

After Socrates. Leo Strauss and the Esoteric Irony¹

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Abstract. Throughout the philosophical tradition, Socratic irony has represented an enigma that all interpreters of the Platonic dialogues have had to face from different points of view. In this article I aim to present the peculiar Straussian reading of Socratic irony. According to Leo Strauss, Socratic irony is a key element of Plato's political philosophy, linked to the «logographic necessity» that rules his texts. I will therefore examine the genesis and the main features of Straussian hermeneutics. I will end the article by highlighting the relevance of the esoteric interpretation of Platonic thought as a conceptual tool that responds to the crisis of modern political philosophy.

Keywords: Irony, Plato, *Republic*, Socrates, Strauss.

[es] Siguiendo a Sócrates: Leo Strauss y la ironía esotérica

Resumen. A lo largo de la tradición filosófica la ironía de Sócrates ha representado un enigma con el que han tenido que confrontarse, desde distintos puntos de vista, todos los intérpretes de los diálogos platónicos. En este artículo presentaremos la original lectura straussiana de la ironía socrática. Según Leo Strauss, la ironía de Sócrates es un elemento clave de la filosofía política de Platón, vinculado con la «necesidad logográfica» que gobierna sus textos. Examinaremos, por tanto, la génesis y los rasgos principales de la hermenéutica straussiana y, finalmente, destacaremos la relevancia de la interpretación esotérica del pensamiento platónico en tanto que herramienta conceptual para responder a la crisis de la filosofía política moderna.

Palabras clave: Ironía, Platón, *República*, Sócrates, Strauss.

Summary. 1. Introduction; 2. Socratic Irony: An Esoteric Reading; 3. Philosophy and Persecution; 4. Platonic Political Philosophy; 5. References.

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1. Introduction

Socratic irony remains a fascinating enigma for Platonic scholars. For centuries readers and interpreters of the dialogues have faced the difficulties related to understanding this central element of Socrates's character. Socrates was certainly ironic when speaking with certain others. However, what exactly does his irony mean, to whom

is it addressed and what is its role in the work of Plato? The question of whether Socrates is ironic as a character is different from the question of whether Plato is ironic as an author. Nevertheless, both problems raise a fundamental question concerning the meaning of Plato's philosophy.³ Leo Strauss ventured an answer to this question stating that the content of the dialogues cannot be separated from the understanding of the dialogic form

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³ For an account on Socratic irony throughout the philosophical tradition, see: LANE, Melissa. «Reconsidering Socratic Irony». In: MORRISON, Donald R. (ed). *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 237-259. Lane stresses how the problem of Socratic irony is essentially related to the reception of Plato's work. She also argues that there is no textual basis for a systematic imputation of Socratic irony in the dialogues; this assertion should lead to the reconsideration of the traditions that posit the philosophical significance of irony. According to other authors, irony is inherent in Socratic philosophy, see NEHAMAS, Alexander. *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998 and VLASTOS, Gregory. *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. For a recent work on irony that also engages with the readings of both Nehamas and Vlastos in order to achieve a broader understanding of the philosophical relevance of irony, see BERNSTEIN, Richard J. *Ironic Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016. On the concept of irony, see JANKÉLÉVITCH, Vladimir. *L'ironie*, Paris: Flammarion, 1964.

as such.⁴ This perspective entails an exegetical approach based on the attention to the literary aspects of the texts. In this sense, a proper understanding of Plato's work requires an enquiry into the role of irony as an essential piece of the dramatic structure of the writings. For Strauss, solving the enigma of Socrates's smile thus implies first taking a stance on the enigma of the Platonic dialogue itself.⁵

Scholars publishing in recent years have tended to reconsider the relevance of the dialogic form for understanding Plato's philosophy.⁶ Nevertheless, the Straussian approach has not yet received proper recognition. In fact, Strauss deserves praise for having introduced the problems related to the dramatic structure of the Platonic texts into the debate, creating an important school of readers that has contrasted with the predominant analytical approach in the United States.⁷ Yet, despite the recent interest in Strauss's reading of Plato,⁸ scholars of ancient philosophy have generally shown a certain amount of resistance and even disdain towards his results. In fact, while the importance of Strauss's work in the field of contemporary political philosophy is broadly recognized, this is not the case for his studies on classical philosophy. This could be due to various reasons that range from the ideological stance against the members belonging to the so-called Straussian School to the existence of solid barriers between disciplines that Strauss aimed to bring down.⁹ However, most of the criticisms rest on the reluctance to accept Strauss's esoteric assumptions. The core of Strauss's dialogic approach in fact aims to recover the esoteric meaning of the texts. From this point of view, Socratic irony would be part of a comprehensive strategy of dissimulation, eventually leading to an ironic reading of the dialogues themselves. This view has been criticized by Platonic scholars as the outcome of «her-

meneutic excess» based on disregarding the textual evidence, on the suspicion towards the utopian nature of the texts and on a radical critique of the connection between philosophy and politics.¹⁰ Yet, I will argue that a correct understanding of Strauss's arguments would lead to an original reading of Plato's philosophy. Strauss's attempt to separate Plato from Platonism open up a perspective that could help to overcome the traditional alternative between the dogmatic or skeptical approach to the dialogues.¹¹ Nevertheless, the significance of Strauss's recovery of Plato's political philosophy cannot be reduced to the field of ancient studies; its ultimate aim is to rehabilitate a philosophical question on human affairs in contemporary times.

