

"In the Grip of the Theological-Political Predicament"

THE CRISIS OF REASON AND REVELATION IN MODERN JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

THE HERO of Leo Strauss's monumental Jewish thought is undoubtedly Moses Maimonides. In fact, it may safely be said that in the entire course of Strauss's Jewish writings—beginning with his first major work, the article "Cohen's Analysis of Spinoza's Bible Science" (1924), and ending with his last major work, the introductory essay in the English translation of Hermann Cohen's *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism* (1972)—Maimonides is consistently treated with more genuine reverence, and along with this receives less obvious criticism, than any other Jewish philosopher.¹ Indeed, if there is in truth something which may rightly be called "the Jewish thought of Leo Strauss," then it is revealed to the greatest possible degree in Strauss's works dealing with Maimonides.

That this should be so, however, may seem to be a paradoxical assertion for two reasons. First, if we count Leo Strauss among the moderns, as seems fitting, do we not suddenly cut the ground from beneath our feet by taking Maimonides, possibly the greatest Jewish medieval thinker, as the philosophic inspiration for Strauss? How can Strauss be a modern Jewish thinker if his own Jewish thought is nothing but a "return to Maimonides"? Can he possibly mean by this an unmediated or undialectical "return"? Why would a modern Jewish thinker who clearly expresses a passionate interest in the modern

theological-political crisis facing the Jews and Judaism² and who has diagnosed the complex causes which brought it about, need to preoccupy himself (for nonantiquarian reasons) with a medieval Jewish thinker, however great. Obviously he is not simply an ultramontanist praising the "ancien régime." However conservative Strauss may have considered himself in regard to Jewish religion and politics, he always soberly recognized both the virtues and the limits of the modern situation, and moderately accepted it as an established fact in Jewish life and thought. Hence, his spiritual affinity for Maimonides cannot be confused with any romantic longings for a return to an idealized, noble past. But what then is there in Maimonides for a Jewish thinker of modern sensibility like Strauss?

Second, these Maimonidean studies by Strauss seem, by his own declaration, to be intended solely as efforts of historical scholarship, albeit of a rare profundity and subtlety, rather than as the vehicle for Strauss's own independent thought. But it is my contention that it is not sufficient merely to acknowledge that the unique literary method and the often radical conclusions of Strauss's research in Maimonidean studies revolutionized the field.³ This undeniable fact may prove him to be a great scholar, but it does not by itself demonstrate how such scholarly research—if it may not be reduced to pure antiquarianism—is necessarily connected with, or even serves, his own Jewish thought. We hope to prove that, for a specific purpose Strauss is merely donning the mantle of an historical scholar. If this is indeed the case, though, why would he not do so candidly, and thus appropriate or employ directly the results of such historical scholarship in his own thought and speculation? In other words, why would a modern Jewish thinker choose to appear in the humble guise of a historical scholar, and to expound his own original thought through interpreting another man's texts?

We cannot attempt to answer these questions⁴ until we have probed some of the leading themes and issues which are at the heart of Strauss's interest in Maimonides. These can only emerge from a reflection on what we deem to be the key texts in the exploration of Maimonides by Strauss, who revived a Jewish thinker previously dismissed as obsolete. It is evident from the paradoxes inherent in Strauss's exposition that this will not be a simple and unequivocal task, and it is further complicated by the existence of significant stages in the development of Strauss's views on Maimonides. Such complexities notwithstanding, it is our argument that Strauss's view of Maimonides, developed over fifty years, manifests nonetheless a substantial unity (this may be equally true of his Jewish

thought as a whole). This is not to say that his views on Maimonides did not grow and change, and, as we hope to prove, even may have passed through three distinct stages. Nevertheless, this intellectual development may be more accurately expressed in terms of "a continuous, deepening process"⁵ rather than as a radical transformation. Indeed, it is our thesis that once Strauss's view of Maimonides reached its essential form in his very early works dealing with Maimonides, his original insight into Maimonides was never fundamentally contradicted by his later unfolding of its full ramifications.⁶

One other preliminary remark would seem to be in order. In the mid-1930s,⁷ Strauss gradually perceived that Maimonides could not be properly and fully understood if one did not take serious account of his literary method. Strauss began to realize that there were reasons why Maimonides wrote in such a deliberately elusive manner. As Strauss saw it, Maimonides' specific instructions for reading the *Guide* and his peculiar manner of expressing himself in it were intended as tools for the select reader to extract hidden or "esoteric" meanings and as obstacles to keep those same meanings safely hidden from the average reader. This discovery, applied to Maimonides' entire text, gave Strauss the key to distinguishing between Maimonides' secret, i.e., true, teaching ("the golden apple"), and his apparent, i.e., diversionary, teaching ("the silver filigree") which deliberately but deceptively overlays⁸ it. This distinction clearly shaped everything Strauss later wrote about Maimonides. Indeed, as we hope to elucidate, this literary method and the reasons for using it may have so persuaded Strauss that he employed it himself in some of his subsequent writings. Strauss apparently chose both to conceal his own views from the average reader and to communicate these same views only to the select reader. In regard to his works specifically concerned with Maimonides, Strauss conveyed his own notions "beneath" his discussion of Maimonides' texts (or, as a hostile critic might put it, by subtly reading in his own views as if they were those of the text)⁹ In interpreting Strauss it seems we must begin by obeying the rules of his own art of writing (which, as we hope to establish, are ultimately derived from Maimonides, although they must not be simply attributed to him). Strauss's first rule, as we might call it, for reading a serious, esoterically written work, would require that the elaboration of the surface teaching must remain the chief or primary task, and only through paying careful attention to this surface, or exoteric, level and its attendant perplexities, can the deeper, or esoteric, level be reached and be clearly set apart from it.¹⁰

