

On the Pedagogical Motive for Esoteric Writing

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What evidence and what arguments can be produced in support of the controversial suggestion, first made by Leo Strauss now over 65 years ago, that most earlier philosophers wrote esoterically and, what is more, that they did so, not merely from fear of persecution, but with an eye to enhancing their pedagogical effectiveness? I argue here that the inherent paradoxes of philosophical education combined with the inherent shortcomings of writing led many earlier thinkers to see the pedagogical necessity of something like the “Socratic method.” And esoteric writing—a rhetoric of riddling concealment—is the closest literary approximation to the Socratic method.

The words of the wise and their riddles

—Proverbs 1:6

The last few decades have seen a veritable explosion in hermeneutical theory. Everywhere there is a heightened consciousness of rhetoric, audience, reader response, playfulness, and other new or long forgotten issues of textual interpretation. All our Enlightenment presuppositions about the nature of writing, reading, and publication have been subjected to a searching critique. In this new world of reopened questions, the time may be ripe for a new, more considered examination of the controversial hermeneutical doctrine of Leo Strauss regarding esoteric communication.

Writing in 1811, Goethe remarked: “I have always considered it a misfortune which became more and more prevalent in the second half of the previous century, that one no longer made a distinction between the exoteric and the esoteric” (1988, 3:168 Letter to Passow, 20 Oct. 1811). For some 250 years now, Goethe suggests here, the whole intellectual and scholarly life of the west has been laboring under a peculiar misfortune: the once familiar phenomenon of esotericism has slowly been lost and forgotten.

It was Strauss’s project to remedy this problem. He argued that, prior to the rise of liberal regimes and freedom of thought in the nineteenth century, almost all great thinkers wrote esoterically: they placed their most important reflections “between the lines” of their writings, hidden behind a veneer of conventional pieties. They did so for one or more of the following

reasons: to defend themselves from persecution, to protect society from harm, to promote some positive political scheme, and to increase the effectiveness of their philosophical pedagogy.

It turns out that, once one begins to look, one finds a surprising amount of historical evidence in support of this theory. To give just a few examples here—more will follow—the famous *Encyclopedia* of Diderot makes mention of esotericism in at least 20 different articles, including one expressly devoted to the topic “Exoteric and Esoteric.” The historical ubiquity of esotericism is also reported by Condorcet (see 1955, 46, 64, 90, 108–109, 136–38) and by Rousseau, who speaks of “the distinction between the two doctrines so eagerly received by *all* the Philosophers, and by which they professed in secret sentiments contrary to those they taught publicly” (1992, 45n, emphasis added).

Two things are certain about this theory. First, if it is true, it is of the greatest importance for our understanding of the whole course of Western philosophy. Second, we are powerfully predisposed to believe that it is false.

If it is true that most earlier thinkers wrote esoterically, then obviously we had better know that. If we don’t, we risk cutting ourselves off, in one degree or another, from the genuine teaching of over two thousand years of Western philosophy. What is more, ignorance of the phenomenon of esoteric writing may even cause us to misunderstand the whole character of human thought as such, especially in its relation to politics or society. For, through the practice of

esotericism, the great minds of the past endeavored to create the impression that they were supporters of the conventional political and religious views of their age. They used all their genius, in effect, to convince their (non-esoteric) readers that even their highest philosophical reflections always remained captive of the prevailing order. Thus, if one surveys the record of past philosophical writing without awareness of its esoteric character, one will necessarily and systematically misconstrue the relation of human thought to politics—or of reason to history, theory to practice—seeing every mind as merely the prisoner of its times. The result will be what in fact we see everywhere in the recent explosion of hermeneutical theory: the radical politicization or historicization of thought.¹

Yet, the grave importance of the subject notwithstanding, the dominant reaction to the theory of esotericism has been a powerful, almost visceral inclination to dismiss it out of hand. For one thing, it would greatly complicate the task of textual interpretation and, through that complexity, also lead to a world of abuses. It constitutes, in the words of one critic, an open invitation to “perverse ingenuity” (Sabine 1953, 220). Furthermore, it involves attributing to great thinkers of the past a degree of elitism and secretiveness that strikes the contemporary mind as both immoral and childish—and so highly improbable.

To the charge that esoteric interpretation will open the door to perverse ingenuity, one can only reply: indeed it will. It must. It already has. And if the present study is successful in winning broader recognition for the necessity of this manner of reading, it will surely contribute to an increase in the number of bad esoteric interpretations—that being the price to be paid for a few good ones. But it is also fair to say, I believe, that virtually all of the new hermeneutical theories now in fashion are invitations to perverse ingenuity—some of them far more so than the theory of esotericism.² Indeed, from this standpoint, the latter theory has at least one very great advantage over all of its rivals: it is not simply rooted in theory. It is partially susceptible of empirical proof—as I intend to show here—through reference to a large body of explicit testimony by writers of the past.

¹There is therefore a strong connection between Strauss’s rediscovery of esotericism and another major theme of his thought: his attack on what he calls “historicism” or cultural relativism. See Melzer 2006.

²For an insightful comparison of the theory of esotericism with other contemporary hermeneutical doctrines, see Cantor 1991.

But, be all of that as it may, the primary response to the above objections must be this: the issue is not whether one *likes* the theory of esotericism or its possible effects on scholarship (still less, whether one likes Strauss or his students) but whether, in fact, it is true. And if, for a variety of reasons, we do have a deep-seated aversion to the very idea of esotericism, that only shows how much we must distrust—and resist—our instincts here.

The contemporary mind, for example, is indeed deeply suspicious of the elitism and secretiveness involved in the practice of esotericism. Yet this same mind is also uniquely multicultural, steeped in the appreciation of historical and cultural differences, and therefore it is—or should be—keenly aware of how the dominant certainties of our time can easily mislead us regarding how people thought and acted in the past. It is obvious, for example, that our democratic age regards as unacceptably elitist all sorts of practices that were not viewed as such in former times.

Similarly, today we cherish the “open society” where the whole phenomenon of secrecy and concealment is fundamentally suspect in ways that it was not in the past. We practice a morality, an epistemology, even a metaphysics of democratic openness, attributing the highest value, the truest knowledge, and the greatest reality to that which is public, disclosed, and available to all. In politics we seek “transparency,” in business “publicity,” in academics “publication.” And as to our personal lives, we live in an increasingly expressive society, a sincerity culture, where people disclose their hearts to strangers on a plane or on live television. Conditioned by this environment, it is very difficult for us to grasp that, for example, in many earlier societies, indeed in much of contemporary India and Japan, husbands and wives, parents and children can pass their whole lives without ever once openly declaring: “I love you.” We are profoundly estranged from the strong traditional inclination for reserve and concealment—just as we find it hard to relate to the inegalitarian attitudes of earlier times.

For these reasons—and still others that will soon emerge—we must make a special effort to escape the limiting conditions of our times and approach this subject with real historical sympathy and tact. To reconnect with this forgotten practice will require a sustained act of recollection and recovery in which the hidden attitudes and assumptions of the present will be as much an object as those of the past.

Of the four motives for (or species of) esotericism mentioned above, we have the least difficulty understanding the fear of persecution. Virtually no one denies the existence of past persecution or, in the face

of it, the usefulness and legitimacy of dissimulation. We have greater problems with the idea of employing esoteric deception to protect society from “dangerous truths”—do such things really exist?—or to promote some political scheme—can this ever be legitimate?

But by far the hardest case for us to relate to is the fourth: the pedagogical motive. At least with the other forms of esotericism, writers resort to concealment only as a necessary evil: they reluctantly obscure their meaning to ward off some unintended consequence of the act of writing—persecution, subversion, or political noncooperation. But with pedagogical esotericism, the writer actually embraces concealment and obscurity (of the right kind) as a positive good and as something essential to the primary purpose of his act of writing: philosophical education. He or she embraces obscurity as necessary for effective communication!

