historical, changing dimension of life dignifies the humanities as an important part of the dialectic of understanding that fosters effective communication.

In the next chapter I will show how Gadamer integrates historical consciousness into his theory of hermeneutics as his approach to overcoming the aporias of historicism. But first, in this chapter, I show why Gadamer makes a distinction between historicism and historical consciousness. His main reason for emphasizing this split is that historical consciousness is actively self-reflective in a way that historicism, as an aspirationally objective science, is not.

Gadamer stands in contrast to Leo Strauss, who views historical consciousness as a new form of historicism that dissolves the authority of the past by relativizing its perspective as one among many.179 But Gadamer is also in opposition to Jürgen Habermas, who sees historical consciousness as a new reification of

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178 Gadamer, “The Problem of Historical Consciousness,” 8. Gadamer first presented this lecture at the University of Louvain in 1957 as Le problème de la conscience historique.

authority that quashes genuine critique of tradition. Against these criticisms, I argue that Gadamer’s understanding of historical consciousness is a meta-recognition of the structure of truth as an endless discussion as opposed to a final interpretation of interpretation. Gadamer is neither attempting to outline a final understanding of discourse, nor is he attempting to silence those who have been repressed by the tradition. Instead, he is revealing that we need an entryway into discourse if we hope to understand what its inexhaustible back and forth means for us.

Although the problems of historicism and historical consciousness are literally central to Gadamer’s development of hermeneutics in his magnum opus, *Truth and Method* (1960), his description of historicism *qua* historicism is indirect. While much of Part II of the book details Gadamer’s coming to terms with the 19th Century thinkers of history, called “historicists,” he is more explicitly concerned with how they prepare his work than what the concept itself means. Even the section explicitly titled “Dilthey’s Entanglement in the Aporias of Historicism” is more about Wilhelm Dilthey’s role in the development of historical consciousness than defining what historicism is.

Therefore, I begin this chapter by drawing out Gadamer’s explicit concept of historicism in “Hermeneutics and Historicism” (1965). Given that Gadamer is a circular writer who often repeats and re-describes his central insights to different

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audiences, it is useful to begin with this later, more explicit articulation of
historicism. Next, I dive into Gadamer's development of historical consciousness, in
both “The Problem of Historical Consciousness” (1957) and Part II of *Truth and
Method*, to articulate how this section is a gradual working out of a response to
historicism. Finally, I explore the political ramifications of Gadamer's understanding
of historicism. Here, I agree with Catherine Zuckert that “Gadamer is
fundamentally a liberal.”

Although Gadamer is deeply invested in conserving the
Western tradition, this conservation serves as the framework for a potentially
inexhaustible historical progress. His goal is to broaden our world view through
interactions with others, both past and present.

Overall, I argue that Gadamerian historicism is a problem of science,
particularly Enlightenment natural science. Whereas Strauss is more explicit
about the moral and political stakes of historicism, Gadamer’s critique of scientific
historicism still represents a political problem. If truth is ultimately defined only by
what we can methodically replicate with absolute certainty, then “historicism,
despite its critique of rationalism and natural law philosophy, is based on the
modern Enlightenment and unwittingly shares its prejudices.”

That is, the attempt to reach certain, unprejudiced knowledge about reality in fact serves to discredit
other valid approaches to understanding the world. Science is an important

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184 Gadamer’s position on Enlightenment natural science echoes much of Continental
Philosophy’s approach to science. Gadamer differentiates himself by stressing the
preservative function of hermeneutics over the deconstructive function of critique. See
Patrick A. Heelan, “Hermeneutical Phenomenology and the Philosophy of Science,” *Gadamer

worldview, but it is not the ultimate arbiter of values. Hence, an overreliance upon science impoverishes us by delegitimizing the humanistic perspectives—theological, philosophical, literary, and historical—that allow us to interact with one another successfully.

**On Historicism**

Historicism is perhaps the central concern of philosophical hermeneutics. As Jean Grondin writes, “historicism, one could affirm with good reason, is the central and most crippling problem facing philosophy since Hegel, namely, the question concerning the possibility of binding truth and thus conclusive philosophy within the horizon of historical knowledge.”\(^\text{186}\) If we are defined by our temporal context, then there is no way to grasp true thoughts that transcend the barriers of time and place. Instead, our sense of an “unchanging” or “stable” reality would only be our subjective projections upon the world that allow us to cope with its instability.

For Gadamer, we must accept a meta-doctrine that “the historical world is not a coherent experience in the way that, in autobiography, history presents itself to the inner world of subjective consciousness.”\(^\text{187}\) What appears as a coherent whole to us in fact part of a larger set of different perspectives. As we share our partial experiences with others, our understanding of history expands to accommodate these differences. This means that the only unchanging truth of history is that it changes as we interact with others. In Stanley Rosen’s terms, “Gadamer thus holds

\(^{186}\) Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 11.

that we have access to permanently enduring meanings, but only from within the perspective of our own time.”

Thus, when Gadamer argues that “the knowing subject, the understanding historian, does not simply stand over against his object, historical life, but is himself part of the same movement of historical life,” his point is that we cannot separate ourselves from history’s effect upon us. There is no “neutral vantage point” from which we can perfectly and objectively understand moments of the past like something captured in a photograph. Indeed, the problem of historicism is precisely the belief that such a picture of the past is both desirable and attainable.

The impossibility of reaching a purely objective understanding is the essence of Gadamer’s critique of historicism. This is why he writes that “historical knowledge is interwoven with historical events.” His point is that historical events impact and change who we are as individuals. They constantly rewrite who we are. Hence, “historical consciousness is a mode of self-consciousness,” because the recognition that we develop within time is part of how we come to know ourselves as selves. Whereas Richard Rorty takes Gadamer to mean that “we should free ourselves from the notion that philosophy can explain what science leaves unexplained,” it is more accurate to describe Gadamer as explaining how we develop

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189 Gadamer, “Hermeneutics and Historicism,” 529.


191 Gadamer, “Hermeneutics and Historicism,” 529

both scientific and non-scientific worldviews. By revealing the shortcomings of the natural sciences, Gadamer makes space for the humanities to facilitate the fusion of horizons that enables mutual understanding.

Therefore, when Gadamer explicitly addresses historicism in “Hermeneutics and Historicism,” he focuses on how ignorance of our own prejudices closes us off from discourse. We all have own perspectives, but when we refuse to check them against other worldviews we become dogmatic. We come to believe that our perspective is objective and that all other views are invalid. Dogmatics—properly understood as taking the truth claims of others seriously—is a vital element in historical understanding. Yet, the belief that we are somehow impartial blinds us to the ways we unintentionally overwrite the truth claims of others. For Gadamer, “this poses the problem of the multiplicity of such dogmatic systems or styles, and this is the problem of historicism.” Although “we must, at least, not find it impossible that [a dogmatic belief] might be ‘true’ if we really want to understand it,” we are only open to the truth claims of others if we are willing to risk our perspective as possibly incorrect.

Insofar as historicism is a serious problem, the German historicist and hermeneutical thinker—Wilhelm Dilthey—presented a first response. According to Gadamer, “Dilthey tried to banish the danger of historicism by deriving different

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195 Ibid.

196 Ibid.
worldviews from the complexity of life.” This observation is important for two reasons: 1) Dilthey is a key figure in the historical development that leads to the Heideggerian hermeneutics Gadamer appropriates and 2) Gadamer is dissatisfied with Dilthey’s explanation. Gadamer’s dissatisfaction stems from using “complexity” as a means to claim that every perspective is at least partially correct. Rather than securing understanding, this view relativizes perspectives by destroying our ability to weigh the worth of different viewpoints. To say that we each partially grasp reality and have a bit of truth seems anodyne. But this view gives us no means of comparing the value of different perspectives. If we cannot judge between viewpoints, then we in fact suggest that every perspective is equal. There is no reason to enter into conversations with others in the search for truth. Truth becomes just another value as important—and therefore as unimportant—as all the others.

Even so, Dilthey presents Gadamer with a key insight: “the categorical characterization of life is temporality which forms the basis for all the others.” We can use the recognition of the flow of time, within which all events and perspectives occur, as a meta-principle. Temporality can be the basis of organizing and ranking values. The problem is that Dilthey believes that we can have objective knowledge of temporality. Yet, if every worldview has some validity because reality is so complex, then Dilthey has no objective basis to value temporality above other perspectives. This leads to what Gadamer calls “the value blindness of historical objectivism.”

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197 Ibid.


Dilthey’s fixation on objectivity necessarily undercuts the particularity that Gadamer appreciates as the essence of our ability to interpret our surroundings.

Gadamer thus reveals the illusory character of “objective” science when he argues that “modern science itself is seen as the dogmatics of a quantifying worldview.” Any attempt to make science into the lens through which we interpret reality is in fact a distortion that cuts out the qualitative aspects of our lives. Such a lens is important and useful for making scientific discoveries, but this is not how people live. Instead of interpreting reality like data hard won through applying the scientific method in a laboratory, Gadamer posits that we actually treat our experiences like a judge in a courtroom. Because “the distance between the universality of the law and the concrete legal situation in a particular case is obviously essentially indissoluble, ... the interpretation of the law is, in a juridical sense, an act that creates law.” The judge is certainly an authority attempting to bring order to her world, but she brings order by artfully applying general concepts to specific, irreproducible situations.

For Gadamer, history is not, as Nietzsche asserts, an “eternal recurrence” of the same events over and over again. Although we have general ideas and theories that we apply to our particular situations, the difference of each situation is key. This is why Gadamer argues that “the historical world is not a coherent experience in the way that, in autobiography, history presents itself to the inner world of

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201 Gadamer, “Hermeneutics and Historicism,” 539.
202 Ibid.
subjective consciousness.”

Our individuality makes a coherent narrative out of our experiences and this “historical coherence must, in the end, be understood as a coherence of meaning that wholly transcends the horizons of the individual’s experience.” It is this transcendence that makes communication possible. But historicism implies that there is no transcendence from specific experiences. While Dilthey tries to overcome particularity through scientific exactitude, Gadamer’s complaint is that this viewpoint smothers every other avenue of understanding. Instead of transcending particularity, the natural sciences simply create one master particularity that labels itself a whole.

History can still overcome particularity, but only when it is free from the scientific straightjacket that prevents its proper function. Hence, Gadamer argues that “it is beyond all doubt that the ‘significance’ of historical events or the rank of works of art becomes more apparent with the passage of time.” We can gradually come to rank events and works of arts by seeing what survives the march of time. This view is progressive because it implies that the accumulation of experience allows us to judge things that were previously impossible to disentangle from their historical moment. But, for this same reason, it is also conservative. Gadamer thinks that we can learn from history only by coming to understand how it still reverberates and contours what we are and how we understand ourselves.

Gadamer’s progressive conservativism is thus an attempt to recognize that there have been many interpretations of what history was and that there will be

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204 Gadamer, “Hermeneutics and Historicism,” 529.

205 Ibid.

206 Ibid., 541.
more in the future. There is no reason for us to believe that our new scientific tools somehow give us purchase on a final, objective view of history. Instead, we need to admit our limits. We must acknowledge that “the right order has no history. History is always a history of disintegration and, sometimes, of the restoration of the right order.” This is because even our idea of “the best order of things... is superseded by the new confusion and disorder that we call history.” At most, it appears that we can present only a formally empty acknowledgment that we cannot make sense of history like we can make sense of the cardiovascular system.

However, by providing an immanent critique of history from within its flow, Gadamer contends that we can orient ourselves without a perfect, objective understanding. Indeed, if historicism is ultimately defined by the attempt to set down a final, objective understanding of history, then we can now appreciate its fatal flaw: our ideas about the eternal order of the cosmos can be overcome, forgotten, or ignored. Even our understanding of objective, unchanging things changes. Perhaps there are no unchanging things, but merely temporary projections that we believe are eternal. Perhaps we can formally agree that history is always a flow of changing paradigms, but this too might be a temporary paradigm. In either case, Gadamer is important because he presents an approach to generating better understandings of what history is by constantly returning to the tradition of historical studies.

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207 Ibid., 550.

208 Ibid.

209 See Heidegger, Being and Time, 220.

210 See Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 44.
Here Strauss becomes vital to Gadamer's articulation of historicism. Strauss explicitly defines historicism as "the assertion that the fundamental distinction between philosophic and historical questions cannot in the last be maintained." For him, historicism is the abandonment of the unchanging, fundamental questions in favor of purely particular concerns about what we should do in our radically unique situation. Gadamer's constant return to tradition overlaps with Strauss's constant return to philosophy. Although there are some important distinctions between the two, both are concerned with conserving understanding in a world that appears to be changing too quickly to hold on to anything.

When Gadamer articulates his view of Strauss, he writes that "the image of the historicist that Strauss here outlines and opposes corresponds ... to that ideal of complete enlightenment that I described in my own inquiry into philosophical hermeneutics as the guiding idea behind the historical irrationalism of Dilthey and in the nineteenth century." Both pinpoint the Enlightenment as an obstacle to understanding how history functions. This turn in history is a serious problem.

But Strauss's complaint is not that we have turned history into a methodical science. His issue is that we have actively abandoned philosophy—to which we can always return—in favor of a technological attempt to dominate and overwrite nature. This is why Gadamer treats historicism as a problem of science while

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211 Strauss, *PPH*, 57.

212 See Zuckert and Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy*, 34.

213 Gadamer, “History and Historicism,” 553.

214 Strauss's concern with technology is reminiscent of Heidegger's own fears. The difference is that Strauss believes that moral philosophy can curb the excesses of modernity. See Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” *The Question Concerning*
Strauss treats the problem of science as the manifestation of a deeper moral problem. Gadamer aims to rehabilitate history by giving it a sphere of authority over and against the natural sciences. But Strauss views historicism as an inability to grapple with the fundamental ethical question of how we should live.

Although Gadamer views historicism as a less serious concern than Strauss does, his interpretation has its own strengths. Where “[Strauss] also seems to think that if a person says something, he has necessarily and fully understood ‘himself’ in the process,” Gadamer suggests that we are opaque to ourselves.215 We are, as Roland Barthes would argue, not our best interpreters.216 This is because “every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way, for the text belongs to the whole tradition whose content interests the age and in which it seeks to understand itself.”217 Even if we could understand the author of a text or the creator of a work of art as she understood herself, Gadamer argues that the history of the reception of these works becomes a part of what they are. That is, works gradually blossom within the flow of time such that their meaning inherently transcends what their creators understood of them.

To recognize how time and tradition thicken and re-contextualize great works is to bestow value upon both creators and interpreters. This is why Gadamer concludes that “it is enough to say that we understand in a different way, if we


216 Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” item 3.

understand at all.”218 It may appear that Gadamer is making a radical Derridean claim that, in Stanley Rosen’s words, “it is not possible to read a text but only to write something that is itself unreadable.”219 But Rosen is right to view Gadamer as presenting a “conservative version of universal hermeneutics.”220 Gadamer is not asserting that the past is somehow radically unreachable. He is instead explaining how we can only understand the past in conversation with the present.

The problem of historicism is that it disrupts the dialogue between past and present. By focusing upon a method of historical-scientific objectivity, we approach the past as a set of objects to be manipulated for our own purposes. We consequently overlook and dehumanize the enduring thoughts and perspectives of the past that can still speak to us if we choose to listen. Gadamer expresses this problem in his “Foreword to the Second Edition” of Truth and Method: “only after the failure of the naïve historicism of the very century of historicism does it become clear that the contrast between unhistorical-dogmatic and historical, between tradition and historical science, between ancient and modern is not absolute.”221 Where historicist methods attempt to look at the past like a sample under a microscope, Gadamer develops hermeneutics as a fusion of past and present [Horizontverschmelzung].222 This permeable and inevitable interrelationship between historical moments forms

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218 Ibid., 308.


221 Gadamer, TM, xxxi.

222 Ibid., 317.
the basis of Gadamer’s understanding of historical consciousness as a separate, superior phenomenon to historicism.

Therefore, Gadamer recognizes historicism to be a school of 19th Century German historians and philosophers who attempted to create a method of historical science in line with the Enlightenment idea of absolute, replicable certainty. But he also sees historicism as what happens when we try to force the world into the procrustean bed of methodical objectivity. It is this anti-methodological ire that causes Gadamer to explore the dialectical back and forth of hermeneutics as a non-specific entryway into the world as we actually experience it. But, before we can understand what hermeneutics is, we need to develop an understanding of how we interact within the flow of time that is history. This is the role of historical consciousness.

**On Historical Consciousness**

Historicism, for Gadamer, emerges from the recognition of historical consciousness. For this reason, it is important to understand what historical consciousness is and how it differs from, but is intertwined with, historicism. Historical consciousness is a genuine aspect of the human experience, but also a newly understood phenomenon that has emerged through and because of our recognition that things change as time passes. This is why Gadamer cannot, in line with Strauss, argue for a return to unhistorical thinking. Instead, Gadamer

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223 In Joel Weisheimer’s terms, “full methodization is impossible.” Any attempt to make the world conform to a method thus deforms a more complete view of human life. See Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, 164.

224 See Strauss, “Progress or Return?,” 264.
argues that “the appearance of historical self-consciousness is very likely the most important revolution among those we have undergone since the beginning of the modern epoch.” Modernity is not inherently a problem for Gadamer. It is only an issue when we learn the wrong lessons about what historical change means.

Consequently, when Gadamer explicitly articulates what historical consciousness means, he insists that “the historical consciousness which characterizes contemporary man is a privilege, perhaps even a burden, the likes of which has never been imposed on any previous generation.” Whereas previous generations could understand themselves on their own terms, Gadamer reveals how such a view is in no longer tenable. The burden of history appears to weigh upon us in a way that it previously did not. Gadamer’s point is that history has always already affected us and we thus misunderstand our relationship to the world by overlooking this vital aspect of human existence.

Gadamer’s defense of his theory of hermeneutics, particularly the endless circle of part and whole into which we must enter, is tied to the way historical consciousness forces us to reflect upon what we are—both as individuals and as members of communities. To say that “today no one can shield himself from this reflexivity characteristic of the modern spirit” is to force us grapple with how we are constructed by and yet still construct the world around us. We have discovered a sense of history as a kind of sixth sense. To have this sense “is to conquer in a consistent manner the natural naiveté which makes us judge the past by the so-

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226 Ibid.

227 Ibid.
called obvious scales of our current life.” Instead of mistakenly believing that our current perspective is objective, Gadamer posits that such understanding is impossible. There is no purely objective access to the world, because we cannot directly observe past events. This is not how we experience reality.

What, then, would allow us to access the world as we actually experience it? According to Gadamer, the tradition itself. Specifically, Gadamer asserts that “modern consciousness—precisely as ‘historical consciousness’—takes a reflexive position concerning all that is handed down by tradition.” Tradition is thus a self-reflexive history of how we have come to understand who we are. Because it is inherently historical, the tradition forms its own medium for “bridging” the apparent gulfs between past and present. It forms the atmosphere in which we think. The problem is that the accumulation of new thoughts and philosophies over millennia can suffocate us. We can become so lost in the accumulations upon accumulations of thoughts that we overlook or forget the questions to which they were originally responding.

228 Ibid.

229 Paul Ricoeur adds that we cannot view the past objectively because, “reality is, in the strict sense of the word, unverifiable. Insofar as it no longer exists, the discourse of history can seek to grasp it only indirectly.” See Paul Ricoeur, “On Interpretation” (1983), _From Text to Action_, Trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson, (London: Continuum, 2008), 1-20, 7.


232 The covering over of original thinking by new thinking is a major theme of the early Heidegger and an important resource for Gadamer’s own work. See Martin Heidegger, _Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity_, Trans. John van Buren, (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1999), 59.
This is why historicism poses such a problem for Gadamer. Even though he investigates the tradition of the historicists as part of the story of the development of hermeneutics, historicism posits that we can understand the tradition apart from and over tradition. Rather than relying upon the web of past thoughts, historicism proposes to cut through the past and present a definitive understanding of what happened. Gadamer thus counters that “historical knowledge cannot be described according to the model of objectivist knowledge because it is itself a process which has all the characteristics of a historical event.”233 Objectivism thus profoundly misunderstands how we experience the past. Our accumulation of information and perspectives may have become a burden, but the attempt to get around these perspectives is akin to getting rid of the atmosphere because breathing is too difficult.

Insofar as modernity represents an improvement over the past, the discovery of scientific method helped awaken our historical sense. Even so, Gadamer fears that an all-consuming obsession with objective methods creates a new kind of prison. After all, the point of René Descartes’s new methodology is that he “has never extended beyond trying to reform [his] own thoughts and to build on a base that is entirely [his] own.”234 That is, Descartes and his modern followers attempt to sever the ligaments of the past that bind us together. While they shook our assumptions about what the past means for us, they did so by making us contemptuous of our own tradition. This is particularly problematic, because we cannot separate


ourselves from the world. We will always smuggle various concepts that helped to construct who we are no matter how hard we try to filter ourselves. Hence, we only learn about the world by getting to know it. This is the essence both of Gadamer’s own education, his Bildung, and the classical Aristotelian view of education.235 Through tradition we learn about the world that preceded us and thus our obligations both to it and to the others who came before and will come after us.

This is why Gadamer writes his own autobiography in addition to theories of hermeneutics, historical consciousness, and historicism. He is not just opining that “school was about wonderful games for the learning of foreign languages. It was about teachers, often so unusual with their tics, their ways of speaking, and especially their vulnerabilities.”236 He is articulating the timelessness of his experience with his particular teachers and predecessors, like Heidegger and Dilthey. He shows how he himself did not learn in a vacuum as part of his polemic against Cartesianism. Rather than shut himself off from the world, he went to live in it.

