

## Stanley Rosen

May 2011

**Stephen Gregory:** This is Stephen Gregory. I am sitting in the home of Stanley Rosen. Stanley, it's good to be here.

**Stanley Rosen:** Thank you very much. I am delighted to have you.

**SG:** Stanley, you studied with Professor Strauss. When did you first begin studying with Strauss?

**SR:** 1948.

**SG:** 1948. Would that have been at the New School?

**SR:** No, it would have been at the University of Chicago in the College.

**SG:** I see, okay. 1948. You must have been one of his very first students.

**SR:** I was, actually. I mean, there were some students in New York whom I didn't know; they were older than I, people like Harry Jaffa<sup>1</sup> and Joe Cropsey.<sup>2</sup> But of the Chicago generations, I was one of the very first. Strauss and I met through the mediation of his son Walter. And he had just come to Chicago, and I had a long conversation with him that lasted a couple of hours and he was kind enough to invite me to become a student of his. He had just come to town, so to speak, and didn't have the large following that soon was to be his destiny. I was unable to accept his offer at the time because I had already started the process of going to the New School. But after a few weeks there, I realized I was in the wrong place and left school, worked for a while, and then got back into Chicago as quickly as possible, where I stayed for five years.

**SG:** So you had met Strauss's son and he interested you in his father, whom you had not heard of before?

**SR:** Never heard of him.

**SG:** I see.

**SR:** I could tell you the entire roster of the Cleveland Indians baseball team, but I'd never heard of professors and philosophers. But Strauss saw something at Chicago, and he backed me all the way. I was always a bit heterodox, but that didn't matter that much to him.

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<sup>1</sup> Harry Jaffa: see "People."

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Cropsey: see "People."

If I may tell a very quick little story which was told to me by Peter H. von Blanckenhagen,<sup>3</sup> a friend of Strauss's. When Blanckenhagen said at the party to me after a few drinks: "Hey, you know, Stanley, I have to tell you that I didn't like you when you came to Chicago." I was a bit uncouth. And whenever he would mention this to Strauss, he always replied: "Oh my, he's getting better." So my career owes itself, such as it is, to the indifference—a truly unique intelligence, namely, Strauss's—the indifference to high society, academic society. He wanted the goods, so to speak, and I'll always honor him for that.

**SG:** When you say he wanted the goods, what was he looking for in a student?

**SR:** Well, since Allan Bloom and I were two of his closest students, it's hard to say. I mean, some of his students were dressed up in outfits from Brooks Brothers and, you know, looked like English dukes, and the rest of us looked like disheveled lower or middle class Jews from New York. I was, I thought, superior to all of them because I came from Cleveland. That allowed me to remove the distance between the various ethnic and philosophical movements. Well, he looked for intelligence. I think that should be without saying, he looked for intelligence. And he looked for a kind of decency, in which the person who was working with him, studying with him, was given every opportunity to progress in his own philosophical studies, amateurish thought they might be. This is an interesting point—I'll just expand on it for a minute, if I may.

He wanted a decency in the sense of a respect for the text. If the authors of the great texts in the history of philosophy were worth studying at all, then they were worth studying as exhaustively as possible. Too many professors would say things like: My view on the truth is thus and so; I differ from Kant in the following six points. I mean, this sounds informal but it's a characteristic model for discussions in philosophy at conventions, contemporary conventions, reading of papers. Strauss wanted us to see that the text had to be mastered, if I could put it that way. You had to know them because they were the foundation of everything: the texts being the Greek philosophers, the Greek thinkers. That requires a certain decency. You must never be so proud of your own prowess, your own technical prowess in particular, that you come to believe that what you have say is more important than what Kant or Hegel said. Now that's not an easy point to understand and it even may be partly wrong; that is to say, if you're going to be respectful to the great members of the tradition, won't you end up being a mere disciple or a mere slave? How can you retain your integrity and the integrity of the text at the same time?