To this end, I will first present the meaning of Socratic irony in Strauss's reading of Plato. I will show how Strauss's conception of irony is essentially related to the notion of «logographic necessity» as both a compositional and hermeneutic principle. The link between irony and «logographic necessity» lies in Strauss's understanding of Platonic esotericism. Strauss places himself in the Schleiermachean tradition of reading Plato –based on the identity of form and content– but he corrects this tradition by proposing a political interpretation of esotericism that he takes from his reading of medieval Jewish and Arab philosophers. This analysis makes it possible to come closer to the philosophical implications of Strauss's turn towards a Platonic political philosophy. I will show that this is his way to respond to the crisis of Western civilization, a crisis essentially related to the loss of the authentic relationship between philosophy and politics inaugurated by modern political theory. In the final section, I seek to unite the interpretive principle of esotericism with the question of the relationship between philosophy and politics, all under the umbrella of irony. There, I aim to show that Strauss's account of Socratic irony as esotericism has not only literary consequences, but also esotericism has a deep meaning for the contemporary renewal of political philosophy.

2. Socratic Irony: An Esoteric Reading

Strauss presents his hermeneutic approach to the Platonic dialogues mostly in his commentary on Plato's *Republic*, in the middle of his book *The City and Man*, published in 1964.¹² Strauss first assumes that Socrates

⁴ STRAUSS, Leo. *The City and Man*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1978, 52.

⁵ *Ibidem*, 55.

⁶ See PRESS, Gerald A. «The State of the Question in the Study of Plato», *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 34, 4, 1996, 513-515 and PRESS, Gerald A. «The State of the Question in the Study of Plato: 20 Year Update», *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 56, 1, 2018, 9-35.

⁷ On this subject, see TRABATTONI, Franco. *Attualità di Platone. Studi sui rapporti fra Platone e Rorty, Heidegger, Gadamer, Derrida, Cassirer, Strauss, Nussbaum e Paci*. Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2009, 436-440. For an account on the Straussian legacy, see: ZUCKERT, Michael. «Straussians». In: SMITH, Steven B. (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 263-286.

⁸ Among the recent reconsiderations of Strauss's work on Plato, see: LASTRA, Antonio, MONSERRAT MOLAS, Josep (eds.). *Leo Strauss, Philosopher. European Vistas*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2016; LANDY, Tucker. *After Leo Strauss. New directions in Platonic Political Philosophy*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2014; FUSSI, Alessandra. *La città nell'anima. Leo Strauss lettore di Platone e Senofonte*. Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2010.

⁹ On the ideological use of Strauss's philosophy, see: ZUCKERT, Catherine, ZUCKERT, Michael. *The Truth about Leo Strauss. Political Philosophy and American Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. As I will show later, Strauss's interpretation of Plato relies on his readings of medieval Jewish and Arabic philosophers, while it is intended to criticize the outcomes of modern political thought. This aspect turns his conception of Plato into a subject of study at the crossroads of different disciplines and thus exceeds the field of ancient philosophy. On this problem, see also: FARNESI CAMMELONE, Mauro. «Presentazione». In: STRAUSS, L. *Una nuova interpretazione della filosofia politica di Platone*. Macerata: Quodlibet, 2016, 13-15.

¹⁰ See VEGETTI, Mario. «Un paradigma in cielo». *Platone politico da Aristotele al Novecento*. Rome: Carocci, 2009, 171-172. A critical discussion of the thesis presented by Strauss, can also be found in LANE, Melissa. «Plato, Popper, Strauss and Utopianism: Open Secrets?», *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 16, 2, 1999, 119-142 and ARRIZZA, Cinzia. «Cleaning the City: Plato and Popper on Political Change», *Polis*, 29, 2, 2012, 259-285.

¹¹ Cf. PRESS, *The State of the Question in the Study of Plato*, 515.

¹² STRAUSS, *The City and Man*, 50-138. On Strauss's reading of Plato, see also: STRAUSS, Leo. «Plato». In: STRAUSS, Leo, CROUSEY, Joseph (eds.). *History of Political Philosophy*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1987, 33-89. The Leo Strauss Center of the University of Chicago has recently made several previously unpublished lectures on Plato available online, see <https://leostrausscenter.uchicago.edu>. On Strauss's unpublished lectures on the *Republic*, see NAMAZI, Rasoul. «Leo Strauss on Thomas Hobbes and Plato: Two Previously Unpublished Lectures», *Perspectives on Political Science*, 47, 4, 2018, 239-256. For a philosophical discussion of

