



# The Noble Liar's Paradox?

## Citation

Frazer, Michael L. 2015. "The Noble Liar's Paradox?" Perspectives on Political Science 44 (3) (June 30): 159–161. doi:10.1080/10457097.2015.1038460.

## Published version

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10457097.2015.1038460>

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Contribution for a Symposium on *Philosophy Between the Lines* by Arthur M. Melzer  
*Perspectives on Political Science* 44:3, 159-161, 2015.

The Noble Liar's Paradox?

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Abstract: Arthur Melzer deserves considerable credit for amassing a remarkable collection of evidence that most pre-modern and early modern philosophers wrote that esotericism was widely practiced. It does not follow, however, that esotericism was actually as widely practiced as these authors claim it was. If we are to take esotericism seriously, we must consider the possibility that these discussions of esotericism are themselves written esoterically. Considering this possibility raises puzzles related to, but distinct from, the classical conundrum of the liar's paradox. Despite the difficulty of these puzzles, there is no evading the fact that, under Melzer's own account of esotericism, philosophers have a wide variety of reasons to write about esotericism esoterically. These reasons apply, not only to the authors that Melzer discusses, but also to Melzer himself.

Keywords: Melzer, Arthur; Strauss, Leo; Skinner, Quentin; esoteric writing; esotericism; liar's paradox; Epimenides

In *Philosophy Between the Lines*, Arthur Melzer sets himself the important task of disaggregating Leo Strauss's claim that pre-modern philosophers are best read as using noble lies to mask hidden teachings—as deliberately writing between the lines—from the larger, all-too-contentious debate over Strauss's philosophy and politics more generally. That past philosophers wrote esoterically is treated here neither as a dogma embraced by members of a quasi-Masonic cult nor as a philosophical conclusion deduced from eternal features of human nature, but as a simple historical fact. Indeed, the proposition that, at least until the mid-eighteenth century, “esoteric writing was still very well known, openly discussed, and almost universally practiced” (p. xii) is not merely a factual claim; it is one that Melzer insists is capable of “empirical proof” (p. 112).

The massive body of evidence that Melzer has collected for the sake of this proof begins with the epigraphs to his book's preface: short quotations from Rousseau and from Diderot's *Encyclopedia* on the nature and ubiquity of philosophical esotericism. Hundreds of similar quotations from across the history of Western philosophy follow. They spill out of the confines of the book itself and into a regularly updated online appendix. Over seventy-five pages long at the time of the book's publication, this appendix has since grown to over a hundred pages.<sup>1</sup>

Melzer deserves the gratitude of scholars everywhere for creating and maintaining such a remarkable resource. Yet we need to be careful about what the testimonial evidence collected here can and cannot establish. It is not just that, as Melzer acknowledges, bare quotations face

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/sites/melzer/>. Accessed 1/5/15.

“significant problems of translation, authenticity, context and interpretation” (pp. 24-25). While these problems are real, the sheer volume, pervasiveness, explicitness, and clarity of the testimony that Melzer has collected proves beyond any genuinely reasonable doubt that most Western philosophers before the current era were familiar with the practice of esotericism and discussed it openly. It does not follow, however, that this mode of composition was “almost universally practiced.” All we have established is that most pre-modern and early modern philosophers wrote that esoteric writing was widely practiced, and that they wrote this openly, in a manner clear to even the most superficial reader. We have not yet established whether they in fact did what they claim to have done, since we cannot just take their word for it.

One could easily imagine our empiricist colleagues in political science attempting to prove the truism that most politicians lie through a method akin to how Melzer sets out to prove the far less obvious claim that most philosophers lie. In doing so, they might amass a giant database of instances in which politicians say that politicians generally lie, that some particular other politician has lied, or even (presumably only on rare occasions) confessing that they themselves have done so. Much could be learned from this data, but one thing it could not do is provide empirical proof that politicians lie most of the time. It is entirely possible (however unlikely) that the only politicians who are lying are those who falsely accuse those in their profession of doing so. Certainly, we cannot put faith in the assumption that politicians are simply telling us the truth when they say theirs is a lying vocation, since it is their very honesty which is at question here.

The problem we face here is related to the ancient logical puzzle of assigning truth values to certain self-referential propositions. Admittedly, what Melzer documents is not an instance of a classic liar’s paradox of the form “This statement is false.” It is not even a version of the paradox which is thought to have arisen when Epimenides the Cretan said that all Cretans are liars. (The apparent paradox is easily solvable if Epimenides is lying and knows that there exists an honest Cretan, and that this Cretan is someone other than Epimenides himself ) If Epimenides had merely insisted that most Cretans are liars most of the time, then the appearance of a logical paradox would have never even arisen. This statement of our imagined pseudo-Epimedes would simply have to fall into the minority of Cretan-uttered propositions: the true minority if it is not a lie, the false minority if it is.