This positive valuation of obscurity is what we find hardest to understand—and to stomach. Thus, in reexamining esotericism (and the sources of our resistance to it), it will be useful to begin by exploring this, the hardest case. Moreover, as the most alien to our way of thinking, it also potentially has the most to teach us.

The Modern Ethic of Literalness and Clarity

In view of our deep-seated resistance, let us begin by stating openly our current instincts on this subject. That is easily done: we find obscurity hateful. To be sure, there are fields that are so inherently difficult and counterintuitive—say contemporary astrophysics—that a fair amount of obscurity is unavoidable. The thing that we hate is *voluntary* obscurity. In almost all such cases, the source of unclarity is a desire to appear wiser than one is, to surround oneself with a cultish air of mystery or profundity, and to shelter oneself from criticism. Voluntary obscurity arises from vanity at best, charlatanry at worst. Therefore, all decent and serious thinkers will strive to speak as clearly, openly, and directly as possible. They will say exactly what they mean. There is simply no valid excuse for anything else.

That is what we want to say, especially we in the Anglo-American world, where philosophy is viewed as something that is—or at least ought to be—an exact and rigorous matter that should not stoop to “rhetoric,” ambiguity, or multivocal speech of any kind. We proudly stand by an ethic of literalness and clarity.

Yet, as obvious and noncontroversial as this attitude may seem to us, historically speaking, it is quite

rare. In *The Flight from Ambiguity*, the distinguished sociologist Donald Levine writes: “The movement against ambiguity led by Western intellectuals since the seventeenth century figures as a unique development in world history. There is nothing like it in any premodern culture known to me” (1985, 21). This remarkable transformation of our intellectual culture was produced by a variety of factors, but most obviously by the rise of the modern scientific paradigm of knowledge which encouraged the view that, in all fields, intellectual progress required the wholesale reform of language and discourse, replacing ordinary parlance with an artificial, technical, univocal mode of communication (see Levine 1985, 2–8, 37–38).

To be sure, we are not unaware that earlier ages had very different instincts in this matter. We all somehow know that as soon as one ventures beyond the narrow shores of our modern world—whether one looks to the ancient Greeks and Romans or to the Bible and the Koran or to the traditional societies of the East, of Africa, and of Native America—virtually everywhere one finds the same thing: “The words of the wise and their riddles.” It is the characteristic way of the wise to speak indirectly, to talk in figures, proverbs, and puzzles. All the sages of premodern cultures seem to share a belief in the ineffectiveness of open statements, the superficiality of direct communication. Wisdom, it seems, would not be so rare and difficult a thing if it could simply be “told” by one person to another.

But, while aware of this view, we are inclined to dismiss it as primitive, irrational, and superstitious. Therefore, it is important to recall that classical rationalism—as distinguished from the Enlightenment variant—regarded the issue of whether wisdom is teachable at all as a central and open question. In Plato’s *Protagoras* (319a–20c), for example, we see Socrates arguing that wisdom and virtue cannot be taught (although they can be learned). There are profound limits, this great teacher held, to what one human being can explain to another. Somehow, philosophical education is inherently problematic.

Compounding this difficulty, classical thinkers were also very much preoccupied with the problem of writing. Can books ever be useful for such education or must all genuinely philosophical instruction be oral and personal? In Plato’s *Phaedrus*, this question was answered firmly in the negative by Socrates—who, like Pythagoras before him, eschewed philosophical writing altogether. And even Plato himself expressed serious doubts on this score in his *Seventh Letter* (341c–e, 343a, 344c–345a). Again, Thomas Aquinas in

explaining the fact that Jesus too did not write, argued that the most excellent teachers must follow the practice of Pythagoras and Socrates, for “Christ’s doctrine . . . cannot be expressed in writing” (1981, 3:2243 [pt. III, q. 42, art. 4]). In short, classical (and medieval) rationalism endorsed and explored the profound intuition—found everywhere outside the modern West—that the whole enterprise of using books for the transmission of philosophic wisdom is an extraordinarily difficult (and possibly futile) undertaking that, when pursued, requires rhetorical techniques extending well beyond the contemporary canon of direct communication, of literalness and clarity.

Our tendency to insist that philosophy should just be a matter of propositions and arguments and that it must always lay out its findings in a clear and rigorous manner—as in a contemporary journal of analytic philosophy—would ultimately seem to stem from the hyperrationalist assumption, inherited from the Enlightenment, that human beings can be addressed as rationalists seeking the truth.

But, as the tradition of classical rationalism emphasized, we may be “rational animals” in that we possess the faculty of reason, but we are hardly born-rationalists. Rather, we are born in “the cave.” Illusion has very powerful roots within us, both social and psychological. We are moved by a host of passions, most of which are in tension with the love of truth. Thus, the primary aim of philosophic education must be less to instruct than to convert, less to elaborate a philosophical system than to produce that “turning around of the soul” (in Plato’s phrase) that brings individuals to love and live for the truth. But precisely if the *end* of education is to foster the love of truth, this love cannot be presupposed in the *means*. The means must rather be based on a resourceful pedagogical rhetoric that, knowing how initially resistant or impervious we all are to philosophic truth, necessarily makes use of motives other than love of truth and of techniques other than “saying exactly what you mean.” That is why, for example, the earlier, classical tradition of rationalism recognized the inescapable need to speak in philosophical poems and dialogues as well as treatises.

In sum, the modern ethic of literalness and clarity—at least in the view of most earlier ages—is plainly too narrow and dogmatic. To be sure the bad use of obscurity and concealment—which is 90% of it—remains hateful. But there really is a good use. The good use—pedagogical esotericism—is made necessary by two sets of problems: the natural difficulties of philosophic education and the inherent shortcomings of writing.

What, then, are these difficulties? A brief examination of the obstacles to a philosophical education that is conveyed through books will put us in a position to see why esoteric concealment has often been embraced as the solution.

Three Dangers of Reading

The invention of writing brought epochal changes to human civilization—most of them good. But books also made possible a whole host of intellectual vices and distortions unknown to preliterate, oral societies. With respect to philosophy, there is a real danger that, in the words of Voltaire, “the multitude of books is making us ignorant.” In a variety of ways, “book knowledge” is the death of philosophy—so much so, that a “philosophy book” is almost a contradiction in terms.

A book is a strange and unseemly thing. It delivers into one person’s hands the distilled essence of another’s thinking. It gives one things one has not earned. That is the core difficulty from which all the more specific problems flow, as we will see. And that is why the solution to all of these problems will involve some form of esotericism: some effort to give away less and to make the reader work more for what he or she is getting.

The first danger of reading books is that it allows you to skip too many stages, shortcutting the proper intellectual development. Especially harmful is that it prevents the humble confrontation with your own ignorance. Reading makes you prematurely wise. Before you have had a chance to face the questions and live with them a while, you have seen the answers. Books give a false sense of knowledge and sophistication based on borrowed wisdom, on the belief that you know what you have only read. Thus, they rob you of the proper state of mind for true education. As Socrates argues in the *Phaedrus* (275 a-b)—putting these words in the mouth of an Egyptian god, Thamus, who is rebuking the inventor of writing—through writing “you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction, and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant.” Plato himself gives this same explanation when he asserts, in the *Seventh Letter* (341e), that he has not and would not ever commit to writing an open statement of his deepest thoughts. Reading such an account, he explains, would not help people but rather fill them with “a lofty and vain expectation that they have learned some impressive things.” The false presumption of wisdom, which is generated by books,

presents the greatest obstacle to the acquisition of the real thing. Whence the inner logic of Milton's description: "Deep versed in books and shallow in himself" (1968, bk iv, line 327: 389).

