

Interview with Werner Dannhauser
May 3, 2011

Stephen Gregory: This is Stephen Gregory. I am sitting with Werner Dannhauser, visiting him just outside Collegeville, Pennsylvania. Hello, Werner. Thanks for having me.

Werner Dannhauser: Hello, Steve. Nice to see you.

SG: You studied with Leo Strauss soon after he came to University of Chicago?

WD: Soon after he came? No, I didn't arrive in Chicago 'til '55 or '56.

SG: So did you come to Chicago to study with Strauss? Did you know about him before you came?

WD: Well, first of all I knew—where I was raised in Cleveland, especially young Jewish intellectuals, we all looked to Chicago rather than Harvard or Columbia or Yale. And I'd applied there three times already and I was admitted each time, but no fellowships. So I went to other worthy schools but in the meantime I heard of Strauss. First I heard of Hutchins¹; then I heard of Strauss. And then I was in Europe on a Fulbright and I decided to give Chicago one more chance, and I got a very lavish fellowship to the Committee on Social Thought, which is where I wanted to go because you could study with Strauss and evade a lot of requirements that way.

SG: So you came to the Committee in 1955?

WD: I think it's '56, now that I think of it.

SG: '56. Okay. And what was your first experience with Strauss?

WD: I came from the New School, indirectly. There was a Wednesday night—and I believe it was called the Graduate Seminar. And he came there already from Chicago, and he lectured on Thucydides, whom I had not read at the time. I didn't think he was an unusually excellent lecturer, but then he was questioned by the graduate faculty and I was amazed both at his friendliness and the fact that I thought he was the most alert mind—and that he knew more about Thucydides than anyone in the world, though I'd never read him.

SG: So you heard Strauss lecture on Thucydides, and then soon after you came to the Committee?

WD: After he came, I came to the Committee, recommended by Howard White² of the New School.

¹ Robert Maynard Hutchins: see "People Mentioned in the Interviews" [hereafter "People"].

² Howard White: see "People."

SG: Right.

WD: And I went to his office, and Howard had written him about me, and he said [he] hoped that I liked it and that if I only took one course, I should come to his Hobbes seminar—who I also had not read. That’s the one I signed up for.

SG: How was he in your first meeting?

WD: He was perfectly cordial and sweet. He was very busy ’cause it was registration week, but he gave an unhurried air: the atmosphere of someone who enjoyed being a teacher.

SG: And how was the Hobbes course?

WD: I hate to be platitudinous. It was an eye opener. I had known nothing about Hobbes except that he was, you know, the wicked Locke. And he just sort of started by—you know, it’s a good question: “Why are we reading Hobbes?” And then he led into it.

I’ll also first describe what the requirements were. You had to write a seven-page paper because long experience had taught him that that’s what twenty minutes took [to read]. And I was amazed at how light the requirements were. That was—if I remember correctly, you didn’t even have to hand in the things. And the paper: he just criticized you afterwards.

SG: You didn’t turn the paper in? You gave it in class?

WD: You gave it in class. Then he’d comment on the paper and commented on—each paper was on a certain segment of the text. And in a few of his courses (but I don’t think in this one) there was a final. But it was always a very routine question, like: What are the main themes of the Leviathan? That was it, and you could say what you wanted to.

SG: What kind of feedback did he give when you gave your paper in class or others did? He had not had a chance to read the paper beforehand?

WD: No. He’d just say certain things like, I was wrong in my discussion of sin which played a role. But otherwise it was—I believe he used the word “alert.” And afterwards, as he saw me leave, he smiled and said, “Howard White was right about you.” I was in heaven.

SG: Did he often compliment students?

WD: No. That would have lost the value of it. No. He was never mean; the meanest thing that in my many years that I have ever heard him say was: “We will now turn to a coherent discussion of the text.” But otherwise, sometimes he would just say something like: “Thank you very much.” I must boast once more, then hit me. I really came to my own in the second quarter, which was Thucydides. I gave the paper and he didn’t say anything for a while but made one of his elaborate and unintelligible charts on the wall. And he suddenly turned around and said: “By the way, that was excellent.” So I was in heaven again.

SG: How many courses did you end up taking or sitting in on with him? How long did you have a chance to attend his courses?

WD: A long time. I belong to the generation when it was considered bad manners to do your Ph.D. quickly, so I took twenty years. But the courses by him were something you dropped in on long after. Nobody bothered about credits or anything; you just wanted to learn something or to hear what the course was about.

SG: And how was Strauss as a teacher? What stood out to you about him as a teacher?