However, to comprehend in its proper order Strauss's Jewish thought as it developed in his Maimonidean studies, we must begin with the simpler issue which actually preceded the rediscovery of esotericism, for Strauss wrote important works about Maimonides in advance of that rediscovery. This issue may be put in terms of these queries: Why did Strauss originally turn to Maimonides? What "lost wisdom" did he seek to find, especially in *The Guide of the Perplexed*? And what was the fundamental view of Maimonides that accompanied and supported Strauss in this turn? All of these questions may be seen to receive a decisive answer in a statement which appears in the very first line of Strauss's brief yet monumental *Philosophy and Law*: "Maimonides is the 'classic of rationalism' in Judaism."¹¹ In fact, as we understand him, it does not overstate the case to say that the basic themes and issues that animated Strauss's concern and directed his attention are condensed in this statement as well as in the following twenty pages, which should be looked at as the vindication of it. (Indeed, the constancy of Strauss's Jewish thought is reflected in the striking similarities, even to the repetition of phrases, between his vigorously original Introduction to *Philosophy and Law* and the equally powerful Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, despite the thirty years separating them.)¹² For Strauss, Maimonides was the "classic" of not just any "rationalism," but he meant the term in a very specific sense. As he puts it, Maimonides' "rationalism" is "the truly natural model [*Vorbild*], the standard, which is to be carefully guarded from every falsification, which is thereby the stumbling block on which modern rationalism is brought to its ruin." Hence, we already encounter in *Philosophy and Law* a sharp line drawn by Strauss between modern and premodern rationalism, especially of the theological kind. In the division of these two rationalisms, Strauss categorically prefers the premodern, in its Maimonidean phase. It moves in the sphere of the "truly natural" form of reason, which is purer in its conformity with the enduring requirements of man's political nature,¹³ yet is also surer and deeper in its treatment of primary theological motives such as creation, miracles and prophecy.¹⁴

Even so, why should it be necessary for us to turn for guidance in our modern perplexity to Maimonides? Even if he is *the* "classic" representative of medieval rationalism, even of "rationalism in Judaism," still we do not yet know, or we cannot simply assume, as Strauss was well aware, that this is also *the* "true rationalism," let alone *the* true teaching *per se*.¹⁵ In Strauss's justificatory account of this provisional conclusion about what "the truly natural model, the standard" of

rationalism in Judaism is, he tells us that his turn to Maimonides resulted from a genuine cognitive encounter which he staged between medieval and modern rationalisms.¹⁶ Here, "clarity about the present" was the sole original interest motivating him, while the medieval was used as a foil, or as "a mere means" to the end of "a sharper cognition of the distinctiveness [*Eigentumlichkeit*] of modern rationalism."¹⁷ Considering "modern rationalism as the source of the present," Strauss wanted especially to know whether it was rationalism *per se* that had caused the present crisis in modern philosophy and society, which were both gradually but discernibly turning against reason itself, or whether it was produced only by the modern species of rationalism. It was for this comparative diagnostic purpose that he first studied medieval Jewish rationalism.¹⁸ In fact, it was in the course of this encounter, or perhaps as its direct consequence, that Strauss began to radically doubt modern rationalism, and overcome his original "prejudice" in favor of its "superiority" as reason and as a moral force.¹⁹ What he now began to radically doubt was its philosophical, theological, and political adequacy to meet the present crisis.

We must equally bear in mind that "clarity about the present" suggests first of all the actual historical situation with which Strauss was faced: the grave difficulties in which the Jews and Judaism were entangled, as reflected by the catastrophic events and revolutionary changes which occurred during his life. As a Jew in the Germany of the 1920s, he was caught "in the grip of the theologico-political predicament," i.e., he experienced in its full intensity the Jewish crisis as well as the crisis of the West in the trial of liberal democracy, both German and otherwise. This predicament affected Jews so deeply because they had tied virtually *all* their hopes to modern liberalism, modern rationalism's moderate expression as interpreted by Spinoza in the light of classical principles.²⁰ He perceived that since "the present situation of Judaism as such . . . is determined by the Enlightenment,"²¹ the crisis in which the Jews and Judaism are immersed and the crisis of modern Western civilization are fundamentally linked. Strauss recognized the need to reconsider modern rationalism in order to comprehend modern Judaism,²² and as we trace Strauss's "turn" to Maimonides and the medieval rationalist tradition, we must determine what it is about modern rationalism that Strauss rejected.

The concern for "the present situation of Judaism" in Strauss's view does not entail any derogation from "the basic constitution of Judaism," which for him remains "untouched" by the Enlightenment critique of

orthodoxy in its Jewish form.²³ Beginning with this phrase, “the [untouched] basic constitution of Judaism,” Strauss reiterates in *Philosophy and Law* his careful demonstration in *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* that modern philosophy has never actually “refuted” divine revelation as taught by the Hebrew Bible, despite appearances to the contrary.²⁴ To Strauss, the present situation not only encompasses those who marginally identify as Jews but also and especially those who are passionately committed Jews of two different types. The first are those committed Jews who have been fundamentally affected by modern rationalism and liberalism; they reject divine revelation as defining Judaism and determine its character in terms of modern political and cultural categories, especially the movement known as secular Zionism. The second are those committed Jews who accept divine revelation but make it theologically conform with modern philosophic or scientific notions and criticisms. This type refers especially to such modern Jewish religious thinkers as the idealist Cohen and the existentialist Rosenzweig; Strauss puts such diverse thinkers under one rubric, by calling their thought “the movement of return.”