Hence, Gadamer insists that “historical consciousness is interested in knowing, not how men, people, or states develop in general, but quite on the contrary, how this man, this people, or this state became what it is.”237 Where methods attempt to construct generalizable and reproducible understandings of the world, Gadamer argues that real knowledge stems from the interplay of general

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236 Gadamer, Philosophical Apprenticeships, 2.

ideas and specific instantiations. By cutting ourselves off from the world we always already inhabit, we damage the process through which we actually learn.

It is in this sense that we should approach Gadamer's historical preparation [geschichtliche Vorbereitung] in Part II of Truth and Method. Gadamer is not merely rehashing the development of hermeneutics from Luther to himself. Instead, he is providing a historically conscious history of hermeneutics from its inception in pre-historicism. He is showing us what tradition is and how we live it.

**An Historically Conscious History of Historicism**

Now that I have drawn out what Gadamer means when he uses the terms “historicism” and “historical consciousness,” we can make sense of his retelling of the history of modern history. Although Gadamer is clear that he is preparing the way for his philosophy of hermeneutics, we need to understand why he thinks such preparation is necessary. Why does he present a difficult and arcane history of German historical thinkers when much of what makes Gadamer important for 20th Century thought stems from his general theory of hermeneutic experience? After all, Gadamer himself acknowledges that “the historical sections are, as often happens, so influenced by national traditions of thinking that they are almost unintelligible to a reader of another nationality.”

My argument is that the particularity of Gadamer's historical development is an aspect of his dialectical approach to hermeneutics. Gadamer is harshly critical of historicism precisely because of its attempt to generalize the world methodically. Historicism misunderstands itself as a generality when it is in fact a particular

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worldview that is hostile to other means of interpreting reality. Gadamer thus makes it a point to emphasize the contingencies within the tradition that made his general considerations possible. His work is consciously a fusion of meticulous historical research and general theoretical insight. To privilege generality would merely replicate the problems of natural science while privileging particularity would make any insight Gadamer discovers almost impossible to communicate. By putting particularity and generality in conversation, Gadamer not only models his approach to hermeneutics. He presents the entryway into the circle of thinking that the tradition is.

For our purposes, the key insight that Gadamer hopes to establish in his historical preparation is that “hermeneutics is an art and not mechanical process.” As a matter of principle, he cannot teach us what hermeneutics is by presenting a definition. He has to walk us into the always already existing back and forth of life so that we gradually become aware of it. Gadamer’s approach is disorienting, but his whole point is that “meaning is revealed only in the manner described, in the oscillating movement between whole and part.” We are still free to use all of the tools of the natural sciences, but only when we do not use them to the exclusion of our humanistic and artistic sensibilities. That is, even science is more of an art than a science.

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239 Gadamer writes: “I did not wish to elaborate a system of rules to describe, let alone direct, the methodical procedure of the human sciences. Nor was my aim to investigate the theoretical foundation of work in these fields in order to put my findings to practical ends.” See Gadamer, TM, xxv.

240 Ibid., 196.

241 Ibid., 197.

242 Ibid.
History is thus the central facet of Gadamer's story because it is permeable. It straddles the barriers between art and science in a manner that makes it perfect for overcoming the problem of method. Since, “for the historical school there exists neither an end of history nor anything outside it,” a proper understanding of our place within history frees us from the idea that we can be objective observers. If anything, the fact of our observation makes us active participants who give meaning to past events as we consider them.

Historical consciousness serves the vital role of making us aware of how “history is not at its end, but we interpreters are situated within it, as a conditioned and finite link in a continuing chain.” There is nothing like a Hegelian absolute moment that would allow us to understand everything before and after us. Gadamer is aware that his thinking can, and likely will, be superseded. But, by delving back into the tradition, he shows that such supersession becomes possible only when we understand how the past made our new thinking possible. Against Descartes's method of doubting everything but the fact that he thinks and therefore is [Cogito ergo sum], Gadamer is conscious of how the world already exists before we can ever consider it. This is his insight into “the nature of historical reality: that what has come into being is free, but the freedom from which it comes is always

243 Ibid., 204.

244 Ibid.


246 Descartes, Discourse on Method, 33.
limited by what has come into being – i.e., by the situation into which it comes.”

To be historically conscious is to be aware of the tradition that situates us.

If we ignore the insights of Droysen, Ranke, Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Yorck, Husserl, and Heidegger, Gadamer suggests that we will misunderstand the context that makes his own thinking both possible and accessible. Against the historicist impulse to look at events like discrete objects, Gadamer consistently objects that moments always and inevitably feed into each other. This point is most clear in Gadamer’s encounter with Dilthey, because for him “the ultimate presupposition for knowledge of the historical world is experience [Erlebnis].” This understanding of experience as Erlebnis—a discrete moment frozen like a photograph—is definitionally alienated from other events. In contrast, Gadamer presents a theory of experience as Erfahrung, an aesthetic experience that cannot be methodically defined or categorized. It must instead be mediated through self-reflective appropriation. By retelling Dilthey’s philosophy of objective Erlebnis from the perspective of subjective Erfahrung, Gadamer supersedes his predecessor. He appropriates Dilthey’s historicist insight without becoming entangled in historicism himself.

Therefore, we overcome historicism by appropriating it into our dialectic of historical understanding. We should not abandon the partial thinking of the past. Instead we must constantly retrieve it as part of our inexhaustible creation and

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247 Gadamer, *TM*, 211.

248 Ibid., 226.

249 Ibid., 76.
recreation of the horizon of the present.\textsuperscript{250} History does not have an end, but it does have a progressive direction as long as we properly integrate it into our self-reflections.

\textbf{The Politics of Progress}

Gadamer’s distinction between historicism and historical consciousness has important political ramifications. As Catherine Zuckert emphasizes, by rejecting the hegemony of the natural sciences Gadamer could see that “the idea of the Good does not have the character of a \textit{techne}.”\textsuperscript{251} That is, there is no political skill that we can infinitely train and improve as we can with medicine or chemistry.\textsuperscript{252} Since the human and social sciences require a communal discourse that can accommodate new kinds of challenges as time passes, discourse improves through a broadening of perspectives rather than through specialization. This is the essence of Georgia Warnke’s claim that “the task of both politics and political theory will be to foster a continuing conversation in which different possible self-understandings can find their voices.”\textsuperscript{253} Ideally, Gadamer’s hermeneutics is this continuing conversation.

In this sense, Gadamer’s critique of historicism is that it is definitionally narrow and rigid. Whereas actual human experience has to be fluid in order to make sense of the unceasing change that defines life, historicist methods attempt objectify

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., 317.
\item C.H. Zuckert, \textit{Postmodern Platos}, 75.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
our experiences.\textsuperscript{254} Although the goal of this objectification is to improve our observations of the world, the actual effect is that we attempt to bend reality itself to our inevitably partial models. Gadamer thus contends that we should stop trying to force the world to be what we want it to be. It is better for us to “remain open to the meaning of the other person or text.”\textsuperscript{255}

Historical consciousness serves as a response to historicism precisely because it is a fluid acceptance that much of the world is beyond our understanding. As opposed to creating a single master narrative about what happened in the past, Gadamer attempts to foster a conversation between endless conflicting viewpoints—both scientific and humanistic. Consequently, he presents a form of progress that is inexhaustible because it fuses worldviews. While specialization is necessary for the sake of performing literary criticism, computer programming, statistical analysis, and orthopedic surgery, politics is about living within a community where all of these approaches to life have to coexist.

Even so, our history is not the story of a long and uninterrupted peace. Although Gadamer attempts to justify a progressive communal order, his rehabilitation of tradition can be too all-encompassing. This is the essence of Paul Ricoeur’s observation that “in contrast to the positive assessment by hermeneutics, the theory of ideology adopts a suspicious approach, seeing tradition as merely the systematically distorted expression of communication under unacknowledged conditions of violence.”\textsuperscript{256} By advocating a progressive tradition, Ricouer suggests

\textsuperscript{254} Gadamer, \textit{TM}, 284.

\textsuperscript{255} Ibid., 281.

\textsuperscript{256} Paul Ricoeur, “Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology” (1981), \textit{From Text to Action}, 263-299, 264.
that Gadamer justifies any regime no matter what it did. That is, Gadamer accidentally replicates the “value blindness of historical objectivism” that he was trying to solve.\textsuperscript{257} Rather than overcoming historicism, this would mean Gadamer is only presenting a new, perhaps more reflective, strain.

In the next chapter, I will explore how Gadamer’s explicit articulation of hermeneutics addresses both ideological and conservative critiques. For now, it is sufficient to recall that Gadamer’s critique of historicism provides him the resources to distinguish between justice and injustice. By championing hermeneutic reflection and discourse, Gadamer is holding discourse itself as a normative value. In liberal fashion, he is claiming that structures of communication that foster and protect interrelationships are fundamentally more just than those that stamp out diversity.\textsuperscript{258} In this sense, historicism—as a science of history— is a problem because its obsession with objective, replicable methods stamps out “the influence of the interpreter and his time on understanding.”\textsuperscript{259} It silences the human interrelationships that imbue our lives with meaning. This is similar to how violence is, in part, an attempt to silence dissent and enforce perspectives without discourse.\textsuperscript{260}

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\textsuperscript{257} Gadamer, “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem,” 6.

\textsuperscript{258} More specifically, Gadamer argues that “as soon as one acknowledges that one’s own perspective is utterly different from the viewpoints of the authors and the meanings of the past, there arises the need for a unique effort to avoid misunderstanding the meaning of old texts and yet to comprehend them in their persuasive force.” We have a hermeneutic obligation to recognizes and preserve differences while learning from them. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy,” \textit{Reason in the Age of Science}, 88-112, 98.

\textsuperscript{259} Gadamer, \textit{TM}, 342.

Consequently, the primacy of discourse is itself the essence of Gadamer’s progressive politics. To value discourse is to value the community formed by a peaceful and meaningful exchange of ideas. Historicism frays the communicative faculties that foster traditions, histories, and values. In contrast, historical consciousness—through its self-reflexivity—is open to each of these connective mediums. Hence, by drawing out the dueling implications of historicism and historical consciousness, Gadamer argues that we can improve upon the past by reckoning with its strengths and shortcomings. We can critique the tradition by understanding what is worthy of preservation and what we should never repeat. This is why “even the most genuine and pure tradition does not persist because of the inertia of what once existed. It needs to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated.”

The tradition is not a barrier to understanding. It is the essence of our affirmed values that make communication both possible and desirable.

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261 Gadamer, *TM*, 293.
CHAPTER 3—

OVERCOMING HISTORICISM: HERMENEUTICS PROPERLY UNDERSTOOD

We have to repudiate the illusion of completely illuminating the darkness of our motivations and tendencies.

- Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy,” 1976\textsuperscript{262}

Hermeneutics epitomizes Hans-Georg Gadamer’s major contribution to the philosophical tradition. This circular, self-reflexive doctrine of interpreting ourselves through our own inescapable context orients us within our communities.\textsuperscript{263} It teaches us that even if we can never entirely escape the prejudices that informed us, we can still genuinely understand ourselves and others. But to do so, we must recognize that “there is always a world already interpreted, already organized in its basic relations, into which experience steps as something new, upsetting and undergoing reorganization itself in the upheaval.”\textsuperscript{264} Although our personal histories serve to limit our possibilities, they also function as the medium through which we can transform ourselves and our world.

Under this framework, historicism is a problem because—in Jean Grondin’s words—it’s “pretension to supratemporal truth derives precisely from the denial of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{262} Gadamer, “Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy,” 104.
\item \textsuperscript{263} Gadamer, \textit{TM}, 338.
\item \textsuperscript{264} Gadamer, “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem,” 15.
\end{itemize}
its own historicity." Since hermeneutics is predicated on understanding that we exist within a context that we help to define, historicism disrupts this exchange by causing us to forget our partiality. Hence, in contradistinction to Leo Strauss’s claim that historicism is the assertion “that the local and temporal have a higher value than the universal,” Gadamer counters that we fall into historicism when we forget that “we are mortals and not gods.”

Consequently, much of the Gadamer’s response to historicism focuses on how historical consciousness [geschichtliches Bewußtsein]—“the privilege of modern man to have a full awareness of the historicity of everything present and the relativity of all opinions”—is the basis of the fusion of horizons [Horizontverschmelzung] that actuates hermeneutics. Against the historicist notion that we can “reconstruct history as it once was,” Gadamer articulates hermeneutics as an inexhaustible, anti-methodological dialectic. Its goal is neither to discover unchanging, eternal truths, nor is it to create a certain, objective framing of reality. Instead, hermeneutics is an entryway into the circular meta-structure of question and answer that is human life.

265 Grondin, Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics, 11.
266 Strauss, NRH, 14.
269 Gadamer, TM, 317.
270 Weinsheimer, Gadamer’s Hermeneutics, 134.
271 See Leo Strauss, WIPP, 11.
272 See Descartes, Discourse on Method, 19.
I thus argue that Gadamer overcomes the aporias of historicism by appropriating the desire for objective, final knowledge of history into the definitionally inexhaustible dialogue that is hermeneutics. By treating historicism as one view among many, he enables us to learn from it without corroding other worldviews. As Gadamer writes, “precisely through our finitude, the particularity of our [B]eing, which is evident even in the variety of languages, the infinite dialogue is opened in the direction of the truth that we are.”273 Building upon Martin Heidegger’s assertion that time itself is finite and changing, Gadamer reconstitutes all human understanding as partial.274 We can genuinely understand one another. We can bridge the gaps between cultures and historical eras. But we can do so only if we acknowledge our limits as temporary, partial beings. That is, we must produce a hermeneutically conscious, post-historicist understanding of history.

To pursue my argument, I break this chapter into three sections. First, I define what hermeneutics is and how it functions as Gadamer’s key insight in *Truth and Method*. Although hermeneutics has a long history, Gadamer’s instantiation is a purposefully self-reflexive appropriation of the tradition of hermeneutics. He thus illustrates how we are formed by the contexts that we later transform through our own actions.275

Next, I explain how hermeneutics overcomes historicism. Using my previous distinction between historicism [*Historismus*] and historical consciousness [*geschichtliches Bewußtsein*], I argue that awareness of our partiality opens us to the

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275 Gadamer, *TM*, 305.
tradition as the resource through which we create ourselves. Where historicism creates novel methods to circumvent our prejudices, Gadamer views prejudice itself as the entryway into the process of understanding. He thus appropriates the partial viewpoint of historicism by putting it into conversation with other perspectives—philosophical, literary, theological, biological, and political.

Finally, I consider the implications of applying Gadamer’s post-historicist hermeneutics to politics. While hermeneutics can mediate differences between opposing worldviews, Gadamer still treats it as a master worldview that shapes other perspectives. From its privileged position, hermeneutics can answer Jacques Derrida’s critique that no process can overcome deep-seated disagreement. Yet, in contradistinction to Jürgen Habermas’s “deliberative politics” and John Rawls’s “original position,” Gadamer’s hermeneutics also questions the efficacy of non-coercive methods for obtaining impartial agreements. Although Gadamer shares many of the mediating goals of both methods, he views method itself as a distortion of the human experience.

276 Ibid., 283.
279 In Catherine Zuckert’s terms, “Gadamer argues that knowledge (or, literally, a science) of human existence cannot be achieved using the methods of natural science; it can only be acquired hermeneutically.” While Rawls and Habermas are both sympathetic to discourse, from Gadamer’s perspective they replicate the problems that hermeneutics is supposed to correct. See C.H. Zuckert, Postmodern Platos, 88.
Insofar as methods try to reach absolute assessments, Gadamer counters that all interaction is open to new interpretations, understandings, and applications as our contexts inevitably shift. Since “the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test our prejudices,” there can be no final answer concerning how to live. Instead, we must anchor ourselves to our tradition as the partial, imperfect, but powerful conversation that allows us to consider the fundamental questions of philosophy.

I conclude that hermeneutics serves as Gadamer’s attempt to grapple with the problem of relativism. Whereas Leo Strauss attempts to understand authors as they understood themselves as proof that solid truth exists, Gadamer argues that all understanding must be different because our particularity ensures that every interaction is unique. Rather than collapsing into relativism, however, hermeneutics enables us to apply our considerations to our own lives. By opening ourselves to uncertainty, we restore philosophy to its rightful position as the imperfect, but effective, bridge to understanding. In place of the objective/subjective distinction, we overcome historicism by learning how to participate in the tradition that we are.

What Is Hermeneutics?

At its most basic, hermeneutics means to interpret. The term originates from the Greek hermeneuin and alludes to Hermes, the messenger god who translates

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divine commands into human language. Hermeneutics thus began as a means to clarify difficult, contradictory passages of divine texts, such as the Bible. Even so, the thrust of modern hermeneutics stems from Friedrich Schleiermacher’s recognition that understanding itself is so difficult that we must always interpret the texts we encounter. It is with this recognition that “understanding as such becomes a problem.” There is no methodical way to overcome obstacles to understanding; the recognition of these obstacles is the key to hermeneutic consciousness.

Rather than recapitulating the history of hermeneutics, I use this section to enter into the dialectic that is Gadamerian hermeneutics. Since Gadamer purposefully appropriates the history of hermeneutics as an always already existing background, there is no way to reach its foundation. This is because, in Paul Ricoeur’s words, “history precedes me and my reflection; I belong to history before I belong to myself.” Our definitions and self-understandings are inevitably inflected by the language and thinking that preceded us. We cannot objectively and permanently establish solid foundations, since our situation is always peculiar. Every person lives a particular life within a particular community in a particular

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286 Ibid., 189.

287 Ricoeur, “Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology,” 268.
place at a particular time. To overlook this fundamental experience is to misunderstand how we come to develop genuine thoughts worth sharing.

Against the Cartesian notion that we can create or discover objective methods that perfectly replicate understandings and experiences, Gadamer begins with the particularity of his own life and its incumbent prejudices as the entryway into genuine thinking. Thus, when Gadamer first defines hermeneutics he begins with a description of Heidegger’s virtuous circle of thrownness \([\textit{Geworfenheit}]\) and projection \([\textit{Entwurf}]\) in \textit{Being and Time}.\(^{288}\) Although Gadamer is contending that he can only consider the hermeneutic circle because of his exposure to Heidegger, he is also exhibiting how we think. We do not spawn our ideas out of nowhere. We interpret and appropriate our own experiences and apply them to the world we encounter. We can create and innovate, but only by acknowledging the way our education, environment, and contexts have shaped us.

Gadamer’s innovation over Heidegger’s circle structure \([\textit{Zirkelstruktur}]\) is thus his discovery that hermeneutics is, but is also more than, interpretation. It is in fact a tripartite interrelated circle consisting of interpretation \([\textit{Auslegung}]\), understanding \([\textit{Verstehen}]\), and application \([\textit{Verwendung}]\). As Gadamer writes, “interpretation is not an occasional, post facto supplement to understanding; rather, understanding is always interpretation, and hence interpretation is the explicit form of understanding.”\(^{289}\) This is, but is also more than, an application of Heidegger’s circle of thrownness and projection. By appropriating Heidegger’s circle, Gadamer


\(^{289}\) Gadamer, \textit{TM}, 318.
expands it. He discovers that “understanding here is always application.” Since we can only make sense of Heidegger’s thought by using it, application reveals itself to be a third coequal aspect of hermeneutics. Theoretical interpretation is thus an indelible aspect of action. The apparently abstract task of reading is integral to making sense of our place within the world.

In practice, this means that we should approach the universal process of Gadamerian hermeneutics the way we read books. Today, anything can be a text, but the principles of interpreting texts are still like that of reading. According to Gadamer, this is because “a person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting.” When we read a book, like *Truth and Method*, we cannot understand the whole thing at once. We look at the cover, open the book, turn the pages, and then read the first words and sentences. We begin with parts but we “[project] a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text.” This is a phenomenological point. Although we almost immediately generate general interpretations of texts, we always begin with the part and not the whole.

Still, we are not trapped by our partiality. We revise our understandings as we read more chapters, talk with friends and colleagues, read secondary sources, and even reread the text. Hence, “working out this fore-projection [Vorentwurf], which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as [we penetrate] into the meaning, is understanding what is there.” This is why Richard Palmer observes

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290 Ibid., 320.
291 Ibid., 279.
292 Ibid.
293 Ibid.
that “truth is not reached methodically, but dialectically.” Any information can potentially become relevant to our grappling with a text. It is a mistake to apply a consistent method for reading beyond observing the back and forth of part and whole.

Critics such as E.D. Hirsch chide Gadamer because his dialectical “approach” gives us no way to arbitrate between good and bad interpretations. Hirsch even claims that this methodological inability to judge makes Gadamer a “historical relativist.” Yet this reproach requires Hirsch to view Gadamerian hermeneutics as consisting only of interpretation and understanding. By actively dissociating interpretation from action, it appears that Gadamer’s textual insights are irrelevant at best and obstructive at worst. But, when G.B. Madison counters that “theory is always the theory of a certain praxis,” he reminds us that application is a coequal aspect of the hermeneutic circle. As Gadamer writes, “the interpreter dealing with a traditionary text tries to apply it to himself.” Since we live our lives by applying our interpretations to the world, we can evaluate them by considering how they improve or hinder our experiences.