WD: One of the things that came to mind immediately is—like many of my friends, who also studied with him and [they] also noticed—is how different he was as a teacher than we ourselves became. Like others and me, we're certainly not averse to using histrionic effects: raising our voices and getting angry and sort of sparring a bit maliciously with our students. But he was much more quiet and gentle, and he just managed to convey the worth and the love of what we were doing. And he was—again, to repeat—he was kind, by which I mean I wouldn't call him loving; he was rather formal with students. He never called any of us by our first names—that would have been unthinkable, except in the case of Larry Berns.³ I don't know the story behind that.

And—but he also seemed genuinely interested. He was very popular. You came to him for something and he was unhurried; like usually with an academic question, and he'd say smilingly: "You have your nerve asking me about that. I last read it forty years ago, so you'll be at the mercy of my bad memory in something." And then he would sort of effortlessly say the most astonishing things about it. And that's it.

SG: I've heard that through the '50s at least, that he really poured himself into his teaching; that his classes would often go long over time and he would take questions until the people no longer had questions to ask.

WD: That's right. Yes, I observed that. And I have even seen him as . . . the only reason he left was Mrs. Strauss came to fetch him. I mean, he would give you a fair warning: "Well, class is now over, but if anyone has any questions, shoot." And that was it.

SG: Why do you think he was pouring so much energy into his teaching? These sessions apparently lasted three or four hours sometimes.

WD: Yes, they did. Well, this is in no way—this [is] terribly reductionist—but the atmosphere conveyed is he was having a good time and that he really—it made him happy, and that made us happy. There was a lot of joking and a lot of laughter in his class. He was quite respectful of students. I remember, to go back to the Hobbes course, where it took me a long time to—I used to be retiring and quiet—to ask a question, 'cause you're never sure it's not a stupid question. But to my amazement, he said: "That's a very difficult point you raised." And then he had a habit

³ Lawrence Berns: see "People."

that was like super-involvement—he'd suddenly be in front of your desk, having walked up and addressed you personally. And as usual, I froze and after fifteen—I don't know—five minutes, I no longer knew quite what he was talking about. But I was hugely impressed. And then it was the first time when things sort of opened up and he said: "You know, that's not quite a correct answer, but it'll have to do." And it wasn't fake modesty; it was him judging himself.

SG: Did you have the sense when you attended his class that he was paying attention to the individual students and understood what their own dispositions were towards what he was teaching? That if a student asked a question, that he was responding not in a kind of formulaic way, but to what that particular student was getting at?

WD: Yes. I mean, I call it rapport. He was never at all, you know—many teachers, including me probably, you get a feeling this is pretentious or this is a showpiece shtick or something. It was always addressed to you and your questions.

SG: How do you think he saw his role as a teacher?

WD: I think he had good students of so many persuasions or shades of opinions, he just wanted you to—well, I think, I guess deep down he really wanted you to learn how to read. And that meant to be—I think, I hope—deeply involved with a book, to sort of try to sit inside of it. And as Joe Cropsey⁴ used to say, you don't learn about these books, you learn from them. And that impressed me. And I think what he certainly—I think he was open to a wide variety of choices by his students.

SG: It was observed at the Strauss Center's conference last weekend that he thought it was good to start students with Aristotle's *Politics* or Aristotle's *Ethics*. But he taught the *Politics* most frequently. This is an unfair question, but why do you think he preferred to start with, and keep returning to, the *Politics*?

WD: To give you a very simplistic . . . I think that he really liked that book. That was an odd choice. As you'd notice, I'd started with Hobbes's *Leviathan*. But he really liked the book. But what made it odd and puzzling—it's in a way a forbidding text; not a page of it reads like a novel. Then there's all the problems of: Are the pieces really in the right order? and so forth. And some of it is very dry. But he rammed it home to us. Though now that you ask me this question, if I had been him or if he had asked me what to start with, I would counsel him to say the *Ethics*, because (that is in no way unique with me) I think the *Ethics* you took to very quickly, especially with his gentle guidance. That's a book we really learned to love more, much more quickly, than the *Politics*.

SG: In a letter to Klein⁵ in 1949, I'm not sure if it was after his appointment or after he knew of his appointment to Chicago, he complained to Klein that students—that he needed to give students a political teaching.

⁴ Joseph Cropsey: see "People."

⁵ Jacob Klein: see "People."

WD: He needed what?

SG: That he needed to give students a political teaching, that students wanted a political teaching, so he had to come up with one. Did you have the sense that there was a teaching in his courses?

