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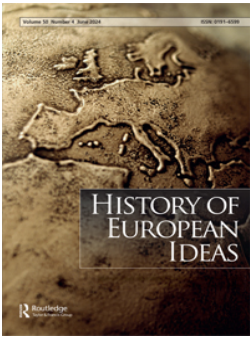
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# What is an ‘open society’? Bergson, Strauss, Popper, and Deleuze

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the different interpretations of the distinction between closed and open societies put forward by Henri Bergson, Leo Strauss, Karl Popper, and Gilles Deleuze. These vary both in the features attributed to the two kinds of society, especially to openness, and in the authors’ evaluations of what they describe. The similarities and differences between their views are documented in detail, and their significance considered.

## KEYWORDS

The open society; Karl Popper; Henri Bergson; Leo Strauss; Gilles Deleuze

In the second half of the twentieth century, and still today, the phrases ‘open society’ and ‘closed society’ have been mainly associated with the work of Karl Popper. This resulted from the considerable influence of his book *The Open Society and its Enemies* (OSE), first published in 1945 and subsequently going through several editions. However, he was not the first to use these contrasting phrases. The credit for that goes to Henri Bergson. And this contrast was also employed before the publication of Popper’s book by Leo Strauss in 1941. Popper acknowledges Bergson as the source of these terms, but emphasises the different meaning he gives to them. Strauss does not differentiate his usage from that of Bergson, but he too deviates significantly from it. The distinction between the closed and open society was also employed rather more recently by Gilles Deleuze, in a manner that goes back, in several respects, to Bergson’s senses of these terms, and carries a very different political message from that of either Strauss or Popper.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper my aim is to clarify these different interpretations of the contrast between the closed and the open society, and the assumptions underpinning them. I will end by considering the relevance of these ideas today.

## 1. Bergson

The contrast between a closed and an open society was introduced by Henri Bergson in the last of his books *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (Bergson 1935). He links it with three other distinctions: between closed and open moralities, religions, and souls. The closed version of each of these is the more primitive, in the sense that it relates to natural requirements arising from the conditions of human life on earth.<sup>2</sup>

For Bergson, the nature of the closed society is largely defined by its type of morality. He argues that closed morality operates below the level of rationality: it is instinctual in the broad sense that it is a product of biology, reflecting the constraints that must operate in order to preserve human communities and to render behaviour within them orderly. It is characterised by a strong sense

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of obligation, and the habitual action this produces is analogous to the behaviour of, say, ants or bees in constructing colonies or hives. Bergson uses ‘virtual instinct’ as a way of characterising this (Bergson 1935:22). As Lacey (1999:145) remarks: ‘for Bergson obligation is the force that binds us to what we would do by instinct if we were purely instinctive creatures, but, since we are not, intelligence is needed to specify our obligations.’ At the same time, Bergson emphasises that morality is not a product of intellectual deliberation, it does not derive, for example, from philosophical ethics.

Crucial for this closed type of morality is solidarity with other members of the group, and protection against outsiders. Indeed, Bergson regards preparedness for war – a willingness to defend the community, and to sacrifice oneself to this cause – as central to the closed morality. He writes: ‘The closed society is that whose members hold together, caring nothing for the rest of humanity, on the alert for attack or defence, bound, in fact, to a perpetual readiness for battle. Such is human society fresh from the hands of nature’ (Bergson 1935:233).

By contrast with this particularistic orientation, the open society involves a creative aspiration towards universalism, in the sense of being open to all human beings; indeed, to the whole of nature. Open morality transcends closed morality, rather than deriving from it through expanding the boundaries of the group. It arises from exceptional individuals – ‘active’ prophets and sages like St. Paul, St. Francis, and Joan of Arc – who develop moral visions, through what Bergson calls intuition, deploying creative emotions like love, joy, and sympathy, and offering at least glimpses of the beatific life that is the open society. These influential figures create new moral practices that acquire a wide following. Through their example they encourage emulation, rather than forcing others to follow rules. So, by contrast with closed morality, the process is one of attraction rather than of compulsion. According to Bergson, the ‘open soul’ that is thereby generated has direct contact with the life force, and is open to a future of further creation. Bergson regarded democracy as the form of political organisation that is most closely in line with this open morality, given its commitment to the universal principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. He writes that it is ‘the furthest removed from nature, the only one to transcend, at least in intention, the conditions of the “closed society”’ (Bergson 1935:270).

