

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Harvey Mansfield, Professor, Harvard University

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I: Mansfield Meets Strauss (00:15 – 11:14)

KRISTOL: Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm Bill Kristol, and I'm very pleased to have with me today Harvey Mansfield, my teacher, to discuss his teacher, Leo Strauss. Who wasn't actually your teacher, however?

MANSFIELD: He wasn't.

KRISTOL: As an undergraduate or graduate student. I noticed in the acknowledgements in your first book, which was your doctoral dissertation, you thanked various Harvard professors and then you thanked Leo Strauss. So how did that happen?

MANSFIELD: Well I certainly had to thank my hero, which was Sam Beer, and I later wrote a book all about him called *Manliness*. He was the most manly man I ever met, and so he deserved to have a book in his honor but my real teacher was not he or not William Y. Elliott, who I also mentioned, but Leo Strauss. I developed an acquaintance with Leo Strauss.

It began by meeting Harry Jaffa in Columbus, Ohio. Harry Jaffa was one of Strauss's students, and he was an Assistant Professor in my father's department of Political Science. My father was a chairman of the Ohio State Political Science Department, and Harry Jaffa was in there, and so Harry as a high school student – this would be about 1948-49 – took me under his wing and introduced me to political theory. I had a previous introduction from David Spitz who was a liberal but for some reason I was more convinced by Harry Jaffa than by David Spitz.

KRISTOL: Jaffa, I guess, studied with Strauss at the New School in the 40s.

MANSFIELD: At The New School for Social Research in New York was where Strauss came when he first arrived in America as a refugee scholar. So perhaps the next stage was going through Harvard and studying with Sam Beer, and then in 1953 when I graduated I read *Natural Right and History*, which was Strauss's great book on the issues that most people understand and perhaps the best way still to approach his thought.

Natural Right and History was – you could say, begins with an attack on the fact-value system, which is the way social science operates. And the way in which I was taught at Harvard. I was always dissatisfied with that because I thought there was more to value, valuing than just assertion. Just saying the way you would love things to be, or wishes. But on the other hand, I was always dissatisfied with the rigidity – it seemed to me – of the natural law position. Say the Catholic conservatism of natural law, which it seemed to me was too rigid and insufficiently flexible. Didn't leave enough room for human prudence.

So Strauss was right in the middle between those two. He was believed that it was a matter of knowledge, say, whether someone was an honest person or not. But on the other hand, to go further than that required a lot of interpretation and a lot of thinking on which reasonable people might disagree. And he later developed the distinction between, or he does in this book, between natural right and natural law.

So that was in 1953 and then – well, a little bit later – I met him, I think. That was in about 1958 in Chicago. I had been invited to one of the conferences that Robert Goldwin, one of his students managed with public figures of one kind or another. I've forgotten which one in this case, but Strauss was there and he smiled at me and we met and that, and that was a great pleasure.

And later on when I was at my first job, which was at the University of California-Berkeley, I got to know him the way a student would get to know a teacher. Up 'til then I was the guy from Harvard. Strauss had a low opinion of Harvard.

KRISTOL: Shocking, really.

MANSFIELD: Yes, it was.

KRISTOL: He was right on so many other things.

MANSFIELD: Yeah, right. But he had a low opinion of Harvard, it has to be said, it was perhaps a certain sense of rivalry with a friend of his or at least a acquaintance of his from Germany, Carl Fredrick, it was of course, the most famous political theorist at Harvard at this time. But for whatever reason he somehow preferred the University of Chicago to Harvard, University of Chicago being where he now was. And so, it was graced, it was certainly graced by his presence so I can't blame him for that.

Yeah. That little opinion of his. So I was always in a way – when I was with him, it was always with his other students and they were more diffident to him or were – rather he was more commanding to them. Or as me, I had gotten my Ph.D. from elsewhere and other people, and this paradoxically might, I think, set me on a level or equality, mock equality with him.

So he would ask me my opinion. He didn't ask what Harvard thought but he had me down as a Protestant so that meant that I knew Luther and Calvin through and through, so when it came up, as it sometimes did, "What was the Protestant view of this or that?" I was consulted and made to rattle off, which, of course, I couldn't do at all, what kind of wisdom there might have been in those two great but totally unknown to me thinkers.

So that was, now we're getting into the period where I was in his reading group at Berkeley, this would have been 1960 to '61. So he was, that year he left Chicago just to come for one year to the advanced what is it? Behavioral Center, or Center for Behavioral Studies, which was in Palo Alto, and I was in Berkeley. So the reading group met on Wednesday evening.

KRISTOL: So that was just good luck that you were both in the Bay Area at the same time?

MANSFIELD: That's right. And he had a reading group, he had brought several of his students with him, and the two most memorable were Ralph Lerner and Martin Diamond, were there and who I got to know, made good friends with in that year. So he had this reading group on Wednesdays from 8 until 12. That was how long he went. He had had a heart attack.

KRISTOL: p.m.?

MANSFIELD: Yeah, p.m., of course.

KRISTOL: Very European.

MANSFIELD: Yeah. Oh no. Eight to 12, and he had heart attack the year before so Mrs. Strauss had given orders that he had to be stopped at 12, otherwise he'd go on and on and on, and when he stopped at 12, we all had a kind of, we had hors d'oeuvres, something to eat and something to drink and then the gossip began. And the meeting usually broke up about 1:30.

And I – Wednesday was a tough day for me because I had a class in the morning and then a seminar in the afternoon which ended at 6 p.m. so at 6 p.m. I had to make it all the way from Berkeley to Palo Alto, driving over the Bay Bridge, eating a sandwich on the way, in order to arrive at eight. And, of course, when I – the return trip was something not be mentioned.

But it was a wonderful experience. It was the most challenging intellectual experience of my life then and still now to meet someone of that brainpower. It took all my abilities to try to keep up with him. So that was a new experience for me.

KRISTOL: And what did you read?

MANSFIELD: We read some Plato. *Laches*, Plato's dialogue on courage. That's what we started from but it was mostly Aristophanes because he was then writing his book, which came out later called *Socrates and Aristophanes*. So that's really my acquaintance with him. I knew him. I was – I can't say I was really close to him, but we were friendly and occasionally he would write to me something that he found out. He took a great interest – he read my dissertation on Burke, which then was published.

The book you just mentioned, *Statesmanship and Party Government*. And I was told this was a great honor. I was told that Strauss had stopped Robert Goldwin, the same one of ran the conferences, in the street one day, and he told Goldwin, "I've just finished reading a book I wish I had written."

KRISTOL: That is a great honor.

MANSFIELD: And but he never said that to me.

KRISTOL: Well, that would have gone to your head.

MANSFIELD: Yes it probably would have.

KRISTOL: But Goldwin told you. That was good of him.

MANSFIELD: Yes, he did. Yes, it was good of him.

KRISTOL: That's great, though.

MANSFIELD: Alright so, but I got to see him now and again a couple times in Annapolis after he'd stopped teaching at Chicago. From this time – so that was 1961 when he was at Berkeley, then he died in 1973 so about a dozen years later.