Whereas Gadamer’s application of interpretation to life may appear arbitrary to Hirsch, it is in fact a purposeful appropriation of Aristotelian prudence

294 Palmer, Hermeneutics, 165.


297 Gadamer, TM, 333.
We cannot have a solid framework telling us what to do in any specific moment, because each moment is unique. This clash between the universal and the particular reveals that “the heart of the hermeneutical problem is that one and the same tradition must time and again be understood in a different way.” In order to transcend this issue, we must apply our understanding like a judge attempting to hand down the most just ruling for a particular case. Although our tradition gives us the resources to decide, we must ultimately make our own decisions. This capacity to choose is “the unique and specific characteristic of human being.” To impose a method over our humanity is to prevent us from applying the prudence that would help us make good judgments.

Thus, although textual analysis serves as our initial ingress into the universal scope of hermeneutics, the main text of human experience is tradition [Überlieferung—literally handing over]. Humanity exists within and as its own history. To access the thinking of the past, we need to recognize how we form links in the chain of tradition that preceded and will (hopefully) outlast us. This is the essence of Gadamer’s claim that “understanding is to be thought of less as a

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300 Gadamer, “Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy,” 95.

301 Ibid., 91.

302 Michael Walzer’s understanding of the moral world resonates with Gadamer’s depiction of tradition. While both are partial, they are also the homes in which we live. Specifically, Walzer observes that “the moral world has a lived in quality, like a home occupied by a single family over many generations, with unplanned additions here and there, and all the available space filled with memory laden objects and artifacts.” See Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 20.
subjective act than as a participation in an event of tradition.”

To interpret the world around us is to apply our understandings to reality. Our application serves to transform our surroundings, but this transformation is just as much a preservation of the past as it is the creation of a new future.

The tradition is, but it is also more than, the history of humanity’s self-reflections about what we are. It is the culture we were born in, the languages we have learned, the sports and games that we play, and the principles that we cherish. We might believe that we can escape from tradition, as Heidegger asserts, but Gadamer’s point is that such an attempt misunderstands what we are. Tradition is not a barrier to the fundamental core of humanity—our *Dasein*—but the material that allows us to make sense of ourselves. Therefore, against his own mentor, Gadamer counters that “tradition is not simply a permanent precondition; rather, we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves.”

Where Heidegger chooses to abandon hermeneutics in his quest to transcend the Western tradition, Gadamer appropriates Heidegger himself by recapturing his insights. Although there will never be a final interpretation of any given phenomenon, we can still affect the world around us by adding to, challenging, or otherwise reorienting the tradition into which we were thrown. In Michael Walzer’s

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305 Gadamer, *TM*, 305.


terms, the tradition is a common possession, “but common possession does not imply agreement.” Our goal should not be to escape or deconstruct the tradition as Heidegger and Derrida attempt, but instead to transform it through discourse with others who have different perspectives. This is the fusion of horizons that forms the basis of Gadamer’s historically conscious challenge to historicism. We come to understand more about ourselves both by encountering foreign perspectives and by trying to reformulate our views based upon these encounters.

Hermeneutics is thus a universal appropriation of textual interpretation since it attempts to make different, foreign concepts familiar. Gadamer asserts that “historical understanding proves to be a kind of literary criticism writ large” specifically because literature is a window into the apparently impenetrable minds of others. In line with Richard Rorty’s recognition of the importance of the novelist’s keen eye for details, Gadamer argues that we discover our universality by seeing what we share in our human, all too human particularities. If historicism is an attempt to establish an objective, impartial science of history, then hermeneutics is the recognition that “the understanding historian does not simply stand over against his object, historical life, but is himself part of the same

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308 Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, 32.


310 Ibid., 348.


movement of historical life.” Our goal is to understand one another as living beings, not to dissect one another on medical tables.

A Hermeneutical Appropriation of Historicism

Gadamer’s critique of historicism is intricately intertwined with his harsh critique of the Enlightenment methodologies first developed by René Descartes. Although historicists, like Wilhelm Dilthey, see themselves as critics of the Enlightenment’s privileging of reason, Gadamer still critiques Dilthey because he retains the quest for objectivity that Descartes championed. According to Gadamer, both are “following the rule of Cartesian doubt, accepting nothing as certain that can in any way be doubted, and adopting the idea of method that follows from this rule.” Although Descartes ultimately founds a new kind of tradition centered on his methodology, Gadamer views this transformation as a misstep. It distorts the way that we begin from prejudices, literally pre-judgments, when we think. Given that Gadamer explicitly defines historicism as an attempt to complete the methodical, objective project of the Enlightenment, I thus articulate Gadamer’s response to historicism by drawing out his response to the Enlightenment.

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313 Gadamer, “Hermeneutics and Historicism,” 529.
314 Gadamer, TM, 241, 283.
315 Ibid., 284.
316 Gadamer, “Hermeneutics and Historicism,” 553.
In contradistinction to Strauss’s doctrine of return,\textsuperscript{317} Gadamer attempts to overcome historicism by drawing it into the conversation that is hermeneutics. When Gadamer observes that “even Descartes, that great and passionate advocate for method and certainty, is in all his writings an author who uses the means of rhetoric in a magnificent fashion,” his point is that the natural sciences cannot speak for themselves.\textsuperscript{318} Science is neither self-evident, nor is its reasoning inherently persuasive. Truth is a function of communicative understanding rather than of methodological rigor. Science still plays a vital role in helping us to understand ourselves and each other, but this is as one perspective among many. Hence, to overcome historicism is to remove it from its perch as the arbiter of truth and to restore the humanities [$Geisteswissenschaften$] as coequal partners in discourse.

While Gadamer’s major concern is conserving the tradition that the sciences ignore, he is still fundamentally progressive because he appropriates even missteps as important aspects of developing communal self-understandings of who we are. We approach truth by fusing different perspectives into larger, more responsive worldviews rather than discarding apparent dead ends.\textsuperscript{319} This is in part Gadamer’s appropriation of “the all-encompassing synthesis of Hegel,” but it is also his recognition that humanistic understanding functions as a broadening of

\textsuperscript{317} See Strauss, “Progress or Return?,” 264.


\textsuperscript{319} Gadamer, \textit{TM}, 317.
perspectives.\footnote{Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Heritage of Hegel” (1979), \textit{Reason in the Age of Science}, 38-68, 39. (Gadamer, THe Heritage of Hegel 1981)} Since the natural sciences depend upon sharpening and specialization through method, they are ill-suited to grasping human nature even if they are excellent at inventing new and surprising technologies.

The major problem of historicism, and by extension the Enlightenment, is that it misunderstands the role of prejudice in self-understanding. As Grondin writes, “historicism, while recognizing the universal historicity of all human knowledge, nevertheless aims at something like absolute knowledge.”\footnote{Grondin, \textit{Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics}, 111.} Historicism attempts to replicate natural scientific certainty even though it recognizes that our prejudices ensure that we can never have absolute, final, or otherwise objective knowledge.

This is why Gadamer insists that “the recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice gives the hermeneutical problem its real thrust.”\footnote{Gadamer, \textit{TM}, 283.} Our goal is not to eliminate our prejudices, but to accept them as the entryway into the inexhaustible self-reflective process of learning who we are. While in scientific investigations human fallibility is an obstacle to discovery and invention, this imperfection is precisely the essence of our humanity. Rather than attempting to eliminate our subjectivities in the quest for objectivity,\footnote{For this reason, Weinsheimer argues that, “from Gadamer’s perspective, objectivism and subjectivism amount to much the same thing.” Both perspectives suggest that there is a complete, non-dialectical way to understand the world around us. See Joel Weinsheimer, \textit{Philosophical Hermeneutics and Literary Theory}, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 13.} we need to
recognize that method overestimates its abilities when it tries to apply itself to nonscientific endeavors.

Any attempt to isolate and control for our prejudices only leads us to misunderstand how prejudices continue to shape us. We need to appreciate, as Ricoeur does, that “prejudice ... is a component of understanding, linked to the finite historical character of the human being.” To forget this vital role of prejudice is to distort our perception by fooling ourselves into believing that we can control a world that is always beyond our grasp. We must rely upon our prejudices because we are incapable of stepping out of history to view it objectively. Since “to be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete,” we must modestly accept our partial, prejudiced limitations.

Therefore, Gadamer’s concern is his observation that “the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which denies tradition its power.” This critique is two-fold. First, Enlightenment-historicism misunderstands itself. Its confidence that it can overcome prejudice stems from its belief that its perspective is objective as opposed to a new kind of prejudice. Yet, as Georgia Warnke writes, “no understanding is objective in a Cartesian sense; all understanding rather involves projections of meaning that arise out of one’s own situation and go beyond observable facts.”

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324 Ricoeur, “Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology,” 271.
325 Gadamer, TM, 313.
326 Ibid., 283.
Our partiality ensures that there is no way to remove doubt as Descartes hopes. To overcome doubt, we would have to have access to the whole of history and everything that has occurred. But, because we live within and as our history, we will never see that end. Hermeneutics is a more honest approach to making sense of ourselves since it is, in part, the recognition that we cannot and should not remove doubt. In Platonic fashion, Gadamer is open to “the knowledge of not knowing” that both the Enlightenment and historicism attempt to supersede.  

More importantly, Enlightenment-historicism cuts us off from the tradition itself. Because it views past perspectives as unacceptably prejudiced, modern historicism attempts to create a new, non-traditional foundation of historical knowledge. Rather than interacting with past cultures and thinkers as fellow interlocutors, this new history treats the past as something upon which we can justifiably impose our own interpretations. According to Gadamer, this is why “Schleiermacher asserts that the aim is to understand a writer better than he understood himself.” By recognizing that we have made new discoveries about our relationship to time, Schleiermacher thinks that he has access to the objectivity that past thought lacked. We do not need to take the tradition seriously, because we have new theoretical tools that correct for the problem of prejudice.  

Gadamer’s response to the “prejudice against prejudice itself” is to develop historical consciousness as a hermeneutic appropriation of the discovery of historical change. Gadamer readily admits that “the emergence of historical consciousness over the last few centuries is a much more radical rupture” than even the Cartesian

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328 Gadamer, TM, 370.

329 Ibid., 198.
methodization of doubt.\textsuperscript{330} But, for him, consciousness of history is a reason to take the tradition even more seriously. Because we are aware of our particularities and shortcomings, we need to delve into the resources of the past to observe how other people in other times with other priorities dealt with their problems. We need the tradition, and its incumbent prejudices, to teach us what can happen when we apply our thoughts to actions.

Against both Descartes and Schleiermacher, Gadamer contends that “what appears to be a limiting prejudice from the viewpoint of the absolute self-construction of reason in fact belongs to historical reality itself.”\textsuperscript{331} By rehabilitating prejudice as our entry point into history, Gadamer reinterprets modernity as a development of the past as opposed to a break with it. Where Descartes turns his reflection inward until he discovers that he thinks, therefore he is,\textsuperscript{332} Gadamer externalizes reflection onto tradition as the history of reflections on what we, as humans, are. This is the essence of Gadamer’s assertion that “historically effected consciousness [\textit{wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein}] is primarily consciousness of the hermeneutical situation.”\textsuperscript{333} History is not dead after it happens; its ripple effect into the present is an indelible facet of how moments unfold across the apparent gaps of time and place.

Since historicism is predicated upon past moments being unchanging, disconnected things, historicists assert that tradition is a calcification of

\textsuperscript{330} Ibid., xxiii.

\textsuperscript{331} Ibid., 289.

\textsuperscript{332} Descartes, \textit{Discourse on Method}, 33.

\textsuperscript{333} Gadamer, \textit{TM}, 312.
misunderstandings as opposed to a resource for transforming the present.\textsuperscript{334} For historicism, the tradition is an obstacle; for hermeneutics, the tradition is the atmosphere in which we think. This is the essence of Habermas’s contention that “the history of the text’s influence is only the chain of past interpretations through which the interpreter’s preunderstanding is objectively mediated with his object, even if this occurs without the interpreter’s awareness.”\textsuperscript{335} We can attempt to access texts as their author’s intended them, but later interpretations are themselves the expression of a text’s influence upon history. They cannot and should not be separated from the meaning inherent in textuality.

Consequently, Gadamer’s response to historicism is that it misunderstands how we grapple with reality. By overlooking how we enmesh ourselves within our historical context, historicism proves itself unable to establish the permanent, objective knowledge that would justify invalidating the humanities. In contrast, Gadamer underscores “the productivity of the historical process” precisely because this temporal dimension reveals what has and has not survived the march of time.\textsuperscript{336} Because hermeneutical reflection recognizes how we constantly reinterpret the past for the sake of applying our thoughts to the present, it serves as the arbiter of value. While historicism, hermeneutics, Gadamer, Heidegger, Schleiermacher, Plato, Hegel, and Aristotle have all become constellations in our tradition, it is only through the passage of time that we discover what thoughts remains persuasive. We

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must recognize persuasion itself as the essence of how we apply our interpretations to our lives as members of communities. This is why Michael Walzer argues that “morality, in other words, is something we have to argue about.”

**Hermeneutics as Politics**

Although hermeneutics is certainly Gadamer’s major contribution to the philosophic tradition, we still need to understand what it means to apply hermeneutics to politics. In practice, Gadamer’s thinking requires us to use hermeneutics as a meta-perspective that mediates opposing worldviews, even though each perspective has some claim to validity. As Leo Strauss observes, Gadamer undertakes “the philosophic task of understanding the universal structure common to all historical worlds.” This is why Gadamer is so critical of the idea of method.

If hermeneutics becomes a method, then it replicates the quest for objectivity that hinders both Cartesianism and historicism. Yet, if hermeneutics remains as a porous meta-approach, then we can maintain our recognition of the partiality that captures what our human experience is. It is in this vein that Georgia Warnke argues that “the most important implication of a hermeneutic approach to issues of justice seems ... to be the centrality it requires of a notion of hermeneutic conversation.” While conversation emerges as the key to applying hermeneutics to politics, we must still determine what this conversation entails and whether it is

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337 Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, 32.

338 Strauss, “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy,” 3.

possible to maintain a non-methodological orientation to the world. My goal in this section is to explain what it means to apply hermeneutics to politics and whether this approach is superior to post-Gadamerian re-appropriations of method.

While historicism is too rigid to accommodate the unexpected emergencies that Aristotelian prudence adjudicates, the hermeneutical dialectic is so open that it risks providing only superficial answers to our most pressing questions. Gadamer's preliminary response is that “what man needs is not just the persistent posing of ultimate questions, but the sense of what is feasible, what is possible, what is correct here and now.” Since communities must face problems together, this shared experience should enable us to act together politically. Although Gadamer, like Strauss, promotes the primacy of questions over answers, he also recognizes that politics is defined by applying necessarily insufficient answers to the overarching questions that shape our traditions.

There are two major obstacles to applying Gadamerian hermeneutics to politics. The first is the inherent difficulty of forging agreement, even in liberal democratic societies. Just because we converse with one another does not mean that we will come to a shared understanding. Even if we do understand each other, this does not mean that we will have the same ends. It is just as possible that we will discover irreconcilable disagreements that no amount of mediation can overcome.

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341 Ibid., 371.


343 Carl Schmitt’s friend-enemy distinction is relevant to this point. Since he believes that all politics is based upon invariable antinomies, broad agreement is impossible. Instead, one party actuates its will with force or the threat of force. Victory in politics goes to the
This is the essence of Jacques Derrida’s challenge to Gadamer. He argues that hermeneutics requires “good will—the condition for consensus even in disagreement.”\textsuperscript{344} He then demonstrates his point by refusing to debate with Gadamer in good faith. By denying an interest in even forming agreements, Derrida suggests that hermeneutical politics is empty. It lacks the sense of urgency and specificity needed to forge political action.

Gadamer responds that “whoever opens his mouth wants to be understood; otherwise one would neither speak nor write.”\textsuperscript{345} Even though Derrida attempts to deconstruct Gadamer’s commitment to hermeneutics, Gadamer contends that this is still an engagement in debate. Both agree that the question of interpretation is worth discussing. This is why Darren Walhof observes that “understanding, ..., involves neither my adoption of your views nor your adoption of my views, but a coming-into-language of something that is common to us.”\textsuperscript{346} Gadamer’s goal is not to replace scientific certainty with a new form of hermeneutical certainty, but instead to establish an understanding of what discourse is.\textsuperscript{347} Against Derrida, Gadamer treats the resilience of the tradition as proof that meaning does not break down in our modern world.\textsuperscript{348}

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\item[D\textsuperscript{344}] Derrida, “Three Questions to Hans-Georg Gadamer,” 53.
\item[H\textsuperscript{345}] Hans-Georg Gadamer, Reply to Jacques” (1981), \textit{Dialogue & Deconstruction}, 55-57, 55.
\item[G\textsuperscript{347}] Gadamer, \textit{TM}, 240.
\item[I\textsuperscript{348}] Ibid., 301.
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While Richard Bernstein argues that “Gadamer himself is unwittingly a victim of the Cartesian persuasion that he is reflecting against,” Gadamer’s recognition of the limitations of hermeneutics chastens this assessment. Gadamer actively “[concedes] that the hermeneutical experience has a far less degree of certainty than that attained by the methods of the natural sciences.” Because preservation, as opposed to certainty, defines the hermeneutical approach to tradition, Gadamer can stake out a position between Derrida and Descartes. He can maintain the dimension of the classical—“preservation amid the ruins of time”—within his modern framework. This is why Gadamer believes that we can bridge understandings across the chasms of time without binding ourselves to sciences of reason or history. Even under circumstances of profound disagreement, we are not inherently trapped in the dissolution of meaning that Derrida posits. This is because traditions are predicated upon preserving disagreements worth considering in addition to the agreements we take for granted.

This leads to a second major obstacle to applying Gadamerian hermeneutics to politics. Although Gadamer can defend hermeneutics against the charge of relativism, he also needs a response against post-hermeneutical methodologies. For example, Jürgen Habermas posits an objective, or at least intersubjective, approach to discourse that claims to have appropriated and superseded Gadamer’s own

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352 Ibid., 317.
insights. This is the essence of Habermas’s assertion that “the confrontation of ‘truth’ and ‘method’ should not have led Gadamer to an abstract opposition between hermeneutic experience and methodical knowledge as a whole.”353 In Gadamerian fashion, Habermas attempts to fuse the horizons of hermeneutics and methodology that Gadamer himself separates.

One response to Habermas’s appropriation of Gadamer is to treat new methodologies as progressive corrections to hermeneutics. Since hermeneutics is itself predicated on an endless interconnected process of interpretation, understanding, and application, the fusion of horizons “means that as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded.”354 By positing an inexhaustible, non-methodological dialectic, Gadamer opens the possibility that later thinkers can build upon his work to establish insights that he himself thought impossible.

Although Gadamer believes that we can never overcome our prejudices,355 it is perhaps possible to control for them once a hermeneuticist, such as Gadamer himself, alerts us to their existence. It is this kind of recognition that guides John Rawls’s “original position” as a thought experiment wherein “the parties are not allowed to know the social positions or the particular comprehensive doctrines of the persons they represent.”356 This same recognition spurs Habermas’s own attempt to construct an embedded democratic procedure wherein “deliberations are free of any

353 Habermas, On the Logic of the Social Sciences, 167.

354 Gadamer, TM, 317.


internal coercion that could detract from the equality of the participants.”

A hermeneutically inflected method can in theory control for prejudices through an awareness of them.

However, Gadamer is dissatisfied with such neo-methodological approaches. They attempt to cut off important humanistic aspects of debate that allow us to transcend from private perspectives into language. As Catherine Zuckert writes, “in contrast to Habermas, who regards appeals to emotions to be essentially coercive because they are not purely rational, Gadamer thinks that rhetoric may legitimately be utilized in achieving such an agreement.”

Although we can fuse our understandings with others to create broader, more reflective worldviews, we cannot and should not erase our particularities. Since, as Ricoeur observes, “universality is not abstract; it is, for each investigator, centered on a dominant problematic, a privileged experience,” we must be able to use our individual experiences in dialogue.

The point of post-historicist hermeneutics is to break the stranglehold of scientific reason as the sole arbiter of truth. Against the notion that we can objectively understand history, religion, philosophy, and literature, Gadamer counters that the humanities and the sciences are in fact elements of a larger discourse defined by “the primacy of dialogue and the structure of question and answer.”

This interplay is actualized by using language to persuade ourselves and

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357 Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 305.


359 Ricoeur, “Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology,” 265.

others that one interpretation of a phenomenon is superior to another. While Habermas believes that he is improving upon Gadamer, he is restoring the scientific reason that Gadamer is critiquing. In this restoration of science, Habermas accidentally closes off the linguistic interactions that best teach us who our fellow citizens, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances are.

By establishing philosophical hermeneutics as a phenomenological account of what interpretation, understanding, and application are, Gadamer reveals “the real fundamental nature of a question: namely to make things indeterminate.” While this uncertainty seems insecure in comparison with the certainties of rational science, Gadamer underscores the nature of prejudice as proof that reason itself rests upon unexamined assumptions. To be aware that we can never overcome our prejudices is to find comfort in our insecurity.