The driving force behind the open society is a creative enthusiasm, an openness to all forms of experience, including those rejected by science and the narrow forms of rationalism often associated with it; indeed, Bergson regards religious mysticism as central to open religion and morality. The general implication here is that intellect and rationality are slaves to habit and emotion, rather than motive forces in their own right. Therefore, transcendence of the closed society must come from elsewhere. At the same time, Bergson argues that all morality derives not from rational or intellectual understanding but from the vitality of Nature, which he also identifies with God. *Both* closed and open morality are a product of the *élan vital*, and both serve an essential purpose in the process of ‘creative evolution’ (Bergson 1911).

Bergson does not treat ‘closed’ and ‘open’ as types marking the end-points of a process of evolution in human history. He does not believe that the closed morality has disappeared in modern society, or perhaps that it ever will completely disappear. He regards human history as having involved repeated openings in which new ideas and practices developed, but with these subsequently being assimilated back into established belief and habit. In this sense the open society perhaps never totally supersedes the closed society, even though processes of recurrent ‘opening’ significantly change human belief and behaviour (Bergson 1935: 233–6; see also Germino 1974:12; Lawlor 2003:90–91).<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Strauss

Leo Strauss’s use of the contrast between the closed and open forms of society occurs in a lecture on ‘German nihilism’ (Strauss 1999 [1941]; for discussions see Altman 2007, Shell 2009, and Rose 2022). He wrote this for a seminar at the New School of Social Research, one of the institutions

where he first located on reaching the United States after leaving Nazi Germany (though the paper was not published at the time, only much later). The seminar was focused on ‘Experiences of the Second World War’, and Strauss’s discussion was concerned with the reasons why there had been so much support for Hitler among German youth. He insists that this support should not simply be denounced, that we must try to understand it, because it throws light on the nature of liberal democratic societies by highlighting a danger inherent within them.<sup>4</sup>

At the time Strauss gave his lecture, it was widely claimed that German support for National Socialism arose from nihilism.<sup>5</sup> He argues that this is false if what is meant by that term is the desire to destroy everything, including oneself. Instead, he suggests that the attitudes of German youth stemmed from opposition to modern civilisation, specifically that of the ‘Anglo-Saxon West’; and that the goal of modern civilisation, the establishment of an open society, was seen by much of German youth as ‘irreconcilable with the basic demands of *moral* life’ (Strauss 1999 [1941]:358). They believed that ‘the root of all moral life is essentially and therefore eternally the closed society’:

[...] only a life which is based on constant awareness of the sacrifices to which it owes its existence, and of the necessity, the duty of sacrifice of life and all worldly goods, is truly human: the sublime is unknown to the open society. The societies of the West which claim to aspire toward the open society, actually are closed societies in a state of disintegration: their moral value, their respectability, depends entirely on their still being closed societies. (Strauss 1999 [1941]:358)

Thus, German nihilists rejected ‘the prospect of a pacified planet, without rulers and ruled, of a planetary society devoted to production and consumption only [...]’, ‘a world in which no great heart could beat and no great soul could breathe, [...]’. This prospect was seen as a ‘debasement of humanity’ (Strauss 1999 [1941]: 360; see, also, Strauss 1968). In these terms, claims to progress amounted to hypocrisy. As should be clear, while Strauss cites Bergson, and stays fairly close to his concept of the closed society, he interprets and evaluates the notion of an open society rather differently. Indeed, there are affinities between Bergson’s conception of the closed society and the underlying beliefs that Strauss ascribes to German youth.