This same problem is elaborated very powerfully in *Emile*, Rousseau's book on education: "I hate books. They only teach one to talk about what one does not know." And again: "Too much reading only serves to produce presumptuous ignoramuses." The key point is that bookish presumptuousness is what makes people ignoramuses. "The abuse of books kills science. Believing that we know what we have read, we believe that we can dispense with learning it" (Rousseau 1979, 184, 450). Intellectual humility and the keen sense of our ignorance are the necessary starting points for genuine philosophical development; therefore, books—even as they transmit brilliant philosophical insights—undercut philosophy at its root.

The most obvious way for an author to counteract this danger is to scrupulously avoid handing the reader any clear and ready-made answers. One might also go further: make a point of including in one's books enough difficulty and obscurity to humble the reader and force him to confront his ignorance. Friedrich Schleiermacher, the nineteenth-century German philosopher, theologian, and classical scholar, attributes precisely such a rhetorical strategy to Plato. In his *Dialogues*, the latter sought to "bring the still ignorant reader nearer to a state of knowledge"; but Plato also clearly recognized the very great necessity "of being cautious with regard to him not to give rise to an empty and conceited notion of his own knowledge in his mind."

[Therefore, it] must have been the philosopher's chief object to conduct every investigation in such a manner from the beginning onwards, as that he might reckon upon the reader's either being driven to an inward and self-originated creation of the thought in view, or submitting to surrender himself most decisively to the feeling of not having discovered or understood anything. To this end, then, it is requisite that the final object of the investigation be not directly enunciated and laid down in words, a process which might very easily serve to entangle many persons who are glad to rest content, provided only they are in possession of the final result, but that the mind be reduced to the necessity of seeking, and put into the way by which it may find it. The first is done by the mind's being brought to so distinct a consciousness of its own state of ignorance, that it is impossible it should willingly continue therein. The other is effected either by an enigma being woven out of contradictions, to which the only possible solution is to be found in the thought in view, and often several hints thrown out in a way apparently utterly foreign and accidental which can only be found and understood by one who does really investigate with an

activity of his own. Or the real investigation is overdrawn with another, not like a veil, but, as it were, an adhesive skin, which conceals from the inattentive reader, and from him alone, the matter which is to be properly considered or discovered, while it only sharpens and clears the mind of an attentive one to perceive the inward connection. (1836, 17–18)

This kind of esoteric artfulness is essential, according to Schleiermacher, to avoid the first danger of reading.

But book learning thwarts philosophic education not only by fostering a false presumption of wisdom but also an enfeebling passivity. "Much reading is an oppression of the mind," remarks William Penn (1808, Chap 2, para. 19), "and extinguishes the natural candle, which is the reason of so many senseless scholars in the world." As Montaigne (1958, I.25:101) puts it: "We let ourselves lean so heavily on the arms of others that we annihilate our own powers." The same point is made by Schopenhauer:

When we read, another person thinks for us: we merely repeat his mental process. . . . So it comes about that if anyone spends almost the whole day in reading . . . he gradually loses the capacity for thinking; just as the man who always rides, at last forgets how to walk. This is the case with many learned persons: they have read themselves stupid. (1899, 51)

The solution to this problem is to be found, once again, in employing a salutary obscurity that does not allow the readers passively to rely on the writer's thinking, but forces them to think for themselves. Thus, Thomas Aquinas, in considering the question of why the Bible often uses veiled, metaphorical language, remarks: "The very hiding of truth in figures is useful for the exercise of thoughtful minds" (1981, I:6: [pt 1, qu.1, art 9]). Augustine (1995, 4.61:223) makes the same point: the disciples "have spoken with a helpful and healthy obscurity in order to exercise and somehow refine their readers' minds." Similarly, Sallustius, the fourth-century Neo-Platonist, in discussing why the Greeks shrouded their religious teachings in myth, remarks:

There is this first benefit from myths, that we have to search and do not have our minds idle. . . . To wish to teach the whole truth about the Gods to all produces contempt in the foolish, because they cannot understand, and lack of zeal in the good; whereas to conceal the truth by myths prevents the contempt of the foolish, and compels the good to practice philosophy. (1925, 242–43)

Somewhat similar is Rousseau's description of his writing style in the preface to the *Letter to M. d'Alembert*. In this book—which he identifies as a popular work as distinguished from his other, philosophical writings, addressed to the few—he states: "I do not speak here to the few but to the public, nor do

I attempt to make others think but rather to explain my thought clearly. Hence, I had to change my style” (1960, 6). In a striking reversal of our own attitudes toward writing, Rousseau sets up here a strict disjunction between “making others think”—the task of his philosophical books—and “explaining my thought clearly”—the job of his merely popular writings. To get others to think, one must carefully avoid doing everything for them. A famous statement by Montesquieu—which may have been in the back of Rousseau’s mind—expresses the same idea: “One must not always so exhaust a subject that one leaves nothing for the reader to do. It is not a question of making him read but of making him think” (1989, 11.20:186).

Still another danger of reading, closely related to that of mental passivity, is the development of an excessive trust and dependence on the author. Books—with their steadfast endurance over time, their unwavering repetition of the identical words and thoughts, and even (since Gutenberg) the more-than-human regularity of their type—inspire a kind of reverence. Writing has a tendency to become “scripture.” We undergo a curious distortion of the mind whereby we come to look for truth in books, not in the world. We replace thinking with reading. This is especially true when studying the great philosophers. To quote Montaigne:

We know how to say: “Cicero says thus; such are the morals of Plato; these are the very words of Aristotle.” But what do we say ourselves? What do we judge? What do we do? A parrot could well say as much. (1958, I.25:100)

Cicero clearly describes the problem—as well as his particular solution:

Those who seek to learn my personal opinion on the various questions [of philosophy] show an unreasonable degree of curiosity. In discussion it is not so much weight of authority as force of argument that should be demanded. Indeed, the authority of those who profess to teach is often a positive hindrance to those who desire to learn; they cease to employ their own judgement, and take what they perceive to be the verdict of their chosen master as settling the question (1961, I.v: 13).

As he goes on to describe here, Cicero’s solution was to frustrate the reader’s “unreasonable degree of curiosity” by ensuring that his own final position remained unclear. He did so by composing his philosophical writings in the form of dialogues or of treatises that merely surveyed the arguments of the various schools.

In sum, there is an inherent tension between philosophy and books. The philosophical writer stands in

danger of harming his readers in the very act of trying to help them, by fostering an unhealthy presumption, passivity, and dependence.

The Paradox of Philosophical Education

But this characterization of the problem of writing—along with the general solution: refraining from a full and open statement of one’s thought—does not quite get at the deepest level of the problem. For, philosophical education requires not merely that one avoid discouraging the reader in these three ways from employing his own mind, but that one positively motivate him to think and, above all, to think authentically and for himself. One must somehow induce in him a new level of awakesness, inner-directedness, and self-ownership. But how can a book or even a live teacher do that? The central paradox of philosophical education, whether in writing or in person, is this: how can one transmit to others something that can never genuinely be given from without, but only generated from within? For that is of the essence of philosophy: it can never be done for you. It is our “ownmost” activity: you must do it all for yourself or you haven’t done it at all.

This is the case for a number of related reasons. By definition, philosophy aims, not at “right opinion,” but “knowledge”: not simply at possessing correct answers but at knowing how and why they are correct. It aims at truths the origin and grounding of which one completely understands. Thus, it does not help—it is often a hindrance—to be given the answers from the outside, when the essential thing is to begin at the beginning and reenact their discovery by and for oneself.

