

Strauss Before Straussianism: Reason, Revelation, and Nature

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Rationalism itself rests on nonrational, unevident assumptions; in spite of its seemingly overwhelming power, rationalism is hollow.¹

—Leo Strauss

I

Despite the impact of Leo Strauss on American political science and political theory, where, exactly, Strauss was “coming from,” in both senses of that phrase, has been far from clear. Carl Friedrich, reviewing the, at that point, unknown author’s book on Hobbes, noted that Strauss might have been more forthcoming about his own position, but he believed that it was safe to conclude that he was a “historical relativist.”² Friedrich may have been closer to the mark than many subsequent commentators realized, but in order to understand Strauss’s work, it is necessary to return to the universe he inhabited before “coming to America.” Since Strauss’s death, his enterprise has been subject to careful scrutiny,³ but his early life and work have remained opaque.

1. Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, ed. Thomas Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 43.

This essay is the final version of a long paper originally presented at a symposium on Leo Strauss sponsored by the Institute of Human Values at the annual conference of the Canadian Learned Societies, Laval, Quebec City, June 1989. The proceedings of the symposium were printed in the first issue of *The Vital Nexus*, May 1990. Two subsequent revisions were the basis of presentations at the University of Chicago (November 1989) and Princeton University (April 1990). Although the focus, argument, length, and content have been substantially transformed, I have retained the original main title, since the subject has remained “Strauss Before Straussianism.” I wish to acknowledge valuable conversations with Shadia Drury over a period of several years as well as her considerable aid in obtaining material, such as Strauss’s dissertation, to which I did not have initial access. I also thank my colleague Peter Breiner for helping me work through passages in the untranslated dissertation.

2. Carl Friedrich, “Thomas Hobbes: Myth Builder of the Modern World,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 3 (1938): 25–57.

3. See, for example, Kenneth L. Deutsch and Walter Soffer, eds., *The Crisis of Liberal Democracy: A Straussian Perspective* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987); Shadia Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988).

Like so many of the emigres from Germany who had such a profound effect on political theory in the United States,⁴ Strauss's arguments, and even his intellectual identity as a political theorist or political philosopher, evolved in the context of the American academy and the matrix of issues that constituted the conversation in which he found himself. It would indeed be difficult to extrapolate either the form or substance of his major work from his early writings. Yet what he contributed to that conversation were ideas and concerns that were fundamentally formed in the world of Weimar Germany.

Recent critical commentary on Strauss has raised radical questions about the manner in which his work has been conventionally understood, and even among his most dedicated followers, there are notorious divisions of opinion. There are, however, limits to an interpretation pursued in terms of an analytical examination of Strauss's post-emigration writings. My goal is to historicize Strauss and recapture "Strauss before Straussianism."

I am concerned with the Strauss who came to intellectual maturity while grappling with a crisis in Jewish theology and who first ventured directly into the discussion of politics in his reply to Carl Schmitt, the same year that he fled Germany. More specifically, I wish to explore the roots of Strauss's critique of liberalism, the formulation of his historical/philosophical project, his persistent concern about the tension between philosophy and politics, and his conception of natural right.⁵

II

Leo Strauss was born in Kirchhain, Hessen, Germany on 20 September 1899. He was raised in an assimilated but orthodox Jewish family (his father sold farming supplies). He attended the gymnasium in Marburg where, in his words, he "became exposed to the message of German humanism" and "furtively read Schopenhauer and Nietzsche." By age 16, he had decided that he would be content to enter a humble occupation and spend his life "reading Plato and

4. See John G. Gunnell, "American Political Science, Liberalism, and the Invention of Political Theory," *American Political Science Review* 82 (1988): 71-87.

5. For a more analytical treatment of these issues based primarily on Strauss's later work, see John G. Gunnell, *Political Theory: Tradition and Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Winthrop, 1979; University Press of America, 1987). "Political Theory and Politics: The Case of Leo Strauss," *Political Theory* 13 (1985): 339-61.

breeding rabbits." But at age 17, he became a convert to "straight-forward political Zionism."⁶ The problem of the relationship between philosophy, theology, and politics would circumscribe his intellectual world. As he noted later, "I believe that I can say without any exaggeration that since a very early time the main theme of my reflections has been what is called the Jewish question."⁷

After serving in the German army during World War I, Strauss studied philosophy at the University of Marburg among the remnants of the neo-Kantian school that had been founded by the late Hermann Cohen. Cohen's work appealed to Strauss, since it was devoted to the complementarity of philosophy and Judaism and the reconciliation of reason and revelation. But he had problems with Cohen's approach and remained a "doubting and dubious adherent of the Marburg school."⁸

Strauss eventually took his doctorate in philosophy at the University of Hamburg in 1921 where he wrote a short, primarily expository, dissertation on the epistemology of F. H. Jacobi.⁹ Although in his subsequent work Strauss had little to say about Jacobi, some of the similarities between their concerns and arguments are indeed striking. Jacobi is no longer a well-known figure, but he was the protagonist in a late eighteenth-century debate that had a profound effect on the evolution of German philosophy.¹⁰ Much of the idealist tradition, from Kant to Hegel, was an attempt to salvage rationalism from Jacobi's critique.