KRISTOL: Did he ever come talk at Harvard?

MANSFIELD: No, but he came to Boston and gave a talk there. But I did invite him when I was, to give a talk at Berkeley, which he did, where I had just arrived. I had just arrived; I was totally green Assistant Professor, and here I was inviting this famous but somewhat controversial, even disliked, disapproved of, professor, and he gave a talk to the Berkeley crowd who listened not altogether respectfully, certainly not in agreement, but yeah that was, that was my time that I invited him.

KRISTOL: That's good.

MANSFIELD: Yeah.

KRISTOL: Disappointing that he never set foot, apparently, on the Harvard campus, that's to Harvard's demerit.

MANSFIELD: I think that may have been the case.

II: How to Begin to Read Strauss (11:14 – 26:29)

KRISTOL: So I mean, there's been so much written, so many levels and commentary on Strauss and texts on Strauss and defenses of Strauss but in a way you encountered him fresh so what would you say if someone asked what all this – Strauss, you're a Straussian, what's all that mean? What's the right way to begin thinking about Strauss?

MANSFIELD: Well, I already mentioned the right approach, and that, I think, is to read *Natural Right and History* because, as I say, that is his analysis of the current intellectual situation in America, in the West. The background of it. So that's the book to start with.

On the other hand, he made a great discovery. And, or rediscovery. And that was of the existence of esoteric writing, and so this is the most striking thing about Strauss. And when you become a Straussian, there's always a point of conversion. That word, kind of religious word is almost appropriate. And that is when you discover and begin to appreciate esoteric writing.

Esoteric writing means – well, to quote a title of a recent book – “philosophy between the lines.” This is the title of a recent book by Arthur Melzer, which I very much recommend to anyone who wants to study Strauss, in which he presents the much overlooked evidence. Much of it, so much evidence there is of esoteric writing by philosophers by their references to the need for this.

What esoteric is – this, there isn't just one audience for a philosopher, he lives in his time but also lives beyond his time so he wants to address other philosophers but he also wants to address the people in his time. These are two different audiences because the first audience, you might say, the audience of eternity deals with those permanent and eternal questions most of which cannot be answered finally or at least in such a way that everyone will agree. It's notorious that philosophers disagree, and yet they all love being philosophers and they respect their philosophers.

Now, the thing is that to study the permanent questions means to unsettle the temporary answers or agreements that societies have. Societies can't live on disagreement or on total dissension, or on mere skepticism. They have to have an answer, and each has to have its own answer, a kind of official answer. And this is true even of liberal or democracies or free societies, they have a certain amount of disagreement, which they call pluralism.

But say on a – for example, America, that all man are created equal, that the way to think about justice is to think in terms of rights, these are fundamental principles, which really cannot be questioned by an American or at least politically by an American. So society has its beliefs and philosophy has its questions and that's a diremption, that's a dichotomy, which cannot be, cannot ever be totally overcome.

And this cannot fail to impress itself upon any philosophers so the philosopher quickly sees the need for addressing these two audiences differently but in the same work, so it isn't that you have a little known work that is your esoteric writing and a better known one, exoteric. No. The two were always mixed together so that the careful reader that is a philosopher can see things, problems in the text in which the careful writer inserts remarks that are intended for the philosopher and not just for the political people or moral people of his time.

And that's what Strauss discovered or rediscovered because it was perfectly well known to all philosophers up until about the beginning of the 19th century. At that time history appeared on the scene and the notion arrived that a thinker was a creature or child of his own time, a child of his own time – that's a phrase of Hegel, a 19th-century philosopher. Perhaps the greatest. According to that view, every

philosopher is a spokesman for the myths or the beliefs or the opinions, or even the truths of his time, but of his time only.

And eternal problems don't exist, and certainly, the several eternal solutions, which one can see in the history of philosophy, are each to them compartmentalized into stages of world history – not for us today, we've settled that. For example, the religious question. That's all dead. That's obsolete. That's not a 21st-century question.

So that's the historical view and that took over from the, when I say the other rival view that made room for esotericism. And it really denied that here was a distinction between what was said to philosophers and what was said to political people but the two could be blended together or needed to be blended together and that really no philosopher really had the ability to be critical of his own time. That's really what it's saying. If you're a child of your own time, that means you can't be a critic.

And that was very destructive of philosophy. So philosophy really lives on the possibility of esoteric communication. Otherwise, it's taken over by the beliefs of its own time. And so that was Strauss's great discovery, which he made. So this story – I don't remember it very well, in a Berlin library when he was reading a text of Avicenna, on Plato's *Laws*, and Avicenna remarked that Plato was understanding the legislator as a kind of prophet.

That meant that the philosopher was a, trying to give a way in which to understand the laws of any society. Not as philosophically based but as religious, with a kind of religious foundation, or one might say, covering even. And so in that and Strauss began to expand on this marvelous insight and found all kinds of esoteric writing in unsuspecting places.

One of his great discoveries was Strauss discovered Xenophon the Greek philosopher, Xenophon who had always been despised as a kind of not very, not very intelligent, gentlemanly type. Good fellow but really not very sharp.

As Strauss showed far from that, he was a very sharp fellow pretending to be a good sort of gentlemanly type. And that he was right there on par with Plato and with other philosophers and far superior to his denigrators in modern times among classical scholars. So that was one of his, one of his many writings on Xenophon he tried to show as he once, I think he once put it, I think, tried to make a – to recover the greatness of Xenophon.

KRISTOL: Right.

MANSFIELD: So together with esotericism, you also discover exotericism is the way in which a philosopher has to present the beliefs of his own time to the people who live in his own time in such a way as not to so much to lead them to truth as to lead them to political stability and moral decency.

KRISTOL: And also to protect themselves.

MANSFIELD: And also to protect themselves.

KRISTOL: *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, I mean, Strauss —

MANSFIELD: That's right, of course.

KRISTOL: Somewhat exoterically, maybe, stresses the simplest reason why you would need to.

MANSFIELD: Simplest reason why a philosopher needs to be exoteric is to cover himself from possible attack or a fatwa or something like that. That was still a danger, today actually, and used to be everywhere.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I would think in the essay *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, where Strauss plays this out at least in some degree, he says persecution and then — it seems first that's the main reason but then sort of respect for the healthy opinions, not to disturb healthy opinions of society, turns out maybe to be a slightly deeper reason but then education seems to be really also. Even if there weren't persecution or the tension between opinions and questions maybe philosophers would still write that way. I mean, carefully.

MANSFIELD: Yeah. If only to teach future philosophers.

KRISTOL: Force you to think.

MANSFIELD: Force you to think. Yeah.

KRISTOL: I think that part is underreported sometimes.

MANSFIELD: A good teacher walks into a classroom, say, and raises a question and may give one answer and one answer on the other side and say, "What do you think?" That's a contradiction. Contradiction is something that forces you to think. So if you put a deliberate contradiction in your text then you raise the reader.

You raise him above being a mere reader or mere follower, you force him to think on his own and when he thinks on his own he's getting closer to you and he's less of a disciple or mere reader and more of a thinker. So today we set greats by original thinking but thinking has to be original in everybody.