Ironically, hermeneutic transcendence is predicated upon accepting that some problems cannot be overcome. In the spirit of the early Heidegger, we should “wish to increase and keep awake philosophy’s need to be ever turning on preliminary questions, so much so that it will indeed become a virtue.” It is through this recognition that we can make advances in medicine, biology, physics, and chemistry while still appreciating the necessary insights of philosophy, theology, literature, and politics. Although this means that Gadamer is prepared to prioritize

361 Specifically, Gadamer writes that “language is not a mere instrument or a special capacity with which humanity is endowed; rather it is the medium in which we live from the outset as social natures and which holds open the totality within which we live our lives.” See Hans-Georg Gadamer, “On the Philosphic Element in the Sciences and the Scientific Character of Philosophy,” 6.

362 Gadamer, TM, 383.

hermeneutical understanding, it is because he believes that this approach best
manages the inevitable collisions of conflicting worldviews.

Even so, it remains to be seen if Gadamer’s understanding of historicism as
an attempt to make the humanities into sciences is sufficient. While Strauss and
Gadamer both agree that we need a Socratic openness to knowing what we do not
know, they have different assessments of how serious the problem of historicism is.
Where, for Gadamer, historicism is a kind of category error—treating things that are
not sciences as sciences—, for Strauss the problem is more radical.

Strauss treats historicism as a crisis that threatens to destabilize, if not
destroy, the West as a tradition.364 He contends that “the thesis of radical
historicism can be stated as follows: all understanding, all knowledge, however
limited and ‘scientific,’ presupposes a frame of reference; it proposes a horizon, a
comprehensive view within which understanding and knowing take place.”365 That
is, there are no overarching fundamental questions that transcend our partial
perspectives. There are no eternal truths, or at least questions, that would make it
possible to fuse our horizons and understand each other as Gadamer desires.
Therefore, in my next chapter I turn to Strauss’s doctrine of return as an alternative
response to the problem that historicism—particularly in its radical variation—
represents.

364 Strauss, CM, 3.
365 Strauss, NRH, 26.
CHAPTER 4—

OVERCOMING HISTORICISM: RETURN PROPERLY UNDERSTOOD

Within a living tradition, the new is not the opposite of the old but its deepening: one does not understand the old in its depth unless one understands it in the light of such deepening; the new does not emerge through the rejection or annihilation of the old but through its metamorphosis or reshaping.

- Leo Strauss, Preface to *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 1965

Leo Strauss’s doctrine of return is simultaneously one of his most enduring and most misunderstood teachings. Critics insist that his call to return to pre-modern, classical thinking is proof that Strauss is a secret partisan of tyranny hoping to destroy liberal democracy. Even scholars friendly to Strauss are split on what exactly he means by return. Catherine and Michael Zuckert are right to underscore how Strauss’s project is “the restoration of Socratic philosophy” as “political philosophy in the original and still valid sense.” But this restoration is ambiguous enough that Mark Lila can insist that Strauss unhesitatingly chose the

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369 Zuckert and Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy*, 338.
position of the classics while Stanley Rosen could counter that “it should be easy to see that the recommendation of a return to the past is the mark of a modern.”

Part of the confusion over what Strauss’s return means is that, as Thomas Pangle observes, “we cannot simply return to the ancients: we have to reopen the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns.” Even in *The City and Man*, one of Strauss’s most thorough considerations of return, he is clear that “only we living today can possibly find a solution to the problems of today.” This is because Strauss is interested in return as a response to the crisis of historicism—the collapse of faith in our culture that causes us to doubt the value both of maintaining society and of practicing philosophy as the quest for unchanging knowledge. His goal is not to transport us back to ancient Athens or Jerusalem. Instead, he wants to recover “the elementary Socratic question of how one ought to live.” By grasping this problem as a problem “no more is needed to legitimize philosophy in its original Socratic sense: philosophy is knowledge that one does not know, or awareness of fundamental problems.”

I thus argue in this chapter that Strauss’s concept of return is a return to non-historicist—and thus timeless—philosophy. Against Martin Heidegger’s assertion that “a revival [of Greek philosophy], even if such an impossibility were

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371 Rosen, “Leo Strauss and the Problem of the Modern,” 120.


375 Strauss, *NRH*, 32.
possible, would be no help to us,” Strauss contends that the universal nature of fundamental questions makes return both possible and even necessary. As Gregory Bruce Smith writes, “we begin from a reflection on the ancient authors to recover the necessary point of departure for philosophy. We do not begin from the ancients to ultimately end in the same place.” Insofar as modern political philosophy has gone astray we need to return to its pre-modern foundations in order to discover whether we can correct ourselves.

Return functions as a propaedeutic. It is a preparation for the practice of the eternal, or at least “trans-political, trans-religious, and trans-moral” thinking that historicism—as a denial of the unchanging things—depreciates. This is why Strauss suggests that “man cannot say Yes to the philosophers of the future without saying Yes to the past.” More than an echo of Nietzsche’s “eternal return,” Strauss is suggesting that we can only understand our future possibilities by understanding the past as it was. Against Hans-Georg Gadamer’s Hegelian use of a “fusion of horizons” that progressively overcomes differences by putting them into

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378 Strauss poetically refers to this phenomenon as “a deep pit beneath the cave” Socrates describes in The Republic. What moderns believe is an ascent to knowledge reveals itself as a delusion deeper than our initial naiveté. See Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing155.


conversation,\textsuperscript{381} Robert Pippin sums up Strauss’s position in two words: “no reconciliation.”\textsuperscript{382}

Strauss unequivocally rejects the modern dream of synthesis because he contends that “men are not simply wiser and gentler than they were in older times. The belief in progress must be qualified with a view to the fact that human nature does not change.”\textsuperscript{383} This unchanging nature allows us to understand one another despite the barriers of time and place. It is also the reason why fundamental tensions inherent in the foundation of human culture cannot be overcome. We can acknowledge that science and technology have made astonishing discoveries in manipulating the world, and even human bodies, while still contemplating the same question of how to live.

Rather than providing a single answer to the question of how to live a good life, fundamental questions reveal the underlying alternatives that define the West: Athens vs. Jerusalem, ancients vs. moderns, and philosophy vs. politics. As Strauss argues in \textit{The City and Man}, “because of the elusiveness of the whole, the beginning or the questions retain a greater evidence than the end or the answers, return to the beginning remains a constant necessity.”\textsuperscript{384} We cannot simply fuse our understandings with others to solve our problems. Although “finite, relative problems can be solved; absolute problems cannot be solved.”\textsuperscript{385} Hence, we need to

\textsuperscript{381} Gadamer, \textit{TM}, 317.


\textsuperscript{383} Strauss, \textit{CM}, 235.

\textsuperscript{384} Ibid., 21.

\textsuperscript{385} Strauss, “Preface to the English Translation,” 6.
return to the questions themselves as an acknowledgment of these deep, irresolvable tensions. We need to articulate our problems honestly, even if this rules out the possibility of achieving the completeness that we crave.

To approach the problem of return I break my analysis into two parts. In the first, I articulate what return means on its own terms. To this end, I present an in-depth interpretation of Strauss’s lectures on “Progress or Return?,” while drawing on other relevant texts that shed light on his apparently puzzling observations. Here, I argue that return, in its many forms, is ultimately an attempt to understand fundamental questions as questions. That is, return is the recognition that we do not know what the good life itself is, even if we can consider key tensions as the set of possible alternatives.

Next, I consider how return answers, or at least reframes, the aporias of historicism. If historicism is “the doctrine that ‘everything is historical,’ i.e., that it is not possible to make a clear-cut distinction between the invariable (‘eternal’) and the variable elements of human things,” then I argue that the restoration of the capacity to distinguish between kinds of incommensurate lifestyles overcomes the crisis historicism represents.386 Since historicism *cum* nihilism rests upon the assumption we cannot understand other eras, Strauss uses the resilience of fundamental questions as proof that classical philosophy, in its original sense, is still possible.387 My argument here is that return is non-temporal. Strauss’s goal is not to go back to another time or innovate upon a foundation, but to prove that unhistorical thinking is the one thing needful in our era of radical historicism.

386 Strauss, “Historicism,” 73.

I carry out my investigation in the spirit of Allen Bloom’s observation that Strauss “looked to the origins, because there the arguments for a position are usually made more seriously than later when they are already victorious and have the self-evidence which attaches to success.”\(^{388}\) Strauss’s goal in returning to the past is not simply to see what survives Gadamer’s “preservation amid the ruins of time.”\(^{389}\) Instead, he intends to discover what our most serious questions are by turning to “the fertile moment when all political traditions were shaken, and there was not yet in existence a tradition of political philosophy.”\(^{390}\) This moment, though Greek, stands as a timeless position free of the noise of thousands upon thousands of years of conflicting interpretations. After all, “the peak of Greekness is the peak of humanity.”\(^{391}\)

**What Is Return?**

Return is a concept so central to Strauss’s thinking that it recurs constantly throughout his work. Although Strauss uses return in the nostalgic sense of going back to a past time when life was better, he has a more sophisticated definition in mind. As Strauss reminisces with his lifelong friend Jacob Klein, return means “the possibility of a genuine return to classical philosophy, to the philosophy of Aristotle and of Plato, a return with open eyes and in full clarity about the difficulties to

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\(^{388}\) Bloom, “Leo Strauss,” 375.


\(^{390}\) Leo Strauss, *WIPP*, 27.

which it entails.”

More than a restoration of a lost way of living, Strauss intends to demonstrate that classical philosophy, like Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*, “is meant to be a possession for all times.”

Strauss most thoroughly examines return in a series of aptly titled lectures he delivered at the University of Chicago’s Hillel House in 1952. These lectures—“Progress or Return?”—thus serve as the point of departure for this chapter. Insofar as Strauss contrasts return to the ancients with contemporary accounts of progress, he recovers a fundamental question so basic that we almost intuitively overlook it: Should we walk the path of “progress or return?” Should we continue to live as we have been living or should we stop and reevaluate our ideas about the good life? In this sense, return is not itself the answer to the crisis of modernity, but a question meant to guide us once we realize that we are lost.

To articulate Strauss’s understanding of return, I quote his introduction to “Progress or Return?” in full:

The title of this lecture indicates that progress has become a problem—that it could seem as if progress has led to the brink of an abyss, and it is therefore necessary to consider alternatives to it. For example, to stop where we are or else, if this should be possible, to return. Return is the translation for the Hebrew word *t’shuvah*. *T’shuvah* has an ordinary and an emphatic meaning. Its emphatic meaning is rendered in English by “repentance.” Repentance is return, meaning the return from the wrong way to the right one. This implies that we were once on the right way before we turned to the wrong way. Originally we were on the right way; deviation or sin or imperfection is not original. Man is originally at home in his father’s house. He becomes a stranger through estrangement, through sinful estrangement. Repentance, return, is homecoming.

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393 Strauss, *CM*, 142.

394 Leo Strauss, “Progress or Return?,” 249.
In this single paragraph, Strauss spins a multitude of threads: 1) progress has become problematic, 2) return is experimental; it is not clear that return will save us from the “abyss” Strauss claims is at the end of the path of progress, 3) return has Jewish, biblical roots, 4) there is potentially a right path of thinking, and 5) return is a home, a place where we can find security, family, and even purpose. Although these threads are intertwined, I untangle Strauss’s knot by approaching them one at a time.

*The Problem with Progress*

Progress has become problematic. If progress were working for us, if scientific discoveries continued heap reward upon reward upon us, then we would have no need to question our goals. But something has changed. By 1952, some of the problems with progress had time to become obvious. Although the allies defeated Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union rose as a powerful challenge to American liberalism and multiple countries were already testing their own atomic weapons. Proponents of Enlightenment reason promised solutions to the ills of sickness, destitution, and dogmatism. But by the time of the Cold War we could see the Enlightenment’s dark side: its weapons, its brutality, and its unparalleled capacity for destruction.

Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union were two of the world’s most modern countries, yet they presented immoderate, terrifying examples of what modernity run amok could do. As Strauss observes at the end of the first section of *What is...*  

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395 Leora Batnizky suggests that “the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns for Strauss is about the excesses of the moderns and the moderation of the ancients.” The problem with modernity is not that its ideas are inherently bad, but that it immoderately attempts to eradicate problems coeval with human being. See Leora Batnziky, “Leo Strauss...”
Political Philosophy?: “The biggest event of 1933 would rather seem to have proved, if such a proof was necessary, that man cannot abandon the question of the good society, and that he cannot free himself from the responsibility for answering it by deferring to History or to any other power different from his own reason.”396 By forgetting the responsibility of asking fundamental questions, Strauss suggests that modern regimes—like Nazi Germany—would be inclined to indulge their most immoderate, dangerous impulses. Empowered by their admittedly puissant technology, they would overestimate their ability to recreate the world in their own image.

Even in America, Strauss could plausibly ask: “Does this nation in its maturity still cherish the faith in which it was conceived and raised? Does it still hold those ‘truths to be self-evident’?”397 Although the United States represents a kind of modern Aristotelian mixed regime, it still needs to understand why its principles are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.398 It has to ask why these are its values. It needs not just plausible, but persuasive responses in the face of the alternatives of Communism and Fascism.

Still, the crisis of modernity—the loss of faith in progress—first became perceptible in the fallout of World War I.399 Strauss most thoroughly considers this


396 Strauss, WIPP, 27. Emphasis mine.

397 Strauss, NRH, 1.

398 See Zuckert and Zuckert, The Truth about Leo Strauss, 76-77.

emergence in his 1940 lecture, “The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy.” Before the Nazi regime could attempt the full-scale genocide of the Jewish people, Strauss already discusses critics, such as Oswald Spengler, whose “work was a most ruthless attack on the validity or the value of modern science and philosophy (and indeed of science and philosophy altogether).” ⁴⁰⁰ Although the specters of genocide and nuclear Armageddon are horrifying on their own, they are actually the epiphenomena of a deeper crisis.

Specifically, progress has become problematic because we can no longer accept its authority uncritically. It is this loss of faith that has opened the door to catastrophe. Even though “the bankruptcy of modern man seemed to become obvious in the crisis of modern science,” this emptiness actually emerges from a profound inability to defend the value of our principles. ⁴⁰¹ This is why Strauss elsewhere suggests that “the theoretical crisis does not necessarily lead to a practical crisis,” even though several such crises emerged. ⁴⁰² If we were able to contain the crisis as a set of fundamental questions, we could have recognized the contingency that the modern path represents. We could open ourselves to return as a possible response. But this would require us to grapple with the problem of “progress or return” as a problem.

Indeed, Strauss first addresses the crises of modernity maieutically, as a means of explaining why the Germans lost faith in progress. He says that “I speak of what other people thought—I do not necessarily approve of these thoughts—but my

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⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 125.

purpose is exclusively to give you sound information.” Before he can even consider return as a political philosophical project, Strauss tries to understand both why modernity emerged (even if contingently) and why critics rose to counter it. Here, he observes how “progress’ implies that the answers to the basic questions can be taken for granted, that they can be permitted to become prejudices for all generations after that of the founding fathers.” As long as science continually makes new discoveries and advances, we have no reason to return to our foundations. We can unthinkingly accept the past as a preparation for our present.

But this faith in the future has a serious problem: “the inability of modern science or philosophy to give man an evident teaching as regards the fundamental question, the question of the right life, led people to turn from science or reason to authority, to authority of the State or the authority of Revelation.” Rather than providing citizens with the tools to actuate their visions of what the future should be, modernity robs us of the ability to consider alternatives. As long as the evident teaching is the material proof of an improving world, we stop considering the question of the good life. We enter into an unthinking daze. For this reason, a mere stumble can unnerve us. While wars are coeval with humanity, progress promised an end to such barbarity. Hence, a war, particularly a Great War, could shake modernity in a way that would only puzzle the ancients.

404 Ibid., 124.
405 Ibid., 129. My emphasis.
Once Strauss, some twelve years later, speaks in his own voice in “Progress or Return?”, he argues that “the idea of progress was bound up with the notion of conquest of nature, of man making himself the master and owner of nature for the purpose of relieving man’s estate.”407 This is the kind of self-evident goal that a future oriented people could accept. Under these terms it makes sense for us to denigrate our beginnings as “barbarism, stupidity, rudeness, extreme scarcity.”408 Whereas Strauss endeavors to reopen the possibility of a reevaluation of our foundations, he fears that faith in progress has blinded us both to its own defects and to the benefits of other approaches to life.

Strauss readily admits that “modern man is a giant in comparison to earlier man.”409 We can conquer nature and bend it to our wills. We can reroute rivers, obliterate countries, and change the climate. The caveat is that “we have also to note that there is no corresponding increase in wisdom and goodness.”410 Although we have certainly become giants, Strauss contends that “modern man is a blind giant.”411 We are prone to destroy nature itself, the world in which we live, because we no longer even see it as it is. In Thomas Pangle’s terms, “a human race is in no whit morally improved or even morally enlightened by its acquisition or domination over nature.”412 But if the Enlightenment project fails to enlighten us, then the recognition of this failure can allow us to reconsider our options.

407 Strauss, “Progress or Return?,” 263.
408 Ibid., 253.
409 Ibid., 264.
410 Ibid.
411 Ibid.
412 Pangle, Leo Strauss, 9.
Return as an Experiment

Return is experimental. Strauss is convinced that “what has taken place in the modern period has been a gradual corrosion and destruction of the heritage of Western civilization.” What moderns call progress is in fact historicism. As Strauss elaborates, “the so-called discovery of history consists in the alleged realization, that man’s freedom is radically limited by earlier use of his freedom, and not by his nature or by the whole order of nature or creation.” Under this view, there is no such thing as human nature. Instead, we are the accidental creation of a series of events that have congealed together as and within time. Or, as Strauss argues in Natural Right and History, the historical school “discovered the superiority of the local and temporal to the universal.” That is, the apparent progress that history elaborates is in reality a covering over of the fundamental questions of how we should live.

While historical knowledge is supposed to teach us about the contingencies and possibilities inherent in the past, modern history instead convinces us that events are necessary. What appears as a preservation of our heritage reveals itself as destruction of the pathways that our history should allow us to walk. This is because the “more recent form of the belief in progress is based on the decision just to forget about the end, to forget about eternity.” By covering over universal questions—How should I live?—with local questions—What should my tax policy

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413 Strauss, “Progress or Return?,” 268.
414 Ibid., 272.
415 Strauss, NRH, 14.
416 Strauss, “Progress or Return?,” 263.
look like? Did Machiavelli read Florentine newspapers?—we implicitly deny that eternal, or at least trans-historical truths exist. Since history is the study of change, it is all too easy to suggest that the only trans-historical truth is that no such thing exists. This is the essence of Martin Heidegger’s radical phenomenology. He concludes that eternity is a false projection upon a finite reality.\footnote{Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 217.}

The study of history has become a serious problem, because it implies that all questions are local and temporary. There are no longer questions so important that they justify the full attention of our most educated, perceptive citizens. Strauss best articulates this problem in \textit{The City and Man}: “To replace political philosophy by the history of political philosophy means to replace the doctrine which claims to be true by a survey of more or less brilliant errors.”\footnote{Strauss, \textit{CM}, 8.} It is this replacement that forces Strauss to consider return as an experimental answer to historicism. What appears to be a reasonable claim—that we cannot know the truth—serves as a kind of laziness. Historicism reveals itself as an unwillingness to grapple with the fundamental questions by denying that they are worth our time. This outlook prevents us from taking thinkers of the past seriously. But, according to Strauss, “to understand a serious teaching, we must be seriously interested in it, we must take it seriously, i.e., we must be willing to consider the possibility that it is simply true.”\footnote{Leo Strauss, \textit{PPH}, 59.} Perhaps a Socrates, a Machiavelli, or a Rousseau is wrong, but we cannot know that until we investigate their thought as if it is, or could be, the truth.
Strauss cannot promise solutions to our fundamental problems. But he at least tries to grapple with our problems as problems. He contends that “historicism is in the best case a proof of our ignorance—of which we are aware without historicism.”\textsuperscript{420} We already know that we did not know what the truth was before thinkers like Heidegger declared it categorically inaccessible. This why Strauss observes that, “as a philosopher, [Socrates] knows that we are ignorant of the most important things.”\textsuperscript{421} Because we are ignorant of the highest goals for humanity, “the question of the utmost urgency, the question which does not permit suspense, is the question of how one should live.”\textsuperscript{422}

We may never reach beyond this question, but this makes its priority all the more imperative. As Heinrich Meier argues, “in every tradition, the answers gain the upperhand over the questions, and in fact to such an extent that the answers come to be taken for granted and are no longer questioned.”\textsuperscript{423} To seek for answers to questions that we cannot even remember is not just a fool’s errand; it is dangerous. Like the immoderate Germans of 1933, the quest for answers freed from their questions unmoors us from the moderating realization that we may never find adequate solutions. To overcome our tensions, to reconcile disagreements that are the lifeblood of our cultures is itself a crisis for Strauss. This is what causes us to take our foundations for granted.

\textsuperscript{420} Strauss, \textit{LIGPP}, 132.

\textsuperscript{421} Strauss, “Progress or Return?,” 296.

\textsuperscript{422} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{423} Heinrich Meier, \textit{Leo Strauss and the Theological-Political Problem}, 61.
Therefore, the premise of return is that we must be honest enough to admit that our most fundamental tensions are likely irresolvable. Perhaps “philosophy will never go beyond the stage of discussion and disputation and will never reach the stage of decision.” But, “genuine knowledge of a fundamental question, through understanding of it, is better than blindness to it, or indifference to it.” To return to our foundations is to attempt to understand the questions that are worth answering. This is why Strauss argues that “the return to classical political philosophy is both necessary and tentative or experimental.” Return allows us to rediscover the questions that are most important to us, but it also promises nothing in terms of resolution, fulfillment, or solutions.