Strauss fully respects the first type (i.e., adherents of secular political Zionism) as providing an admirable and a “highly honorable” approach but believes it is not a “sufficient” one to meet the full needs of the present.²⁵ Not only is Zionism “atheistic” in its political basis, but as a purely political movement, Zionism ignores that its “solution” to the “Jewish problem” is inspired by liberalism while simultaneously exposing liberalism’s own limitations. Hoping to be efficacious in one sphere of the modern Jewish dilemma alone—in “the restoration of [Jewish] honor through the acquisition of statehood”—political Zionism (with which Strauss originally identified himself completely) “implied a profound modification of traditional Jewish hopes, a modification arrived at through a break with these hopes.” In other words, in order to be preoccupied with human honor and put one’s faith in the termination of the exile by purely human means, with the end in view of establishing a secular liberal state, it seems one had to have already lost some faith in divine promises, in divine election and special providence, and in the perfection of the divine law. However, precisely for the sake of the very efficacy political Zionism held in view, it had to “make its peace” with Jewish tradition and to recognize the need for a spiritual “return” (*teshuvah*).²⁶ For no matter how “secularized” one’s Zionism was, if one wanted a “Jewish state” and not just a “state of Jews,” one needed a Jewish culture—and hence cultural Zionism. With his mature, clear-eyed

"Platonic" vision, Strauss saw that this secular project for creating a Jewish culture as a support and even as a guide for the Zionist political project would never be able to sever itself fully from the traditional Judaism against which it had rebelled, yet to which it could not help but be tied if it was not to forget its roots in the very Jewish history it planned to daringly redirect.

As for the second approach—i.e., contemporary Jewish religious thought, which he termed "the movement of return"—Strauss did regard it as praiseworthy for radically changing in several respects the previous direction of modern Jewish life and thought (which had been formulated in an apologetic vein by post-Mendelssohnian "religious liberalism").²⁷ However, at the same time Strauss believed that this fledgling movement did not represent a sufficiently fundamental change; he felt it had not yet squarely faced or truly answered the Enlightenment critique of orthodoxy, and so it carried through its "return" with serious reservations about the Jewish tradition. While it readily admitted the source of its reservations as rooted in the Enlightenment (and especially Spinoza), it did not as a "movement" justify them, in any adequately systematic form, but virtually presupposed their necessity.²⁸ It is no exaggeration to maintain that Strauss's initial point of departure in Jewish theology was to ascertain as precisely as possible what place these reservations about the tradition should occupy in future Jewish thought, and hence also to deal with the question of whether "the movement of return" was warranted by its own premises in considering necessary this limited critique of the orthodox tradition.

The crucial link between modern rationalism and the modern Jewish crisis may be further elucidated if we consider what the primary *cause* of the crisis is, from Strauss's perspective. To Strauss, modern Jews and Judaism, as well as modern Western civilization, are in the midst of a moral, religious, and political crisis engendered by their waning faith in an eternal truth. Since "the authoritative layer of the Jewish heritage presents itself . . . as a divine gift, as divine revelation," the eternal truth which it teaches is rooted in "the irrefutable premise" of belief in the being of "the omnipotent God whose will is unfathomable" and who reveals himself as he wills.²⁹ While modern rationalism is precisely constituted by the rebellion—whether it be viewed as speculative or scientific—against this "irrefutable" premise, it is a rebellion that Strauss incisively characterizes as nothing but a "moral antagonism." He says it was previously defined by the Jewish tradition as "Epicurean" unbelief.³⁰ Though not exactly correct in a philosophical sense, this traditional

Jewish attitude certainly captured the *moral* motive in the modern critique of religion. Inasmuch as modern reason or philosophy dogmatically denies the very possibility of divine revelation (though often camouflaging its radicalism for political purposes), it is a denial which it cannot demonstrate, and thus the very basis for modern rationalism is not "evident and necessary knowledge" but rather "an unevident decision." Hence, following Strauss's logic, philosophy paradoxically puts itself in the category of a faith. Yet modern reason, despite its faulty basis, is permitted by ostensibly "enlightened" theology to pass decisive rational judgments about divinely revealed religion; in particular, it is permitted to give criticism of traditional texts and beliefs. Modern reason also asserts an unconditional victory against classical reason; here too it is a matter of assertion, and not demonstration, its persuasiveness deriving perhaps from the successes of modern science in mastering nature.

Yet as Strauss succinctly indicates, in the very "progress" of modern reason and universal homogeneous civilization, its faith in itself as a force of absolute good for man gradually fails and eventually collapses due to both irrationalist philosophical developments and the events of history revealing the dubious benevolence in human self-assertion against nature.³¹ (Strauss speaks of "the self-destruction of rational philosophy" in our day.) Modern rationalism, as Jews adapted the Jewish tradition to it, not only leaves Judaism more exposed to attack by its modern critical opponents for its suprarational claims, but also leaves it appearing less inspired than medieval or premodern philosophy ever did in its happy adaptation to such philosophy. However, even in modern rationalism's collapse through "the victory of orthodoxy" or irrationalist philosophy, its virtual antipode,³² Judaism is not actually helped, as Rosenzweig especially would have us believe. In stark contrast to him, Strauss expounds Judaism undoubtedly in the spirit of both Maimonides and Hermann Cohen, viewing it as a faith which claims only to possess "suprarational," and not "irrational," truths. Hence, the truths which Judaism teaches, according to Strauss's thought, do not contradict reason but only pass beyond what unaided reason can apprehend by its own efforts and abilities alone.³³ He uses as his proof-text a favorite Torah verse (Deut. 4:6), which he often cites in order to emphasize the rational character of the Jewish tradition, saying: "Jewish orthodoxy based its claim to superiority to other religions from the beginning on its superior rationality."³⁴

