

Interpretation

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The Dialectic of Political and Private Senses of Ethical Virtue in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

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It is a commonplace that for Aristotle, in contradistinction to moderns, ethics is always already political.¹ There is certainly some important truth to this, but Aristotle is also familiar with a relatively private notion of ethical virtue. In fact, the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) harbors a certain tension between more public and more private senses of virtue—at times, one finds expression, at times the other. I will here try to trace out the development of this tension within the text, eventually exploring as well some connections between this issue and Aristotle's subordination of the ethical life to the contemplative life in book 10. In the process, I hope to reveal the strong presence of dialectic in Aristotle's ethical writings, even in places where it does not initially appear to be at work.

1. THE DELICATE BALANCE OF POLITICAL AND PRIVATE VIRTUE IN *NE* BOOKS 3–4

If one looks to Aristotle's account of the ethical virtues in books 3–4, it is clear that he allows for both political and private virtue in his account of the ten virtues treated there. By political virtue, I mean virtue the

¹ See, for example, Richard Bodéüs, *The Political Dimensions of Aristotle's Ethics*, trans. Jan Edwards Garrett (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); Eugene Garver, *Confronting Aristotle's Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 124–63; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 147–48, 150–52, 155–57; Stanford Cashdollar, "Aristotle's Politics of Morals," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 11, no. 2 (1973): 145–60; A. W. H. Adkins, "The Connection between Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*," *Political Theory* 12, no. 1 (1984): 29–49; T. H. Irwin, "Aristotle's Conception of Morality," in *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 1, ed. John J. Cleary (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), 115–43; Peter Simpson, "Contemporary Virtue Ethics and Aristotle," in *Virtue Ethics: A Critical Reader*, ed. Daniel Statman (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1997), 245–59.

primary or paradigmatic expression of which is found in activities occurring in the arena of the political community or city (*polis*) as a whole, in the way that magnificence, for example, has a particular connection to the sort of giving that benefits the whole community (1122b19–23, b33–34).² By private virtue, I mean virtue the primary or paradigmatic expression of which is found in activities occurring in the arena that the ancient Greeks spoke of as “one’s own” (*to oikeion*). “One’s own” is the sphere of life centered on oneself and one’s family and friends. It is important to stress from the start that I do not wish to restrict the “private” to the sphere of the isolated individual: relations among family and friends are not properly political but nonetheless obviously transcend the solitary self.³ In fact, there seems to be only one virtue that does not require for its primary activity any strong relation to another person: the virtue of temperance is concerned with excellence in respect of one’s enjoyment of the pleasures of taste and above all touch, and has no essential involvement of another person (1118a23–b8). Nonetheless, since it is hard to perfectly divide the private sphere from the political for the ancient Greeks generally or for Aristotle in particular,⁴ it is best to understand this distinction on the model of a spectrum, with some virtues falling relatively close to the political pole, and some virtues relatively close to the private pole, and some falling somewhere between.⁵

What I want to do now is to work through Aristotle’s treatment of the virtues in books 3–4 with this distinction between private and political virtue in mind. Aristotle begins his account with courage, making it clear that he thinks it should be understood in a somewhat narrowly delineated fashion as a grand public and martial virtue, arguing against the extension of courage beyond the sphere of what ordinary political and martial opinion consider it to be.⁶ Thus, he says, one is not courageous with

² References to the *NE* are to I. Bywater, *Aristotelis Ethica Nicomachea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1894). Quotations are from the translation by Joe Sachs, in *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics* (Newburyport, MA: Focus, 2002).

³ I would perhaps speak of domestic virtue instead of private virtue if it were not for the fact that the “domestic” tends to unduly emphasize the relations of the family above all else.

⁴ That there is nonetheless still such a distinction for Aristotle is most easily seen in his discussion of complete justice at 1129b25–1130a8, discussed below.

⁵ It is perhaps because of a tendency to think that this distinction is either perfectly precise or barren that a commentator such as Richard Bodéüs can claim that all the virtues discussed by Aristotle are political, even those such as temperance and good humor (*Political Dimensions of Aristotle’s Ethics*, 44–45).

⁶ For a good articulation of what Greek ordinary opinion considers courage to be, one might consider Plato’s *Laches*, where Laches, when asked what courage is, replies without hesitation that it is standing one’s ground in battle (190e).

respect to death at sea or through illness (1115a28–29).⁷ Instead, one is courageous in regard to the possibility of death that arises in war. This is because there is a particularly strong connection between the noble (*to kalon*) and courage (1115a30–31, 1115b11–13, b21–24, 1116a10–12, a14–15, a28, 1116b2–3, 1117a17, 1117b9, b14–15), and only death in war is noble—death at sea or in illness cannot be so (1115a29–b6).⁸ The special nobility of death in war is presumably based on the idea that it is a sacrifice of oneself for the political community.⁹ Deaths at sea or by illness are, by way of contrast, much more private affairs, out of the sight of the community and without immediate benefit for the community.¹⁰ This is, then, a rather forceful way of limiting the significance of courage to the more public realm.¹¹ The closest Aristotle comes to granting an extension of courage beyond its ordinary, public and martial form is when he acknowledges that there may be various *likenesses* of courage that would deal with more private matters (1115a18–22), but his account does not take this up as something of much importance.

Aristotle next considers temperance (*sōphrosunē*), a much less flashy and much more private virtue. One should be careful to acknowledge that it is possible for temperance to be given strong political significance, as it is, for example, in the “Just Speech” in Aristophanes’s *Clouds*, where temperance is connected to the politically conservative and militarily focused faction (961–1023).¹² My point, then, is not that it is in principle impossible to link temperance with the political sphere, but rather that the account given by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* simply does not do this, presenting

⁷ Nor is one courageous with regard to poverty, loss of friends, and things of that sort (1115a10–12).

⁸ The connection of the noble and the political sphere will be considered at greater length below. As Platt has noted, Aristotle’s claim about the impossibility of a noble death at sea ill fits with the opening of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, where the Boatswain has some claim to dying one of the nobler deaths in all of Shakespeare (Michael Platt, “Tragical, Comical, Historical,” in *Analecta Husserliana XVIII*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka [Boston: Reidel, 1984], 391–92 with I.1.52–53).

⁹ See Aristotle’s presentation of the common opinion according to which there is an essential connection between nobility and self-sacrifice in his *Rhetoric* (1359a1–5, 1366b36–1367a5, 1389b37–1390a1). Aristotle himself ultimately rejects that idea that noble action is opposed to one’s good (*NE* 9.8), but, in accord with dialectical method, he is willing to provisionally employ the common appearances (1145b2–7).

