Philosophy Between the Lines, or Through Dubious Signs?

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Abstract: Arthur Melzer’s Philosophy Between the Lines is a much better account of esotericism than anything that Leo Strauss wrote. But although Melzer uncovers many examples of writers who make claims about other writers’ esotericism, he provides fewer examples of actual esotericism than he thinks, and his evidence is sometimes tenuous. More important, perhaps, is Melzer’s valuable evidence about particular esoteric techniques. But there are some curious silences here: he does not support Strauss’ claims that esoteric writers used the techniques of numbers and density. How much of Strauss’ esoteric interpretation rests on alleged techniques for which there is no historical basis? And Melzer’s evidence about the alleged technique of centers involves a misreading of Cicero. I also raise questions about Melzer’s distinctions between esoteric and non-esoteric, and between esoteric and literal. Moreover, his treatment of Strauss’ critics sidesteps their key objections—objections that remain unanswered. Despite these problems, Melzer’s analysis of esotericism is a great advance on Strauss’ analysis: this book is a major contribution.

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Arthur Melzer’s Philosophy Between the Lines is an excellent guide to esotericism in the history of political thought. Esotericism includes “every form of secretiveness in the communication of thought” (368; emphasis removed). This broad view of esotericism is questionable, and there are deeper problems, but I’d recommend Melzer’s book over those of Leo Strauss: Melzer marshals far more evidence and gives better practical advice. I start with the strengths and weaknesses of Melzer’s evidence for esotericism in general and of esoteric techniques in particular. The latter is a key advance, but some of Melzer’s evidence is partial or ambiguous: careful readers will want to follow up quotations, some of which are less convincing when read in context. I then question Melzer’s esoteric/non-esoteric distinction and his view that non-Straussians make “strictly literal” interpretations. I suggest that Melzer has repaired some of the damage caused by Strauss’ methodologically naive interpretations, before praising Melzer’s account of the academic division of labor and his practical advice.

THE EVIDENCE FOR ESOTERICISM

Melzer has tirelessly tracked down hundreds of historical statements about authors’ own esotericism or others’ esotericism (especially 13–24, 137–42), collated in a huge and still-growing online appendix. He also describes esotericism and allusive communication in non-Western cultures (48–52, 97), in Christian, Jewish, and Islamic thought (98–101, 165–68), in the USSR/Eastern Europe (129–33), and by gays and writers of sexual innuendo (134–35).

Four caveats are needed. First, Melzer’s evidence is, inevitably, stronger for allegations about others’ esotericism than for authors’ admissions of their own esotericism. This weakens his claim that “esoteric communication was a nearly universal practice among Western philosophers prior to the late modern era” (69; emphasis added; see also 5).

Second, it is not surprising that some philosophers’ claims about other philosophers’ esotericism can be refuted. For example, Rousseau thought that Machiavelli concealed his republicanism in The Prince because of the Medici and only praised the “execrable” Cesare Borgia to indicate insincerity (252). Yet we now know that Machiavelli was praising Borgia long before The Prince.
Third, some evidence for philosophers’ own alleged esotericism is partial. Melzer overlooks Rousseau’s more negative comments about esotericism: his reference to the “deadly” esoteric doctrine and its relationship to pride (Melzer’s appendix does not quote this part of the passage), his attack on esotericists’ “secret and cruel morality” in the Reveries, and its link to power struggles and sectarianism in the Dialogues. Christopher Kelly argues that Rousseau consistently links esotericism to pride, “the private selfishness of philosophers” who are “manipulating public opinion for selfish purposes,” leading to dogmatism and sectarianism.

Fourth, and most important, some evidence is far more ambiguous than Melzer implies. I am not nearly as confident as Melzer about Rousseau’s esoteric intent in the Second Discourse’s “Notice on the Notes” (301). And Rousseau’s unpublished preface from his second letter to Bordes, which Melzer relies on several times (16, 112–13, 118, 255), is by no means clear evidence of esotericism, especially when read in textual context. The preceding paragraphs state that Rousseau has a controversial “System” that underpins the Discourse: he does “not wish to say everything,” and he treats the truth carefully, showing only the “branches” of his ideas to the many such that only the few see the “trunk.” This could easily be read straightforwardly and is not obviously more esoteric than Rawls’s “concealment” of his engagement with Hegel, which Melzer accepts “does not rise to the level of full-blown esotericism” (135), even though it meets his definition of esotericism as secretiveness in communication (368).

Also ambiguous is Machiavelli’s comment, in a letter to Guicciardini, that “for a long time I have not said what I believed,” and “if indeed I do happen to tell the truth, I hide it among so many lies that it is hard to find” (54). Strauss, and some non-Straussians, infer that Machiavelli’s writings are thus insincere. But it looks less obviously damming when read in context. It is in one of three letters that Machiavelli wrote, in jocular fashion, while on a diplomatic mission with the Franciscans, pondering how he could “sow so much dis-cord among [his hosts] that... they may start hitting each other with their sandals,” and explaining how he pretended to be important in order to get better accommodation. I agree that Machiavelli’s comment might imply insincerity in his political writings, but we can’t state that unequivocally.