If it really is thinking, otherwise, you're just accepting, and however original thinker you are it turns out, at the end of the day, if there aren't 1,001 possibilities, as Nietzsche fancifully suggested. No, there are several. There are several ways to look at the world, and you can through some exercise of an effort learn what they are. Learn the principle alternatives.

And this is what would be an education, an education one can still get today in a college. And then perfected it or maybe ruined in graduate school.

KRISTOL: But luckily you can read the books.

MANSFIELD: Yeah.

KRISTOL: On the commentaries of Strauss and others and you and get the education that maybe that your college professors aren't, aren't so great. You know, that's a great service of Strauss, too. Why people write books, maybe, to teach beyond.

MANSFIELD: Not only did Strauss write books, but he got you to read the books that he wrote about. He never used his books as text, and indeed while he was alive most Straussians, or students of his, treated them as if they were sacred things that one mustn't read even, or certainly not comment on publicly and not defend publicly because Strauss wasn't like, let's say, Michael Oakeshott who wanted Oakeshottians to read Oakeshott.

But no, he wanted you to read the great books as opposed to *Natural Right and History*, Hobbes and Locke and Rousseau. Those, and so if you were a Straussian, he would give a course on those books and not on Strauss. However, we might read Strauss in order to teach those books if you wanted to do a good job.

KRISTOL: Because that's himself was commenting on all these books not on giving his own teaching.

MANSFIELD: But when I was in undergraduate, the typical course in political theory was to read excerpts from books and then read the textbook, which would explain those excerpts. Usually from the historicist

point of view. But since then, and this is an effect Strauss has had on the teaching of political theory, generally in America now, people read entire books and they read the original.

KRISTOL: I was struck even when I got to Harvard, I mean, some teachers would still talk about, "Study X thinker and learn his doctrines," and I do think one of Strauss's greatest services was right away making you see whatever doctrines might be presented by various thinkers those were for whatever reason official or not the real thought, you know?

MANSFIELD: Those are exoteric. Those are the things that he thought would be good for you to learn or to be known to believe.

KRISTOL: Or to go through a stage of thinking about, maybe, and then realizing the limitations of or something. Yeah, so. I mean. That's really the fantastic thing that you don't get, you get beyond the sort of "so-and-so believed X and so-and-so taught Y," and you really have to think through the text.

MANSFIELD: There's certainly such a thing as a Straussian but never such a thing as Straussianism. There's never. There's not a Marxism that finds a parallel in Strauss.

KRISTOL: That's a good point.

III: Strauss and the Straussians (26:29 – 1:10:32)

KRISTOL: So there's no Straussianism, which I think is an important point but there are Straussians and even a school, schools of Straussians. Was that according to his intention or despite his wish for everyone to think for himself?

MANSFIELD: I think it was according to his intention. He wanted everyone to think for himself but he also wanted people to see and maybe follow and work out for themselves the insights that he had discovered.

Because he thought they were so important, that they were intended to recover the possibility of philosophy in our time from the two main enemies that it had – science and history. Science, saying that the only real knowledge is scientific knowledge and philosophy has to be the same think as science, otherwise it's just valuing, wishing, hoping. History, that there isn't any possibility of a permanent question or a permanent solution, that the permanent doesn't exist, that everything moves in a way, nothing moves because there's nothing to move.

That's paradox, you could say of, history and also refutation of it. His two great enemies were science and history, and I think he wanted to found a school, which would make philosophy possible again along the general lines that he had begun. So that would be a kind of school or sect, you could use that term, which is used by Machiavelli and Bacon and others. To mean religion, but also a historical way of thinking. It's a school that's open to the whole of philosophy, both ancient and modern. So it isn't a school in the sense of Epicureans or the Stoics per say, which did have definite doctrines, things you had to believe in order to belong to.

So that there are disagreements among Straussians, and the West Coast Straussians versus the East Coast, that's a famous disagreement. The West Coast wanted politics to be more like philosophy or to be good friends, best friends of philosophy. Perhaps identical twins, perhaps. To go that far. And the East Coast, that's where I am, to maintain a certain estrangement even between such a wonderful country as America and such a wonderful philosopher as Aristotle.

So there are these disagreements within the school but I think it's quite clear that he intended to start a school. He did this especially in his book, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, which I believe was intended to be especially directed to a student who wanted to read esoterically and who wanted to see how modernity, how our time fits into the history of philosophy. So in that book he gives all these wonderful, makes all these wonderful little textual discoveries of Machiavelli.

The strange numerology that he makes use of, significant numbers and so on. And the placement of remarks of the many ways in which Machiavelli has at intimating his thought as opposed to just saying it out loud, however good he was at saying things out loud. Goodness is not enough. *La bonta non basta!*

That's a wonderful Machiavellian phrase. So there was all this, and Machiavelli puts his – he's trying to place Machiavelli in what he called the great tradition, and this had reason in Machiavelli because Machiavelli too seems to refer to the tradition of philosophy, which he wants to change. He wanted to change it to make philosophy more capable, more powerful.

So for him philosophy should have an agenda. An agenda, things to do, things to change. Marx once said "That philosophers hitherto have been satisfied with interpreting the world, the point now is to change it." But Machiavelli said that and meant that a lot earlier than Marx, but it's a good statement of what modernity implies.

So perhaps this is a way of introducing the question of the ancients and moderns in Strauss. If esotericism is his grand discovery, which, you might say, a point of method or methodology in the way philosophers operate, the distinction between the ancients and modern, perhaps a more substantive or leads to a more substantive thought.

And that's, that recovers, that again is a rediscovery and not just a discovery. It rediscovers some events of the 17th century, and Jonathan Swift spoke of the ancients and the moderns and the battle of the books. The modern books versus the ancient books.

And *Gulliver's Travels* is a good deal about the way moderns behave and lead or bewildered as they are by philosophy as opposed to the ancients who somehow live much better on the basics of common sense. So this is not a new distinction again that, but it's newly understood. And Strauss's new understanding of the ancients and moderns is that the ancients are still possible, and that they have not been covered over or they have been covered over but they have not been made obsolete by modern principles.

And when Machiavelli wanted philosophy to change to become occupied with politics and political change in improving things, and this was developed by Francis Bacon. Science should be philosophy, and philosophy should be science, and science should be concerned with the relief of man's estate, a much more practical goal than just contemplation or just understanding.

So that was a way of saying that philosophy should take a turn, and that turn, the modern turn, you could say, had to do with opposing the weakness combined with the cruelty of the prevailing system of thought, which was Christianity, so it was an attack on Christianity. The moderns at the beginning.

And so you might think that then this would, this modernity or this way of understanding philosophy would be just a temporary accommodation to a problem that didn't exist for the ancients. That the ancients didn't have such a commanding religion, they had a religion a philosopher could live with more easily, polytheism.

That wasn't a rival, such a grand and obvious rival to philosophy in philosophical terms the way Christianity was. So what, what Christianity then might then seem to be a temporary thing but once the modern way of doing philosophy gets started it's hard to stop. And one looks for ways to carry it on rather than for ways to get out of it.

