

# Esoteric philosophy: Leo Strauss and sociolinguistics

Aron B. Bekesi<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Leo Strauss's controversial theory of esoteric philosophy, as presented in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952), sparked a fierce debate. Opponents and proponents of the theory utilised a wide range of perspectives to support their arguments. By investigating esoteric philosophy from a sociolinguistic perspective, this paper introduces a novel perspective to the Strauss dispute. In *PAW* Strauss is mistaken regarding esotericism and its role in philosophy. On the one hand it is reasonable to endorse Strauss's persuasive account on the origins of esoteric writing. The Straussian account provides a plausible sociological background as to why philosophy, *per se* became an esoteric field. On the other hand, it seems as Strauss ascribed undue significance to possible clandestine messages that may be found within works of philosophy because philosophy is mostly already done in an esoteric linguistic space.

**Keywords:** Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, sociolinguistics, esoteric philosophy, Minowitz<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Independent researcher, medical student at the University of Pécs with a background in philosophy (MA, History of Philosophy: KCL): aron.b.bekesi@gmail.com

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## 1. Introduction

My thesis is that, while Leo Strauss's account regarding the origins of esoteric writing presented in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952)<sup>1</sup> might appear persuasive, Strauss seems to ascribe undue significance to possible clandestine messages that may be found in the already esoteric field of philosophy. Novel linguistic perspectives presented in the current paper challenge the literal interpretation of Strauss's hypothesis on two grounds: (1) The dichotomy of esoteric—exoteric meaning exists in an objectively true and demonstrable sense. Sociolinguists have demonstrated that a dichotomy of esoteric and exoteric meanings routinely appears in language. However, contrary to Strauss's concept presented in *PAW*, sociolinguistics provide substantial evidence that philosophy, in general, is highly exemplary of esoteric language use. The linguistic view that philosophy as a whole occupies an esoteric linguistic niche challenge Strauss's arguments that subversive ideas need to be hidden from the masses by esoteric writing techniques because philosophy is a linguistic niche that is intrinsically hard to access for the majority. (2) The sociolinguistic model of communication and the requirements of the successful spread of information as described by Dawkins (1976) support the view that clandestine messages incorporated into an already esoteric field would have a marginal effect. This model contradicts Strauss, who suggests that hidden esoteric messages may serve to pass on secret teachings and revolutionary, subversive ideas.

## 2. Esotericism

In *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, political philosopher Leo Strauss presents a unique model of communication that challenges traditional ways in which scholarly texts are read. Strauss's model of communication is based on the thesis that two layers of meaning can coexist within a single text. An external, easier to comprehend exoteric layer serves as a vehicle for transmitting the clandestine message of the author, which comprises the internal, harder to comprehend, esoteric layer. The essence of Strauss's model of communication can be understood as a dichotomy of esoteric and exoteric meaning. To present a concise recapitulation of Strauss's concept of esotericism one has to consider the sociological premises Strauss provides in *PAW* that serve as groundings of the esoteric—exoteric dichotomy. Accordingly, the following section presents the development of the esoteric—exoteric dichotomy in the context of its sociological premises as laid out by Strauss.

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Strauss's arguments rest on an underlying tension between the prevailing power structures of society and independent, heterogeneous thought, resulting in persecution by those in power of those promoting subversive ideas. An inherent interest of the prevailing political power is to suppress ideas that conflict with its views, thus maintaining a homogenous intellectual milieu that favours political stability. The political interest of homogenous thought is protected from the heteronomous ideas of 'independent thinkers' by politically motivated prosecution that manifests itself as censorship (Strauss 1952: 23). Censorship may present itself in several forms (*Ibid.*: 33) and act as a source of pressure on individuals wishing to express their independent ideas. As a reaction to political oppression, some authors capable of free thinking develop the ability to 'write between the lines', *i.e.* authors imbue their texts with meaning hidden well enough to pass censorship (*Ibid.*: 24-5). The phenomenon of evading censorship by writing between the lines is the central concept of Strauss's theory of esoteric communication, a method that Strauss calls the 'art of writing'. Thus the art of writing, according to Strauss, denotes the elaborate skills that an author needs to imbue a text with hidden messages.

Esoteric texts, according to Strauss, have an exoteric, more accessible layer open for deliberation to a larger audience, plus an esoteric, less accessible layer, which can be understood only by a minority of readers who have the skills of reading between the lines (*Ibid.*: 17-9). Parts of the text that are easier to comprehend serve to obscure the important messages of the author, which in turn become difficult to uncover even for the 'trained' philosopher (*Ibid.*: 24-5). Therefore a cautious author of exceptional intellect holding heterogeneous views, and wary of prosecution, is likely to produce works that are comprehended only by a minority of his or her readers, who are interested enough in its interpretation and have the intellect necessary to decipher the hidden code of the author (*Ibid.*: 25). The majority of readers remain misguided (*Ibid.*: 35-6).

It is worth noting that Strauss deduces the emergence of esoteric writing as a seemingly inevitable consequence of the coevolution of different strategies that develop from the conflict of public and individual interests. The interests of the prevailing power produce persecution that manifests as censorship, which limits the work of independent thinkers and infringes on free deliberation. As a reaction to censorship, at least some independent thinkers produce esoteric works. Once Strauss's sociological premises are accepted, they initiate seemingly inevitable coevolution that unfolds into Strauss's model of communication. Persecution gives rise to the art of writing; esoteric messages appear within exoteric texts; consequently the exoteric—esoteric dichotomy is established within the sociological context of Strauss's theory of communication.