But this rediscovery, furthermore, is not simply a matter of retracing the logical sequence of arguments. For, the “knowledge” at which philosophy aims is not purely intellectual or academic—like book knowledge. One must feel these truths from the inside, make them one’s own, and live them. The rediscovery, then, must start from one’s own personal perplexity, draw upon one’s own lived experience, and make use of the inner activity of one’s own powers of reasoning and realization. Amid all the far-ranging ventures of one’s thinking, one must maintain the concrete and vital connection of thought to life. In other words, “thinking for oneself” means not only that it is oneself that does the thinking but that one thinks for one’s own case, thinks from out of one’s own care, future, and fate.

Finally, it is only thinking for oneself in this deeply personal sense that produces a real and transformative

effect upon the soul. It is only in this way that one undergoes what Plato speaks of as definitive of the truly philosophic life: a “turning around of the soul,” a fundamental reorientation of the objects of one’s longing and the manner of one’s being.

If this is the character of genuine philosophy, then it really *is* an open question whether it is teachable. Wisdom cannot be told. The central paradox of philosophical pedagogy, to say it again, is: how can one transmit from the outside what can only grow from within? Is there something that one can do for a person that will somehow make him do everything for himself?

This is the problem that the “Socratic method” (as we have come to call it) is intended to address. It has at least four elements, all of them making use of “esotericism” in one sense or another. The first, which we have now seen over and over again, is the negative imperative: Do not give away the answers. The Socratic teacher leaves the most important things unsaid or at least unclear. Yet, second, there is also something positive that the teacher or writer can do: he can stimulate the student to think for himself—while subtly guiding that thinking—by making artful use of questions, hints, and puzzles of the right kind.

But, third, for this thinking and questioning to maintain an authentic connection to the student’s life, it must be *dialectical*. This means (among many things) that it must take its start from where the student is, from what he believes right now, and proceed through an internal critique. One cannot begin abstractly—from first principles or from a general statement of the big questions—if the student is truly to think for himself, with his own life on the line. For, he does not begin as a blank slate. Whatever may be the situation at birth, by the time a student is old enough to be thinking about philosophical questions, he is already fully immersed in a world of beliefs and answers. He is trapped in a cave of illusions. Thus, his education must begin by lighting up and then questioning the things that he already believes, the foundations of the life that he is already living. He cannot jump out of his skin and make a new beginning: he must start from the inside and slowly, painstakingly work his way out.

But people draw their initial beliefs primarily from the worldview of their particular society. It follows, then, that a writer who seeks to educate philosophically through Socratic dialectics must make a special effort to enter sympathetically into the received opinions of his time and place—though he may consider them false—while pointing quietly to certain puzzles or contradictions within those opinions. This

means that the demands of philosophical pedagogy largely parallel those of the defensive and protective motives for esotericism. On the surface of his writings, a philosophical author will embrace the views prevailing in his time not only to defend himself from persecution and to protect society from harm, but also to help the student to begin his philosophical reflections from what, for him, is the necessary beginning point.

This idea is well-expressed by Kierkegaard, who goes so far as to call it “the secret of the art of helping others.” In *The Point of View for my Work as an Author*, an autobiographical essay devoted to explaining his technique of writing, he states:

One can deceive a person for the truth’s sake, and (to recall old Socrates) one can deceive a person into the truth. Indeed it is only by this means, i.e., by deceiving him, that it is possible to bring into the truth one who is in an illusion. Whoever rejects this opinion betrays the fact that he is not over-well versed in dialectics, and that is precisely what is especially needed when operating in this field. . . . Direct communication presupposes that the receiver’s ability to receive is undisturbed. But here such is not the case; an illusion stands in the way. . . . What then does it mean ‘to deceive?’ It means that one does not begin directly with the matter one wants to communicate, but begins by accepting the other man’s illusion as good money. (1962, 39–40)

This is necessary because “if real success is to attend the effort to bring a man to a definite position, one must first of all take pains to find him where he is and begin there. This is the secret of the art of helping others” (1962, 27).³

A fourth element of the Socratic method—actually, just a further aspect of its dialectical character—is that a proper philosophical education must proceed in *stages*. Just as education must begin

³Kierkegaard also adds here a related but different argument for the necessity of concealment and indirection:

No, an illusion can never be destroyed directly, and only by indirect means can it be radically removed. . . . A direct attack only strengthens a person in his illusion, and at the same time embitters him. There is nothing that requires such gentle handling as an illusion, if one wishes to dispel it. If anything prompts the prospective captive to set his will in opposition, all is lost. And this is what a direct attack achieves, and it implies moreover the presumption of requiring a man to make to another person, or in his presence, an admission which he can make most profitably to himself in private. This is what is achieved by the indirect method, which, loving and serving the truth, arranges everything dialectically for the prospective captive, and then shyly withdraws (for love is always shy), so as not to witness the admission which he makes to himself alone before God—that he has lived hitherto in an illusion. (1962, 24–26)

The point Kierkegaard makes here—that a refined and delicate modesty is often what stands behind the practice of esotericism—is extremely important for us since it helps to counteract our strong tendency to recoil from esotericism as something inevitably rooted in exclusiveness and arrogance.

by addressing the student where he is, so, as he learns and changes, it must stay with him. The internal or dialectical critique of received opinion does not take place in a single stroke, but in a series of successive approximations to the truth, each of which will seem in its time to be the final one. The student must not be encouraged to race through these stages to the end, but on the contrary to settle down and live with each for a while, so that he has the time to truly take it in and absorb it—and to allow it to transform him. Our lives do not change as quickly as our thoughts. If the student tries to move too fast, he leaves his life behind, and his thinking becomes purely intellectual. He ceases to believe what he thinks and think what he believes. Tempo is everything. Prematurity—showing the student more than he is ready to understand or digest at the moment—is the great wrecker of educations. As Rousseau remarks in *Emile*, “never show the child anything he cannot see.” Again: the child “must remain in absolute ignorance of ideas . . . which are not within his reach. My whole book is only a constant proof of this principle of education” (1979, 183, 178).

This principle—the need for proper tempo and stages, adjusted to the individual characteristics of the student, so that his thinking remains firmly rooted in his own experience and life—is why a perfect education would require what is depicted in *Emile*: a philosopher devoting himself full-time to the raising and education of a single student from birth. While this is hardly to be expected in practice, it highlights what is so terribly problematic about books: they are impersonal and fixed, saying the same thing to everyone regardless of their state of readiness. That indeed is Socrates’ primary objection to writing as stated in the *Phaedrus* (275d-e). To the extent that there is a solution to this problem, it lies, once again, in esotericism—in writing on two or even more levels—so that the same book will say different things to different people, or to the same person at different times, depending on their stage of understanding.

To promote a genuinely philosophical education, in sum, it is necessary to write esoterically in at least four ways—to withhold the answers, to begin by embracing received opinion, to guide the reader by way of hints and riddles, and to address the different stages of understanding by writing on multiple levels.

The Rhetorical Effect of Obscurity

In order to clarify and extend some of the preceding points—especially the core assumption that obscurity can and should be used as a stimulus to genuine

thought—let us take up an obvious objection. Even if it is true that one hinders philosophic education in various ways by telling a student too much, still doesn’t one hinder it even more by saying too little? A writer who hides what he knows and fills his book with stumbling blocks will only frustrate and discourage the reader. Nobody denies that a pedagogically effective writing must above all stimulate the mind to its own efforts, but nothing is more deadening than obscurity.

When it is pointless and impenetrable, obscurity is indeed deadening. But the right kind of obscurity—the kind that, with the proper effort, can be deciphered and penetrated—turns out, in fact, to be the greatest stimulus to thought. Everyone loves a secret. Mystery is alluring. Hide something and we will seek it. This simple fact is the first premise of all pedagogical esotericism.

