# The influence of Plato and Aristotle on Leo Strauss

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**Abstract:** The article deals with the influence of Plato and Aristotle on the philosophical work and thought of Leo Strauss. Significant issues are approached, which are directly related to the Platonic and Aristotelian views of politics, always in connection with the direct crisis of nihilism brought about by the age of modernity. The interpretations given should be taken as a result of Strauss's own research into the history of philosophy in an attempt to deal with political problems philosophically. Given that Strauss's approach to Platonic and Aristotelian texts is unorthodox, the philosopher attempts to address complex political issues through the scope of their reinterpretation in a selectively synthetic way.

**KEYWORDS:** Aristotle, historicism, Leo Strauss, modernity, philosophy, Plato, political philosophy.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

If one could summarize the most important aspect of Leo Strauss's teaching, one would say that he devoted himself to the rediscovery or rather, to the restoration of classical political philosophy (Zuckert, 1996: 5). In his text "*On Classical Political Philosophy",* he states for the first time the central theme of his philosophical thought, which he republishes in his text "*What is Political Philosophy?".* Strauss's primary goal was to utilize classical political philosophy to elevate and refine those political structures that have their origins in modern political philosophy. Undoubtedly, he believed in the supposed creative dynamics of the conflict between the ancient and the modern. He vehemently opposed the notion that envisioned the emergence of the new in the ruins of the old, and, instead, proposed, as far as possible, a substantial harmonization of classical and modern political and philosophical thought. As far as Strauss is concerned, classical political philosophy can only be perceived as obsolete and "ancient" if it is really treated as such. Therefore, Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, since it remains timeless and is still in dialectical interaction with the modern and the contemporary, can by no means be considered ancient (Lenzner, 1997).

Strauss (1978: 10-11) approaches classical political philosophy with a notion of renewal and proposes the rediscovery of it through a modern reading of the texts, mainly of Plato and secondarily of Aristotle. Plato is at the core of Strauss's thought (along with Xenophon[1]) and not so much Aristotle, as his interest revolves primarily around the personality and attributes of Socrates, the central figure in Platonic dialogues. He characterizes Aristotle as the "first political scientist" and his *Politics* as the first record of political science (Strauss, 1978: 12).[2] However, Socrates is the proposer of political philosophy (Strauss, 1978: 19-21), as the first thinker to recognize the uniqueness of the political and expressed questions/questions about it (see "what is politics?", "what is common sense?"). Aristotle founded political science, but in a different way than introduced by Plato, who did not perceive it as a branch among others, but as a central and fundamental one, as the first (non-metaphysical) philosophy, as the core of philosophy itself in general. Aristotle introduced political science, not because he achieved holistic knowledge, but because he discovered the concept of moral virtue and associated it with politics (Strauss, 1978: 20-27).

Strauss's work should not be accepted as a systematic attempt to interpret the notion of moral virtue or as a genuinely historical narrative that takes into account all the heterogeneities of classical political thought. On the contrary, it mainly expresses the philosopher's intention to step on the classical texts, to prove their semantic connection with the present and to contribute to modern political and philosophical thought, but often in a way that is characterized as idiosyncratic, paradoxical, and even perverted (Burnyeat, 1985: 30-36). Strauss himself stated that to achieve this, it was imperative to recover the original classical thought, namely the original Platonic and Aristotelian, as on the one hand, the Platonic universe changed due to the passing of Neoplatonism, and especially with the predominance of Christian interpretations, while on the other hand, the Aristotelian one was associated with "Jerusalem" and the birth/emergence of modernity (Zuckert, 1996: 5). Regarding the latter, Strauss argued that the allegations of

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[1] Strauss considers Xenophon to be a genuine philosopher. However, he does not hold him in such high regard as Plato and Aristotle, the "men of the highest excellence" (Strauss, 1978: 49).

[2] Strauss (1978: 19) ignores and does not take into account the opinion of Aristotle, who characterizes Hippodamus as the first political scientist. This is because, as he claims, he did not perceive politics in a separate and unique order of things.

ideological and semantic relevance between "Athens and Jerusalem" should be assessed as fundamentally incompatible, since the Reasoning cannot refute the Apocalypse and the latter cannot be substantiated by rational arguments (Gunnell, 2011: 12-27, 42-51, 83–88; Smith, 2007).