### 3. Reception

The ideas put forth by Strauss were highly controversial. Contesting interpretations of the exoteric—esoteric dichotomy stand at the heart of the dispute<sup>2</sup>. This section presents a summary of how Strauss's ideas were received, showing that concerns stemming from the exoteric—esoteric dichotomy remain unresolved (Smith 1997). By unresolved I mean that the academic debate has so far been unable to develop an interpretation regarding the exoteric—esoteric dichotomy that could warrant credibility amongst the majority interested in Strauss's theory.

Numerous scholars, for instance, hold the view that Strauss himself wrote in an esoteric way (Lampert 2009: 63)<sup>3</sup>, but opinions split over whether that is laudable (Frazer 2006) or odious (Drury 1985). Other commentators argue that it is entirely false to assume that Strauss wrote in an esoteric way, as it would be inconsistent with Strauss's own claims (Batnitzky & Leora 2016). Lack of consensus on the interpretation of Strauss's exoteric—esoteric dichotomy produces contradicting interpretations of the ideas, and even the personal character of Strauss, and compete in an on-going dispute. For example, while some argue that Strauss was a fascist, others claim Strauss was a defender of democracy against Nazism (Grant 2016)<sup>4,5</sup>.

On one side, Strauss is charged with historical inaccuracy, the vagueness of expression, elitism, and obfuscating the meaning of the works he interprets. Acclaimed scholar of ancient philosophy, Myles Burnyeat, for example, states that Strauss's account of political philosophy is 'a tale' containing 'extraordinary inaccuracies' (Burnyeat 1985). Shadia Drury became one of the most influential opponents of Strauss by devoting much of her work to presenting an extensive criticism of Strauss<sup>6</sup>. In one of her early works, Drury suggests that Strauss's thesis of esoteric writing is based on a tautology (Drury 1985). Drury herself, however, received some negative responses that centred on 'technical difficulties' and 'intellectual short-sidedness', allegedly flawing her arguments (Lora 2000).

On the other side, Strauss's philosophy is seen as a possible counterpoint to the failure of modern rationalism. The failure of modern rationalism is a wider concept in Straussian philosophy that refers to a series of philosophical crises, *e.g.* nihilism, challenging traditional value judgment (Pangle & Nathan 1987), which amount to an intellectual gap between contemporary Western philosophy and its historic roots. Peter Minowitz stands out from amongst the proponents of Strauss by dedicating an entire volume to defending Strauss from contemporary criticism, focusing on Drury's allegations (Minowitz 2009). Minowitz points out Drury's biased approach, unrealistic assumptions, lax—or lack of—references, and inaccurate conclusions, as main weaknesses undermining Drury's work (Schaefer 2010). Underscoring the bitterness of the

dispute, in an arresting, somewhat flamboyant passage, Minowitz claims that the situation for followers of Straussian thought compares to that of the members of the 'GLBQT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, and transgender) community'. Both Straussians and GLBQT members are, according to Minowitz, 'routinely excoriated' and 'in the eyes of prominent individuals' act as 'scapegoats' (Minowitz 2009: 5).

Additionally, certain proponents of Strauss offer confusing answers to problems raised by the exoteric—esoteric dichotomy; for example, what seems to be Strauss's esoteric teaching is, in fact, Strauss's exoteric teaching, and therefore is not to be given serious consideration *per se* (Frazer 2006). It seems that the most moderate readings of Strauss, recapitulated in broad terms, interpret the esoteric—exoteric dichotomy in the wider context of Straussian philosophy and view the dichotomy as a somewhat abstract enquiry into the 'nature of truth' (Batnitzky & Leora 2016).

Notwithstanding the many approaches, ideas and argumentations sparked by Strauss, according to my research, as of today, there has been no publication investigating philosophic esotericism from a sociolinguistic perspective. This paper seeks to undertake that task.

## **4. Impact of Esoteric Writing**

Taken literally, one is likely to find the exoteric—esoteric dichotomy highly troubling, as it challenges traditional ways of how great works of philosophy ought to be interpreted. Uncovering possible esoteric messages would call for a thorough revision of philosophic literature. Strauss, however, seems to set the standards of interpretation required by such a revision to almost unattainable heights.

The practical implications of Strauss's dichotomy of exoteric and esoteric writing seem to create an intellectual trap, where the burden of proof to verify the candid or clandestine nature of a text rests on the reader. In the worst cases, the reader is either deceived by the exoteric layer of a text or remains sceptical of the text's true meaning. In a somewhat better scenario, the reader discovers evidence of the dichotomy, becomes sceptical of the misleading exoteric layer, but fails to uncover the esoteric meaning (*Ibid.*: 32). Only the remaining cases are truly favourable, when either the reader can detect a dichotomy and then is able to successfully interpret the esoteric layer, or the reader with absolute certainty can establish that the text is written in a candid way. It follows that precise interpretation of a text depends on the reader's ability to ascertain the existence or the lack of existence of esoteric meaning.

