

# Leo Strauss, Xenophon, and Natural Law

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*Strauss via David Levine*

**Leo Strauss** (1899-1973) is most widely known as an intellectual god-father of modern conservatism. He was the teacher of Alan Bloom, author of *The Closing of the American Mind* (and inspiration for Saul Bellow's *Ravelstein*). Strauss has also been credited with, and vilified for, influencing a number of figures in the Bush White House.

But Strauss is in many ways an odd candidate for a public intellectual, as he advanced his own thought largely through commentaries on ancient texts, which he famously read "between the lines." This method is as controversial as the substance of his thought.

**Xenophon** (roughly 430-355 BC), an Athenian contemporary of Plato and Thucydides, wrote philosophical and historical works but had, in Strauss's day, largely been sidelined by his more famous rivals. Strauss aimed to rehabilitate Xenophon's writings on Socrates, and argued that they were as subtle and deep as Plato's own.

**Natural law** first appears in developed form in a passage from one of Xenophon's works on Socrates, the *Memorabilia*. So does the argument from **intelligent design**. Today we associate these views with old-school conservatives, but Strauss, the old-school conservative, implies that neither view was held by Socrates. We'll discuss why he does so—and why I think he was wrong to do so.

## Upcoming events:

On November 12, **Paul Brown** will discuss why characters in Homer appear to address other characters as if they were possessed. Really.