In this sense, Stanley Rosen is right when he observes that “it is quite clear from Strauss’s own words that he has no adequate defense against Heidegger’s fundamental views, nor does he find any prospect of assistance in the various philosophical positions of his day.” If Strauss believed that modern positions could sufficiently answer Heidegger, then he would not have to return to the ancients. Even so, there are multiple foundations to which we could return.

**Athens and Jerusalem**

Although Strauss often discusses return as an explicit return to Athens, particularly the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, he also acknowledges a second

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425 Ibid.  
root, Jerusalem. It is no accident that Strauss’s first reference to return in “Progress or Return?” is a translation of the Hebrew term $t'shuvah$: “$T'shuvah$ has an ordinary and an emphatic meaning. Its emphatic meaning is rendered in English by ‘repentance.’ Repentance is a return, meaning the return from the wrong way to the right one.”

Perhaps Strauss leans on the Jewish aspect of return because he is speaking at Hillel House, but this would be a shallow explanation for Strauss’s approach. As much as Strauss turns to Socrates as the man who knows that “knowledge of ignorance is not ignorance,” this same knowledge requires us to inquire what other worldviews might be viable.

We cannot simply choose to go to Athens, especially because Jerusalem is the seat of the foundation of Western religion, Judaism.

Judaism is particularity important to Strauss because it predates both Christianity and Islam. Christianity and Islam, by sheer numbers, are far more popular as religions. But Judaism has somehow survived more than five millennia and the birth of new religions that have attempted to supersede it. What is so special about Judaism? How has it survived for so long? According to Strauss, “Judaism is concern with return, it is not a concern with progress.”

Because it attempts to resist change, because it concerns itself with the timelessness of its foundations, it has a profound resilience. Whereas everyday people, such as the man from Missouri, may know about Socrates as the philosopher from ancient Athens, Judaism still exists today in real communities. Judaism exists not just as a relic in

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428 Strauss, “Progress or Return?,” 249.

429 Strauss, WIPP, 38.

430 Ibid., 251.
holy texts like the Torah, but also as a recognizable way of life that has somehow maintained itself even in our modern era.

For Strauss, the key to the perseverance of Judaism is that it is not a mere tradition. In Strauss’s terms, “the acceptance of the past or the return to the Jewish tradition is something radically different from a mere continuation of that tradition.”431 By constantly returning to its foundations, Judaism has preserved itself. Against the notion of history as a documented proof of the inevitability of change, Strauss posits that we can maintain ourselves if we take up this maintenance as our first responsibility.

In contradistinction to progress—the idea that the beginning was a form of barbarism—return, especially in its religious instantiation, remembers that “the beginning is the Garden of Eden” and that “the past is superior to the present.”432 There is no going back to Eden, at least until the Messiah returns, but it was also the location of the best human life. Adam and Eve lived in Paradise until they acquired knowledge, specifically knowledge of good and evil. But Socrates, the philosopher at the heart of Athens, searches for wisdom even if “his wisdom is knowledge of ignorance.”433

Here, we reach the (in)famous theologico-political problem. Strauss proposes return as a response to progress. Yet, he begs his own question when he asks “but return to what?” only to immediately answer, “Obviously to Western civilization in

431 Ibid., 257.
432 Ibid., 250.
its pre-modern integrity, to the principles of Western civilization.” What appears as a clear answer to the fundamental question of progress or return immediately runs into its own obstacle: “the whole history of the West presents itself at first glance as an attempt to harmonize or synthesize the Bible and Greek philosophy.” This is the aspect of “progress” that most disturbs Strauss.

Strauss purposefully repeats himself with the addendum that “a closer study shows that what happened and has been happening in the West for many centuries, is not a harmonization but an attempt at harmonization.” While our history is a story of attempts to fuse understandings together, return implies that we can understand both Athens and Jerusalem if we instead try to grasp them in their uniqueness. If we take these cultures seriously, then we can acknowledge a fundamental obstacle:

Each of these two roots of the Western world sets forth one thing as the one thing needful, and the one thing needful by the Bible is incompatible, as it is understood by the Bible, with the one thing needful proclaimed by Greek philosophy, as it is understood by Greek philosophy.

Both Athens and Jerusalem have incommensurable worldviews. Any attempt to fuse the two together represents a betrayal of what they are. That is, “progress” infects the project of return by attempting to reinterpret what the past meant. Rather than trying to understand what past cultures were, harmonization scavenges them for its own purposes.

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434 Strauss, “Progress or Return,” 272.

435 Ibid., 273.

436 Ibid. My emphasis.

437 Ibid.
Once we take the roots of Athens and Jerusalem seriously as potential paths to the truth, we can begin to make sense of the ineradicable tensions that tradition covers over by placing them into a single story of the history of the West:

To put it very simply and therefore somewhat crudely, the one thing needful according to Greek philosophy is the life of autonomous understanding. The one thing needful as spoken by the Bible is the life of obedient love. The harmonizations and synthesizations are possible because Greek philosophy can use obedient love in a subservient function and the Bible can use philosophy as a handmaid; but what is so used in each case rebels against such use, and therefore the conflict is really a radical one.\textsuperscript{438}

What seems to be a fusion of worldviews inevitably ends with one of the roots dominating the other. Faith and reason can each use the other for their own purposes. They can even believe that they are respectfully preserving the other. Yet this belief fails to grapple with the tension of how to live one’s life. Under religion, knowledge can be incredibly destructive. It is what ruined paradise. Yet, philosophy is the quest for knowledge as the best possible life.

While critics such as Heinrich Meier argue that Strauss ultimately resolves the “theologico-political problem” in favor of Athens\textsuperscript{439} and Harry Jaffa counters that Strauss bends to Jerusalem, or at least faith,\textsuperscript{440} Strauss’s own words check both perspectives.\textsuperscript{441} He does nothing to resolve the conflict. Instead, he maintains that “this very disagreement presupposes some agreement. In fact, every disagreement, we may say, presupposes some agreement, because people must disagree about

\textsuperscript{438} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{439} Meier, \textit{Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem}, 3-28


\textsuperscript{441} For a more thorough investigation of the different Straussian perspectives see Zuckert and Zuckert, \textit{Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy}, 313-327.
something and must agree as to the importance of that something.”

Strauss admits that there is at least one fundamental agreement, but it is that we agree about a problem important enough that we cannot settle it.

The paradoxical agreement to disagree serves as a non-historicist reopening of the question of how we should live. Against the progressive notion that one side or another in the struggle for the West can finally dominate the other, Strauss tries to maintain every live vein of thinking he can discover. To say that “it seems to me that this unresolved conflict is the secret of the vitality of Western civilization” is to contend that the focus on such a fundamental question is healthier and more enlightening that any asserted answer.

Strauss’s answer to the fundamental questions is to force us to admit that we lack a sufficient answer.

**The Right Path of Thinking**

Strauss’s quest for the revival of fundamental tensions serves as a kind of answer to how we should live. But his answer is open to constant revision. It is in this sense that Strauss’s “right way” of thinking is a zetetic—literally question driven—enterprise. In Daniel Tanguay’s terms, “the zetetic defense of philosophy rests on a presupposition: the best life is that entirely devoted to the search for an answer to the best way of life.” This implies that Strauss has to walk the path of philosophy, even though he recognizes that religion remains another viable path opposed to philosophical premises. Strauss admits that “no one can be both a

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442 Strauss, “Progress or Return?,” 273.

443 Ibid., 289.

philosopher and a theologian or, for that matter, a third which is beyond the conflict
between philosophy and theology, or a synthesis of both.” Synthesis, the modern
position, is a misstep because it fails to grapple with the roots of its foundations as
they are. Theology does not have to be philosophic as long as it follows its revealed
laws. But philosophy is aware of its incompleteness in a way that opens it to the
possibilities inherent in both theology and synthesis.

Insofar as there is a right way of life, Strauss wants to find it. He thus seems
to choose philosophy over the other lifestyles because it is definitionally the quest for
knowledge. Yet Strauss proceeds with caution:

Men are constantly attracted and deluded by two opposite charms: the charm
of competence which is engendered by mathematics, and the charm of humble
awe, which is engendered by meditation on the human soul and its
experiences. Philosophy is characterized by the gentle, if firm, refusal to
succumb to either charm. This understanding of philosophy, as a zetetic practice,
is a refusal to accept
dogmatic, unquestionable answers. To say that “philosophy is essentially not
possession of the truth, but quest for truth” is to obligate ourselves to admit when
we do not know. It is to prevent ourselves from the complacency that causes our
thoughts to devolve into uncritical ideologies.

When Strauss articulates his understanding of the relationship between
philosophy and revelation, he sidesteps the Christian subordination of philosophy by
figures such as Thomas Aquinas. He instead quotes Yehuda Halevi’s statement in
the Kuzari that “Socrates says to the people, ‘I do not reject your divine wisdom, I

\[\text{445 Strauss, “Progress or Return?,” 290.}\]
\[\text{446 Strauss, WIPP, 40.}\]
\[\text{447 Ibid., 11.}\]
simply do not understand it. My wisdom is merely human wisdom.” Strauss’s point is that a person can walk the path of philosophy without denying the possibilities of theology. This position is anti-synthesis. The religious life can be a good life, but it is a life beyond human knowledge. As Strauss observes, “confronted with an unproven possibility, [Socrates] does not reject, he merely suspends judgment.” Because Socrates refuses to succumb to the charm of claiming explicit knowledge, his philosophy keeps the doors of Athens, Jerusalem, and even of modern synthesis open.

Philosophy, at least in its instantiation as the Socratic lifestyle, is an active awareness of available options. Because its central task is to keep alive our awareness of fundamental questions, it refuses “to let [itself] be bullied into the acceptance of an alleged solution.” Philosophy thus emerges as an enterprise in asking worthwhile questions. According to Strauss:

The question of utmost urgency, the question which does not permit suspense, is the question of how one should live. Now this question is settled for Socrates by the fact that he is a philosopher. As a philosopher, he knows that we are ignorant of the most important things. The ignorance, the evident fact of this ignorance, evidently proves that the quest for knowledge of the most important things is the most important thing for us. Philosophy is then evidently the right way of life.

This Socratic style of philosophy is distinct even from other Athenian philosophies. Strauss often talks of Athens as a monolith. But he makes an important distinction in *The City and Man*: “not Socrates or Plato but Aristotle is truly the founder of

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448 Strauss, “Progress or Return?,” 295-296.

449 Ibid., 296.


451 Ibid., 296.
political science: as one discipline, and by no means the most fundamental or highest
discipline, among a number of disciplines.”452 Insofar as Aristotle represents
Athenian philosophy as a set of explicit knowledge claims, Socrates is something
distinct. He provides no specific answers. He keeps up an endless quest that may
never move beyond the fundamental questions.

When Strauss presents Socratic philosophy as the right way to think, his
path is deeply unsatisfying to those who want explicit answers. If anything, Strauss
proposes Socratic thinking as a refusal to give answers. In place of answers, Strauss
proposes that “philosophy is meant, and that is the decisive point, not as a set of
propositions, a teaching, or even a system, but as a way of life, a life animated by a
peculiar passion, the philosophic desire or eros, not as an instrument or a
department of human self-realization.”453 This philosophy is every bit as
inexhaustible as Gadamer’s approach, but it is even more open.454 Where Gadamer
accepts that humanity is finite and doomed to perish, Strauss counters that we do
not know what the infinite is even though we should contemplate it as a
possibility.455

Yet, to be responsible, we have to constantly remind ourselves that no
philosophy is dispositive. This is how Strauss can imply in “Progress or Return?”

452 Strauss, CM, 21. For this observation, I am indebted to Catherine and Michael
Zuckert; in particular, their chapter “Why Strauss is not an Aristotelian.” See Zuckert and
Zuckert, Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy, 144-166.

453 Strauss, “Progress or Return?,” 297.


455 In Michael Zuckert’s words, “Strauss’s philosophic work should thus be seen as
the quest for the eternal, not as an a priori affirmation of it.” See Michael P. Zuckert, “Leo
Strauss: Political Philosophy as First Philosophy,” Forthcoming, 6.
that Socrates’s example represents the right kind of life, even as he admits that the fundamental questions between Athens vs. Jerusalem and Ancients vs. Moderns cannot be solved. Strauss concludes that “all alleged refutations of revelation presuppose unbelief in revelation, and all alleged refutations of philosophy presuppose faith in revelation.” ⁴⁵⁶ But he also recognizes “that men of the highest excellence (Plato and Aristotle) are known to have lived in deed, whereas of the best regime it is known only that it necessarily ‘lives’ in speech.” ⁴⁵⁷ Insofar as we know that specific individuals have lived good lives, they can serve as examples of how to navigate the ineffable, timeless experience that is human life.

**Returning Home**

Home is a strange place. For many it is fraught with discomfort and terror. For others, it is the seat of comfort. But it is always a place that, at least for Strauss, is retrievable. It is in this sense that “repentance, return, is homecoming.” ⁴⁵⁸ This final form of return allows us to navigate politics. If philosophy is a quest, a search questions worth answering, then return is the process of reintegrating into the community we leave when we perform our investigations. Like Odysseus returned to Ithaca, the thinker who “engages in the study of classical philosophy … is not likely to return to the shores of our time as exactly as the same man who departed from

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⁴⁵⁶ Strauss, “Progress or Return?,” 309.


⁴⁵⁸ Strauss, “Progress or Return?,” 249.
them.” It is this instantiation of return as reintegration that deals with a final fundamental tension: philosophy vs. politics.

Since our lives begin within political communities, we need to be respectful of this first home if we are to live good lives. Against synthesis, progress, or faith, Strauss wants to return to the beginning of our actual lived experiences. This is the point of departure for *The City and Man*, Strauss’s most thorough consideration of what return to the beginning of political philosophy—as a practice founded by Socrates—means. It is here that Strauss asserts that “classical political philosophy is the primary form of political science because the common sense understanding of political things is primary.” Where in other works Strauss contends that “political science stands or falls by the truth of the prescientific awareness of political things,” it is in this work that Strauss considers what home, as the seat of the prescientific, means.

Philosophy, as a practice, predates Socrates. There are entire schools of thought contained within the term pre-Socratic. This fact of nomenclature illustrates the peculiar importance of Socrates. For Strauss, it is no mistake that “Nietzsche paints Socrates as ‘the single turning point and vortex of so-called world-history.’” Socrates embarks upon a new way of thinking that separates him from all previous

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461 Ibid., 12. My emphasis.


philosophies. He represents a kind of second sailing, a return within Athens itself. Ironically, Socrates’ thinking is revolutionary because it is so apparently mundane.

The original practice of philosophy was a form of gazing at the heavens: “the heavenly or divine things are the things to which man looks up or which are higher than the human things; they are super human.” These heavenly things are above our humanity and necessary for our existence, but they do not need us or any of our considerations in order to exist. Socrates’s innovation is his recognition that “philosophy must be compelled to turn back toward the human things from which it originally departed.” Even as the founder of political philosophy in classical Athens, Socrates’s approach is already a return to community. In Seth Benardete’s terms, “the city thus comes to light as a special kind of part: while being the obstacle to philosophy it alone makes philosophy possible.” By realizing what we owe to the city, our political community, we can learn both how to apply our thinking and how to acknowledge our limitations.

Return is a form of moderation. Lest we, like Thales, trip into a well while gazing at the stars, return makes us cognizant of how we are informed by our surroundings. In principle, this recognition is cross-cultural and cross-temporal. Return as t’shuvah is the same kind of awareness of common sense that Strauss uncovers in Athens. Indeed, Strauss insists that “Socrates conceived of his turn to the ‘what is’ questions as a turn, or a return, to sanity, to ‘common sense.’”

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465 Ibid., 14.


need to moderate ourselves by constantly reflecting on “the human things: what is by nature right and noble or with the nature of justice and nobility.” This is not a claim that Strauss knows what is by nature good or right. His focus upon fundamental questions is an explicit insistence that we will likely not discover what the good is, even though we can and should continue to ask.

Against the unbridled conquest of nature that embodies much of modern science and politics, Strauss insists that “in its original form political philosophy broadly understood is the core of philosophy or rather ‘the first philosophy.’” It also remains true that human wisdom is knowledge of ignorance.” That is, the reason why modernity has fallen into crisis is that it has forgotten how to check itself. By demanding knowledge and tools sturdy enough to become an unthinking foundation, we have allowed our foundations to rot. We have forgotten what we owe to our communities. This is why Strauss “began therefore to wonder whether the self-destruction of reason was not the inevitable outcome of modern rationalism as distinguished from pre-modern rationalism, especially Jewish-medieval rationalism and its classical (Aristotelian and Platonic) foundation.” If the problem of modernity is that we have become estranged from our own homes, then the proper response is to repent and return home.

The essence of political philosophy as “first philosophy” is Strauss’s explanation of what knowledge of ignorance entails: “there is no knowledge of the whole but only knowledge of parts, hence only partial knowledge of parts, hence no

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468 Ibid., 20.

469 Ibid.

unqualified transcending, even by the wisest man as such, of the sphere of opinion.” 471 Because we cannot have real knowledge of the whole of existence, we can never overcome the opinions and myths that define the political realm. Even the wisest individuals hold unprovable opinions. In fact, we can only begin the quest for real knowledge by learning what our communities value and how those opinions both informed and nurtured us. In other words, “genuine knowledge of political things is inseparable from prejudices or superstitions.” 472 To attempt to escape from our prejudices is to misunderstand how we came to understand reality. 473

Strauss recognizes the problems inherent in the interweaving of knowledge and opinion that is common sense. He acknowledges that “common sense contains indeed genuine knowledge of broomsticks; but the trouble is that this knowledge has in common sense the same status as alleged knowledge concerning witches.” 474 Even so, awareness of our incompleteness teaches us to be careful about what we think we know rather than importing various superstitions into scientific systems supposedly devoid of such impurities. By admitting our individual weaknesses, we can relearn the importance of community. While it is all too easy to think of philosophy as a lonely endeavor of contemplating life, the universe, and everything, Strauss purposefully draws attention to the activity as Socrates practices it.

Although Socrates never wrote anything, his practice of deep conversations with others is itself a teaching. Strauss recognizes that, “generally speaking, we

471 Strauss, CM, 20.


473 This represents a major point of agreement between Strauss and Gadamer. See Gadamer, TM, 283.

can know the thought of a man only through his speeches oral or written,” but “every child knows that the spokesman par excellence of Plato is his revered teacher or friend Socrates to whom he entrusted his own teaching fully or in part.”

Strauss is aware that he is making a commonsense assumption about how to access Socrates’ teachings, but that is precisely the point. Instead of focusing on a specific doctrine, Strauss draws our attention to the communal nature of Socratic inquiry. He advises us to “assume that the Platonic dialogues do not convey a teaching, but being a monument to Socrates, present the Socratic way of life as a model.”

It is in this way that Steven B. Smith is right to argue that “[Strauss] believes that the dialogue is the teaching itself.”

By focusing on Socratic political philosophy as a dialogue, Strauss reminds us that “one cannot separate the understanding of Plato’s teaching from the understanding of the form in which it is presented.” The goal of philosophy should not be to scavenge pearls of wisdom from the wreckage of the past, but to learn how to live together in a shared inquiry sensitive to our individual limitations. To suggest that, “in its highest form, communication is living together,” is to demonstrate that political philosophy is a satisfying endeavor even if it does not produce or discover timeless knowledge.

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475 Strauss, CM, 50.

476 Ibid., 51.

477 Steven B. Smith, Reading Leo Strauss,” 90.

478 Strauss, CM, 52.

479 Ibid.
There is a profound difference between assuming that we know what philosophy is and actually asking ourselves what it is. Once we recognize this distinction we can understand why Strauss begins his famously controversial interpretation of *The Republic* with the exhortation: “Let us then return once more to the surface. Let us abandon every pretense to know.”⁴⁸⁰ Return is not a return to ignorance, but a return to the knowledge of our ignorance. This is not just the wisdom of Socrates, but the recognition that our commonsense, surface world represents our only possible introduction to knowledge. We do not need to journey to Troy in order to learn about the world. We need to recognize how alien home itself is so that we can learn its nature and become truly at home within it.

The philosophers “know that the life not dedicated to philosophy and therefore even political life at its best is like life in a cave, so much so that the city can be identified with the cave.”⁴⁸¹ But the “first” philosophers—the political philosophers—know that we cannot and should not abandon the cave. When the Athenian jury gives Socrates the option either to leave the city or to stop philosophizing, he chooses to die in the city as a philosopher. He sees this sacrifice as what he owes to the city, even as the city rejects him.⁴⁸² Although this sentence appears as a kind of Athenian ejection from Eden, Socrates’ willing death is testament in favor of the city as the commonsense home that enabled him to practice philosophy. His sacrifice teaches us that we can indeed eternally return home, even when that return is perilous. Against historicism—the doctrine that return is

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⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., 55.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., 125.

impossible because all meaning is a mere reflection of a changing history—Socratic inquiry experimentally questions this assumption.

The Return to Non-Historicism

Strauss was not always convinced that return was possible. In his preface to the English translation of *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, written 35 years after its initial publication, Strauss writes that “the present study was based on the premise, sanctioned by powerful prejudice, that return to pre-modern philosophy is impossible.” In that intervening time, something changed that convinced Strauss that such a return is not only possible, but necessary. Something convinced him that we could overcome the historicist thesis that “there is no essential necessity for raising the question of the good society; this question is not in principle coeval with man; its very possibility is the outcome of a mysterious dispensation of fate.”