¹⁰ Note that Socrates’s death as described in the *Phaedo* would *not* qualify as noble or courageous according to these very political standards.

¹¹ See also Garver’s way of connecting the martial and political with respect to courage (*Confronting Aristotle’s Ethics*, 132–34).

¹² Aristophanes, *Clouds*, in *Four Texts on Socrates: Plato’s “Euthyphro,” “Apology,” and “Crito” and Aristophanes’ “Clouds,”* trans. Thomas West and Grace Starry West (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

it instead in relatively private terms.¹³ He portrays temperance as the virtue governing rightness with respect to the sense of touch (and perhaps to some extent taste) and is content to leave it at that, drawing forth no political implications of this virtue (1118a23–32). In fact, his fundamental approach to the discussion of this virtue is to cut away from it every possible extension of its significance, until he is left with a highly delineated virtue (1117b27–1118b1). Aristotle tells us the three things the temperate person looks to in determining what is temperate: what promotes health, what is in accord with one's financial resources, and what is beautiful or noble (1119a16–18).¹⁴ The temperate person does not, in other words, look to something having to do with the community as a whole. This treatment of temperance thus reveals something intriguing: although Aristotle seems quite concerned to preserve the political and public nature of courage, he then immediately moves to consider an almost wholly private virtue. This dynamic is characteristic of Aristotle's account of the virtues in books 3–4: as we will see, there are certain structural tendencies that slant things in favor of the political even as this is resisted by other tendencies toward something broadly inclusive. One would want to note as well that Aristotle provides us with the reason for treating courage and temperance first: these virtues belong together as “the virtues of the non-rational [*alogon*] part of the soul” (1117b23–24).¹⁵ This is important insofar as it reveals that the organizational principle for the discussion of ethical virtue is at least initially indifferent to the distinction between the political and the private, even though this distinction is at work in other ways.

That organizational indifference immediately disappears, however, as Aristotle turns to generosity and magnificence. These virtues are distinguished, at least provisionally, with reference to scale; magnificence is generosity on a large scale (1122a21–23).¹⁶ This, however, means not only that

¹³ Garver argues for the political nature of temperance for Aristotle, but it is noteworthy that he is forced to cite the *Politics* rather than the *Nicomachean Ethics* to try to defend this view (*Confronting Aristotle's Ethics*, 135). Irwin attempts to do the same, but this is because Irwin is committed to the position that the *kalon* is essentially connected to the common good, and so he is forced to try to locate a connection between temperance and political life (“Aristotle's Conception of Morality,” 131–37).

¹⁴ Note that we find here a private sense of *to kalon*, which is unexpected in light of its usage in the discussion of courage. This will be discussed further below.

¹⁵ Of course, there is something puzzling in this claim; we would have expected from Aristotle's earlier discussion of the soul that *all* the ethical virtues belonged to the *alogon* part of the soul (1102b29–1103a10). Garver takes it to mean that the other virtues belong instead to *thumos* (*Confronting Aristotle's Ethics*, 139). One difficulty with this interpretation is that it would make courage, which seems like one of the more spirited virtues (1116b24–31), into one of the least spirited. I cannot pursue this question any further here.

¹⁶ Qualifications are eventually added to this; Aristotle goes on to say that there can be a difference

its expenditures tend to be greater, but also that the paradigmatic expenditures of magnificence are those that benefit the whole city; magnificence is exemplified in funding such things as religious worship, dramatic productions, warships, and civic feasts (1122b19–23).¹⁷ Generosity, by contrast, is a much less political virtue; it seems, in fact, to lie closer to the private pole for Aristotle. While we tend today to think of generosity as a rather universalistic virtue, directed most of all toward those most in need, Aristotle's account of generosity does not emphasize this aspect. He speaks in book 4 of the relevance of generosity for friendships (1122a10–11), and later makes this clearer when he discusses the way in which intimacy and friendship make for greater demands of giving (1165a2–35, 1169b12).¹⁸ One might think as well of Aristotle's emphasis on generous giving in complete friendship (see, e.g., 1162b6–13). The difference between magnificence and generosity with respect to the paradigmatic recipient of the giving is also the basis for the hierarchical ordering of the two. As Aristotle makes explicit in his discussion of magnificence, it is a greater virtue than generosity: while generosity gets right spending what one ought and as one ought, magnificence gets these right while adding a certain splendor that is lacking in generosity as such (1122b8–14). As he says, magnificence, as having the greater magnitude, is also greater with respect to the noble, the end of ethical virtue (1122b14–18). This draws upon and reminds the reader of a similar hierarchy that was provided in the opening moments of the *NE*: “if [the good] is attained for only one person that is something to be satisfied with, but for a people or for cities it is something more noble [*kallion*] and more divine” (1094b9–10). With magnificence and generosity, then, Aristotle has begun to explicitly treat the difference between political and private virtue and to hierarchically order these to the advantage of political virtue.

The privileging of magnificence over generosity is mirrored in the relation of the two virtues that immediately follow: magnanimity and the nameless virtue concerning small honors. Magnanimity is a difficult virtue to pin down precisely, owing to the extremely dialectical nature of

between a deed performed out of magnificence and a deed performed out of generosity even when the expenditure is equal (1122b11–14).

¹⁷ This is not to deny that magnificence can be used in relatively private settings, e.g., to fund a wedding (1123a1) or give a lavish private gift (1123a14–15), but note that Aristotle, before allowing these private expenditures into his account, stresses that the one concerned with these most communally honored expenditures is “most” (*malista*) a magnificent person (1122b33); and even once he calls attention to the relevance of large private expenditures, he drifts almost immediately back to affairs involving the whole city (1123a2).

¹⁸ See Garver, *Confronting Aristotle's Ethics*, 138–39.