The burden of proof is on the reader to uncover evidence of, or evidence for the absence of an esoteric message. In Strauss's words: 'the burden of

proof rests with the censor. It is he, or the public prosecutor who must prove that the author holds or has uttered heterodox views.’(*Ibid.*: 26) Strauss here elaborates the arduous tasks of interpretation with respect to the work of the censors. All readers, however, face the same challenge. Considering that the reader bears the burden of proof to produce a clandestine message or the evidence of absence of a clandestine message, I believe, sets the standards of interpretation to levels that can hardly be met in practice.

Strauss addresses the difficulty of interpretation himself and comes to the conclusion that the arising problems of reading call for new strategies of exegesis (*Ibid.*: 30). Based on the above, it seems unlikely that any strategy can be a reliable tool for establishing the evidence of, or evidence of the absence of ideas that have been concealed so well that, as of now, no one has discovered their existence.

By introducing the dichotomy of esoteric—exoteric writing, Strauss puts forward a novel model of communication that challenges the traditions of reading. Since Strauss’s model of communication sets the standards of interpretation to levels that seem difficult to meet in practice, it follows that many traditionally accepted interpretations of philosophy are, and most likely remain, false.

According to the sociological and political premises, Strauss provides in *PAW* as the groundwork for the development of esoteric writing, the extent of misinterpretations may vary between two extreme cases. In the most favourable scenario, the most revolutionary, therefore probably most important, thoughts of some of the greatest thinkers are distorted or omitted from discussion. In the worst scenario, the traditional interpretations of the history of Western philosophy are mostly misguided fictions based on recapitulations of the exoteric teachings of great authors. In any case, the implications of esotericism seem far-reaching and subverting in relation to our understanding of philosophy.

## **5. Sociolinguistics and Strauss**

The two most important questions pertaining to Strauss’s model of communication: (1) whether esoteric texts exist, and if esoteric texts exist, (2) what is the impact they have on philosophy. The following section compares Strauss’s account of esotericism with the sociolinguistic model. The impact of esotericism on philosophy is estimated based on sociolinguistics and Dawkins’ stipulations on the conditions required for the successful spread of information.

From a linguistic perspective, the model of communication presented by Strauss is hierarchical. By hierarchical I mean that different interpretations

subordinate one another. Strauss presents a model of communication that divides readers into two categories: the ‘thoughtless’, who are ‘careless readers’, and the ‘thoughtful’, who are ‘careful readers’ (Strauss, 1952: 25). Due to their superior intellect and longer attention span, ‘thoughtful’ readers can decipher the concealed ideas of a text. The ‘thoughtless’ readers are barred from the esoteric messages and can only access the exoteric layer of esoteric work. As the abilities to think clearly and directing one's attention are part of what is termed ‘general intelligence’ (McGrew 2005), the two factors of attention span and thoughtfulness referred to as separate capacities by Strauss can be safely merged and referred to as intelligence<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, Strauss’s model suggests that intelligence is the key to uncover and distinguish the esoteric truth from the exoteric layer camouflaging it.

Six different types of contradictions are listed in *PAW* that serves as clues for the reader to uncover esoteric messages (*Ibid.*: 71). The contradictions pose a gradually increasing intellectual demand for the interpreter. Compare, for example, a simple contradiction  $(a = b; a \neq b)$  to  $(a = b; a \neq \beta; [b = \beta + \varepsilon]; a \neq b)$ .  $(a = b; a \neq \beta; [b = \beta + \varepsilon]; a \neq b)$  denotes, in Strauss’s words:

‘[the] method... to introduce between... two contradictory statements an intermediary assertion, which, by itself not contradictory to the first statement, becomes contradictory to it by the addition, or the omission, of an apparently negligible expression; the contradictory statement creeps in as a repetition of the intermediary statement’ (*Ibid.*:71).

That Strauss’s model of esotericism allocates a decisive role to intellect in deciphering the esoteric layer raises doubts about the credibility of the model. Granting intelligence the prominent role, as Strauss did, allows for infinitely regressing streams of interpretations. If, for example, an interpreter has reconstructed an esoteric message “A” from a text, a more intelligent reader might find a deeper esoteric meaning “B” in the same work. The following, even more eminent interpreter can, according to Strauss’s theory, come up with a third hidden message “C” found within the previously exposed esoteric layer “B”, and so on. It seems theoretically possible that different readings of work based primarily on the intelligence of the interpreters can regress *ad infinitum*. One could argue that a definite reading can be accomplished, but Strauss himself implied the contrary: ‘...reading between the lines will not lead to a complete agreement among all scholars.’ (Strauss 1952: 30). Additionally, according to the logic of *PAW*, increasingly elaborate readings

will falsify the less complex interpretations by demonstrating that the previously uncovered esoteric messages were part of the exoteric layer of the text. Therefore, allowing for the possibility of finding a reader who is by some degree more intelligent than the previous reader may result in continuous production of new interpretations without ever providing definite assurance that the final and true esoteric message of a text has been understood. It seems that this shortcoming is a result of oversimplification and the centrality attributed to intelligence in Strauss's model of esotericism.