Thus, Strauss began to radically doubt modern rationalism once he started asking whether the modern form of rationalism was “the source of the present” predominantly in a debilitating sense, while simultaneously pondering whether in fact the medievals exemplified in their rationalism a higher and more enduring standard for measuring the present.³⁵ Strauss regarded himself as faced with a choice, a choice which all modern people face if they reflect upon their spiritual situation and are not fully satisfied by any modern, post-Enlightenment alternative: we may either put our faith in “what cannot be known from the start—that only new, unheard of, ultramodern thoughts can clear away our dilemma”³⁶ or, if this seems an unreasonable hope, we may with Strauss consider whether “the critique of modern rationalism as the critique of modern sophistry;³⁷ is the necessary starting point, the constant concomitant, and the unerring hallmark of the search for truth possible in our age.”³⁸ If that is so, we must “approach the medieval enlightenment, the enlightenment of Maimonides, for help.”³⁹ Animated by both theological and political concerns that beset him as a modern Jew philosophically preoccupied with accounting for and justifying his unyielding but problematic commitment to Judaism as a revealed truth, Strauss turned to Maimonides for this help, and never retreated from him, for Strauss’s Jewish thought was transformed by the “aid” he received. In fact, we would suggest that the testing of this “tentative” solution⁴⁰ emerged as his life’s work. In Maimonides, Strauss believed he had genuinely discovered “the truly natural model, the standard” of rationalism in Judaism, and perhaps even in all philosophy, a belief which his subsequent discoveries only confirmed and deepened. Already in *Philosophy and Law* he declares unambiguously against the moderns that “the purpose of the present writing is to awaken a prejudice in favor of this conception of Maimonides, or rather, to arouse a suspicion against the powerful contrary prejudice.”⁴¹ The prejudice against Maimonides was first created and enunciated by the supposedly “free” and “unprejudiced” modernist Spinoza, and repeated ever since by his manifold followers.⁴²

But what does Strauss ultimately mean to say, in a philosophical sense, by characterizing the premodern as “the truly natural” form of reason, or as we put it, as the purer and deeper form?⁴³ The fundamental lack of “purity” Strauss attributes to modern rationalism consists in the willfulness of the prior “unevident decision” about the nature of things and in the determination to “construct” the world as it wants the world to be⁴⁴ rather than accepting the limiting inferences possible from

experience by first grounding itself well in the evident nature of things.⁴⁵ To Strauss, if philosophy is the search for truly "evident and necessary knowledge," then the search for knowledge properly commences in the visible world of human experience which is there for us first and plainly evident to be seen with our own eyes. However, the visible world in the beginning can only be intelligibly articulated and authoritatively explained to us through received or authoritative opinion as one's own city and law establish it. Man only moves or rises gradually, through the intellect's probing of opinion in doubting the "necessity" of the city's opinions, perhaps by comparison with other cities' opinions. One is able to dimly divine the truth, which, acting in the capacity of a final cause, draws one from "the given" to an awareness of the whole, especially as it may be reflected in the few generic and permanent features of the one human soul which manifests itself as such across the many opinions.⁴⁶ In other words, Strauss discerned that in the opposed starting points of philosophy, classical versus modern, the ultimate conclusions are already contained, if by these conclusions one limits oneself, as he did originally, to characterizing this fundamental difference by the absolute distinction between nature and history. As a result, what is "first for us"⁴⁷ is *either* what Plato termed "opinion," which like "the given" or the empirical *per se* helps us to transcend itself by first forming our view of the visible world and only subsequently leading us to ask about "the condition of its possibility"; *or* it is what the Enlightenment termed "prejudice," which is merely received or forced upon us against our true nature, and which as such hinders and deceives us entirely, so that we can only commence true knowing by utterly substituting for this merely given thing some absolute certainty.⁴⁸

And yet "prejudice," as Strauss further discerned, is itself a derivative notion; in fact, as the fundamental polemical notion of the Enlightenment in its fight against orthodox revealed religion, Strauss perceived that "prejudice" is chiefly a "historical category" and not, as it claims, a purely natural one.⁴⁹ It is for this reason that Strauss originally wanted both the justification and the dubiousness of "'prejudice' as a category" to be elucidated in light of the fight with revealed religion⁵⁰ rather than devoting himself to its argument with classical philosophy. Indeed, only for the Enlightenment is it "*the* prejudice pure and simple" to maintain that divine revelation is possible or that this possibility has been actualized in the Bible.⁵¹ In fact, the Enlightenment waged its war against "prejudice" primarily and ultimately "with a view to the radical meaning of revealed religion." This "radical meaning" which it

dogmatically rejects resides in orthodoxy's maintaining that mankind has a need for divine illumination and hence lacks self-sufficiency in attaining the truth. In Strauss's interpretation, revealed religion fundamentally rejects this world, i.e., the world of ordinary human experience and reasoning, as the final moral standard, or even as a possible source for such a standard, since "how man *is*" is essentially sinful.⁵² Instead, it projects that which is known by divine revelation, by a transcendent source beyond man and the world, as the only true basis for a genuine morality, since only "how man *should be*," i.e., in the image of God, is the valid standard.⁵³ In other words, revealed religion is, like classical philosophy, morally "utopian," although modern philosophy castigates such moral "idealism" as purely imaginative and wishful, and offers its own "realism" as the first truly rational and efficacious teaching. Hence, Strauss's first substantial theological work in 1928 already reached the conclusion that modern philosophy is moved not so much either by scientific discoveries or by "secularization" of religious meanings and values, as it is by a moral passion; this passion is directed against all claims to transcendent sources of truth made accessible in our world through God's action: "The opposition to utopia is thus nothing other than the opposition to religion."⁵⁴