WD: No. I think that—do we have time for an anecdote about other Straussians?

SG: We have lots of time.

WD: Just two days ago, I talked to Arthur Melzer,⁶ who is now after many years close to finishing a book on esotericism and Strauss, and he said he was dealing with the issue of whether Strauss had a political teaching. And Arthur has taught everything under the sun at Michigan State. He was impressed that he, Strauss, was far less political than he, Arthur—that he never or very rarely addressed himself to today’s political, or current political things. And I think that’s correct. Or as we used to say: Anne Landers is quoted ten times as often as Plato.

SG: That is a striking thing about his courses when you look at the transcripts: the number of times that he refers to not big political figures, but simply figures who are in the news. Grace Kelly.

WD: Oh, yeah?

SG: Well, others. I doubt if she appears more than once—that it seems to be an important part of his teaching. I mean, just the way he taught, to bring up things that were happening on a daily basis.

WD: Yeah.

SG: Do you think that he had any particular hopes for his teaching students?

WD: I think he developed them—let me say something hugely self-serving: I think he was very lucky in his students, and he kept liking us and it gave him satisfaction. You know, not everyone, certainly—I can mention some scoundrels, but I will seal my lips—but that they turned out well. Or at least, you know, that what they learned somehow made them fuller and happier.

SG: So he, if he had an end in view, it was simply having students who became—who were able to study political philosophy in a serious way and became, as you say, fuller and happier for doing so?

WD: Yeah, and completely non-doctrinaire. I mean, you can say as a doctoral student, I had several crises. But the earlier ones were all that I thought Nietzsche was right at the beginning. And he seemed slightly bored, by the way. What did he say? He was, like: Well, what else could

⁶ Arthur Melzer: see “People.”

you think at your stage? And you know the question, Was Nietzsche right? was certainly a necessary question to deal with; and with Nietzsche that could be very, very painful unless you like fascists.

SG: He taught Nietzsche at Chicago perhaps three or four times. There were two courses on Nietzsche, and then he included Nietzsche on reading lists one or two other times. Of course, as a young man Strauss was like you, very interested in Nietzsche, in his teaching. Did Nietzsche come up as a particular alternative he felt students had to meet and address?

WD: I'd like to think so, but I don't really. I mean, I think there are just . . . thinking of the way I think he thinks, there are—to plagiarize from Montaigne, there are a lot of different roads to the same end. I think, I certainly think that some of the functions could be fulfilled by Marx if you were deep in the nineteenth century and had some feelings or had read some of the novels of Balzac or Stendhal or practically everything else, that there is something—or Flaubert—seedy about the bourgeoisie.

SG: And that's a prejudice that Strauss never himself seemed to entertain.

WD: Yeah. Although—though I think, you know, ultimately, I think his hero was Goethe as far as the moderns are concerned. Goethe certainly knew everything that was wrong with the bourgeoisie. And that's why so many wild women [are] in the text, but he gave things [their] due. And the road—that's an interesting question—it works both ways historically. I think Goethe in a way puts Nietzsche to shame. But the same in the other direction: I think Nietzsche is a very powerful critic of Goethe—such as, he never understood the Greeks; he never understood Greek tragedies too.

SG: There were several students of Strauss who were registered with the Committee on Social Thought. Did you see any difference between the Social Thought students who were studying with Strauss and the political science students?

WD: No. I consider that to our credit as students. That simply didn't matter. I mean, now that I think back on it, there were majors in Chinese or in Jewish Studies, or all sorts of things. I don't think we paid too much attention. Now that I am very old, sometimes the question comes up and I simply don't remember whether so-and-so studied political science or on the Committee, though I suspect that there was more snootiness on the Committee.

SG: Were there any institutional obstacles to your studying with Strauss since you were not in the political science department?

WD: No. There would have been the other way because the man who subsidized me, who controlled the fellowship, was Hayek.⁷ Hayek certainly knew there was nothing, so to speak, in common between him and Strauss. As far as I know, they didn't really know each other very well. But Hayek was very, you know, old-fashioned Austrian, courtly. And it didn't matter to

⁷ Friedrich Hayek (d. 1992), Nobel prize-winning economist, was a professor on the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago from 1950-62.

him at all that I was plainly on the Committee known as a Strauss student. And none of the others—I mean, people today have been asked again and again, how could you be both Grene's⁸ student and Strauss's student? It just wasn't a problem, even though we knew that Grene had called Strauss a lunatic in the *Tribune*.⁹

SG: Right. Well, didn't Grene look upon Strauss as a close friend for some time?