Strauss constructed a hierarchical model based on simple dichotomies of conflicting concepts. Besides the exoteric—esoteric dichotomy, the thoughtful—thoughtless, careful—careless, truth—lie, etc. dichotomies also appear in *PAW*. Strauss's system is notably hierarchical since these dichotomies subordinate each other and are value charged. By value charged I mean that opposing concepts of *PAW* are linked to either the domains of freedom or repression (*Ibid.*: 32), therefore the dichotomies, in essence, represent value judgments of right and wrong (*Ibid.*: 29-30), good and evil. Since a correct reading depends on the intellectual capacity of the interpreter, the reader also becomes a subject of the above-mentioned binary splitting, automatically suffering a value judgment. According to *PAW* (*Ibid.*: 59), intelligent readers are good and worthy (*Ibid.*: 25), while their less intelligent colleagues are second rate (*Ibid.*: 29), worthless at understanding the real intent of esoteric work. It is noteworthy how the subjective variable represented by the reader is first reduced to an objective quantity, intelligence, then further simplified by qualifying his or her performance as apt or inapt. Due to the exclusive centrality Strauss attributes to intelligence in the interpretation process, the Straussian model, in a linguistic sense, can be considered simple. Furthermore, the value judgments associated with an assortment of dichotomic traits describing the reader's ability and the quality of philosophic texts, makes Strauss's model hierarchical.

I hold that Strauss failed to consider the simple fact that people have different personalities. By way of their different personalities, people think, speak, and write in different ways, resulting in a complex heterarchical linguistic environment that allows the coexistence of a multitude of esoteric linguistic spaces.

The same text, for example, might be read by three readers of the exact same intelligence. One of these readers might have an exceedingly sophisticated knowledge of poetry, the other an interest in history, while the third could be an expert in deductive logic. It can be expected that the three readers will produce three different subjective interpretations of the objective reality represented by the text. The different interpretations could be difficult to achieve by others lacking particular knowledge of a specific field.



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Moreover, a reader of particular expertise may uncover a hidden aspect, in other words, an esoteric meaning, of a text.

It seems biased to single out one such esoteric interpretation and to claim all others worthless. One could object, claiming that the correct reading includes all perspectives and a reader of proper intelligence could produce that interpretation. I object based on the ground that it would seem foolish to expect that, for example, every philosopher should analyse technical texts of their particular discipline with equal and detailed respect to their aesthetic, historical, logical, etc. merits. On the contrary, a professional is rightly expected to interpret a text within the bounds of his or her own discipline.

It seems arbitrary to hold that the role of intelligence should be prioritised in the interpretation process since other factors also play a role in producing different, often equally correct readings of a text. Not only might one find it condescending to use intelligence as a basis of value judgments to qualify readers, but it also seems to be logically incorrect. There is no good reason to support the thesis that a certain reading of objective reality is more or less correct than another, because mutually correct interpretations of a text may exist without subordinating each other, thereby allowing for several correct esoteric meanings to exist in a mutually inclusive, heterarchical way.

The numerous subjective differences between people lead to three important effects: (1) Several interpretations of objective reality may coexist without challenging each other, thereby creating a heterarchical system. (2) Subjective differences provide the basis of esoteric communication because individual subjective differences enable one to comprehend a type of information that is difficult to access by someone else. (3) By virtue of subjective differences, it is possible for several layers of esoteric meaning to coexist within the same text. Consequently, I propose that esotericism exists in an objectively true sense but contrary to Strauss's suggestion esotericism exists in a heterarchical model of communication. This line of thought is supported by sociolinguistics.

The notion that subjective factors are decisive in the interpretation of objective reality was not a novel idea at the time of *PAW's* publication. Philosopher Edmund Husserl pioneered the thought that objective reality is construed in a subjective way. Husserl published what is often considered his most important book, *Logical Investigations*, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Husserl 1900). The school of phenomenology developed along with the ideas of Husserl (Zahavi 2003) and had a decisive influence on psychology. Phenomenology eventually became a distinct subfield of psychology. From the beginning of the 1940s, psychologist Carl Rogers, considered the most influential promoter of phenomenological psychology, started developing person-centred psychotherapy, which is, in broad terms, the practical application of phenomenology in psychology (Rogers 1942). These

developments unfolded before *PAW*'s publication. In the 1960s, subjective factors of interpretation gained scientific recognition in linguistics and led to the development of sociolinguistics, a subfield of linguistics.

The origins of sociolinguistics can be traced to linguistic research dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which culminated in the wake of William Labov's work in the late 1960s (Koerner 1991). Sociolinguistics studies the effects society has on language (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz 2008), which is what underlies Strauss's theories in *PAW*. Grounded in sociological research, sociolinguistics acknowledges individual differences and delineates a complex, heterarchical linguistic system, which, contrary to the ideas of Strauss, allows for the coexistence of esoteric spheres of language.

In contrast with Strauss's reasoning—that persecution leads to philosophical esotericism, an *a priori* argument independent of experience—sociolinguistics rely on *a posteriori* justification to support its results. Sociolinguistics is a descriptive, evidence-based science.

‘...[sociolinguistics is] is the scientific study of the relationships between language and society, which entails practising a different way of doing linguistics that is very much influenced by work in the social sciences. It is empirical research — *i.e.* based on observation —, specifically focusing on how human beings actually use language in social interaction in real, everyday life situations and studies languages exclusively in their naturalistic social context’ (Hernández-Campoy 2014)

Objective linguistic observation, a fundamental feature of sociolinguistics, is achieved via fieldwork, meaning that data later analysed by linguistic professionals is collected on the site where the specific language or language variation is used. ‘[The linguistic data] collected in the field, *i.e.* in natural environments of spoken language, just as people usually and casually meet and interact, rather than in an office.’ (*Ibid.*)

‘Sociolinguistics is therefore in a continuous process of theoretical reformulation and methodological redefinition in consonance with the epistemological evolution and the development of new fieldwork methods, data collection techniques and — in the case of quantitative approaches — statistical analyses.’ (*Ibid.*)

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The success of the sociolinguistic method is underlined by its widespread, real-world application in a variety of fields, ranging from medicine to business.