is the spokesman *par excellence* for Plato. Strauss thus deems it necessary to consider what the meaning of speaking through the mouth of a man well known for his irony might be. In other words, we can only correctly comprehend Platonic teachings if we understand what Socratic irony is. According to Strauss, irony is «a kind of dissimulation or of untruthfulness».¹³ This definition stresses the negative aspect of irony: irony intended as dissimulation is a form of falsehood that consists of saying something with the intent that the message is to be understood as conveying a different meaning compared to what is stated.¹⁴ Considering irony as a kind of insincerity, to whom irony is addressed becomes of prime importance for Strauss. In fact, when it is addressed to someone who is expected to grasp the ironic gesture, irony can be a playful way of conveying meaning. At other times, when irony is addressed to someone who is expected to be obtuse and oblivious to it, irony can be a way of discriminating between the people who are capable of understanding the true meaning and those who are blind to it.¹⁵ Strauss thus decides that he has to respond to the objection that irony, when used for these purposes, might be viewed primarily as a vice, as Aristotle does;¹⁶ to this objection, he replies:

Irony is the dissembling, not of evil actions or of vices, but rather of good actions or of virtues; the ironic man, in opposition to the boaster, understates his worth. If irony is a vice, it is a graceful vice. Properly used, it is not a vice at all: the magnanimous man—the man who regards himself as worthy of great things while in fact being worthy of them—is truthful and frank because he is in the habit of looking down and yet he is ironical in his intercourse with the many. Irony is then the noble dissimulation of one's worth, of one's superiority.¹⁷

Intended in this way, irony is the form in which a man who is aware of his own superiority addresses an inherently divided audience. Irony is not a vice, but rather a form of humanity; it is «the humanity peculiar to the superior man: he spares the feelings of his inferiors by not displaying his superiority».¹⁸ Therefore irony cannot be understood merely as a rhetorical pleasantry, but instead it must be understood as a political necessity «essentially related to the fact that there is a natural rank among men».¹⁹ Strauss's conception of irony rests on the idea that men are not equals due to their differing degrees of intelligence, in fact, «the highest form of superiority is the superiority in wisdom».²⁰ Irony is thus the

philosophical and political response to this difference and in the highest sense it consists of «the dissimulation of one's wisdom, i.e. the dissimulation of one's wise thoughts».²¹ According to Strauss, this dissimulation can adopt two forms:

either expressing on a «wise» subject such thoughts (e.g. generally accepted thoughts) as are less wise than one's own thoughts or refraining from expressing any thoughts regarding a «wise» subject on the ground that one does not have knowledge regarding it and therefore can only raise questions but cannot give any answers.²²

Irony thus consists of «speaking differently to different kinds of people»,²³ which means that is essentially related to a certain type of esotericism.²⁴

Without questioning Strauss's anti-egalitarian assumption for the time being, we can ask what the philosophical and political reasons for such a conception of irony might be. Another way of posing this question would be to ask: why should Socrates hide his wisdom? The question needs to be approached by addressing *whether* and *how* Socrates might be Plato's spokesman. The answer to this question implies the political significance that Strauss sees in both the form and the content of the *Republic*.²⁵ Strauss stresses the anonymity of Plato's own direct voice in the dialogue: «Whereas in reading the *Politics* we hear Aristotle all the time, in reading the *Republic* we hear Plato never. In none of his dialogues does Plato ever say anything».²⁶ This approach underlies the fact, as Mario Vegetti puts it, that «Plato alone was not there».²⁷ Hence, the silence of Plato raises the question on his relationship to Socrates and opens the debate concerning the way in which the dialogues should be read.

According to Strauss, to begin with, we cannot read the dialogues as if they were a dogmatic philosophical treatise. Instead, we must read them as dramatic texts; consequently «we cannot ascribe to Plato any utterance of any of his characters without having taken great precautions».²⁸ Likewise, for Strauss, the speeches made by all Platonic characters must be understood in the light of the deeds.²⁹ The 'deeds' are in the first place the setting and the action of the dialogue. To read the speeches in the light of the deeds means to focus on the silences, on what it is not openly stated by the characters. As Strauss states, «It is relatively easy to understand the speeches of the characters: everyone who listens or reads per-

Strauss's book, *The City and Man*, see MONSERRAT MOLAS, Josep. «Notas a La ciudad y el hombre de Leo Strauss». *Res Publica. Revista de Historia de las Ideas Políticas*, 8, 2001, 55-70.

¹³ STRAUSS, *The City and Man*, 51.

¹⁴ Cf. FARNESI, Mauro. *Giustizia e storia. Saggio su Leo Strauss*. Milan: Franco Angeli, 2007, 183-188.

¹⁵ Cf. LANE, *Reconsidering Socratic Irony*, 237-238.

¹⁶ Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Eth. Nic.* 1108a19-22; 1124b29-31; 1127 a20-26, b22-31.

¹⁷ STRAUSS, *The City and Man*, 51.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ For a critique of this conception of irony, see: VEGETTI, *Quindici lezioni su Platone*. Turin, Einaudi, 2014, 173-176.

²⁵ On Strauss's reading of the *Republic*, see GIORGINI, Giovanni. «Leo Strauss e la "Repubblica" di Platone», *Filosofia politica*, 5, 1, 1991, 153-160.