Strauss was looking for people who had a kind of sobriety and, in that sense, decency, who were able to put their full energy, their focus, onto the task of illuminating the text. Notice that I haven't been talking about not drinking too many alcoholic beverages, not carrying on with your neighbor's wife and so on, but those things are all secondary. And to make a point from the ancients, [one] that I of course first heard from Strauss: for the Platonic philosopher—and that's what Strauss was trying to represent—for the Platonic philosopher, the family is secondary. That's something that is very hard for modern men to appreciate. It's not easy to honor when one is living in the modern epoch. But I think there can be no question. Since we're interested in Leo Strauss' views: I heard him say directly in one of his seminars on Plato that he himself had no doubt that for Plato, romantic love was silly, childish. Childish. Now as one who was in love and

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<sup>3</sup> Peter von Blanckenhagen: see "People."

had been so on more than one occasion, I started out my statements on Strauss with a prejudice. But he sort of set me straight in the sense that he wanted me to understand that if you come to the point where you're trying to do something that you can't do, then you are not being a decent man in the sense that I use the word. Is that too complicated?

**SG:** No.

**SR:** Okay.

**SG:** I'm thinking of the virtue probity as you're speaking.

**SR:** Uh-huh. I'm not, unfortunately. [Laughs] Go ahead.

**SG:** So Strauss was looking for a certain kind of decency, a sobriety in his students, as well as of course high intelligence.

**SR:** Right. He wanted theory and practice to be attended to. Practice may or may not be as easy as theory to disseminate, but in the main of political thought, in order to succeed, one has to be sensible. And being sensible means something very close to what I assume you mean by probity. For example, Strauss used to quote very frequently a passage from Perry Mason,<sup>4</sup> one of his favorite authors. And he said that Perry Mason—I didn't read that particular Perry Mason novel so I can't cite it, but the man who wrote the books, Erle Stanley Gardner, says of his leading character, Perry Mason: He was sharp as a razor and clean as a hound's tooth. You ever hear that?

**SG:** Yes.

**SR:** I think it's famous in the Strauss circles.

**SG:** Well, I don't know about that, but I read Erle Stanly Gardner separate from—

**SR:** So I wanted to be sure that my remark in answer to your question was not too pious. In other words, probity is a faculty for seeing things in their sharpness and in their detail. It's an open question whether that's a moral—

**SG:** Yes. I understand.

**SR:** For Strauss, it was not. It was something different. Well, we can summarize this. You want to know about Strauss as a teacher of young people: Strauss wanted people who would create the political circumstances that would make philosophy itself more secure. That's what he wanted.

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<sup>4</sup> Perry Mason, a fictional criminal defense lawyer, appears in dozens of novels and stories written by Erle Stanley Gardner. From 1957-1966, a popular television series, of which Strauss was a fan, dramatized some of Mason's cases.

**SG:** It's been said that in his teaching at Chicago he emphasized the moral teaching in philosophical texts in his classroom teaching. Does that sound recognizable to you?

**SR:** Yeah, I mean the whole business which we haven't mentioned so far in your visit—the whole business of esotericism comes into play here. I don't want to develop one long speech; you can articulate it for us.

**SG:** Well, it's been said that in his teaching of philosophical texts at Chicago that he often emphasized the moral teaching.

**SR:** Yeah, because theoretical teaching is useless, literally useless. For Aristotle, it's not a practical activity at all. Politics is a practical activity. So the question of esotericism, which strikes our contemporaries as so odd, simply means that human beings with any real cleverness for managing the affairs of their fellow human beings must do so cautiously. I mean, every sane person would grant that. I sometimes say this and people are shocked. I say: Strauss's doctrine of esotericism was childishly simple. Anybody who, like myself, grew up on the ghetto streets of Cleveland, Ohio would never take it seriously at all. John Rawls, or—I mean, it just couldn't be done. It has nothing to do with politics or, for that matter, with reason. So yes, Strauss emphasized the practical. Here's how Strauss taught. Let's cut to the quick. I went to visit Strauss on another or the same visit that I recounted before.<sup>5</sup>

**SG:** Around 1971 or '72 at St. John's?

**SR:** Yeah, something like that. The way the question seems to be formulated today is that it's immoral to keep anything from anyone about anything. And Strauss pointed out always that if you did that you would level society to the point at which freedom itself would be impossible. What we would call great works of art would cease to exist, scientific enterprises would cease to exist. I think that's going to happen, by the way. Let me know if it does. I mean, I'll be dead by then, but it'll be interesting to have this conjecture activated. So carry on.

**SG:** Well, you brought up the issue of esotericism in connection with Strauss's teaching, and I'd asked you about the practical or moral side of his teaching and that led you to the reflection on esotericism. And was Strauss practicing the simple principle of esotericism in his teaching?