This article introduces a further deepening of the influence of Plato and Aristotle on the thought and philosophy of Leo Strauss. Undoubtedly, this subject could not possibly be covered in the limited extent of just an article of a few thousand words, since in the work of the US-born German political philosopher, the influences of the two classic philosophers are more than obvious and quite extensive. In any case, the modern Strauss reader should be philosophically suspicious of the thinker's attempt to bring the dialectic of politics back to its pre-scientific period, where "danger" and "threat" of modernity had not yet become apparent. What needs to be clarified is that when we talk about the influence of Platonic and Aristotelian thought on Strauss, it is the one that emerges from his own, alternative re-reading of the texts of Plato and Aristotle.

## 2. RETURN TO THE CLASSIC AND THE CRISIS OF MODERNITY

Strauss (1978: 1) justifies the necessity of turning to the classical political thought of antiquity and stimulating the interest of classical thinkers, realizing that through the creative utilization of it, the crisis of nihilism that afflicts Western political thought can be managed. Moving on to the reasoning of Heidegger and Nietzsche on the prevalence of nihilism in modern society, Strauss perceives the current crisis as an opportunity to return and rediscover the classical texts, which he considers free of the distorting power of modern hypotheses. While Heidegger and Nietzsche went backwards, focusing on pre-Socratic philosophers, believing that they were really free from metaphysical concerns that ultimately led to the nihilization of modernity, Strauss focuses on Plato and Aristotle, that is, on the "culprits" of the metaphysical turn of world philosophy, and therefore the crisis of nihilism (Lampert, 1996; Ferry, 1990). This differentiation (Drury, 1988, 1985: 315-317), lies in the fact that he perceives the crisis of modernism as political and moral, rather than as existential, as in its focus the question of the Good is examined more than that of the Being. (Strauss, 2000: 212; Umphrey, 1994: 287). In the same vein, Strauss (1978: 24-46) accuses existentialists of not only not facing the crisis of modernity, but of feeding it (Loadman, 1998; Gildin, 1975: 81-98).

The return to the Platonic and Aristotelian stochastic universe, according to Strauss (1968: 331-351), paves the path for the modern political intellect so as to identify the real cause of nihilism: that is, the loss of man's contact with nature in the level of political and moral life, as well as the rediscovery that there is no specific way of life that has any intrinsic value. Strauss conceives the crisis of modernism, not as a loss of Being, that is, of human existence, but as a loss of the Political, that is, of citizenship. The search for existence and authenticity, to which the proponents of Existentialism indulge, according to him, is a symptom of modernism and not a solution for liberation from it (Emberley & Cooper, 1993: 62-63). He argues that the pursuit of Being is detrimental to human nature and disorients man's gaze from what is of real value to him: his existence, as defined by urban life, as it is structured by rules, laws, standards, and the norms (Strauss, 1988: 29).

He sees the crisis of modernism as a problem that does not concern the question of the existence of man himself but is directly related to his ability to actively participate in a political and moral life, which leads him to the Good and creates links among citizens with the perspective and vision of achieving a state of Bliss (Zuckert, 1996: 111-115). The authentic and original encounter does not concern man in the sense of *dasein*, but with man, as shaped by his involvement in political and moral life. From this engagement, a certain type of man emerges called "citizen". Thus, according to Strauss, the modern political philosopher can retrieve and rediscover the form of authenticity and originality in dialectical Platonism and Aristotelianism. According to him, it is wrong to seek this authenticity in the "poetic" philosophical thought of the Presocratics.

## 3. REDISCOVERY OF NATURE AND MODERN HISTORICISM

The demand for a return to the Platonic and Aristotelian texts stems from the need to recover the true nature of political life, which was lost with the introduction and prevalence of the Machiavellian way of approaching political philosophy.[3] According to it, political philosophy was associated with the tangible transformation of what earlier political thinkers considered exclusively on a theoretical level, through visas. Undoubtedly, this "tangible" version of the fundamental principles of politics, differentiated it in terms of practice and exercise and led to an inseparable connection of theory and practice (Strauss, 1988: 40). According to Strauss, Machiavellian thought equated political philosophy with strategic policies of delimiting the visions and perspectives, with a new conception of nature, with the replacement of the human will in nature by a set of rules and standards. This transformation of political philosophy essentially marked the beginning of modernity, which is characterized by the internalization of morality and its limitation to human subjectivity, by a departure from nature that is gradually becoming oblivious, by the historicization of politics and moral standards, on which the status of the citizen is structured and the state politics, which lead to the Good and the Bliss (Vertzagia, 2016: 11-27). For Strauss (1978: 139), the two classic ascetics of political philosophy, Plato and Aristotle, through the "proper" reading of their works, show how the true nature can be sought, that is, the best political state, which, although possible,