Or it becomes more and more difficult to get out of it because modern philosophy has its triumphs, it has its fruits. That's Francis Bacon's word, the fruits of philosophy. And the greatest fruit of philosophy, it's pretty clear today, is modern medicine, And this is just what Bacon thought would be the most attractive way of improving the standing, the moral reputation of philosophy to get it to enable people to live longer.

So as soon as you bring up your doubts about modernity, other people will react or you yourself might think, "What about modern medicine that's kept me alive?" That's true of me and most everyone these days.

So how do you get out of that? And also the ancients seem to be based on the polis, which is a very small, in modern terms, intimate community. Totally different from our great United States with its continental extent and it's marvelous diversity of peoples and things and thoughts and places.

So the polis doesn't seem to be applicable to today, and yet for some reason we still use the word *political*. We can't get out of that word and it's, and you'll find it everywhere. And it's used with the same notion of close community. So you can have politics in a university or a corporation, in a symphony orchestra or in any human association with problems on how to govern and who should rule.

So politics today is an adjective without a noun, so perhaps then we need to go back and look at the polis in order to find the noun that our adjective, which we still find useful, describes. So that would be a kind of answer, a beginning answer to the question of the relevancy of ancient thought.

And then, of course, it isn't all that great sometimes to live so long, to have your life prolonged beyond its viability really. You call that living? Maybe it isn't. So people still die, and they still have lingering deaths. and so that, you know, together with other triumphs of modern technology like the atomic bomb and other weapons of mass destruction.

It's not, it's a whole bag, package that you get of modernity, and it's hard to take the good parts and forget the bad parts. You can't do that; it seems to be a packaged deal. So there again you can question it, at least in your thinking, and look back at the origins of modernity.

So what Strauss wanted to do was to challenge the irreversibility of the modern. Modern sort of covers up the alternative to modern, it prevents you from seeing the question as it originally presented itself to Machiavelli and Bacon, the early moderns. The most interesting, I think, is the deepest of the modern thinkers are those two, maybe.

And so you need to be able to challenge this irreversibility. Once you say that modernity is irreversible then it doesn't seem as if it can, that there's any way out. And that's the character of this seemingly temporary beginning, which is made.

Once you say that it's possible for philosophers to bring reason into politics and morality into society and provide a rational society, it's very hard to get away from that because if you say that the rational society is not possible then it seems as if philosophy is not possible. So any difficulties that you have in society seem to extend to philosophy and so.

That's because you've enormously increased the ambition of philosophy. And the stakes of philosophy. Philosophy has to show much more, has to show itself and prove itself to non-philosophers in a way in which it never had to before.

So that tends to, in other words, erase the distinction between philosophy and non-philosophy. And it tends to, therefore, to undermine the basis of reason itself. So whereas the modern world started out as a great promotion of human reason against superstition and prejudice and custom, now at the end, it's human reason that comes under attack, under questioning and attack, and we no longer are confident that there is such a thing as progress. Or that we are living more and more reasonably.

This is, the most modern philosopher is still Nietzsche, end of the 19th century, and he was the one who most deeply saw this and promoted this critique of modernity as essentially leading to nihilism and to saying that no criterion is a good guide for our lives. And this includes reason. Reason is the one that makes us the least interesting, the most boring, and the least ambitious.

KRISTOL: It seems to me a lot of thinkers over the years, obviously, have been struck by the problem of modernity and have yearned for something else and been nostalgic for an older time or romantic about other possibilities. But I do think with Strauss you have the defense of reason, of classical rationalism as an alternative to modern rationalism and apparently he's inclined to think, perhaps, superior alternative.

I've always thought that A, important of itself. But also B, important as a way out of the kind of typical modern paradox, or not paradox but don't know what exactly situation. But C, modernity is deeply problematic and then thinking there's no alternative except a kind of leap of faith of some sort or romantic –

MANSFIELD: Now, Strauss was certainly not a romantic, he looked down on that. That was simply unthought-out rejection of modern rationality. Not unreasonably, the rejection isn't unreasonable but the way in which it was done is – because to be against superstition and prejudice and custom is the way of reason, that's true. Just that most people need superstition and prejudice and custom and that's –

And to find a way of expressing that so that's it's healthy instead of limiting is the work of an exo – the exoteric work of a philosopher, a political philosopher. So Strauss was a classical rationalist as opposed to a modern rationalist. It isn't that the thing to do is not to be a conservative in the way of getting rid of reason but rather of redirecting reason. Seeing what can be recovered for it from the attacks of history and science.

KRISTOL: In that respect, was the art of writing, as the methodological breakthrough, if that's the right word, and the ancients and moderns as kind of, I don't know what, an organizing principle you might say? Both fit in, I think, with the, I guess what I want to say with the third great or obvious theme that Strauss or Straussians emphasize so much, which is philosophy in the city, or philosophy –

MANSFIELD: Philosophy and politics.

KRISTOL: Philosophy and politics.

MANSFIELD: Or philosophy and the city. Yeah, that would be a description of the way that the ancients saw things. There was always a tension between society and philosophy, or between a life of action and a life of contemplation. A life devoted to reason versus a life devoted to getting things done.

That's what Strauss thought. And he phrased this in an interesting way, that he sometimes said that the theme of his work was the theological-political question. And so it's hard to know what that means. Theological-political question.

But I would try something like this, that the question is who governs us? Who governs us human beings? Is it God? Or is it we ourselves? If it's God, then we should adjust to God. And if it's we ourselves, then God should adjust himself to us, to our political necessities. Then the question also becomes what sort of God?

Is this a mild or tolerant God, or is it an angry or jealous God? Does God second us or promote in us the desire to get vengeance on our enemies and to punish those who are unjust?

Or is God a more tolerant liberal minded sort of fellow who doesn't like to pass judgment? And so this theological-political question is really a kind of development of a political question, the question of any political regime. Who rules?

And who rules is the way of asking the question, how are we ruled? Because you'll be ruled differently according to who rules. Whether we regard ourselves as agents or instruments or creatures of God. Or whether we think ourselves independent, and entitled to a God that respects our independence.

So it's a way of asking the question about philosophy and politics, which emphasizes the importance of religion for politics. And Straussians, I think, you can always tell them by the fact that although they may

be personally, politically interested and very partisan they also got in their minds something which is above politics.

And a way of life or a way of living, a philosophical way of living, which is asking rather than answering questions. To be a politician you have to have answers. You can use your questions but those who disrupt the answers are your enemies, your opponents, so you can be skeptical but not about yourself.

You'll have to play offense as they like, the politicians like to say. Otherwise, you're playing defense. You've got to have something to asset, a program, and that means a different mode of being and thinking from someone who contemplates, observes, comments, and clicks. Without getting angry.

KRISTOL: Right. It does seem that Straussians are both, if I can oversimplify, wildly defenders of philosophers, on the one hand, and defenders of politics, on the other.

MANSFIELD: Right, I feel both of those impulses in myself.

KRISTOL: Strauss encourages them both, though.

MANSFIELD: Yes, he does.