Aristotle's treatment of it, but there are various features of the virtue that make clear its very public and political nature. One way to get at the nature of magnanimity is to look at what it is most opposed to: smallness of soul (1125a32–33). Aristotle says that smallness of soul is the worst of the extremes in this sphere insofar as the one who is small of soul will “stand aside from noble actions and pursuits as though they were unworthy” (1125a25–27). This makes clear one of the most important features of the magnanimous: the magnanimous will see the occasion and the need for some great action and seize upon this occasion, even at great risk to themselves (1124b8–9). It seems clear that this sort of action is envisioned as primarily political or public in nature: the magnanimous perform the sorts of actions that the community can then repay with honor, which the magnanimous then accept in an appropriate fashion (1123b18–20; see also 1134b2–8). The nameless virtue concerning small honors is somewhat more straightforward, insofar as it is simply the virtue by which one is properly disposed toward those honors that tend to come in more everyday life (1125b1–5). Magnanimity is clearly understood as the greater in comparison with the virtue concerning small honors, insofar as the former is presented as a completion or culmination of the ethical life while the latter is not (1123b26–1124a4). This (roughly) middle section of Aristotle's account of the virtues goes the furthest in the direction of the political nature of ethical virtue in books 3–4.

Once again, however, Aristotle takes care to balance this political privileging with a reaffirmation of the private. After making an ascent to one of the culminations of ethical virtue in political magnanimity, Aristotle ends his account with somewhat humbler virtues that allow something more of the private sphere. He begins with a virtue that is somewhat intermediate between the public and the private: gentleness of temper, the virtue that concerns anger. This virtue seems relevant for both political and private life but seems to be weighted more toward the private side, insofar as one tends to think of the intensity involved in anger as arising most of all in connection with those intimate personal matters found in private life. In the *Politics*, Aristotle connects anger with intimacy, arguing that anger “is more aroused against intimates and friends [*sunētheis kai philous*] than against unknown persons” when they do us wrong.¹⁹ Aristotle repeats this claim in the *Rhetoric*: people “get more angry at their friends than at those who are not their friends, since they believe they deserve to be better treated

¹⁹ *Politics* 1328a1–3. The translation is from Aristotle's “*Politics*,” ed. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

by them than by those who are not friends.”²⁰ Note also that the examples of anger given in the *Rhetoric* seem somewhat more heavily weighted toward the private sphere: he discusses those who get angry when belittled for their poverty, sickness, eros, love for philosophy, physical appearance, and so forth (1379a16–38). Aristotle, at any rate, does little here to point to any possible political significance of anger (unlike, for example, the way that Plato in the *Republic* discusses *thumos* [spiritedness, the seat of anger²¹] in its political aspect, in relation to the guardians in particular [e.g., 375a–c]).²²

Aristotle next speaks of friendliness, the social virtue. This is the virtue of appropriately pleasing and paining others in the social encounters of life. This virtue also straddles the borders of the political-private distinction. Insofar as Aristotle makes it clear that friendliness encompasses the field of “those one knows and those one doesn’t, those one is accustomed to be around and those one isn’t” (1126b25–26) and is relevant for dealings with both “customary associates and strangers [*sunēthōn kai othneion*]” (1126b27), it is obviously not simply private in the sense of the home. Indeed, he goes so far as to say that friendliness is different from friendship precisely in being put to work toward those who are *not* one’s intimates in affection (1126b20–27). Nonetheless, friendliness does not seem as robustly political as certain other virtues, insofar as it does not essentially involve preeminently political activities such as ruling or providing counsel at the assembly; at best, it can accompany these activities at times. Friendliness is paradigmatically put to work as one conducts one’s affairs and thereby encounters and relates to coworkers, acquaintances, and even strangers. This virtue, then, is either indifferent to the distinction between the political and the private or, perhaps, is somewhat more heavily weighted toward the private, insofar as it governs the whole of social relations, which are, for most people (even Athenian gentlemen), more often one’s own affairs than those of the city. Some particular connection to the private sphere is indicated as well by the way that Aristotle begins the discussion of this virtue: he speaks of the field for this virtue as being located “in social relations, in living together, and in sharing words and deeds” (*en de tais homiliais kai tōi suzēn kai logōn kai pragmatōn koinōnein*) (1126b11–12). “Living together” (*to suzēn*) is in fact the feature

²⁰ *Rhetoric* 1379b2–4; see also b13–15. The translation is from Plato’s “Gorgias” and Aristotle’s “Rhetoric,” trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport, MA: Focus, 2009).

²¹ Plato, *Republic* 439e–440a.

²² The one moment where Aristotle allows anger to touch upon political affairs in his account of gentleness of temper is when he says that “sometimes we call those who are harsh manly, as people capable of ruling” (1126b1–2).

that Aristotle claims most of all characterizes friends (1157b19); and he later claims that “to whatever extent people share something in common, to that extent is there a friendship” (*kath’ hoson de koinōnousin, epi tosouton esti philia*) (1159b29–30). It is surprising, then, that Aristotle uses this term, given that he does distinguish this virtue of friendliness from friendship itself, but it suggests that he understands friendliness as operating within a field that is not entirely different from that of friendship and that maintains something of the private dimension.

From there Aristotle turns to truthfulness concerning self, which he explicitly distinguishes from truthfulness in more serious contexts, such as in contractual agreements or the domain of justice (1127a34–35). Instead, this virtue deals with “occasions of speech and life in which nothing of that sort is at stake” (1127b1–3), in which “telling the truth makes no difference” (1127b4). These occasions would seem above all to be the occasions of relatively private life: Aristotle gives an example of an extreme in this domain of the man who boasts “to his neighbors” (*tois pelas*) of his special wisdom (1127b19–20). This sort of backyard boasting obviously falls closer to the private than to the political.

The last of the virtues discussed in books 3–4 is good humor, which seems to be the smallest, least grand, and most private of these ten virtues. This is the virtue that deals with the occasions of relaxation and with playfully passing the time (1127b33–35). Here one avoids extremes of boorishness and buffoonery by being playful in a harmonious way, making sure that one delights without being crass or insensitive to others’ pain. Richard Bodéüs argues that even this virtue is political, insofar as it governs the sort of activity that takes place in a setting such as a symposium, which remains a gathering of citizens of a *polis*.²³ But if one looks to a drinking party such as that presented in Xenophon’s *Symposium*, one sees that it would be going too far to say that the many jests contained there are necessarily political in any important sense. When, for example, the notoriously ugly Socrates vies in a beauty contest with Critobulus, and makes a (philosophic) joke that equivocates on different senses of the term *kalos*, claiming that since his snub nose works best for unhindered smelling and his bulging eyes best for seeing in all directions, and so are fine in function (*kaloi*), they are thus the most beautiful (*kaloi*) (5.1–7), it hardly seems like a particularly political activity. The fact that an event occurs within a city among those who are citizens is not sufficient to make it political. And while this virtue can at times be

²³ Bodéüs, *Political Dimensions of Aristotle’s Ethics*, 44–45.

used in political contexts, at any assembly of the city, for example, this should not obscure the fact that this virtue more often and more paradigmatically governs private occasions. The assembly, after all, is not a paradigmatic place of humor in the way that a symposium at a private home is.²⁴

We have seen, then, that Aristotle begins his account of these ten virtues by indifferently switching from political to private (with courage to temperance), then subordinates the private to the political (with the hierarchical relation of magnificence and magnanimity relative to generosity and the virtue concerning small honors), before finally making it clear that he will not allow the political to completely overshadow the private dimension (with gentleness of temper, friendliness, truthfulness, and good humor).

