

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

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I. What is Esoteric Writing? (0:15 – 26:35)

KRISTOL: Hi. I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm pleased today to be joined by my long-time friend, Arthur Melzer, a distinguished professor of political science at Michigan State for quite a long time, right?

MELZER: More than I care to say.

KRISTOL: Okay. We won't even talk about that. We were together in grad school at Harvard and that began our friendship. Author of a very fine book on Rousseau earlier in your career and now of this really terrific book, *Philosophy Between the Lines*, which I encourage everyone to get and which will be the basis of our discussion today, your arguments and discoveries in this book. So thank you for joining me.

MELZER: Oh, my pleasure.

KRISTOL: So what is *Philosophy Between the Lines*? Kind of a weird title for a book in my opinion.

MELZER: Yeah. So the full title is *Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing*.

KRISTOL: Now that second part, that's what made it a bestseller, right? [Laughter]

MELZER: Right. [Laughter]

KRISTOL: Lost history. They like that.

MELZER: That's right. Yeah. There are dinosaurs in there that they had.

And well, the first thing to explain is esoteric writing. It's a form of writing not so much in favor now but used in the past, and it means writing, as the title suggests, between the lines. That is to say speaking in hints and riddles instead of a straight-out exposition of one's thought in a clear way. And doing that because the author is trying to hide and conceal the more unorthodox parts of his thought behind a

vener of conventional pieties and accepted opinions. And so that's the phenomenon that is the subject of the book.

But the phrase "lost history" refers to the fact that this is a practice, that at least in the thesis of the book, was engaged in by philosophers basically from the beginning of Western philosophy until about 1800 and went through many changes. It's not identically practiced necessarily with the same motives at every point, but it was almost ubiquitous.

Around 1800 in late Enlightenment it starts to disappear. A little bit later it gets forgotten and then later than that, which is our time for about the last century and a half, not only was it forgotten, but the whole idea is ridiculed and dismissed as preposterous.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I think what's interesting about the book is, I mean the argument, is it's not just like a few people did this and here's one and here's another. But it's really central to understanding most, maybe the huge majority of important thinkers, philosophers, but maybe also beyond philosophy to some degree or people we consider literary thinkers too. I would say this could fall into that category. A huge number of these people until at least 1800. So you really are talking about – you're providing a kind of revisionist history of political philosophy at least in this book I think.

MELZER: Right. Yes. Yeah. The idea is that it's not idiosyncratic.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I think that's right.

MELZER: I mean everybody, even philosophers, scholars who dismiss the idea in general will say, "Well there's certain people who engaged in this like Maimonides." It's so –

KRISTOL: You're living in a time of religious persecution. You won't say everything you think perhaps if you're religious.

MELZER: Right. But there are only certain people that are sort of given a pass regarding having done this. So Maimonides because he's so explicit about it they include. And more generally there's no denial or no resistance to the idea that throughout history mystics engaged in this. And even now if you google or you use Wikipedia under the term esotericism, oh sure, you'll find lots of references and they're all to mysticism.

So what is new? And again, this is getting back to the title *Philosophy Between the Lines*. That's the controversial thing. Everybody's willing to grant yes, mystics, alchemists, astrologers did this, but precisely because they're associated with them, that's part of the revulsion at the idea that Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, I mean real philosophers did this. That's the controversial claim.

So it's *Philosophy Between the Lines*. That's the lost history. That's what's been lost, that they did that. And it basically remained lost until, you know, basically the work of Leo Strauss in the late 1930s started uncovering this and returning it. And what I'm doing in the book is spelling out to a large extent and elaborating what he did.

KRISTOL: I think we once had a conversation where I remember saying Strauss purposely seems to have chosen a term that was in bad odor. I mean if you go around there – I remember I was once in a city, I can't remember where it was, and there was a book store, Esoteric Books, and it was entirely, you know, astrology and sort of nonsense of various kinds. And I think now, I suppose he chose to use the term maybe to provoke, but also I guess the main reason is because it is actually a term from Greek philosophy, right? Esoteric and exoteric.

MELZER: Right. Well, actually first of all so Strauss himself often talks about esotericism, but more often he actually avoids the word; he uses exotericism.

KRISTOL: Yeah, so say a word about what that is.

MELZER: Right. So an esoteric book is one where one writing has two doctrines. So multiple-level writing is another term for it, also the theory of two doctrines. These are terms that throughout history have been used for it. And the idea is that there's a surface teaching, that's the exoteric teaching, which is the one that is the veneer, is the, you know, falsely conformist view. And then beneath that the esoteric doctrine.

KRISTOL: I think it's literally secret. I mean exoteric is surface or –

MELZER: Right. Exoteric, exo, it means exterior, outside.

KRISTOL: Exterior.

MELZER: And esoteric means innermost.

KRISTOL: And I suppose while you say it's the conventional orthodox, I mean normally that would be the case just for obvious reasons, but I suppose literally it needn't be the case, right? I mean you could have a daring teaching on the surface and a somewhat undaring one underneath. It's hard to know why you would do that, I suppose.

MELZER: Right, yeah.

KRISTOL: Though strictly speaking exoteric means "surface," and esoteric means "hidden."

MELZER: Right.

KRISTOL: Okay.

MELZER: And so yeah, for some reason, for most of the time Strauss prefers the term exotericism –

KRISTOL: Right.

MELZER: – instead of esotericism perhaps to distance himself from the conventional use of esotericism, which was that it's mysticism.

KRISTOL: And sometimes he just says "a forgotten," the "art of writing" or a "forgotten art of writing," right? All kinds of – He doesn't obsess on the term in a certain way, right?

MELZER: Yeah. And there is – I mean if you look at the whole history, there is no particularly standardized vocabulary here. Different writers, like for example Francis Bacon talks about it and he distinguishes instead of esoteric and exoteric, he says the enigmatical and the disclosed.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's good.

MELZER: So there wasn't a settled vocabulary.

KRISTOL: Okay. So why is this central to the history of philosophy? I mean what's the –

MELZER: Well, right.

KRISTOL: What's your evidence I guess for why it is central?

MELZER: Okay. Well, let's start with this. Why does this matter? Why is it important? And to some extent it's very obvious. If, as I'm claiming – I mean what's crucial to the importance claim is that it's not idiosyncratic.

KRISTOL: Right.

MELZER: That you're getting back to the point you made earlier it's not idiosyncratic; it's kind of standard equipment that goes with the philosophic life. You know, when you get your philosophy license, you get this too, and it just follows philosophy wherever philosophy emerges.

Historically something like this pops up as well. Rousseau makes this point. And Rousseau and others in the Enlightenment are talking about it and they say, for example in India that there's an esoteric and an exoteric version of Hinduism, of Buddhism and so on. So they see it as a kind of very standard, just goes with the territory of being philosophic. So that's the first point in terms of its importance, that it's almost ubiquitous.

But then secondly I mean if somebody has written this way, if a book is written esoterically and you don't read it esoterically, it sort of follows almost by definition that a very important part of the doctrine, especially the most controversial and, therefore, perhaps most original and liberating part of the doctrine is something you're going to miss.

KRISTOL: Or you'll be too obsessed with the surface doctrine and miss that there's a complicated interplay of teachings and suggestions and so forth under the surface. That seems to be one problem with people who've read – from my limited knowledge – some of these thinkers without being aware of the complicated art of writing.

MELZER: Right.