‘In Medicine, Sociolinguistics has been helpful in therapeutic discourse and doctor-patient communication... In Business, for intercultural communication in the world of commerce, the language of advertising and mass media communication; as well as in Education, Government, or Social Justice [...]Sociolinguistics has been one the most applied branches of linguistics since its initial conception.’ (Hernández-Campoy 2014)

Some of the best established, evidence-based sociolinguistic concepts support that an esoteric—exoteric dichotomy exists in an objectively true and demonstrable sense. According to sociolinguistics, language can consist of several *linguistic communities* of different sizes (Marcyliena, 2014). The broadest category encompassing all linguistic communities within a language is the *national language* (Brann 1994). A national language signifies all written and spoken communication of a language. *Vernacular* is a particular version of the national language that all speakers of the national language understand (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1998). Smaller linguistic communities, or in the sociolinguistic term *speech communities*, develop within distinct groups of people who are, in a linguistic sense, in proximity to one another and use language in a unique and mutually accepted way amongst themselves (Yule 2006). A group of friends or members of a family, for instance, are likely to form a speech community. Physical vicinity, however, is not a requirement of a speech community. Two academics of the same field, but who are separated by distance, for example, even if they have never communicated with each other, are likely to share a speech community. A person may be a member of several speech communities. More importantly, speech communities use a variation of language, or *language variations*, characteristic to a particular group of speakers.

Language variations represent unique uses of language (Wardhaugh 2006: 6). There is an inverse relationship between the uniqueness of a language variation and its closeness to the vernacular. The more unique a language variation is, the less it has in common with the vernacular, and consequently, it is more likely to exclude people from its comprehension. To varying extents, language variations mix easily with hard-to-access linguistic elements<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, speech communities produce variations of language that, as

described by sociolinguistics, support a dichotomic communicational space of esoteric and exoteric meaning.

Previously, I argued that Strauss was mistaken in prioritising the intellect in the interpretation process and that besides general intelligence, subjective factors also play a decisive role in the interpretation process and provide the bases of a heterarchical model of communication. The sociolinguistic account of language supports the above argument because sociolinguistics studies language based on individual differences of language users. Moreover, according to sociolinguistics, language variations create spheres of esotericism. Language variations are developed by speech communities. Speech communities are in turn formed by individuals, often not out of necessity, but according to their individual affections based on various subjective differences (Kristiansen & Jorgens 2005: 287-330). Language variations coexist without either being subordinated to each other or qualified as having a lesser or greater value. Therefore, sociolinguistics supports a heterarchical account of esoteric communication.

Linguistic evidence supports that a dichotomy of exoteric and esoteric communication exists as an objectively true phenomenon in language. Sociolinguistics verifies that Strauss was right to propose that esotericism plays an important part in communication, and confirmed that esoteric texts exist. There are, however, contradictions between Strauss's and the sociolinguistic account of esoteric communication.

There are two main differences between how Strauss and sociolinguistics describe esoteric communication. First, according to Strauss's account, exoteric and esoteric language appears in a hierarchical model, whereas sociolinguistics presents a heterarchical model. Second, there is a discrepancy between Strauss's mystic account of esotericism, and the sociolinguistic account that presents esotericism as a mundane phenomenon. Concerning the first discrepancy, I have already argued in favour of a heterarchical view. The second discrepancy has not been addressed so far.

Contrary to Strauss, it seems to be a mistake to assume that hidden meanings play an important role within philosophic texts for the reason that most of philosophy is done in an esoteric way. In effect, philosophy is probably one of the best examples of esoteric language use.

Contrary to how flamboyant the notion of secretive communication seems, a brief sketch of a few common language variations strongly suggests that esotericism is a mundane linguistic phenomenon. Several types of language variations have been categorised according to the history of their development and function. *Dialects*, *sociolects*, *argots*, and *jargons* are amongst the best examples of language variations. Dialects usually develop as a result of geographical isolation and are regional variations of a language (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1998). Sociolects occur irrespective of

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geographical boundaries, developing amongst speakers of similar social standings. Sociolects are often used to express status or solidarity with a group (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1998)<sup>9</sup>. An argot is a cryptic language version used by a group, originally criminals, to prevent outsiders from understanding communication within the specific group (Hukill & Jackson 1961: 145-51)<sup>10</sup>. Jargons are used by a speech community that participates in a common profession. Jargons are ‘specifically associated with professional and technical circles’ (Forsyth 2007: 88) and make use of a ‘vocabulary [that] may not be understood by people outside these groups’ (Llamas et al. 2006: 218). Jargons tend to feature technical terminology consisting of narrowly defined words of specific meaning. The reason for esoteric communication thus may range from contingent circumstances, *e.g.* in case of dialects, to the explicit need of communicating in a secretive way, *e.g.* in case of argots. It follows that people communicate in esoteric ways for all sorts of reasons, probably often without knowing that they do so.