WD: They were friendly. I think that they liked each other; though, you know, Straussianism can have excesses. Once I took a course with Grene that he taught at the downtown center. It was on some Shakespeare plays, and Grene was excellent at teaching Shakespeare. But then I got—I had survived his dislike for me some time and gotten enough nerve, so there was—so I raised my hand at something and found myself (I can't even remember the play) giving a very elaborate and practically wrong, I think, but definitely Straussian reading of a certain section. And he looked bemused and then he said, "Werner, do you really believe all that nonsense?" That was a very, a very Grene—I had wits enough to say, "Not when you put it like that."

SG: Was Strauss on your dissertation committee?

WD: Yes, he was.

SG: Did he give you feedback on the dissertation?

WD: He did something better than that. He read it very, very promptly and wrote me back a very nice letter, saying it was good, yet the following maybe a half-a-dozen suggestions, and then came a saving end: "These are all trivial. Dispose of them as you wish." So that's what I call an ideal dissertation reader.

SG: Prompt, with detailed feedback that he gives you permission to ignore.

WD: Yes.

SG: And is that how you supervise dissertations?

WD: No. I didn't live up to it.

SG: Strauss was an émigré. How did he view his American students as Americans? What did he think of his American students compared to his European students he might have had, had he been able to remain in Germany?

WD: Well, I think he liked American students. I think he really liked America. Though it's a moot point, he may have liked England slightly better—because my memory of the letters is that when he first came to England, he sort of fell in love with the English. Now that may have

⁸ David Grene: see "People."

⁹ We could not find this article.

something to do with his early Hitler times, and Britain was the last remaining hope. I don't think he ever fell in love with America, but he appreciated it.

SG: What did he appreciate in the American qualities of his students, if anything?

WD: I think their good-naturedness. Simply, I think that American students are less sour than most students in most countries. More sweet, if you want to use an imprecise word. And, well, I guess innocent would be a kind of word, too.

SG: Is there such a thing as a Straussian?

WD: Yes.

SG: What is it?

WD: Well, you're looking at one.

SG: O.K. What is a Straussian?

WD: Someone who is moving in the direction of thinking that Leo Strauss was right, that his way of looking at things is better than any other teacher that's around.

SG: During his lifetime, he had the chance to observe that there were people who called themselves Straussians and who were called Straussians by others. There were famous controversies about Straussians while he was still alive. Do you think he was pleased to see there were people called Straussians? Or indifferent, or—

WD: No, I think he was pleased. I am filled with a warm memory that he really liked us, and with us there is a kind of an inner circle. We're the ones who are—when called Straussians we like it or it's like a badge of honor, and others don't. But I remember when we used to gossip—a very important virtue—I don't think anyone felt embarrassed in front of him to call himself a Straussian. It was just a term with a pretty fair identification record.

SG: In addition to his teaching at the University of Chicago, Strauss gave a remarkable series of lectures at Hillel House on Jewish topics. Did his being a Jew feature into his teaching or the way that he taught, the outlook that he had?

WD: Oh, yes indeed. But I mean, there may be a tribal sense when, like a deeply committed Jew, I tend to think that everyone I like is Jewish secretly somehow, in some mysterious way. But this is a complicated question which is not always easy to explain. But here was a man who only very rarely went to synagogue, and he certainly after a while never kept Jewish ritual obligation or the Jewish dietary laws. But he was very, very deeply Jewish and [at] the Hillel House, there he conveyed it. He was—[I'm] certainly not giving away any inner secrets—Strauss was a stingy man; he had his faults, and he was certainly not in love with giving lectures without compensation. He would rather have been paid. But of course he would do almost anything for

Hillel, it seems like. One lecture, I think by no means his best, captured [the situation] in its title, “Why We Remain Jews.” We just took that for granted.

But if I can just diverge for a minute (I mean, since I’m Jewish myself; you wouldn’t have guessed): there’s a number of us he turned into better Jews by the simple route that he was in no way condescending to the Jewish tradition. I certainly came to the University of Chicago [with the thought]: those old books, they’re antiquarian. But all you had to do, if you ever were lucky enough, [was] listen to him on Maimonides. And there simply was not a bit of condescension or anything. And he took that very seriously, and he taught us to take it very seriously. Maybe we, that is we Jews, maybe we never took St. Thomas seriously enough, that’s possible, or Augustine. But we did learn the Jewish thing. There was—in addition, he was without condescension within Jewishness.