Strauss argues that while the German rejection of modern civilisation was not nihilistic in itself, it tended towards nihilism in the 1920s and 30s, both because of social and political circumstances in Weimar Germany and as a result of the threat of a communist future. German nihilists refused the prospect of a completely open society, put forward by communism as well as liberalism, but were at the same time influenced by the communist idea that existing society must be swept away, so that a new civilisation could arise from the ashes. As a result, they were led to support whatever forces promised to destroy the status quo: they had little sense of a positive alternative. Strauss argues that what was lacking here was the right kind of education:

I am convinced that about the most dangerous thing for these young men was precisely what is called progressive education: they rather needed old-fashioned teachers, such old-fashioned teachers of course as would be undogmatic enough to understand the aspirations of their pupils. (Strauss 1999 [1941]:361)<sup>6</sup>

These teachers would be able to ‘explain [...] in articulate language the positive, and not merely destructive, meaning of their aspirations’ (Strauss 1999 [1941]:362). But, instead of this, there was the influence of such writers as Nietzsche, who promoted irrational decision and commitment.

It is not entirely clear, in this article, when Strauss is merely describing the views and feelings of German youth and when he is expressing agreement with these. At one point he says: ‘I take it for granted that not everything to which the young nihilists objected, was unobjectionable, and that not every writer or speaker whom they despised, was respectable’ (Strauss 1999 [1941]:363). Indeed, as we have seen, Strauss explains the rise of German nihilism as resulting, in large part, from the failures of Western secular liberalism.<sup>7</sup> He writes that no adequate response to German nihilism could be made by those:

who mistake analysis of the present or past or future for philosophy; who believe in a progress toward a goal which is itself progressive and therefore undefinable; who are not guided by a known and stable standard: by a standard which is stable and not changeable, and which is known and not merely believed. In other words, the lack of resistance to nihilism seems to be due ultimately to the depreciation and the contempt of reason [...] (Strauss 1999 [1941]:364)

What he means by ‘reason’ here is not modelled on the method of modern natural science but rather on what he takes to be Socrates’ philosophical practice, which he regards as central to pre-modern philosophy. He argues that, in its modern form, reason tends to be ‘a servant or slave of the emotions; and it will be hard to make a distinction which is not arbitrary, between noble and base emotions [...]’ (Strauss 1999 [1941]:364). This contrasts with Bergson’s rather more optimistic view of the progressive evolutionary function of emotions.

Strauss argues that this classical form of reason is central to the original nature of civilisation, from which modern civilisation has degenerated. He writes that:

civilisation is the conscious culture of reason. This means that civilisation is not identical with human life or human existence. There were, and there are, many human beings who do not partake of civilisation. Civilisation has a natural basis which it finds, which it does not create, on which it is dependent, and on which it has only a very limited influence. (Strauss 1999 [1941]:366).

He claims that, by contrast with this, ‘the nihilists in general, and the German nihilists in particular reject the principles of civilisation as such’ (Strauss 1999 [1941]:367). They reject them in favour of the military virtues, valuing these virtues for their own sake and to the exclusion of all others. He insists that classical civilisation did not reject those virtues, but treated them as of value solely in offering necessary protection from both external and internal attack. He writes: ‘all civilised communities as well as uncivilised ones are in need of armed force which they must use against their enemies from without and against the criminals within’ (Strauss 1999 [1941]:366).

So, the fundamental problem, for Strauss, is modern civilisation’s rejection of the classical notion of reason, under the influence of historicism and positivism (see Strauss 1953). It is this which leads to the undesirable features of the open society, not least the rise of nihilism. He argues that:

Human reason is active, above all, in two ways: as regulating human conduct, and as attempting to understand whatever can be understood by man; [in other words,] as practical reason and as theoretical reason. The pillars of civilisation are therefore morals and science, and both united. For science without morals degenerates into cynicism, and thus destroys the basis of the scientific effort itself; and morals without science degenerates into superstition and thus is apt to become fanatic cruelty. (Strauss 1999 [1941]:365)

It is hard to determine precisely what Strauss means by ‘closed’ and ‘open’ society in this discussion, which is why I have quoted him at some length. He seems to share Bergson’s conception of the closed society, to some degree, and he believes that there has been a move toward openness, albeit conceptualised differently from what Bergson had in mind. However, he does not view this positively; even though he does not see the closed society as ideal. In addition, he is plainly at odds with Bergson over the role of reason and emotion; and, as we shall see, with Popper about the nature of reason and its connection with liberal democracy.