KRISTOL: He says defending politics against the reduction of politics to – I don't know what you call – history or sociology or – I don't know – lack of human agency, on the one hand and, of course, the defense of philosophy, which is different from the defense of politics.

MANSFIELD: He has students who love politics and students who love philosophy and he encourages them both. I think that's quite right. He said things that were rogue things in different publications of his. Which would give encouragement to one or the other, and this, I think, for a very good –

Now, why would Strauss want to promote politics or encourage politics? And that's because our politics seemed to be, especially in the progressive part, the notion that modern politics is a kind of progress from prejudice to rationality, that seems to be hostile in itself to politics because it says that we can set aside questions once we've solved them and go on to new questions and solve them.

And that means those questions that we've solved are no longer open for political discussion. So to promote politics is a way of promoting the impermanence of politics. That's actually a freeing of discussing, an opening up of issues that people want to settle permanently by, through legislative decision. The best way to pose them is to promote politics in the sense of issues to be discussed and decided.

KRISTOL: So I suppose, dogmatism or scientism or progressive or religious doctrine, all of these things are both enemies in a way of true philosophy and true politics.

MANSFIELD: They are.

KRISTOL: So somehow defending –

MANSFIELD: They narrow us. Both of them try to narrow us. And you can look at the scientific dystopias to see us narrowed in the way that progress in quotes attempts.

KRISTOL: Right. Great. Strauss's works have also impressive, and this is maybe a crazy question, but do you have a favorite book or essay of Strauss's that you just –?

MANSFIELD: Yes, his favorite book – I once raised that question with him, and that's why I profited by saying my favorite was *Thoughts on Machiavelli* while I was working on Machiavelli, and his book was my guide, my prince, if you like.

He kindly said, "Yes." He had a lot of fun writing that, and I said, "And the footnotes?," and he said, "Yeah." That's right, that's where he especially enjoyed himself. And what he did in the footnotes of that book was to set little puzzles for his students to come along and try to discover. Some of them were easy, and some were hard. I got some of them but by no means all.

KRISTOL: You learned a lot in trying to decipher them?

MANSFIELD: Of course, you do, yeah. For example, here's one. This is a numerological one. In *The Prince* and *The Discourses* taken together as if they were one book, there are 14 uses of the word *form*, and 51 uses of the word *matter*.

Now, that tells you immediately, because 14 and 51 are multiples of 7 and 17, that this is a question of *nomos* and *physis*. Of convention or custom and nature. Because the Greek philosophers used those numbers, 7 to indicate *nomos* or what was customary or political or legal. And 17 to indicate what was natural. So for Machiavelli what he's saying is that what is natural is only matter and not forms. Forms are put there by custom or by politics or by the prince. But he just left it like that, Strauss did.

KRISTOL: Left it just at the numbers?

MANSFIELD: Yes, 14 and 51.

KRISTOL: He didn't explain what you've just said in the last —

MANSFIELD: Certainly did not explain what I just said, and moreover, he did not add them up for you. 14 and 51 when added are 65. Which is a multiple of 13, and 13 is Machiavelli's number, indicating this is me, and this is my enterprise and this is what I'm doing.

So he is, he is saying that my enterprise is to understand forms and matter as conventional or political forming of matter. And for no definitions, no ideas, no essences and this mine, this is my doing. And also, and incidentally, it shows you that *The Prince* and *The Discourses on Livy*, which are two quite different works, are also from a certain point of view, from this highest point of view, one book.

KRISTOL: So Strauss indicated that *Thoughts* was his favorite?

MANSFIELD: Yea, and now all this was in a footnote at the end of a footnote, which was really directed at something else. That was the kind of fun you have doing this. Then, Strauss answering me that he thought his favorite book was *Socrates and Aristophanes*, and that was because well he says, "I learned something new." And—

KRISTOL: Would you care to hazard a guess as to what that was?

MANSFIELD: My guess is that the new things that's in there, or the most prominent new thing, is the idea of a comic equivalent. That here is a funny way of making a serious point. This is how best to understand the philosophy in Aristophanes. Or serious or even tragic point. So the comic equivalent.

So those were, maybe, two favorites but other people have other favorites. Certainly his works on Plato are the most Straussian in the sense of most remote from current controversy. If you read them, they look like mere summaries of what Plato said, but summaries that occasionally make a remark. And also summaries that occasionally leave out things or put things in a certain order.

So here he is, seems to be imitating the Arabic philosophers that he first studied. One mustn't forget that Strauss was a leading Arabic student of Arabic philosophy in the Middle Ages and is well known in that field. And he had a great student who became a professor at Harvard, a colleague of mine, Muhsin Mahdi. He was in the theorist department who also was a very renowned scholar, especially of *The Arabian Nights*.

So Strauss had this absolutely marvelous comprehensiveness to him. There was nothing that he couldn't touch and turn to gold. And all his students, however, never achieved that, so they were all students in one branch of his complex works.

So he started with studies of not just Arabic but also Jewish philosophy, Maimonides, of course. And there he is known as a Maimonides scholar and a somewhat notorious for having questioned Maimonides', I'll say, faith or belief in Judaism. And so that's another instance of his subversive influence on modern scholarship, as you might say.

And then he wrote a big, when his first book was called *Philosophy and Law*, which was a study of Jewish things and the way in which Jewish philosophers questioned the legal findings of the rabbis.

And then he wrote a book on Spinoza, which was an excellent study of Spinoza and his antecedents and he wrote a book on Hobbes – the what's the title of that?

KRISTOL: Something about the political theory of –

MANSFIELD: Something about the political theory of Hobbes or something like that, which is, I think, quite well known and I think rather respectable among Hobbs scholars.

KRISTOL: It's a sort of pre-Straussian.

MANSFIELD: Sort of a pre-Straussian view of Hobbes. There, he shows that they're sort of two general trends in Hobbes' thinking, one is morals and the other is science. And he says that the morals come first. He chose science because of the morals. The question of morals he wanted to reduce, Hobbes wanted to be able to reduce politics to a more viable morality that was within reach of possibility. More than Aristotelian virtues. And this was why he chose science. So he was not fundamentally a scientist but instrumentally so.

KRISTOL: And that seems to be a position that Strauss held to later and informed his study of other moderns.

MANSFIELD: That's right. That modernity is not essentially a philosophical or scientific discovery, it's a moral discovery or philosophical discovery, which is issues in science, with the natural science that we know today. And the politics of rights that we live in. So what else?

KRISTOL: Well, those were kind of the pre-Straussian Strauss, which is still awfully impressive if any normal person had done that first career he'd be a major scholar but then he had the breakthrough on *The Art of Writing* and has a bunch of essays in the 40s, and then really the three books that, I guess, introduce him in America are *Persecution and the Art of* – well *On Tyranny* which is –

MANSFIELD: *On Tyranny* we mustn't forget.

KRISTOL: Commentary on the, I mean, it's as if he wanted to take the hardest case to prove that he's right about how these philosophers wrote. Because you take Xenophon, not Plato, not, you know, anyone famous. And you show that Xenophon went with this unimaginable care and cleverness and wit. And –

MANSFIELD: The most recondite philosopher or most hidden philosopher with the worse reputation is the one he wants to save. And that was Xenophon.