Indeed, modern philosophy, as Strauss consistently maintained, was perhaps directly "caused," and certainly decisively "facilitated," by the passion which he calls "antitheological ire."⁵⁵ However, as Strauss subsequently recognized—and this represents a shift in his view—what modern philosophy teaches in opposition to "theology" seemingly applies to the biblical *and* the classical philosophic traditions, both of which are equally "utopian" in the "strict demands" of their moralities and "theological" in the exclusive God (or god) whose truth transcends and fulfills their respective moralities.⁵⁶ Classical philosophy shares with the biblical tradition not only a certain common attitude toward morality, but also "the natural world view" which is in a sense presupposed by their common moral attitude.⁵⁷ If we put this "natural world view" common to both traditions in the simplest possible language of philosophy, we might articulate Strauss's silent premise by saying that final and formal causes are still valid and are determinative in defining what the nature of a being is, and that, as such, all beings have a natural end or perfection which is peculiar to them. Morally, man is to be viewed in the light of the high or superhuman rather than of the low or subhuman; he is by nature a noble being, and this classical notion is in rough moral equivalence with the biblical teaching that man is

“created in the image of God.” This “wisdom” about man common to both the Bible and classical philosophy is a necessary element for both in the complete and final perfection of human life. These principles, with their moral and natural ramifications, are repudiated by modern philosophy and science as prejudices which we must escape, and also by modern historicism as positions which we have progressed beyond.

Strauss incisively cuts through these diverse modern positions and exposes their common core in this one presupposition they all share: the belief that we cannot “return” to the “natural world view” because it has been demonstrably refuted. Yet this presupposition may in fact be itself a prejudice that was consciously *created* by modern rationalist philosophy, supposedly on the strength of modern science, in order to further its cause. It was this prejudice, ironically taken for granted by modern historicism, which gave it the ammunition to mount the attack against its own precursor, modern rationalism, as a “refuted” position which can and must be simply gotten beyond, and to which we can never return. As Strauss puts it, “this belief is a dogmatic assumption whose hidden basis is the belief in progress or in the rationality of the historical process.”⁵⁸ Moreover, this modern “belief in progress,” even in its original rationalist form, contains in itself a plain denial of “the theological tradition” rather than merely its “secularization,” i.e., the selective translation of the theological whole into parts usable by the secular world. The theological tradition had “recognized the mysterious character of providence,” while modern philosophy “culminates in the view that the ways of God are scrutable to sufficiently enlightened men.”⁵⁹ Accordingly, Strauss reveals the fundamental weakness of the modern rationalist position, and hence of modern philosophy *per se*, by uncovering the irrationalism of its basic premise—namely, that it can penetrate, and move beyond, the realm of God through rationality alone, or as this same dogmatic presupposition might be put purely philosophically, that it can achieve the conquest of chance in mastering nature as this is made possible by modern science.⁶⁰

Although Strauss reached some of these primary conclusions in his first historical and theological studies, he was also previously influenced by the works of the Jewish thinker Franz Rosenzweig, with whom he was acquainted and whom he “greatly admired.”⁶¹ The fact that Strauss dedicated *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* to the memory of Franz Rosenzweig expresses the stage of spiritual growth in which Strauss developed the book’s main thrust—the move from purely political Zionism to a decidedly theological orientation. The chief thesis of

Strauss in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* is, like Rosenzweig's thought, rooted in the philosophic vindication of theology or divine revelation, insofar as the exposure of the hollowness of the modern claim to have genuinely refuted this spiritual possibility yields the plausible inference that its truth claim should be reconsidered. Rosenzweig taught him, among other things, that "the natural, original, pristine is *fidelity*"⁶²—a notion which, we would suggest, also serves as the human basis for "opinion" rather than "prejudice." Likewise, Rosenzweig represented, by the heroic odyssey of his return to the Jewish tradition and his rediscovery of its deep spiritual sources for sustaining man in life and in death, the genuine possibility of "return" to an ancient truth even in our modern circumstances.

Strauss was familiar with Rosenzweig's "New Thinking," especially in its critique of Hegel, which postulated the victory of orthodox revealed religion against Enlightenment reason as a consequence of the Hegelian system's "final collapse." But taking this Rosenzweigian insight one step further, Strauss discerned that we can no longer assume that this vindication of orthodoxy alone is true. In other words, Strauss recognized that the Hegelian system's "final collapse" *equally* rehabilitates the Enlightenment along with the Bible or genuine divine revelation, since it too was supposed to have been "sublated," or given its best and highest exemplification, in the historical synthesis of Hegelian dialectical reason.⁶³ In the light of the collapse of the Hegelian synthesis, Strauss next began to wonder whether the Enlightenment, or modern rationalism, could in principle ever achieve its goal, not only of the simply rational society, but of the completed philosophic system⁶⁴—a goal positive science shares but tries to achieve by a different method—since it began its efforts from such a shaky point of departure. It could not refute its chief opponents, biblical orthodoxy and classical philosophy, so it simply set about "constructing" the world and hoped to eclipse them by its successes. This did seemingly work as a strategy for several centuries. (Strauss calls it a "truly Napoleonic strategy.")⁶⁵ However, its eventual failure and what Strauss terms our present theological-political crisis should cause us, according to Strauss's logic, to reacquaint ourselves with the Enlightenment's basic premises and arguments and to ask whether they hold as much certainty as was originally claimed for them. In other words, the rationalism of the original Enlightenment returns to life with the collapse of Hegel, although (as one learns in studying the course of modern philosophy)

the doubts about it which led it to be subsumed and sublated by Hegel should not and cannot be forgotten.