It is a fact that has been noticed throughout the ages. Jesus—who hides his thought in parables—gives this famous literary advice: “Do not give dogs what is holy; and do not throw your pearls before swine” (*Matthew* 7:6). The medieval *Glossa Ordinaria* on this passage elaborates: “What is hidden is more eagerly sought after; what is concealed appears more worthy of reverence; what is searched for longer is more dearly prized” (quoted by Thomas Aquinas 1987, art. 4:52). Similarly, St. Augustine remarks: “Lest the obvious should cause disgust, the hidden truths arouse longing; longing brings on certain renewal; renewal brings sweet inner knowledge” (1953, vol. 3, letter 137: 34). Again, according to Nietzsche:

The misfortune suffered by clear-minded and easily understood writers is that they are taken for shallow and thus little effort is expended on reading them: and the good fortune that attends the obscure is that the reader toils at them and ascribes to them the pleasure he has in fact gained from his own zeal. (1986, vol. I, chap 4, aph 181:92)

Clement of Alexandria, in a chapter of his *Stromata* entitled “Reasons for Veiling the Truth in Symbols,” observes that “all things that shine through a veil show the truth grander and more imposing; as fruits shining through water, and figures through veils” (1869, bk 5, chap IX: 254–55). In short, the objection stated above has the rhetorical situation exactly backwards: the right kind of obscurity is far more intellectually stimulating than is a plain and explicit statement. As Augustine puts it:

All those truths which are presented to us in figures tend, in some manner, to nourish and arouse the flame of love . . . and they stir and enkindle love better than if they were set before us unadorned, without any symbolism

of mystery. It is hard to explain the reason for this; nevertheless, it is true that any doctrine suggested under an allegorical form affects and pleases us more, and is more esteemed, than one set forth explicitly in plain words. (1953, vol 3, letter 55:277)

It may indeed be unfortunate, but surely that is how it is.

Yet, once it is conceded that hiddenness and obscurity of the right kind do indeed have this stimulating power, one may go on to raise an opposite objection to their use in philosophical pedagogy. For, if it should turn out that this stimulating power ultimately stems from irrational or immature impulses, one would hardly want to encourage it in serious writing. This would seem to be the real objection of those who hate the idea of pedagogical obscurity: not that such writing is too deadening but too exciting in the wrong way, that it appeals to people's primitive, childish and easily abused enchantment with secrets and mysteries. A proper education should endeavor to make people mature, sober, and clear-minded. Are we really to believe that the best means that the greatest minds of the past could find to educate people to rationality was to exploit their adolescent fantasies about buried treasure?

The question thus becomes: what is the true source of obscurity's rhetorical power? Is it simply childish? How does it work? And is there a legitimate role for it in a literature of philosophic rationality? Without aspiring to an exhaustive treatment of this complex subject, let us focus on three elements of obscurity's appeal.

Obscurity and Reader Involvement

The first and least controversial of these is that by withholding the answers and speaking in hints and riddles the esoteric text constrains the reader to think for himself. We have already seen that thinking for oneself is philosophically essential; the further point here is that it is a strong stimulant, a powerful source of motivation and encouragement for the reader. As Nietzsche has just put it, "the reader toils at [obscure writings] and ascribes to them the pleasure he has in fact gained from his own zeal."

This is not true, of course, for every reader or perhaps even for most—not for those who would rather be told the answers. But "if you have to be told everything, do not read me," Rousseau declares (for "if you have to be told, how will you understand it?") (1979, 137, 111). That is the unstated maxim of all esoteric texts. As Jean d'Alembert, in his *Analysis of the Spirit of the Laws*, states regarding the famous obscu-

rity of Montesquieu's work: "We will say of the obscurity that can be permitted in such a work, the same thing we said about the lack of order; what would be obscure for vulgar readers is not for those whom the author had in view" (1822, vol. 3:450–51; quoted and translated by Pangle 1973, 12). To understand the workings of esoteric rhetoric, one must appreciate that it is a frankly elitist practice. It is narrowly designed for a specific and relatively rare kind of reader: those who love to think, those who, from an early age, could always be heard to say "now wait . . . don't tell me." In a variety of ways, such readers will be stimulated by the puzzles the text poses: they will feel energized by the exercise of their faculties, feel pride in the progress of their understanding, and joy in the powerful sense of insight that accompanies a discovery one has made for oneself.

If this is a correct description, then it seems fair to say that there is nothing immature or irrational in the power of obscurity to generate philosophical motivations such as these. Indeed, it is a power that has been noted, praised, and employed by a long line of thinkers. Nietzsche, that master of the coy and aphoristic style, speaks of:

The effectiveness of the incomplete.—Just as figures in relief produce so strong an impression on the imagination because they are as it were on the point of stepping out of the wall but have suddenly been brought to a halt, so the relief-like, incomplete presentation of an idea, of a whole philosophy, is sometimes more effective than its exhaustive realization: more is left for the beholder to do, he is impelled to continue working on that which appears before him so strongly etched in light and shadow, to think it through to the end (1986, vol I, chap 4, aph 178:92).

Montesquieu alluded to this same "effectiveness of the incomplete" in his famous remark quoted above: "One must not always so exhaust a subject that one leaves nothing for the reader to do. It is not a question of making him read but of making him think." Indeed, Montesquieu's artful incompleteness was finely calculated to tantalize and please the acute reader, as was beautifully described in Hippolyte Taine's account of the *Spirit of the Laws*:

He seems to be always addressing a select circle of people with acute minds, and in such a way as to render them at every moment conscious of their acuteness. No flattery could be more delicate; we feel grateful to him for making us satisfied with our intelligence. We must possess some intelligence to be able to read him, for he deliberately curtails developments and omits transitions; we are required to supply these and to comprehend his hidden meanings. He is rigorously systematic but the system is concealed, his concise completed sentences succeeding each other separately, like so many precious cof-

fers. . . . He thinks in summaries; . . . the summary itself often bears the air of an enigma, of which the charm is twofold; we have the pleasure of comprehension accompanying the satisfaction of divining. (1876, vol. IV:260)

This statement is strikingly similar to the view of Theophrastus as approvingly described in *On Style*, a work on rhetoric attributed to the fourth-century B.C. orator Demetrius of Phaleron:

These, then, are the main essentials of persuasiveness; to which may be added that indicated by Theophrastus when he says that all possible points should not be punctiliously and tediously elaborated, but some should be left to the comprehension and inference of the hearer who when he perceives what you have omitted becomes not only your hearer but your witness, and a very friendly witness too. For he thinks himself intelligent because you have afforded him the means of showing his intelligence. It seems like a slur on your hearer to tell him everything as though he were a simpleton. (1902, bk 4:222)

Again, Rousseau in his pedagogical work *Emile* emphasizes that, for the sake of heightening the student's interest and motivation, it is vital to leave things unsaid. He criticizes modern writers like La Fontaine who place an explicit statement of the "moral" at the end of their stories.

Nothing is so vain or ill conceived as the moral with which most fables end—as if this moral were not or should not be understood in the fable itself. . . . Why, then, by adding this moral at the end, take from [the reader] the pleasure of finding it on his own? Talent at instruction consists in making the disciple enjoy the instruction. But in order for him to enjoy it, his mind must not remain so passive at everything you tell him that he has absolutely nothing to do in order to understand you. The master's *amour-propre* [pride] must always leave some hold for the disciple's; he must be able to say to himself, "I conceive, I discern, I act, I learn." . . . One must always make oneself understood, but one must not always say everything. (1979, 248)

A page later, Rousseau indicates that he has followed this pedagogical strategy himself in the composition of *Emile*, declaring: "I also do not want to say everything" (1979, 249).