Ironically, the person who presented Strauss with the spark needed to reconsider the fundamental questions was the philosopher of the “mysterious dispensation of fate” himself, the “only radical historicist,” Martin Heidegger.

Martin Heidegger is the nemesis of Strauss’s whole approach to philosophy. According to Strauss, Heidegger “denies that once can understand a thinker better than he understood himself or even as he understood himself: a great thinker will understand an earlier thinker of rank creatively, i.e. by transforming his thought.

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and hence by understanding him differently that he understood himself.”

Not only does Heidegger treat the past as something to be raided, he denies that we can properly return to it. Instead, all return is a transformation of the past that pretends to have grasped what is no longer accessible.

Strauss is still deeply impressed by Heidegger because “no one has questioned the premise of philosophy as radically as Heidegger.” If philosophy has become stultified by the assumption that we obviously know what it is, then the only way to make us reevaluate the practice is to shake our certainty so completely that we have no choice but to reexamine our beliefs. This is how “the crisis of our time may have the accidental advantage of enabling us to understand in an untraditional or fresh manner what was hitherto understood only in a traditional or derivative manner.” Against the dogmas and certainties of tradition, Strauss wants to return to the problems that make philosophy worthwhile.

But Strauss could not make his discoveries in his private considerations of Heidegger. He needed, as befits a Platonic dialogue, the help of a friend. This aid came in the form of an observation by Jacob Klein:

Klein alone saw why Heidegger is truly important: by uprooting and not simply rejecting the tradition of philosophy, he made it possible for the first time after many centuries—one hesitates to say how many—to see the roots of the tradition as they are and thus perhaps to know, what so many merely believe, that these roots are the only natural and healthy roots.

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486 Strauss, “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy,” 2.


488 Strauss, CM, 9.

Heidegger himself was completely uninterested in the possibility of return. Strauss acknowledges that, “above all, [Heidegger’s] intention was to uproot Aristotle” so he could plant the seeds of a new kind of thinking. Yet, by uprooting what Aristotle had become, Heidegger was able to remove the layers upon layers of Aristotle commentary that had obscured its original meaning. He taught Strauss, in Benardete’s phrasing, that “the restoration of political philosophy demands the ‘deconstruction’ of the tradition of political philosophy” so that we can see what it was before it calcified into accepted beliefs.

Despite Heidegger’s own intentions, his approach to philosophy “protected [him] from trying to modernize Aristotle.” For this reason, Heidegger’s interpretations of Greek philosophy were so powerfully untraditional that many students, such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, first believed—mistakenly—that his goal was to be an “Aristotle redivivus.” Even in 1940, speaking at Syracuse University, Strauss observed that “under the guidance of Heidegger, people came to see that Aristotle and Plato had not been understood.” This is the key phrase for opening the door to a return to classical philosophy. Against modern doctrines that claim to have refuted the errors of the past, Strauss counters that a philosopher “cannot have been refuted, if he has not been understood.” Since the tradition buries the

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490 Ibid.

491 Benardete, “Leo Strauss’s The City and Man,” 2.


493 Gadamer, Philosophical Apprenticeships, 50.

494 Strauss, LIGPP, 134.

495 Ibid.
thoughts of the past in layer upon layer of new thoughts, it still stands to reason that the old thoughts might remain healthy if we take the time to investigate them.

Again, Heidegger is uninterested in recovery. Yet, Strauss still insists that “Heidegger’s interpretation of Aristotle was an achievement with which I cannot compare any other intellectual phenomenon which has emerged in Germany after the war.”496 Whereas “even a classical scholar is a modern man, and therefore under the spell of modern biases,” Heidegger’s radicality cracks the horizons of history that suggest that we can never think beyond our historical moment.497 His work presents the possibility that a particularly careful reader can think the thoughts of the past as long as she is willing to forget everything she thinks she knows. By opening ourselves to the unknown, we can read long dead writers as genuinely fresh and timeless individuals whose thoughts are possessions for all time.

For Strauss, “philosophy in the original meaning of the word presupposes the liberation from historicism.”498 Although philosophy has its own history and development, it is as practicable today as the days when Socrates lived it.499 We can eternally return to philosophy simply by returning to common sense and admitting that we do not have knowledge, but would like to seek it. Although Strauss is often misinterpreted as a kind of hyper conservative dogmatist dissatisfied with what the West has become, even his doctrine of “natural right is an open question and not an

496 Ibid., 134.
497 Ibid., 135.
498 Ibid., 133.
499 Richard Velkley presents the most thorough investigation into how “Strauss ... proposes an alternative to Heidegger’s philosophy, his account of Socratic political philosophy.” See Velkley, Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy, 112.
obsolete issue.”500 Even when considering the development of history as an academic discipline, Strauss reminds us that “the word history is a Greek word, historia, and means simply inquiry, namely, that inquiry which proceeds by asking other people.”501 The problem with historicism is that it has atrophied our ability to ask real questions.

There is no reason to think that questioning is dead. We can always return to our questions—especially our fundamental ones. But to do so we must recognize that “the beginning of philosophy is wonder and there are too many things which have ceased to be a matter of wonder and surprise since generations—which have been taken for granted since centuries.”502 We have to become like Socrates and admit that we do know how to choose between Athens and Jerusalem, the ancients and the moderns, or philosophy and politics. Rather than attempting to cover over such distinctions with a process of synthesis, we should live the tension and enjoy the quest for knowledge of how to live.

The great irony of historicism is that it is an attempt to make us at home in our specific historical context. By teaching us that there is no understanding beyond our era, the historicist tries to help us focus on living out our lives as radically unique individuals. Yet “the attempt to make man absolutely at home in this world ended in man’s becoming absolutely homeless,” because it implies that we cannot share our thoughts or concerns with those living in other eras.503 By stifling the

501 Ibid., 10.
503 Strauss, NRH, 18.
wonder felt when studying different societies and kinds of life, historicism silences the questioning faculty that makes the philosophic life possible.

It is in this sense that “the nihilistic consequence of historicism could have suggested a return to the older, pre-historicist view.” Once we have become exhausted, once we feel like we have come to the end of our path, we are not obligated to keep going. Existence has not become meaningless simply because the way we are thinking has stopped working. We are always free to stop and reevaluate ourselves. We can return to the moment of wonder and try to being again. Even in a bad or decayed regime, we as individuals can converse together and learn, once again, what it is that we should be learning. This is the return to non-historicist philosophy to which Strauss attempts to guide us.

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504 Ibid.
CHAPTER 5—

HISTORICISM IN DIALOGUE: THE STRAUSS-GADAMER ENCOUNTER

I do not believe that either of us possesses full clarity about this issue [of la querelle des anciens et des modernes]: all the more reason that we should continue to try to learn from one another. I promise you that I shall do this.

- Leo Strauss, Correspondence Concerning Wahrheit und Methode, May 14, 1961

I have always regretted that the dialogue was not pursued.


In The City and Man, Leo Strauss observes that “there is no Platonic dialogue among men who are, or could be thought to be, equals.” Not only is there no philosophic exchange between Socrates and the Eleatic stranger or Timaeus, there is no conversation whatsoever, in any dialogue, between Socrates and Plato. It seems that Plato asks us to imagine what such a conversation would be, as if it is the task of the reader to construct the most important—but unsaid—dialogue on her own. Rather than providing us with a doctrine in his own voice, Plato forces us to learn how to philosophize by turning our attention to the dialogic structure itself.

While Plato never presents a dialogue between equals, such conversations do exist. Modernity is plagued with myriad problems, but it also hosts at least one example of such a correspondence: Leo Strauss and Hans-Georg Gadamer. If Strauss

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507 Strauss, CM, 55.
is correct that “liberal education consists in listening to the greatest conversations among the greatest minds,” then a virtue of modernity consists in the multitude of such exchanges.508 Yet, the problem with real conversations is that they pale in comparison to the idealized Platonic dialogue. In real discussions interlocutors talk past each other, fail to overcome their differences, or even confuse their audiences with half-formed thoughts that we can only hope to disentangle after a long period of fitful contemplation. Gadamer himself, decades after his correspondence with Strauss, was dissatisfied with the encounter.509

Even so, a dissatisfying exchange has a major advantage over the imagined one: we can actually study it. We can appreciate not only how ideas perform when challenged in discourse, but also why real exchanges feel less momentous than the action of Shakespeare’s Hamlet or Sophocles’ Antigone. While Gadamer is correct that “the productive ambiguity that constitutes the essence of a work of art is only another way of expressing the play’s essential characteristic of continually becoming a new event,” the real exchange of an actual dialogue has always already occurred.510 When we investigate a dialogue it does not necessarily become something new. But it can become something which we better understand.

It is in this sense that I turn to the Strauss-Gadamer correspondence. By disclosing both Gadamer and Strauss’s “community of background” in the German academy—the influence of Martin Heidegger—and why they “have marched from that common ground in opposite directions,” I consider the implications of their

508 Leo Strauss, “What is Liberal Education?,” An Introduction to Political Philosophy, 311-319, 317.


dueling approaches to moderating contemporary politics.\footnote{511} Although much shorter than Strauss’s encounter with Alexandre Kojève\footnote{512} or Gadamer’s debate with Jürgen Habermas,\footnote{513} this particular exchange is indispensable because it is concerned with the interpretive preconditions of understanding that enable politics. Insofar as Heidegger represents a genuinely radical philosophic project with political—even fascistic, nihilistic—resonances, they both understand that the question of philosophic moderation is far from academic.\footnote{514}

Still, the question of how to moderate extremism remains open. Strauss attempts to counter “radical historicism” by returning to the fundamental questions that Heidegger attempts to supersede. He argues that “in grasping these problems as problems, the human mind liberates itself from its historical limitations” without having to reinvent philosophy.\footnote{515} In contrast, Gadamer critiques the “unreality” of Heidegger’s world-night [Weltnacht] while maintaining his genuine hermeneutical insights.\footnote{516} Whereas Strauss accepts Heidegger’s diagnosis of modernity and proposes a return to our philosophical roots, Gadamer denies the category of crisis while appropriating apparently radical thinking for the sake of understanding the present.

\footnote{511} Strauss, “February 26, 1961,” \textit{Correspondence}, 5.
\footnote{512} See Strauss, \textit{On Tyranny}.
\footnote{513} See Habermas, \textit{On the Logic of the Social Sciences} and “On Hermeneutics’ Claim to Universality.”
\footnote{515} Strauss, \textit{NRH}, 32.
Behind the question of moderation stands an even more fundamental question of how we make sense of ourselves within and beyond our historical contexts—the problem of historicism. On the one hand, Gadamer contends that “the hermeneutically trained mind will also include historical consciousness.” Any attempt to forge self-understanding forces us to acknowledge that “we are always situated within traditions” that structure our possibilities even as they remain beyond our control. We can overcome our historical horizon, but only by accepting that it forms an inescapable prejudice that we must appropriate in the process of learning from others. On the other hand, Strauss argues that “every philosopher belongs essentially to this or that ethnos but as [a] philosopher he must transcend it.” That is, philosophy is a kind of timeless practice that overcomes the barriers of historicism by sharing the fundamental, human questions that arise in any and every society. Where Gadamer attempts to appropriate historicism into his hermeneutics, Strauss denies that the perspective adequately captures our experience of reality.

Strauss and Gadamer readily admit that they have serious disagreements concerning both the status of modernity and the nature of interpretation. But underlying this tension is the fundamental agreement that their concerns are worthy of debate. Hence, rather than attempting to resolve the fundamental tensions between Gadamer and Strauss, I instead articulate what their agreements and disagreements mean both for the study of political philosophy and for the

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518 Ibid., 294.
practice of politics generally. Although I understand why Ryan Holston argues that Gadamer prevails over Strauss by critiquing the objectivity inherent in Straussian interpretation, I doubt that Gadamer would be satisfied with such a resolution.\textsuperscript{520} Neither Strauss nor Gadamer treat their correspondence as an agonistic attempt to defeat the other in philosophic combat.\textsuperscript{521} Gadamer himself is at pains “to show [Strauss] in [his] own work what [he] mean[s].”\textsuperscript{522} He wants to draw out the resonances of his work with Strauss’s while Strauss wants to highlight the disparities. This difference of approach does not impede the mutual goal of teaching one another, and the reader, how philosophy can aid our quest both to understand and to practice politics.

Therefore, in this final chapter my goal is to articulate the major points of agreed tension between Strauss and Gadamer. Beginning with the importance of understanding the quarrel between the ancients and moderns, I draw out 1) how we should approach textual interpretation, 2) the possibilities of overcoming historicism, and 3) how we should moderate radical politics today. In the spirit of moderation, I do not propose to solve our most pressing problems, but I do present approaches to grappling with them.


\textsuperscript{521} Fred Dallmayr suggests that the proper approach to dialogue is to recognize that “its fruit is not the triumph of one opinion over another, but, rather a mutual learning process in the course of which partners gain a better understanding of both the subject matter and themselves.” See Fred Dallmayr, “Hermeneutics and Inter-cultural Dialog: Linking Theory and Practice,” \textit{Ethics & Global Politics}, 2009, Vol. 2, No. 1, 23-39, 27.

The Quarrel

In some ways, the dialogue between Strauss and Gadamer is incomplete. The published correspondence concerning *Truth and Method* spanned about three months from late February into mid-May of 1961. After Strauss broke off the correspondence, Gadamer attempted to lure him back into dialogue by adding the 1965 essay, “History and Historicism,” as an appendix to the second edition of *Truth and Method*. This attempt was less than successful. Strauss never directly responded to Gadamer again, even as they kept in touch as friends. Still, the correspondence, “History and Historicism,” and Gadamer’s 1981 interview with Ernest Fortin allow me to present the basic stakes and problems that concerned both thinkers. For this reason, the Strauss-Gadamer encounter is more complete than the Gadamer-Derrida debate, wherein Derrida performatively refused to take his opponent seriously.

The easiest point of entry into the Strauss-Gadamer encounter is their shared fundamental concern over the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns [*la querelle des anciens et des modernes*]. Robert Pippin observes that this issue is the “one great opposition, or *gigantomachia*” that pervades Strauss’s whole critique of modernity. But, since Gadamer understands himself as a defender of modernity properly understood, he must also provide his own justification for modern life.

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524 See Gadamer and Derrida, *Dialogue & Deconstruction*.
against other possibilities.\footnote{Gadamer, “Gadamer on Strauss,” 12.} Thus, although this topic is the last substantive issue to which Strauss refers before cutting off the correspondence, it is the primary concern that motivates their discussions of interpretation, historicism, and politics.

When Strauss introduces the concept of the quarrel, he does so in the context interpreting Thucydides’ understanding of economics. Even though Thucydides does not explicitly or centrally discuss the subject, Strauss posits that a good interpreter “must answer the question of how economic things appear to Thucydides.”\footnote{Strauss, “February 26, 1961,” Correspondence, 6.} This possibility reflects Strauss’s doctrine that “to understand a serious teaching, we must be seriously interested in it, we must take it seriously, \emph{i.e.}, we must be willing to consider the possibility that it is simply true.”\footnote{Strauss, \textit{PPH}, 68.} Since Strauss is committed to the task of understanding thinkers as they understood themselves, he argues that we can reconstruct what economics means for Thucydides by discovering how it relates to his fundamental, unchanging questions.

In contrast, Gadamer denies that we can understand ourselves as we intend, let alone others. He argues that “self-understanding is always on the way; it is on a path whose completion is a clear impossibility.”\footnote{Gadamer, “Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy,” 103.} Since understanding is an asymptotic project, we can produce better interpretations of ourselves and others without ever grasping \emph{the} interpretation. This further entails that “the very idea of a definitive interpretation seems to be intrinsically contradictory.”\footnote{Ibid., 104.} It is in this sense
that Gadamer later argues that Strauss “underestimates the difficulties of understanding, because he ignores what might be called the dialectic of the statement.”532 More than a development of his earlier claim that “not occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author,” Gadamer suggests that the attempt to understand a statement exactly distorts how we actually encounter it as a personal experience.533

In practice, Gadamer’s hermeneutics of circular question and answer means that “the ‘historian of economics’ would … have to be reflective about himself” when interpreting Thucydidean economics.534 Although Gadamer agrees with Strauss that we can learn much from reading ancient texts, it is because “every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way, for the text belongs to the whole tradition whose content interests the age in which it seeks to understand itself.”535 For Gadamer, the interpretation of classical texts is vital for modernity because it allows us to situate ourselves within our lived historical context. Because the world in which we live always precedes us, we can only begin to make sense of ourselves by grappling with the past events that shaped our world. Hence, “the classical, then, is certainly ‘timeless,’ but this timelessness is a mode of historical being.”536 That is, our foundational ideas are timeless because they have survived through countless

532 Gadamer, “History and Historicism,” 553.
536 Ibid., 301.
transformations and reinterpretations into our present world. We do not return to the past so much as see how it influenced and structured what became our present.

This is where Strauss and Gadamer diverge. They agree that we should study classical thinkers like Thucydides and Plato, they recognize that interpretation is a philosophic problem in its own right, and they see how ignorance of the past impedes our ability to make sense of who we are. Yet, Strauss correctly observes that “this example also indicates the fundamental difference between us: la querelle des anciens et des modernes, in which querelle we have taken opposite sides; our differences regarding hermeneutics is only a consequence of this fundamental difference.”

Whereas Strauss’s approach hinges upon “an unqualified return to Thucydides,” Gadamer’s hermeneutics is built upon the impossibility of ever reaching such an understanding.

Consequently, the stakes of the quarrel are as high for Gadamer as they are for Strauss. While Gadamer appreciates “Strauss’s criticism of modern faith in history, which appears in a number of outstanding books on political philosophy,” he denies that this critique obviates historical developments. To advance his criticism, Gadamer provides his own interpretation of the quarrel:

We are familiar with the querelle des anciens et des modernes, which dominated the minds of the literary public in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France. Although it is primarily a literary quarrel that displayed the defenders of the excellence of the Greek and Roman classical poets competing with the literary self-confidence of the writers who were at that time introducing a new classical period of literature at the court of the Sun King, the tension of this argument finally ended in a sense of historical awareness [geschichtliches Bewußtsein]. For it was necessary to limit the absolute

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538 Ibid.
539 Gadamer, “History and Historicism,” 551.
exemplariness of the classical world. That *querelle* was, as it were, the last form of an unhistorical debate between the tradition and the modern age.\textsuperscript{540} Inherent in the way he develops his story, Gadamer challenges Strauss’s Manichean presentation of the ancient-modern distinction. What Strauss presents as a proof that we can still consider the past as a genuine alternative to the present, Gadamer instead presents as the discovery of the historical consciousness [*geschichtliches Bewußtsein*] that obviates such a choice.

For Gadamer, the moment the French could uphold their own art as equal in stature to that of the Greeks and Romans, they reinterpreted the definition of the “classical.” It transformed from the art and thinking of the foundation of the West into “something that resists historical criticism because its historical dominion, the binding power that is preserved and handed down, precedes all historical reflection and continues in it.”\textsuperscript{541} Not only are the Platonic dialogues and the plays of Aristophanes, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides classical. Now the works of Corneille, Shakespeare, and Goethe could be “classics.” Any work of human artifice, be it classic rock or a classic movie like *Citizen Kane* could also become a “classic.” More than an assertion of equality, the French courtiers opened the *querelle* as a means to assert dominance over their predecessors. Because they discovered the historical dimension of existence, the moderns are superior to the ancients.

Strauss is unsurprisingly unenthused by the modern perspective. In *What is Political Philosophy?* he complains that “in later epochs, the philosophers’ study of political things was mediated by a tradition of political philosophy which acted like a

\textsuperscript{540} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{541} Gadamer, *TM*, 299.
screen between the philosopher and the political things, regardless of whether the
individual philosopher cherished or rejected that tradition.” Rather than opening
the possibility for moderns to compete on equal—even superior—footing with the
ancients, Strauss cautions that modernity misunderstands philosophy by treating
thinkers as secondary to their historical context. Great modern thinkers, such as
Nietzsche and Heidegger, do exist. But by understanding them as “moderns” or
even “post-moderns” we historicize them. We treat them as if their thinking is a
reflection of their time as opposed to potentially timeless thought that we can
approach as the truth. Under this schema, Thucydides becomes a resource for
moderns to mine as opposed to a genuine trans-historical thinker whom we need to
take seriously.

While Gadamer does not align with Strauss’s position, he is still sympathetic.
He attempts to show what he shares with Strauss by putting the latter’s thoughts
into his own words:

What [Strauss] criticizes is that the ‘historical’ interpretation of traditional
thought claims to be able to understand the thinking of the past better than it
understood itself. Whoever thinks like this excludes from the outset the
possibility that the thoughts that are handed down to us could simply be
true. This is the practically universal dogmatism of his way of thought.

Although Gadamer is correct that Strauss is concerned with approaching past
thoughts as if they “could simply be true,” he distorts Strauss’s position by leaning
on the concept of tradition [Überlieferung]. Strauss’s point is that “the tradition and

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542 Strauss, WIPP, 27

543 Thomas Pangle observes that “each of Strauss’s major interpretive writings do
exhibit him as a kind of disciple of the thinker that he is interpreting.” See Pangle, Leo
Strauss, 44.