KRISTOL: And so if you prove Xenophon, by definition it must be true.

MANSFIELD: Everything else is easier.

KRISTOL: So, *On Tyranny*, which you present in your introductory book in a way, although it's an awfully deep introductory book and the *Natural* – well, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, *On Tyranny*, and *Natural Right and History* are sort of all a group and then *Machiavelli*.

And then he seems to have decided the last 15 years of his life to study the Greeks and write as you said earlier, a terser and more philosophical way, maybe, commentaries that would help his very best students understand Xenophon and Aristotle and Aristophanes, Plato, Socrates. I mean, those are pretty hard books to just pick up. The Xenophon books that he writes in the 60s.

MANSFIELD: That's the picture, I would say, yeah.

KRISTOL: But *Natural Right and History* is what first drew you, and you still recommend it.

MANSFIELD: I would, yeah. Because that had Hobbes in it. Otherwise, you could start with his *Hobbes* book but that doesn't take you his real, his radical questioning and his real position.

KRISTOL: The title, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* is just fanatic statement of, you know, his claim about the art of writing. Which puts into common-sensible way that gives it more of a –

MANSFIELD: He used to laugh, he once found his book in the etiquette section of a book shop

KRISTOL: Oh, is that right?

MANSFIELD: Yeah, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* was a question of manners.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's good.

MANSFIELD: That was the kind of thing he loved. To see the connection between manners of this sort of superficial thing and something much deeper.

And that too, he had a certain appreciation for certain writers like Agatha Christie who was good at portraying manner and the significance of manners. He would try to look at the manner of each of her characters to see if the possibility of being a murderer is contained. So that's the kind of lovely sort of, I think, he liked to read P.G. Wodehouse. He liked to read Mickey Spillane. He liked to watch *Perry Mason*.

He had a taste for the superficial. In P.G. Wodehouse, Strauss compared the relationship between Jeeves and Bertie Wooster. Jeeves the intelligent valet, Bertie Wooster the not-so-intelligent, to the philosopher and the gentlemen. And then the philosopher was, or the gentlemen learned to go to the philosopher to answer his problems and dissolve the difficulties of his life.

And he was always, Bertie is always a very nice guy. He always wants to do the right thing he just doesn't quite succeed at doing it. But on the other hand, there's a defect in Jeeves, too, in that his schemes are often too complicated. They depend on actors who are intelligent as he. So even the philosopher can go wrong as well.

This is a comic writer, P.G. Wodehouse, wrote 100 novels or so. Who doesn't seem to have a thought in his mind.

KRISTOL: Deceptive.

MANSFIELD: Actually, Strauss made something, or saw something that was there. And if you're a Straussian, you go around reading things and going to movies and trying to find things sometimes foolishly or too ambitiously or in a silly way, but still he teaches that habit in you.

KRISTOL: And did he personally? I never met him but, maybe when I was a little kid I might have if he ever came to my parents' apartment – my father published a couple of his books – but I'm not sure that he ever did. But then again I never met him knowingly. Did he have, one has a sense that he must have had an impish sense of humor but did that come out, I mean, when you –?

MANSFIELD: Yes, very much so. He was a short man, shorter even than I. And he had a big smile. And these glasses. A German accent he never got rid of, even changed much. Although he became a perfect writer in English, you wouldn't know.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's an amazing thing that's also too little commented on. Just taken for granted that, of course, he is a great and powerful writer when he wants to be and sometimes misleadingly. You might say it's like the end of the Machiavelli book when he wants to be rhetorical he can be really powerful and moving, and that's not his native –. When did he first start writing in English? It must have been already in his 30s? I mean, he wasn't a young man like an 18-year-old coming over, you know?

MANSFIELD: So that was a totally amazing thing. He liked to smoke cigarettes, which was, of course, bad for him. He had a holder for cigarettes. It didn't directly touch his lips but there was this certain distance between the smoke, or the end of the cigarette and himself. Sort of like FDR, who also smoked with a cigarette holder. It gave him a sort of raffish debonair air when he was smoking, which he continued to do after his heart attack but it wasn't good for him.

He was very impish. He liked to make jokes. So, and this was in our, the time of our reading group was a time when the United States was negotiating with the Soviet Union and there was always a question whether we needed to make concessions in order to get the other side to negotiate. Current matter, like today. Or whether we shouldn't make unilateral concessions. And so he said that he was willing to make a unilateral concession to the Soviet Union.

And this was that all words that begin in English with H could be pronounced "guh" as in Russian. So "Gitler" and "Geidegger." Those were two German names that he was going to sacrifice to the Soviet Union in order to get them to come to the bargaining table with us.

KRISTOL: But he didn't otherwise approve of the concessions we were making.

MANSFIELD: No, and I remember too when he was, he would play games. People whose last names are philosophic last names and are political, and the same name political but have different first names, like John Dewey the philosopher and Tom Dewey the politician. So, how many of those could you find? That kind of thing. So games like that.

And also in these gossip sessions in our reading group he would come in on the politics of the day and also his rivals or his friends. Jacob Klein, his friend. Hans Gadamer, his more of a rival or more friendless rival. It hadn't, this is in 1960 and at Berkeley that Gadamer came out with this great book, *Truth and Method*. And Strauss immediately read it and wrote him a long letter critiquing it. He regaled this to us and in our conversation.

You know, but yeah, he was human and close. But he was a philosopher, you were in the presence of, you felt his presence.

KRISTOL: That seems to be what he enjoyed, all the other stuff.

MANSFIELD: There was a recent movie made of Lincoln, which I thought did very well in putting onto film and into a movie the greatness of a person and the way in which all those in the film recognized that this was not just anybody that you were dealing with. So I had that, and that was a wonderful experience in my life.

IV: Great Contemporaries (1:10:32 – 1:36:38)

KRISTOL: That's great. Let's talk a minute about a couple, a few of your fellow students of Strauss and your friends of yours and close friends in some cases. Themselves important scholars and thinkers. I don't know which one – Seth Benardete, you met him when you were both quite young, right?

MANSFIELD: I did. I was, that would be sometime when I was a graduate student.

KRISTOL: He came to Harvard as a –

MANSFIELD: That would be the late 1950s so I was introduced to him by Allan Bloom. He said, "This is my friend Seth Benardete, he's at Harvard, you must meet him". Turns out that we were both living in Elliott House. I had an office there, and he was a Junior Fellow at rooms there. So we were both in the same senior common room in the end. We got to know each other, and he was, I think, the best student of Strauss. Of all of them. I mean, that's my judgment.

I think he was the deepest and the quickest of all of Strauss students that I met. We would have lunch in Elliott House at Harvard and somebody unconsciously, some professor or student unconsciously would sit down with us and usually Benardete reduced him to blithering after two or three minutes of questioning. He would go after, he would say, "What do you principally study, what is it you're doing? What is your dissertation?"

And you know, after a very short period of time that person was completely lost and had to be questioning everything that he believed. So and this was like, it was kind of a mini-experience of Socrates. Watching him operate against the people.