Jacobi was a philosophical realist who criticized Kant's concept of the "thing-in-itself" as contradictory, but he initially pressed his arguments through an attack on Spinoza and the German Enlightenment. Although Spinoza had been almost universally reviled during the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century, his influence was unsurpassed in Germany by the late 1700's. The rehabilitation of Spinoza had begun in mid-century with Moses Mendelssohn, but

6. Jacob Klein and Leo Strauss, "A Giving of Accounts," *The College* 25 (1970): 2.

7. Leo Strauss, "Why We Remain Jews: Can Jewish Faith and History still Speak to Us?" Lecture at the Hillel Foundation, Chicago, 1962, p. 3.

8. Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 31.

9. Leo Strauss, *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der philosophischen Lehre Fr. H. Jacobi's*, dissertation, University of Hamburg, 1921. This manuscript, and the possible impact of more than one dimension of the work of both Jacobi and his friend and contemporary J. G. Hamann, deserve more attention than can be rendered here.

10. Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1987).

his fame was principally the product of a dispute between Mendelssohn and Jacobi—the so-called Pantheist controversy.

Mendelssohn had been about to write a tribute to G.E. Lessing, the leading representative of the *Aufklärung*, when Jacobi, in 1785, undercut him by publishing an account of a conversation between himself and Lessing which intimated that the latter had been influenced by Spinoza. This suggested an abandonment of many of the values with which Lessing had been associated and particularly the idea that religious beliefs could be rationally justified. What transformed the event into a major intellectual issue was Jacobi's claim that religion must be based on faith rather than reason, since Spinoza, the quintessential liberal rationalist, ended up an atheist and fatalist.

Jacobi argued that rationalism inevitably led, as Hume demonstrated, to skepticism. Scientific naturalism, founded by Spinoza, undercut practical belief and entailed relativism and eventually *Nihilismus* (a concept that Jacobi introduced into the vocabulary of modern philosophy). Jacobi, a Christian, argued for a return to orthodoxy. The dilemma of skepticism created by the pursuit of reason could only be solved by a leap in faith. Either follow reason and become an atheist or renounce reason and choose faith. The Jacobian dilemma and the critique of modern rationalism would remain fundamental for Strauss's perspective.

After finishing his degree, Strauss went to the University of Freiburg (1922) to seek out Husserl whose "ontological turn," and phenomenology, presented a challenging alternative to neo-Kantianism. But Husserl seemed to offer him little, since Strauss's "predominant interest was in theology" and the problem of orthodoxy in Judaism.¹¹ Theology, however, was being revived by individuals such as Franz Rosenzweig in reaction to Enlightenment ideas, and it was Rosenzweig's return to revelation that formed the pivot of much of Strauss's early thought. But it was here, in "Husserl's entourage," that he also first encountered Martin Heidegger.

Strauss sensed that Heidegger's lectures dealt with something of the "utmost importance to man as man," and he was in awe of Heidegger's interpretation of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* which he remembered in terms of having "never heard or seen such a thing—such a thorough and intensive interpretation of a philosophical text."

11. Klein and Strauss, "A Giving of Accounts," p. 2.

Strauss commented to Rosenzweig that, compared to Heidegger, Max Weber was only "an orphan child."¹²

Jacob Klein, his friend from Marburg and later fellow exile, recalled that Strauss's principal concerns at this time were "God" and "politics."¹³ Orthodoxy still suffered from the attack of the Enlightenment, and it was this problem, Strauss recalled, that brought him, in 1922, like Jacobi before him, to confront Spinoza's *Theological Political Treatise* which was "the classic document of the attack on orthodoxy." Since he was not satisfied with Cohen's "fierce criticism" of Spinoza, he undertook a "fresh study" in order to form an "independent judgment."¹⁴

From 1925 through 1932, Strauss held a post at the Academy of Jewish Research in Berlin. Here, between 1925 and 1928, he wrote his book on Spinoza (1930), but the involvement with Heidegger's ideas continued. In 1925, Heidegger came to Marburg where Klein attended his classes regularly. Klein and Strauss spent much time together, often at the Prussian state Library in Berlin and nearby coffee houses, and Heidegger, as well as Nietzsche, became principal objects of their conversation. Strauss later noted that

nothing affected us as profoundly in the years in which our minds took their lasting direction as the thought of Heidegger . . . who surpasses in speculative intelligence all his contemporaries and . . . attempts to go a way not yet trodden by anyone or rather to think in a way which philosophers at any rate have never thought before. Certain it is that no one has questioned the premise of philosophy as radically as Heidegger.¹⁵

Strauss recalled that "gradually the breadth of the revolution in thought which Heidegger was preparing dawned upon me and my generation" as he replaced Hegel and "dethroned" everything else.¹⁶ It was, however, Klein who, according to Strauss, first "saw why Heidegger is truly important: by uprooting and not simply rejecting the tradition of philosophy, he made it possible for the first time after many centuries . . . to see the roots of the tradition and thus perhaps to know, what so many merely believe, that those roots are

12. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

15. Leo Strauss, "An Unspoken Prologue to a Public Lecture at St. John's," *Interpretation* 7 (1978): 2.

16. Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, p. 28.

the only natural and healthy roots." Klein discerned in Heidegger's disinterest of the ancients an unintentional opening to "the possibility of a genuine return to classical philosophy, to the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle."¹⁷

Heidegger's *Destruktion* of the philosophical tradition was a "taking down" which served to "uproot" and "lay bare" Greek philosophy and make it possible to see it "as it was in itself and not as it had come to appear in the light of the tradition and of modern philosophy." What was needed was a "return to, and recovery of classical philosophy."¹⁸ Strauss attributed to Heidegger the discovery that "with the questioning of traditional philosophy, the traditional understanding of the tradition becomes questionable."¹⁹

Strauss had only begun to entertain these ideas as he worked through his analysis of Spinoza, from which, he noted, he was "led to Hobbes, on the one hand, and to Maimonides on the other."²⁰ Both foci became the subject of books that emerged shortly after he left Germany.²¹ Strauss noted that when he undertook his study of Spinoza, he was in the "grip of a theological-political predicament."²² The problem Strauss referred to was the "Jewish problem" in the context of Weimar Germany.