**SR:** I think he was, at points.

**SG:** At points.

**SR:** Yes. I mean the fact that Strauss could be misunderstood to be religious or a rabbi, practically a rabbi. I mean, when Dick Kennington<sup>6</sup> was working on Descartes in the Committee on Social Thought and he gave a very interesting paper on Descartes—I was quite young, you know, even for a college student at the time, but I was fascinated by his claim that Descartes did

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<sup>5</sup> In a conversation that was not part of this interview.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Kennington: see "People."

not believe in God. Strauss said to me: Philosophers are paid not to believe. I'll always remember that. [Laughs] Always remember that. I'm giving you all my material from the essay I've written on Strauss in Chicago.<sup>7</sup> But in any event, that's the point. Of course there are wise men, whether they were ancients or futurists. Of course they practiced esotericism. It would be insane not to.

**SG:** There's a letter from Strauss to Klein around 1949—this would have been around the time he got his appointment to Chicago—in which he complains to Klein that students need a political teaching and he has to come up with a political teaching.<sup>8</sup> My understanding is it doesn't necessarily mean party politics; but did you have the sense when you were a student that he had a teaching that he was deploying for the sake of his students?

**SR:** Yes, I did. It's fairly clear to me, don't ask me to demonstrate it.

**SG:** Sure.

**SR:** But Strauss believed that politics, political wisdom was in one sense relative to theoretical wisdom, when in another sense had to be worked out so that people could be free to engage in theory. You know that from Aristotle. People must be free to engage in theory. If they can't do that, if they don't have that capacity, then philosophy will perish. That's almost happened in our own time. I mean, this insane obsession with brain waves—you know, you're regarded as an illiterate at the American Philosophical Association if you can't cite the experts on cybernetics and brain surgery. That's the end of philosophy, when that takes over; and we're just a hop, skip and a jump from that. Did Strauss know this? I once had a talk with him, I'll quote that, in which he and I were alone in his office and we were talking about just this very subject, and I asked him: What is your plan for political society? Something like that; I'm not even sure that I was as explicit as I just was with you. But in this conversation Strauss said very clearly and explicitly that his purpose politically was to formulate a teaching that would make political activity safe for philosophy. Now that means no public speech. You know, lots of things which I love. How could I tell my jokes if there were no public speech?

There was no mystery about the secret teaching. Only fools, third-rate students of Strauss in various places around the country regard themselves as wise men, and they walk around chuckling, you know, their eyes twinkling. In the old days, they had a pipe. It was part of their tools. And they would also stop periodically in the walk and say: Yah, yah. Just a kind of base imitation of what it is to be a philosopher. That's what most people know about philosophy. Yes, Strauss had in mind the formulation of a political teaching, one which drew heavily on Aristotle and Locke. I'm sure he liked Rousseau more than Locke—who could fail to like Rousseau more than Locke? But that's not the question; the question is what works politically. And Rousseau

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<sup>7</sup> Stanley Rosen, "Leo Strauss in Chicago," *Daedalus* 135 (2006): 104-13.

<sup>8</sup> Letter to Jacob Klein, July 12, 1949. See Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, bd. 3 (hrsg. Heinrich Meier) (Stuttgart: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 2001/2008), 597. Jacob Klein: see "People."

contributed to the line in which Nietzsche was perhaps the next member, and they destroyed modern civilization. I'm far more interested in Nietzsche, Heidegger, Kojève,<sup>9</sup> others of that sort.

Did you ever hear or see it written—Strauss was talking himself about his youth. He said he and Klein, his best friend, would go to a café where intellectuals gathered and they would be quiet for a few minutes and then suddenly they would yell to each other across the room: Nietzsche! Heidegger! That's a sign of high-spirited playfulness, but it's not all playfulness. Strauss himself, I'm quite sure, preferred to read Heidegger than John Locke. I hope that doesn't strike you as blasphemy.

**SG:** In Strauss's teaching in the classroom—I'm not aware of him ever teaching Heidegger, and I have heard that he never referred to him.

**SR:** That's almost true. It was true when I, for example, got there.

**SG:** Well. If Heidegger was most interesting and perhaps most important, why didn't Strauss teach Heidegger? Or why didn't he discuss him more openly?

**SR:** He thought it was too dangerous. Don't blame me: that was his view. He never taught Heidegger; he never mentioned his name until approximately [the] mid-1950s.

I think Strauss was partly amazed at the [his] great popularity, and I think he tried to get it without thinking he'd have any great luck. But he got it. Perhaps your very presence here is a powerful example of the fact that Strauss retains all of his charisma and attractiveness to young people. What do you think? I mean, you're probably closer to this than I am.