KRISTOL: How to become unpopular maybe?

MANSFIELD: Yes, how to become unpopular, yes. In a way that it didn't make him really unpopular but it certainly didn't make him president either. Anyway, so he was a Greek scholar. He knew, I mean, one could say he knows more Greek than God. And he was that rare thing, a combination of a philologist with a philosopher. Most philologist don't really care much about the philosophy and the people whose language they study and often have very foolish things to say about it.

And most philosophers don't know much Greek. Especially to the extent that Seth Benardete did. His colleagues in the Department of Classics at NYU where he ended up teaching would always come to him with any question that came up, you didn't know something, "Go ask S.B." That was Seth Benardete.

But he worked all day. He stayed in his office and read and read and read and read. He read everything, he knew everything. And he had a family. So at first he started off as almost a dehumanized philosopher when I knew him at first. He would called me Mansfield, by my last name. We were good friends.

Funny way to behave even in those more formal days. But then he met a girl named Jane Johnson, Jane Johnson who was an English graduate, graduate student in English. American literature, actually. And they fell in love and got married and had children and that turned him from a philosopher into more of a human being, if you can say that's it's correct to make a distinction between those two things.

KRISTOL: Right.

MANSFIELD: Yeah, but he started calling me Harvey and he had two wonderful children, Emma and Ethan who further humanized him. It was amusing and kind of inspiring to watch him being educated, so to speak out of his philosophy into a closer appreciation. So he was a family man, and he was a philosopher-scholar.

But in between he had not much existence in society in general or in politics. He followed politics but he had no passions about it.

KRISTOL: He doesn't seem to have tried very hard to make his work – I mean, his work is so daunting, fantastic that –

MANSFIELD: Very daunting works and very, just to show you how, just open it up and look at one page and see how much he was able to find. These are books mostly on Plato but also on Homer and later he wrote on the Latin, or about Latin authors. The theme of this work was poetry and philosophy.

In Plato's *Republic* in Book 10, there's a statement referring to the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy. So poetry stands for what is particular. And it also stands for what seems to be revealed by muses. For a poet, you're inspired by something, it's not that you think it out beforehand. And poets don't like it if you ask them what is the point of your poem, because if they tell you the point of the poem you actually don't need to read the poem anymore. And it also, it would give you the point of the poem in other words than the poetry of the poem which would seem to say, well why don't we just talk about the point instead of all this poetry?

Which is really unnecessary. Whereas philosophy talks about not what is particular but what is universal and not what is revealed but what is observable and what is thinkable, reasonable. But he attacked that quarrel and tried to show that poetry was more philosophical than it looks like and philosophy more poetic and that there is, perhaps together they were one thing with two different sides. Who could deny that Plato is poetical?

KRISTOL: Right.

MANSFIELD: And who could deny that Homer is philosophical? Except most classicists, fools that they are.

KRISTOL: Once you see Benardete's work –

MANSFIELD: Yes, all they have to do is read Benardete, and that will be a kind of, that will be a punishment for them. That would be close to a life sentence, or even death.

KRISTOL: Right. To scrap all their other work, that would be bad.

MANSFIELD: It would be, and that was one of the great things about Strauss that he made a lot of scholarship just irrelevant, foolish, and it was totally based on the wrong presumption.

KRISTOL: Right.

MANSFIELD: Most scholarship is based on the presumption that when a man says something, that's what he thinks. So they never consider that sometimes he would say something you didn't fully mean. The word *irony* doesn't figure in their thinking. Isn't Socrates known for or notorious for his irony? So that's just a way in kind of the beginning by which one might attack most modern scholarship.

And so most modern scholars didn't like Strauss or Straussians. They disbelieve. They disapprove, and sometimes it gets even worse than that, they get ferocious.

KRISTOL: Strauss suffered for those attacks.

MANSFIELD: This never worried Seth Benardete, he was totally above this, and he didn't care that he never got the recognition that he deserved as a scholar or really the awe that he deserved, should of had from his fellow classicists. So whereas other people like Allan Bloom.

KRISTOL: Yeah, so let's talk about Allan Bloom. Seth Benardete was probably the most, greatest student of Strauss, was the most obscure in the broad world of intellectuals and professors, whereas Bloom was, maybe, the best-selling student of Strauss.

MANSFIELD: Yes, the opposite. He was the most brilliant and also the most successful, you could say, in the way of, the way of writing a bestseller, *The Closing of the American Mind*, which sold a million copies in a year. Made him a rich man, Allen. We always called him Bloom even if you were his friends. Bloom, made him a rich man. Funny thing is that he always lived his life as a rich man. And it was only towards the end of it when he published this bestselling book that he was able to afford what otherwise he had to borrow.

People like me, say, with our small minds, didn't know how really to spend money. Even though I had a wife, children, college, and a house and so on. None of these he needed. He was a bachelor and didn't really have nobody to spend money on except himself and he excelled in that. He loved that.

He once told me, because I like to shop at Filene's Basement where you could get fine clothes for cheap prices. He says, "You have the taste of Louis XIV shopping at Filene's Basement." And I always thought, I first thought when I heard that that that was quite a compliment. He was complimenting my thrift and my success. But no, when I learned and knew him better, it's better to spend more than less because that's what a magnificent person does. It's one of Aristotle's virtues.

So he would always spend more. He once was in a shop where they sold high-fidelity musical equipment and with another student and then he remarked, and so Bloom said to the salesman, "That's the best you've got? Isn't that correct?" and the man said, "No, Mr. Bloom, it isn't the best but it's the most expensive." And Bloom said, "That's what I'll take." That's what I'll take. So these are, the wonderful quirks of Allan Bloom. But his brilliance made him a brilliant teacher. He was the best of the Straussian teachers, and probably still is.

He had the art of conversion, which from, into the young man usually, but also women, into a Straussian, and how to do this. It wasn't really a conscious art in his sense or at least didn't seem to be but his own brilliance, his wit, his jokes. It was said that you could stand outside his classroom and hear constant gales of laughter. If you're another professor you say, "How I wish I could do that in my class".

So this happened to me once or twice and just to hear him holding forth it was quite an experience. He was so good at getting young people into philosophy. It was partly that he saw them outside the classroom. Being a bachelor he didn't have people to, he didn't have a family to preoccupy him.

So he had a lot more free time, and he would use it to teach kids music. How to listen to fine music and how to talk about and read about and talk about literature. Things that weren't on the syllabus of the class that he taught.

KRISTOL: He also had a real insight into people's characters, I think, in a way that was unusual.

MANSFIELD: He could read you. Yeah. See what you wanted.

KRISTOL: He adapted it seems to me.

MANSFIELD: And he always tried to make you a little bit more honest than you are. He would do that to me all the time.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

MANSFIELD: Yeah.

KRISTOL: About yourself you mean?

MANSFIELD: Yeah, about yourself, of course.

KRISTOL: Not about him?

MANSFIELD: Yeah right. To be honest about him was to admire him.

KRISTOL: I see. That's appropriate.