²⁶ STRAUSS, *The City and Man*, 50.

²⁷ VEGETTI, *Quindici lezioni su Platone*, 151. On this subject, see also PRESS, Gerald A. (ed.), *Who Speaks for Plato? Studies in Platonic Anonymity*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000.

²⁸ STRAUSS, *The City and Man*, 59.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

ceives them. But to perceive what in a sense is not said, to perceive how what is said is said, is more difficult».³⁰ Yet, for Strauss, this is the fundamental task of the interpreter, since it allows us «to see how the philosophical treatment of the philosophical theme is modified by the particular or individual or transformed into a rhetorical or poetic treatment or to recover the implicit philosophical treatment from the explicit rhetorical or poetic treatment».³¹ In other words, «by understanding the speeches in the light of the deeds, one transforms the two-dimensional into something three-dimensional or rather one restores the original three-dimensionality».³²

In this way, Strauss calls for reflection upon the dialogic form as a literary genre. The relevant aspect of this dialogic approach is the fact that scholarly work would not consist solely of reconstructing Socrates's *argumenta*, as if the dialogues were philosophical treatises, but rather it would lie in the broader consideration of the connection between the different arguments expressed in the text and the dramatic structure of the text itself.³³ In Strauss's words:

One cannot separate the understanding of Plato's teaching from the understanding of the form in which it is presented. One must pay as much attention to the How as to the What. At any rate, to begin with, one must even pay greater attention to the «form» than to the «substance», since the meaning of the «substance» depends on the «form».³⁴

In the quoted passage, Strauss takes the identity between form and content, or «substance», as a given, an approach that Schleiermacher proposed as a hermeneutic criterion for the Platonic dialogues.³⁵ However, according to Strauss, Schleiermacher fails to understand a crucial aspect of reading the Platonic dialogues. For Schleiermacher there is only one Platonic teaching, although there are infinite levels to the understanding of Plato's teaching. Yet, for Strauss, there are different levels to the text and different teachings at each level.³⁶ The point is that the Platonic dialogue presents different teachings that correspond to the different natures of the audience: this is the primary insight of Strauss's esoteri-

cism.³⁷ The Platonic dialogue says «different things to different people – not accidentally, as all writings do, but that it is so contrived as to say different things to different people, or that it is radically ironical».³⁸

In this way, irony assumes a central role in the interpretation of the dialogue: given that, according to Strauss, it is impossible to separate the form from the content, irony is the key to understanding the dialogues' philosophical meaning. This shift between Socratic and dramatic irony becomes manifest in the distinction between esoteric and exoteric teachings.³⁹ However, this distinction between «esoteric» and «exoteric» is not the distinction between oral and written teaching.⁴⁰ Rather, Strauss claims that «the proper work of a writing is to speak to some readers and to be silent to others».⁴¹ He continues:

the proper work of a writing is truly to talk, or to reveal the truth, to some while leading others to salutary opinions; the proper work of a writing is to arouse to thinking those who are by nature fit for it; the good writing achieves its end if the reader considers carefully «the logographic necessity» of every part, however small or seemingly insignificant, of the writing.⁴²

The principle at work in Strauss's account of Plato's manner of writing is that we can reconstruct the Platonic teaching from a careful reading of the multiple levels and voices in the text. This careful reading tells us that we can recognize a form of dissimulation, of falsehood, through irony that we can identify as the exoteric teaching of Plato. Yet, this dissimulation reveals what is hiding behind it: the truthful content of the dialogue, the esoteric meaning accessible only to men who possess good natures, distinct from the various types of men who lack them.⁴³ Socratic irony is then intended as a

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *Ibidem*, 60.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ See TRABATTONI, *Attualità di Platone*, 437-438. Trabattoni recognizes the advantages of Strauss's dialogic approach, but he also stresses the fact that Strauss contradicts himself when, in order to recover the hidden meaning of the text, he relies on what Socrates says. In other words, the main problem of Strauss's reading would lie in the inherent contradiction between the dialogic approach he proposes and the implicit acceptance of the theory of the spokesman.

³⁴ STRAUSS, *The City and Man*, 60.

³⁵ See SCHLEIERMACHER, Friedrich. *Schleiermacher's Introductions to the Dialogues of Plato*. DOBSON William (trans.). New York: Arno Press, 1973.

³⁶ See STRAUSS, Leo. «Exoteric Teaching». In YAFFE Martin D., RUDERMANN Richard S. (eds.). *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s*. New York: Palgrave, 2014, 275-286. On the relationship between Strauss and Schleiermacher, see KERBER, Hannes, «Strauss and Schleiermacher on How to Read Plato: An Introduction to *Exoteric Teaching*». In YAFFE Martin D., RUDERMANN Richard S. (eds.). *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s*. New York: Palgrave, 2014, 203-214.

³⁷ Cf. PETIT, Alain. «Strauss et l'esotérisme platonicien». In JAFFRO, Laurent, FRYDMAN, Benoît, CATTIN Emmanuel, PETIT, Alain (eds.), *Leo Strauss: art d'écrire, politique, philosophie*. Paris: Vrin, 131-146, 135.