III

Although it is difficult to determine Strauss's original assessment of the situation, he later claimed that Weimar was an "option against Bismarck," against the traditional *Rechtstaat*, and a "leaning" toward the liberal democratic regimes of France and England. It had a "moderate nonradical character" which was a balance between 1789 and "the highest German tradition," but unlike the "old Germany" which was "stronger in will," it was "weak" and amounted to "justice without a sword." In this situation, the man with the "strongest will or single-mindedness, the greatest ruthlessness, daring, and power over his following and the best judgment about the strength of the

17. Strauss, "An Unspoken Prologue to a Public Lecture at St. John's," p. 2.

18. Klein and Strauss, "A Giving of Accounts," p. 3.

19. Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), pp. 9-10.

20. Klein and Strauss, "A Giving of Accounts," p. 3.

21. Leo Strauss, *Philosophie und Gesetz* (Berlin: Schocken, 1935); *The Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes: Its Genesis and Its Basis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936).

22. Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, p. 1.

forces in the immediately relevant political field was the leader of the revolution."²³

Strauss argued that, following the principle of understanding "the low in light of the high," it was necessary to explain the new Germany in light of the old. Germany had never been "distinctly in favor of liberal democracy," there was a general political weakness consequent to Germany's defeat in the war, and there had been a betrayal by the liberal democratic allies in the form of a treaty which "discredited liberal democracy in the eyes of Germany." The weakness of Weimar made the situation of the Jews "precarious."²⁴ Strauss recalled that in the old Germany, "we Jews there lived in profound peace with our neighbors. There was a government, not in every respect admirable, but keeping an admirable order everywhere, and such things as pogroms would have been absolutely impossible."²⁵

Even though it understood itself as a great advance over medievalism, by its relegation of religion to the private sphere and by its adoption of "a universal human morality," Weimar nevertheless provided conditions conducive to repression and eventually totalitarianism. While the split between the public and private realms insured political rights, the independence of the social sphere offered a relatively unrestrained space for the pursuit of egoism and material interest which often eventuated in discrimination. For Strauss, it was no accident that Weimar, which for the first time in Germany gave political rights to the Jews, "was succeeded by the only German regime — the only regime anywhere — which had no other clear principle than murderous hatred of the Jews." Hitler, after all, Strauss noted, did not emerge from Prussia or Bismarck's Reich but from a liberal democracy.²⁶

The general sentiment in German society was that Judaism was in conflict with the basic, and Christian, spirit of the culture. Thus, for Strauss, and many other young Jews who wanted to avoid "spiritual dependency," this led to a form of social alienation which made Zionism popular. Political equality did not produce "social equality" and "honor." But although Zionism was a "blessing," it did not ultimately solve the Jewish problem. It did not deal adequately

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

25. Strauss, "Why We Remain Jews: Can Faith and History Still Speak to Us?" p. 3.

26. Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, p. 3.

with the issue of Jewish culture and its basis in revelation and a divine dispensation. In the most fundamental sense the Jewish problem was "insoluble," by human and political means, even in the state of Israel.²⁷ Strauss always maintained that there ultimately was "no solution to the Jewish problem," and this was both because of the inevitable tension between the divine and temporal, and because "the human species consists by nature of tribes or nations, *ethne*."²⁸

In the context of liberal democracy, a partial solution to the Jewish problem was to return to the Jewish community and reject cultural assimilation. Yet, Strauss argued, this often tended to conflict with the demands of reason which transcended any "*ethnos*." Although it seemed to many that Jewish theology had succeeded in meeting secular challenges, it had done so, as in the case of Cohen, by understanding Judaism as a "religion of reason" and seeking the identity of reason and revelation, philosophy and prophecy, which Cohen believed was adumbrated in medieval Jewish philosophy and its turn to Plato.

Strauss "grew up in an environment in which Cohen was the center of attraction for philosophically minded Jews who were devoted to Judaism." He was "the greatest representative of German Jewry and spokesman for it," but, at the same time, "the most powerful figure among the German philosophers of his time." In his life and his ideas, he represented, like Mendelssohn before him, a synthesis of reason and religion, ethics and science, and Judaism and German society. All this "assumed indeed that the state is liberal or moving toward liberalism."²⁹

Strauss claimed that these arguments "suddenly lost all their force." Both tradition and experience demonstrated the autonomy of faith and revelation. Modern reason had reached its high point in Hegel whose work exemplified all the "limitations" of reason. In the perennial battle between reason and revelation, the latter, Strauss concluded, had won out. This position seemed to reflect Jacobi, but it also found support in the "new thinking" represented by Rosenzweig (to whom Strauss dedicated his book on Spinoza).³⁰

27. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

28. Strauss, "Why We Remain Jews: Can Jewish Faith and History Still Speak to Us?" p. 9; "The Problem of Socrates," Lecture at St. John's College, Annapolis, 1970, p. 5.

29. Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, pp. 168, 233, 247.

30. Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, pp. 8-9.

In his early attempt to deal with the Jewish predicament, Rosenzweig nearly converted to Christianity, but then made a radical turn toward the Judaic tradition and away from the "curse of historicity" that plagued both Christianity and philosophy. In *The Star of Redemption* (1921), the enemy was Hegel and German idealism. Rosenzweig was drawn to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and the idea of faith in the face of nihilism. Although a student of Cohen, Rosenzweig rejected humanism and embraced the tradition of the Kabbalah and classical theology where man was not the measure. He rejected epistemology and metaphysics in favor of a philosophy grounded in natural reason and the temporality of life and speech.

Rosenzweig's position, Strauss claimed, was paralleled by another trend of "new thinking" represented by Heidegger which offered an even deeper understanding of what was involved in the "insight or demand" that modern rationalism must be superseded. A problem with Rosenzweig's position was that his return was not, in the end, an unqualified return to the days before Mendelssohn, for example, to Maimonides. The new thinking was still an heir to elements of the old thinking. It historicized the Torah and was not a return to faith as it had been understood in the past. Rosenzweig, like Cohen, was still halfway between orthodoxy and liberalism.³¹

All this, Strauss said, "made one wonder if whether an unqualified return to Jewish orthodoxy was not both possible and necessary—was not at the same time the solution to the problem of the Jew lost in the non-Jewish modern world and the only course compatible with sheer consistency and intellectual probity." These issues eventually led to a confrontation with Spinoza—"the greatest man of Jewish origin who openly denied the truth of Judaism and had ceased to belong to the Jewish people without becoming a Christian." It was this defender of modern rationalism who must be proved "wrong in every respect" if there was to be a return to orthodoxy.³²

IV

Spinoza, Strauss argued, was "the first philosopher who was both a liberal and a democrat. He was the philosopher who founded liberal democracy, a specifically modern regime."³³ In his conception of the

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

polity, there was more freedom for the passions. Everything was understood as natural, and consequently, as opposed to the classics, the life of passion was not against nature. There was no natural end for man. The end of man was conceived and created by reason, and thus emerged the modern notion of an "ideal" and of man as a human project. Spinoza's philosophy entailed a liberal society that promised an end to the tension between Christians and Jews by transforming the latter into the former and the former into "cultured human beings" who transcended religion through art and science and achieved secular redemption. It was, in short, a society from which Hitler could emerge.³⁴

Strauss concluded, however, that Spinoza refuted orthodoxy only if orthodoxy depended on *knowing* such things as the occurrence of miracles — not if it was simply based on a belief in such things. Spinoza never demonstrated, and could not in principle demonstrate, that the premise of God's existence was refutable by reason, logic, or experience. Since Spinoza could not deny the possibility of revelation, he could not demonstrate that the philosophical account was necessarily the true one. In the end, it "rests itself on an unevident decision, on an act of will, just as faith does. Hence the antagonism between Spinoza and Judaism, between unbelief and belief, is ultimately not theoretical but moral," that is, based on faith.³⁵

Beginning at least from the point of his encounter with Jacobi, Strauss was convinced that reason ultimately rested on irrational decisions. Reason and revelation were rooted in irreducible commitments. His encounter with Nietzsche and Heidegger only confirmed this idea. But there were consequences to embracing reason; it was not simply a neutral choice.

Modern rationalism, as opposed to more ancient skepticism and Epicureanism, led man to "making himself the master and owner of nature," and this in turn required political action, revolution, and a life and death struggle directed toward "the systematic attempt to liberate man completely from all non-human bonds." Yet in the end this "really leads to man becoming . . . smaller and more miserable in proportion as the systematic civilization progresses." Eventually the idea of pushing back nature in order to achieve freedom began "to wither" and a "new fortitude" and harsher view of life set in. Religion was rejected not because it was hard, but because it

34. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

was comforting—a “final atheism” based on “intellectual probity” but in the end grounded on “belief” and an “act of will,” a position which is “fatal to any philosophy.”³⁶

Thus Strauss, like Jacobi, found himself forced to conclude that orthodoxy won out, both theoretically and practically, because of the “self-destruction of rational philosophy” and its religious and political manifestations. This, however, he could not accept as an “unmitigated blessing,” since it entailed not only the victory of Jewish orthodoxy but of any orthodoxy. These matters and

other observations and experiences confirmed the suspicion that it would be unwise to say farewell to reason. I therefore began to wonder whether the self-destruction of reason was not the inevitable outcome of modern rationalism as distinguished from pre-modern rationalism, especially Jewish-medieval rationalism and its classical (Aristotelian and Platonic) formulation.³⁷

V

In the early 1930's, Strauss pursued the recovery of medieval Jewish thought and focused on Maimonides. Just as his later work would be devoted to reawakening the quarrel between the ancients and moderns with respect to political philosophy, this book continued to attack the idea that modern rationalism had refuted Jewish orthodoxy and to confront “modern rationalism” with “medieval rationalism.”³⁸ Although Strauss assumed that in principle the Enlightenment had been discredited, its residue in Mendelssohn, Cohen, and even Rosenzweig continued to undermine the revelatory “foundation of the Jewish tradition.” He concluded that the only path was to “repeat” the “classical quarrel between Enlightenment and orthodoxy.”³⁹