544 Gadamer, “History and Historicism,” 553.
the continuity disappear once one begins to interpret.”545 Once we read Thucydides, Machiavelli, or Nietzsche seriously, we discover that each of these thinkers is an individual who speaks both to, but also beyond, his historical moment. To be concerned with the way that a thought ripples out into a tradition is to treat the thinker herself as a piece of a larger mechanism as opposed to an individual to whom we could return.

Whereas Strauss treats a genuine return to the ancients as a live option, Gadamer denies this possibility. This tension is the wedge separating the two. It is in this sense that Gadamer tells Ernest Fortin that “I argued that this kind of debate was necessary, that it challenged the modern period to find its own evidence, but that the choice was not really an open one.”546 Although we have much to learn from the past, that does not mean that we can understand it as it was. Gadamer thus continues his critique:

I tried to convince Strauss that one could recognize the superiority of Plato and Aristotle without being committed to the view that their thought was immediately recoverable and that, even though we have to take seriously the challenge which they present to our own prejudices, we are never spared the hermeneutical effort of finding a bridge to them.547

In this telling, the ancients serve as a foil to our historical moment that help us to grasp what our situation, in its particularity, means. Since we are always conditioned by our prejudices and fore-meanings, it is impossible to bracket ourselves from the act of interpretation. Therefore, when Gadamer interprets Thucydides he fuses his concerns and questions with the thoughts that emerge as he

547 Ibid.
reads. This is why the interpreter has “to be reflective about himself” when he interprets.548

Taken to its conclusion, Gadamer summarizes the disagreement concerning la querelle des anciens et des modernes by telling Strauss that “I do not believe in a return of pre-historicist hermeneutics, rather in its factual continuation, which is only hidden by history.”549 In Heideggerian fashion, Gadamer recognizes that history can cover over phenomena while at the same time serving as the only medium capable of accessing, and thus rediscovering, the past. Although Gadamer denies that a real return is possible, he moderates his position by asserting that we can still practice genuine interpretation since the activity has persisted across time. It has even been preserved within the web of traditions that Strauss criticizes.

Yet, where Gadamer sees continuation as the hallmark of tradition, Strauss responds that “I believe that you will have to admit that there is a fundamental difference between your post-historicist hermeneutics and pre-historicist (traditional) hermeneutics.”550 While Strauss agrees that Gadamerian hermeneutics is linked to the pre-historicist hermeneutics, he insists that the development and reinterpretation of hermeneutics is a different phenomenon. Although this phenomenon is a real way to grapple with texts, this does not preclude Strauss from trying to understand what interpretation meant before the “discovery” of historical consciousness. It is thus incumbent upon us to consider the nature of interpretation itself.


549 Ibid.

Interpretation(s)

Whether Gadamer or Strauss provides a better approach to the interpretation of texts, Strauss is at least correct that “our differences regarding hermeneutics is only a consequence of this fundamental difference” over the possibility of a genuine return to the ancients.\footnote{Ibid.} Therefore, in this section I articulate the stakes of the ancient and modern approaches to interpretation. Because Strauss believes that return is possible, his goal is “ministerial.”\footnote{Ibid.} He wants to draw out what writers actually believed by filling in the assumed knowledge that contemporary readers would have known.\footnote{Strauss, “February 26, 1961,” Correspondence, 5.} In contrast, because Gadamer denies return, he centers the interpretive task on the “productivity” of the reader in making sense of what she encounters.\footnote{Gadamer, “April 5, 1961,” Correspondence, 9.}

In terms of interpretive methods, Strauss writes to Gadamer that “I find myself at a great disadvantage in speaking to you. You possess and present a comprehensive doctrine.”\footnote{Strauss, “February 26, 1961,” Correspondence, 6.} Although Gadamer would object to use of the word “method” to describe his interpretive approach, he consistently asserts that “we are not observers who look at history from a historical distance; rather, insofar as we are historical creatures, we are always on the inside of the history that we are striving to comprehend.”\footnote{Hans-Georg Gadamer, The Beginning of Philosophy, trans. Rod Coltman, (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 20.} This inescapable context impels us to recognize “that all
understanding inevitably involves some prejudice.” 557 Since our sense of self is so pervasive, there is no way to bracket our biases even if we are aware of them. Hence, “even the risky enterprise of interpreting the beginning of Western thought must always be a dialogue between two partners in a conversation”—the writer and the interpreter. 558

Not only does Gadamer deny that we can understand an ancient like Thucydides as he understood himself, he denies that any form of understanding can achieve such a complete introspection of another person’s mind. Instead—learning from Edmund Husserl and Count Yorck—Gadamer argues that “every experience has implicit horizons of before and after, and finally fuses with the continuum of the experiences present in the before and after to form a unified flow of experience.” 559 Whether we are reading the text of a long dead thinker or talking with a friend in a café, all understanding is a process of making alien ideas familiar so that “the alien is appropriated.” 560 This process of familiarization is the reason why Gadamer stresses the productive aspect of interpretation.

For Gadamer, every reading of a text will vary because “the prejudices and fore-meanings that occupy the interpreter’s consciousness are not at his free disposal.” 561 Even the same person reading the same, unchanged text at a different time will develop a different interpretation based upon various imperceptible

557 Gadamer, TM, 283.
559 Gadamer, TM, 246.
560 Ibid., 253.
561 Ibid., 306.
prejudices that color her reading. Whether the text in question is Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* or Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, the particular questions that the reader has will alter what emerges in her reading. If I am interested in questions of economics, then I will read these texts with an economic lens. But if I am interested in questions of love, justice, faith, or the passage of time, then my readings—as the same person—will reflect these central concerns instead.

Even the same basic question, for instance about the nature of fidelity in Anna Karenina’s adulterous relationship with Count Vronsky, will take on different resonances based upon how my own lived experiences alter my perspective. This is why “understanding is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity as well.”

My interpretation is literally a fusion of my concerns with those that come to life in my reading.

Hermeneutics is not a method to discover the objective reality of a text, but instead to become familiar with it the way we get to know a hiking trail or a neighborhood. It is in this sense that “the hermeneutical experience is the experience of the difficulty that we encounter when we try to follow a book, a play, or a work of art step by step, in such a way as to allow it to obsess us and lead us beyond our own horizon.” It is a mistake to suggest either that the (con)text completely determines us or that we exclusively determine the text. Hermeneutics is instead a mutually constitutive process. I am shaped—often imperceptibly—by my prejudices, education, and concerns. But my ideas also reshape my surroundings.

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562 Ibid., 307.

My neighborhood may have preceded me and my family, but I can add something to it by building a house on the street, planting a tree, or opening a business.

A successful interpretive act adds something to the tradition of text that was not previously there. This is why “the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices.”

The texts, neighborhoods, and ideas that survive the passing of time are those that we constantly revivify by discussing them in the conversation that truth, at least for Gadamer, becomes. In contrast to Strauss’s restorative project, Gadamer’s approach means that “it is by no means certain that we can ever recapture and integrate the original experiences encapsulated in those works.”

The experiences captured in the passage of time can even alienate a text from the author who wrote it.

It is in this sense that Gadamer argues that “it is certainly correct that we have to understand what the author intended ‘in his sense.’ But ‘in his sense’ does not mean ‘as he himself intended it.’” Not only does the author of a text herself have to interpret her work in order to discuss it with others, but the reader or discussant “must relate the text to his situation if he wants to understand it all.”

Although it might be particularly important to learn about the origins and contexts of texts themselves—in autobiographies for instance—this does not release us from

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564 Gadamer, _TM_, 317.


568 Gadamer, _TM_, 333.
the task of productive interpretation. There is no returning to the text as it first existed. It is always already in conversation with who we, as readers, are. Since we cannot negate ourselves in the process of interpretation, there is no way to get to the text itself.

Unsurprisingly, Strauss strongly disagrees with Gadamer’s perspective. At minimum, Strauss counters that “it is not easy for me to recognize in your hermeneutics my own experience as an interpreter.” Against the notion of a universal hermeneutic approach—predicated upon first acknowledging our ineradicable prejudices—Strauss points to “the feeling of the irretrievably ‘occasional’ character of every worthwhile interpretation.” Insofar as every text is a different entity, each should be approached on its own terms. Both the History of the Peloponnesian War and Anna Karenina are texts that require interpretation, but they are also discrete experiences with different requirements. Perhaps a skilled interpreter will use the same hermeneutic to approach both texts, but Strauss still asks “whether a universal hermeneutic which is more than ‘formal’ or external is possible” given that different texts present different challenges.

Where Thucydides wrote a history of a war between two city states in ancient Greece, Tolstoy wrote a novel about French speaking aristocrats in Czarist Russia. Strauss contends that it is possible to understand both of these texts as their authors intended, but his caveat is that we need specialized tools. A history is a different form of writing than a novel. It develops different kinds of truth claims

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569 Strauss, “February 26, 1961,” Correspondence, 5.
570 Ibid., 6.
571 Ibid., 5-6.
based upon entirely different historical, linguistic, and formal settings. This is the essence of Strauss’s retort to Gadamer:

I agree with your demand that the interpreter must reflect on his hermeneutic situation and he must apply the text to that situation, but I content that prior to modern historicism all intelligent people whom I have studied and who spoke about the understanding of old books have done this. ⁵⁷²

Acknowledging the importance of historical context is not a modern discovery, but a part of the ancient practice of pre-historicist hermeneutics that Strauss champions.

Even then, understanding a text as the author intended does not exhaust or unlock everything about it. This interpretative opening “may be the indispensable starting point for an adequate analysis, to be achieved by us, of present-day society in its peculiar character,” but it is neither a final nor a complete reading. ⁵⁷³ Strauss thus continues his argument:

At least in the most important cases, earlier or contemporary I have always seen that there remained something of the utmost importance which I did not understand, i.e., that my understanding or my interpretation was incomplete; I would hesitate to say however that no one can complete it or that the finiteness of man as man necessitates the impossibility of adequate or complete or ‘the true understanding.’ ⁵⁷⁴

In one sense, Strauss’s hermeneutic principle of understanding a text as the author understood it is aspirational. Writing elsewhere in response to criticism of his esoteric thesis, Strauss remarks that “I merely said that the historian must proceed on the supposition that the great thinkers understood better what they thought than the historian who is not likely to be a great thinker.” ⁵⁷⁵ But his point is also that we

⁵⁷² Ibid., 6.
⁵⁷³ Strauss, CM, 11.
can accomplish great feats of interpretation only if we are serious about interrogating texts fully.

Strauss even suggests that he can understand Gadamer’s intentions when he acknowledges the hermeneutic claim that “the historian cannot understand a teaching as it was meant by its originator but he necessarily understands it differently than its originator understood it.”\footnote{576 Strauss, CM, 9.} In this recognition, Strauss contends that he understands Gadamer as Gadamer intended and not at all differently. Thus, Strauss further develops his observation:

Ordinarily the historian’s understanding is inferior to the originator’s understanding; in the best case the understanding will be a creative transformation of the original understanding. Yet it is hard to see how one can speak of a creative transformation of the original teaching if it is not possible to grasp the original teaching as such.\footnote{577 Ibid., 9-10.}

While Gadamer argues that we always understand a text differently from an author \textit{because} we cannot know what an author intends, Strauss counters that we must have access to some kernel of an author’s thought to even recognize that our interpretation differs from theirs.

It is \textit{because} our perspectives inherently differ from the writers we interpret that Strauss stresses “the essentially ministerial element of interpretation proper which is concerned with understanding the thought of someone else as he meant it.”\footnote{578 Strauss, “May 14, 1961,” 11.} Instead of trying to bracket our prejudices by acknowledging that we likely cannot succeed at bracketing them, Strauss provides a different approach:

One may grant that the initial point of view of the historian who studies a teaching expounded in the past necessarily differs from that of the originator of the teaching, or, in other words, that the question which the historian

\footnotesize{576 Strauss, CM, 9.}

\footnotesize{577 Ibid., 9-10.}

\footnotesize{578 Strauss, “May 14, 1961,” 11.}
addresses to his author necessarily differs from the question which his author attempted to answer; yet surely the primary duty of the historian consists in suspending his initial question in favor of the question with which his author is concerned or in learning to look at the subject matter in question from the author’s point of view.579

Strauss still proposes a kind of bracketing, but his approach is different in kind from Gadamer’s. Rather than beginning with the recognition of our particularity as the entryway into a text, Strauss asks us to bracket our questions (which we can later ask) in order to let the author tell us what questions are worth asking. No less an authority than Gadamer himself learned from Plato that “contrary to the general opinion, it is more difficult to ask questions than to answer them.”580

This is why Strauss challenges Gadamer’s concept of a fusion of horizons [Horizontverschmelzung]. Strauss is dedicated to the proposition that “a doctrine ... must be understood in its claim to be true and this claim must be met.”581 He demands that we attempt to discover the questions that motivate a text. But the fusion of horizons elides this obligation. Strauss thus articulates his most important misgiving with Gadamer’s approach:

I do not believe however that this state of things is brought out when one speaks of a ‘fusion of horizons.’ Surely my horizon is enlarged if I learn something important. But it is hard to say that Plato’s horizon is enlarged if a modification of his doctrine proves to be superior to his own version.582

Just because a text has its own effect upon history does not mean that the text itself has changed. It may be important to understand how a text has made its mark on history. But, for Strauss, this question is separable and even secondary to the

579 Strauss, CM, 10.
580 Gadamer, TM, 371.
582 Ibid.
question of grasping the text itself in all of its strangeness. Since Strauss is serious about return, he believes that we are obligated to try to understand the past as it was. Yet, because Gadamer believes that this is impossible, he is committed to studying history, as a process, instead.

**Overcoming Historicism**

One of the apparent disappointments of the Strauss-Gadamer correspondence is that the two sometimes talk past each other, especially concerning the problem of historicism. On the one hand historicism is central to Strauss’s worldview. It is the crisis at the heart of modernity:

> Historicism rejects the question of the good society, that is to say, of the good society, because of the essentially historical character of society and of human thought: there is no essential necessity for raising the question of the good society; this question is not in principle coeval with man; its very possibility is the outcome of a mysterious dispensation of fate.⁵⁸³

In this telling, historicism is the denial of the possibility of understanding other times and places because we are so profoundly limited by the world into which we are born. Since Strauss understands philosophy as the quest for knowledge of unchanging things, the doctrine of historicism rules out the classical practice of philosophy in its entirety.⁵⁸⁴

On the other hand, Gadamer’s project denies such catastrophizing. While Gadamer agrees that “the emergence of historical consciousness over the last few centuries is a much more radical rupture with the past” than other discoveries, he still cautions that “perspectives that result from the experience of historical change

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⁵⁸⁴ Ibid., 11.
are always in danger of being exaggerated because they forget what persists unseen.”\textsuperscript{585} His problem is not that modern discoveries have prevented us from returning to the past, but that the dominance of the objective sciences has hollowed out the dialectical investigation that history should be.\textsuperscript{586}

Although Gadamer and Strauss share several misgivings about the priority of the natural sciences, their assessments of the problem of historicism are of different magnitudes. Gadamer’s point is that “historical knowledge cannot be described according to the model of an objectivist knowledge because it is itself a process which has all the characteristics of an historical event.”\textsuperscript{587} The goal of studying history is not to grasp it as it happened, but instead to understand how it is a development, an inherently changing thing. There is no crisis, only a failure to understand how history functions. But Strauss instead cautions that the development of technology represents a challenge so profound that it could block our access to the past permanently. This would be a world night:

Aristotle did not conceive of a world state because he was absolutely certain that science is essentially theoretical and that the liberation of technology from moral and political control would lead to disastrous consequences: the fusion of science and the arts together with the unlimited or uncontrolled progress of technology has made universal and perpetual tyranny a serious possibility.\textsuperscript{588}

In essence, modernity is in such a crisis that we need to return to the roots of classical philosophy as an attempt to prevent or subvert a perpetual tyranny.

\textsuperscript{585} Gadamer, \textit{TM}, xxiii.

\textsuperscript{586} Gadamer, “Hermeneutics and Historicism,” 553.

\textsuperscript{587} Gadamer, “The Problem of Historical Consciousness,” 39.

\textsuperscript{588} Strauss, \textit{NRH}, 23.
It is this difference that fuels some of the most intense disagreements within the correspondence. Specifically, Strauss writes that “it does not appear from your presentation that the radicalization and universalization of hermeneutics is essentially contemporary with the approach of the ‘world-night,’ or the Untergang des Abendlands: the ‘existential’ meaning of the universalization, the catastrophic context to which it belongs, thus does not come out.”^{589} While Strauss is impressed with Gadamer’s “translation of Heidegger’s questions, analyses and hints into a more academic medium,” he suggests that Gadamer misinterprets why Heidegger proposes a new kind of phenomenological philosophy.\textsuperscript{590} Because Heidegger believes in a world-night—the possibility that the West will collapse under its own accretions of metaphysical thinking—his philosophy is meant as a challenge to the whole tradition that preceded him.\textsuperscript{591}

Yet, because Gadamer denies a radical crisis that would force us to reconsider the nature of the philosophical tradition, he instead focuses on what Strauss elsewhere calls “the philosophic task of understanding the universal structure common to all historical worlds.”\textsuperscript{592} Even if we live within a changing historical world, the concept of world itself still has unchangeable features.\textsuperscript{593} This serves to justify the hermeneutic approach to situating ourselves within our inescapable historical context. The problem with this goal, at least from Strauss’s perspective, is

\textsuperscript{589} Strauss, “February 26, 1961,” Correspondence, 5.

\textsuperscript{590} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{592} Strauss, “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy,” 2.

\textsuperscript{593} See Rosen, “Interpretation and the Fusion of Horizons,” 186.
that it causes Gadamer to entangle himself in precisely the historical events that Heidegger was attempting to dismantle.

This is the essence of Strauss’s critique of effective history [Wirkungsgeschichte]. It treats “what is necessarily thematic for the interpreter in the light of what is not necessarily thematic for [the writer].”594 If, in Richard Rorty’s terms, “the conversation Plato began has been enlarged by more voices than Plato would have dreamed possible, and thus by topics he knew nothing of,” then Strauss suggests that Gadamer is more interested in the new voices than in Plato himself.595 While Strauss believes that we can still get back to Plato, this requires us to grapple with his thoughts on his own terms as opposed to those of the interpreters who came after him.

Therefore, the most serious problem that Strauss has with Gadamer is his assumption that we have no choice but to begin our interpretive work from the tradition itself. In Strauss’s terms, “the most comprehensive question which you discuss is indicated by the term ‘relativism.’ You take ‘the relativity of all human values’ of all world-views for granted.”596 What for Gadamer is a trans-historical truth about the inescapability of relativism is for Strauss a covering over of other worlds that we can still access. It is in this vein that Strauss complains that “you do not expect that the insight into the historicity of one’s own existence and therewith the impossibility of one’s transcending one’s own horizon will be superseded in the

595 Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, 391.
way in which Parmenides and Hegel were superseded.” For Strauss, Gadamer is entangled in a modern worldview that is as temporary as the worldviews of other major thinkers. Since Strauss can provide examples of radical shifts in orientation, he questions Gadamer’s assumption that we are trapped in relativism.

Of course, Gadamer is far from defenseless. He not only has responses to Strauss’s critiques, but his own set of concerns. His first response is to tell Strauss that “you are entirely correct when you speak of Heidegger translated into an academic medium, Dilthey instead of Nietzsche.” This preference for Dilthey is a suggestion that we do not have to think in terms of the crises, catastrophes, and revaluations of values that define the Nietzschean project. We do not need the radicality of thinkers like Nietzsche—who can proclaim that “I am not a human being, I am dynamite”—to address our most pressing questions.

Decades later, when Gadamer clarifies his preference for Dilthey over Nietzsche to Fortin, he says that “what it means is that for me the tradition remains as a living tradition. I am a Platonist. I agree with Plato, who said there is no city in the world in which the ideal city is not present in some ultimate sense.” The ideal is not a past object that we need radical tools to rediscover, but instead a living aspect of the world around us that we can reach with a sufficiently sensitive hermeneutic. We can “return” to Plato by considering what the ideal regime means.

597 Ibid.
in relation to the world that we always already inhabit. Modernity is not so bad or so helplessly corrupt that we need to return to or construct another system of morals.

This view of a moderate modernity elucidates Gadamer’s response to Strauss’s charge that the translation of Heidegger into “a more academic medium” warped the Heideggerian project.601 Gadamer’s view is that “one must ask oneself whether this ‘transposition’ is possible without essential alterations.”602 This is an instantiation of the applicative aspect of hermeneutics. Not only is hermeneutics a circular process of mutually constitutive interpretation and understanding; it is an application of that process to our lives.603 In order to apply our interpretive understandings, we need to translate them into our peculiar context.

Rather than misunderstanding or misusing Heidegger, Gadamer argues that he is undertaking “the task of historical hermeneutics: to consider the tension that exists between the identity of the common object and the changing situation in which it must be understood.”604 Even if, as Gadamer admits, “Heidegger too would likely feel a lack of ultimate radicality in the conclusions I draw,” this does not mean that Gadamer’s moderate, modern project misuses his mentor.605 Instead it means that Gadamer has found a useful application that Heidegger neither considered not developed.

603 Gadamer, TM, 318-320.
604 Ibid., 320.
605 Ibid., xxxiv.
Even though Gadamer advances his own project, this does not mean that he fails to grasp Heidegger's. This is how he can confidently tell Strauss that “my point of departure is not the complete forgetfulness of being [vollendete Seinsvergessenheit], the ‘night of being’ ['Seinsnacht'], rather on the contrary—I say this against Heidegger as well as against Buber—the unreality of such an assertion.”606 By denying certain aspects of Heidegger while developing other insights, Gadamer treats Heidegger as a part of the tradition. His work, like all other work, is open to interpretation.