**SG:** I think the most remarkable thing we've seen in the last decade are a number of serious scholars around the world who never studied with a student of Strauss who are now doing interesting work on Strauss's thought. Strauss's thought has become a subject of study, and Strauss is being treated as a thinker in his own right apart from any "movement": these individuals, primarily in Europe, also in China, are coming to [Strauss] independently.

**SR:** Esotericism is here. Does that constitute success?

**SG:** Well, I understood you to say that his success was linked to his practice of esotericism and his giving his students a teaching.

**SR:** That's correct, that was part of his hermeneutical program.

**SG:** Let me back away from these heights just for a minute. You saw Strauss at the very beginning of his teaching career, at Chicago, I mean.

**SR:** Yes.

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<sup>9</sup> Alexandre Kojève: see "People."

**SG:** There's a story told that when he came to give a job talk that there was a university historian, an historian who's reported to have said: This man will be a researcher but he'll never be a teacher. And was the Strauss that you knew in '48 and '49 an effective teacher? Or is this something he learned over the course of his time at Chicago?

**SR:** Well, I'm not sure that I can give you the final answer on that, but I can tell you that I had only to be in Strauss's presence for 15 minutes in order to know who he was and what I was dealing with. He was the first genuinely intelligent man—I'm not talking about mathematical logicians now, this sort of thing—he was the first and most intelligent man that I met as a teacher of philosophy. First of all, he knew everything. That's the way it looked to us. He knew everything. Secondly, he could answer every question that was put to him. The guys in the philosophy department neither knew nor could they invent, they were simply—you're not Jewish, obviously, but they were *flocken*. That's a nice Jewish word. It means beast, beast of the field, something like that. No, I knew that immediately.

**SG:** Particularly in the early years at Chicago, but I think for at least a decade, he was known for having his classes run for an hour or two hours over.

**SR:** That's right.

**SG:** And Strauss obviously in that time was just pouring himself into his teaching, I mean, spending four hours with a class, answering every question that came up. Why do you think he did that?

**SR:** I can answer that question. I don't know if you'll like it. Strauss was very timid. And his courses were given at that time—you know on the mall on 62<sup>nd</sup> Street or 63<sup>rd</sup> Street; it was a rough neighborhood. And he always agreed to have some big graduate student walk him home. I was told this by people who were much closer to him than I was. So I meant that seriously. I can't tell you that it's true, but—

**SG:** Well, he could have ended the course, the class on time and had a graduate student walk him home.

**SR:** He could have. He could have done several things. He could have quit the teaching business at 3 o'clock and gone home. Of course, the weather was bad in Chicago in the winter. So in any event, if you're asking me was the delay, or the extension of his—

**SG:** Was there an intention behind it? Was he trying to do something?

**SR:** I never thought of it. I thought of it as a man who loved to talk. Strauss got carried away with a genuine enthusiasm for talking. We're talking of him as some kind of super-genius. One limitation he had was that he was as naive as a child, and it was very charming. I mean, it was part of his erotic technique, if I can put it that way. It was part of his erotic technique. And it certainly never fooled me because I'd been publishing poetry on eros, you know, from the time I was ten years old. But there is no question that that's what he was doing there: he was carried away. But Strauss had a great difficulty to face: that is, he knew that philosophy was superior to

poetry. And he in fact had very little poetry gift, in the original sense of poetry. I think he was working to succeed in developing this cadre of political apparatchiks that we were alluding to a little bit ago, and I think that it did not work.

I can assure you that I'm giving you a more accurate picture of Strauss than others I could name. But he was really just so sly and at the same time he was like a child. He was very impressed by America when he came to America. He told us one night in his home—he had been in town for just a couple of months. He said: America, a wonderful country. He said that American people who buy newspapers leave change on the coin thing. He said: That's amazing; it's such honesty, such virtue. It could never happen in Europe: if you left the money on the tray, people would take it away immediately. That was one of his best. Very, very, very fine man.

Excellent teacher from the very beginning. Incredible knowledge. A man who could convert the most diverse kinds of people. And I say I thought I was smarter than Strauss. Three months later I certainly no longer had *that* view. He used to tell us regularly: I'm not a philosopher. I sat in a room many times when he said this: I'm not a philosopher; I'm only a student of philosophy. No, he wasn't kidding. He was not a philosopher in his sense of the word. Who were the philosophers? Locke, Leibniz—you know the names that occurred frequently, those names. He didn't regard himself as anywhere near that category, and he made that absolutely clear for the twenty years that I knew him.