Strauss argued that the Enlightenment had not so much refuted orthodoxy as mocked it and dismissed it. It “left in its rear the uncapturable fortress of orthodoxy” as it turned to the practice of “civilizing the world and man,” or pushing back “natural limits,” and eventually embraced the ideal of “freedom, understood as the autonomy of man and his culture.” Then (through Hegel) the “ideal

36. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

38. Strauss, *Philosophy and Law* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1987), p. 3.

39. *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 7, 8.

of culture, understood as the sovereign creation of the spirit" and the "self-assertion of man against an over-powerful nature" became dominant.⁴⁰

In his discussion of the conflict between the ancients and the moderns, Strauss argued that Maimonides "rational critique of reason" approached the problem of the tension between revelation and philosophy through the idea of the "grounding of philosophy" in revealed law which in turn commanded reflection on revelation and issued in the "philosophical grounding of the law." Ultimately, however, revelation was paramount, since the philosopher was forced to admit the "inadequacy of human reason to know the truth" of things beyond the "lower world."⁴¹

Strauss also found in Maimonides another dimension of the answer to the tension between reason and revelation and between Greek philosophy and Judaism. Both the philosophers and the prophets recognized "man's being by nature a political form" and were guided by the idea of natural right as a law addressing the total order of human life as well as by the idea that "the human race needs laws and thus a lawgiver." The prophet is at once a teacher, leader, philosopher, and lawgiver. The medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophers understood revelation in light of Platonic philosophy, but Plato also "foretold" revelation. The prophet is like Plato's founder of the ideal state who knows the upper world and solves the problem of theory and practice by acting as a mediator between the two worlds.⁴²

Strauss's conclusion, however, was that medieval Jewish philosophy's answer to the problem of the relationship between philosophy and religion was, in the end, a tenuous one. For the Jews, philosophy faced religion and divine law much like philosophy faced politics in Greece—something without, on its face, public authority. Only in the figure of the prophet cum lawgiver, modeled on the philosopher-king, could there be a resolution. But this did not offer a solution in the practical modern world, and Strauss would eventually see the tension between revelation and reason as something that could not be overcome.

This tension was a vital dialectic in the Western tradition, but it did ultimately require a "choice." In Jewish thought, the law, although philosophically grounded, was not open to question. Thus,

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 16.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 40–41.

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 50–51.

in the end, this position “does not have the sharpness, originality, depth, and ambiguity of Platonic politics.”⁴³ Strauss, eventually a nonbelieving Jew, chose philosophy or “Greek wisdom” over “biblical wisdom.” By adopting the philosophical attitude, “we have already decided in favor of Athens against Jerusalem.”⁴⁴ He would eventually conclude that “no one can be both a philosopher and a theologian” and that revealed divine law and rationally discerned natural order present fundamental alternatives which can be neither transcended nor synthesized.⁴⁵

Strauss noted that when he wrote his critique of Spinoza, he had proceeded on the “premise, sanctioned by a powerful prejudice, that a return to premodern philosophy is impossible.” But he had found that a return to orthodoxy required coming to terms with “traditional philosophy, which is of Greek, pagan origin.” This “change of orientation found its first expression, not entirely by accident,” in his reply to Carl Schmitt’s *Concept of the Political*.⁴⁶

VI

This “change” involved, in part, the idea, which was largely the product of his encounter with Heidegger, that philosophy was bound up with historical deconstruction and that

the enlightenment critique of the tradition must be radicalized, as it was by Nietzsche, into a critique of the principles of the tradition (the Greek as well as the biblical); thereby the original understanding of these principles may again become possible. The “historization” of philosophy is therefore, and only therefore, justified and necessary. Only the history of philosophy makes possible the ascent out of the second, “unnatural” cave (into which we have fallen, less through the tradition than through the tradition of the polemic against the tradition), into the first, “natural” cave that Plato’s image depicts, and the ascent from which, to the light, is the original meaning of philosophizing.⁴⁷

What Strauss had come to accept by the time that he addressed Schmitt was the idea that the critique of religion and politics were two basic and entwined projects. He found in these realms, and

43. *Ibid.*, p. 55. 44. Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, p. 150.

45. Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, p. 270.

46. Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, pp. 8–9, 31.

47. Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, p. 112.

the tension between them, irreducible aspects of human existence. Religion and politics were the “*original facts*,” the natural dimensions of life.⁴⁸ Thus a critique of modernity was necessarily theological-political in character and based on elements that stood outside the pluralistic horizon of the philosophy of culture. It was in his discussion of Schmitt that Strauss announced the naturalness of the political and most explicitly extended his critique of liberalism and modernity from religion to politics.

Although Schmitt eventually became an apologist for the Third Reich, he was generally recognized as a brilliant legal theorist. Despite his increasingly right-wing associations and his defense of the use of emergency powers and executive authority in the Weimar constitution, he continued, through 1932, to have considerable influence on thinkers across the political spectrum. Few of the emigres were innocent of Schmitt’s work and his transformation of the term “political” into a noun. Much of his influence derived from his focused attack on liberalism — which was an object of disapprobation on the part of both the left and right.

