

WILLIAM WOOD

LEO STRAUSS ON RELIGION AS THE FUNDAMENTAL
ALTERNATIVE TO PHILOSOPHY*

Leo Strauss is well known for seeking to revive the ancient idea of the philosophical life, which he associates above all with Socrates. Strauss is also well known for his provocative thesis that philosophy and religion are fundamental and irreconcilable alternatives, which cannot be harmonized or synthesized. However, it is less widely recognized that his thought on this issue follows two divergent trajectories. The first emphasizes the unique importance of revealed religion while the other emphasizes the conflict between philosophy and “religion in general.” Sometimes, Strauss suggests that what he calls “revelation,” i.e. monotheistic revealed religion, poses a unique “challenge” to philosophy, such that the philosopher must refute (or at least try to refute) the mere possibility of divine revelation in order to establish the legitimacy of his own enterprise. Sometimes, however, he suggests rather that revealed religion is a religion like any other, which would seem therefore to pose no unique challenge. It is not clear how these two strands of his thought are related or if they can be reconciled.

My aim will be to shed light on this important tension by closely examining each strand of Strauss’ thinking about religion as an alternative to philosophy. First, I present an extremely succinct characterization of Strauss’ conception of philosophy as a way of life, emphasizing those elements which bring philosophy into conflict with religion. Then I focus on revelation, before turning to the conflict between philosophy and “religion in gen-

WILLIAM WOOD, PhD, European Center of Political Philosophy, Matthias Corvinus Collegium; correspondence address: Tas vezér u. 3–7, 1113 Budapest, Hungary; e-mail: williamcarroz@gmail.com; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9415-9976>.

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eral,” which I argue that Strauss identifies with “authoritative tradition” of any kind.

My primary aim will neither be to defend nor to criticize Strauss, but to contribute to a clearer understanding of his thought and what we can learn from it. However, my discussion will have an unavoidably critical and questioning character. The reader quickly discovers that his provocative, and seemingly clear-cut and decisive, formulations become progressively more complex and elusive as one seeks to unpack them and bring to light their implications. However, to turn Strauss himself into an authority, as is so often done by his followers, would be a betrayal of his own conception of the philosophical life as a life devoted to the ceaseless questioning of every authority. I conclude, then, with some critical suggestions about what appear to me to be unresolved difficulties in his thought.

While many scholars have addressed the conflict between philosophy and revelation in Strauss’ thought,¹ the tension or duality internal to his approach to religion in general has gone largely unnoticed. The only major interpreter of Strauss to have emphasized this tension is Daniel Tanguay, who concludes that Strauss ultimately differs from his medieval Averroist and early modern predecessors in granting to revealed religion, especially in its Jewish form, “an intrinsic cognitive value” which other forms of religion lack.² This cognitive value lies in its ability to call the philosophical life radically into question, thereby forcing philosophy to acknowledge that “it cannot refute Jerusalem’s claims to represent the only just way of life” and contributing in this way to augmenting the philosopher’s self-knowledge.³

By contrast, I argue that Strauss oscillates inconsistently between these two “levels” of his thought about religion, as Tanguay calls them, and that this inconsistency reflects tensions, which Strauss fails to resolve, internal to his positive conception of philosophy itself as forging a middle path between dogmatism and skepticism. With respect to revelation, I argue that Strauss

¹ See, *inter alia*, Heinrich MEIER, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, trans. J. Harvey Lomax (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Leora BATNITZKY, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy and the Politics of Revelation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and David JANSSENS, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Philosophy, Prophecy and Politics in Leo Strauss’s Early Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008). Thomas Pangle’s *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003) is not directly a study of Strauss, but a Straussian attempt to articulate the relationship between philosophy and revelation understood as incompatible ways of life.

² Daniel TANGUAY, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Christopher Nadon (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 208.

³ *Ibid.*, 210.

begs the question on the decisive issue by assuming, rather than proving, that it follows necessarily from what he calls “the very idea of revelation” that philosophy and revelation are incapable of being harmonized. I argue that this assumption is related to the fact that Strauss oscillates between taking for granted a purely active and discursive conception of human reason, in a manner that aligns him with late modern philosophers such as Kant and Nietzsche, and acknowledging that there is a receptive or noetic dimension intrinsic to human reason, in a manner that aligns him rather with ancient philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle.

I

What, then, *makes* the philosophical life truly philosophical for Strauss? Such a life is animated by a passionate desire for the “the truth,” i.e. the truth about “the fundamental and comprehensive problems.”⁴ It is therefore characterized by two elements, an erotic orientation towards the truth and a skeptical moment, a suspension of judgment in the face of claims insufficiently supported by the evidence: “Philosophy is love of truth, i.e. of *evident* truth. Precisely for this reason, it is of the essence of the philosopher to *suspend* his judgment, and *not* to assent, in all cases in which assent would be based on insufficient evidence. Whoever is incapable of suspending his judgment in such cases, of *living* in such suspense, whoever fails to know that *doubt* is a good pillow for a well-constructed head, cannot be a philosopher.”⁵ The positive orientation entails the negative moment, because the philosopher who uncompromisingly desires the truth will avoid as far as possible assenting to unevident claims, especially about matters of fundamental importance.

Strauss frequently claims that philosophy begins with the discovery of nature: “The first philosopher was the discoverer of *phusis*. *Phusis* had to be *discovered*: man does not know without further ado that there is such a thing as nature.”⁶ It is unclear if he means the discovery that there *is* such a thing as nature or the discovery of the revolutionary *hypothesis* that there *might be*

⁴ Leo STRAUSS and Alexandre KOJÈVE, *On Tyranny: Including the Strauss-Kojève Correspondence*, ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 196.

⁵ Leo STRAUSS, “Reason and Revelation” (1948), appendix to MEIER, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 171–72.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

such a thing. In one place, he speaks of the “discovery or invention of nature.”⁷ However, he certainly believes that philosophy is essentially naturalistic. This indicates both the subject matter of philosophy (“the whole” or “the world,” not merely the human world) and the distinctively philosophical way of considering it (as governed by impersonal necessities, not mysterious or unpredictable divinities).