I also happen to be a German Jew. German Jews for hundreds of years were very nasty toward Polish Jews and others, and were very contemptuous of Yiddish as a language. I mean, Hebrew was the language of the streets and everything. There was never any condescension by Strauss or by [Gershom] Scholem¹⁰ toward the Yiddish language or—Strauss was an admirer of Sholem Aleichem¹¹, that’s another one. German Jews: they’d rather deal with Kafka.

SG: It’s a remarkable that a few of his students went on to write about Jewish subjects but Strauss never taught Jewish subjects apart from those several lectures that he gave at Hillel House.

WD: Yeah.

SG: When you had a chance to speak to him—

WD: Part of that is [if] you consider Spinoza as a Jew—

SG: Okay.

WD: Or not?

SG: Fair enough.

WD: Well, we solved that. He’s a bad Jew.

SG: When you had a chance to speak to him out of class, was Jewish thought one of the things that would come up in your conversations with him?

¹⁰ Gershom Scholem: see “People.”

¹¹ Sholem Aleichem (d. 1916), pen name of Yiddish writer Solomon Naumovich Rabinovich, author of stories about Tevye the dairyman, upon which the musical “Fiddler on the Roof” was based.

WD: Oh, yes, but some of it indirectly because we were both German refugees, so the German question and the Jewish question were always rubbing shoulders together. But in addition, one of the reasons Mrs. Strauss liked me, I think (not only 'cause I'm so likable), [was] 'cause like many German Jews, she wanted to talk German to people. Which is why in Israel the German Jews to a huge extent kept talking German: there were whole cafés where you couldn't hear anything but German. And Mrs. Strauss would always break into German when she got the least bit excited. And lo and behold, I've even had instances when Strauss, when he was talking fast and knew somewhere that I was a Kraut, would break into German for a while.

He was also into Jewishness. He liked Israel. And for us, it gives me a warm feeling. One of the most impressive things I know was [his] reading the riot act to the *National Review* in the letter defending Israel.¹² You know, as we said, he practically threatened to cancel his free subscription.

SG: In addition to not teaching Jewish authors, Strauss never taught Goethe as far as I know of, at least at the University of Chicago.

WD: That's—as far as I know, he didn't, yeah.

SG: Was Goethe something else you learned from him about, but not in class?

WD: Yeah. Not so much. I learned—Mrs. Strauss had an amazing knowledge of German literature, especially poetry. She seemed to have read everything. So I learned a lot from her—paid no tuition. But I don't know how reliable is the course count. For example, Nathan¹³ only told me later, after somewhere I raised a Tocqueville question, that Strauss never gave a course on Tocqueville. And of course, among his students, Tocqueville is a favorite subject. So I don't know what silence means exactly. Being a Straussian, of course, I think it means a lot.

SG: After you left Chicago, you kept in touch with Strauss?

WD: Yes.

SG: What kind of relations did he have with his former students? I mean, was he someone you would correspond with or—

WD: Oh, yes. After I left we corresponded irregularly, but then whenever I was in Chicago or he was in New York, which was by no means just me, we would touch base. You know he came to lecture for *Commentary*, and then there was an evening with him that [was] full of rambunctious argument. And when at long last I got back to my thesis, I was married with one child. I just needed to touch base with him, so we visited him at St. John's in Annapolis. They were received very warmly even though I don't think he really loved children a lot. And he got a little nervous when rambunctious Fanya kept bumping into him.

¹² *National Review*, January 5, 1956.

¹³ Nathan Tarcov: see "People."

SG: Did you think of Strauss as a friend in those days?

WD: No. I mean, 'cause friendship always, you know—and I know what Aristotle said, but friendship implies equality, and I never thought of myself as his equal or whatever; I always thought of him as my superior.

SG: What made Strauss different in that way from everyone else? I mean, it [was maybe that none of his students felt that they were his equal. Or it may be that—

WD: I don't think that's true, by the way. Well, you know, gossip is so far beyond me, but I know students who do think, or did think they were his equal. Well, I say it and it's not even malicious: Stanley Rosen came to mind immediately.

SG: What do you think made the difference between Strauss and others? He stood head and shoulders above most of the crowd.

WD: Yes.

SG: What do you think made the difference? What made Strauss different from everyone else?

WD: Well, the first answer may sound moronic. I think he's just smarter. His was just the most powerful mind that I ever came close to. And that's it.

SG: Well, we've covered a lot of ground. Is there anything that you'd like to bring up, that we should discuss that we haven't touched on?

WD: No. You have emptied my cup, or whatever the right thing is. I think I've said everything that's worth saying.