Through the 1920’s, Schmitt mounted an attack on the pluralist theory of the state and on the party politics and parliamentary practice of Weimar which he claimed failed to recognize the “objective nature and autonomy of the political.” He argued that “the concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political,” but this equation failed when there was an interpenetration of state and society and a loss of a distinct center of sovereignty.⁴⁹ For Schmitt, political actions and motives were reducible to the relationship between “friend and enemy,” in the same manner that good and evil defined the sphere of morality or that competition defined economic relations. But politics, morality, and economics were different realms. The problem with liberalism was that it conflated these distinctions and obscured the nature of politics by reducing or subordinating it to these other dimensions of life.

Schmitt’s claim was that while the state had the role of defining friend and enemy — both internally and externally, “liberal individualism” and pluralism tended, in theory and practice, to deny the sovereignty of the state and the existence of the political as a decisive entity. Furthermore, states were fundamental in the sense that

48. *Ibid.*

49. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. and ed. George Schwab (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1976), pp. 27, 19.

there were necessarily multiple states. The idea of a world state and a transpolitical natural law was a contradiction, because the very idea of the state and law, based on the notion of friend and enemy and the concept of sovereignty, presupposed others and otherness."⁵⁰

All genuine political theories, according to Schmitt, saw man as evil or at least saw human nature as problematic in the sense of self-seeking. Thus, as Hobbes indicated, the state is concerned with protection and obedience and must be clearly distinguished from society. The liberal hope for the disappearance or sublimation of the state and the political was misplaced. "The state and politics cannot be exterminated."⁵¹

There is a great deal of Schmitt's argument that Strauss embraced: the emphasis on the autonomy and irreducibility of the political, the impossibility of a world state, and the danger of the encroachment of society and a technological materialistic culture. Strauss's principal disagreement with Schmitt was quite simply that his critique of liberalism did not go far enough and that he failed to recognize that the roots of liberalism were deeper than the Enlightenment and that Hobbes was actually a "founder of liberalism," of the "idea of civilization," and, ultimately, of the notion of a rational universal society.⁵²

Hobbes was the initiator of modern natural right theory and the idea that the individual preceded, temporally and in priority, the state and politics. He did not present the state as a natural entity. It was to Hobbes's credit that he saw the fundamental problem of politics in human nature and not merely in corrupt institutions. And it was his successors who moved to the idea of man's "natural goodness" and eventually to the "philosophy of culture" which was the final "self-consciousness of liberalism." But it was nevertheless Hobbes who started the whole process by denying the naturalness of the political and suggesting that the human world was entirely open to artifice.⁵³

Strauss praised Schmitt for his affirmation of the political and his defense of the state in the face of the liberal negation. "Whereas Hobbes living in an illiberal world, lays the foundation of liberalism,

50. *Ibid.*, pp. 45, 53.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

52. Leo Strauss, "Comments on Carl Schmitt's *Der Begriff des Politischen*," in Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, p. 89.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

Schmitt living in a liberal world, undertakes the critique of liberalism."⁵⁴ And it was this project with which Strauss fully identified. His quarrel with Schmitt centered on the fact that Schmitt was still bound by a residue of liberal assumptions and did not sufficiently demonstrate the naturalness of the political as distinct from specific historical institutions such as the state. In a subsequent letter to Schmitt, Strauss emphasized once more that Schmitt's formulation, despite the recognition that politics was grounded in human nature, still left room for the implication that the political was in some way "derivative."⁵⁵

Schmitt affirmed the political, Strauss claimed, because he realized that "when the political is threatened, the seriousness of life is threatened. The affirmation of the political is in the last analysis nothing other than the affirmation of the moral." But "in order to launch the radical critique of liberalism that he has in mind, Schmitt must first eliminate the conception of human evil as animal evil, and therefore as 'innocent evil,' and find his way back to the conception of human evil as moral depravity," that is, back to a conception of human nature that antedates Hobbes and liberalism.⁵⁶

Strauss, agreeing with Schmitt, stressed that politics "remains constantly determinative of man's fate," but it also was "always dependent on what is at any given time man's ultimate concern." And, he claimed, today, in Weimar, that concern had been reduced, both domestically and internationally, to the liberal ethic of "neutralization" and "agreement at any price." Humanity entails the question of what is right, and this often means choices about life and death which justify a division between friend and enemy and require a rejection of a "humanitarian pacifist morality."⁵⁷

Since, in Strauss's view, Schmitt was still in part bound by the liberal vision, his "affirmation of the political as such can therefore not be other than merely the first word from Schmitt against liberalism. It can do no more than prepare the way for a radical critique of liberalism." Rather "it is undertaken only to clear the field for the decisive battle against the 'spirit of technology,' the "mass faith

54. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

55. Leo Strauss, letter to Carl Schmitt, in Heinrich Meier, *Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss, und "Der Begriff des Politischen"* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1988), pp. 132-33.

56. Strauss, "Comments on Carl Schmitt's *Der Begriff des Politischen*," pp. 99, 97.

57. *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101.

of an antireligious, this worldly activism' and the opposite spirit and faith, which it seems, does not yet have a name" but which looks forward to the "order of human things" which was Schmitt's "last word."⁵⁸

This language, in retrospect at least, sounds indeed ominous — particularly in light of the manner in which the revised 1932 version of Schmitt's essay, on which Strauss was commenting, was being understood. Within the next year, Heidegger would be personally inviting Schmitt to join him in theoretically underwriting the new Reich. Strauss was flirting with philosophical doctrines that were much more proximate to the political demise of Weimar than the liberalism, positivism, existentialism, and relativism on which he later focused.