Strauss remarks, “The idea of philosophy implies directly the possibilities of dogmatism on the one hand and skepticism on the other.”⁸ After Plato’s death, the Platonic Academy was riven by conflict between dogmatists and skeptics, each claiming the Socratic-Platonic legacy as their own. However, Strauss claims that philosophy in its original Socratic form was neither dogmatic nor skeptical but “zetetic” (searching). He agrees with Pascal that we know too much to be skeptics and too little to be dogmatists,⁹ but he takes this not as a reason to take refuge in faith, but rather as “the only possible justification of philosophy which as such is neither dogmatic nor skeptic.”¹⁰

Strauss spent his life trying to articulate a coherent middle way between dogmatism and skepticism. He proposed that zetetic philosophy consists in reflectively articulated (not merely inchoate) awareness of the fundamental and comprehensive problems, which necessarily stops short of resolving them:

As long as there is no wisdom but only quest for wisdom, the evidence of all solutions is necessarily smaller than the evidence of the problems. Therefore the philosopher ceases to be a philosopher at the moment at which his “subjective certainty” of a solution becomes stronger than his awareness of the problematic character of that solution. At that moment the sectarian is born.¹¹

Strauss is frustratingly elusive about the exact nature of this “awareness,” which he claims is the core of Socrates’ famous knowledge of ignorance. He sometimes describes the fundamental alternatives as “coeval with human thought”: “Philosophy is knowledge that one does not know; that is to say, it is knowledge of what one does not know, or awareness of the fundamental

⁷ Leo STRAUSS, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 253.

⁸ Leo STRAUSS, “Letter to Helmut Kuhn,” *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 2 (1978): 23.

⁹ See Blaise PASCAL, *Pensées and Other Writings*, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 40–43. Strauss alludes to thought no. 164.

¹⁰ STRAUSS and KOJÈVE, *On Tyranny*, 196.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

problems and, therewith, of the fundamental alternatives regarding their solution that are coeval with human thought.”¹² At other times, however, he ascribes to the Socratic way of philosophizing an open-ended and essentially unfinishable character: “We may think that the possible alternatives are exhausted by the great thinkers of the past. But... who are we to believe that we have found out the limits of human possibilities?”¹³

Although Strauss often speaks of fundamental alternatives, his use of this formula is ambiguous. Sometimes he seems to mean *intra-philosophical* alternatives, the different possible solutions to a given metaphysical problem. Although he rarely gives direct examples of what he has in mind, the reader is led to think of such alternatives as “idealism, materialism, dualism,” or “realism, nominalism, conceptualism,” and so on, which presumably add up to different comprehensive hypotheses about “what nature is.” But sometimes, he seems rather to have in mind *alternatives to the philosophical life itself*—such as the religious or the political life, and perhaps also “poetry,” i.e. the life of the reflective poet, such as Aristophanes.

Strauss often claims that *the* fundamental alternative is philosophy and revealed religion: “No alternative is more fundamental than the alternative: human guidance or divine guidance. *Tertium non datur*. The alternative between philosophy and revelation cannot be evaded by any harmonization.”¹⁴ He claims that revelation represents a fundamental “challenge” to philosophy, which the philosopher must meet in order to justify his *own* enterprise: “The Bible ... offers the only challenge to the claim of philosophy which can reasonably be made. One cannot seriously question the claim of philosophy in the name, e.g., of politics or of poetry.”¹⁵

The thesis that philosophy and revelation are fundamental alternatives is interesting and suggestive, but it hardly goes without saying. The Straussian view contrasts most directly with the traditional Roman Catholic and Thomistic view that philosophy and revelation, far from being “alternatives,” are harmonious. Although there often *appears* to be a conflict, there is no ultimate, irreconcilable antagonism—a philosophical life can also be a faithful one, a fact guaranteed by revelation itself, because revelation supplies certain knowledge (not merely true belief) and truth does not contradict truth.

¹² Leo STRAUSS, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1953), 32.

¹³ STRAUSS, *Rebirth*, 30.

¹⁴ STRAUSS, “Reason and Revelation,” 149.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

On the other hand, from a purely secular perspective, the idea that revelation represents *the* fundamental “challenge” to philosophy itself, which must be confronted and overcome, appears arbitrary. Most secular philosophers today regard revealed religion either as a dangerous superstition which ought to have no place in the modern world, or as a harmless private hobby about which one may have sentimental feelings, but certainly not as a radical challenge to the very possibility of philosophy. Indeed, if revelation *must* be as thoroughly contra-rational as Strauss seems to claim, a “brute fact” which interrupts the natural order of things and which natural reason in no way points one towards, it is difficult to see why the philosopher should take it seriously at all. But if revelation *need* not be understood in this way, but *could* also be understood as illuminating natural reason, opening up wider vistas for human rationality, rather than simply overriding it, it is difficult to see how one can *a priori* rule out the possibility of harmony with revelation without begging the decisive question.

In framing the alternative as “philosophy *or* revelation,” then, rather than as “harmony *or* opposition *between* philosophy and revelation,” Strauss pretends to a certain neutrality while seeming in fact to beg the question. Similarly, when he claims that, confronted with revelation, “philosophy must try to *refute* revelation,”¹⁶ this formulation also seems to beg the question. Wouldn’t a more truly Socratic response to the claims of revelation consist in trying to find out *whether or not* they are true, even if one strongly suspects they are not?