In a linguistic sense, as described by sociolinguistics, philosophy is an example of a jargon, a language variation that typically makes excessive use of technical terms. In addition to excessive technical terminology, a large vocabulary and advanced comprehension requirements make philosophical texts some of the most difficult to access.

According to the *Oxford Dictionary of English*<sup>11</sup>, the English language contains approximately 170,000 words<sup>12</sup>. A fraction of this vocabulary is used in practice. Between 100 and 150 words are enough to begin reading simple English texts (Milton *et. al.* 2016). West proposed that a simplified vocabulary of approximately 2000 words is sufficient for a fluent understanding of English (West 1953), while Hirsh and Nation have suggested increasing the threshold to 5000 words (Hirsch & Nation 1992). Upon beginning higher education, UK undergraduates possess an average vocabulary of around 10,000 words (Milton *et. al.* 2016). The vocabulary of the average university graduate peaks around 18,000 words. The vocabulary of non-graduates is significantly smaller, and peaks around 15,000 words (*Ibid.*: 2016). The difference between the vocabulary sizes is likely the result of the special vocabulary requirement of the higher education courses. Formal training in philosophy can be achieved through higher education. Therefore it is reasonable to assume that understanding philosophy requires a vocabulary size equal or greater than the average graduate possesses. According to the Office of National Statistics, ‘In July to September 2017, there were 34 million people aged between 21 and 64 in the UK who were not enrolled on any educational course... Breaking these people down by the highest qualification they held: 14 million, or 42% were graduates’<sup>13</sup>. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills reports, that in 2014 41% of the working-age population achieved a level 4 diploma or above<sup>14</sup>. Therefore, on average more than half of

Britain's population lacks the vocabulary to understand philosophic texts. It follows that philosophic texts are hard to access for the majority, approximately 60%, of the UK's population.

In addition to the large vocabulary requirement, complex sentence structures also complicate the understanding of philosophical texts. Specific readability tests are able to indicate the difficulty of comprehending a passage. Readability tests, such as the *Flesch–Kincaid readability* and *Lexile Framework for Reading*, support the claim that philosophy is amongst the most difficult to access areas of language<sup>15</sup>. Some rudimentary works of philosophy, such as Descartes's *Discourse on the Method, Meditations on First Philosophy* and Kant's *The Critique of Judgment*, top the Lexile scale.

Moreover, it is worthy to consider that 'Anaxagoras, Protagoras, Socrates, Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, Avicenna, Averroes, Maimonides, Grotius, Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, Bayle, Wolff, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, Lessing and Kant' (Strauss 1952: 33), authors Strauss have hinted to have included hidden ideas in their texts, lived in ages when even basic literacy was an exceptional skill. The literacy rate in England in the 1640s was around 30 per cent for males, rising to 60 per cent in the mid-18th century. In France, the rate of literacy in 1686-90 was around 29 per cent for men and 14 per cent for women (Melton 2001: 81–2)<sup>16</sup>. Because of lower accessibility to education in the past, it is probable that even the literate few possessed, on average, a vocabulary and comprehension skills markedly lower than our contemporaries. Therefore, we can assume that during the Age of Enlightenment, more so in previous ages, only the smallest proportion of society had the chance of understanding complex works of philosophy, making philosophic texts highly esoteric. Furthermore, one can wonder about the literacy rates of classical antiquity. So did, for example, Descartes, Kant and Anaxagoras have reasons to include hidden ideas in their texts? It seems unlikely they had any reason to do so. That the majority, both today and historically, have had no access to works of philosophy, is in direct contradiction with the groundwork of Strauss's argumentation in *PAW*:

'...a philosopher... could expound only such opinions as were suitable for the nonphilosophic majority: all of his writings would have to be, strictly speaking, exoteric. These opinions would not be in all respects consonant with truth. Being a philosopher... [he] would leave it to his philosophic readers to disentangle the truth from its poetic or dialectic presentation. But he would defeat his purpose if he indicated clearly which of his statements expressed a noble lie, and which the still more noble truth.' (Strauss 1952: 35)

*Esoteric philosophy: Leo Strauss and sociolinguistics*

The need for a large vocabulary, high comprehension skill levels, and knowledge of a unique technical terminology support the notion of philosophy being an esoteric discipline. In sociolinguistic terms, the jargon of philosophy makes philosophy hard to comprehend for the majority of contemporary English speakers. Lower literacy rates and poorer access to education made philosophy even more exclusive during the life of the authors Strauss refers to in *PAW*. It follows that philosophy, or at least most of it, is and has been done in an esoteric way. The linguistic view that philosophy occupies an esoteric niche contradicts Strauss's argument that subversive philosophic ideas need to be hidden from the masses by esoteric writing techniques because philosophy is a linguistic niche that is *per se* hard to access for the majority. It follows that there is no rationale for philosophers to incorporate clandestine ideas in their works with the intent of concealing them from the majority.

Nevertheless, assuming that, as Strauss claims, esoteric messages exist that are hard for even well-trained scholars to discern, and accepting that these secretive messages have some sort of effect on philosophy, this effect is most likely marginal. Messages that are accessible solely to a community of handful philosophers of the highest ability are simply unsuitable to form the continuous and sustainable discourses characteristically seen throughout the history of philosophy. Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins' thesis on cultural evolution supports that esoteric teachings are not suitable to become part of a wider discourse.