KRISTOL: They always want to say "this is Plato's doctrine of X" – the Ideas or something, right? As opposed to saying, "well, this is actually in a dialogue where it's problematic and Socrates shows you all the usual, you know, the things that one might say if you read it in a more complex way."

MELZER: Right. And I would say that to put it a different way, I mean so yeah, so for scholars or people who are trying to understand these thinkers, the argument would be, you know, you haven't understood them if you have only the exoteric doctrine. So you're missing a large piece of it, as if there were a whole raft of writings that they had that you didn't possess and so on.

Secondly, it seems to me to some extent that – I mean we have great reverence for these ancient writings and the whole history of Western philosophy. It's always under fire by various people for one reason for another, they're dead white males or whatever, but there still is a lingering reverence.

But at the same time I would guess that most people who say when they get to college and they start reading these things that they've heard of, they're excited, but there's also a vague sense of disappointment that hovers over the experience of reading these books. And that's because they seem, I don't know, in some ways conventional. They seem in some ways lacking in logic, leaps of faith. Where did he get this? You know, why is Socrates talking about Zeus? You know, what, he's supposed to be a philosopher. Could he really be believing in Zeus and so on?

So I think that the books are basically just disappointing and more boring if you don't see that they have greater depth, that if you don't have this premise that when somebody says something in this whole period of Western philosophy, it doesn't mean that they completely believe it.

KRISTOL: That when you see a contradiction, you're seeing something they saw, that they intended, not –

MELZER: Right. That they planted. Yeah.

KRISTOL: It's not like Machiavelli wasn't smart enough to realize that he contradicts himself two chapters apart or something.

MELZER: Right. And then the third point I make is that it seems to me that if you engage in this practice as we have for basically two centuries, our whole scholarly history or whole, you know, our culture or scholarly culture is built on non-esoteric reading so to speak. And it has a distorting, more global distorting effect on a scholarly culture.

And I would argue that if you asked me what is sort of the most characteristic vice of contemporary reading, you know, across the spectrum of disciplines, I'd say kind of hypercontextualism, by which I mean everybody wants to take a writing and instead of just wanting to understand it for itself, they're saying, "Well, how does this relate to his background? How does it relate to his biography, to his time, to his religion, his race?" There is this effort to assume and to understand an author by reducing them to their context.

Now, some degree of contextualism is necessary and crucial and always interesting. But hypercontextualism is to really reduce a person to their thought [sic; "time"] and, therefore, in the end it means to not take them seriously.

And this is what Strauss also talked about under the name of historicism: [the notion] that everyone is a prisoner of their time and place. So why is our culture so much – why is our scholarly culture so drawn to this? And I would argue it's the – there's many reasons, but one is that the consequence of spending two centuries in ignorance reading esoteric books as if they were exoteric.

And the reason is that what does it mean to be esoteric? It means to pretend to be trapped in your time and place, right. It means that these are geniuses using every bit, every ounce of their intelligence to create the façade of conformity to their time and place. And so if you don't know about esotericism, inevitably you take that façade seriously.

And that leaves you thinking, somewhat dispiritedly, "This is how it is for humans and even our great geniuses, they're trapped. You know, the greatest geniuses are just giving the hometown ethnocentrism polished up. That's all they can claim for themselves or we can claim from them." So it has a general distorting effect I'd say on our literary and intellectual culture.

KRISTOL: That's so interesting. I had this experience a little bit. I think we read like one book of Plato's *Republic* in senior year of high school, you know, the way they do read books. And I remember reading it and of course it was Plato and so you're supposed to think, "Wow, this is one of the greatest thinkers ever and greatest writers ever." But even I – and I was not reading it closely or carefully; I was just goofing around like you do in high school – but even I saw like some of these arguments are just bad arguments. I mean one thing doesn't follow from the next, and this part of the argument seems to be very different from that part, and what is Socrates doing there?

I don't know, for some reason they had us read Book 10 I think of the *Republic*. And so you're right. It's like "well, I guess he's a great thinker when someone says he is; and he wrote a lot of books and stuff, dialogues. Maybe those are hard to write because they're dramatic or something." But it's not really something important to you if you as a 17-year-old could already say this seems wrong.

And I remember what an awakening it was when I got to Harvard and studied the *Republic* my first term, by good luck with Mark Blitz, and read Bloom's commentary that's in the translation and thought, "Whoa, okay, this is not what I thought," you know. So there's a kind of awakening, which I think is genuine. It's not to the depths and to the questions.

MELZER: Right. It's so right. The awareness of esotericism suddenly makes these books much more interesting, you know, and shows you why they're *trying* to be boring. You've experienced them as maybe a little boring. They were trying to in certain respects. And it enables you to see past that.

KRISTOL: And why generations afterwards who also understood at that time esotericism or exotericism knew that it was a great thinker. If a 17-year-old kid can see problems, that's not a great thinker.

MELZER: Actually the classic example of this phenomenon is Xenophon, which was a great love, so to speak, of Strauss, because I mean Plato even when he's not telling you some daring thesis that he holds truly, the surface is pretty exciting. I mean he's a wild man and I mean it's just full of interesting characters, interesting arguments even if it seems, you know, a little incoherent and contradictory. So Plato chose to make his surface be entertaining in a variety of ways.

Xenophon is one of the few esoteric writers who chose –

KRISTOL: Who is a contemporary of Plato.

MELZER: Contemporary of Plato and wrote dialogues like Plato but made them very placid. And so once the phenomenon of esoteric writing was forgotten and so everybody just sees every book for its surface, Xenophon was a big loser from that and he was dismissed. He was regarded as a great philosopher equal to Plato through most of history and suddenly this great contempt for Xenophon, which is necessary if he's really just about the surface, then don't read him, you know, because he's boring. And they just regarded him as an old general telling war stories.

KRISTOL: Right.

MELZER: And so yeah, that shows –

KRISTOL: Strauss does use Xenophon as part of his rediscovery. And I guess his first book published in the United States, *On Tyranny*, is a commentary on Xenophon's obscure dialogue. And it shows you like whoa

MELZER: Yeah, and in fact that's the book that Strauss uses as the one book that he wrote that tried to sort of say to teach people how to read. I mean it was more instead of just giving his results or so on, he's saying here, read Xenophon in this way and you'll see it will start opening up for you. So yeah, he chose Xenophon because he is really in a way the great –

KRISTOL: It's like if you can prove it on the toughest case, you can prove it on the others.

MELZER: Right. Yeah.

KRISTOL: Okay. So why do this? I mean you mentioned you vaguely want to look conventional or orthodox, but why?

MELZER: Right, okay. So actually before we get to it, let me just say I mean both of us are believers in this phenomenon. As I've been saying it's a lost history because the vast majority of scholars in philosophy, and across all literary disciplines, don't believe in this philosophic esotericism as distinguished from mystical.

And so I think I should put on the table at least a little bit of evidence before we go on so that people don't wonder if we're just making this all up as we go along. So actually this is how I got started in this business.

KRISTOL: Say a word about that.

MELZER: Yeah. I had been working on Rousseau in particular and had written a book about him, and in the course of doing that I was reading his context. I was looking at Diderot and other thinkers around and I was very much struck by the fact that there was a lot of very open reference to esotericism at that time.

I think that the ancient thinkers, in some ways that was the heyday and the height of esotericism. But because of that they didn't actually openly speak about it very much. Whereas, in the Enlightenment although they continued to use it in a slightly different form, they were very chatty about it. And so I started coming across very explicit statements, and I started thinking to myself, you know, somebody

ought to collect all this stuff because people have their doubts and it's reasonable that they have their doubts. Just if somebody could collect all this stuff, that would be a useful thing.