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[3] According to Strauss (1959: 44), Machiavelli, driven by his anti-theological rage, rewrote Aristotle's Ethics and incorporated it into political science.

has never existed and does not really exist. Strauss thus managed to prove, albeit implicitly, that it is possible to distinguish between the rational and the real, which, he argues, philosophers of modernity such as Hegel (Gildin, 1989: 71-72) have tried to silence.

In this light, the historicization of the political and moral models –based on which modernism emerges– implies the transcendence of nature from human activity, which aims not only at the transformation of the former but also at its conquest. Strauss interprets historicism as an attempt by the man of modernity to transcend his true nature while pointing out that modern philosophers such as Heidegger and Nietzsche, who start from the "wrong" starting point (see Presocratics), are left distracted by Machiavellian political philosophy. Based on the above, it can be argued that Strauss (1988b: 170) identifies, among other things, that the crisis of modernity is due to the misconception of real nature, which tries to dominate (Strauss, 1965: 336, 1978: 43-44). The solution to the problem of modern nihilism is the rediscovery of real nature, that is, the one which precedes the modernist approach and interpretation of the world (Strauss, 1995: 135-136). The rediscovery of nature presupposes a return to it, that is, a return to the Platonic and Aristotelian philosophical texts, perceived as an attempt to historicize political philosophy. The study of Platonic and Aristotelian political thought directly from its source will essentially free the modern thinker from understanding the difference between the historicization of philosophy and the historicization of political and moral models. The former reveals the true meaning of philosophy and the second displays the meaning of a falsified-constructed "real" philosophy (Strauss, 1995: 136).

This distorted-constructed philosophy results from the need imposed by modernity on man to dominate nature and to replace it with a human condition. Through modernist anthropocentrism, the natural world becomes human and is evidenced by the historicization of what previously concerned nature itself. At the core of the human world, nature does not lie, it is annihilated (Strauss, 1965: 336). The world of modernity is therefore distinguished by the nihilism of nature, while the crisis of modernism arises precisely from the exultation over this fact. In this modern context, everything seems to follow and serve man, a characteristic that makes them unreal. With the turn of the thinker towards the truth of Plato and Aristotle, the transcendence of the modern limits is achieved and the real nature is "opened" before him, the one that remains unchanged, pure, and intact from the decay of human history (Taylor, 1998, 1992: 91-107). In the Platonic and Aristotelian texts, modern man can become acquainted with the pre-modern concept of nature (Pippin, 1995: 139-160).

Strauss explicitly states the need to re-study the Platonic and Aristotelian universes as a response and solution to the restoration of the modern world to its true nature. However, Strauss, being aware of the enormous and timeless influence of the ideas and views of the two classical Greek philosophers on human thought and action throughout history, proposes their re-approach, the reading of their texts back from the start. This is due to the fact that the modern reader will be able to come into contact with the unhistorical nature that dominates their work and to realize that this may be a response to the crisis of modern nihilism (Strauss, 1999: 30-31). The modern reader of the classic texts of Plato and Aristotle, according to Strauss, knows the "truth" that lies hidden within them, which serves the purposes of the western intellect and can certainly not turn people in search of true nature (Strauss, 2000: 292, 1978: 119-120). For this reason, it is imperative that these texts be re-approached and re-evaluated in their true dimension, which is ultimately opposed to modernity (Zuckert, 1996: 5).

Undoubtedly, Strauss, by "re-reading" and reinterpreting the classical texts, tries to discover some other Plato and some other Aristotle, quite different from those who "fuel" with ideas, principles, and philosophical positions the defenders of modern philosophy and thus those who contradict his own conception of political philosophy. Many scholars have pointed out that Strauss, like any "self-respecting" thinker, attempted to start his political-philosophical system from the two greatest thinkers of ancient philosophy so as to "legitimize" it. However, in order to distinguish himself from the "modernists", he preferred to read Plato and Aristotle in a seemingly perverted way, and to dismiss their thought from anything metaphysical, from anything that refers to the dogma of the soul or ideas (Strauss, 1997: 463, 1988b: 8).