### 3. Popper

For Popper the closed society is characterised by obedience to custom simply because it is ‘what has always been done’, ‘what the ancestors commanded’, or ‘what the authorities proclaim’. Furthermore, there is reliance on superstition and magic, which renders custom rigid and relatively unchanging, rather than allowing adaptation to circumstances and learning about the world. There is also a tribalistic focus on support for the in-group and rejection of out-groups. By contrast, he views the open society as encouraging rational thought that generates new ideas, and as universalistic and humanitarian in orientation. Decisions are made through rational investigation of the evidence, rather than ideas being accepted on any other grounds. Popper’s model for the open

society was, in large part, his conception of how natural science communities operate, or should operate (Popper 1963).<sup>8</sup>

As I noted earlier, Popper (1966a:202) acknowledges Bergson's invention of the distinction between closed and open societies; and, despite emphasising the differences, he recognises a 'certain similarity' in the meanings he gives to them. This is primarily true of 'closed society'; by contrast, there is a considerable difference in how he interprets the phrase 'open society'. Popper ascribes this difference to his 'rationalist' orientation versus Bergson's 'religious' concerns. Perhaps most important of all, where Bergson regards rational and intellectual thought as subordinate to the *élan vital*, in the form of habit and emotion, Popper sees them as allowing escape from the closed society, not least from a narrow concern with the interests of one's own group or nation, in favour of a broader humanitarianism. While Popper emphasises the role of creativity in developing new theoretical ideas, by contrast with Bergson he places equal emphasis on the need to test those ideas, whether through empirical investigation or through rational discussion among those with conflicting views. Similarly, though both Popper and Bergson treat the open society as characterised by universalism, as against the particularism or parochialism of the closed society, Popper (1966a:202) regards mysticism not as bringing about openness but as 'an expression of the longing for the lost unity of the closed society, and therefore as a reaction against the rationalism of the open society'.

An important difference from both Bergson and Strauss is that Popper interprets the history of the West as *progress* from a closed to an open society, albeit with reversals – notably in the Middle Ages, as well as in Germany and Austria in the 1930s and early 40s. By contrast, as we saw, both Bergson and Strauss believed that the need for the virtues of the closed society persists, so that they must be preserved to some extent. At the same time, Popper (1966a:174) recognises a danger that the open society may turn into what he calls an 'abstract society', in which it loses 'the character of a concrete or real group [...] or of a system of such real groups'. In what he describes as an exaggerated form, this would be 'a society in which [people] practically never meet face to face – in which all business is conducted by individuals in isolation who communicate by typed letters or by telegrams, and who go about in closed motor-cars. (Artificial insemination would allow even propagation without a personal element.)'. He insists that 'there never will be or can be a completely abstract or even a predominantly abstract society – no more than a completely or even a predominantly rational society' (Popper 1966a:175), though it must be said that we are closer to the first of these today than he would probably have anticipated. What he says about the abstract society suggests that he does not believe that complete 'openness' is either possible or desirable. He acknowledges that 'most of the social groups of a modern open society (with the exception of some lucky family groups) are poor substitutes, since they do not provide for a common life'. But, to a large extent, this does not go beyond his recognition that there are costs and strains involved in openness. Furthermore, he emphasises the gains, not least 'personal relationships of a new kind' which can be 'freely entered into, instead of being determined by the accidents of birth' (Popper 1966a:175).

As I noted at the beginning, Popper's concept of the open society, of all those discussed here, has been the most influential in the public sphere, not least through the work of the Open Society Foundations. However, even within this context the meaning of the term has undergone some slippage over time. As Ignatieff and Roche (2018) point out, this has stemmed from the need to adjust to changes in the character of what is being opposed: no longer simply totalitarianism but also autocratic or populist forms of democracy.

While Popper's conception of the closed society is quite close to that of Bergson, his interpretation of 'the open society' is nearer to that of Strauss, even though they differ sharply in their attitudes toward it. When we turn to Gilles Deleuze, there is a move back towards Bergson in some key respects, despite some parallels with the other two writers. But there are also significant political differences from all the others.