³⁸ STRAUSS, *The City and Man*, 52. As Vegetti points out, Strauss is not the first to propose an ironic reading of Plato's philosophy. A similar approach can, in fact, be found in some Neoplatonic and medieval interpreters. See VEGETTI, *Quindici lezioni su Platone*, 173-176.

³⁹ Strauss's account on esotericism is based on the reading of Lessing. Cf. STRAUSS, *Exoteric Teaching*, quoted above. On this topic, see KERBER, Hannes «Lessing y Schleiermacher», *Aperion. Estudios de filosofía*, 4, 2016, 113-125; KINZEL, Till. «Lessing's Importance for the Philosopher». In: LASTRA, Antonio, MONSERRAT MOLAS, Josep (eds.). *Leo Strauss, Philosopher: European Vistas*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2016, 101-116.

⁴⁰ On the differences between Strauss's esotericism and the esoteric approach proposed by the so-called Tübingen School, based on the recovery of Plato's «unwritten doctrines», see: SZLEZAK, Thomas. «Tanja Staehler and the homonym *esoteric*», *Journal of Ancient Philosophy*, 8, 2, 2014, 160-164. The fact that Strauss barely focuses his attention on Plato's writings leads him to identify the essence of Plato's teaching in the dialogic form. This assumption leads to the consequence that, for Strauss, the Socratic form is the original form of philosophy, intended as a non-dogmatic and open-ended research. For this reason, Szlezák points out that Strauss's reading of Plato is not original from a philological point of view, since it belongs to the Schleiermachean tradition. Instead, his originality must be found in the philosophical-political sense.

⁴¹ STRAUSS, *The City and Man*, 53.

⁴² *Ibidem*, 54.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, 53.

part of a «logographic necessity», expressed through the esoteric manner of writing, which aims to understand Socrates not as Plato's spokesman but as his *mask*.⁴⁴ Through ironic dissimulation, Plato is able to communicate the truth only to those who are prepared to receive it, while giving others salutary opinions. But why should Plato hide his true teaching under the mask of Socratic irony? To answer this question, it is necessary to return to the hermeneutic approach to the philosophical texts that Strauss developed in his previous writings.

3. Philosophy and Persecution

Strauss presented the philosophical core of his hermeneutical approach in 1941 in the volume of *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, where he presents his research on medieval Arab and Jewish thinkers such as Maimonides and Al-Farabi.⁴⁵ In the introduction of the book Strauss states that his aim is to investigate the relationships between philosophy and society, rediscovering a phenomenon of which our time is blind, but of which philosophers from the past were well aware: the phenomenon of persecution. In Strauss's view, we must develop a sociology of philosophy in order to understand the history of philosophy. This means that specific attention must be paid to the philosopher's need to hide his or her true thoughts. The manner in which a philosopher is able to hide his or her thoughts in plain sight is by developing a distinction between esoteric and exoteric teaching.⁴⁶ The thesis that Strauss presents is linear and intelligible enough: given that political power is able to persecute philosophers in multiple ways, philosophers must protect themselves. The way in which philosophers protect themselves from political power is by elaborating a code, a specific language and an art of writing

in which the truth is presented exclusively between the lines. That literature is addressed not to all the readers, but to trustworthy readers only. It has all the advantages of private communication without having its greatest disadvantage—that it reaches only the writer's acquaintances. It has all the advantages of public communication without having its greatest disadvantage—the capital punishment for the author.⁴⁷

This way, only thoughtful men who are careful readers can reach the deepest esoteric meaning of the text.⁴⁸ According to Strauss, Socrates is the first example of

a philosopher persecuted by power. In response, Plato consequently elaborates his own art of writing, based on «logographic necessity». Following Al-Farabi's reading of Plato,⁴⁹ Strauss claims that in Plato's time:

philosophy and philosopher were in «grave danger». Society did not recognize philosophy or the right to philosophizing. There was no harmony between philosophy and society. The philosophers were very far from being exponents of society or parties. They defended the interests of philosophy and of nothing else. In doing this, they believed indeed that they were defending the highest interests of mankind. The exoteric teaching was needed to protect philosophy. It was the armor in which philosophy had to appear. It was needed for philosophical reasons. It was the form in which philosophy became visible to political community. It was the political aspect of philosophy. It was «political» philosophy.⁵⁰

Through his hermeneutical approach Strauss is not only recovering the way in which we should read philosophers from the past; he is also pointing out the essence of political philosophy: political philosophy is the manner in which philosophy presents itself to the community. However, since it is impossible to separate form from content, the way in which philosophy appears also reveals the substance of its teaching. Philosophy may be persecuted by political power because its search for truth amounts to questioning the opinions in which the political community—the city, in Strauss's terms—needs to believe in order to constitute and preserve its identity. Political order can be maintained only if the philosophers who make up a minority of the population do not openly criticize the beliefs, superstitions, and faith that constitute the distinctiveness of a certain society. In this sense, «the distinction between exoteric and esoteric speech has then so little to do with “mysticism” of any sort that it is an outcome of prudence».⁵¹ Thus we can clearly see why esotericism, and irony as its manner of expression, is a political necessity.⁵² So, there is a close connection between esotericism and a peculiar attitude towards political life. Strauss claims that esotericism owes its existence to the necessary imperfection of praxis. In fact, what political philosophy reveals in its classical form is the awareness that every political constitution, even the best, is necessarily imperfect:

The concealed reasons for the imperfection of political life as such are the facts that all practical or po-

⁴⁴ Cf. FARNESI, *Giustizia e storia*, 185.