And the way of course that it is with these things, eventually I got to a point where I said all right, I'll do it myself. So I started working and I thought I would just publish basically a compendium of such stuff. But then the more I worked on it, the more interesting it got and there was philosophical aspects to the whole thing that drew me in. And so what ended up, the result was this book. But there's an appendix to this book which the University of Chicago Press did not wish to include because it would –

KRISTOL: Even fatter.

MELZER: – jack up the price. And so we agreed that I would do an online appendix. And in fact I've printed out the online appendix, and as you can see, it's not thin.

KRISTOL: Right.

MELZER: This thing is about a hundred pages long. Now, it's a little deceptive because some of the passages that are important are in here twice, once under the person who wrote it. So if say Rousseau is saying something about another thinker, it will appear once under Rousseau and once under the other thinker. So let's say it's 70 pages, but on the other hand I've been updating it. I haven't put the updates online yet. That will get it back up to a hundred pages. So let's say a hundred pages of this stuff. So there's a lot of this stuff out there.

KRISTOL: So these are quotes from different thinkers at different times about the phenomenon that you're discussing in this book.

MELZER: Right. Correct. Either saying, "I wrote esoterically." Or more commonly, "X wrote esoterically." Or thirdly, just is talking about esotericism in general and acknowledging the phenomenon and also usually praising. But anyway, let me –

KRISTOL: People can go look at this appendix without even shelling out for your book. That's maybe a questionable marketing decision. [Laughter]. But how do they get to read it?

MELZER: I didn't mean to reveal that. Yeah. So the appendix is online absolutely free, and it's got a very long link title, but the easiest thing to do is to just google my last name, Melzer, M-E-L-Z-E-R, Melzer comma appendix, and that will take you, not to my YouTube home video of my appendectomy but rather –

KRISTOL: That's reassuring. [Laughter].

MELZER: Reassuring. Yeah, to this. And you can leaf through it and pick your favorite philosopher – it's chronological – and see if there's something in there about him or by him on the subject.

But I'll just read you the two passages that were sort of what got me started, you know, that really said yeah, somebody's got to collect this stuff. And the first is a statement by Diderot, and he writes –

KRISTOL: A famous French Enlightenment thinker, author.

MELZER: And close friend of Rousseau, until they parted ways, and the editor of the famous *Encyclopaedia*. He says, "The condition of the philosopher is very dangerous. There is hardly a nation that is not soiled with the blood of several of them. What should one do then? Must one be senseless among the senseless? No. But one must be wise in secret." So that's one passage.

And the other is by my guy, Rousseau, and there's another place which I won't take the time to read where he says very explicitly that his first writing, the first discourse, that he wrote it meaning to conceal certain things and to display others. And now here he's saying that everybody does that. So here he

refers to, “The distinction between the two doctrines,” and as I say, this is a phrase for, you know, esotericism and exotericism.

“The distinction between the two doctrines so eagerly received by all the philosophers by which they professed in secret, sentiments contrary to those they taught publicly.” So this is kind of what got me started, and I think it’s understandable. This is pretty open and explicit stuff, and it really showed that somebody’s got to do something about this. So sort of that’s how I got started. And it was an effort also maybe to sort of free the country from the inordinate fear of Straussianism.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I don’t know that you succeeded in that, but that was a good effort.

MELZER: No. I think I certainly haven’t.

KRISTOL: People don’t read things as simple-mindedly as they did 50 years ago.

MELZER: Right.

KRISTOL: Even the ones who don’t want to quite acknowledge a lot of Strauss’s readings, or agree with them, or your readings or anyone else’s, there’s more sense of the –

MELZER: Yeah.

KRISTOL: Maybe I think.

MELZER: I think that’s fair.

KRISTOL: Anyway, so.

II: Why Write Esoterically? (28:08 – 54:03)

MELZER: But you had asked me about why did they do this.

KRISTOL: Right. What is the –

MELZER: That’s obviously the big question. And what I would say is that, you know, there’s not just one reason. They had multiple reasons that were interconnected. I sort of distinguish between four different motives or kinds of esotericism. And as I said, they go together, so it’s not like a thinker is either doing one of these or the other. Most of them who are doing the first are going to do the second and the third that I’ll describe at least.

But the first is the most obvious, and that is that through most of history there was no First Amendment. There was no free speech. And it was dangerous to come up with unorthodox ideas. I mean people are always saying even today we need to think outside the box, but most of the time they’ll kill you if you think outside the box, too far outside.

KRISTOL: Right.

MELZER: And so in short, a fear of persecution is the first and the most obvious, the most compelling reason for writing esoterically. That’s why Strauss’s book on the subject is entitled *Persecution and the Art of Writing*: that you write differently if you’re in an environment of persecution. So I call that defensive esotericism. You’re defending yourself against persecution. But then the second one –

KRISTOL: Strauss makes the point just on the persecution point that – and even in a liberal regime as we live in, there’s of course persecution short of killing you the way Socrates was killed –

MELZER: That’s right.

KRISTOL: – which has its own incentives. So we shouldn't feel like well, we've gone beyond that, right?

MELZER: Oh yeah, absolutely. And people self-sensor all the time. Yeah. Nobody wants to be hectored and 'canceled' to put it in contemporary terms. And so yeah, it still exists, the persecution and, therefore, in some mild manner this kind of esoteric, you know, toning it down, watching what you say, say it in an indirect way.

One time a writer for *The New York Times*, you know, was at a conference that I was at, and we got to talking and I mentioned what I was working on and he said, "Yes, you know, I've heard of that. And the first time I heard of esotericism, I thought gee, that's nuts." And then he thought to himself wait a minute. You know, when his editor doesn't like where he's going with something, without thinking about it, putting a name to it, he automatically, you know, thinks, 'Well, how can I do this more indirectly or indicate it between the lines.' So it's something that nobody has to teach you to do. It's something that people do automatically.

KRISTOL: And I suppose a lot of us would just okay, "I won't bother making this controversial point. Why should I take the grief?" And I guess your point is if you're a philosopher, you don't want to simply give up on trying to tell the truth or as much of the truth as you can or help educate people to discover the truth. So you do need somehow to do it indirectly. You can't just not – which a journalist would like just decide I'm just going to leave out this part.

MELZER: Well, no. I mean this guy was saying –

KRISTOL: He said he does try to do it.

MELZER: Yeah. I mean, you know, I –

KRISTOL: Because he has a certain compulsion to –

MELZER: Right. You know, if you've got some backbone to you and your editor – no one likes to be, you know, no one likes their editor.

KRISTOL: Right.

MELZER: You know, 'he's trying to get me to say this. Damn if I'm going to do that.' And so I've had this experience now many, many times where people spontaneously say – especially people in publishing – that yeah, that they do this and they do it kind of – as I say, they don't need to have read about esotericism, learned it somewhere. It just happens spontaneously.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

MELZER: Or if you think about other ways in which we talk, I mean let's say, you know, people are diplomatic, right. So somebody running for office, they have a certain view, but they realize it's not going to go down so easily so they find a way of just signaling it a little bit, signaling without saying. I mean the phenomenon is all around us if you start looking for it. And so it's nothing so strange that philosophers would engage in it.

KRISTOL: So persecution is the first and most obvious motive I guess.