But perhaps the strangest thing about Strauss’ thesis is that it implies that any genuine philosophers who lived before the advent of revealed religion or outside its orbit *must* have thought through the possibility of revelation, as the most important alternative to philosophy conceivable, and as it were refuted it (or at least *tried* to refute it) *avant la lettre*. In one place, Strauss characterizes Greek philosophy as “the philosophical rebellion against God,” a formula which seems more appropriate for Feuerbach or Nietzsche than for Socrates or Plato.¹⁷ Strauss even claims that the “possibility of refutation of revelation” is “implied in Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy,” although “what their specific argument is, we cannot say before we have understood their whole teaching.”¹⁸ But whatever the cognitive status of religious experience

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁷ Leo STRAUSS, “Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization,” *Modern Judaism* 1, no. 1 (May, 1981): 43.

¹⁸ Leo STRAUSS, “Notes on Reason and Revelation” (1948), appendix to MEIER, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 179.

in Plato and Aristotle, they certainly *seem* to have regarded the political life as the most important alternative to philosophy, not the religious life, let alone the life of faith in revealed religion, which didn't even exist for them in the realm of historical experience. Even someone persuaded by Strauss' controversial reading of Plato and Aristotle as atheists or religious skeptics will likely balk at this further, more extravagant suggestion.

However, one must juxtapose Strauss' emphasis on revelation with another, contrary tendency. While he often contrasts revelation with "myth," and emphasizes that Biblical monotheism presents a serious challenge to philosophy while polytheistic mythology does not, he sometimes suggests, confusingly, that there is *no* decisively important difference between revealed and pagan religion. In a discussion of the medieval philosopher Alfarabi's interpretation of Plato, he remarks that for Alfarabi, the "religious knowledge" available in *his* time had no more "cognitive value" than the "religious knowledge" available in Plato's time. Alfarabi rejects "any claims of cognitive value which may be raised on behalf of *religion in general* and revealed religion in particular.... This verdict is not affected if one substitutes the religious knowledge available in Farabi's time with the religious knowledge available in Plato's time" (my emphasis).¹⁹ Strauss argues, then, that for Alfarabi, Judaism, Christianity and Islam have no more "cognitive value" than polytheistic religion. The context suggests that Strauss implicitly endorses this view. But what about the "religious knowledge" available in Strauss' own time?

A few pages later, Strauss ascribes to Alfarabi the view that prudent, outward "conformity with the opinions of the religious community in which one is brought up is a necessary qualification for the future philosopher" (17). Alfarabi seems to have assumed that, given the nature of political things, *any* community in which *anyone* is raised must be "religious." Of course, Strauss knows this is no longer the case; in the modern world, we have openly secular and liberal communities—not all political communities have a religious basis. Or does he mean rather to suggest that Alfarabi was in fact right, given a sufficiently flexible conception of "religion in general"? In a discussion of totalitarian states a few pages further on, Strauss refers to "the holy book or books of the ruling party" (25). He seems to have in mind such examples as the authority accorded the works of Marx and Lenin in the Soviet Union. Such books are not very "holy"! In an essay on Maimonides in the same vol-

¹⁹ Leo STRAUSS, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1952), 13.

ume, Strauss remarks, “Public opinion was then [in the 12th century] ruled by the belief in the revealed character of the Torah or the existence of an eternal and unchangeable law, whereas public opinion today is ruled by historic consciousness.”²⁰ Is “historic consciousness” a kind of secular religiosity, a late modern substitute for belief in divine law? Elsewhere, Strauss writes, “At all times there exists a ruling power, a victorious power which dazzles the eyes of most writers.”²¹

According to this train of thought, revelation would pose no unique challenge. Furthermore, the fundamental alternative would no longer be philosophy and revelation as two ways of life among various competing possibilities; rather, it would be philosophy and religion understood as *disjunctive and exhaustive* alternatives, where “religion” refers to the way of life enshrined in the “authoritative opinion” of the political community,²² whether or not this opinion is “religious” in a conventional sense. On this model, everyone is religious *to the precise extent* that they are not philosophical, i.e. that their life is guided by authoritative opinion rather than their own freely inquiring reason.

The ambiguities in Strauss have led to differing approaches on the part of his sympathetic interpreters, some of whom (e.g. Heinrich Meier²³) emphasize the decisive importance of the confrontation with revelation, while others (e.g. Richard Velkley²⁴) de-emphasize the importance of revelation relative to the more general problem of the conflict between free, untrammelled questioning and submission to authoritative opinion. I am inclined rather to think that there is a real tension in Strauss on this point. But whether or not his position can be rendered consistent, to understand his thesis that philosophy and religion or revelation are irreconcilable alternatives, one must keep both trains of thought in mind.

II

To begin with revelation, there are two *kinds* of reason why someone might argue that philosophy and faith in revelation are irreconcilable. First,

²⁰ Ibid., 55–56.

²¹ Leo STRAUSS, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1958), 33.

²² STRAUSS, *Natural Right and History*, 12.

²³ See MEIER, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*.

²⁴ See Richard VELKLEY, *Heidegger, Strauss and the Premises of Philosophy: On Original Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

one might argue that the metaphysical tenets essential to revelation (e.g. the existence of an omnipotent God) are incompatible with those implicit in the idea of philosophy itself. Secondly, one might argue that what *makes* a life authentically philosophical excludes what makes a life obedient to God.

On the first point, Strauss insists that philosophy in its original Socratic sense isn't bound up with a particular conception of nature. However, Strauss *does* insist that philosophy itself is bound up with the general idea of nature, which he distinguishes from the particular conceptions proposed by, say, Democritus or Aristotle. He seems to imply that Socratic insight into the fundamental problems itself constitutes an insight into nature *as such*, i.e. into what any possible conception of nature has in common with any other by virtue of being a conception of *nature*—although it is unclear if *this* insight is meant to be hypothetical or categorical (he speaks of “the discovery *or* invention of nature”), just as it is unclear if he believes that it is possible to refute revelation demonstratively.