Insofar as Gadamer actively disagrees with his mentor, he upholds the value of effective history. For Gadamer, “this means, above all, that it is not correct to assert that the study of a text or a tradition is completely dependent upon our own decision making.”607 Even great thinkers like Nietzsche or Heidegger, who assault the concept of tradition, cannot overcome the imperceptible, traditional atmosphere that enabled their attacks. If anything, Gadamer has “advocated against Heidegger, for decades, that also his 'bound' [Satz] or 'leap' [Sprung] back behind metaphysics is alone made possible through this itself, (historically operative consciousness! [wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein!]).”608 Not only is the attack on tradition prepared by the tradition itself, the radicality to which Heidegger points is another—though unintentional—development of it. This is why “historical self-consciousness is not the abandonment of philosophy’s eternal task, but is the path

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It is a continuation of the activity of philosophy as Plato, Aristotle, and even Heidegger practiced it.

Since Gadamer views the problem of historicism as the unwelcome injection of objectivity into the dialectical enterprise that is history, he consistently posits that “the knowing subject, the understanding historian, does not simply stand over against his object, historical life, but is himself part of the same movement of historical life.”\(^\text{610}\) It is this recognition of our inescapable context that allows us to approach our lives as complete experiences open to interpretation. Against both Heidegger’s attempt to supersede our horizons and Strauss’s attempts to return to the past horizons of Athens and Jerusalem, Gadamer presents a modern alternative.

Rather than subscribing to “your catastrophe explanation,” Gadamer “remember[s], instead of this, the one world which I alone know, and which in all decay has lost far less of its evidence and cohesion than it talks itself into.”\(^\text{611}\) It is this not-at-all-decayed world that represents Gadamer’s answer to radical philosophy in all of its forms. Like his joke that “a bad infinity is not as bad as it sounds,” Gadamer suggests that the “crises” of historicism and the West are exaggerations that sell our current possibilities short.\(^\text{612}\)

Yet from Strauss’s perspective, Gadamer is deaf to the seriousness of the crisis that prompts a return to the past. Against accommodating ourselves to an inescapable present, Strauss counters that “it is necessary to reflect on the situation

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610 Gadamer, “History and Historicism,” 529.


which demands the new hermeneutics, i.e., on our situation; this reflection will necessarily bring to light a radical crisis, an unprecedented crisis and this is what Heidegger means by the approach of the world night.”613 While Heidegger’s own solution to the modern crisis—a dalliance with the Nazi Party—was a profound mistake, he at least understood that a radical change in the way the West understood itself was needed.

Since for Strauss the crisis of the West is that it has “become uncertain of its purpose,” any perspective that minimizes this problem is not just wrong but dangerous.614 It is perhaps for this reason that Strauss cuts off the correspondence. Insofar as historicism is the lodestar of Strauss’s critique of modernity, Gadamer’s “silence on this crucial question and [his] failure to reply to my remarks on ‘relativism’” implies an incommensurable disagreement.615 While Gadamer later agrees that “a radical historicism that historically relativizes all unconditional values cannot be right,” he still maintains that historical consciousness is a sign of progress as opposed to decay.616

It is thus fortuitous that Strauss observes in “Progress or Return?” that “in fact, every disagreement we may say, presupposes some agreement, because people must disagree about something and must agree as to the importance of that something.”617 Gadamer even agrees that “without some agreement, some basic

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614 Strauss, CM, 3.
616 Gadamer, “History and Historicism,” 552.
617 Leo Strauss, “Progress or Return?, 273.
agreement, no disagreement is possible.” 618 Ultimately, Strauss and Gadamer present overlapping, but distinct, interpretations of what historicism and relativism mean. What for Strauss is evidence of a decline so perilous that we might never recover is for Gadamer the discovery of a historical dimension that better enables us to understand our reality. Therefore, in attempting to resolve—or at least articulate—the fundamental tensions between Gadamer and Strauss, I turn to how their thinking maps on to the practice of politics itself.

**Moderating Politics**

In terms of grappling with political problems as they emerge in our everyday lives, Gadamer and Strauss manifest themselves as unexpected resources. Unlike Hannah Arendt, neither thinker even proposes an explicit philosophy of action. 619 On the one hand, Darren Walhof captures much of the tone of Gadamer scholarship when he observes that “few political theorists approach Gadamer as someone whose ideals and writings shed light on politics itself.” 620 On the other, while Strauss is more apparently political, he is also more controversial. When he is not being accused of having so much political influence that he could enable the Iraq War, 621 he can appear as a quietist interested only in protecting his ability to practice

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621 On this topic see Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss*, 1-20.
philosophy. Yet, despite their differences, Strauss admits to Gadamer that “I agree with you that our practical agreements as interpreters is much greater than our theoretical dissension seems to show.” What they agree upon is that we should approach politics from a moderate, anti-utopian perspective.

Both are particularly concerned with moderation because they have seen firsthand how a fusion of radical politics and philosophy manifests. Rather than saving the world, it results in “outstanding thinkers” like Martin Heidegger indulging in what Gadamer euphemistically calls a “political interlude.” In effect, Gadamer and Strauss have to contend with the notion that Heidegger’s Nazism has an “intimate connection with the core of his philosophic thought.” Given that Strauss also argues that “Heidegger’s philosophy of history has the same structure as Marx’ and Nietzsche’s: the moment in which the final insight is arriving opens the eschatological prospect,” this judgment applies to the radical left as well as the right. Attempts to use reason and technology to solve political problems completely have not only been unsuccessful, but catastrophic.

Even so, Strauss and Gadamer present different approaches to moderating radical politics based upon their positions in la querelle des anciens et des modernes. Strauss believes—with the help of Heidegger’s radicality—that it is possible “to see

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622 In “A Giving of Accounts” Strauss suggests that the philosophers must protect their cities because “without cities, no philosophers.” See Klein and Strauss, “A Giving of Accounts,” 5.


624 Strauss, “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy,” 2 and Gadamer, Philosophical Apprenticeships, 51.

625 Strauss, “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy,” 2.

626 Ibid., 5.
the roots of the tradition as they are and thus perhaps to know, what so many merely believe, that these roots are the only natural and healthy roots.”627 That is, we can ameliorate our modern political problems by acknowledging the ancient wisdom that “knows that evil cannot be eradicated, and therefore that one’s expectations from politics must be moderate.”628 In contrast, Gadamer presents a defense of modern politics in line with Hegel’s dictum, “hic Rhodus, hic salta,” or “here is the rose, dance here.”629 Since “the beginning is not given to us directly,” we need to accommodate ourselves to living together in the world we already inhabit.630 Rather than transforming our world into some kind of paradise, we need to live in it as it is and improve it to the extent possible, even if “the solution to such problems [of politics] is ruled out.”631

Between the two thinkers, Strauss’s approach to the immoderate fusion of politics and philosophy is more apparently radical. Although Strauss’s political philosophy appears as its own kind of fusion, he implies that the practice is actually a mediation between the two ways of life. This is the essence of the exoteric-esoteric distinction in Persecution and the Art of Writing. Since many philosophic teachings call into doubt the opinions that ground communities,632 Strauss argues that “the exoteric teaching was needed for protecting philosophy. It was the armor in which

628 Strauss, WIPP, 28.
630 Gadamer, The Beginning of Philosophy, 12.
631 Ibid., 17.
philosophy had to appear.” In other words, it is necessary to moderate radical philosophic views by presenting them alongside edifying public teachings. This allows philosophers to undertake radical investigations into the nature of reality without corroding the faith in politics that ordinary citizens need in order to have faith in the justice of their societies.

Taken to its extreme, Strauss is critiquing the recklessness of philosophers, such as Nietzsche, who publicly advance “the possibility, nay, the fact that human life is utterly meaningless and lacking support, that it is lasts only for a minute which is preceded and follow by an infinite time during which the human race was and will not be.” Even if Nietzsche is correct and his investigations are philosophically necessary, they are politically deleterious. They prevent people from living in peace within their communities and thus disrupt the political stability that would allow philosophers to develop their thoughts. Thus, Strauss notes that “by interpreting Nietzsche in the light of the German revolution [the rise of National Socialism], one is very unjust to Nietzsche, but one is not absolutely unjust.” Whether Nietzsche would have supported the Nazis is an important question, but the fact remains that the irresponsible propagation of his teachings influenced them either way.

This is why Strauss’s doctrine of return is intertwined with his observation that “whoever is concerned with political philosophy must face the fact that in the

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634 Strauss, “Note on the Plan of Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*,” 180.

635 Strauss, “German Nihilism,” 372.
last two generations political philosophy has lost its credibility.”

Philosophy has become so radical in its critique of the possibility of knowledge that it has undercut our ability to believe in anything. This radicality is tied specifically to a historicism “based not on history but on philosophy: on a philosophic analysis proving that all human thought depends ultimately on fickle and dark fate and not on evident principles accessible to man.”

Yet instead of concluding, as Heidegger does, that Western philosophy is intrinsically self-immolating, Strauss questions what philosophy itself is. He thus proposes a return to the original understanding of political philosophy as a first philosophy asking fundamental, life-affirming questions.

Strauss’s point is that meaningful distinctions, such as political philosophy vs. politics, are still possible. Specifically, “political philosophy was concerned with the best or just order of society which is by nature best or just everywhere or always, while politics is concerned with the being and well-being of this or that particular society.” Although modernity, in its historicist manifestation, has “discovered the superiority of the local and temporal to the universal,” Strauss counters that this interpretation of reality is at best contingent. We should not place the goals of politics above those of philosophy, especially when understood as a moderate

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636 Strauss, “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy,” 1.
637 Strauss, NRH, 19.
639 Strauss, CM, 20. See also Michael P. Zuckert, “Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy as First Philosophy.”
640 Strauss, “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy,” 1.
641 Strauss, NRH, 14.
political philosophy. To the degree that we can understand classical political philosophy as it once existed, we rebuke the notion that modernity is destiny.

Modernity is thus problematic because it impels us to accept utopian values that it cannot hope to actuate. While the modern principle is best represented by the “rejection of the classical scheme as unrealistic,” Strauss’s contention is that modernity itself is far more naïve.642 His problem is that “modern science has not kept the promise which it held out from its beginning up until the end of the nineteenth century: that it would reveal to us the true character of the universe and the truth about man.”643 Although Machiavelli’s break from the ancients—the idea that “one must start from how men do live; one must lower the sights” of philosophy—has helped to expand our worldly power, it has failed to provide the answers it promised.644 We still are uncertain about the nature of truth.

In response to the modern promise that we can entirely solve our worldly problems, Strauss returns to the Republic. Although this text appears as the classical articulation of a utopian society wherein a philosopher-king rules justly, Strauss contends that “the Republic conveys the broadest and deepest analysis of political idealism ever made” precisely because it concludes that “the just city is then impossible.”645 At most we might—by sheer chance—live in a society where a philosopher becomes a king or a king becomes a philosopher, but this potentiality is both unlikely and prone to be unstable.

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642 Strauss, WIPP, 40.
645 Strauss, CM, 127.
The realization that utopia is practically unattainable allows us to accept a world beyond our control. We do not have to follow Machiavelli’s teaching that fortune is a woman who can be conquered.\textsuperscript{646} We can instead maintain faith in our values by honestly acknowledging that “there is no knowledge of the whole but only knowledge of parts, hence only partial knowledge of parts, hence no unqualified transcending, even by the wisest man as such, of the sphere of opinion.”\textsuperscript{647} This might require us to “insist on the strictly esoteric character of the theoretical analysis of life—that is, restore the Platonic notion of the noble delusion.” \textsuperscript{648} But it would also enable us to contemplate the radical philosophic projects of Nietzsche and Heidegger without disrupting the opinions that undergird our communities.

Thus, for Strauss, return is a recognition that there are profound limitations to our knowledge that spur radical thinkers in the quest for truth. While these quests are actual instantiations of the philosophic life as the best life, they are still incapable of founding utopias that permanently solve our fundamental problems. After all, “men of the highest excellence (Plato and Aristotle) are known to have lived in deed, whereas of the best regime it is known only that it necessarily ‘lives in speech.’”\textsuperscript{649} This is the essence of Strauss’s peculiar political moderation. While we are all free, even encouraged, to think radically, we should not expect our impact on the world to reflect our desires.


\textsuperscript{647} Strauss, \textit{CM}, 20.

\textsuperscript{648} Strauss, \textit{NRH}, 26.

\textsuperscript{649} Strauss, \textit{CM}, 49.
In contradistinction to Strauss, Gadamer’s project of moderation requires us to grapple with difficult and radical ideas in the open. From Gadamer’s perspective, “philosophers are no different from other men, for other men too are in the habit of thinking definite things and avoiding contradictions.”\footnote{Gadamer, “The Philosophical Foundations of the Twentieth Century,” 122.} While Gadamer agrees with Strauss that “human thought is nonetheless continually dominated by questions for which science promises no answer,” he maintains that “philosophy takes up its task, a task that has remained the same to the present day.”\footnote{Ibid., 109.} Instead of trying to return to a world that we have not lived, it makes more sense to philosophize within our own horizon. We can still use the great thoughts of the past to shed light upon our concerns without having to restore the past as it was.

It is in this sense that Gadamer believes he can construct his philosophic system upon Heideggerian foundations without entangling himself in Nazism. While it is unfortunate that Heidegger became involved in radical politics—perhaps in part because of his philosophic commitments—this does not make his thinking inherently problematic. Since Gadamer contends that “understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition,” the point of hermeneutics is to broaden our personal horizons by encountering other ways of thinking.\footnote{Gadamer, \textit{TM}, 302.} Insofar as we reconstitute the tradition by appropriating the thoughts of others—with the expectation that we too can be appropriated—we can moderate radical philosophies by drawing them into a wider tradition.
Gadamer’s argument is that radical political projects become dangerous when they calcify into apparently inevitable necessities. The particular danger of Nazism is in part a reflection of its status as a dogma that could not be challenged in a post-Weimar Germany. Although “dogmatics is, in fact, an element in our historical knowledge”—since we must begin our thinking by acknowledging our prejudices—we become politically endangered once we lose the ability to question and adjust our pre-judgments. This is why Gadamer insists that “true prejudices must still finally be justified by rational knowledge, even though the task can never be fully completed.” We must still transform our pre-judgments into judgments by considering them in addition to other possibilities.

Thus, when Gadamer discusses historicism on his own terms he observes that “the problem of historicism” is in fact “the problem of the multiplicity of such dogmatic systems or styles” that are fundamentally incompatible with one another. By recognizing that different worldviews—fascism, communism, Christianity, liberalism, etc.—cannot entirely account for each other, we open ourselves to hermeneutics as a meta-conversation about the nature of reality. This is why “the real power of hermeneutical consciousness is our ability to see what is questionable.” We learn what we do not know by discovering points of disagreement within our overlapping, permeable traditions.

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Even so, the one experience that all traditions share is that they disclose themselves within history. Consequently, Gadamer is committed to the proposition that “interpretation, as we understand it today, is applied not only to texts and verbal tradition, but to everything bequeathed to us by history.”

Rather than treating the discovery of historical consciousness as the spur for the quest for complete solutions to fundamental problems, Gadamer stresses how history becomes the shared field of trans-temporal and trans-cultural exchange. Historical consciousness is thus distinct from mere historicism, because “having an historical sense is to conquer in a consistent manner the natural naiveté which makes us judge the past by the so-called obvious scales of our current life.”

Through historical consciousness we can learn about the values of Plato and Aristotle—in addition to those of Machiavelli, Nietzsche, or Dilthey—without having to accept all of the implications of their philosophies.

Jürgen Habermas captures the productive aspect of Gadamer’s approach to hermeneutics when he observes that “bridge building distinguishes the mentality and cast of thought of this learned man generally.” Despite the radicality of Heidegger’s political-philosophical fusion, Habermas commends how “Gadamer urbanizes the Heideggerian province” by drawing out what is useful in his thinking for us today. Indeed, when Gadamer himself discusses his appropriations of

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661 Ibid.
Heidegger, he clarifies that “I do not follow Heidegger at all when he talks about new gods or similar things. I follow him only in what he does with the empty or extreme situation.”

In other words, Gadamer is able to consider the implications of Heidegger’s radical thoughts without sharing his conclusions.

It is Gadamer’s ability to disagree with those he interprets that conveys his approach to moderating modernity. Since “it is enough to say that we understand in a different way, if we understand at all,” we can learn from radical texts without necessarily radicalizing ourselves. It is in this sense that Gadamer tells Ernest Fortin that “even [Heidegger’s] famous statement, Nur ein Gott kann uns retten [only a god can save us now], means only that calculating politics is not what will save us from the impending catastrophe.”

This Heideggerian language is precisely what Strauss points to when warning Gadamer of a radical crisis that imperils existence itself. This crisis is not merely philosophical, but a representation of what nuclear Armageddon would mean for us. But Gadamer moderates this language by treating it metaphorically: “if we go on in this manner, technology will be enshrined as a terminal state, a final world government will come into being, and everything will be regulated by an omnipotent bureaucracy.”

Although a world bureaucracy would be less than ideal if it calcified into its own dogma, Gadamer’s point is that we can only grapple with this problem by understanding our current possibilities. His approach to moderating our political-

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663 Gadamer, TM, 307.
665 Ibid.
technological tendencies is to reiterate that “we remain embedded in the social structures and normative perspectives in which we were reared and must recognize that we are part of a development that always proceeds on the basis of some preshaped view.”\textsuperscript{666} This self-conscious position allows us to acknowledge the limitations of our abilities without having to relitigate \textit{la querelle des anciens et des modernes}. Indeed, because Gadamer rejects Strauss’s notion of return, he believes that the only way we can check the temptation to remake the world in our image—“to play at being Faust”—is to remind ourselves of our place within the wider tradition.\textsuperscript{667}

**Conclusions**

In his autobiographical reflection, \textit{Philosophical Apprenticeships}, Gadamer observes that “one who takes himself to be ‘against’ Heidegger or for that matter ‘for’ Heidegger makes himself ridiculous, for this is not the way to get around a mode of thinking.”\textsuperscript{668} This remark is intriguing for two reasons. First, it teaches us that political responsibility requires us to grapple with problems as they appear. We cannot blindly choose to uphold or reject a thought as a means to preserve our worldviews uncritically. If Strauss is correct that “the crisis of the West consists in the West’s having become uncertain of its purpose,” as opposed to “[going] down in honor, certain of its purpose,” then we can address this loss of faith only by learning

\textsuperscript{666} Ibid., 13.

\textsuperscript{667} Gadamer, \textit{TM}, xxi.

\textsuperscript{668} Gadamer, \textit{Philosophical Apprenticeships}, 46.
what our values are and why we should uphold them.\footnote{669 Strauss, CM, 3.} We need to approach other modes of thinking seriously both so we can choose what appears best for us and so we can defend ourselves when our principles are inevitably questioned. Insofar as historicism represents a rejection of the responsibility to consider alien modes of thought, Strauss and Gadamer teach us how to understand others.

Second, Gadamer’s observation sheds light on how we relate to our predecessors. Rather than rejecting or attempting to supersede our mentors, we owe them the honor of coming to terms with their work, even if we disagree with them. When Strauss criticizes Heidegger as the kernel of the “radical historicism” that threatens to destroy our faith in the West, he still acknowledges that “as far as I can see, [Heidegger] is of the opinion that none of his critics and none of his followers has understood him adequately. I believe that he is right, for is the same not also true, more or less, of all outstanding thinkers?”\footnote{670 Strauss, “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy,” 2.} In part because Heidegger’s thought is radically potent, we have to grapple with it. Perhaps society as a whole needs to shield its opinions from a Nietzschean radicality that “tears one mask after another from the I, until finally no more masks remain—and also no more I.”\footnote{671 Gadamer, “The Philosophical Foundations of the Twentieth Century,” 117.} But the shield of ignorance is a poor defense. We still need thinkers like Gadamer and Strauss who can grapple with radical thoughts while maintaining their faith in moderation. We can learn from them how to fight monsters without ourselves becoming monstrous.\footnote{672 See Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good & Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 89, §146.}
It is in this spirit that I turned to the works of both Strauss and Gadamer with the intent to discover the truth. I did so even as I realized that, in Strauss’s words, “at least in the most important cases, ... there remained in the text something of the utmost importance which I did not understand, i.e. that my interpretation was very incomplete.” But this is hardly an indictment of interpretation, either generally or in this specific case. Even Platonic dialogues ended in aporia. And aporia, as the recognition of the irresolvable, is ultimately a form of wisdom. It is the essence of Socrates’ recognition that “I am very conscious that I am not wise at all.” In contradistinction to the historicist cum nihilist notion that real knowledge is unattainable, the wisdom to which Gadamer and Strauss subscribe is that we must be modest about our intellectual claims. Although we cannot be certain about what we know, we can know that we, as humans, are fallible.

Since Strauss and Gadamer agree that human thought is defined by its limitations, they are friends approaching the same problem from different perspectives. As Strauss writes to Gadamer, “the difference of starting points and hence of the ascents does not lead to the consequence that the plateau which all interpreters as interpreters wish to reach is one and the same.” Despite their serious divergences, both recognize that we can only live the philosophic life by protecting and maintaining our political communities. This is the dialogic teaching that enables us—despite our differences—to understand each other.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