MELZER: Right. And then the second one is this, that if the first is you're going to be esoteric for fear for your own safety, the second is fear for the safety and wellbeing of society, you know, not of the writer but of the audience of the writer. And again, just as you need to remember with respect to persecution that there was no free speech through most of history, so what was there through most of history?

There was, you know, not a modern liberal dynamic open society but a traditional society. And that means, you know, quite literally based on accepted inherited traditions and customs from the ancestors and presumably ultimately from God or the gods. So every society had its customs and its ways and its myths. Societies didn't claim to be based on reason and they weren't. And, therefore, it follows from that reason, you know, a certain kind of resolute rationalism would be a highly disruptive phenomenon in any conservative or rather traditional society.

And so philosophy is the resolute unwillingness to stop in your pursuit of the truth wherever it takes you. It's a subversive activity in the context of a traditional society. And so the philosophers felt that they were a threat to society, which they were.

And this relates back to the first point. The first point again is fear of persecution. But why was there so much persecution? And the philosophers were open to the idea that it wasn't just a vice and a narrowness and a redneck nastiness on the part of society, but that it was also the case that yeah, what we're doing is questioning everything that society and most people believe. Of course they should be upset at that. And so the point is that motive number two is they were esoteric for the sake of the good of society to not subvert it, to not, you know, undermine its foundational beliefs.

KRISTOL: If those beliefs were sort of reasonably healthy and reasonably necessary, you might say, just for the society to function, right?

MELZER: Right.

KRISTOL: I mean I guess that would be the –

MELZER: But if they weren't, the philosophers for the most part didn't think that they were in a position to –

KRISTOL: To improve it.

MELZER: Yeah, to improve things. I mean occasionally they would. And I mean it is the case that there's some element of a reformist concern in all of these philosophers, and they're trying to make little revisions on the margins. But by and large they take society as they find it, and they don't want to cause it any unnecessary trouble. And so that's motive number two, which I call protective. They're protective toward society and they think it's their duty not to be too open about what they're thinking.

KRISTOL: Strauss I guess just calls this the "tension between the philosopher and the city" or "Socrates and Athens." There are a million formulations for this. And that is pretty commonsensical I think.

MELZER: Right.

KRISTOL: And incidentally, wouldn't you say the modern societies also, we have our self-evident truths that maybe aren't quite as self-evidently true as we assert in our public documents.

MELZER: Right.

KRISTOL: And if you were – you might not want to, you know, you might want to indicate the limitations of some of those truths if you were writing in America without dismissing them.

MELZER: Yeah. I mean we are –

KRISTOL: Political correctness is a term that in a funny way captures this, right?

MELZER: Right.

KRISTOL: Every society has political correctness.

MELZER: Right. Yeah, things that shouldn't be thought and shouldn't be said. And we're adding to the list every day these days.

KRISTOL: Philosophers are about thinking things, not *not* thinking things.

MELZER: Right. I mean again they want to be outside the box. So okay. So we got defensive and we got protective and they're just the flipside of each other really. So on to the third.

The third you can get to in this way. So on the basis of the first two you're saying well, it's dangerous to me, the writer, it's dangerous to others, the readers, so why write at all? I mean if it's that dangerous to everybody, what's the purpose of writing a philosophical book?

And primarily the purpose – I mean as we just said, you know, around the margins it's some reformist concern for society, but that's not the major purpose and if that were their only concern, they'd just keep their mouths shut and live safe and not trouble society. But they believe in the philosophic life. They believe this is the greatest life and they want to propagate it. They want to keep it alive. They want to spread it to the next generation.

So through most of the early period of philosophy in the West, the primary purpose of all philosophic books was education, philosophical education for the few individuals who had the gifts and the kind of strength of character to follow that path. And so then that brings up the question okay, so if these are mainly educational texts and they're written by people with a great deal of thought about pedagogy and how they themselves wound up as philosophers.

So there's an art to writing from a pedagogical standpoint. And that art as it turns out has also got the character of esotericism in the sense that you want something like the Socratic method, by which even today we appreciate that idea, and that's in perfectly good odor. And the idea is that when you teach, you don't do all the work for the student. The worst thing you can do is to spoon feed them or hand them the answers. No. You want to pepper them with questions about what they believe right now and let them work their way out.

So you want them to do the work, point one. And number two, you want to begin with them – you want to start with them not from where you want them to get to. You don't start with your destination and your answer. You start with where they are now. If you want to give somebody directions, the first thing you say is well, "Where are you now? and then I'll tell you how to get there." So philosophical pedagogy has to begin with where people are now. So they begin with the accepted conventions of their society and create a slow road out that involves hints and riddles because you want the student to do the work.

So in short, there's a kind of nice harmony between the pedagogical demands of your book and the safety demands of your book both for you and for society. So the three esotericisms – and I called the third one pedagogical esotericism – kind of all fit together.

KRISTOL: Yes. And I think the indication of this is even if you were totally protected in some fortress and the king loved you and you could say whatever you wanted here, there's no issue of persecution and you weren't going to corrupt anyone or ruin society because maybe you were just teaching 20 people in your own little classroom, even so in the actual teaching part of it you don't, "Here's the doctrine, here's the truth," about X, right.

MELZER: Exactly.

KRISTOL: It's not like that. You want people to work their own way through the questions and riddles. You may end up not with a doctrine but with a set of questions and so forth.

MELZER: Right.

KRISTOL: Yeah. And I do think that's a key part of maybe the resistance to it, don't you think, that people don't like – I mean in the last 200 years people have gotten used to X's doctrine of Y, you know. Locke believed in the state of nature, and Plato believed in the Ideas. And it's always sort of reduced to a kind of formulaic thing. Whereas this writing, it seems to me, really cuts against that. I mean that's what I personally felt when I started understanding a little bit about how this might work.

MELZER: Yeah, that's right. Right. And it's got to do even in a way with the understanding of what philosophy and the philosophic life is. I mean philosophy isn't a subject matter like botany or whatever. It's a way of life. It's the way of life of somebody who, at least in the presentation of these ancient thinkers, has thought his way out of the aims and the purposes and the goods that most people follow in life. They've seen that they're not adequate, or contradictory, or elusory and, you know, ascended to a view that thinking and knowing, without necessarily coming to a final doctrine, that that is somehow the good life.

And if that's the case, then the book you're writing, even if there weren't the issue of making somebody think for him or herself, it's just that it's the thinking itself and not the doctrine. And so if you think of philosophy as that, then a much more open-ended book that is frustrating, you know, frustrating to somebody who thinks philosophy is "knowing the doctrine." And so why in the world are they writing their books in such a frustrating way? Well, it's less frustrating if the purpose of philosophy is not knowing the doctrine but, you know, knowing a practice and a way of life.

So once again it all fits together in the context of if you get beyond certain contemporary or modern assumptions about what philosophy is, it makes more sense.

KRISTOL: Yeah. That's good. But I think in the book you have a fourth reason.

MELZER: Yeah, yeah. Number four. So the first three go together and form a unit. And basically that's the purpose of esotericism as practiced by premodern philosophers. And by premodern I mean let's say before 1500, before the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.

In the Modern Period the whole purpose of philosophy begins to change. And that has to do with the thing that you were alluding to before, that the premise of the ancient thinkers is that look, this thing, the philosophic life, this is definitely a rare thing. It's not for everybody. And not only that but when you've achieved this way of life, you live very differently from other people and there's a gulf, there's a distance between the philosopher and what Strauss calls "the city," meaning everyone who is living the active life, the citizens' life, the moral, political, religious life. And there's a gulf there and that gulf can't be bridged. It's not like you can take the city and make it philosophize and live this way, this philosophic way of life.