These points are related, because Strauss *does* claim that the existence of nature *however conceived* is incompatible with the God of revelation. Although he is frustratingly elusive on this point, his core argument seems to be that *if* there is an omnipotent God, then nothing is necessary, because everything seemingly “necessary” (such as the law of gravity, or even the law of non-contradiction) is subject to change at the arbitrary whim of God.²⁵ Revelation “challenges” philosophy by holding open the possibility that what appears to be unchangeable and knowable natural necessity is merely what God has willed up to now, which He may change tomorrow if He so pleases.²⁶ Strauss seems to assume that non-voluntarist conceptions of God, such as that of Aquinas, are confused and inconsistent compromises between the religious idea of the omnipotent God, whose will is humanly unfathomable, and the philosophical idea of impersonal and knowable natural necessity. In short, if the world is God's creation, there is no such thing as nature.

On the second point, Strauss argues that the inner stance of free questioning and knowledge-seeking essential to philosophy is incompatible with the unquestioning obedience essential to faith. Strauss should not be misunderstood on this point. He certainly did not mean that the sincere religious believer is of necessity a thoughtless fanatic. His position might be illustrated by a somewhat paradoxical observation made by Hannah Arendt in 1945. Arendt suggested that many Catholic converts in the twentieth century, such

²⁵ STRAUSS, “Progress or Return?” 39.

²⁶ STRAUSS, *Natural Right and History*, 90.

as Chesterton and Péguy, by virtue of their sacrifice of the intellect with respect to the *most* fundamental philosophical questions, were able to achieve a far more sensible approach to a host of subordinate but still very important political questions than were many of their unbelieving contemporaries, whose spiritual torpor made them susceptible to revolutionary and totalitarian enthusiasms: “The best among the converts knew from bitter experience how much better it was, how much freer one could remain, and how much more reasonable, if one accepted the single great assumption which Christian faith exacts than if one remained in the turmoil of modernism, which enforces every other day, with a maximum of fanaticism, another absurd doctrine.”²⁷ Strauss would have agreed with this statement without hesitation. Nonetheless, also very much in the spirit of Strauss, Arendt insists that Thomism is not a “philosophy” but a “system of certainties,” and that “philosophers by definition are supposed not to be in a hurry.”²⁸ However, Strauss goes further than Arendt in the same direction and seems to exclude the mere *possibility* that free questioning might *itself* lead one to have insight into the truth of revelation.

Strauss excludes this possibility because he assumes that the philosophical attitude of passionately inquisitive openness to the truth is incompatible, at a *fundamental* level, with the attitude of unquestioning obedience at the core of faith. Thus he identifies the religious conception of happiness as “obedience to God,” but *not* as “contemplation of God.”²⁹ Indeed, the very idea of contemplation is strangely absent from his characterization of the life of faith in revelation; he seems to assume that the attitudes of contemplation and obedience are mutually exclusive. He claims that it is essential to revelation insofar as it is true to its own idea to reject philosophical *eros* as sinful: “When the classical philosophers conceive of man’s desire to know as his highest natural desire, the Bible protests by asserting that this desire is a temptation.”³⁰ He prefers Judaism to Christianity, because he interprets the story of the Fall to mean that the alternative is “philosophy *or* obedience to God’s revelation,”³¹ and he thinks that the idea of “nature” is absent from the Hebrew Bible: “The Old Testament, whose basic premise may be said to be

²⁷ Hannah ARENDT, “Christianity and Revolution,” in *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1994), 154.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 155.

²⁹ STRAUSS, “Reason and Revelation,” 149.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 142.

the implicit rejection of philosophy, does not know ‘nature.’”³² As an attempt to integrate philosophical naturalism with Biblical voluntarism, Strauss claims that the New Testament represents a calamitous “break” with “ancient thought” as a whole.³³

Rémi Brague has made the provocative suggestion that Strauss takes for granted what Brague calls “the Islamic conception of revelation,”³⁴ insofar as the radically voluntarist and anti-philosophical position which Strauss assumes is implied in “the very idea of revelation”³⁵ was dominant in classical Islamic tradition, and arguably finds plentiful support in the Qur’an, while being marginal in Christianity, at least prior to the Reformation.³⁶ Brague even suggests that Strauss may have misinterpreted the Jewish scriptures by reading them (unwittingly) through a “Muslim” lens.³⁷ But whether or not Brague is right about this, for Strauss himself, as Heinrich Meier points out, the core issue doesn’t ultimately concern the proper interpretation of a particular tradition.³⁸ Although Strauss often seems to take Jewish tradition, and especially the Hebrew Bible, as normative for the very meaning of “revelation,” his deepest concern is with “the very idea of revelation” as a trans-historical possibility which, in principle, even Plato and Aristotle could have thought through (and perhaps did), and which Jewish tradition merely happens to have exemplified with the greatest consistency.

In a surprising way, then, Strauss has a certain affinity with those tendencies in Christian theology which aim to liberate Christian faith from the supposedly distorting influence of Greek rationalism. Pope Benedict XVI articulates a powerful objection to this approach:

It is often said nowadays that the synthesis with Hellenism achieved in the early Church was an initial inculturation which ought not to be binding on other cultures. The latter are said to have the right to return to the simple message of the

³² STRAUSS, *Natural Right and History*, 81. For a contrasting view of “nature” as an idea integral to the teaching of the Old Testament, see Matthew LEVERING, *Biblical Natural Law: A Theocentric and Teleological Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³³ Leo STRAUSS, “Some Remarks on the Political Science of Farabi and Maimonides,” *Interpretation* 18, no. 1 (1990): 4–5.

³⁴ Rémi BRAGUE, “Athens, Jerusalem, Mecca: Leo Strauss ‘Muslim’ Understanding of Greek Philosophy,” *Poetics Today* 19, no. 2 (summer 1998): 247–48.

³⁵ STRAUSS, “Reason and Revelation,” 142.

³⁶ Rémi BRAGUE, *The Law of God: The Philosophical History of an Idea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 146–56.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, “Athens, Jerusalem, Mecca,” 246.

³⁸ MEIER, *Leo Strauss and the Theological-Political Problem*, 20.