This distinction between political and private can be considered as well with respect to Aristotle's emphasis on *to kalon* (the noble or the beautiful) in connection with ethical virtue. Aristotle introduces *to kalon* in his account of the virtues in such a way as to emphasize its political character.²⁵ As we already saw, this connection between courage and *to kalon* was used by Aristotle to establish that courage is a political-martial virtue that is not exercised in more private affairs. This is because *to kalon* is found only in the sort of grand, large-scale action that one finds in fighting and sacrificing for the city (1115a28–b6). Aristotle could do nothing better to show from the very start that he wishes to maintain strong continuity with ordinary, political-martial notions of nobility than to employ a commonplace of this sort: martial deaths are noble while others are not. Note as well that he explicitly appeals to the way that honor is bestowed in the political community on the basis of excellence in battle as a confirmation of this point (1115a31–32). The *kalon* as it functions in this passage thus seems connected to grandeur and the common belief that battle and death in battle are splendid things. The ordinary moral man or the courageous soldier is simply drawn to the grandeur of these large-scale actions.²⁶

²⁴ See Plato, *Symposium* 193e–194c for a discussion of the difference between a public event such as a dramatic production and a private event such as a symposium. For a concrete illustration of this, consider Alcibiades's speech regarding Socrates, a speech that contains very personal history that Alcibiades clearly understands to be (at best) just barely appropriate even for a private gathering of like-minded men (217e–219d). See also Allan Bloom, "The Ladder of Love," in *Plato's "Symposium,"* trans. Seth Benardete (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 60–61.

²⁵ As Owens notes, talk of the *kalon* fits the large-scale virtues better than it does the small-scale ones (Joseph Owens, "The KAAON in the Aristotelian *Ethics*," in *Studies in Aristotle*, ed. Dominic O'Meara [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1981], 263n6).

²⁶ Here we also see a strong manifestation of the connection of the *kalon* and the praiseworthy, which Aristotle points to at *Rhetoric* 1366a33–34 and *Eudemian Ethics* 1248b16–25.

Aristotle makes this connection between *to kalon* and magnitude (*megethos*) explicit at times throughout his account. He notes that military conflict presents the “greatest” risks in such a way that seems to help make them the most splendid risks (1115a30–31).²⁷ When discussing magnificence, he writes that it is superior to generosity precisely by outdoing the latter in having greater magnitude and *thereby* being more *kalon* (1122b10–18). Aristotle’s treatment of magnanimity makes the same point. He first posits that magnanimity consists in a certain proportion of equality between one’s worth and one’s consideration of one’s worth. But he then insists that this needs to be qualified: magnanimity is not found in the harmonized ratio between just any degree of worth and consideration of worth, but only in the proportion that obtains for those of *great* worth. This adorning and beautiful virtue (1124a1–4), in other words, requires not only proportion for its moral grandeur, but also magnitude. Aristotle makes this even clearer through an analogy with physical beauty. He writes, “Someone who is worthy of little and considers himself worthy of that is sensible, but not magnanimous, for magnanimity [greatness of soul] is present in something great [*megethei*], just as beauty [*to kallos*] is present in a body of full size [*megalōi*], while small people can be elegant [*asteioi*] and well-proportioned [*summetroi*] but not beautiful [*kaloi*]” (1123b5–8).²⁸ Just as physical beauty, then, requires magnitude, so too does the nobility or beauty of deeds and souls. One could also express this by saying that virtuous deeds are *kalon* not only in their status as means, but also in their status as extremes (see 1107a6–8, 1123b13–14).²⁹

Nonetheless, Aristotle says that *to kalon* is the end of *all* the ethical virtues (1120a23–24).³⁰ He does not hesitate to speak of even temperance as having some fundamental connection to *to kalon* (1119a18), and says that *to kalon* is present even in good humor. We can make some sense of this: it is perfectly intelligible to say that there is something ugly in great

²⁷ In the *Politics*, Aristotle connects the *kalon* to the possession of a certain number and size (1326a25–b7). Rogers, despite consistently minimizing the significance of magnitude for the *kalon*, notes that *kalon kai megan* (noble and great) was a common Greek epithet: see, e.g., Homer’s *Odyssey* 1.301, 3.199, 9.513 (Kelly Rogers, “Aristotle’s Conception of *to kalon*,” *Ancient Philosophy* 13 [1993]: 367n18).

²⁸ This passage should not be assimilated to that of *Poetics* 1450b34–1451a6, which claims that something cannot be *kalon* without a certain magnitude because otherwise its order and harmony will not be manifest to sight or contemplation. The whole point of this passage in the *NE* is that small bodies can have a *manifest* symmetry and yet still lack the grandeur and impressiveness that makes for the *kalon*.

²⁹ Note the connection between *to kalon* and magnitude at 1177b16–17 as well; this passage will be considered at greater length in sec. 4.

³⁰ See also 1115b12–13, 1120a11–13, 1122b6–7.

intemperance or in the rigid boorishness that despises playfulness—and so the respectively opposed virtues would thus seem to hold some possibility of beauty. Here we begin to enter onto questions of the proper translation of *to kalon*: it can be translated either as “the noble” or as “the beautiful/the fine.” The range of English translation is not accidental to the Greek term but distinguishes different shadings that the word can possess. When one translates *to kalon* as “nobility,” one emphasizes the grand, public, and political aspect of *to kalon*. When one translates the term as “beautiful” or “fine,” one allows for a broader and more inclusive range (that also fails to signify all that “nobility” does). This distinction is manifest in the fact that it would be rather strange to say that temperance is noble but not so odd to say that it is fine or beautiful. The truth is that there is a structural ambiguity in the *NE* such that at different moments throughout books 3–4 *to kalon* takes on these different resonances and cannot be understood solely in terms of either translation.