So even though in their books, to some extent, there's some reformist intention around the edges of these ancient thinkers, they don't seriously entertain the idea that these two worlds, the world of philosophy and the world of citizen life can really be bridged, that there's harmony between them.

There's in fact conflict between them because the philosopher to do what he does must essentially question all of the things that the citizens are believing. So there's no hope to bring those two things together. And so there's not a real activism, in short, in the philosopher's attitude towards society. Improvements that were around the edges but no transformation, no changing of the world. And so the purpose of their books is just to educate a few people to philosophy ultimately.

So fast-forward to the Modern Period. For a variety of reasons, that view – I call it the conflictual view that these two kind of ways of life, the philosophic life and practical life, the citizen's life, that those two things are necessarily in conflict and that esotericism is in a way the thing that smooths over that conflict and that difference. In the Modern Period there's this idea of, "No, we can bring these two things together, that if the philosophers would get off their mountaintops and they would start writing in a more accessible and popular manner, they can slowly transform society and go beyond traditional customary mythical bound societies and create a rational society."

And obviously this is the whole project, you know, that led to, let's say, the United States, and it's very clearly seen as such a new thing in say *The Federalist Papers*. So now you have a new purpose for doing philosophy and especially for writing philosophy. And the new purpose is social change, is political change, is rationalizing the world of these two things that don't fit together, the philosopher and this city. This is to make the city philosophic, in the sense of rational.

So that calls upon a very different kind of book. And as it turns out, it still involves esotericism but of a different kind. Now, what they're trying to create is a world where finally at some future point we'll have a rational world and society based on reason. And then there'll be no need for esotericism or at least no need other than the pedagogical one. But these Enlightenment thinkers don't think they're there yet. What's new is that they're aiming for this, not that they're there.

KRISTOL: Some of them think you may never get there or only get there for a few people so it's not as if all Enlightenment thinkers are pure rationalists.

MELZER: Right. Yeah. There's a whole array.

KRISTOL: But that it would be better the more rational it is, I guess.

MELZER: Right. And so the more rational they think the place where you can get, the more they think that eventually there'll be no need for esotericism because the gulf will have been narrowed or eliminated. So the Enlightenment thinkers on the one hand have a certain hostility to ancient esotericism because they thought that there were things that could have been done, you know, by the philosophers to improve their societies that weren't done.

So on the one hand there's a certain hostility to it. At the same time they themselves need to practice a different kind of esotericism, namely this: You want your book to change the world. If you want your book to change the world, you need to write it in a certain way. You need not just true ideas because truth just alone isn't that powerful. You need powerful ideas. So this is a shift in the direction of the love of powerful ideas. And so that leads them to slightly or sometimes more than slightly distort what it is they really believe in order to put forward doctrines that will have power.

And later in the modern world they invented a word for this and it's propaganda. So propaganda is the fourth kind of esotericism, which I call political esotericism. A way of writing that distorts or hides – that deviates from what you think of as strictly true, on behalf not of coddling and keeping society safe in its foolish traditions and myths, but rather one that empowers the philosophic class and the intellectual class that grows up in its shadow to have a power over society and to move it in a rational direction.

KRISTOL: Yeah. That's interesting. So it's quite different though from the ancient esotericism.

MELZER: Right. Yeah. In some ways it's opposite. I mean in the sense that protective esotericism is, "let's protect society from philosophy."

KRISTOL: Right.

MELZER: And protect their traditions and their myths, maybe just trim them a bit. And modern esotericism wants to subvert society, wants to subvert the customs and the traditions slowly. In a measured and calculated way let's slowly subvert that and then create a new – and then refound society on a rational basis.

KRISTOL: But getting people there requires a certain amount of oversimplification probably. I mean that's sort of the propaganda thing. You have doctrines that everyone agrees to. And of course when you think hard about the "state of nature" or all these other doctrines, they're a little more complicated or problematic or –

MELZER: Right. Or like the social contract.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

MELZER: Now, did Locke or Hobbes, did they really think that in the state of nature people got together and said, "Wait a minute, let's make a contract?"

KRISTOL: Right.

MELZER: That's not where societies come from, and they know that. That's a myth. It's a myth that has a certain core truth to it that if it were explained, it would be more complicated and wouldn't be very catchy. So social contract theory is a kind of, you know, oversimplification that creates a powerful doctrine that you can, you know, can have force in the world.

KRISTOL: And what do you call that fourth kind, that sort of more practical –

MELZER: Political esotericism.

KRISTOL: Yeah, yeah. So achieving a certain reform agenda, which as you say, some people might believe that at some point the reform has gone so deep that you don't need it anymore, but even the Federalists, *Federalist 49* I think you need to have reverence for the Constitution. I mean you could have a partial enlightenment, right. I mean not every enlightenment thinker thought everyone would be fully enlightened. I mean, it is a fundamentally different way of thinking about the world than, "we're all stuck in a cave and one philosopher can leave." It's the opposite, right? You're bringing the light into the cave.

MELZER: Right.

KRISTOL: But it doesn't mean it gets fully lit so to speak or it's –

MELZER: Right. Although there were –

KRISTOL: or that people have different capacities and et cetera.

MELZER: Right. But it does seem that the point you're making is important if you want to understand that period, because there's a kind of slightly cartoonish version of Enlightenment rationalism which empowers somewhat unreasonable, unfair attacks on it in the Counter-Enlightenment and so on.

But the truth is that there was an array of – there were degrees among different thinkers. And one of the curious things is very often in a movement things get more radical over time, but in the Enlightenment Period it seems to me it went the other way. That is people like Hobbes and Machiavelli are more radical than the thinkers that come after them.

So I believe that Hobbes not only was an atheist for all of the talk that he gave about Christianity. This would be one example of an esoteric reading. He was an atheist. But furthermore, that he, I think, really did think an atheist society was possible and that that was his goal.

And it's hard to say for Machiavelli. You have someone like Helvétius, a somewhat less-well-known Enlightenment figure, again at the same time as Rousseau and Diderot. I think he is also regarded as, you know, someone who wants an atheistic society. And so these people are more sanguine about real rational foundations for society.

Others are not. So Voltaire clearly didn't think you could – you needed to reform religion, radically reform Christianity. But that we always needed religion I think he did believe in, though I think he himself was not a believer. Same thing for Rousseau.

KRISTOL: That would be a psychological judgment, or empirical judgment, as it were about people's soul. I mean people want to believe and so you give them – Locke does this, right – a reasonable version of Christianity as opposed to what they would regard as a more damaging one to civil peace.

MELZER: Exactly. Yeah. I mean or two things. Number one, does society need it?

KRISTOL: Right.

MELZER: You know, will people really obey and be good citizens? Can an atheist be an honest man? The old question. And so does society need for order and obedience, does it need religion? But then what you said, the more deep question of, you know, does the human soul really not long for something like that?

KRISTOL: Well, they're related. If society needs it, it's because human beings need it or long for it. Well, it's a little different question I guess. Either they'll do bad things if they don't think there's divine reward and punishment. Or there's a more subtle I guess version of that, which is people want to – Nietzsche says that people want to believe. I mean, you know.

MELZER: Yeah. Right.

KRISTOL: So it matters what they believe.

MELZER: Right. And today I mean half the atheists are just religious in a different way, right. So it's not something easily uprooted.

KRISTOL: Right.