⁴⁵ STRAUSS, Leo. *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1988. On Strauss's «discovery» of esotericism, see LAMPERT, Laurence. «Strauss's Recovery of Esotericism». In: SMITH, Steven B. (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 63-92 and LASTRA, Antonio, «In ultimate literaritis. Leo Strauss y la traducción filosófica». In GÓMEZ RAMOS, Antonio (ed.). *Pensar la traducción: la filosofía de camino entre las lenguas*. Actas del congreso (Talleres de comunicaciones). Madrid septiembre de 2012, Madrid, Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, 2014, 39-48.

⁴⁶ STRAUSS, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 7-8.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, 25.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, 24.

⁴⁹ On Strauss's reading of Platonic philosophy through the mediation of medieval Jewish and Arabic authors, see BRAGUE, Rémi. «Athènes, Jérusalem, La Mecque. L'interprétation “musulmane” de la philosophie grecque chez Leo Strauss», *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 94, 3, 1989, 309-336; MONSERRAT MOLAS, Josep. «La descoberta “platónica” de Maimònides en Leo Strauss», *Enrahonar. Cuaderns de filosofia*, 54, 2015, 55-75; ZUCKERT, Catherine. «Strauss's New Reading of Plato». In: YORK, J.G., PETERS Michael A. (eds.). *Leo Strauss, Education, and Political Thought*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011, 52-75.

⁵⁰ STRAUSS, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 18.

⁵¹ STRAUSS, *Exoteric Teaching*, 278.

⁵² Cf. PETIT, *Strauss et l'ésotérisme platonicien*, 132-142.

litical life is essentially inferior to contemplative life [...] and that the requirements of the lower are bound from time to time to conflict with, and to supersede in practice, the requirements of the higher.⁵³

This statement on the hierarchy between philosophical and practical life is at the core of Strauss's conception of classical political philosophy. According to Strauss, this is also what determines the superiority of classical political philosophy over modern political theory. Classical political philosophers knew that the contemplative life is essentially superior to the political life, that political practices cannot attain the perfection of philosophical life, and they make this knowledge central to their thought.⁵⁴ This is where it is possible to observe the philosophical-political meaning of the distinction between esoteric and exoteric teaching. For Strauss, maintaining that the exoteric teaching of Plato is radically distinct and autonomous from the esoteric teaching is tantamount to affirming that we have to take the falsehood that irony exhibits *seriously*:

there is a difference not of degree but of kind between truth and lie (or untruth). And what holds true of the difference between truth and lies holds equally true of the difference between esoteric and exoteric teaching; for Plato's exoteric teaching is identical with his «noble lies».⁵⁵

According to Strauss, Plato attributes a strategic political role to these «noble lies» in which the majority of men that constitute the political community must believe. They help to maintain political order, while at the same time protecting the philosophers from persecution. If we remember here that irony is a «noble dissimulation» we can have no doubt concerning its function. The ironic reading that Strauss proposes thus aims to present the basic tension between the requirements of philosophy, intended as a trans-political search for the truth, and the requirements of politics, which calls for the maintenance of political order. For Strauss, pointing out this tension aims to eradicate the utopian nature of modern political philosophy and to redirect our attention to the true meaning of philosophical activity.⁵⁶ To better understand this aspect, it is worth keeping in mind that when Strauss addresses the phenomenon of persecution and the conflict between philosophy and the political community he is not only referring to the past, but also to the present and his contemporary situation. As Strauss states at the beginning of his essay *Persecution and the Art of Writing*:

In a considerable number of countries which, for about a hundred years, have enjoyed a practically

complete freedom of public discussion, that freedom is now suppressed and replaced by a compulsion to coordinate speech with such views as the government believes to be expedient, or holds in all seriousness.⁵⁷

Strauss here refers to a critique of totalitarian regimes yet, by taking the essential tension between the philosopher and the city as a given, he also underscores the impossibility of a conjunction between philosophy and action. From this point of view, the return to Platonic political philosophy aims to focus on the limits of political idealism, also with regard to democratic regimes.⁵⁸