Yet it would still be odd to take pseudo-Epimenides entirely at his word when he made this self-referential claim, since he is making a statement which draws its own truth into suspicion. Similarly, it is odd for Melzer to take the authors he cites at their word when they make similar claims. If most of what philosophers wrote in eras before our own were actually noble lies concealing hidden truths, then it seems unlikely that their frequent discussions of the art of lying would all fall into the minority of their writings that display the truth entirely unmasked. It is the doctrine of esotericism itself which teaches us to doubt that what philosophers write clearly and openly is in fact their true teaching. Just as Melzer cites Strauss as

insisting that a consistent historicism “must be applied to itself,” so too must a consistent esotericism.<sup>2</sup>

Although he does not directly apply esotericism to itself, Melzer does wrestle with some closely related issues. He acknowledges that we might find it odd to discover that esotericism has been so widely, openly, and clearly discussed, since “as a secretive activity, esotericism is obviously resistant, by its very nature, to open and clear disclosure” (p. 5). His response is to point out, correctly, that “there is no *necessary* inconsistency in speaking openly about secrecy” (p. 12; emphasis in original) since “what is necessarily secret in esotericism is the content of the hidden doctrine, but not its existence” (p. 11). Of course, while the mere existence of a secret teaching need not be hidden for a piece of writing to qualify as esoterically composed, it need not be discussed openly either. Sheer logical consistency allows philosophers to choose from a wide variety of literary strategies on this point. To be sure, Melzer provides a full, quite plausible account of why philosophers might choose to write openly and truthfully about esotericism (see especially pp. 261-263). Yet there are also plausible reasons for falsely claiming to be practicing esotericism, reasons that are no different in kind for the reasons that motivate philosophers to lie more generally.

This seems like the appropriate juncture to point out that I have so far discussed only part of Melzer’s argument for the historical reality of philosophical esotericism. Melzer does not merely collect testimonial evidence for the existence of the practice he is examining; he also offers a clear and convincing explanation of the purposes this practice can serve. Helpfully refining and fleshing out ideas that Strauss has only hinted at—and doing so in a manner superior to all previous literature on the subject<sup>3</sup>—Melzer discusses four types of motives prompting four types of esoteric writing. Defensive esotericism is designed to avoid persecution for heterodox (if often truly harmless or even salutary) doctrines; protective exotericism is designed to prevent the propagation of genuinely dangerous ideas; political esotericism is designed to promote the cause of large-scale practical change; and pedagogical esotericism is designed to educate the next generation of philosophers. Multiple aims can be pursued in a single piece of esoteric writing; ancient and medieval philosophers usually acted from all the motivations Melzer describes except a desire for political reform, while early modern philosophers acted from all except a desire to protect society from dangerous subversion.

False claims to be practicing esotericism can serve all four of these purposes. Consider a society in which some form of esoteric writing is an established, accepted practice, yet in which open philosophizing is not. As is always the case when philosophers appear to endorse orthodox views, there is a possibility here that philosophers who superficially seem to be advocating esotericism may have a hidden, heterodox purpose. For example, Melzer suggests medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophers gave a false appearance of participating in a long tradition of religious esotericism that was tolerated, or even encouraged, by the reigning authorities. He

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<sup>2</sup> Leo Strauss, “Political Philosophy and History,” p. 73, as cited in Melzer, p. 343.

<sup>3</sup> See, for what it’s worth, Michael L. Frazer, “Esotericism Ancient and Modern: Strauss contra Straussianism on the Art of Political-Philosophical Writing.” *Political Theory* 34:1 (2006).

insists that this false appearance of religious, mystical esotericism is masking a real practice of anti-religious, philosophical esotericism (p. 168). Yet claims to be writing in the authorized esoteric mode—such as those found in the introduction to Maimonides’ introduction to the *Guide to the Perplexed*—might still serve a defensive or protective purpose even if they do not hide a deeper esoteric practice, but merely serve as required (in the defensive case) or even salutary (in the protective case) lip-service to prevailing norms before otherwise straightforward philosophical argumentation can commence. One thinks here of the celebrations of Marxism-Leninism at the beginning of Soviet scholarly works, which were present regardless of whether what followed was a coded attack on the regime or a perfectly ordinary piece of academic research.

The pedagogical and political motivations for falsely claiming to be practicing esotericism, moreover, apply even in societies in which such writing is not an established practice. Anyone who has faced a lecture hall of slouching, half-asleep sophomores knows that the most difficult pedagogical challenge a philosophy teacher faces is motivating students to care about thought. As sales of Dan Brown’s novels reveal, however, and as Melzer points out, “Everyone loves a secret. Mystery is alluring. Hide something and we will seek it. This simple fact is the first premise of all pedagogical esotericism” (p. 218).