MELZER: But anyway, so the point is yes, you're right, that there was a pretty wide array of thinkers with respect to the question of well, just how rational do you expect to make society. But nevertheless, everybody was onboard with that project in one form or another it seems.

III: A Lost Tradition (54:03 – 1:25:45)

KRISTOL: So that's running us up into the late 18th century and Rousseau and you could probably read some other thinkers, but they do seem to talk about it a lot more for some reason then, maybe because other people are more skeptical at that point.

MELZER: Yeah.

KRISTOL: And then it seems to stop. So you should say a few things – Well, read a couple things first and then say what happens. I mean why does this just not chug ahead through the 19th century and into much of the 20th?

MELZER: Okay. So this is just back to another interlude where I try and just lay some stuff on the table so again folks know that this is real. Now I have already displayed my thick list of examples and testimonial evidence.

KRISTOL: I mean I should say the book itself is full of examples and testimonial evidence. So you should order the book in addition to looking at this free appendix.

MELZER: Right. And it does explain everything so it's useful. But the point is so I mean really I think if we extended this conversation for just another, say, four-and-a-half hours and I don't know what your schedule looks like. [Laughter].

KRISTOL: It's great. It's not my schedule; it's our viewers.

MELZER: I could go through the hundred pages.

KRISTOL: Right.

MELZER: But plan B would be to try and do what we can with just a few examples, let's say three. And one way to I think to get the most bang for the buck is to do it this way. Let's try and think about the thinkers who would be the least likely to have been practicing esotericism. And then if it should turn out that there's testimonial evidence of one kind or another to them, then, you know, we can say okay, if they were, then I can believe that anybody was.

And so you can do a lot of work with just a few examples. So let's play that game. And let me suggest for starters the clearest example in this list, and that is, what is the single least likely place in the world for you to find the acknowledgement of esotericism, the embrace of esotericism, even the practice of esotericism? I think it's clearly going to be something in the Enlightenment since that's, you know, adopted the project of being open and rational and bringing reason and philosophy precisely into the public.

And what is the focus, you know, ground zero for that Enlightenment endeavor to bring philosophy out into the open? And it's obviously the *Encyclopedia*, right, this project of Diderot and d'Alembert and other Enlightenment thinkers to create this vast encyclopedia of human knowledge that would be available to people generally in order to work towards the age of reason and to popularize rationality and philosophy.

So I think that that's a good candidate, right, for the least likely place in the world where you would find esotericism. But we've already actually heard that statement that I read from Diderot that was published in the *Encyclopedia*.

KRISTOL: Right.

MELZER: So there already you have some evidence, but let's stick with the *Encyclopedia* for a second to show that that wasn't just an idiosyncratic thing, that statement about being wise in secret but that in the *Encyclopedia* there is mention of the practice of esotericism in over 25 different articles by different people. And so also the nice thing about this being an encyclopedia is it shows that the awareness of this was, you know, an encyclopedia is where you expect to find something that's general knowledge, and that you've got these 25 articles by different people sort of testifies to the idea that yeah, of course everybody knew about this.

So 25 articles and if you look at them, one of them is about esotericism. It is actually an article about esotericism in the *Encyclopedia* entitled "Esoteric and Exoteric." And among other things it says, "The ancient philosophers had a double doctrine; the one external, public, or exoteric; the other internal, secret, or esoteric."

So that's pretty clear. Now it's of course a statement about what the ancients were doing. So that raises the question well, what about more modern people. So there is another article in the *Encyclopedia* entitled "Encyclopedia." That's to say there's a discussion about encyclopedias in the *Encyclopedia* so it's sort of like an 18th century selfie.

KRISTOL: Meta. Yeah.

MELZER: And this was written by Diderot himself and in it he says that some articles were written to "secretly attack, unsettle, and overturn certain ridiculous opinions which one would not dare to insult openly."

KRISTOL: Talking about the articles in the –

MELZER: Yes. In fact, what he's referring to in particular is this, he's claiming – and it's amazing that he lays this out so openly, but he says that in writing the *Encyclopedia* after every entry there is, as in most

encyclopedias now, a reference part where it says “see:” and then it lists other articles that you should see in connection with this one.

And so what they did is if there is some issue, you know, like there’s an article on the Bible or whatever, so they’ll have an article dedicated to the Bible and that one will be very respectful. But then they’ll say “see:” and they’ll lead you to other articles that may be on trivial, you know, I don’t know, on baby carriages, who knows, I mean some innocuous and irrelevant-sounding article in which it is indicated in one way or another, you know, a critique of certain views presented in the –

KRISTOL: Miracle. Baby carriages don’t appear out of nothing and that’s a way of saying that –

MELZER: Exactly. Yeah.

KRISTOL: – God didn’t create whatever.

MELZER: That’s right.

KRISTOL: I assume there’s not actually an article on baby carriages, however in the *Encyclopedia*.

MELZER: Correct. At least to my knowledge.

KRISTOL: I’ve never actually looked at the *Encyclopedia*. It’s such a famous thing, but it’s –

MELZER: Oh yeah. No. It’s full of good stuff.

KRISTOL: Yeah. It sounds great.

MELZER: But not baby carriages. But at any rate, this shows not only are they embracing – first of all, not only are they recognizing yeah, there is this thing, esotericism is very widespread. Not only are they saying we’re practicing it, but in a way he’s kind of saying almost as if the whole thing is set up. It’s a systematic aspect of the structure of the *Encyclopedia* as such that aims at, you know, a sort of esoteric activity.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that’s good.

MELZER: So I think that’s a big winner for the pro-esotericism camp.

My second candidate for the very unlikely person to be doing this, especially when you consider that esotericism involves a kind of dishonesty and a kind of playfulness – playfulness as opposed to philosophic gravity. So you think about those things and you think okay, well, what about Saint Thomas Aquinas? Are you telling me that this saintly man at the center of Christian theology, you know, certainly he wouldn’t be messing around playing games of hide-and-seek with his books, but you would be wrong.

So he writes somewhere in the *Summa*, “Certain things can be explained to the wise in private, which we should keep silent about in public. Therefore, these matters should be concealed with obscure language so that they will benefit the wise who understand them and be hidden from the uneducated who are unable to grasp them.”

KRISTOL: That’s pretty remarkable.

MELZER: Yeah. So it is pretty striking. And it also just incidentally and parenthetically it shows you that this whole idea of kind of basically what we’re talking about is proving the existence of esoteric writing not only by what I began by explaining the motives for it and saying look, doesn’t it make sense they would be doing this, but also, you know, empirically.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

MELZER: And empirically by relying on explicit testimony. Now, you could say well, wait a minute, how can there be explicit testimony? If you're esoteric, you're supposed to be keeping secrets. You know, how could you also be spilling them? And the point is that it's one thing to say I am writing esoterically. It is another thing to say what you're hiding, what your secrets are.

And that proves to be an operative distinction in the history of all of this, that lots of people are willing to say that I or some other philosopher wrote esoterically and hid things. What they don't by and large do is say what they were hiding. So you can be open about secrecy in that sense. And so yeah, so Thomas, it's really quite striking.

So my third and final example is Aristotle. Now, Plato, as I was saying before, he's kind of a wild man and his surface is full of, you know, jokes and games and puzzles and it's a lively play. It's like Shakespeare.

KRISTOL: Images, metaphors.