#### 4. Deleuze

Deleuze shares Bergson's conception of the closed society, to a large extent, and he draws on his philosophy of irreducible plurality to argue for an 'open society of creators' (Deleuze 1988:111). Nevertheless, there is also a sharp difference because Deleuze has a thoroughly negative view of the closed morality and the closed society, seeing them as characterised by conformism and a 'herd mentality'. For Bergson both the closed and the open moralities were products of the vital spirit in nature, whereas for Deleuze this seems to apply only to the open society. Here, the over-riding influence on him appears to be Nietzsche.<sup>9</sup>

Like Bergson, Deleuze views the open society as intrinsically related to democracy, though he has a somewhat different conception of what this entails. Baugh (2016:353) writes that this is a democracy:

not in the sense of the rule of the actually existing people, but the rule of the 'people to come'. In the actually existing situation, such a people is lacking or missing (Deleuze 1994: 215–24). When the people becomes a society of creators, the result is a society open to the future, creativity and the new, which is to say, that 'the people to come' are the people open to what is to come, and so open to their own creative potential.

Here social order is generated not by subordination to an external authority but arises spontaneously from the interactions of free and creative individuals. The open society is *virtually* present, and is revealed when 'popular forces push against the forces of constraint and homogenisation that would force everyone to strive to conform to a single and uniform set of norms'. Whereas the closed society aims to assimilate everything to pre-established structures, 'an open society seeks connections with new, heterogeneous entities that will creatively transform it' (Baugh 2016:353). Such creativity amounts to the affirmation of difference for its own sake, but achievement of this is always potentially blocked by the persisting effects of the closed morality.

While in some ways this is close to Popper's view of the open society, there are clearly fundamental differences. Like Bergson, Deleuze does not regard the open society as rational – it arises from 'creative emotion' (Deleuze 1988:111) – and there is a similar appeal to the role of 'great souls of artists and mystics' in spreading openness to difference. Furthermore, for Deleuze, openness involves eliminating property, family, and national commitments, since these create opposing interests. The aim is to realise 'the virtual potentialities of "being human" as such, [...] without qualities and beyond categories'. It would be 'a fraternity of "anarchist individuals" whose only "quality" is "democratic dignity"' (Deleuze 1997: 84–6), which Deleuze interprets as the 'common aspiration to reconnect with "the creative effort manifested by life" [...]' (Baugh 2016:357). Such 'fraternity' is open to all, and preserves universalism, a feature that Bergson and Popper also regarded as characteristic of the open society, albeit in different terms.

Like Bergson, Deleuze argues that 'great souls' exemplify the creative life force, though for him they also highlight what is intolerable, 'inspiring others to revolt in the name of a better life' (Baugh 2016:357). And he appeals to the notion of a utopia that is built into current reality as a potentiality, but by contrast with Bergson his position is atheistic, in the sense that it rejects any form of transcendence (Shults 2014). Deleuze insists that 'politics is active experimentation' (Deleuze and Parnet 1987: 137), of a kind that is close to what Popper labelled 'utopian social engineering'. This is true even though Deleuze, like Popper, rejects the idea of change based on a blueprint for a future society. In this respect, Deleuze is closer to Lukács' view of a new society arising out of the destruction of the old; what Strauss dismissed as nihilism. At the same time, Deleuze shares Strauss's view of the 'meanness and vulgarity' of modern society (Deleuze and Guattari 1994:107–8); even though he differs sharply from Strauss in his views about what would be a desirable alternative. With Bergson, he believes that what is required is to bring about change by encouraging 'vital and creative forces' that already exist within societies, the consequences of these (he seems to assume) necessarily being of positive value.



## 5. Discussion

The contrast between closed and open societies is related to attempts to differentiate ‘traditional’ from ‘modern’ societies, such as Spencer’s distinction between ‘militant’ and ‘industrial’ types of society (which influenced Bergson), Tönnies’ notion of communal social relations (*Gemeinschaft*) as opposed to contractual ones (*Gesellschaft*), and Durkheim’s distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity (also probably an influence on Bergson). Such contrasts vary in focus; and, as we have seen, this is also true of that between ‘closed’ and ‘open’ societies (Richter 1974). Furthermore, in all of its uses this distinction seems to carry an evaluative load. In the case of Popper it is fairly clear that, crudely speaking, ‘closed’ is bad while ‘open’ is good.<sup>10</sup> Much the same can be said about Deleuze. By contrast, both Bergson and Strauss are more equivocal, but they nevertheless had strong views about what was good and bad in contemporary society.