Based on evolutionary biology, the thesis formulated in his influential work, *The Selfish Gene* (Dawkins 1976), Dawkins states that in the case of humanity, biological evolution is replaced by cultural evolution (*Ibid.*: 190-2). Dawkins refers to units of human culture as *memes* (*Ibid.*: 192). According to Dawkins, a memes can be '...tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches.' (*Ibid.*: 192)<sup>17</sup>. Concisely stated, a meme denotes an idea that exists in human culture. According to Dawkins, memes spread in culture just as genes do in nature.

'Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself...' (*Ibid.*: 192)

Dawkins' stipulations describing the successful spread of ideas relates closely to Strauss's theory.

‘Imitation, in the broad sense, is how memes can replicate. But just as not all genes that can replicate do so successfully, so some memes are more successful in the meme-pool than others. This is the analogue of natural selection. I have mentioned particular examples of qualities that make for high survival value among memes. But in general they must be [...] longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity.’ (*Ibid.*: 194)

While longevity ‘is probably relatively unimportant’ (*Ibid.*: 194), it is connected to the prolificacy of memes.

‘ As in the case of genes, fecundity is much more important than longevity of particular copies. If the meme is a scientific idea, its spread will depend on how acceptable it is to the population of individual scientists; a rough measure of its survival value could be obtained by counting the number of times it is referred to in successive years...’ (*Ibid.*: 194)

Copying-fidelity, Dawkins’ third condition, denotes how well a meme can be grasped and spread to the minds of others (*Ibid.*: 194). Esotericism in philosophy, as proposed by Strauss, does not meet any of the conditions Dawkins identifies as requirements for the successful spread of ideas. Strauss claims that esoteric messages are hard to discover and difficult to reliably reconstruct. Therefore, deeply concealed esoteric philosophical ideas can be reasonably assumed to spread with great difficulty.

It seems that if the esoteric teachings, as presented by Strauss, exist, these esoteric ideas are not suitable to enter, nor to initiate, a philosophic discourse. Even provided that esotericism, in the sense of hidden meanings, has some effect on general philosophic discourse, that effect is likely marginal<sup>18</sup>. More likely, if such esoteric teachings exist, they form islands of thought isolated from continuous philosophical thought and are of significance only to historians of philosophy interested in intellectual curiosities<sup>19</sup>.

It seems that philosophers had scant, if any, need to write between the lines. Provided they did so, isolation makes any possible esoteric idea within philosophy insignificant. The insignificance of esotericism in philosophy is in stark contrast to the significance Strauss attributes to writing between the lines.



## **6. Conclusion**

I have contended Strauss's theory of esoteric writing on several grounds. Strauss's arguments in *PAW* are problematic in that they can lead to infinite regression, that the burden of proof to uncover evidence of esotericism rests on the reader, and outlined some additional deficiencies that stem from Strauss's ambiguity. I avoided the recapitulation of these shortcomings because most of them have already appeared in the critical literature. There are more profound problems presented in this paper, which to my knowledge have not been addressed, that challenge the literal interpretation of *PAW*.

Because Strauss never provides a single example, the alleged phenomenon, in which hidden meaning supposedly occurs 'between the lines', exactly what he is referring to is never made clear. The ambiguity led to several competing interpretations of Strauss's dichotomy of exoteric and esoteric meaning, ranging from literal to symbolic readings of *PAW*. Because Strauss masterfully based his thesis on sociological premises grounded on hard to contest minimalist claims, the current paper follows a literal interpretation, *i.e.* that Strauss held that esoteric, hidden messages exist as a form of written communication within works of philosophy. The decision is supported by the practical consequences that are entailed by a literal reading.

The dichotomy of esoteric—exoteric meaning exists in an objectively true and demonstrable way. Sociolinguistics provide evidence that esoteric language use routinely appears in communication. Strauss however, uses the term 'esoteric' in an unconventional and arguably confusing way. Esotericism, in a linguistic sense, refers to language that is understood only by a group of speakers, because it makes unique use of language in a way not generally known by the public at large. Strauss uses the term differently, referring to one meaning of a generally accessible text that has been carefully constructed by its author to convey dual levels of meaning: one to the general literate public, the 'exoteric' level, and one only discernible to a small number of specialists, the 'esoteric' level.

There are three main differences between the Straussian and the linguistic model of esotericism. (1) Strauss's account of esotericism is hierarchical. The esoteric layer of a text subordinates the exoteric layer and intelligence plays a central role in uncovering the true meaning of a text. According to sociolinguistics, several hard to access, in this sense, esoteric layers can coexist in a heterogeneous way without subordinating each other. Besides intelligence, various other factors contribute to the understanding of an esoteric layer. (2) In *PAW* Strauss presents esoteric writing as an unusual, mystical feature of philosophy. According to sociolinguistics, philosophy is generally done in an esoteric way. In technical terms a jargon, a type of language variation that is hard-to-access to the majority, philosophy is an

esoteric discipline. (3) Strauss suggests that esoteric philosophy serves to pass on certain teachings and ideas veiled from the general public. According to sociolinguistics, there is no need to hide philosophic ideas because philosophy is already mostly done in an esoteric way. Moreover, according to Dawkins esoteric philosophy, as proposed by Strauss, is unsuitable to reliably pass on teachings and ideas.