MELZER: Right. Everything, poems. I mean it's just – it's a whole three-ring circus. And so I think most people even, you know, very stern Plato scholars can appreciate that, you know, maybe almost anything is possible with Plato. I mean I think people would be willing to say yeah, Plato is capable of that, and after all, he does talk about the noble lie and that that's necessary and good in society, in the perfect society. So okay, not Plato. But Aristotle. Aristotle is a straight man.

KRISTOL: Sober.

MELZER: Sober, grave, serious, and also literal minded. I mean he seems so eager in his texts to be clear, precise, methodical, and so on. And so for reasons like that it's fair to say that in the literature on these things and the mass scholarly literature on Aristotle everybody regards him as the last person in the world who could be accused of having written esoterically.

But it turns out that if you look at the long history of commentary on Aristotle – and there is no philosopher in the Western tradition about whom there is more commentary than Aristotle. I mean there are thousands and thousands and thousands of pages written in Aristotle commentary. So the secondary literature is older and larger than on any other thinker.

KRISTOL: And a lot of that commentary by philosophers themselves, not just by scholars.

MELZER: Right. No, by almost all of –

KRISTOL: Famous –

MELZER: Yeah. Almost all of it by philosophic individuals. So it turns out that it's almost absolute unanimity that he's writing esoterically. So one writer, for example, Simplicius, a lesser known ancient commentator on Aristotle, states that in his works, "He deliberately introduced obscurity, repelling by this means those who are too easygoing."

And similarly there's a long discussion of this in Plutarch, too long to read but really fascinating about a letter that Aristotle wrote to his best pupil, or at least his most famous pupil, Alexander the Great, and the reply of Alexander, and basically Aristotle is saying, you know, I've published some books on philosophy. And Alexander's writing back saying no, that's a bad idea. No. You can't reveal this stuff. And then Aristotle writes back and says, "well don't worry, they are published and not published." And it's a famous phrase that echoes through the commentary on him, you know, taking it very clearly to mean that it's published but not in a way that can be easily seen.

But let me get to the best source on this. There is a Greek satirist named Lucian living in Roman times in Rome and he writes a comic dialogue entitled "The Sale of Lives." And this depicts a slave auction of

philosophers arranged by Zeus with Hermes as the auctioneer. And so let me read you a quick section on this. We pick up the action after the sale of Pythagoras, Heraclitus, and some other lesser lights and finally he puts Aristotle on the block. So Hermes: "Come now, buy the height of intelligence, the one who knows absolutely everything." Buyer: "What's he like?" Hermes: "Moderate, gentlemanly, adaptable in his way of living, and what is more, he's double." Buyer: "What do you mean?" Hermes: "Viewed from the outside he seems to be one man and from the inside another. So if you buy him, be sure to call the one self exoteric and the other esoteric."

KRISTOL: Wow.

MELZER: So again, you know, pretty explicit.

KRISTOL: And it shows how deep the tradition was. I mean hundreds of years later in Rome –

MELZER: Right.

KRISTOL: – tossed off almost –

MELZER: Yeah.

KRISTOL: I mean not as a revelation, just as a character in whatever that is, a dialogue or a play or something –

MELZER: Yeah. So I think that again my scheme is that if these three hardest cases are so very clearly – I mean I don't think there's any ambiguity here. I think there's so much evidence for each of these three that they were esoteric. It just seems to me, you know, it greatly increases the likelihood that basically anybody could have been if they were, and that this was really a very widespread practice.

KRISTOL: Okay. So in the few minutes since we don't have four-and-a-half hour conversations – maybe we should though. That'd be more philosophic. Didn't Plato – they spoke all night in *The Republic* and then *Symposium*. But briefly so why did this get lost? I mean why did Leo Strauss have to do his work and make his very astonishing discoveries, which are he was astonished by what he discovered though, if you look at the letters from the thirties and then you had to write this book and stuff. So give us the brief version of the –

MELZER: Okay. Let me just rattle off some quick points and stick with one of them for a little more. If you think it through, you realize that esotericism pretty much, this practice pretty much violates every cherished value we have in the Modern Period. For example, for egalitarians this is a very elitist practice, right, hyper elitist.

Secondly, we believe in honesty, telling the truth, especially scholarly, you know, scholars have a duty to tell the truth. And this is plainly dishonest. Thirdly, the whole meaning of philosophy in the Enlightenment Period is for demystification, but this is mystery, this is mystification.

Another issue is that for a variety of reasons, you know, we've evolved in the Modern Period into a period of very great what I could call hermeneutical skepticism. There's very great skepticism that one can even use the phrase "the correct interpretation" as if there could be a correct interpretation of something. I mean if you use that phrase in the modern academy, you're looked upon as a kind of somewhat backward and benighted soul. We know that there's no such thing. So there's hermeneutical pessimism because obviously the idea of esotericism presupposes that people are able to tease out very subtle things but still in an accurate way.

But the I think most important thing – well, one more before we get to that. It's seen as cowardly because again the modern Enlightenment understanding of the philosopher is you're supposed to change the world, you're supposed to speak truth to power, not hide from power.

KRISTOL: Right.

MELZER: But, you know, ultimately and underlying all this is there's a certain – the basic premise of ancient political esotericism is what I call this conflictual view that these two kind of peaks of human life, that human life is dualistic and it has these two peaks; one is philosophy, one is citizenship and that they are in tension with each other. And that's tragic. I mean that means that life is fundamentally flawed if what perfects one person puts another person's way of life, you know, in some jeopardy.

I mean and we are humanists. We're in the modern world. And so the opposite view beginning in the Enlightenment is this what I call the harmonist view, that life fits together in the end. Maybe not at first, but we can make it fit together. Human beings can solve every problem that nature throws up to them. We're solutionists.

And the ancient view and the esoteric view is very, you know, anti-solutionist. It's rather resign yourself to a certain necessity, that there's flaws in the human condition that cannot be overcome. Death is a big one. But another one is this, that the perfections of our nature are such that they don't fit together. So I think that there is this just repugnance that they feel for the attitude that lies behind this practice.

KRISTOL: That's interesting. I mean I guess that could be tragic, or comic I mean in a way, being that comedy is often about the disproportion of things or whatever.

MELZER: Right. That's true. Comic, depending on where you fit into the scheme.

KRISTOL: Yeah, but neither is congenial to this modern view.

MELZER: Right.

KRISTOL: You're either a kind of resigned comic view of life, you know, Aristophanes I suppose. And this is the way it is, you know. Or a kind of resigned tragic view of life I suppose. Yeah, that's interesting. I hadn't really thought of it that way.

And so then I guess I mean who's the last thinker – I don't remember – you cite who's explicit about – I mean is there a moment where we can see it disappear? I mean there are thinkers in the 19th century who quietly make clear they understand this. You know, they just don't talk about it much. They read other previous thinkers the way you would want them to, but they don't make a big deal of it because it's so out of fashion I suppose.

MELZER: Yeah. Well, I don't think it's ever completely disappeared.

KRISTOL: Right.

MELZER: Yeah. I don't think it's ever completely disappeared. And Strauss is the one – well, let me say it hasn't completely disappeared, but even among, you know, just scholars who in general scoff at the idea, they'll all of them say, you know, except for this guy.

KRISTOL: Yeah, right.