MANSFIELD: He would send me students. He was at Cornell most of the time, also at Toronto. He would send me his B.A.s to get Ph.Ds. I once said, "You really teach them, and I just give them a little polish". And he looked at me and said, "Harvey, but you do it so well." So that was good enough for me.

KRISTOL: Compliment from him. And say a word about *The Closing of the American Mind*.

MANSFIELD: That was a book, it was just an amazing book. One week after it was published I started seeing it under students' arms in Harvard Yard. I never had that experience before. *The Closing of the American Mind*, that was in 1987. That was a book about the American universities and how they were mis-educating their students, making them narrower in the way I mentioned before.

It was full of wonderful observations of students, of the importance of rock music, of the drug culture, things like that. All of which us, we professors, didn't know or overlooked or despised. He studied and watched. He really got into the lives and hearts and the minds of young people. And he saw so clearly how they were being misled by the professors that they had to listen to.

And so then he went after, after he studied the students in the first part of the book, he went after the professors and showed how they were all slaves of German thinking. Essentially of Hegel and Nietzsche and Heidegger. And all of the damage that those German thinkers had done in to politics – the clear, rational, enlightened politics of America.

So that was a wonderful book, and it still is a wonderful book, and if you wanted to get a look, a work by a Straussian, that's really excellent, that's definitely something to look at. And perhaps you could even begin a study of Strauss from that book. That's what Strauss is applied to our life. It shows you the relevance of Plato and Aristotle in a way Strauss's more scholarly work doesn't do.

So that was really an experience to watch, to be with him, too, and to enjoy with him. And he loved it, and he made everything of it, and he gave speeches to rich people and businessmen and made a lot of money on the lecture circuit as well from royalties of his book. That was a pleasure to see.

KRISTOL: And well deserved. I think you once said that he had bottled himself. Reading the book gave you a little bit of the experience of what it must have been like to study with him or to be a friend of his even. That he sort of bottled himself and put himself into this book in a way that was unusual, it wasn't the work of commentary or scholarship.

Ernest Fortin was also a good friend of yours and a great student of Strauss. Little different from Bloom or Benardete, I suppose.

MANSFIELD: Fortin was a priest of the Assumptionist Order, a minor, almost unknown order, I think, exists in Canada and France, given to scholarship. He was one of the most erudite persons I've ever knew and a man of great wit, too. And not one to rely on his priestly dignity. When I first met him I started calling him Father and then he looked at me and said, "Oh Professor Mansfield", as if being a professor were equal to being a priest. Which, of course, it is not.

KRISTOL: Right.

MANSFIELD: But so he was very easygoing priest. I remember once, he was a good friend of Allan Bloom's too. Once we were together in Paris sitting at a table at Café De Flore which was Allan Bloom's great haunt there. He liked to be where John Potash had been and others. So and Bloom said in his expressive way, "Here we are, the three of us! Protestant, Catholic, and Jew, these are Americans!" So America is the uniting and coming together of these three great religions. As if any one of us was really a proper representative of his religion. Well Ernest was a little bit closer than the other two of us.

And so Ernest studied medieval political philosophy and, of course, the Christians although it wasn't that he wasn't acquainted with Maimonides or Averroes or others. But he specialized in two things. The first was the Church Fathers and their relationship to philosophy. The Church Fathers, of course, include Saint Augustine and Saint Jerome, but he also wrote on others less well known like Saint Clement of Alexandria and others of that time.

It was always, especially in early Christianity he was always quite questioned what to do with philosophy. Philosophy seemed to be denounced in the Bible or at least criticized in the Bible by Saint Paul when he speaks of those who are lukewarm believers. In other words, philosophers who made accommodation to Christianity but didn't deeply accept it or believe it. So it was really, there were figures like Gregory the Great or Tertullian or others who really thought that philosophy was an enemy that should be extirpated by the Christian Church.

But no, the Church was, you could say, the Church was saved but the Church saved philosophy, in a way that we're all indebted to it for. In that early period, when it could have crushed or at least heavily damaged what remained of Greek and Roman, Latin philosophy. But on the contrary, maintained it and this was, of course, especially the work of Saint Augustine but also of these others among the Church Fathers. Saint Jerome, too.

Yeah, philosophy could be a handmaid to religion, and that was a role, which had a certain independence to it in fact if not in theory. And then his other, Ernest Fortin's other great topic was Dante. And he wrote that's the title of his book. He just wrote one book, *Dissent and Philosophy in the Middle Ages*. And it's a book on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which he shows is an altogether esoteric work. It's an esoteric work of a certain character, a different character. Because the esotericism is not hidden.

There's so many obvious puzzles to follow out when you read about Dante that you overlook the ones that aren't so obvious, and so if you don't do that and if you follow out what Ernest Fortin found you can begin to question how faithful a Christian Dante was. Though, of course, he was known as the Christian philosopher, and still is.

So what Strauss did to Maimonides, Fortin did to Dante. So following Strauss one could say. Then there are still, now also four volumes of Ernest Fortin's essays, which deserved to be read. Every single one of them. He was a man of great wit. He was very good at introducing speakers. To be introduced by Ernest was a challenge. How you would respond and also a pleasure because he was so amusing.

He was a wonderful man, and he had a great influence at Assumption College and at Boston College. Both of which he had taught in the Psychology Departments. And then the sort of uneasy relationship between theology and philosophy. That was his specialty, and that's where he lived. And he was a wonderful guy.

KRISTOL: Just say a word maybe a conclusion about, just as a cursory of listening to you, the wit of Bloom, Fortin, Benardete in a slightly different way, I think.

MANSFIELD: They're all funny men.

KRISTOL: What is the relation of that to philosophizing or rediscovering the art of writing? I mean, they're —

MANSFIELD: It is irony. Things aren't as they seem, and serious things are often decided for unserious reasons. And unserious things can be very much more important than they seem.

Wit is not just an accompaniment but part of the essence of the philosophy. Of course, you can be superficial and witty, like Noel Coward would say, but still that we are amused is a sign that there's something interesting there.

KRISTOL: And the wit points to something deeper, maybe.

MANSFIELD: It does.

MANSFIELD: The wit points to something ridiculous, some disproportion, something unexpected. All those are wit.

KRISTOL: The modern disposition is so much, to be so serious, takes tragedy very seriously and comedy superficial but somehow Strauss seems to suggest a little bit the, maybe not quite the opposite but the –

MANSFIELD: Almost the opposite. Tragedy ends up as something political, essentially political, and comedy is something philosophical. You're laughing. While you're laughing, you're not thinking so that, you could say, is the superficial part of comedy and when you're sent off in gales of laughter, you're thought process stops. But afterwards, you think, "Well, why did I laugh and what was so good about that?" It hit the spot.

That's another thing. Comedy is successful. Tragedy is unsuccessful. You can have a perfect tragedy, a Shakespearian tragedy. *King Lear*, that's perfect. But it's perfect as a tragedy as something which isn't perfect. So it's not, it needs to be supplemented by the laughs that we get in life.

KRISTOL: Well, on that note, thank you so much for taking this time to discuss Leo Strauss and Straussians.

MANSFIELD: It's been a pleasure, thank you.

KRISTOL: My pleasure and thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]