**SG:** How do you understand this combination in Strauss of childlike naiveté and wiliness?

**SR:** I don't know. We have to start from the data, as Sherlock Holmes said in another passage that Strauss and I both shared a liking for. Watson said: What's going on here, Holmes? And Holmes says: Watson, he says, Data, data, I must have data. You can't draw blood without—I don't know, a fancy passage that Strauss used to quote regularly. I don't know that he succeeded in it, but that's what he was up to.

**SG:** You made the striking observation that Strauss combined childlike naiveté and wiliness. He was so wily you don't know what to think of him from month to month. And I'm just asking you to reflect on that one more moment, how those things could be combined in Strauss. They seem to be opposites.

**SR:** Yeah. But you know, if you knew a lot of the German, European in general expatriate scholars, thinkers, and artists, that was very common. I mean, they were sophisticated in some ways, but many of them were naïve people without clear political views. I think that Strauss had to have everything restated in a philosophical way for the thing to make any sense to him. I would say also that naiveté and theoretical brilliance are *not* separated or are opposites at all. I think they go well together. I will even go so far to say that practical philosophy when understood properly *is* theoretical philosophy. But don't quote me. I don't like that formulation.

So, an absolutely remarkable man. What I learned from Strauss can't be learned by going to school and reading his books. I mean, Strauss set me straight. You know that famous story Kant writes in one of his letters, one of his essays. He said: When I was a young man I revered David Hume, or words to that effect. David Hume was number one on the hit parade. But as I grew



older, I came to see that it was not that at all but (I suddenly lost the word that it is) it's virtue. It's virtue.

Well, I've been trying very hard for the last 20 minutes to assure you that my admiration for Strauss in one way knows no bounds.

**SG:** Okay, well, let me—I will take you to another track, but let me just return to one other thing, which is: I believe you that Strauss' self-understanding was that he was not a philosopher. Do you think he was right?

**SR:** No. I mean, if you ask me do I think that Strauss was Leibniz, the answer would be no. In other words, Strauss devoted his life to the study of the history of philosophy, namely, other men's books, because their books were better than his books. Or they taught him something that he needed to know. I mean, he also of course criticized very sharply. I mean, nobody could be a scholar and never say anything bad about his teachers or his colleagues without going crazy. We all have these grandiose notions that we're better than our teachers. Heidegger mentions it, but you don't need Heidegger to tell it to you, it's quite clear. Nietzsche has very nice paragraphs on that: the best thing that a teacher can do for his students is to kill him or to cut the umbilical cord, which is a slightly different variation on the story.

No, I think that Strauss, this business about there being twelve philosophers in the history of the world: that's romanticism in my opinion. If you say, well, there are 2,500 members of the American Philosophical Association, that's the answer to how many philosophers there are—you know, unless, God forbid, some of them have died in the last second. They're all philosophers—I mean, that's their Ph.D., their specialty, their articles. Well, of course they're philosophers. You would be regarded as fantastically rude to make this point at a professional convention, but Strauss made it regularly in public. And that appealed to my arrogance. One of the things I liked about Strauss is that he was very arrogant. I mean, he would spend two hours giving a lecture on modesty and prudence and so forth; then he would say to me, when we had a lunch appointment: Let's go down to the bookshop because I was told that copies of my new book are going to appear today and I want to see if the window display is proper. You just told me about modest virtues and so forth. No, Mr. Gregory, Nicholas:<sup>10</sup> Strauss was a member of the elite. He was a member of the elite as to his learning: nobody could touch it.

**SG:** On the rivalrous relations between students and their teachers of philosophy, I remember in Strauss's interpretation of the *Memorabilia*, he points out that the title of Xenophon's work might also be translated as Memories of Resentment. Did you see that at work in some of Strauss's students?

**SR:** I saw it more in Strauss than I did in his students.

**SG:** Resentment towards—

**SR:** Their general status in life.

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<sup>10</sup> Rosen refers to Stephen Gregory as "Nicholas," in error.

**SG:** Towards his students or towards those whom Strauss learned from?

**SR:** I think the largest category of Strauss's students consisted in people who were at once hypnotized by him and then took refuge, you know, underneath his coattails to promulgate the following view: I of course know nothing, but Strauss knows everything; and I'm Strauss's student and therefore I'm in on the secret. I mean, what is the mystery of esotericism? Well, we touched on that before: there's no mystery at all. You live a certain number of years and you die. You know those things vary from one person to another. There's no universal set of principles.