Regarding Plato, Strauss discovered a thinker whose work fully responds to the need of modern man to return to his nature, to regain his contact with the phenomenological nature, which is the basic source and the fundamental component of politics and moral life. However, this feature presupposes the existence of human ability, that is, a cultivated skill, through which one can capture what, according to Strauss, the Platonic text achieves. This is because he cannot rely on the analyses that have preceded and are usually considered generally accepted on the basis of the modern "look" of their interpreters. Strauss invites readers to understand the texts on their own, without the aid of traditional explanations. To make it clearer, he tried to prove the non-existence of the metaphysical interpretation of the extraterrestrial character of Plato's Ideas (without much success) or Aristotle's teleology, arguing that such a thing simply could not be believed by the modern reader (Strauss, 1988b: 44).

Strauss does not, of course, reject the Platonic theory of Ideas, but utilizes it when it suits him. He believes that ideas are not outside the world and the state, that they are not metaphysical entities, but symbolic references to the permanent and fundamental problems of humanity (Strauss, 1988: 39). Strauss claims that Plato refers to these problems through the language of symbolism, so as to emphasize their unhistorical character. In contrast to the proponents of modern political philosophy who historicize the problems of mankind, Strauss ahistorizes them and finds an "ally" for this in Plato, who –through his ideas– also ahistorizes the permanent problems that make up the whole, that is, the state (Strauss, 1999: 32-33, 1988: 229, 1987: 50-51). In this ideological context, classical philosophy emerges similarly, in an ahistorical systematic investigation of ideas-problems, which are perceived in the same ahistorical way.

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For Strauss, philosophy is about all that knowledge that no one knows in advance. It is the system that illuminates the "road" to communicate the fundamental human problems and to find the appropriate solutions and the appropriate answers, which essentially arise simultaneously with knowledge. Nothing in philosophy, as defined by the classical thinkers Plato and Aristotle, is historicized, that is, known in advance, but it is left to the people-readers to discover, recognize and solve it at the same time. Whatever is presented as a definite or standard solution in philosophy implies that a serious danger of dogmatism arises. For Strauss (1999: 32), wisdom cannot be given, limited, defined, but it should always be understood in a state of search, to occur at the same time as the awareness-awareness of the problem it is called to face, to manage. Therefore, wisdom in its modern sense, as defined, can only be dogmatic and thus constitute dogmatism.

**4. OPINION VS KNOWLEDGE AND PHENOMENOLOGY**

In real philosophy, as Strauss perceives it –that is, the ahistorical– which emerges from the classical thought of Plato and Aristotle, the search for wisdom that leads to the understanding of problems is more essential than simply discovering a solution to them. Strauss appears in direct opposition to the philosophers' conception that they possess objective truth or do not have objective answers or solutions to problems. On the contrary, he argues that the philosopher should by all means expand his capacity when his subjective (let alone objective) certainty is projected as stronger than the realization of the problematic dimension of the solution he proposes (Strauss, 2000: 196). In this context, the real philosopher should not have a definite image of himself, of what he believes he is, of the knowledge or wisdom he theoretically possesses. Strauss's conception of the philosopher and philosophy is directly related to how he interprets Platonic and Aristotelian thought: as a basis for proving that philosophy is an opinion, in particular, a movement amongst alternative propositions that are taken for granted, one-sided or exclusive. For this reason, he expels from Platonic and Aristotelian thought everything metaphysical, anything that is defined on an extraterrestrial level and is recalled as objective certainty that provides standardized solutions to problems. For example, an opinion that challenges the decisions of a state's leadership is essentially a philosophical act that reveals nature as it exists in classical texts in its pre-modern form, as it urges humanity to consider these decisions in the context of a perpetual reality, i.e. of nature (Strauss, 1999: 83-93).