Of course, we can question whether binary typologies of this kind are helpful in thinking productively about the complex issues they cover: are not more subtle sets of discriminations necessary? And we must certainly ask: closed to, and open to, what? The four authors I have discussed answer this in starkly different ways. In brief, we can say that, for Bergson, the open society is open to intuitive awareness and understanding that goes beyond rational intellect; for Strauss the problem is that it is open to what is of no value, or even evil; for Popper it is open to discovering the truth and to rational action; for Deleuze it appears to be open to anything.

As noted earlier, Bergson and Deleuze share similar conceptions of the nature of closed and open societies. For both, the second involves creative intuition that produces an inspiring model of joyful and harmonious diversity. By contrast, Strauss and Popper both conceive of an open society as characterised by rational inquiry modelled on natural science and the exercise of individual freedom, even though they adopt contrasting attitudes towards this. At the same time, whereas Bergson and Strauss view elements of the closed society as ineradicable or essential, Deleuze and Popper seem to believe that a fully open society (albeit conceived very differently) can be realised, or at least that efforts should be made to achieve it.

These differences in interpretation and evaluation are no doubt to be explained partly by the fact that the four authors were writing at different times and in different circumstances. But I suggest that, in large part, they stem from divergences in philosophical and political attitudes that were, and are, quite widespread – and that run very deep. They reflect long-term trends in Western thought, from ancient and medieval times, through the Enlightenment and Romanticism, to conflicting sets of ideas that prevailed in the last decades of the ‘long nineteenth century’.<sup>11</sup> Fundamentally, they relate to tensions amongst values that, while to a large extent held in common across communities, can be given differential priority, producing sharply discrepant views both about what is the most desirable form of society and about what is wrong with actual and contemporary ones.

So, while each of the four writers I have discussed is concerned with the problems of modernity, they diagnose these differently and propose very different remedies. It is easy summarily to dismiss their views by caricature: Bergson’s mysticism, Strauss’s antiquarianism, Popper’s naïve assumption of universal rationality, and Deleuze’s lauding of all that is creative and novel. Nevertheless, their arguments repay attention; albeit some more than others.

In recent years the work of Bergson and Deleuze has become particularly influential in some parts of the humanities and social sciences (Ansell-Pearson 2018). This reflects a shift, in many quarters, towards rejection of natural science in favour of art and literature as models for both inquiry and society, with an emphasis on creative freedom and the production of novelty. From this point of view, democracy does not involve any curtailment of freedom in the common interest; instead, it represents spontaneous cooperation emerging out of the free expression of individualities. This idea of a spontaneous form of democracy that celebrates difference has been particularly appealing to many on the Left; though, despite a deep divide in political substance, there are interesting affinities between this and libertarianism on the Right, whether inspired by Hayek or Nozick

(Gaus 2017; White 2023). However, we should note that, notwithstanding their celebration of democracy, there is an element of elitism in the positions of Bergson and Deleuze: both believe that change is brought about by what Deleuze calls a ‘minority’ who can act as creators, forging new lines of development for others to follow. For these two authors, while the role of philosophy is to provide a metaphysical justification for the open society, it cannot bring it about, other than by subverting the rationales for those practices and forms of thought that block the emergence of creative diversity. But, as with most forms of metaphysics, and indeed of religion, we are faced with the question of what independent basis there can be for evaluating them, and choosing one over another.

Much more is to be learned, in my view, from careful assessment of the ideas of Popper and Strauss, even though these too are certainly not without serious problems. Popper’s perspective could reasonably be labelled as liberal rationalism, since it views the history of Western thought and society as a story of progress, despite barriers and setbacks; and treats the development of natural science and of liberal democratic forms of government as complementary. While he recognises that there are respects in which living in the open society is less comfortable than inhabiting a closed society, and that the latter may retain appeal for many, he insists that an open society is the most desirable form. By contrast, while Strauss does not deny that liberal democracy has virtues, not least in allowing the freedom to pursue philosophy, by contrast with totalitarianism, he nevertheless argues that it tends to sap and misdirect genuine thinking. In particular, it encourages relativism and scepticism (a charge sometimes directed at Popper’s philosophy – Stokes 1998). And he sees these philosophical views not simply as intellectually defective but also as socially destructive: they undermine decent morality and social order (see Hammersley 2023).<sup>12</sup>

