

How to Study Early Modern Philosophy?

Historical Understanding and the Author's Intention

Keywords: Hermeneutics – Methodology – Leo Strauss – Quentin Skinner

On May 16, 1944, the German-Jewish philosopher Leo Strauss delivered a lecture titled *How to Study Medieval Philosophy* (1). Although the title suggests that the lecture deals solely with a specific period of intellectual history, Strauss immediately expands it in the opening sentences to encompass the entirety of intellectual history. In doing so, he revisits his hermeneutical approach, which he had already outlined in his 1941 essay *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (2).

In this essay, Strauss argues that many philosophers and authors under repressive political regimes were forced to conceal their true views out of fear of persecution. They developed a writing technique that distinguishes between an exoteric surface and an esoteric center. According to Strauss, there can be no timeless formulas for decoding texts as such, as philosophers must strategically adapt their publications to the social conventions of their time.

Through analyses of the works of philosophers such as Plato, Maimonides, Spinoza, and Hobbes, Strauss demonstrates how they employed a written "Political Rhetoric" to express their critical thoughts on political philosophy without directly clashing with the ruling powers (3).

Interpretations of Strauss's oeuvre (Bluhm, Meier, Weichert) characterize his definition of the philosopher as someone perpetually exposed to the dangers of persecution, censorship, or social ostracism. This is rooted in the very definition of the philosopher as a "lover of knowledge" who must always question established conditions and constitutions. Within this strict definition, many works of philosophers are, by their nature as *philo-sophoi*, subject to subversive writing techniques, even if these philosophers did not formally live in times of political persecution.

Under this premise, the question arises as to how philosophical works should be interpreted hermeneutically, and more specifically, how historical texts can be understood. In relation to this conference, the question is posed of how historical works of Early Modern philosophers should be read and understood.

In the opening sentence of his essay *Political Philosophy and History* (1989), Strauss makes it clear that philosophy is not a historical discipline (4). He sharply distinguishes himself from a historicist reading of philosophical texts and advocates for what he calls "historical understanding." He views the historical contextualization of a work as a preparatory step to uncovering the intention of the philosophical author.

1 At the Fourth Institute of Biblical and Post-Biblical Studies. This was later published with a modified title: *How to Begin to Study Medieval Philosophy*, in: *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, 1989, pp. 207-226.

2 First published in *Social Research*, November 1941, pp. 488-504.

3 See in particular the essays *How to Study Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise*, *The Literary Character of the Guide for the Perplexed*, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, and *Hobbes' Political Philosophy*. The term *Political Rhetoric* originates with Harald Blum in: *Die Ordnung der Ordnung*, 2002.

4 *Political Philosophy and History*, in: *What is Political Philosophy?*, 1989, pp. 78-94.

However, by the author's intention, Strauss does not mean the approach formulated by Quentin Skinner in his essay *Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas* (1969), which profoundly influenced the study of early modern philosophy, particularly in the works of figures like Machiavelli and Hobbes (5). Although both approaches pursue the same goal through intentionality, they represent two distinct hermeneutical methods. While Skinner seeks to situate philosophical writings within the practical and ideological conflicts of their time, Strauss aims to understand the author as they understood themselves. This fundamental shift in methodological focus will be contrasted in my presentation, along with critical perspectives on both approaches (6).

5 Quentin Skinner, *Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas*, 1969.