New Testament prior to that inculturation, in order to inculturate it anew in their own particular milieux. This thesis is not simply false, but it is coarse and lacking in precision. The New Testament was written in Greek and bears the imprint of the Greek spirit, which had already come to maturity as the Old Testament developed... The fundamental decisions made about the relationship between faith and the use of human reason are part of the faith itself.³⁹

However, in contrast to the theologians whom Benedict has in mind, Strauss is well aware that what he sees as the systematic contamination of revelation by philosophy (and vice versa) is already embodied in the New Testament itself. What Benedict calls the “inner rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry,”⁴⁰ Strauss calls “the perverse interweaving of a *nomos*-tradition with a philosophical tradition,” and he sees this “perversion” as characteristic of Christianity from its very origins.⁴¹ If Strauss prefers Pascal and Kierkegaard to Aquinas, it is because in his view they recover a more authentically “Jewish” perspective.

Strauss, then, seems to have assumed dogmatically one particular answer to *the fundamental question of what it would mean for “revelation” to be true*. On the metaphysical issue, one might contrast Strauss with his contemporary, the Thomist Josef Pieper. While Strauss claims that if the creator God exists, nature must be a fiction, Pieper shows that, for Aquinas, it is *because* finite beings have been created by God, the infinite source of all finite intelligibility, that they possess knowable natures: “Because and insofar as God has creatively thought things, just so and to that extent they have a nature... Things have their intelligibility, their inner clarity and lucidity, and their power to reveal themselves, because God has creatively thought them. This is why they are essentially intelligible... To put it succinctly, things are knowable because they have been created.”⁴² Pieper praises Jean-Paul Sartre for recognizing that it is *atheism*, not faith in revelation, that renders nature problematic—and for embracing the consequences.⁴³ While Pieper’s Tho-

³⁹ Pope BENEDICT XVI, “Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections,” accessed October 20, 2022, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Letter to Gerhard Kruger, November 17, 1932, cited in MEIER, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 8.

⁴² Josef PIEPER, *The Silence of St. Thomas*, trans. John Murray and Daniel O’Connor (Pantheon: New York, 1957), 55–56.

⁴³ Ibid., 52–53.

mistic view should not simply be taken for granted, the same goes for Strauss' anti-Thomistic view.

On the issue of the relationship between philosophical *eros* and obedient faith, Strauss also seems to beg the question. Strauss claims that, in contrast to other non-philosophical ways of life, revelation “challenges” philosophy with a claim to *knowledge* that must be questioned, but cannot simply be disregarded: “Only through the Bible is philosophy, or the quest for knowledge, challenged by *knowledge*, viz. by knowledge revealed by the omniscient God.”⁴⁴ But if there is a real possibility that revelation might furnish the “philosopher who is open to the challenge of theology”⁴⁵ with *knowledge*, isn't this tantamount to conceding that revelation *might* satisfy the philosopher's erotic desire for the truth without violating his intellectual conscience, i.e. to conceding that philosophy and revelation *might* (contrary to the Straussian mantra) be in harmony after all?

Furthermore, Strauss equivocates on whether “the very idea of revelation” requires that revelation furnish the ordinary lay believer with *knowledge*. Sometimes, he seems to assume that only the inspired prophet or religion-founder, such as Moses or Muhammad, would enjoy direct experiential knowledge of revelation—the ordinary believer, including the theologian, must rely on testimony and conjecture, which involves him in obvious difficulties. Of course, many theologians claim that experiential knowledge of revelation is the common property of the faithful, albeit not in the extraordinary form in which it is available to the founder or prophet. Perhaps surprisingly, Strauss does not reject this position as inconsistent with “the very idea of revelation.” Rather, he emphasizes that, according to one legitimate way of understanding revelation, “the intelligent believer” would “know everything the philosopher knows, and he would know more.”⁴⁶ However, although he acknowledges that revelation can be understood as providing knowledge to all the faithful, he insists, “There cannot be any evidence in favor of revelation but the *fact* of revelation as known through faith. Yet this means that for those who do not have the experience of faith, there is *no shred of evidence* in favor of faith... Revelation is nothing but a *factum brutum*.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ STRAUSS, “Reason and Revelation,” 149.

⁴⁵ STRAUSS, “Progress or Return?” 45.

⁴⁶ STRAUSS, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 106–7.

⁴⁷ STRAUSS, “Reason and Revelation,” 142.

Accordingly, Strauss says that “a *direct* proof of revelation contradicts the nature of revelation.”⁴⁸ By a direct proof, he seems to mean either an attempt to prove by the natural light of reason alone the divine origin of a *particular* religious tradition or an attempt to demonstrate with certainty the existence of the omnipotent creator God. This is probably one reason why he shows very limited interest in apologetic disputes between different religious traditions or in traditional arguments for the existence of God. If “revelation” is true, posits Strauss, the only way one could possibly *know* this would be through the direct experience of revelation, in some form or other. Any attempt to know the God of revelation through rational inquiry is inconsistent with the status of revelation as a brute fact that interrupts the natural order. Furthermore, it is also inherently blasphemous or idolatrous, because “every attempt of this kind amounts to substituting trust in flesh for trust in God.”⁴⁹

For Strauss, then, the only *kind* of argument which the theologian has the right to make when disputing with the philosopher is what he calls an “indirect proof.”⁵⁰ By this, he seems to mean an argument which doesn’t claim to supply the philosopher with knowledge, but rather to show that, in the *absence* of such knowledge, it would be more reasonable for him to make a “leap of faith” than to persist in his refusal to obey. The most famous indirect argument is Pascal’s wager, which threatens the philosopher who suspends judgment with the *possibility* of eternal damnation. However, as Strauss wisely notes, “the self-destruction of rational philosophy,” however it might be achieved, would lead at best to the victory of “any orthodoxy,” rather than to the victory of a particular form of orthodoxy—whether Christian, Jewish or Muslim.⁵¹ How, then, would the defeated, acquiescent philosopher choose between them? With no way to adjudicate this difficulty, “the refutation of the claim of philosophy,” says Strauss, would lead “not to faith, but to despair.”⁵²

In a paradoxical way, the very fact that Strauss assumes revelation must be understood in a radically anti-philosophical fashion enables him to regard it as a “challenge” to philosophy while also making it difficult to see in what sense this challenge deserves to be taken seriously. At the theoretical level, revelation challenges philosophy by rendering questionable the idea of

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Leo STRAUSS, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 256.