Platonic and Aristotelian texts enable Strauss to propose as much as possible a philosophical and phenomenological realization, understanding, awareness, based on sound reason and not on an empirical technicism that defines and standardizes (Strauss, 1988: 86). The philosopher is not cut off from the world and, on the contrary, whenever he expresses his opinion on things, he is reduced to a carrier of non-subjective knowledge. The problems, which in the Platonic universe, according to Strauss, are ideas, are within the world and not outside it, so the philosopher cannot be limited to static knowledge, but expresses opinions and is in a state of search for truth. Just as Socrates constantly wonders, so does modern man, as any other philosopher, can constantly ask, express opinions, and transcend standardized and unchanging knowledge, as it characterizes modern wisdom, of all problems: human or not, earthly or not, existential or not (Strauss, 1978: 19). These emerge as natures, individual or complex, as phenomenological realities and not as metaphysical causes, just as Strauss perceives Platonic ideas (1989: 141-142, 1988: 39-40, 1978: 19). The nature of problems perceived as phenomenological realities cannot be conceived as an unchanging synthesis consisted by individual natures, therefore it cannot constitute an unchanging object of subjective thought. This means that, according to Strauss, the philosopher can ignore, until he wonders, formulate opinions on phenomena, and eventually acquire knowledge about them. In this light, the philosopher philosophizes on phenomena and not on those that transcend them (Strauss, 1988: 38-39, 1978: 20-21).

Contrary to what he argues for the dogmatism of the standard, the permanent, and the predetermined, Strauss seems to adopt a more Nietzschean conception of the functioning of the state as a natural, closed community of people. He believes that it is maintained by the common commitment of its members to the legal rules. Contrary to the ideal ending of Good and Bliss, Strauss believes that achieving them on an individual level can be catastrophic for the collective whole. Aristotle paves the way for the modern philosophers: The city is natural because men tend by nature to it (Strauss, 1978: 41). The city satisfies the nature of people, which includes the inclination-the ability to bliss (Strauss, 1978: 41). According to Aristotle, people become happy, prosperous within the city, if and when they release their nature from all forms of slavery (Strauss, 1978: 41-42). The above position undoubtedly presents an ambiguity. This is because citizens who question the way their city operates, its traditions, and its system of values, mobilize in favor of guaranteeing rights, equality, freedom, and justice. In essence, they express their opinion, which is in line with the true meaning of philosophy, and therefore with the true nature. When Strauss argues that every city must be closed, operate according to defined views-laws, be conventional, he essentially accepts that it cannot be just, equal, free or fair, so it cannot be in accordance with nature (Strauss, 1978: 102, 1988: 227).

For Strauss (1978: 102) the classic texts of Plato and Aristotle constitute the epitome of sociological and psychological phenomenology inherent in the relationship between the state and the philosopher. In these, Strauss explores the equally troubling connection of philosophy with other manifestations of human activity, mainly within the state (Zuckert, 1996: 121-128). Moreover, he intends to highlight the political character of philosophy and the actions that take place within the city, as well as the thought, which exceeds both opinion and political life itself. The classic Platonic and Aristotelian works eloquently depict the interaction between life and thought, which Strauss (1978: 61-62) utilizes to highlight the conflict between "political" words and deeds.

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Everything Strauss pinpoints and highlights is what the careful modern reader can identify and understand, being also willing to bypass the traditional interpretations of these texts, which are also reproduced in the (post) modern era. The thought of the classic Plato and Aristotle, is not metaphysical, but derives and is related to human life and the problems that arise from/in it, while promoting the useful notion for Strauss that human excellence emerges as a community that acts collectively in favor of maintaining and strengthening political and moral life, perceived as phenomenological activities. In this philosophical context, the search for wisdom, and therefore for the truth, as mentioned above, is detected at the level of opinion, hence, according to Strauss, the political and moral activity that develops within the state does not initially exceed that level. Based on the classical texts, Strauss expresses the view that the state –that is, the naturally closed assemblage of people– is plagued by problems that keep the latter apart from nature, until the moment when they begin to express opinions and views, that is, until the moment that the problems are realized and at the same time solutions or answers are proposed for them.