**SG:** Was one element of the relation of Strauss to students one of resentment because of Strauss's superiority, his mastery?

**SR:** That was true at the level of his colleagues. His students, I just never knew. I was struck down by your formulation. I never knew of anybody who envied Strauss. But it could be because they believed that they were already equal to Strauss, however they got that exalted position. Maybe one reason why philosophers are talking so much about moderation, prudence, temperance, modesty is because they don't have any of those qualities.

**SG:** Is there a way that it makes sense to speak of Straussians, and if so, what would that be? I mean, it sounds as though you almost use the term for second-raters, those who studied with Strauss but never became independent on their own.

**SR:** Straussianism has come to mean something in the public domain which I'm not part of. So if I use the word Straussian in quotation marks, in other words, I use it as a joke because the very notion of a Straussian, exactly like that of a Wittgensteinian, or a Kantian or a Husserlian, all amount to the same thing from the standpoint of the present discussion. They mean someone who subordinates his thinking to somebody else and who will not listen to reason, or who will refuse to regard as reasonable any criticisms that are made of his master, and so on. That's what I mean by Straussian. Clearly, it can't be the case that I think that anybody who uses the word Strauss in a friendly way is an enemy of Strauss. That would be the exact reverse of what my view is. I don't like to be categorized, and especially by people who don't know anything about me from Adam.

**SG:** Let me push you just one more time about the Straussian, the phenomenon of Straussians. During his lifetime, Strauss could see that there were those who called themselves Straussians. Do you think this is something that he wanted to have emerged? Did he want to have a school or a movement grow out of his teaching?

**SR:** Yeah, for political reasons. I mean, his official philosophical doctrine was a kind of Socratic skepticism. There's a lot of talk about the ideas but there's very little illumination. I mean, when one is suspicious and has been positively influenced by Strauss, then as soon as one sees there is no doctrine of ideas, one should begin to rethink the whole thing. The whole thing loses its chastity, and then we get down to the really nitty-gritty. Does that makes any sense to you?

**SG:** That if there's no metaphysics behind a "quote unquote Straussian school," then there's no basis for this school. That's how I reformulate what you have just said.

**SR:** Right. The really interesting thing is that we can function without a basis. I mean, it's all very well to say that there's a clear difference between evil and morality and intelligence and stupidity, and so on and so forth. But if you're looking for justifications, why is it true that we should live a good life and regard that as a philosophical accomplishment? We should be living a good life if and only if life is good. If it's not good, then, you know, get thee hence.

**SG:** I'd like to ask you to reformulate this one more time. That Strauss wanted there to be a school for political reasons, what does that mean? Because people have wide understandings of what that word political means, widely different understandings.

**SR:** You mean, why is that the case for Strauss—

**SG:** That for political reasons he wanted that there be Straussians. What were those political reasons? What was he attempting to do?

**SR:** Make the world free from modern philosophy departments. He wanted to make the world safe for philosophy. By the way, I kept meaning to say this and it disappeared in the discussion. You really can't understand Strauss unless you have a knowledge of two other people, and those guys were Klein, Jacob Klein, and Alexandre Kojève. Because what was Kojève's project, what was Kojève's enterprise?

**SG:** Well, you were saying that Strauss wanted to make the world safe for philosophy.

**SR:** So did Kojève. I was sitting in Kojève's office one day, and I started laughing, and he said: What's so funny? I said: You sound just like Strauss. Isn't it true that first of all you believe in the esoteric teaching? You know, I see his famous essay on Alexander of Aphrodisias. First, it's clear that you believe in the secret teaching. And your main goal is to conquer the world, to become the king of the world, the king of the universe. Strauss did not want to conquer the world except by understanding it all; Kojève wanted to understand it but he wanted to conquer it. From Kojève's standpoint, you're hallucinating. He said: Well, I have the following philosophical view but it has no doctrines and there is nobody who could really substantiate it.