The differences between Popper and Strauss are highlighted in their views about National Socialism, from which both were forced to flee. Popper saw this political movement as an attempt to return to the closed society, prompted by the strains deriving from openness. By contrast, Strauss believed that National Socialism highlighted what is wrong with an open society – that it is at odds with human nature, properly conceived. Popper was vehemently opposed to this sort of argument, asserting that it legitimated totalitarianism. He insisted that any attempt to turn the clock back was futile. It seems likely that Strauss agreed that there could be no return to the past in political terms, but, by contrast with Popper’s liberal rationalism, he espoused a more conservative political view. From his perspective, government should be exercised by an educated elite, with education based, not on the model of science, but rather on the study of premodern political philosophy, particularly the works of Plato – whose writings Popper regarded as one of the main sources of totalitarianism. In some respects, the differences between these two philosophers amount to a revival of the ‘quarrel between the ancients and moderns’: Popper is on the side of the moderns, and those he sees as anticipating a modern perspective in the past such as Pericles, while Strauss wanted a return to the ancients in thought even if not in political practice.

There has been some debate about Popper’s view of democracy (Shearmur 1996; Gaus 2017, 2021). Fundamentally, what seems to have been most important to him is preservation of the conditions that allow individuals the freedom to engage in rational inquiry and to take responsibility for their own decisions. In the first half of his life he believed that this may well require governments to intervene to restrict the inequalities generated by capitalism. But, perhaps under Hayek’s influence, he weakened this aspect of his position later. This may have brought him even closer to Strauss’s emphasis on the need for prudence in politics, though his insistence on piecemeal rather than utopian social engineering already reflected that orientation.

While Popper agrees with Bergson that we should value creativity, he is surely correct that what this produces must be subject to rational assessment on the basis of evidence, in the context of what Oakshott referred to as ‘the politics of conversation’ (Jacobs and Tregenza 2013). Conspiracy theories and fake news display great creativity, but fact-checking is essential to control them. The core of Popper’s position is fallibilism: that we can never know that a belief is true with absolute certainty, so that we must be tolerant, but also engage in critical discussion to discover our errors.

There is something of a parallel with Strauss's opposition to what he regards as the hubris of modern thought, in particular its atheistic rejection of revelation as a source of, and justification for, morality. Like Popper he emphasises the limits to rational inquiry, even though his model for this is ancient philosophy rather than modern science. And we should also note Popper's tolerance for religion and emphasis on the role of tradition (Popper 1963:ch4; Popper 2008:ch5). Both the rational interrogation of creativity and novelty and highlighting the limits to what science and philosophy can provide strike me as particularly important today (Hammersley 2014).

Similarly, even if we prefer art to science, does not any concept of art necessarily imply judgments about the relative excellence of what is produced? Following Strauss, do we not need to think carefully about what excellence means, even if we do not accept his interpretation of it? And the idea of democracy as spontaneous expression by creative individuals – aside from being at odds with the orientations of most people in actually existing democracies, and any foreseeable change in these – appears to ignore the need to defend ourselves against aggression by those promoting very different views or interests. This applies not just to threats coming from outside, but also to those that arise within our own societies. This indicates that there is no absolute right to express any opinion, nor any obligation to respect all expressed opinions, even those within the limits of what is lawful. Free expression, like its suppression, must be circumscribed, but it is important to be clear about the limits to, and grounds for, both.<sup>13</sup> In this respect, and others, Strauss was surely right in emphasising that some elements of the closed society ought to be retained. In the shadow of the appalling consequences of failed states around the world, should we not value social order and accept the minimum constraints on our freedom that protecting this demands?

In conclusion, it seems clear that we must ask: what mix of openness and closedness, of various kinds, characterises the good society, both in general and in particular cases? None of the authors I have discussed in this paper provides an entirely cogent answer to that question, but their work may help us to address it for ourselves in the challenging circumstances we face.