Strauss's demand for a return to nature is rather tantamount to a return to classical political science, which implies the connection of modern and scientific political science with what is considered by modern thinkers to be "old" and "obsolete". This is none other than the Aristotelian, which is the "archetype" of the political science of "today" (Strauss, 1995: 205). He derives from Aristotelian theory the disciplinary character of politics, which completely separates from the philosophical dogmas of empiricism and logical positivism. He utilizes Aristotelian political science to persuade thinkers to search for an alternative to its modern version, in which there is no separation between values, rules, norms, and standards with the facts that actually reveal the problems of humanity. In the new political science proposed by Strauss, which is based on Platonic and Aristotelian thought, he highlights the importance of understanding and intuition of man, and therefore the importance of his experience. In this light, although, logically, he should not advocate the empirical character of political science, being himself a reader of the classical texts, instead he embraces it without a doubt (Strauss, 1995: 215). For Strauss, the political scientist is an empiricist, as he does not depend on the knowledge he gains from the study of political processes, which is based on predetermined rules and an established common sense (Strauss, 1995: 212). On the contrary, as an empiricist, the political scientist lacks common sense, challenges predetermined knowledge, wonders, and expresses opinions, "examining" carefully every source of experience related to people and things, in the current time (Strauss, 1995: 212-213). The deprivation of common sense implies that the political scientist ignores the dogmatic and constructed truths, and not the real ones (Strauss, 1995: 213).

For Strauss, Platonic and Aristotelian political philosophy represents the pre-scientific ignorance of common sense which is the springboard of empiricism and legitimizes the supremacy of thought and opinion over consciousness and knowledge (Strauss, 1995: 213). He states that he is determined to return to classical pre-science and philosophy, and calls on others to follow him, to detach themselves from the scientifically constructed "natural" world of "common sense" (Strauss, 1979). Strauss chooses for this reason the classics, and especially Aristotle, whose political philosophy he perceives as the primary form or version of "common sense" on things and problems. The notion of primacy essentially documents Strauss's aversion (1978: 12) to the predetermined knowledge that structures common (modern) logic.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The texts of Plato and Aristotle were used by Strauss so as to substantiate his proposition that philosophy does not suggest ways of acquiring knowledge, as it is not an end in itself. On the contrary, philosophy is the field of movement of dialectical processes and alternative opinions, from which problems are identified and their solutions are proposed. When philosophy produces knowledge and not opinion, it is dogmatic. Whatever it deals with does not go beyond phenomena, it does not come down to existence as conceived by the proponents of modern philosophy, it is not metaphysical. Although it starts from Platonic and Aristotelian thought, resists questioning, seeking, and reasoning on the principle of the appearance of whole phenomena which it perceives, and essentially rejects the basic interpretation of the reasoning of the classical thinkers that is placed in the hereafter. In fact, Strauss is influenced by Plato and Aristotle, whom he interprets, cut off from the philosophical tradition, stripped of any trace of historicization. The peculiarity of their re-reading lies in the fact that it places them in a completely phenomenological context leaves their metaphysics and teleology completely on the sidelines and redefines their place in the modern philosophical context (Strauss, 1946: 326-367).
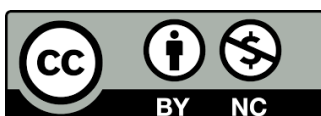
The Platonic and Aristotelian texts are approached by Strauss as classic and timeless manuals for dealing with problems, which perpetually reappear throughout history and are related to the position of the Good in subjectivity. In the age of modernity, where the crisis of nihilism is intensifying, Strauss identifies this subjectivity as technological. Undoubtedly, although the re-reading of the works of Plato and Aristotle by Strauss seems and is considered paradoxical, it gives his thought originality, but also a "legitimacy", to be included in the tradition of critique of modernity, applied by the phenomenological perspective. The attempt to connect classical Greek philosophy with modern reality, in the case of Strauss, takes on a systematizing dimension and "reveals" an alternative path of reflection for the solution of the problems that arise in modern society. However, questions arise as to how desirable, wishful, or useful a distorting reading of Plato and Aristotle is, far removed from the traditional Platonic and Aristotelian way of interpreting reality, respectively.

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Strauss, even though he displays a particular preference for Platonic thought over Aristotelian because of Socrates' dominant form, seems to use them synthetically and complementarily. This means that where "philosophy" is not completed through Plato, it is supplemented by Aristotle, who, due to the moderate metaphysical dimension of his thought, renders things in a more definite and concrete way. Strauss brings Aristotle very close to Plato and Plato to Aristotle in order to serve his goals, while at the same time he overlooks or interprets differently –and always to the satisfaction of his purposes– fundamental points of the Platonic and Aristotelian universe.

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