MELZER: It's somebody that they've worked on because it turns out that if you dig deep enough regarding almost anybody, you'll come across this stuff. And so it turns out that lots of scholars who will reject this Straussian obsession with secrets and so on, nevertheless, they think, well but this guy actually did. So a Diderot scholar here, a Rousseau scholar there. Even Quentin Skinner, the leader of the Cambridge school of interpretation which emphasizes all the contextualism and historical grounding that I was talking about earlier, he has a book on Hobbes and he thinks Hobbes was an atheist.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

MELZER: So the pieces of it never disappeared, but the whole picture with its deeper philosophical significance, that is what has disappeared. It's hard to say who was the last person who had that, but, you know, there's a letter from Goethe who is lamenting the decline that he sees taking place before his very eyes.

KRISTOL: And that's at the turn of the 19th century, right?

MELZER: Yeah.

KRISTOL: I mean Goethe would be late 18 – yeah.

MELZER: Right.

KRISTOL: I suppose if you get to Kant, Hegel, et cetera, it's much less –

MELZER: Right. They still know that people did this, but they don't approve of it and they don't really believe that it could have worked. They kind of reject the larger meaning and significance and philosophical roots of it all. But that people did it, I mean there's a piece by Kant where he's criticizing somebody in his time who was doing this and basically on the grounds that it's not telling the truth.

KRISTOL: That's interesting. That's so interesting. So your book came out, what, maybe five years ago?

MELZER: Twenty fifteen basically.

KRISTOL: And I'm curious, reaction to it? I mean on the one hand you're taking on – you're defending what's sort of an unpopular position, maybe not as unpopular as it once was, but you have all this evidence. It's a little different from interpreting one text where people can say well, either that interpretation is wrong or maybe that person had this quirky idea that he should write this way, but it's not really central to 2,000 years of major, major, major philosophers. I mean so I'm curious what the reaction – what surprised you one way or the other?

MELZER: Well, it was fairly broadly reviewed. I don't know, maybe it got something like 30, 35 reviews. And I would say for the most part they were all positive. And even the people who were critical, you know, obviously people have criticisms and maybe it deserves some too, but still they were all admitting well, yeah, it did open my eyes a bit as to how widespread this phenomenon was.

Nobody sort of said this is just fake news or whatever. That was before we had that useful phrase. But at the same time what I was hoping for was a kind of larger engagement with it and, you know, people who are scholars involved in what we call hermeneutical questions, questions of interpretation in reading, people from the Cambridge school, and so on, that there would be some kind of attacks or at least some kind of assessment and engagement. And that so far hasn't happened. So that's been disappointing.

KRISTOL: Well, I guess maybe that's a sign that they don't really – it's easier to ignore than to criticize if you don't have good criticisms, right?

MELZER: Well, that's what I like to think, but I'd prefer –

KRISTOL: And scholars have a big investment and, you know, this is the big problem. I'm always struck with Strauss who was such a huge figure. There were a few people who mid-career or early career read it and think oh my God, you know, I did not know this, I didn't understand this, I've been doing things wrong, Willmoore Kendall I think, perhaps not a great thinker, but still it's very much to his credit that he –

MELZER: Yeah.

KRISTOL: I don't know how old he was, but he had already written an important book I think on Locke, right?

MELZER: Yeah, yeah.

KRISTOL: Sort of says well, this is –

MELZER: Strauss put me back to school.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I mean how many scholars can say that?

MELZER: Yeah.

KRISTOL: That's what strikes me. So maybe it's just the next generation that really has to decide, you know, this is pretty compelling and I need to – whatever my professor and my, you know, political science 101 class is telling me, I need to read these books with more suspicion and I think more fun.

I guess I'll just close with this maybe. For me at least – we've discussed this several times. I mean you came to this from your studies of Rousseau, as you said here, your unhappiness with what was there in terms of just you're reading these statements and no one else is commenting on them. A lot of people though get intrigued I think with this just because it's so much more fun and exciting to read a book in the way this would suggest.

MELZER: Right.

KRISTOL: It can lead you off of course also.

MELZER: Yeah, very easily.

KRISTOL: You know, you're playing so many games at once that you sort of lose track of what you're doing. Or you go off on some tangent. Or you misunderstand hints and so forth. But there is something so much more – I found this just as a student. I mean I haven't done this in years obviously, but, you know, I don't know. I don't know. I'm just curious when you teach and, you know, with students, do people have a taste for that kind of, the playfulness of it? I mean I think that's what strikes me. Certainly your teacher Allan Bloom did, right?

MELZER: Yeah. I think that I'd say they don't enjoy the idea or the prospect of having to read esoterically because it's daunting and it's difficult. And there's a lot of downside, which we haven't talked about, to this whole phenomenon. Downside in the sense that, you know, if it's true that you need to interpret these books esoterically, that's hard to do and hard to do right and a hundred ways to go wrong. So it increases the level of nonsense out there as well as the possibility of, you know, something that goes deeper than things had previously.

So yeah, I think that people feel daunted and it could even discourage people from wanting to read these people and just stick to contemporaries who don't do this. On the other hand, it does make these thinkers more interesting. So you're more asking about the process.

KRISTOL: Well, either way.

MELZER: Yeah. But so that I find that I mean there are certain people who have a knack for this. The funny thing is that I never thought I'd be writing on this because I don't, and I don't even much like esoteric interpretation myself. I mean the act of it.

KRISTOL: Right.

MELZER: I'm just a very literal-minded person. And so I'm a little, you know, part of me would say I wish this weren't true, but on the other hand, what we had talked about earlier is it does make them more interesting.

And that initial disappointment that a lot of people feel when they pick up these famous books and hope to be blown away by them and are not, I think it makes them more interesting when they realize well, you know, there's more here than meets the eye. And that, you know, one can pursue these things and think about them more deeply with the help of these books and that's more interesting. So that's the way I would describe the up-side.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I've always been struck – I mean I've always wondered – well, when I was in this business briefly as a student and then grad student and then professor a couple of years – yeah, it was sort of, "Why aren't more people attracted to this?" Both other scholars and professors but also just students.

And, you know, it's just so obviously to me more interesting than, you know, the kind of doctrinal deductive, you know, working things out. That's fine for some. It's important. But I think I underestimated what's the core of your argument really, which is the resistance to it for, what should we call it ideological reasons or for, you know, that once you accept this, you're not just accepting a method of reading, right; you're accepting a certain understanding of how philosophers think, the relationship between a philosopher and society as you said.

MELZER: Right.

KRISTOL: The gap between the few and the many as all these quotes, many of these quotations explicitly say; and, you know, the wise and the unwise and that's a hard thing maybe for people to get over so to speak.

MELZER: Right. Yeah. I think it galls people on so many levels.

KRISTOL: Right.

MELZER: Yeah. But I think that on the simplest level, as one scholar said in reviewing one of Strauss's books, it's an invitation to perverse ingenuity. And Strauss and these Straussians, they think they have a key that nobody else has and they have secret truths that we don't. The whole thing is just obnoxious.

And so I think it just galls people on a certain level. And, you know, again, it has to be confessed that it is an invitation to perverse ingenuity in the wrong hands. I think Strauss is one of the most dependable and sober and reliable of esoteric interpreters, but the same can't be said for every one of his students or everybody who gets involved in this game.

There are a hundred ways to go wrong once you start interpreting esoterically. And so it's not unreasonable to want it not to be true. So I don't know.

KRISTOL: That's interesting.

MELZER: There's a whole raft of good and bad reasons for resisting it, but resisting it we have.

KRISTOL: Right. But overcoming the resistance we have. So congratulations on your book.

MELZER: Thank you.

KRISTOL: And thank you for taking the time for this conversation.

MELZER: It's been a pleasure.

KRISTOL: And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]