You know all of these fetishist arguments. If you ask me (and you're wise to do so), the best thing to understand is that 75 percent of philosophy, official philosophy, is garbage. No sane people believe it and you shouldn't either. But first of all, philosophy does not simply collapse into garbage. There's a strain of sobriety in healthy food, healthy nourishment. There's a strain in it that keeps it going. I mean, my God, what would we have if we had no philosophy? We have to qualify that by saying this: Since most people are never going to achieve philosophy, either there's going to be something which is superior to philosophy or something that is worse than philosophy. So naturally we want to take the one superior to philosophy. Well, what could that be? What's superior to philosophy? I never had an answer to that question when I was a young man, and I'm not suggesting I have it right now. In other words, there isn't anything that answers the fundamental human desire which is camouflaged under the name philosophy. How can it be

philosophy in the sense of the highest speeches when we don't know what the highest speeches are, we don't know what the lowest speeches are, and on and on and on?

**SG:** Strauss was your supervisor, your dissertation supervisor.

**SR:** Yes.

**SG:** But you were in the Committee on Social Thought?

**SR:** Yes.

**SG:** But he was allowed to be your chair?

**SR:** Yes.

**SG:** I see.

**SR:** Same was true of Benardete.

**SG:** And you wrote on?

**SR:** *Libertatum philosophandi*: Freedom to philosophize. It's always mistranslated as freedom of speech, as though Spinoza was Rawlsian or something. My dissertation was on Spinoza's argument for political freedom.

**SG:** How did you arrive at your dissertation topic? Did—

**SR:** Strauss told me to write it.

**SG:** Was it a good choice by him?

**SR:** I don't know. I never showed it to anybody. I published an article based on the dissertation in a learned journal published in Italy. That's the last I've ever seriously looked at it. I did give a version of that talk to a conference in Yeshiva University, of all places, in New York.

**SG:** Why do you think Strauss suggested that topic to you?

**SR:** Because it was something I could handle. He believed in professionalism, which was ironical because he was so far alienated from the professional crowd. But his students had to know something. If they write about Foucault, they have to know who Foucault was, and they have to be able to say something about the physical characteristics of his work and so on. So he was surprisingly conventional. He was living in Israel at the time, in Jerusalem—my dissertation; he received it long distance. And I wrote a dissertation of 350 pages: by today's standards, nothing—very, very small. So I wrote this and mailed it off to Israel. Strauss wrote back after a very short interval. He said: Dear Mr. Rosen, I could wish—I never forget the grammatical case he used—I could wish that you had written your entire dissertation in the style of the third

paragraph on page 53 in the earlier version. How's that for condemnation from your teacher? So I went home—I can take a hint as well as the next fellow—I went home and wrote the dissertation in the style of paragraph 53, whatever, on page 53. I got my dissertation immediately. I didn't feel myself that I had accomplished anything wonderful. I wasn't interested in that. I wanted to graduate. I was never interested in Spinoza. For two years, I had to walk around the country giving lectures on stuff I had no interest in. And that was the end of it. As I separated myself from Strauss—I don't mean in some quarrelling way, but just growing up—I was able to bloom in a number of directions that most of Strauss's students could not accomplish.

I once went to visit him at St. John's, and Mrs. Strauss had prepared some goodies and I said: No, thanks, I don't want any. She pointed to Leo Strauss: You see your students. You're not feeding them properly. He said: Look, my students come to see me, not to eat.

**SG:** In your career, in your turn to studying Heidegger, did you feel that you were influenced by Strauss's teaching as you—

**SR:** No.

**SG:** No?

**SR:** When I graduated from Chicago, as I started to tell you an hour ago, Benardete and Gildin and I would meet every Saturday to read, in English of course, some essays by Heidegger. At that time, as far as I can discern (my sphere of knowledge was limited) nobody else in Chicago had even heard of Heidegger, let alone stopped to read him. Strauss would have disapproved. He regarded us as too young or too vulnerable to read this horrible monster who was the greatest thinker of the twentieth century. He had a real love-hate relationship with Heidegger, and he did his best—I mean, he regarded himself as an inferior to Heidegger. He said, more specifically: Heidegger was a philosopher, whereas I am merely a professor of philosophy. Well, you can't be any more explicit than that.

**SG:** You say that Strauss failed in his efforts as a teacher.

**SR:** Well, only in the sense that he could never have produced a doctrinally purified doctrine of political philosophy. I mean, can you think of any examples that have succeeded?

**SG:** I guess the question I would ask about his success is whether he imparted a spirit of sobriety that still exists and runs counter to what you described as the madness of Nietzsche and Heidegger, which might be described as dominant voices in the academy.