At the same time, one would do wrong to note that range of the term in such a way as to suggest that the term is simply stretched out in an indifferent way between these poles of nobility and beauty. The signal that the term is not indifferent in this way is found in the fact that whereas the account of the very grand virtue of courage abounds in references to *to kalon* (in fact, it is with respect to courage that Aristotle puts his heaviest emphasis on *to kalon*³¹), the account of temperance contains only two references to it (1119a18, 1119b16). Note as well that the more modest virtues of friendliness and good humor mark exceptions to Aristotle's explicit claim that *to kalon* functions as the definitive end of *all* ethical virtue, insofar as friendliness brings in consideration of advantage as well as *to kalon* (1126b28–30, 1127a4–5) and good humor brings in considerations of necessity (1128b3–4). This suggests that there is something different in the application of *to kalon* to these sorts of virtues and may indicate that Aristotle feels a sort of a stretch involved in extending the *kalon* as an end to all the ethical virtues. Ultimately, then, it seems that to look at the ethical virtues in terms of the *kalon* already tends to support the priority of the political over the private with respect to virtue.³²

2. THE POLITICIZATION OF VIRTUE THROUGH JUSTICE

I now wish to consider the next stage of Aristotle's presentation, his account of the eleventh virtue, justice, to which he devotes an entire

³¹ See Ronna Burger, *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 76, 81.

³² I will return to this point below in sec. 4.

book (book 5). Justice, it is clear, is primarily a political virtue for Aristotle. This is the case for both “complete justice” or lawfulness and “partial justice” or equity. Speaking of complete justice, Aristotle says, “In one sense, we speak of the things that produce and preserve happiness or its parts in the political community as just” (1129b17–19). Speaking of partial justice, he writes that “in associations that involve exchange, what is just...holds them together... for a city stays together by paying things back proportionately” (1132b31–33).³³ The fact that Aristotle concludes his account of the ethical virtues by devoting a whole book to a manifestly political virtue is itself significant, shifting even further toward a political emphasis.

The account of justice, however, privileges the political aspect of virtue through more than simply its disproportionate length. Complete justice, Aristotle says, is the same as complete virtue put to work in relation to others (1129b25–27). But Aristotle also equates complete justice with what is lawful, writing that “the law orders one to do the deeds of a courageous person, such as not to leave one’s assigned place or run away or throw down one’s arms, and the deeds of a temperate person, such as not to commit adultery or be wildly extravagant, and those of a gentle person, such as not to hit people or slander them, and similarly with the things that are in accord with the other virtues and vices, commanding the one sort and forbidding the other” (1129b19–24). If the reader steps back, however, to remember the ten virtues given in books 3–4, it is clear that not all of these virtues or their respective deeds are commanded by law. Good humor provides a clear example of this: the law, thankfully, holds no punishments in store for those who find themselves unable to tell a good joke. We find something similar with other virtues. The law does not, for example, command deeds of generosity toward friends in need. Nor does it regulate friendliness or sociability in its essential aspect, namely, providing pleasure for others when socially appropriate and causing pain only when necessary (1126b28–1127a6). And although Aristotle here connects law to two of the virtues I have deemed more private, that is, temperance and gentleness of temper, the relation of the law to such virtues seems somewhat minimal, prohibiting only the worst and most public violations of such virtues (adultery, violence, slander). It manifestly does not try to govern private life in the way that the virtue does (hitting the mean with regard to consumption of food and drink, avoiding unjustified angry remarks that would not fall under the category of slander, the perfecting of

³³ See also 1160a11–14: “the political community seems to gather together from the beginning, and to remain together, for the sake of what is advantageous. The lawmakers aim at this, and people call the common advantage just.” See also 1134a26–b18.

one's unexpressed feelings of anger, etc.). So even while Aristotle connects some private virtues to the law in this passage, he does so only by making them more public, which at the same time makes them more minimal. This passage, then, shows an important shift in the fundamental conception of ethical virtue whereby the private and smaller virtues are either ignored or thinned out. In shifting to a sense of ethical virtue in which it makes sense to subsume all of ethical virtue under the categories of a politicized justice and law, Aristotle has allowed the political to blot out the private qua private.³⁴

There is another way in which the discussion of complete justice privileges the political dimension of virtue. Here we find Aristotle provide his most explicit distinction between virtue in the private and public sphere: complete justice, he says, is the whole of the virtues put to work toward others in the broader community, beyond the sphere of one's own (1129b25–1130a13). This is in fact what gives complete justice its distinctive perfection (and special wondrousness, 1129b27–29), that it holds this special reference to the activity of virtue toward the broad political community made up of those with whom one does not identify oneself but takes as other. Aristotle argues that this activity of virtue is the more “difficult task” (1130a8) (and is thus more praiseworthy), since “many people are able to put virtue to use with regard to their own affairs [*en men tois oikeiois*] but unable to do so in affairs that involve another [*en de tois pros heteron*]” (1129b33–35). When Aristotle goes on to explain what he above all means by acting with virtue “toward another” (*pros heteron*), he does so with reference to political activity, citing the proverb of Bias that “ruling will reveal the man,” since “the ruler [acts] toward another and within a community from the start” (1130a1–2).³⁵ It seems that the political ruler is the one who can most of all be at work with complete ethical virtue, if he is the one who most of all goes beyond his own affairs to deal with the affairs of the community.³⁶ Aristotle continues this line of thought when he writes, “Justice is the only virtue that

³⁴ Aristotle does, however, provide suggestions that this very lofty account of law must be qualified: see 1136b33–34, 1137a9–12, b11–34. Note also his qualified claim that “pretty much the bulk [*schedon ta polla*] of the things that are lawful are the things that are ordered from complete virtue” (1130b22–23).

³⁵ This same contrast between taking care of one's own affairs and taking care of the affairs of the broader community is employed in a different context in *NE* 6.8, where Aristotle notes that some people fault the politically active as “busybodies” insofar as they do not attend to their own concerns (1142a29–b11). There may also be in this discussion an echo of the Platonic discussion of the charge that the politically and martially active neglect their own affairs (see *Laches* 179c–d, 180b).

³⁶ See also *Politics* 1277a14–16: “We say that the excellent ruler must be good and prudent, whereas the good citizen need not be prudent.”

seems to be another person's good, because it is in relation to another, for it does what benefits another, either the ruler or the fellow member of the community" (1130a3–5). To act *pros heteron*, then, is above all to act in the context of the city, doing well toward those with whom one has no bond other than the political bond.³⁷ We now realize that we have to dialectically revise our earlier account of certain of the virtues, recognizing, for example, that generosity cannot be limited so strongly to the private sphere. There might be a rightness to a form of giving that does not reach to the level of magnificence in benefiting the whole community and yet is primarily concerned not with intimates but with any of the various members of the community; and this may be the higher generosity. The hierarchy contained in this line of thought is apparent: the perfection of virtue is found in its properly political form—virtue is most of all virtue when it is political.