It’s revealing that Melzer talks about “[p]roving the reality of philosophical esotericism” (5, 11, 112). Strictly speaking, nothing empirical can be proved (or disproved—hence my criticism of those who reject Strauss’ interpretations as unfalsifiable). Because we cannot know authors’ motives and meanings with certainty, we often need to indicate our degree of uncertainty in our findings: history of political thought is not about reporting facts but commenting on the strengths and weaknesses of our inferences. Careful readers who follow up Melzer’s quotations may feel less confidence than he does.

TECHNIQUES OF ESOTERICISM

The best evidence for esotericism is to find talk and practice of specific esoteric techniques. Melzer’s evidence here is far superior to Strauss’ (299–317). I once wrote that “Strauss is in effect telling us that writers like Plato, Machiavelli, and Spinoza tried to hide messages using techniques which, as far as we know, no one spotted until Leo Strauss himself.” I was wrong; some techniques were indeed discussed before Strauss.

But only some. Melzer doesn’t cite evidence that people used centers, numbers, or density. I’m particularly skeptical about Strauss’ emphasis on centers (e.g., paying close attention to the center of a text, or looking for contradictions in the middle three examples in a list of seven). There are so many centers, especially the multiple centers of books, that some important or unusual things will inevitably be central, especially when Strauss includes things that are not actually central.

Melzer seems to give evidence of centers, but on closer inspection, there is a problem. Melzer cites, without giving full bibliographical details, two of Strauss’ references to Cicero (322/405n68). But in neither place does Cicero mention the technique of centers—indeed, the reverse. Have careful Straussian readers spotted this? If so, have they stayed esoterically silent, suspecting that Strauss was merely showing how to decode his own esotericism? Or have they been too trusting? If so, how many of Strauss’ interpretations use alleged esoteric techniques that he invented? I’m afraid that Melzer has not yet put such doubts to rest.

THE ESOTERIC/NON-ESOTERIC DISTINCTION

I now turn to three ways in which Melzer’s depiction of the Straussian/non-Straussian relationship could be clarified. The first is that I am not sure if he sees some so-called contextualist/Cambridge School readings as esoteric. Consider these two well-known examples. First, Rousseau’s apparently abstract thought parallels the details of Genevan politics so closely and so often that we can plausibly read him as implicitly taking sides in the vicious Genevan power struggles. Second, “the fact that [Machiavelli’s] Il Principe was in part intended as an attack on the morality embodied in humanist advice-books to princes cannot be discovered by attending to Machiavelli’s text, since this is not a fact contained in the text.”

Both examples fit Melzer’s intentionally broad understanding of esotericism, which includes all secretiveness in communication (368). Melzer certainly praises Quentin Skinner for “unlocking the esoteric level of Hobbes’s writings” (i.e., Hobbes’ implicit challenge to humanist rhetoric) (385; also 403). Are the Rousseau and Machiavelli examples also esoteric? If so, has esotericism been defined too broadly? Moreover, no contextualists use Melzer’s/Strauss’ esoteric techniques (288–99, 323–24). To paraphrase Strauss’ famous title, are Melzer and Strauss only concentrating on a particular kind of esoteric writing?

THE FALSE DISTINCTION BETWEEN ESOTERIC AND “STRICTLY LITERAL” INTERPRETATION

A second clarification relates to Melzer’s distinction between esoteric and “strictly literal” readings of texts (112–14, 180
Likewise, Melzer mentions the “so many” people who deny that “texts can communicate more than they openly state, that what they say is not the whole of what they do, that these texts are not complete in and by themselves but rather start a process that must be completed by the reflections of the reader him or herself” (384–85). I am not sure who Melzer thinks would deny this. He rightly spots that Skinner accepts this (385). Indeed, it is a completely standard idea in philosophy of language. Do many textual interpreters think otherwise?

I believe that Melzer can sidestep his “strictly literal” straw man. But that raises a bigger problem: because we all know that all past philosophers kept some ideas implicit, the question is how to test claims about this. This brings me to the third and most important way in which Melzer’s account could be clarified.

HOW STRAUSS DAMAGED THE CAUSE OF ESOTERIC INTERPRETATION

Melzer writes that “we” have forgotten about esotericism (xi–xv), that there is a “denial of esotericism” (102), and that Strauss’ critics oppose esotericism (96–97). This allows Melzer to give himself too soft a target, by focusing primarily on non-Straussians who object to esoteric interpretation per se. True, some critics talk this way, and Melzer rightly dismisses silly arguments about esotericism’s elitism and dishonesty, Strauss’ politics, or his difficult writing style (105–7). But is Melzer troubled by more powerful methodological critiques?