The Enlightenment, whose assumptions conquered the non-orthodox Jewish world, is the seventeenth and eighteenth century movement inspired by "Descartes' *Meditations* and Hobbes' *Leviathan*"⁶⁶—but which Strauss would subsequently trace to Machiavelli as its "evil" genius⁶⁷—aiming to make man "the master and owner of nature" through science.⁶⁸ However, as Strauss discovered, the Enlightenment originated not in a genuine scientific refutation of either biblical orthodoxy or of classical philosophy (i.e., of "the natural world view" shared by both the Bible and by Aristotle),⁶⁹ but in an act of will or belief, in a moral choice, even though "the new natural science appears to be the true entitlement (or justification) [*Rechtsgrund*] of the Enlightenment."⁷⁰ Only while "the old notion of truth still ruled the minds [*Gemüter*] of men,"⁷¹ i.e., "the idea of an eternal nature [and] an eternal truth," was a continued belief in the promise of modern science made possible.⁷² Once the Enlightenment and modern science were "sublated" by modern idealism, which "consummates itself in the discovery of the 'aesthetic' as the truest [*gediegensten*] insight into human creativity" and "in the discovery of the radical 'historicity' of man and his world as the final overcoming of even the idea of an eternal nature, an eternal truth," then modern natural science, which was the glory of the Enlightenment in its fight against orthodoxy, is exposed as merely "one historically conditioned form of 'interpretation of the world' among others."⁷³ In other words, it "could not long maintain its claim to have brought to light the truth about the world as it is 'in itself.'"⁷⁴ As Strauss reads it, "the 'idealistic' construction of itself was already built into [*steckte. . . in*] its basic approach." This rather cryptic statement can perhaps be better comprehended if we examine a similar statement he made in the Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* about how Spinoza's philosophic system "prepares German idealism." He says that neither God nor Nature as it is in itself is the most perfect being to Spinoza, but God or Nature as it is in the process of becoming is most perfect: indeed, the movement from the One to the many represents an ascent, not a descent. "Spinoza thus appears to originate the kind of philosophic system which views the fundamental *processus* as a progress: God in himself is not the *ens perfectissimum*. In this most important respect he prepares German idealism."⁷⁵

Furthermore, it was through this idealistic breakthrough that the Enlightenment's "victory" against orthodoxy was actually denied its force

and persuasiveness. As Strauss perceived, this leads to a further consequence with respect to the Enlightenment's "original, decisive justification: the demonstration of the unknowability of miracles as such becomes invalid [kraftlos]. For only on the premise of modern natural science is miracle as such unknowable."⁷⁶ Hence, idealism explodes the very truth claim of modern natural science, with the sole exception of its own demoralizing comprehension as a substitute—demoralizing because science can no longer aspire to truly know nature, but can only know either its current state as a configuration in our knowledge or the permanent tools by which the human mind constructs how such things may be. Finally, Strauss observes that even a critical view of knowledge which idealism postulates and clings to as the only truth remaining for us about things, is refuted by existentialism, its own "stepchild," as yet another form of "essentialism," i.e., the false belief in "an eternal nature, an eternal truth." Thus, Strauss diagnosed existentialism (in the form of radical historicism) as the very last consistently modern movement, whose pride and supreme claim as a more or less philosophical movement are based on its purer, *self-conscious* willing to construct the world and even man. Simply put, modern reason in the process of freeing itself from theology and the divine will has destroyed itself as reason by eventually reducing itself to human will. It is revealed by Strauss to be motivated not by pure love of wisdom, which would compel it to encounter theology as a serious and worthy opponent (if not as a teacher), but to be motivated by "atheism," or by "antitheological ire," or—with certain modern revisions—by Epicureanism.⁷⁷

It seems plainly evident from Strauss's incisive diagnosis of the crisis in modern rationalism in *Philosophy and Law* (a diagnosis which was never repudiated by him, although it may have been subsequently radicalized) that his original interest in the attempted refutation of orthodoxy by Spinoza and the Enlightenment was by no means determined by a passion for orthodoxy pure and simple, even though he deeply respected it and often appears in the guise of its noble protector. Rather, it is an expression of a decided preference for an eminently reasonable theology, in one for whom "the desideratum of an enlightened Judaism is not to be denied [*unabweislich*]."⁷⁸ He "greatly admired" Franz Rosenzweig, but Strauss was not satisfied by his approach, even if he did acknowledge that "Jewish theology was resurrected from a deep slumber" by him.⁷⁹ Seeking an "enlightened Judaism," Strauss was "obliged to ascertain whether enlightenment is necessarily modern enlightenment," and hence he pursued a different path in search of this

goal. Ultimately he found this goal only attainable by striving to reappropriate a premodern "Platonic" criterion for measuring "enlightenment,"⁸⁰ a criterion which points toward and concentrates on the few who can truly achieve it, and disavows what passes for "enlightenment" among the many.⁸¹