The ancient writers, Rousseau emphasizes, are the true masters of this technique of energizing incompleteness. He particularly admires Thucydides' pedagogical style: "He reports the facts without judging them, but he omits none of the circumstances proper to make us judge them ourselves" (1979, 239).

The other ancient historian most famous for his brevity and obscurity is Tacitus. The specific pleasure and encouragement produced by his rhetoric is nicely described by Sir Richard Baker (1568–1645), the English historian and writer. And his point is essen-

tially the same as that made by Nietzsche, Montesquieu, Taine, Theophrastus, Demetrius, and Rousseau: Tacitus' obscurity

is pleasing to whosoever by laboring about it, findes out the true meaning; for then he counts it an issue of his owne braine, and taking occasion from these sentences to goe further than the thing he reads, and that without being deceived, he takes the like pleasure as men are wont to take from hearing metaphors, finding the meaning of him that useth them. (Baker 1642, cited by Alvarez 1961, 40)

Still another statement of the same point is made by Thomas Gordon, Tacitus' eighteenth-century English translator. Tacitus

is remarkable for a surpassing brevity. . . . He starts the Idea and leaves the Imagination to pursue it. The sample he gives you is so fine, that you are presently curious to see the whole piece, and then you have your share in the merit of the discovery; a compliment which some able Writers have forgot to pay their readers. (1770, IV:149–50; Quoted by Rahe 1992, 246)

In sum, the right kind of obscurity energizes and pleases the right kind of reader by making him active and responsible. That is a piece of "reader response theory" with a very long history.

Love of the Hidden and Reverence for the Obscure

A second general aspect of obscurity's appeal is the well-known phenomenon that whatever is veiled strikes us as more alluring and desirable. As Emily Dickinson writes (1960; quoted by Shattuck 1996, 125):

A Charm invests a face
Imperfectly beheld—
The Lady dare not lift her Veil
For fear it be dispelled

There are at least two reasons for this phenomenon. If something is completely present, available, and open to view, it gives no scope to imagination or longing. It is what it is. What you see is what you get. But whatever is partly hidden holds out a promise for more—an open promise onto which imagination is free to project all our hopes and longings. That is why it is absence that makes the heart grow fonder.

In addition, we have a natural tendency to value things by what they cost us. We despise what is too available. Obstacles arouse us and strengthen desire. Difficulty ennobles. We pursue most eagerly what is hard to get. Thus an esoteric text—suggestive and challenging, full of promises and obstacles—arouses the mind and charges it with strong hopes and vigorous striving.

Obscurity motivates and inspires the reader in still a third way when it derives not merely from an intentional coyness but from an inherent loftiness that seems to surpass our understanding. Then it overawes us and makes us feel that we are in the presence of something greater than ourselves. Thus, as the *Glossa Ordinaria* quoted above states: “what is concealed appears more worthy of reverence.” The natural rhetorical effect of this kind of obscurity is to call us to attention and inspire us with reverence, awe, and wonder.

So, are either of these latter two rhetorical effects—love of the hidden and reverence for the obscure—childish and irrational? They could not fairly be called “childish,” but they could be charged with appealing to our “irrational tendencies,” depending on one’s understanding of ultimate reality. If the “true world” is of a beauty and perfection that far transcends the sensory world, then the curious tendency of our imaginations to idealize what is hidden will come to light as a crucial divination of the truth. Similarly, if there is a God, then the reverence-inspiring tendency of scriptural obscurity is an appropriate and accurate effect that helps to put us onto the path of truth and righteousness. A more materialist or at least more skeptical thinker, on the other hand, will deny the rationality of these rhetorical effects.

But even such thinkers as find the rhetorical power of obscurity irrational may still judge that it is a legitimate and useful tool in the difficult task of philosophical pedagogy. After all, that task—the conversion to philosophy—would not be so difficult if one’s readers were already fully rational beings who could be motivated and instructed by purely rational means. In reality, one must often make artful use of the student’s irrational motives until one has succeeded in strengthening the rational ones—just as we use grades to motivate students until the hoped for time when they come to see the inherent interest or utility of the subject matter.

Furthermore, if obscurity has so strong and irrational an effect on us, that can only be because we ourselves remain irrational. Obscurity has a way of tapping into the groundless hopes and fears that we continue to harbor within us. And the best way to purge ourselves of these may well be, not to ignore them or bury them in disdain, but precisely to stimulate them, bring them out in the open, and truly work them through. Only a person fully in touch with the irrational temptations buried within him has a chance of becoming genuinely rational. For this reason too, an effective philosophical pedagogy will not necessarily shrink from—indeed, it may positively require—an

esoteric rhetoric that makes initial appeal to our irrational tendencies.

The Rhetorical Effect of the Prosaic

One last point in reply to those who would reject the pedagogical use of obscurity or indeed of any kind of rhetoric as unphilosophical: is there really an alternative? Is it *ever* possible to avoid rhetoric and its irrational effects? In practice, it seems the only real choice is between helpful and unhelpful rhetoric. The modern rationalist, the believer in literalness and clarity, holds that by writing in a dry, neutral, and rigorous manner one appeals directly to the rational faculties, without any involvement of rhetorical bias. The problem is that such a style is not really neutral, for the *prosaic too* has a powerful rhetorical effect—and not a simply rational or salutary one.

The flip side of our irrational idealization of the hidden is our irrational devaluation of the open, public, and familiar. That is the reason for what Nietzsche called above “the misfortune suffered by clear-minded and easily understood writers;” namely, that “they are taken for shallow and thus little effort is expended on reading them.” We have a curious tendency—regrettable but very powerful—to close our minds to what is open and available. It would seem that if the truth does not somehow hide from or abandon us—then we abandon it. With us, obviousness is insulting; clarity is a sign of superficiality; and familiarity breeds contempt. That is the powerful rhetorical distortion produced by the seeming avoidance of rhetoric. The open and prosaic is intellectually clear but existentially stunting: it conveys the right information but the wrong attitude; it puts the deeper reaches of the soul to sleep. It is fine for engineering, bad for philosophy. Profound ideas somehow evaporate when laid out openly for every passing eye. They become overexposed, discharged, profaned. They lose their power to move us. To maintain their potency, they need to be husbanded. “Silence is a fence around wisdom,” states Maimonides (1975, II:5:33). Indeed, Pythagoras was famous for imposing a lengthy period of silence on his students to prepare their souls for philosophy.

Many earlier thinkers were moved by this spirit of husbanding. They embraced the rhetoric of hiddenness, notwithstanding its involvement with certain irrational effects, as a necessary counterpoison to the still more irrational effects of the prosaic and open. For example, Diogenes Laertius (1925, IX.6:413), in his account of the notoriously obscure writings of Heraclitus, remarks: “according to some, he deliberately

made it the more obscure in order that none but adepts should approach it, and lest familiarity should breed contempt." We have already seen a similar remark by Augustine: "Lest the obvious should cause disgust, the hidden truths arouse longing."

Today, we have lost this instinct for husbanding. The open society is highly sensitive to the dangers of obscurity but blind to those of plainness and clarity. Ultimate reality, we seem to presuppose, is what exists in broad daylight and is accessible to everyone in their everyday mood. But many earlier thinkers saw the greatest obstacle to philosophic insight precisely in the deadening effect that the prosaic has on the soul: a kind of trivializing everydayness arising from our dispersal in the world, from our excessive garrulousness, from the grip of stale custom and convention, and from the loss of mystery, wonder, and awe.