Melzer, he largely sidesteps such challenges. He mentions Shadia Drury, who explicitly avoids Strauss’ textual interpretations, and Nicholas Xenos, whose discussion of Strauss’ interpretations does not focus much on methodology. When Melzer does engage with methodological criticisms, by Skinner and George Sabine, he overlooks their key objections. Melzer thinks Skinner attacks Strauss’ “strongly textual emphasis” (385), but actually Skinner criticizes such things as Strauss’ assumptions about coherence and, more importantly, his unconvinced and circular methodological principles.

Likewise, Sabine does not say that esotericism is “an invitation to perverse ingenuity” (97, 106, 111) but that Strauss’ techniques may be. Remember that Strauss overinterpreted evidence before his esoteric phase: Michael Oakeshott notes several times that Strauss pushed meager evidence too far in his 1936 book on Hobbes. A. P. Martinich’s forthcoming critique of this book shows just how unreliable Strauss’ interpretations can be.

The problem, as I have argued before, is not Strauss’ esoteric interpretation but Strauss’ esoteric interpretation. Melzer could thus clarify whether he thinks that Strauss has actually damaged the cause of esoteric interpretation. Yes, Strauss raised its profile, but if esotericism “has a particularly hard time getting the fair and sympathetic hearing that it particularly requires” (5), this is partly because of Strauss. Perhaps “the modern worldview somehow involves a deep aversion to esotericism” (7), but many modern academics have a deeper aversion to tenuous, one-sided interpretations. My own view is that in his understandable eagerness to remind people about a forgotten kind of writing, Strauss gave esotericism a bad name.

THE ACADEMIC DIVISION OF LABOR

Some of my comments have been very critical. Let me end with two more positive thoughts.

Melzer offers a beautifully sensible defence of an academic division of labor. “Cautious analytic minds will do close analyses; bold, synthetic ones will provide sweeping syntheses. . . . All of us do not have to specialize in every one of those jobs, but we all have to appreciate the necessity of each” (288). This compares favorably to John Dunn’s “contempt” for political scientists who do empirical research without considering norms: “an adult and civically responsible human being” would not study politics like this. But we don’t want everyone to take the same approach: we benefit from people doing what they do best while using insights from people with other skills as needs be. Melzer’s book itself combines big-picture comparison and detailed analysis; while I have questioned aspects of both, Melzer has definitely advanced the debate about esotericism.

MELZER’S PRACTICAL ADVICE

Much methodological discussion in the history of political thought is frustratingly abstract, offering little of practical value. Melzer’s practical advice (288–99; see also 323–24) is in fact superb. If you want to know how to read texts esoterically, this is where to start. One should not assume immediately that a text is esoteric (297–98) or move too quickly beneath the surface of the argument (298). Esoteric interpreters should study the political and philosophical history around a text (295) and engage with the non-esoteric secondary literature (299). I would add that one should explicitly compare competing interpretations, space permitting. For example, because some scholars reach different conclusions about Rousseau’s esotericism, Melzer could say why he thinks they are wrong. (I do not mean this critically: the book is already rich and detailed.) Of course, the principle of comparing competing interpretations applies to all textual interpreters, esoteric or not.

CONCLUSION

Arthur Melzer’s Philosophy Between the Lines significantly advances our understanding of the theory and practice of esoteric philosophical and political writing. Its evidence is less persuasive than Melzer implies but more persuasive than Strauss’: Melzer has repaired much of the damage that
Strauss did to the cause of esoteric interpretation. I expect that Straussians and non-Straussians will disagree about some passages and some alleged esoteric techniques. But I expect that Straussians and non-Straussians will now agree that talk of esotericism was once common, that its practice of esotericism was more widespread than many of us (myself included) assumed, and that some of the techniques mentioned by Strauss were indeed practiced in the past. These are valuable contributions.

NOTES

3. The *Collected Writings of Rousseau* vol. 2, eds. Roger Masters and Christopher Kelly (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2003), 45–46; Melzer, *Online Appendix*, 73–74 (note that page numbers will change as the appendix grows).
16. Cicero, *De Oratore I, II*, trans. E. W. Sutton (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942): “I also censure the people who place their weakest points first . . . [T]he strongest point should come first . . . while collecting into a general medley in the middle any points of moderate importance” (II.313–15; see also II.311–12); Cicero, *Orator* section 15.50: “his strongest arguments will appear some of them in the front, and others at the close of his discourse; and as to those of a more trifling consequence, he will occasionally introduce them here and there” (translation from http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/9776). For the original Latin, see Cicero, *Orator*, ed. Rolf Westman (Munich: K. G. Saur Verlag, 2002), 15–16.
24. Skinner, *Visions*, 57, 64, 70, 72, 75.