In his search for modern alternatives which might still be embraced, Strauss is sharply critical of what he calls the "moderate Enlightenment," which attempted numerous "harmonizations" [*Vereinbarungen*] between the "radical Enlightenment" and orthodoxy. He did not believe it signified a cogent third way in preserving and unifying the best of both modern reason and traditional revelation, for he rejects the very notion of mediation contained in its premise. Strauss concurs with the romantics and the idealists, as well as with "the most equitable historical judgment," that this mediating effort amounts to an "untenable . . . compromise."⁸² The "moderate Enlightenment" is first represented by Moses Mendelssohn and his followers in the emergence of modern Judaism. But for Strauss, "modern Judaism is a synthesis between rabbinical Judaism and Spinoza," thus a synthesis between two mutually contradictory doctrines. Mendelssohnian "religious liberalism" can only elaborate and maintain its position either by ignoring the contradictions entirely or by smoothing them over in such a way as to inhibit any exact understanding of their pointedness.⁸³ In Strauss's estimation, all such harmonizing or synthesizing attempts by the moderate Enlightenment are futile, for it sustains no model or standard beyond the modern (i.e., radical) Enlightenment by which it could measure or criticize its own attempts at synthesis, and hence recognize and reconcile its own contradictions.⁸⁴ In fact, Strauss discerned that this movement ultimately failed in its own efforts at "mediation," and actually served as the unwitting advance guard in the Enlightenment's attack against orthodoxy: "in the end, these harmonizations always work as vehicles of the Enlightenment, and not as dams against it: for the radical Enlightenment, the moderate Enlightenment is the best first fruit."⁸⁵ The moderates create a palatable and even harmless version of the modern Enlightenment which, once the infiltration is complete and resistance is defused, eventually expedites a complete victory by the radicals.

These same strictures which Strauss applies to the pre-idealistic moderate Enlightenment concerning its subservience to the radical Enlightenment, he also applies, with some modifications, to subsequent philosophical and theological developments, i.e., Hegelianism and the

anti-Hegelians. In Strauss's view, the "higher plane of the post-Enlightenment synthesis," with its "interiorizations" of the orthodox tradition's primary assertions, "robs these assertions of their entire sense"⁸⁶ as claims about the "external" world. Taking the most fundamental case, Strauss maintains that if these "post-Enlightenment synthesizers" believe God did not "actually create" the world, and if they do not accept as a given this scriptural belief in the divine creation of nature as an entirety, i.e., "as simply true, as the fact of creation," then there is in the Hegelian and anti-Hegelian schools a spiritualizing tendency more or less continuous with their moderate Enlightenment predecessors. This spiritualizing tendency, however, has moved even farther away from any genuine scriptural belief, for it claims to have ascended to a higher synthesis which surpasses the claims of both its constituent theses—i.e., their claims to be *the* truth. But to Strauss, the spiritualizing tendency of this synthesis represents an equivocation, even a vacillation, of a still greater radicalness, which undoubtedly expresses the overwhelming fact that for the "higher plane of synthesis" "the relation of God to nature could no longer be understood, and hence is no longer even of interest,"⁸⁷ because it has followed modern natural science in wholly surrendering the belief that it is necessary to infer metaphysical principles in order to explain adequately the physical universe.

Not only does the moderate Enlightenment thus transformed by the Hegelian synthesis still serve the radical Enlightenment in general purpose, but also the two procedures by which it validates its specific claims of harmony or synthesis are for Strauss completely "unscrupulous" as well as "erroneous" in principle.⁸⁸ First, it designates the "external" or literal sense of Scripture as a mere relic of "an immature level of formulation of the faith,"⁸⁹ even in regard to such seemingly crucial doctrines as creation out of nothing, verbal inspiration, and individual immortality.⁹⁰ Second, it "invokes against orthodoxy extreme utterances ventured in the Jewish tradition" as if they were normative, and hence turns them upside down as if the base were "the tip of the pyramid."⁹¹ In his judgment the moderate Enlightenment reads the Bible and tradition as a mere search for prooftexts in order to justify its own preconceived opinions. Strauss undoubtedly counts among the figures who employ such a faulty method not only its spiritual patriarch Mendelssohn, but also the two greatest post-Hegelian Jewish thinkers, namely Cohen (with his "idealizing" interpretations) and even Rosenzweig (with his "new thinking"), both of whom readily admit the

Enlightenment origin of their "reservations" [*Vorbehalte*] toward tradition.⁹² All "interiorizations" or "spiritualizations" [*Verinnerlichungen*] of the tradition's basic and primary assertions are to Strauss, in his radical critique, "in truth denials" of the tradition; for him this "is a fact obvious to the unbiased view."⁹³ That is because in the very act of "internalizing" or "spiritualizing" their meaning, the traditional assertions are stripped of their claims to be truths about the world in its external, factual sense.⁹⁴ This is obscured from view only because we, "so long as we do not make a point of fighting against our prejudices through historical recollection [*Besinnung*], are completely under the spell of the mode of thinking produced by the Enlightenment, and consolidated by its proponents and opponents."⁹⁵ Thus, in the very act of reconsidering the Enlightenment's encounter with orthodoxy, Strauss seems to have liberated himself from the Enlightenment-created "prejudice" endorsing its own rational necessity. He emerged in favor of premodern reason, achieving this liberation decisively aided by theology.⁹⁶ In the course of his embattled and passionate reconsideration, the theology whose cause he embraces was driven back to its premodern, sounder fortifications. Indeed, he discovered that those fortifications had never actually been destroyed by its opponents; its opponents had merely caused them to be abandoned through a clever diversionary tactic. Yet, how was Strauss enabled to see the great divide and to recognize the enduring validity of the premodern theological approach?