Strauss's reading of Plato's philosophy seems too dependent on the theoretical and hermeneutical suggestions he draws from Al-Farabi and the other medieval Jewish and Islamic interpreters, especially those regarding the problem of persecution and the exegesis of the written sources. The generalization of the statements about persecution, and the related problem of the relationship between philosophy and society, leads him to conflate two very different historical backgrounds. The question of persecution in classical Greece must be revisited accordingly. Consequently, it seems difficult to maintain that we should systematically look for strategies of dissimulation in Plato's writings.⁵⁹ Still, Strauss's attempt has the advantage of proposing a reading of Plato, whose originality is based on the effort to separate Plato from the tradition of Christian Platonism.⁶⁰ In doing so, he posits at the core of his reading of Platonic political philosophy a conception of philosophy drawn from the Socratic practice. If political philosophy in its authentic, esoteric meaning is Platonic political philosophy—a philosophy aware of the need to hide its true content—Strauss's reading of Plato also points out, through the identity of form and content, that political philosophy is the «first philosophy» and it coincides with Socratic philosophy: philosophy as love of wisdom, or a quest for wisdom, cannot be systematic in any sense. Hence, Strauss can argue that philosophy as such «is nothing but genuine awareness of the problems», «that there is no wisdom, but only quest for wisdom», and that «the evidence of the problems is necessary smaller than the evidence of the solutions».⁶¹ From this point of view:

human wisdom is knowledge of ignorance: 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. This Socratic or Platonic conclusion differs radically from a typically modern conclusion according to which the unavailability of knowledge of the whole demands that the question regarding the whole be abandoned and

⁵³ STRAUSS, *Exoteric Teaching*, 277.

⁵⁴ See STRAUSS, Leo. *What is Political Philosophy?*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1988, 9-55.

⁵⁵ STRAUSS, *Exoteric Teaching*, 282.

⁵⁶ On the anti-utopian nature of Strauss's conceptions, see ALTINI, Carlo. «Il futuro degli antichi. Filosofia e politica in Leo Strauss». In: STRAUSS, Leo, *La città e l'uomo. Saggi su Aristotele, Platone, Tucidide*. Genoa: Marietti, 2010, 18-19.

⁵⁷ STRAUSS, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 22.

⁵⁸ On the relevance of the problem of democracy in Strauss's reading of classical political thought, see MONSERRAT MOLAS, *Notas a La ciudad y el hombre de Leo Strauss*, 66.

⁵⁹ For this critique of Strauss's approach on ancient texts, see BURNYEAT, Myles F. «Sphinx Without a Secret», *New York Review of Books*, May 30, 1985.

⁶⁰ Cf. STRAUSS, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 18.

⁶¹ STRAUSS, Leo, *On Tyranny*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013, 197.

replaced by questions of another kind, for instance by questions characteristic of modern natural and social science. The elusiveness of the whole necessarily affects the knowledge of every part. Because the elusiveness of the whole, the beginning or the questions retains a greater evidence than the end or the answers: a return to the beginning remains a constant necessity.⁶²

Philosophy in its original –Platonic and Socratic meaning– is nothing more than knowledge of our ignorance. Yet one cannot know what one knows not without knowing what is not known. In this sense, philosophy is neither skeptical nor dogmatic, rather it is zetetic.⁶³ The dialogic form of Plato's writings highlights the need to return over and over again to the literary 'surface'. Accordingly, the form of the teaching is in fact the teaching itself, which represents the return to the beginning as a philosophical necessity.⁶⁴ This aspect of Strauss's theory makes it impossible to evaluate it solely in political terms and calls for a deeper consideration of his insights on Plato.⁶⁵ Therefore, claiming that Strauss's interpretation, which the esoteric significance of irony is related to, is of greater interest if we consider it more as a contribution to contemporary thought and less as an interpretation of the original Plato would be incorrect.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, as I will show in the next section, a reconsideration of the relevance of Strauss's Platonic turn towards contemporary political philosophy cannot be avoided without missing the opportunity to rightfully acknowledge his intellectual work.

4. Platonic Political Philosophy

Plato represents the most important reference for the development of Strauss's thought and his reading cannot be separated from his critique of modern and contemporary political theory.⁶⁷ In the introduction to *The City and Man* Strauss himself indicates the way in which we should read his work:

It is not self-forgetting and pain-loving antiquarianism nor self-forgetting and intoxicating romanticism which induces us to turn with passionate interest, with unqualified willingness to learn, toward the political thought of classical antiquity. We are impelled to do so by the crisis of our time, the crisis of the West.⁶⁸

According to Strauss, we are facing a crisis of Western civilization that rests on the change that moderni-

ty imposed on politics and philosophy. This is why we have to return to the sources of tradition to regain an understanding of the relationship between politics and philosophy in the pre-modern sense. He denounces the modern loss of an authentic relationship to politics: political theory reflects solely upon the State and its conceptual correlatives, avoiding the transcendental question on justice and direct contact with political reality.⁶⁹ For Strauss, «we are always quarreling each other and with ourselves only over the just and the good»,⁷⁰ something that calls for the need for a radical, constant philosophical interrogation not just on means, but on human ends.