In a number of ways, the rhetoric of hiddenness is helpful in counteracting these harmful effects of the rhetoric of clarity. It trains the spirit in the right attitude towards thought and the world. Terse and indirect communication concentrates the mind. It teaches caution, patience, delicacy, and respect. It makes every word count. At the same time, it awakens us from our sleepy everydayness, our casual contempt for the world, by showing, through its own example, that beneath the familiar and superficial there lies something mysterious and intriguing.

Finally, such writing both issues from and engenders a reverence for one's own soul and its rarer states, a sense of reserve and inwardness, a delicacy that shelters one's higher and more fragile experiences from the coarsening glare of the public as well as from the clumsiness of words and propositions. "Every choice human being," writes Nietzsche, "strives instinctively for a citadel and a secrecy where he is saved from the crowd." Again: "Whatever is profound loves masks. . . . There are occurrences of such a delicate nature that one does well to cover them up with some rudeness to conceal them" (1966, aph. 26:37, aph. 40:50). One cannot philosophize in public any more than one can make love there. Irwin Straus, the phenomenological psychologist, makes a distinction between two kinds of shame: concealing and protective. The former is the familiar impulse to conceal what is base, but the latter is the less frequently noted instinct to hide what is precious and vulnerable (1966, 217–24). Cast not your pearls before swine. Pedagogical esotericism is, among other things, a very natural manifestation of protective shame, an instinctive taste for concealing, sheltering, and husbanding our higher spiritual states. And writing that exhibits this shame also inspires it in the reader.

While it is true, then, that pedagogical obscurity often makes appeal to our irrational inclinations, a plausible case can be made that the same is true of any alternative style of exposition and that, for the right kind of reader, it is in fact the best means for promoting philosophic rationality.

The Burden of Esoteric Interpretation

One further dimension of pedagogical esotericism—and of the contemporary mind's instinctive resistance to it—will emerge from the consideration of one final objection. All the foregoing arguments notwithstanding, most people today will still find it implausible—because so plainly counterproductive—that the great philosophic writers of the past would have written esoterically for pedagogical reasons. This practice seems just too inconsistent with the practical requirements of philosophical learning. If past thinkers deliberately wrote their books in the manner suggested, they would impose on the reader the enormous burden of navigating artificial labyrinths, solving elaborate puzzles, and cracking obscure codes—and all of this effort would be needed just in order to arrive at an understanding of what the book's real argument is. The reader will then scarcely have time left to do the real business of philosophy: to examine the argument, compare it to those of other writers (who must also be interpreted esoterically), and finally decide what he himself thinks of it. The task of interpretation will squeeze out that of philosophical reflection. Even under the best of circumstances, philosophy is almost impossibly difficult. Why would anyone choose to compound the difficulty by adding to it the endless and uncertain task of esoteric interpretation? Whatever might be the advantages of esoteric pedagogy considered in the abstract, in reality it makes no sense—there is simply no *time* for it. It is believable that past thinkers were sometimes forced to write esoterically in order to avoid persecution, but that they would have also done so voluntarily in an effort precisely to *enhance* the transmission of philosophical understanding is implausible in the extreme.

There is no doubt that we feel this objection very powerfully. But we must remind ourselves that the issue is not whether we ourselves approve of and incline to practice pedagogical esotericism, but whether thinkers in the past did so. And by now we have seen a good number of explicit statements by past thinkers acknowledging and praising the use of esoteric writing for pedagogical purposes. What is perhaps even more striking in this context is that I have been unable to find *any* statements, prior to the

nineteenth century, *criticizing* esotericism for the aforementioned problem, or indeed for any other. It would seem that earlier ages were, for some reason or other, much less troubled by this problem than we are.

Leisure and Esoteric Literacy

One likely reason for this is a change of historical conditions. Today we labor under the great burden of a philosophic tradition that now stretches back 2,005 years. There are hundreds of major philosophical works to master and—since the rise of modern scholarship about 150 years ago—there are also hundreds of secondary writings devoted to each one of these primary works. Indeed, in our time, it is hardly possible to walk through the stacks of a major research library and not feel, among other things, oppressed by the crushing weight of so many books. The fact is that modern scholars find themselves in an impossible intellectual situation, which, though it is seldomly thematically discussed, conditions all of their hermeneutical instincts. It strongly inclines us to dismiss as implausible—because simply unbearable—any suggestion that would increase our already overwhelming scholarly burden.

But of course this condition of overload did not always exist. In classical times, the heyday of pedagogical esotericism, intellectual life breathed a very different air. There were many fewer thinkers and books. Nor were books written for busy scholars and university professors who were constantly driven by the pressure to publish. Free from these crushing burdens, intellectual life had a far more leisurely and focused character. And this greatly affected the whole manner in which books were written and read. As John Stuart Mill remarks:

It must be remembered that they [the Greeks and Romans] had more time, and they wrote chiefly for a select class, possessed of leisure. To us who write in a hurry for people who read in a hurry, the attempt to give an equal degree of finish would be a loss of time. (1867, 34)

We find a similar observation in Tocqueville:

One ought to remark, furthermore, that in all of antiquity books were rare and expensive, and great difficulty was experienced in reproducing them and having them circulate. These circumstances came to concentrate the taste for and use of letters in a few men, who formed almost a small literary aristocracy of the elite of a great political aristocracy. (2000, vol. 2, pt 1, chap. 15:451)

In such intellectual circumstances, Tocqueville continues, where the writer could count upon the patient,

sustained, and repeated attention of a highly cultivated reader, nothing is “done in haste or haphazardly; everything there is written for connoisseurs” (2000, vol. 2, pt 1, chap. 15:451). Books were written with extreme care to be read with extreme care. Therefore, there was no ingrained resistance—such as we feel very strongly today—to the very idea that a book should deliberately impose on the reader a significant interpretive burden.

On the contrary, that was, in fact, precisely their taste and preference. The whole tendency of classical culture, in Winckelmann’s famous expression, was one of noble simplicity and quiet grandeur. This manifested itself in a literary style of urbane understatement and lapidary concision. As Mill puts it: “The ancients were *concise*, because of the extreme pains they took with their compositions; almost all moderns are prolix because they do not.” Modern prose tends to be wordy and overstated, he continues, “for want of time and patience, and from the necessity we are in of addressing almost all writings to a busy and imperfectly prepared public” (1867, 37–38, emphasis added). By contrast, the primary addressees of classical writing—a small, refined, exclusive, and homogeneous literary aristocracy with a dense background of shared taste and understanding—naturally delighted in nuance and economy of expression, taking joy in seeing just how much could be conveyed by the smallest of indications. This cultural ideal expressed itself in their conversation no less than their writing. In his “Life of Lycurgus,” Plutarch describes how Spartan children were educated to “comprehend much matter of thought in few words.” Therefore, “as their swords were short and sharp, so, it seems to me, were their sayings. They reach the point and arrest the attention of the hearers better than any” (1979, 64–65). Yet not just the Spartans in Laconia, but the classics in general, were famously laconic. Thus, even apart from the issue of leisure, the marked classical taste for refined understatement would have made classical audiences naturally receptive to the idea of pedagogical esotericism in a way that modern readers—lacking this taste—clearly are not.

Furthermore, having a taste for literary subtlety and having grown up with a literature that practiced it, ancient readers would have learned the rudiments of esoteric reading almost along with the art of reading itself. They were socialized into a laconic culture. Thus, the burden imposed by esoteric interpretation would have impressed them as less onerous as well as less distasteful than it does contemporary readers, who have grown up, as it were, esoteric illiterates.

Esotericism versus the Modern Ideas of Progress and Publication

But it is not only the pressure of unread books, the disappearance of a leisured culture of aristocratic understatement, and the want of socialization in esoteric ways that make us view pedagogical esotericism as so burdensome and thus improbable. Crucially important is also the central role played by the idea of progress in the shaping of modern intellectual life.