⁵² Ibid., “Reason and Revelation,” 142.

knowable natural necessity. At the practical or existential level, it challenges the philosopher by threatening him with the possibility of damnation, for surely it would be irrational and thus unphilosophical to pursue a transient form of happiness in this life if there's a serious possibility that it will lead to eternal suffering in the next. Yet the difficulties raised by these challenges don't seem to give the philosopher any positive reasons to accept revelation, which necessarily takes the form of a *particular* revelation.

In his essay on the medieval Jewish apologist Judah Halevi, Strauss writes: "The philosophers whom Halevi knew went so far as to deny the very possibility of the specific experiences of the believers as interpreted by the latter or, more precisely, the very possibility of Divine revelation... That denial was presented by them in the form of what claimed to be a demonstrative refutation."⁵³ The philosophers in question are the "Averroists," shorthand for "those medieval Aristotelians who as philosophers refused to make any concessions to revealed religion."⁵⁴ Did Strauss believe that such a "demonstrative refutation" was available? Many readers of Strauss would argue that this would amount to a form of dogmatic atheism, which would be excluded by his conception of philosophy as zetetic and problematic.⁵⁵ On the other hand, he could perhaps have replied that zetetic philosophy requires suspension of judgment between *philosophical* "alternatives," i.e. different conceptions of nature. He might have argued that a proper understanding of the fundamental problems leaves open many solutions, while demonstratively excluding revelation by supplying a certain, minimal yet categorical insight into nature. For if nature *is*, God is not.

Strauss certainly makes things easier for himself (although not for his readers) by taking for granted a radically anti-philosophical conception of revelation, as nothing more than a "brute fact," thereby enabling him to dismiss more rationalist conceptions as illegitimate syntheses of religion with philosophy, without having to engage with them directly. But what leads him to make this assumption?

⁵³ STRAUSS, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 107.

⁵⁴ Leo STRAUSS, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983), 226.

⁵⁵ For example, see Leora BATNITZKY, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy and the Politics of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 124 and 188.

III

We are now ready to turn to Strauss' treatment of the relationship between Socratic questioning and "religion in general," understood as "authoritative opinion" about "the all-comprehensive truth."⁵⁶ Placing the problem of revelation in this context will help us understand why Strauss approaches it as he does.

Strauss' preferred image for the philosophical quest is the ascent from the cave in Plato's *Republic*: "Philosophizing means to ascend from the cave to the light of the sun, that is, to the truth. The cave is the world of opinion as opposed to knowledge. Opinion is essentially variable. Men cannot live, that is, they cannot live together, if opinions are not stabilized by social fiat. Opinion thus becomes authoritative opinion or public dogma (or world-view). Philosophizing means, then, to ascend from public dogma to essentially private knowledge."⁵⁷ This might seem like a rather straightforward use of the Platonic myth of the cave as a symbol for philosophy's attempt to replace opinion with knowledge. However, there are two controversial assumptions contained in his formulation. First, Strauss assumes that the opinion from which philosophy must begin is not private or individual opinion, but the authoritative opinion of *the political community*, opinion established by "social fiat." Secondly, he assumes that the world-view which holds together any given social and political order is necessarily a form of *opinion*, not knowledge. Therefore he writes, "There is a necessary conflict between philosophy and politics if the element of society necessarily is opinion, i.e. assent to opinion."⁵⁸

Now, virtually everyone would acknowledge that there is a great deal of truth to the thesis that "the element of society is opinion." Strauss must have something more radical in mind than the trivial proposition that there is always *some* genuine tension between philosophical questioning and public opinion, something which virtually nobody (except the most extreme theocratic or communist ideologues) would deny.

In the first place, Strauss' point concerns the natural distribution of intellectual capacities. On this question, he shares the profoundly inegalitarian perspective of the ancients. If the vast majority of people are incapable of

⁵⁶ STRAUSS, *Natural Right and History*, 12.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Leo STRAUSS, *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1959), 229.

discovering “the truth,” not because they lack the leisure or the educational opportunities to develop their capacities, but because their natural capacities are too limited ever to reach that point, it follows that “the truth” can never be made into the ruling principle of a particular social and political order—unless perhaps through the miraculous intervention of divine revelation. However, the deeper issue concerns, not *how many* people can discover the truth, but the nature of reason itself. In affirming a necessary conflict between philosophy and politics, Strauss isn’t merely making a claim about the relationship between the philosopher, who as such possesses knowledge (of ignorance), and the social and political order (whether that of ancient Athens, medieval Christendom or modern America), which requires opinion “stabilized by social fiat” in order to function coherently. Rather, he *also* makes a deeper claim about the relationship between philosophical inquiry and authoritative opinion in the human soul.

Strauss assumes that the opinion from which philosophy begins is public opinion, not private, because our private, subjective opinions are thoroughly mediated and overdetermined from the outset by the particular social and political context in which we are formed and educated, while the knowledge *to which* philosophy ascends is essentially private and inaccessible to the multitude, who are incapable of truly radical questioning. Whenever philosophical knowledge is passed down by means of a tradition, it is thereby transformed into a form of public dogma, or “religion” rather than philosophy. Strauss seems to assume that the nature of reason is such that knowledge about fundamental problems (i.e. about nature itself) can be acquired only through a dialectical critique of tradition. Accordingly, he contrasts “independently acquired knowledge” with “inherited knowledge,”⁵⁹ claiming that the latter isn’t knowledge at all strictly speaking. He seems to assume—like Kant, but *unlike* Plato and Aristotle, at least as they are usually read—that our knowing intellect is purely active and discursive, not receptive, which implies that tradition *as such* cannot be a source of knowledge and either rules out the gift of revelation or compels one to view it as a wholly unintelligible interruption of the natural order.