In the end, Strauss stressed still once again that the principal problem with Schmitt's argument was that he was still constrained by liberal premises, and he repeated once more that Schmitt's

critique of liberalism takes place within the horizon of liberalism; his illiberal tendencies are arrested by the as yet undefeated "systematic of liberal thinking." The critique of liberalism that Schmitt has initiated can therefore be completed only when we succeed in gaining a horizon beyond liberalism. Within such a horizon Hobbes achieved the foundation of liberalism. A radical critique of liberalism is therefore possible only on the basis of an adequate understanding of Hobbes.⁵⁹

This sentence points forward to Strauss's exile in England, his book on Hobbes, and the more familiar world of Straussianism.

VII

What this excursion into Strauss's early work most clearly reveals is the manner in which the structure of his critique of liberal theology was transformed into a critique of liberal politics and how his repudiation of modern rationalism and liberalism propelled him toward the historical recovery of a different ground of judgment and conception of political phenomena. Exactly where he had arrived intellectually by the time that he came to the United States may be a more contentious issue, but I offer the following conclusions.

Strauss's naturalism had little to do with natural law as commonly

58. *Ibid.*, pp. 102–104.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

understood. What was natural was not some particular moral principle or ethic. Natural right involved demands that were coincident with the naturalness or givenness of the political and its relationship to other orders of existence such as the social and religious. It could be abrogated, but this invited retribution. The political, in some historical form such as the *polis* or the modern state, was rooted both in human nature and humanity's place in nature. Strauss remained emphatic in his claim that "there can only be closed societies, that is, states." The "contemporary solution, that is, the modern solution," with all its technological complexity, which is "the fruit of rationalism," and its drive toward the goal of a universal homogeneous order, was "*contra naturam*."⁶⁰

Strauss was concerned with what was by nature the best regime, but although the "perfect political order, as Plato and Aristotle sketched it," might not be possible, or even desirable, it was an intellectual construct that constituted the logical opposite of what was minimally, and maybe practically, required.⁶¹

Natural right is that right which must be recognized by any political society if it is to last and which for this reason is everywhere in force. Natural right thus understood delineates the minimum conditions of political life, so much so that sound positive right occupies a higher rank than natural right.⁶²

What was natural was "the floor and the ceiling, the minimum condition and maximum possibility of political society." Thus he could agree with what he took to be Aristotle's teaching to the effect that "all natural right is changeable" and that "it is just to deviate even from the most general principles of natural right" under certain circumstances.

Morality in any positive sense was derivative from and relative to the political, but also a necessary aspect of it. Yet morality, as a set of specific dictates, and by definition conventional, could not transcend the political order. It was the beliefs and opinions of, hopefully, the best (most prudent, wise, realistic, just) men in a regime. It was not something discovered by philosophy.

His conception of philosophy offered little in the way of a posi-

60. Leo Strauss, letter to Karl Lowith, 10 January 1946, in "Correspondence Concerning Modernity," *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 4 (1983): 107-108; *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, p. 42.

61. *Ibid.*

62. Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, p. 140.

tive vision. He could hardly have been more pointed when he said that for “the philosopher, what counts is thinking and investigating and not morality.”

Philosophy is the attempt to replace opinion with knowledge; but opinion is the element of the city, hence philosophy is subversive, hence the philosopher must write in a way that he will improve rather than subvert the city. In other words, the virtue of the philosopher’s thought is a certain kind of *mania* while the virtue of the philosopher’s public speech is *sophrosyne*. Philosophy is as such trans-political, trans-religious, and trans-moral but the city is and ought to be moral.⁶³

He did not mean that the philosopher was not concerned with morality (understanding it, supporting it, undermining it), but philosophy, as for Nietzsche, was beyond good and evil.

What philosophy could know was something about the nature of the political, but one of the things that it knew was that everyday political life was based on opinion. And this was the fundamental source of the inevitable, and natural, tension and “gulf” between philosophy and politics that could be bridged neither by philosophical practice nor practical philosophy. Like the difference between reason and revelation, this breach was part of the human condition.

Since philosophy could not say in any specific historical context what was transcendently right, its function was almost necessarily critical and destructive if practiced in an open and unrestrained manner. It could not but reveal the partiality and historicity of political opinion. Although philosophy could and should contribute to sustaining a decent regime and although the philosopher and the city are “attached” through mutual “care,” the philosopher, as questioner, is necessarily “detached” and transcends politics. The philosophical quest creates a “conflict between the philosopher and the city,” and philosophy necessarily becomes a kind of “political action.”⁶⁴

All this is not to say that Strauss was not in some sense a foundationalist, but this is a term best applied to modern rationalism and the epistemological tradition sprung from Descartes which Strauss rejected very early in his life. The notion of foundations of knowledge, the very essence of modern rationalism, is what Strauss so vehemently repudiated. The philosopher who embraces “certainty”

63. Klein and Strauss, “A Giving of Accounts,” p. 4.

64. Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1963), pp. 208, 219.

is no longer a philosopher. Certainty belongs to politics and practical life.⁶⁵ And here he was at one with Nietzsche and Heidegger. From the time of his encounter with Jacobi, Strauss embraced the view that modern rationalism, and its practical manifestations, was self-destructive. It could not justify itself, and it ultimately either ended in nihilism or rested on an orthodoxy of its own. "This basis of rationalism proves to be a dogmatic assumption."⁶⁶

Thus Strauss returned to what he understood as premodern Socratic rationalism which he conceived as something of a different sort that was not, despite how later commentators may have read Plato, based on an idealist and foundationalist epistemology. And it did not, in his view, necessarily underwrite a particular practice of morals, politics, or any form of conventional life. What it grasped was the fundamental character of the human condition and the manner of human being in the world.