What Melzer fails to point out, however, is that the allurements that he describes will work even if the secret being hidden is that there isn’t really any secret at all. In the search for this non-existent secret, students will nonetheless have to do a great deal of thinking, and will hopefully come to appreciate the value of philosophical thought for reasons having nothing to do with the search for esoteric doctrines. A pedagogically false claim to be writing esoterically can thus achieve the same pedagogical goal of genuine esoteric writing; as a “literary counterpart of the Socratic method” it can compel the reader “to develop and rely on his own inner powers (pp. 362-363.) And when the use of false claims to esotericism spreads far enough to encourage critical thinking on matters of public importance among the population as a whole, pedagogical motives can blur into political ones.

To the four noble motives for writing esoterically that Melzer describes so convincingly, we can also add the “bad and vicious” motives for esotericism listed by the late P. N. Furbank, “self-aggrandizement, power-mongering, snobbery and fraud,”<sup>4</sup> among others. While we are understandably hesitant to ascribe such base motives to the great philosophers quoted by Melzer, we cannot deny that ignoble reasons may be responsible, not only for some instances of genuine esoteric writing, but also for some instances of false claims to be writing esoterically. It may not be praiseworthy to play the sphinx without a secret simply for the power and prestige that comes from being thought a great sphinx, but history’s best minds have been known to do worse. If anything, the venal motives at play here are rather small potatoes when compared to those responsible for Heidegger’s Nazism or Althusser’s uxoricide.

Given the wide range of both noble and ignoble motives which might have led the philosophers that Melzer quotes to lie about esotericism, we must carefully return to the

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<sup>4</sup> P. N. Furbank, “A No Code Zone,” *Times Literary Supplement*, June 4, 1999, Cited in Melzer, p. 106.

quotations themselves, and the larger works from which they are drawn. We should not assume that the passages in question are written esoterically, but neither should we assume that they are not. Unfortunately, it would take a team of experts a lifetime of work to repeatedly read and re-read each of the works quoted in Melzer's now-hundred-page appendix, determining in each case whether the quotation can actually serve as the sort of evidence that Melzer claims that it does. Even at the end of this massive effort, the historical reality of esotericism cannot be empirically demonstrated in a definitive, quasi-scientific way, but only endorsed as the best available interpretation of the material at hand. Hermeneutic understanding is always merely provisional, with esoteric hermeneutics even more provisional than most.

One cannot help but wonder whether Melzer is already fully aware of all of this, and whether the notes of positivist certainty in his text are masking some hidden doubt. Melzer insists he is neither writing esoterically himself nor urging others to do so (pp. xii-xiii), but why should we believe him? Since esotericism is far from an accepted practice in current scholarship—since it can only serve to alienate potential intellectual allies, perhaps even eliciting some mild form of academic persecution—an author practicing esotericism today would have good reason to hide this fact. Strauss himself was never able to do so with complete success; in a footnote, Melzer conjectures that “much of the suspicion directed at Strauss derives from the fact that he not only discusses esotericism but also seems to practice it,” a suspicion that Melzer and I agree is probably well-grounded (p. 384).

Unsure of the sincerity of even our present-day colleagues—not to mention that of the classic texts that we study together—a scholar newly introduced to esotericism experiences a kind of intellectual vertigo. It is no wonder that, as Melzer observes, so many have rejected Strauss's theory of esoteric writing as “altogether unmanageable, unbearable, unacceptable” (p. 107). One possibility is to retreat to a kind of intellectual solipsism—to give up on trying to figure out what others mean and to do all our thinking for ourselves. At times, Melzer comes surprisingly close to this conclusion of Quentin Skinner's. Like Cambridge contextualism—which reveals the utter alterity and hence the philosophical uselessness of authors from eras before our own—esotericism is another (rather different) “device for forcing thinkers to be self-reliant, for constraining them to stand, not on the shoulders of others and thus within history, but on their own two feet” (p. 363).

At other times, however, Melzer sounds less like Skinner and more like Strauss. Skinner's solipsism is a version of what Melzer calls modern or Cartesian skepticism, a methodological tool “that is only a prelude to dogmatism.” Classical skepticism, by contrast, is what Melzer and Strauss calls “zetetic or erotic.” It is an attitude that “puts the human stance of questioning, wondering and longing permanently at the center of the philosophic life” (p. 233). Strauss identified true philosophy with this suspension of certainty, with this ever-curious awe toward the mystery of existence.

Strauss's doctrine of esotericism is inseparable from this skepticism. Far from an empirical claim capable of being proven through an a monumental collection of testimonial evidence, the view that philosophers may not always say what they mean is part of a larger anti-

empiricist conviction that things may not always be as they appear. It is to Melzer's credit that, far from establishing philosophical esotericism as a Cartesian point of indubitable certainty, his book actually serves to make the history of philosophy far more mysterious, and hence far more interesting, than more pedestrian scholars believe it to be.