If we turn now to irony, we can see how, in choosing its audience, irony creates a kind of community, that is to say, the philosophical community. Plato's Socrates says that it is safe to tell the truth only among «sensible friends». He engaged in his most blissful work only with his friends, or rather, his good friends.⁷¹ In this way Strauss is recovering a long-lost meaning in politics, focusing on relations formed by *philia*, a bond that unites those who possess and those who search for virtue. Yet the entire political community cannot achieve virtue. With his anti-egalitarian conception, Strauss seems to be questioning the aporetic structure of modern politics while seeking a way to preserve a natural aristocracy based on social and intellectual skills in the context of a democratic government in which all citizens participate to political life. This redirection is telling since, as I have shown, maintaining the community is based on an accurate use of «noble lies». What Plato is telling us, through irony, is that the perfect city –the city where everyone knows the truth– is impossible, and that «the good city is not possible [...] without a fundamental falsehood. It cannot exist in the element of truth».⁷²

As Strauss stated, the image of Socrates gave us no example of weeping, but on the other hand, it does provide us an example of laughter.⁷³ He is depicted as the guardian of this knowledge that protects the city and, at the same time, as the one able to educate the worthy few. The philosopher –a stranger in the city, in every city– nonetheless has a relevant political task: to educate future philosophers and to cultivate the gentlemen in order to raise the standard of human action.⁷⁴ Thus, Strauss's esotericism is not just a political necessity; it is also re-

⁶² STRAUSS, *The City and Man*, 20-21.

⁶³ STRAUSS, *On Tyranny*, 196-197.

⁶⁴ On this subject, cf. FARNESI, *Giustizia e storia*, 182-183.

⁶⁵ For an analysis of Strauss's zetetic skepticism, see FUSSI, *La città nell'anima*, 56-64, and FARNESI, *Giustizia e storia*, 161-174.

⁶⁶ Cf. ROBERTSON, Neil. «Leo Strauss's Platonism», *Animus*, 4, 1999, 34.

⁶⁷ On Strauss's Platonic turn in the context of the criticism of modern and contemporary political theory, see ALTINI, *Il futuro degli antichi*, 7-14.

⁶⁸ STRAUSS, *The City and Man*, 1.

⁶⁹ On Strauss's critique of modernity, see DUSO, Giuseppe et al. «La filosofia e il ritorno ai Greci», in Id. (ed.), *Il potere: per la storia della filosofia politica moderna*. Rome: Carrocci, 1999, 429-436; GALLI, Carlo. «Strauss, Voegelin, Arendt lettori di Thomas Hobbes: tre paradigmi interpretativi della forma politica nella modernità». In: DUSO, Giuseppe. *Filosofia politica e pratica del pensiero. Strauss. Voegelin, Arendt*. Milan: Franco Angeli, 25-57.

⁷⁰ STRAUSS, Leo. «Notes on Schmitt's *Concept of the Political*». In: MEIER, Heinrich. *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss. The Hidden Dialogue*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995, 114. The reference is to PLATO, *Euthyphro* 7b-d and *Phaedrus* 263a.

⁷¹ See STRAUSS, *The City and Man*, 53-54. Cf. Plato, *Republic* 450d10-e1.

⁷² STRAUSS, *The City and Man*, 54.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, 61.

⁷⁴ See GIORGINI, Giovanni. «Leo Strauss, lo straniero iconoclasta», *Il Mulino*, 84, 3, 1984, 396-416. On the Straussian philosopher as a stranger in the city, see also FARNESI, Mauro. «The City and Stranger». In: LASTRA, MONSERRAT MOLAS (eds.). *Leo Strauss, Philosopher*, 81-100.

lated to the problem of education. This educational task is at the core of Strauss's recovery of Platonic philosophy and it represents one of the main features of his esotericism.⁷⁵ While the exoteric teaching coincides with the creation of a moral and ethical nature, the esoteric teaching aims to educate the philosophical nature. In Strauss's account, Socrates's irony manifests the real meaning of political philosophy; for those who are able to see it, this meaning does in fact have something to do with irony:

Its purpose is to lead potential philosophers to philosophy both by training them and by liberating them from the charms which obstruct the philosophic effort, as well as to prevent the access to philosophy of those who are not fit for it. Socratic rhetoric is emphatically just. It is animated by the spirit of social responsibility. It is based on the premise that there is a disproportion between the intransigent quest for truth and the requirements of society, or that not all

truths are always harmless. Society will always try to tyrannize thought. Socratic rhetoric is the classic means for ever again frustrating these attempts.⁷⁶

Strauss's reading offers several insights into the Socratic teaching at the center of Platonic political philosophy. This philosophy is the core of Strauss's own philosophical project; in the end, for Strauss, Platonic political philosophy is identical to political philosophy.⁷⁷ This should restore the awareness of the tension between philosophy and society, recovering the categorical architecture of classical political thought. Reactivating the search for the best political regime in contemporary times, Strauss invites us to return to a meaningful reasoning on human affairs, never ceasing the silent battle against current opinions and unreflected beliefs. Beyond the crisis of enlightened modernity, through the return to philosophy in its original form, the struggle for rationalism seems to remain, for him, the highest end for those who are living inside the cave.

5. References

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⁷⁵ See ALTINI, *Il futuro degli antichi*, 16.

⁷⁶ STRAUSS, *On Tyranny*, 27.

⁷⁷ Cf. MONSERRAT MOLAS, Josep. «Estudis de filosofia política platònica». *Anuari de la Societat Catalana de Filosofia*, iv, 1991, 117-121.

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