Strauss’ approach to revelation, then, appears to be rooted in a certain implied epistemology, and ultimately in a certain anthropology and ontology, a view about the nature of reason and the nature of man as the being who participates in reason. This is the theme of the most interesting critique of

⁵⁹ Ibid., 76–77.

Strauss known to me, Mark Shiffman's essay "The Limits of Strauss."⁶⁰ Shiffman argues that Strauss takes for granted a "purely dianoetic (or discursive) construal of the nature of reason."⁶¹ He thereby dogmatically excludes the possibility of revelation, which must be understood as a noetic gift available to all, not an experience of the divine uniquely accessible to the founder or prophet and incommunicable to others except in the form of an arbitrary demand for unquestioning obedience, or conversely as a dialectical achievement of the questioning philosopher: "For Strauss, the authority of tradition either stems from its origin in revelation, in which case one must incessantly return to the source, or it stems from the superiority of the minds whose thought constitutes that tradition, in which case one must de-sediment the tradition to locate its radical beginning-points and its key dialectical turning-points. Otherwise, the tradition itself is merely a repository of authoritative opinions."⁶²

However, while Strauss certainly seems to beg the question, he doesn't beg the question quite as *consistently* as Shiffman suggests. Strauss *does* often seem to take for granted a purely dianoetic or discursive conception of reason and to conclude from this that the common run of human beings, in contrast to the philosophers who have uncovered the unchanging structure of the problems through dialectical inquiry, strictly speaking don't *know* anything (they only have opinion, not knowledge), or at least about *nature*. However, there also passages that tend in an opposite direction.

On at least two occasions, Strauss seems to acknowledge that there is a noetic or receptive dimension to reason. In a lecture on revelation, Strauss claims that philosophical inquiry "proceeds through sense perception, reasoning and what [the Greek philosophers] call *noesis*... which we can perhaps translate... by 'awareness,' an awareness with the mind's eye as distinguishable from sensible awareness."⁶³ Likewise, in *Natural Right and History*, Strauss writes, "Socrates started in his understanding of the natures of things from the opinions about their natures. For every opinion is based on some awareness, on some perception with the mind's eye, of something."⁶⁴ However, in both passages it is unclear if this "awareness with the mind's

⁶⁰ Mark SHIFFMAN, "The Limits of Strauss," accessed October 20, 2022, https://www.academia.edu/5175979/The_Limits_of_Strauss.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 8–9.

⁶³ Leo STRAUSS, "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy," *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 3 (1979): 112.

⁶⁴ STRAUSS, *Natural Right and History*, 124.

eye” amounts to a kind of inchoate *knowledge*, which the philosopher must render discursively articulate, or if this “awareness” doesn’t constitute *knowledge* at all, but is rather only a necessary starting-opinion which must somehow be transformed into knowledge through Socratic dialectic. This would raise the question of how exactly to understand this awareness if it doesn’t involve an authentic grasp of the intelligibility of the world as it presents itself to us.

However, the dimension of Strauss’ thought which seems to militate most against Shiffman’s reading comes to the fore in his critique of positivist social science. Against extreme positivism or scientism, Strauss argues that “a statement can be known and true without being scientific” and that “political science stands or falls by the truth of the pre-scientific awareness of political things.”⁶⁵ At first, it seems as if his point is relatively trivial; he merely wishes to emphasize that the ordinary, unphilosophical person, whom he playfully calls “the man from Missouri,” indeed knows a great deal about political life (e.g. that the Democrats and the Republicans are the major political parties in the U.S.) without needing to have that knowledge verified through scientific inquiry. However, he then makes a deeper point about the *metaphysical* knowledge implicit in what he calls “empirical knowledge.”⁶⁶ He suggests that “the man from Missouri” does indeed *know* a great deal of metaphysical import about the *natural* world in an inchoate and unreflective manner, presumably through a kind of receptive, noetic awareness—he *knows* that there is an essential difference between a human being and a dog, even if he hasn’t read and wouldn’t understand Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*—which would seem to imply that the Socratic ascent can’t simply be characterized as an ascent from opinion to knowledge but must rather be understood as a purification of ordinary experience. This purification has a sharply critical dimension (many unreflectively held beliefs will be rejected as false or insufficiently well-grounded), but it also involves the clarification of the authentic (albeit inchoate) knowledge already present in ordinary experience: “The only way of overcoming the naiveté of the man from Missouri is in the first place to admit that ... there is no possible human thought which is not in the last analysis dependent on the legitimacy of that naiveté and the awareness or *knowledge* going with it.”⁶⁷

⁶⁵ STRAUSS, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, 315.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 316, my emphasis.

How are we to reconcile passages of this kind with Strauss' insistence that the philosopher must remain open in a "zetetic" fashion to very radical hypotheses, such as Nietzsche's advocacy of "the sovereignty of Becoming," "the fluidity of all concepts, types and species" and "the lack of any cardinal difference between man and beast,"⁶⁸ which radically undermine the wisdom of the man from Missouri? Strauss could be read as making a very simple point. Every worked-out philosophical position involves *some* combination of reliance on, and reflective critique of, ordinary experience. Strauss merely reminds us that the more radically one departs from ordinary experience, the more one must justify how one gets there and show that one isn't engaged in a dogmatic rejection of the world as it appears to us or in mere paradox-mongering. However, this point could be made in many different ways and his particular way of making it seems to exclude *from the outset* certain radical hypotheses towards which he elsewhere suggests a truly "zetetic" philosopher must remain open. At the same time, it appears to commit him to acknowledging a kind of receptive intellection which provides the ordinary person with inchoate *knowledge* of the intelligible forms of the natural world, something which he elsewhere seems to deny.