For Strauss, religion, morality, politics, science and most other conventional dimensions of life were in the end grounded in commitment. And philosophy could not offer a substitute for such practical belief. The pursuit of philosophy, the Socratic quest, also involved commitment, but it was primarily a deconstructive activity. Philosophy was potentially dangerous for society, just as society was dangerous for philosophy. Although Strauss saw Husserl as holding on to the idea of "philosophy as a rigorous science" against the forces of historicism, he also noted that "he did not go on to wonder whether the single-minded pursuit of philosophy as rigorous science would not have an adverse effect on *Weltanschauungsphilosophie* which most men need to live by."⁶⁷

There can be no doubt that Strauss saw the dominant tendency in modern philosophy as rendering political philosophy impossible. Even Hegel and Marx held on to the idea of an "absolute moment" in history, and Nietzsche at least saw something transhistorical in the idea of the "over-man." It was Heidegger, however, who surrendered to the "homelessness" of human historicity and who severed "the connection . . . with politics more radically than either Marx or Nietzsche" and who left "no place for political philosophy."⁶⁸ But it is important not to misunderstand what Strauss was saying.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 210.

66. Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, p. 43.

67. Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, p. 37.

68. *Ibid.*, pp. 32-34.

Although historicism had led to the demise of “rigorous philosophy,” Strauss was not calling for a return to political philosophy based on rationalism. His basic quarrel with Heidegger was, first, that he denatured politics. He no longer allowed for a political moment or for politics as a fact of the human condition or a structure of human existence. But, second, the real problem with Heidegger, as with Nietzsche, was not so much that they were philosophically wrong as practically dangerous. Strauss’s criticism was essentially that their overt teaching rent the fabric of public life. They revealed the awful truth that no conventions were philosophically vouchsafed.

For Strauss, existentialism, typified by Heidegger, was the epitome of historicism, and despite obvious affinities, he felt constrained to say “I swear, that I am not straying on existentialist paths.”⁶⁹ He later argued that there was “an intimate connection” between Heidegger’s philosophy and National Socialism.⁷⁰ He claimed that there was also “an undeniable kinship between Nietzsche’s thought and fascism” rooted not only in his critique of philosophy but in his rejection of both constitutional monarchy and democracy, yet Strauss did not believe that in the end Nietzsche, “a European conservative,” would have sided with Hitler.⁷¹ Strauss argued that Heidegger’s turn toward the Nazi regime was more deeply determined.

It was not, as Arendt would suggest, a mere “error of judgment” on the part of a naive scholar but something rooted in a fundamental “kinship in temper and direction.” He asked “what was the *practical*, that is to say, serious meaning of the contempt for reasonableness and the praise of resoluteness except to encourage the extremist movement?”⁷² An uncharitable commentator might very well say the same about Strauss’s support of Schmitt’s ontologizing of “the political,” but more to the point is the fact that Strauss’s quarrel with Heidegger was in large measure one about the practical role and implications of philosophy.

What Heidegger had done was to declare “that ethics was impossible, and his whole being was permeated by the awareness that this fact opens up an abyss.”⁷³ The “abyss” had two dimensions, and both involved the relationship of philosophy to politics.

69. Leo Strauss, letter to Eric Voegelin, 2 January 1950.

70. Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, p. 30.

71. Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, p. 31, 40.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 30, emphasis added.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

If a rationally grounded ethics was impossible, philosophy lost its authority vis a vis politics. But for Strauss it also involved the danger that the end of certainty in philosophy would issue in a practical crisis by spilling over into popular attitudes and by undermining society's faith in itself. Strauss emphasized that the crisis of philosophy, represented by existentialism, and the crisis of politics, represented by liberal democracy, were both parallel and entwined. "The situation to which existentialism belongs can be seen to be liberal democracy, or, more precisely a liberal democracy which has become uncertain of itself or of its future. Existentialism belongs to the decline of Europe."⁷⁴

Strauss maintained that the modern crisis reflected the fact that "all rational liberal political philosophical positions have lost their significance and power," and he personally could not accept "clinging to philosophical positions which have been shown to be inadequate." But there was no satisfactory philosophical answer to this problem after Heidegger who was "the only great thinker in our time."⁷⁵

A dedicated academic disciple of Strauss once related how after many years he came to realize that Strauss "had no doctrine—or at least a most elusive one." At one intellectual gathering at which Strauss was being discussed, where the participants included H. G. Gadamer and Gershom Scholem, he found himself defending Strauss "against the representatives of Heidegger and God."⁷⁶ This anecdote may convey as accurately as any conceptual formulation the meaning of Strauss's work.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

76. Werner J. Dannhauser, "Leo Strauss: Becoming Naive Again," *The American Scholar* 44 (1975): 641.