Following a literal reading, the interpretation of *PAW* can take two mutually exclusive courses.

- I. In agreement with evidence provided by the present paper, interpreters of *PAW* may endorse the view that Strauss was mistaken in granting a significant role to hidden esoteric ideas that might appear in the philosophy of great authors. Even provided esotericism as laid out in *PAW* exists, its effect on philosophy is likely marginal. According to the argumentation that supports this scenario, it is likely that hidden esoteric ideas within philosophy, if they exist at all, are rare and isolated phenomena only of interest to historians of philosophy fascinated by oddities.
- II. In the second case, one accepts the thesis of *PAW*. Logical consistency requires one taking this stance to (a) refute inferences that can be drawn from objective linguistic evidence, including basic concepts of sociolinguistics, from which it follows that most of philosophy takes place in an esoteric linguistic space, and (b) to challenge Dawkins' thesis on conditions that determine the successful spread of ideas, which would marginalise any effect hidden esoteric ideas within the already esoteric works of philosophy might have on general discourse.

Success of the latter scenario requires a massive defence that seems unlikely to succeed.

According to the novel linguistic perspectives presented in the current paper, it seems that in *PAW* Strauss is mistaken regarding esotericism, and its role in philosophy. It is initially tempting to endorse Strauss's persuasive account on the origins of hidden esoteric writing as a response to persecution. The Straussian account provides a plausible sociological background as to why philosophy *per se* became an esoteric field. Upon further reflection, it seems that Strauss posited, without factual basis, the existence of clandestine messages within works of philosophy, something generally unnecessary because philosophy is mostly already done in an esoteric linguistic space.

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<sup>1</sup> Published in 1952, *PAW* is a collection of essays. Strauss's original article of the same title appeared earlier (Strauss 1941).

<sup>2</sup> '...no aspect of Strauss's work is as hotly contested as his claims about esotericism. Interpretations of Strauss's view of esotericism include: that Strauss advocates clandestine cabals with secrets imparted from teacher to disciple; that Strauss's writings are themselves esoteric documents; that Strauss thinks that all thinkers write esoterically; that Strauss claims to know a secret; that, Strauss promoted mass deception and perpetual war; and that, in one particularly crude rendering, Strauss used his esoteric methods to hide his fascist sympathies, if not his secret Nazism.' (Batnitzky & Leora 2016)

<sup>3</sup> 'It is reasonable to suspect that a partisan of esoteric philosophy [Strauss] would himself write esoterically' (Lampert 2009: 63). Lampert's view is shared by, e.g. Frazer (2006) and Minowitz (2009).

<sup>4</sup> 'Strauss's critics on the left have charged that he was a right-wing—even fascist—enemy of liberal democracy. His supporters on the right have argued that he was a defender of liberal democracy against the threats coming from communism, Nazism, relativism, and historicism.' (Grant 2016). Cf. Frazer (2006) and Smith (1997).

<sup>5</sup> 'The Zuckerts set out to demonstrate two key points, the first of which is also broached by Minowitz: (1) Leo Strauss and his followers are innocent of the charge that the political Left has levelled against them, of being antidemocratic elitists; and (2) the Straussians and neoconservatives, contrary to the customary association, have separate identities. The Zuckerts insist that although the Straussians are tireless advocates of American democracy...' (Gottfried 2012: I)

<sup>6</sup> See, for example Drury's recent book: *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (1997).

<sup>7</sup> For a complete list of abilities that make up of what is defined as general intelligence see Spearman's account (Spearman, 1904) cf. *Cattell–Horn–Carroll theory of cognitive abilities* (McGrew, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> That is, with regards to the comprehensive abilities and lexical knowledge of the majority.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Yanchun 2013: 2209-13.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Ruiz 2015: 47-70.

<sup>11</sup> Lexico, *Oxford Dictionaries*, Oxford University Press. <<  
<https://www.lexico.com/en/explore/how-many-words-are-there-in-the-english-language>>> accessed 14 August 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Numbers in this section refers to word families. As described by Hirsch and Nation (1992), a word family is a headword and its closely related inflected and derived forms.

<sup>13</sup> Office for National Statistics (2017), *Graduates in the UK labour market*. <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/graduatesintheuklabourmarket/2017>> accessed 30 August 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2016) *Further education and skills: statistical first release (SFR) 23 June 2016* <[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/556015/SFR\\_commentary\\_June\\_2016\\_final\\_JuneOfqual\\_update.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/556015/SFR_commentary_June_2016_final_JuneOfqual_update.pdf)> accessed 30 August 2019.

<sup>15</sup> See the Lexile framework for reading under: <[http://cdn.lexile.com/cms\\_page\\_media/135/11x17%20Lexile%20Map.pdf](http://cdn.lexile.com/cms_page_media/135/11x17%20Lexile%20Map.pdf)> accessed 17 July 2019. On the Flesch–Kincaid readability test see: (Flesch, R. 1948: 221-33).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Mitch 2004.

<sup>17</sup> This is a concise recapitulation of Dawkins' thesis, which he later goes on to refine (Dawkins 1976: 195). The refined definition is not in contradiction to the one delineated here, which serves well for the purpose of the unfolding our argument.

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