3. THE RETURN OF THE PRIVATE BY WAY OF *PHILIA*

The next dialectical shift in the argument occurs in books 8–9 with Aristotle's discussion of *philia* or friendship. As one would expect, Aristotle presents *philia* in what is basically a private light; friendship in the best case is the bond of a rare few (usually only a pair [1171a15–20]) joined together in their pursuit of what they take to be the highest good (1172a1–8). And unlike later Roman philosophers, Aristotle does not attempt to situate the best friendship as a quasi-political friendship of those engaged together in the highest sorts of statesmanship.³⁸ Rather, Aristotle consistently downplays the extent to which friendship can be politicized, writing, for example, that "as fellow-citizens [*politikōs*], it is possible to be a friend of many people without being obsequious, but decent in the true sense; but it is not possible to be friends to many on account of virtue and for themselves, and one should be well-satisfied to find even a few such friends" (1171a17–20). Indeed, Aristotle says that "friendship in a political sense" (*politikē philia*) seems to be mere "like-mindedness" (*homonoia*), which consists primarily in agreement

³⁷ Further confirmation that one should take the *pros heteron* in a strongly political sense is provided by a contrast Aristotle draws between making use of virtue or vice "toward oneself and toward one's friends [*kai pros hauton kai pros tous philous*]" with making use of it "toward another [*pros heteron*]" (1130a3–8). This contrast seems to make sense only if one understands friends as not simply other but as (in some sense) belonging to oneself or as "another oneself" (1170b6–7). The "others" are those with whom one does not so identify oneself. Nonetheless, the meaning of this passage has been disputed: see, e.g., J. A. Stewart, *Notes on the Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1892), 398–99.

³⁸ See, for example, Cicero, *De amicitia* 4.15, 14.51, where Laelius speaks of his friendship with Africanius in a way that tends to emphasize their joint political activity (Cicero, *De senectute, De amicitia, De divinatione*, trans. W. A. Falconer [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923]). This is dialectically qualified by Cicero (17.64), but still serves to provide a helpful contrast with Aristotle.

about what is advantageous for the city (1167b2–4). Aristotle's example of such political friendship is agreement that an alliance should be made with a particular foreign city (1167a30–32). This is obviously a minimal form of *philia*, falling under friendship of use (ordered toward advantage) rather than friendship in the governing sense, the friendship that involves love for the other as himself (1156a10–31, 1156b7–32, 1157a25–32). Note further that when Aristotle provides examples of activities that friends might share the bulk of their time performing together, political activities are nowhere mentioned (1172a1–8).

The discussion of friendship, occupying two of the late books of the *NE*, thus serves to shift emphasis back onto the private sphere.³⁹ This shift is strengthened by the fact that *philia* is presented as higher than the justice that had been discussed in book 5. Aristotle writes that “when people are friends there is no need for justice, but when they are just there is still need for friendship, and what inclines toward friendship seems to be most just of all” (1155a26–28). *Philia*, in other words, sublates that which is excellent in justice within something higher and better. Friends have no need for the precise legality involved in justice; they act well toward each other not with reference to a good that stands outside of either of them, but with reference to the good or virtue that each of them embodies (1156b7–9, 1162b6–13). And it is precisely when justice takes the form of equity, the justice that corrects the defects caused by the letter of the law (1137b24–27), that justice is best and comes closest to *philia*. The shift, then, is substantial, helping to set up the final note of the *NE* on the matter, discussed below in section 5.

4. THE SUBORDINATION OF POLITICIZED ETHICAL VIRTUE TO CONTEMPLATION IN 10.7

Despite his emphasis upon the private sphere in the books on friendship, Aristotle returns to his emphasis upon the political in 10.7, making clearer exactly what the grounds for this emphasis are. After broaching the subject of contemplation and lavishing praise upon it (1177a12–b6), Aristotle begins his comparison of the ethical to the contemplative life by providing a determinate focus to his conception of the ethical, writing that “the activity of the virtues that involve action is present in political pursuits and in the things that pertain to war” (1177b6–7). This is his signal that he

³⁹ Despite this general thrust of the books on friendship toward the private, there is nonetheless a qualification to this in Aristotle's discussion of the analogies between kinds of friendships and kinds of rule (1159b25–1161b16). Even here, however, Aristotle stresses the way that the political community looks toward advantage in a way that is different from the best friendships (1160a8–30).

will compare the intellectual life to the ethical life only insofar as the latter is understood in political and martial terms. It will be through a prior and determinate understanding of the nature of the martial and political spheres that he will understand the ethical life in its relation to contemplation. This move to equate the ethical sphere with the political and martial spheres is perhaps the strongest such claim by Aristotle in the *NE*. If taken to its logical consequences, it would entail a very strict hierarchy of the virtues, such that good humor, generosity, and temperance would pale in comparison to virtues such as courage, magnificence, and magnanimity. While we already saw indications of some hierarchy as early as book 4, there were also qualifying notes at that point, as discussed above. This difference appears to be grounded in the way that Aristotle conceives the *kalon* at this point, as will become clear.

Aristotle then quickly dismisses the role of martial action in the happy life, arguing that it is never undertaken for its own sake; rather, war is always for the sake of peace, and viewing martial action as intrinsically worthwhile would naturally lead to absurd attempts to provoke war even with friends so that one could engage in as much martial action as possible (1177b7–12). Something of the grandeur of martial action is necessarily lost in light of this new attention to the fact that the underlying conditions that make possible beautiful and noble deeds in war are themselves ugly and undesirable, that the excellence that we find in battle is parasitic on the evil of war. We realize how different this point of view is from that of the courageous themselves, who, as Aristotle says in book 3, “prefer what is noble in war above all other things” (1117b14–15). One now realizes that one cannot wholeheartedly choose one’s own martial action and excellence; it is desirable not simply speaking but only on the basis of a presupposition (*ex hupotheseōs*), as Aristotle speaks of such things elsewhere (see *Politics* 1332a7–16). Aristotle seems to believe that this realization shifts one toward viewing martial activity as worthwhile more for the sake of its consequences in benefiting the city than for its own sake.