**SR:** Yeah.

**SG:** Or did he impart a spirit of sobriety? He did have students who might be philosophers and they never would've had the opportunity to know what philosophy is if they hadn't had him as a teacher. So those are the two questions I'd wanted to ask about success, just based on our conversation tonight.

**SR:** Yeah, I'm just trying to answer for Strauss and I think it's fair to say that he from the beginning wished to have a political influence as well as a pedagogical one. With that, I don't think he could have dreamed that he would have burgeoned into the kind of success in the public world as it in fact happened, I mean, known for his political influence in the American world. And I just don't think that he would have visualized that. But he *did*. Unfortunately, it came out warped, which is another way of saying that he couldn't succeed.

Now am I suggesting therefore that we give up philosophy? No. I certainly don't mean that. But did Strauss succeed in producing a society that is better than what we had 2,000 years ago? In some ways yes, in some ways no. I've been trying to minimize my participation in the discussion in favor of trying to communicate to you how I interacted with or how he—how I got along with Strauss. That's what you wanted to know. Well, that I can tell you, that Strauss was a great teacher. In a sense, he saved me five years in an education. And I made some wonderful friends through the medium of Strauss and his circle, and I wouldn't have missed it for the world. Am I in favor of everything Strauss taught? No. I may very well be a modern. How's that for shocker? I may very well be a modern. But that never in my eyes cheapened my feelings with or about Strauss.

**SG:** After you left Chicago, you were no longer attending his classes. Did you consider Strauss a friend?

**SR:** Yes. I mean, obviously in one sense he could not be your friend because we were his students. Also, however, we were members of an outcast [group] and that brought all of us together closer. It had some bad effects. But we were a little world of our own, just intoxicated with Strauss and being students of Strauss. I really do want to emphasize that I'm not certain that was entirely good, but it was better than anything else around.

**SG:** Let me ask you one more thing about this teaching. In the five or six years you took classes with him, does any class stand out as one that made an impact on you?

**SR:** The *Statesman*.

**SG:** Why?

**SR:** Because it was the first time Strauss discussed in class in any detail what Plato might have meant by the doctrine of ideas. If I looked at that today, that section of the *Statesman*, I might not have as high an opinion of it. But I spent another twenty years writing a book on the *Statesman*, so if my book were not worth possessing because of Strauss's book there would be no point in my writing it. Yes, the *Statesman* was my favorite book, and we were all enthused about it. Gildin was there, Benardete was there, all the big guns.

Again, my famous visit to Mr. and Mrs. Strauss. Strauss and I sat down on the couch to drink our coffee, and he said: What are you working on, or words to that effect. And I said: Hegel, Hegel's *Phenomenology*. I was on my way towards writing my Hegel book, and I said: I'm writing a book on Hegel. Strauss said: Please, he said, do me a favor. He said: Be sure that you read page

123 of especially the first part of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* before you write or publish your work. So I chuckled—I mean, how could he know I was writing—he couldn't prepare in advance. I went home and told Françoise this amazing story, and then I thought, I might as well look at the paragraph. [It] cast a whole new light. Very funny.

**SG:** You know, one of the things I'm struck by in your portrait of Strauss is you as a rough American lad. Blankenhagen is a European, and Strauss is a European, but Strauss was open to things American.

**SR:** That's right.

**SG:** Do you think that there were—do you think that he learned something from his American students that he would not have learned if he had simply stayed, and had the chance to stay in Europe and teach in Europe?

**SR:** I of course cannot answer that question with any assurance, but I think that he was in his heart a European. Certainly there was no question about that in his youth, when he was looking for a job. I don't think Strauss ever thought that he had something to learn from America. I think he preferred Europe to America at the cultural level. Now he might say [that] also he preferred American democracy. Hence he was idolized by the new Left. That he could have easily had said, that he preferred American democracy. But did he learn anything? No.

**SG:** What would you suggest I ask when I sit down with a former student of Strauss's about Strauss?

**SR:** I think that you should certainly include the question of the relation between theory and practice, to use Aristotelian language. That came up over and over again in our discussion.

**SG:** Right:

**SR:** And that's not by accident: I think that's the heart of the matter. We're interested in Strauss as a teacher (forgive me for saying "we") and we are interested showing Strauss's—in solving the problem or contributing to the solution of the problem whether Strauss had a teaching, a political teaching, or whether that was all rhetorical and he just wanted to be alone with his Plato books. And I think you should ask them where do you stand on the ancient-modern quarrel. I mean, that was the heart and soul of Strauss's teaching.