It seems that the key to this great step beyond the dualism established by modern philosophy—a dualism which sets the final choice as between Spinoza and the Jewish tradition, Enlightenment and orthodoxy, even philosophy and the Bible—is to be located in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Lessing was not bound by the dualism because he had, as Strauss might have put it, recovered *the* "natural horizon of human thought."⁹⁷ Lessing was able to think beyond the modern dualism because he looked back to the ancients who, in his own words (quoted by Strauss), saw with "better" and "sharper eyes" than the moderns who can only claim to "see more."⁹⁸ To Lessing, the ancients already penetrated as deeply as possible to all the fundamental principles of philosophy, while the moderns only apply the same to a wider field and elaborate them in a higher number of examples.⁹⁹ In other words, Lessing was not captivated by history, for "having had the experience of what philosophy is" in its true, i.e., classical, sense,¹⁰⁰ he used history precisely with the proper philosophic intention of recovering "the natural horizon." It would reflect "the eternal truth" beyond either orthodoxy or Enlightenment,

whose conflict had been obscured in his day by polemics and apologetics. In his mature historical studies of the Enlightenment and orthodoxy, Lessing partially vindicated and partially criticized them both, which to Strauss indicates the ironic distance at which Lessing held these two rival parties. According to Strauss's conception, it was Lessing's firsthand knowledge of classical philosophy which enabled him to transcend dialectically these false modern alternatives. He rightly recognized these alternatives as determined mainly by a mere historical accident (i.e., the conflict which occurred in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, primarily caused by the modern Enlightenment's peculiarly bellicose character), and thus not by the suprahistorical or necessary truth.¹⁰¹

Likewise, Strauss justified his own original researches concerning Spinoza, the leading figure in the Enlightenment's critique of religion, by the need to "reenact" or "repeat" [*wiederholen*]¹⁰² "the classic quarrel between the Enlightenment and orthodoxy" as a fight for "the one, eternal truth." He says that in the classic quarrel "the natural desire for truth had not yet been deadened by the modern dogma that 'religion' and 'science' each has in view its own 'truth' coordinated to it."¹⁰³ This notion of Strauss's that the search for the single truth may reside in reviving and "reenacting" supposedly obsolete quarrels is reminiscent of the remark made by Lessing about his need for retrieving truths which he might have lost in discarding certain prejudices.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, the proof for the basic failure of the Enlightenment, especially in its attempt to refute orthodoxy, was apparently furnished in substance for Strauss by three things which Lessing taught him.

First, the radical Enlightenment's need to resort to laughter and mockery in order " 'to laugh' orthodoxy 'out' of its position from which it could not be dislodged by any proofs supplied by Scripture or by reason"¹⁰⁵ demonstrates like no other historical fact that orthodoxy's "ultimate premise" is "irrefutable;" for this resort to base techniques such as mockery must be considered a desperate measure for rational men. As Strauss remarks trenchantly, "mockery does not succeed the refutation of the orthodox tenets but is itself the refutation."¹⁰⁶

Second, according to "Lessing's Law [*Regel*]," as Strauss calls it,¹⁰⁷ the Enlightenment's worldly successes (e.g., modern science and modern politics), inasmuch as they are victories against orthodoxy, do not by any means prove the truth of its assertions, for "victories are 'very ambiguous demonstrations of the rightness of a cause, or rather. . . none at all' and thus 'he who is held to be right and he who should be held to be right is seldom one and the same person.' " It is for this reason among others

that Strauss regarded it as necessary to abandon one's prejudices and to reenact the classic quarrel between orthodoxy and the Enlightenment. He wished to reach an honest judgment about the truth, by considering "uncontaminated by prejudice" each party's "hidden premises": hence "one must pay attention to the arguments of both parties" equally and fairly.¹⁰⁸

Third, the critique of the "spiritualizations" of traditional orthodox assertions—a critique carried through with full force by nineteenth-century anti-Hegelianism, and as such laying the basis for the twentieth-century "movement of return"—was, as Strauss discovered, decisively begun by Lessing.¹⁰⁹ In fact, Lessing engaged in such theological critiques, so Strauss contends, actually as "a rehabilitation of the [radical] Enlightenment" in order to isolate the real disputants in the conflict.¹¹⁰ Following Lessing's lead in remaining free of attachment to either one party or the other, even while "rehabilitating" their most radical arguments, Strauss indeed judges both sides justly. Strauss praises orthodoxy for having withstood its attackers' numerous "ruthless"¹¹¹ offensives by adhering mightily to "the irrefutable premise" on which it is firmly grounded and also because it defends a noble set of moral ideals.¹¹² Similarly, in addressing himself unpolemically to the Enlightenment (i.e., not as if it were a spent force, despite what its post-Kantian and romantic critics maintained against its "dogmatic" rationalism), Strauss vigorously praises it for not arguing "the great issues" with "trivial premises." He says it does not deserve to be treated as "a contemptible adversary,"¹¹³ despite what he admits is its "atheistic" modern Epicureanism.

The dialectical approach which Strauss employs for "reenacting" the quarrel may have been borrowed from Lessing as well. Lessing was also able to criticize sharply those parties which he considered either guilty of a faulty compromise (e.g., Mendelssohn) or immersed in a pious self-deception (e.g., Jacobi). Learning from Lessing this agile and independent style of thinking, Strauss was able to reach strikingly judicious and unprejudiced conclusions about the Mendelssohn-Jacobi *Pantheismusstreit*. He also came to understand what Lessing was trying to get at in his use of a dialectical style which seemed to go out of its way to be paradoxical: he was striving to provoke his friends in both camps to a less dogmatic, more probing form of thinking, one which escapes modern prejudices and ripens into a deeper, classical freedom of thought. It is thought which allows itself a full radicalism of theory while moderating itself by prudence in practice.¹¹⁴