Aristotle then moves to consider the political sphere. Remember that in book 1 *hē politikē* or the political art is said to be the architectonic knowledge of the human good (1094a26–b11). We get a quite different sense for the scope of politics here in book 10, as Aristotle writes that political action is

unleisured, and achieves, beyond itself, positions of power, honors, and the happiness for oneself and for citizens that is different from

political activity, and which it is clear that we seek as something different from it. ...Among actions in accord with the virtues, those that pertain to politics and war are pre-eminent [*proechein*] in the noble [*kallei*] and magnitude, but they are un leisured and aim at some end and are not chosen for their own sake. (1177b12–18)

It is especially important that Aristotle here speaks of the relation of political action to the noble. This establishes a concrete point of connection with his earlier discussions of ethical virtue. As we saw, Aristotle holds that the end of ethical virtue is *to kalon*, or the noble (1120a23–24). Indeed, it seems from early passages that it is the involvement of the *kalon* that makes ethical action worthwhile for its own sake (see 1105a32, 1169a11–b2). In the passage just given, Aristotle states that political and martial actions are preeminent with respect to the *kalon*. This naturally leads to the conclusion that political and martial actions are ethical deeds most of all, if the essential mark of ethical action is found in the *kalon*. I suggested above that we find some strain in Aristotle's attempt to characterize the *telos* of private and political alike in terms of the *kalon*. In 10.7, Aristotle finally seems to acknowledge this problem and consequently elevates political virtue. The context for this passage makes such a reading even more plausible: Aristotle is trying to subordinate the work of intellectual virtue to that of ethical virtue, and so he needs to consider the strongest and best type of ethical work if he is to make his case solid. Aristotle is thus claiming in this passage that martial and political action is most of all ethical action, because it most of all involves the noble—and yet it is still inferior to the perfectly leisured activity of intellectual virtue, because martial and political action involves necessity, the proper antithesis to leisure, necessity being that which marks something as desirable not for its own sake but only for the sake of its consequences. The element of the noble is not sufficient to overcome the element of necessity in such action.

What does it mean, however, to say that the intrinsic choiceworthiness of ethical-political action is marred by this involvement with necessity? One might initially think that Aristotle is simply claiming that ethical-political actions are both choiceworthy in their own right and also useful, and that this combination somehow cheapens them. But this does not seem sufficient: after all, contemplation too might in some cases produce useful benefits, as Aristotle notes elsewhere⁴⁰—and it is hard to see why adding extrinsic utility should in any way lessen the intrinsic worth of an activity. Aristotle's claim must be that the unavoidable involvement of necessity in

⁴⁰ See the case of Thales as presented at *Politics* 1259a5–21.

the ethical-political sphere actually hinders the attainment of the properly ethical ends or goals. That is to say, politics must attend, as he says, to the happiness that is different from political action itself, that is, that part of happiness that is not simply constituted by ethical virtue—the possession of the nonethical goods. This continues the line of thought we found regarding the martial sphere: just as war is desirable not for itself but for the sake of its consequences for the well-being of the city, so too does political action find much of its point in simply securing necessary external goods for the political unit. Politics must attend to necessary matters, such as the preservation and health of the city; indeed, to attain these things is even in some sense noble (*kalon*) (1110a4–23). The problem is that in this way the ethical and its pursuit of the noble can conflict with itself; for example, the noble aim of preserving one’s political body can necessitate deeds of lesser nobility. An illustration familiar to Aristotle is provided in Homer’s *Iliad*, insofar as Odysseus and Diomedes engage in a night raid on the Trojans at a time when the Greeks desperately need any sort of success (book 10). Odysseus and Diomedes slay and loot many men in their sleep, and while it may not be unjust or wicked to attack the enemy in this way, it surely has less of the splendor of nobility. From the perspective afforded by *NE* 10.7 1177b12–18, however, we can say that its lesser share in the noble does not entail that it ought not to have been done, or that it was a deed of mere cleverness rather than prudence. While Aristotle tends to connect prudence to the *kalon* in the *NE*,⁴¹ he reminds us here that political prudence ultimately cannot consider the noble alone but must understand the noble as one (key) element in the human good that must be intelligently situated within it rather than taken to simply and solely constitute it.⁴²

Legal punishment provides another example. Aristotle holds that punishment is not simply noble or beautiful but has more of the element of necessity to it (*Politics* 1332a7–18).⁴³ Nonetheless, political leaders cannot afford to allow their love for the noble to overshadow the real need to punish in order to maintain a lawful society (which is itself a noble end). Or consider whether the city and its leaders can afford to be generous in the way that

⁴¹ See 1143b21–23, 1140b6–7, 1141b12–14; *Eudemian Ethics* 1216a23–27; see also John McDowell, “Deliberation and Moral Development in Aristotle’s Ethics,” in *Aristotle, Kant, and the Stoics: Rethinking Happiness and Duty*, ed. Stephen Engstrom and Jennifer Whiting (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 30–31.

⁴² Consider in this vein Aristotle’s rejection of the staunch defenders of the noble who altogether reject the building of city walls (*Politics* 1330b32–41).

⁴³ See also *Rhetoric* 1366b28–34; Plato, *Gorgias* 469b; *Laws* 860b; and *Republic* 439e–440a, with Ronna Burger, “The Thumotic Soul,” *Epoché* 7, no. 2 (2003): 151–67.

Aristotle describes generosity earlier in the work: giving to such an extreme (*to hyperballein*) that one scarcely can have riches (*ploutein*) (1120b14–15) and does not look out for oneself (*mē blepein eph' heauton*) (1120b6). A city that pursued such a policy would be an imprudent city; its leaders cannot afford to be generous in this way. And this careful prudence is again in its own way a part of the noble.

The un leisured character of politics means that ethical virtue is always politically in danger of being fundamentally thwarted from within, that the noble can conflict with itself in the political sphere. The serious character of politics thus yields both an ethical grandeur and an ethical difficulty; the serious nature of the consequences of political action means that one cannot always pursue the most noble or beautiful actions, if these will lead to serious political harm. In this way, the ethical life in its political form shows its internal limitation, its un leisured aspect.

Note that it is precisely because of the connection to the martial and political spheres that ethical action is shown to harbor such a defect. Aristotle subordinates ethical action to contemplation only by first connecting ethical action to martial and political action, and then showing us the defect of martial and political action. This raises the question whether there might be a form of ethical virtue that would prove more resistant to this critique.