## Notes

1. For a discussion of the diverse meanings that can be given to the term 'openness', see Germino 1982:ch1. He also discusses a range of other writers who have referred to 'the open society', directly or indirectly. Germino champions a conception of openness put forward by Voegelin, which is close to that of Bergson (Germino 1974, 1978; Douglass 1983). Others have highlighted Hayek's notion of the 'great society' as a synonym (Gaus 2021; Turner 2023), or Nozick's 'meta-utopia' (White 2023). There are also those who have suggested that 'open society' is an oxymoron, since all societies necessarily have borders (Lilla 2018), just as liberalism necessarily limits freedom (Galston 1991). Even advocates of the open society today recognise its 'unresolved' and 'contested' character: see Royer and Matei 2023.
2. For general introductions to Bergson's work see Kolakowski 1985, Lacey 1999, and Ansell-Pearson 2018. On the background in French philosophy, see Gutting 2001:chs1-3. For a detailed discussion of Bergson's *Two Sources*, see Germino 1982:ch9 and Lawlor 2003: Appendix 1. For a discussion of the political implications of Bergson's notion of a closed society, see Parel 1982. On Bergson's influence in France, see Pilkington 1976.
3. There is a contrast here with the views of Durkheim, a fellow student of Bergson's at the *École Normale Supérieure* (Lefebvre and White 2010). Durkheim's picture of historical development is from a form of social organisation reliant on 'mechanical solidarity' (similar in some respects to Bergson's 'closed society'), to one that involves 'organic solidarity', in which there is much more individuality and creativity (see Lukes 1973). For him this is an entirely social process, whereas (as we have seen) for Bergson the open society must ultimately be traced back to the life process, the *élan vital*. There are other important differences too, and it has been suggested that *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* was intended as a direct challenge to Durkheim's arguments.
4. There is a parallel here with Karl Mannheim's insistence that liberal democracies must learn from fascism, rather than simply dismissing the latter as an evil aberration; though there were also, of course, significant differences between these two writers (Hammersley 2021, 2023). In particular, the lessons to be learned were very different (Shell 2009 suggests that Strauss draws here on the ideas of Carl Schmitt, and these do seem to be the model for the views ascribed to German youth). The idea that fascism pointed to fundamental weaknesses in liberal democracy was not uncommon among conservative commentators: see Kojec'ký 1971.

5. Strauss cites a recently published book by Hermann Rauschning (1939) entitled *The Revolution of Nihilism: Warning to the West*, as well as one of the other talks at the New School seminar by Carl Mayer (1942), which also discusses the notion of German nihilism. Rauschning's book was a set text for the seminar.
6. Interestingly, in his early life Popper was involved in the progressive education movement in Germany: see Hacothen 2000. It seems likely that Strauss saw himself as one of the 'old-fashioned teachers' he commends.
7. It is worth examining Strauss's debate with Kojève in this context: see Strauss 1991.
8. For an excellent introduction to Popper's social and political philosophy see Shearmur 1996.
9. For a good brief introduction to Deleuze see Gutting 2001:331–41.
10. In *Plough, Sword, and Book*, Ernest Gellner, a colleague of Popper's at the London School of Economics in the 1950s and 60s, provided a more up-to-date account of the various strands of change underpinning the traditional/modern distinction, drawing on a wide range of research (Gellner 1990; see also Lessnoff 2002). Like Popper, he sees the change from traditional to modern in positive terms, with neither regret for 'the world we have lost' nor any belief (in the manner of Strauss, or for that matter the advocates of Critical Theory) that the process of development had taken a wrong turn. For an attempt to elaborate on, and correct, Popper's account of the transition from closed to open societies, see Alamuti 2023.
11. For excellent discussions of these ideas, and their broader intellectual contexts, albeit adopting very different approaches, see Shklar 1957 and Burrow 2000.
12. Kendall (1960) offers an even more fundamental challenge to the notion of the open society, tracing this notion back to John Stuart Mill, and insisting that there should be restrictions on the public expression of views that are at odds with those of the majority in society. While, like Strauss, he believes that a society is wise that allows a select few to pursue truth privately, he argues that even scholarly and scientific communities necessarily, and properly, operate in a relatively closed fashion, demanding that challenges to orthodoxy prove themselves. There is a parallel here with Polanyi (1962).
13. There is a lack of sufficient clarity, for example, about the nature of academic freedom: see Hammersley 2016.

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