The idea of progress, which today seems almost too obvious to explain, holds that human knowledge tends continually to advance because each generation can build on the achievements of the preceding one. Yet, there is an unstated presupposition here regarding the matter of transmission. Faith in progress is based on the (very unSocratic) assumption that wisdom or knowledge can not only be taught but can be “published” in the modern sense: written down in books in such a way as to be easily and genuinely appropriated, so that the next generation, after a brief period of learning, can begin where the previous one left off.

A second, related assumption of modern progress-philosophy is that intellectual production functions in essentially the same way as economic production: the progress of both results from “teamwork,” from the practice of the division of labor or specialization within a group. And just as the essential precondition of the economic division of labor is exchange, so the precondition of intellectual specialization is the efficient exchange of knowledge—through publication.

In the modern period, the whole enterprise of philosophy and science has been organized around this idea of progress. The pursuit of knowledge has become uniquely “socialized,” become a team effort, a collective undertaking, both across generations and across individuals within a single generation. This has affected our whole experience of the intellectual life. The modern scholar or scientist ultimately does not—and cannot—live to think for himself in the quiet of his study. He lives to “make a contribution” to an ongoing, public enterprise, to what “we know.” And at the core of this effort at collective knowing is the modern institution of publication, through which each can readily appropriate the work of the others. Thus, writing and publication have a unique meaning for modern thought; they play a special role that was unknown to earlier thinkers, even though they too of course wrote books.

It is no surprise, then, that the modern intellect instinctively recoils at the very idea of voluntary obscurity and pedagogical esotericism: this practice and its premises run directly counter to core modern

assumptions about the easy transmission of knowledge through publication and thus to the whole collective organization of modern intellectual life. It inevitably appears to us not only as destructive but transgressive, a violation of the sacred ethics of publication that is the lifeblood of modern knowing.

But this reaction was wholly alien to the premodern world which inclined to reject the basic assumptions of the idea of progress. Whatever may be the case for certain limited, technical aspects of philosophy, genuine philosophical depth and insight cannot simply be written down and transmitted from one generation to another. Wisdom cannot be told. So each generation by no means starts where the previous one left off. And as for the division of labor, the philosophic life—the radically personal effort to see life whole—can never be genuinely pursued as a collective enterprise of specialists who read each others’ articles. The classics had no faith in progress because they had no faith in publication in the modern sense. Indeed, they were skeptical of books of every kind, as we have seen.

To be sure, in every age people are strongly tempted to rely upon the thinking and findings of others. And this can often seem like a useful shortcut. But if philosophy is to remain authentic and not degenerate into a “tradition,” then above all it must resist this dangerous temptation—the very temptation upon which modern progress-philosophy seeks to build. It was precisely to counteract this temptation, that, as we have seen, classical thought turned to the use of pedagogical esotericism: by hiding the truth in the right way, it hoped to force others to rediscover it by and for themselves, without the excessive reliance upon others. But this means that the objection stated above—through which we moderns tend to dismiss the practice of pedagogical esotericism as implausible because such a great hindrance to the ready transmission of knowledge—is precisely what led the classics to embrace that practice: it is a great obstacle to the easy appropriation of others’ ideas.

The Esoteric Book as an Imitation of Nature

But, even granting this huge difference in perspective, we might still try to reformulate our modern objection to pedagogical esotericism on classical premises. Let us assume with the ancients that the primary aim of writing is to promote, not the progress over time of a collective intellectual enterprise, but the philosophical authenticity of the rare individual. Still, is increasing the interpretive difficulty of a book really the best way

to get the reader to think for himself? Granted, it may prevent the latter from adopting the author's views unthinkingly. But, as argued above, it will also burden him with a difficult interpretive task that will stand in the way of his main job of philosophizing. The author's artificial literary puzzles will only serve to mire the reader down in textual minutiae and distract him from the great puzzle of the world. The most likely effect of this kind of writing, then, is not to make the reader authentically philosophical, but rather bookish and pedantic.

We have already seen a large part of the reply to this objection. Classical philosophical texts were not primarily written for scholars and other workers in a collective enterprise but the "rare individual," the person of extraordinary philosophical and interpretive gifts who, as such, would not be excessively burdened by its interpretive challenges. And, as we have just seen, both the taste for and the art of close reading were more highly developed in past ages.

But there is a deeper reply to this objection that also points to a crucial dimension of pedagogical esotericism that we have so far neglected. The objection assumes that the deciphering of an esoteric text is a task altogether different from—and therefore obstructive of—philosophizing. It assumes that the puzzles contained in the esoteric book are purely "artificial" and unrelated to the puzzles in reality that occupy the philosopher. But this is not necessarily the case. Indeed, one of the primary purposes of pedagogical concealment is precisely to train the reader for the kind of thinking needed to philosophize. But whether and how it is able to serve this purpose depends on how one understands the true character of philosophy and of the reality it seeks to penetrate.

If, for example, philosophy is able to know the world through a deductive system of some kind, then presumably "philosophizing" would have nothing in common with the practice of esoteric reading. But if, on the other hand, reality is hidden from us by a cave of opinion or convention, as Plato maintains, and if philosophy largely consists, not in a science of geometric deduction, but in the delicate art of freeing oneself from received opinion by detecting its subtle flaws and contradictions, then the art of esoteric interpretation might well be the best possible training for philosophy. In learning how to read the text, you learn how to read the world. More generally, if the world is comprised of appearance and reality, of a surface and a depth, then a book that consciously imitates that structure might best prepare one for comprehending the world.

Again, if true philosophy is dogmatic, system-philosophy that would banish all mystery from the world, then the human activity or posture of "questioning" would not be truly central to the philosophic life, and the openness of an esoteric text would have no essential relation to philosophy. But if true philosophy is some form of skepticism—not the modern, Cartesian kind that is only a prelude to dogmatism, but classical, zetetic or erotic skepticism that puts the human stance of questioning, wondering, and longing permanently at the center of the philosophic life—then the elusive question-world of an esoteric book might be the most suitable training ground for philosophy.

Socrates, for example, who claimed to know only that he knew nothing, was a skeptic in this sense—to adopt here the interpretation of Leo Strauss. For Socrates, philosophy is knowledge of ignorance. But one cannot *know* that one is fundamentally ignorant without knowing that the world poses fundamental questions to which one does not have the definitive answer. Knowledge of ignorance, then, is not ignorance; it is knowledge. It is knowledge of the permanent problems, the fundamental perplexities that stimulate and structure our thinking. For the skeptic Socrates, then, these questions (and not the eternal Ideas) are the most fundamental and permanent beings that he knows, beings that continually summon him to thought. He experiences the whole as neither perfectly transparent nor perfectly opaque, but as elusive and alluring. And this experience derives not simply from the limitations of human reason but from the character of the world: hiddenness is a property of being itself. Nature is esoteric. Now, if this is the case, then the puzzle-quality of an esoteric text would not be artificial and obstructive of philosophy but rather natural and necessary, being an accurate imitation of reality. Thus, according to Strauss, Plato wrote his dialogues so as to "supply us not so much with an answer to the riddle of being as with a most articulate 'imitation' of that riddle" (1946, 351). Similarly, Thucydides' history "imitates the enigmatic character of reality" (Strauss 1989a, 94). A rhetoric of concealment would be most useful, perhaps even necessary, to disclose reality as it is in its hiddenness.⁴

⁴For a discussion of these claims, see Strauss (1959, 38–40). See also where Strauss seems to follow Heidegger in maintaining that "to be means to be elusive or to be a mystery" (1989b, 43). And see Benardete who, on this basis, attributes to the ancients what he calls "metaphysical esotericism" (2000, 409).

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