One might suggest that Strauss' critique of positivist social science is merely "exoteric," but this would go much too far. No doubt the moralistic, even preachy tone he tends to adopt in this context has a certain edifying purpose, but he also wants to make a serious philosophical point, which is difficult to reconcile with other aspects of his presentation of Socratic philosophy. A lot rests on just what he means when he claims that all genuine knowledge of nature is "independently acquired knowledge." The inchoate knowledge of the natural world possessed by the man from Missouri is surely not "independently acquired" in the same sense as Socratic knowledge of ignorance.

Ultimately, then, the question of religion brings us back to the questions of how exactly Socratic inquiry is supposed to effect a move from opinion to knowledge which forges a middle way between skepticism and dogmatism and in what sense this knowledge involves a problematic insight into nature. Strauss suggests that Socratic inquiry must proceed by critical reflection on ordinary experience, which accounts for and in some sense relies on its starting-point, while at the same time transcending it and rendering it more perspicuous. But what exactly does this amount to? Strauss provides us only with suggestive intimations, which moreover are in tension with one another.

⁶⁸ STRAUSS, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, 177.

On the one hand, he supplies a phenomenology of ordinary experience which seems to commit him to a natural world ordered according to intelligible forms and a view of reason as involving receptive intellection of these forms. On the other hand, he posits a radical tension between philosophy and ordinary experience which appears to be bound up with a view of reason as purely discursive or dianoetic, raising the question of how the philosopher effects the transition from the “cave” of politically conditioned opinion to the “light” of knowledge. Furthermore, his account of philosophical knowledge itself as problematic insight into nature seems to be woefully undertheorized. In his writings, “nature” often appears to be a largely polemical concept, to be used as a weapon against the God of revelation (or against historicism), without being fleshed out or given much content of its own. Finally, Strauss posits without much justification an irreconcilable tension between philosophy and “religion in general,” according to which “religion” is virtually identified with “authoritative tradition,” while also suggesting that revealed religion in particular represents *both* a fundamental challenge to philosophy in a way radically different from other authoritative traditions *and* merely a species within a genus which can be disposed of once it is recognized as such, as it was by medieval philosophers such as Alfarabi and Averroes. All these elements of his thought are interrelated in a complex fashion which however is difficult to render coherent.

In concluding with these critical suggestions, I do not mean to dismiss Strauss’ importance as a philosopher; there is an inexhaustibly great deal to learn from him and, as Mark Shiffman remarks, there is a “compelling logic” to his formulation of Socratic zeteticism.⁶⁹ If Strauss ultimately failed to resolve these difficulties, it is in large part due to the intractable nature of the problems themselves.

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⁶⁹ SHIFFMAN, “The Limits of Strauss,” 6.

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LEO STRAUSS ON RELIGION
AS THE FUNDAMENTAL ALTERNATIVE TO PHILOSOPHY

Summary

Leo Strauss is well known for his thesis that there is an irreconcilable conflict between philosophy and "revelation," i.e. monotheistic revealed religion, which cannot be harmonized. The philosopher qua philosopher cannot be a believer, while the believer qua believer cannot be a philosopher. However, it is less widely recognized that Strauss' thought about religion as the fundamental alternative to philosophy follows two divergent trajectories. The first emphasizes the unique importance of revealed religion, while the other emphasizes the conflict between philosophy and what he calls "religion in general." Sometimes, Strauss suggests that revelation poses a unique "challenge" to philosophy, such that the philosopher must refute the mere possibility of revelation in order to justify the legitimacy of philosophy itself. Sometimes, however, he suggests rather that revelation is a religion like any other, not essentially different from e.g. ancient polytheism, which would seem therefore to pose no unique "challenge." I argue that Strauss ultimately fails to reconcile these two strands of this thought and that this failure is related both to tensions internal to his positive conception of philosophy itself as a middle path between dogmatism and skepticism and to the fact that he begs the question by assuming, rather than proving, that it follows necessarily from "the very idea of revelation" that it cannot be harmonized with philosophy.

Keywords: Leo Strauss; philosophy of religion; philosophy as a way of life.

LEO STRAUSS O RELIGII
JAKO PODSTAWOWEJ ALTERNATYWIE WOBEC FILOZOFII

Streszczenie

Leo Strauss jest autorem znanej tezy o istnieniu nierozwiązywalnego konfliktu między filozofią a „objawieniem”, tj. monoteistyczną religią objawioną. Filozof jako filozof nie może być osobą wierzącą, zaś osoba wierząca jako wierząca nie może być filozofem. Mniej znane jest natomiast to, że myśl Straussa o religii jako podstawowej alternatywie dla filozofii podąża dwiema rozbieżnymi torami. Pierwszy z nich podkreśla wyjątkowe znaczenie religii objawionej, podczas gdy drugi kładzie nacisk na konflikt między filozofią a tym, co nazywa on „religią w ogóle”. Czasami Strauss sugeruje, że objawienie stanowi szczególne „wyzwanie” dla filozofii i filozof musi podważyć samą możliwość objawienia, aby uzasadnić prawomocność filozofii. Czasami jednak sugeruje on, że objawienie jest po prostu jedną z religii, nie różniącą się w swej istocie np. od starożytnego politeizmu i w związku z tym nie stanowi, jak się wydaje, szczególnego „wyzwania”. Twierdzę, że Straussowi ostatecznie nie udaje się pogodzić tych dwóch wątków i że to niepowodzenie jest związane zarówno z napięciami wewnątrz jego pozytywnej koncepcji samej filozofii jako drogi pośredniej między dogmatyzmem a sceptycyzmem, jak i z tym, że przesądza on z góry sprawę, zakładając bez uzasadnienia, że z „samej idei objawienia” wynika w sposób konieczny, iż nie da się jej zharmonizować z filozofią.

Słowa kluczowe: Leo Strauss; filozofia religii; filozofia jako sposób życia.