5. THE FINAL RETURN OF PRIVATE ETHICAL VIRTUE IN 10.8

In fact it seems that Aristotle himself presents just such an alternate picture of ethical virtue later in book 10. He is addressing the question of the need for external prosperity for happiness. After noting the obvious need for some such prosperity to provide the condition for the possibility of any excellent activity, he then writes:

But one certainly ought not to suppose that someone who is going to be happy will need many things or grand ones, if it is not possible to be blessed without external goods; for self-sufficiency does not consist in excess any more than action does, and it is possible for one who is not ruler of land and sea [*archonta gēs kai thalattēs*] to perform noble actions [*ta kala*]. For one would be capable of acting in accord with virtue from moderate means, and it is possible to see this plainly—for private persons [*idiōtai*] seem to perform decent actions not less than powerful people but even more—and it is sufficient if that much is present, since the life of someone at work in accord with virtue will be happy. (1179a1–9)

Here we see something radically different from what we had earlier in book 10. Now we are reminded of the possibility of private ethical virtue; and we are reminded, even more strongly, that those with such private ethical virtue seem to perform noble and decent actions even more than do political rulers.⁴⁴ This dialectically challenges the earlier claim that political actions are preeminent with respect to the noble—presumably through revising our conception of the noble itself. No longer is the noble to be tied primarily to magnitude or *megethos*, as it explicitly was earlier in book 10, but it is understood to be possible even in smaller, less visible and less publicly efficacious deeds that nonetheless reflect a serious moral commitment. The common opinion according to which the *kalon* appears only or mainly in such places as the battlefield (1115a28–b6) has been dialectically revised. It is only by reconceiving the *kalon* itself that Aristotle can avoid the difficulty discussed above, namely, the awkwardness of understanding the *kalon* as the end even of the more private ethical virtues. We approach for a moment the ethical sensibility of the story of Baucis and Philemon, the two humble peasants who invite a disguised Zeus and Hermes to share their home and meal, and who please the gods with their private, humble virtue more than did the rich and powerful, who are all destroyed by the gods for their wickedness.⁴⁵ This also converges with the position of Socrates at the end of the *Republic*, who, in recounting the story of Er, describes how the soul of Odysseus, the only one to make a good choice for its next life, “found relief from its love of honor by the memory of its earlier labors, [and] went around for a long time looking for the life of a private man who minds his own business [*bion andros idiōtou apragmonos*], and with effort it found one lying somewhere, neglected by the others. It said when it saw this life that it would have done the same even if it had drawn the first lot, and was delighted to choose it.”⁴⁶

And, indeed, this form of ethical virtue seems much more resistant to the internal limitations of ethical virtue in its martial and political forms. No longer does the excellence of ethical virtue rest upon conditions that are themselves undesirable, as with war. We eliminate the tension contained in the fact that one cannot fully will one’s virtuous activity, insofar as one cannot will its condition. Furthermore, the fact that there is a lesser magnitude found in the private life means that there is actually less of an

⁴⁴ Note that Aristotle here uses the same term, *archōn*, that he used in book 5 to speak of the political ruler who was most able to possess complete virtue (1130a2).

⁴⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8.

⁴⁶ *Republic* 620c–d. The translation is from *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991), with slight changes.

internal threat to the ethical; the private individual can afford to be generous to excess, to give without looking out for himself. The private individual can engage in moral exhortation but generally need not burden him- or herself with punishment (or, remembering the travails of the rearing of children, not with the more serious punishments). And while the more private virtue of friendliness may not be as grandiose as the more public virtue of magnanimity, nonetheless the former has a certain grace that the latter lacks; and does anyone really want to *live with* the magnanimous person?

Note that we thereby end up with a version of ethical virtue that is much closer to the intellectual virtue to which it is supposedly inferior.⁴⁷ Both end up looking surprisingly private and surprisingly humble. Neither is as flashy as common opinion expected happiness to be; Aristotle refers in this regard to the statement of Anaxagoras that the happy person would appear strange to most people (1179a13–15). This is further expressed insofar as, in the discussion of the small need for external goods for happiness, Aristotle abruptly shifts without any explanation from a discussion of intellectual activity to ethical activity (1178b28–1179a9); he appears to view them as much more commensurate at this point than he had previously.

6. A NOT YET FINISHED DIALECTIC

To sum up the results of this investigation, I see five stages to Aristotle's treatment of the relation of the political and the private to ethical virtue. (1) He begins by mixing the political and the private in his account of ten ethical virtues throughout books 3 and 4. Here he subordinates the private to the political, but takes care not to let the political form of virtue blot out private virtue, devoting time to such private virtues as temperance and good humor. (2) In book 5, ethical virtue is construed in such a way that it becomes possible to subsume it wholly under justice and lawfulness; the private slips out of view here. (3) In books 8–9, in his account of *philia*, Aristotle restores the private, insofar as the best friendships are basically rare, private affairs involving only a few, and yet these friendships are understood as a preeminent locus of ethical virtue, surpassing even justice. (4) In 10.7, Aristotle allows the political form of ethical virtue to again blot out the private sphere and private virtue; and this becomes the ground for the subordination of ethical virtue to contemplation. (5) In 10.8, Aristotle provides his strongest ethical subordina-

⁴⁷ See also Aristide Tessitore, *Reading Aristotle's "Ethics"* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 109–10.

tion of the political to the private; it is now said that the private life affords more opportunities for ethical action than does the political life.

We find, then, the dialectical presentation of a variety of views as to the relation of the political and the private in regard to ethical virtue. It is likely that all these views are implicitly contained within different aspects of the *endoxa* or authoritative opinions which Aristotle says ethical inquiry must take pains to respect (1145b2–7). Ordinary ethical experience, as the source of the *endoxa*, reveals a particular sort of excellence and brilliance to large-scale, communally beneficial action, even as it shows a special charm and worth in modest, quiet manifestations of ethical virtue. We do not, however, find a definitive resolution to this dialectic in Aristotle; instead we are shown or reminded of this tension which lay implicit for us but which we never quite grasped with clarity. Further, Aristotle fleshes out for us what it would look like to take these various possibilities seriously, what each of them entails, with everything appealing and problematic in them. This then allows for us to persist with good hope of insight. Perhaps this open-endedness is Aristotle's true Platonism shining through: while his work initially appears to present definitive doctrines, and to do so with some naiveté, we end up realizing that what he does most of all is to encourage the activity of philosophizing.

The State of Philosophy and Thomas More's Utopia

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Quamquam ridentem dicere verum quid vetat?

—Horace

*On the Best State of a Commonwealth and the new island of Utopia*¹ suffered a fate not dissimilar to that of its author. For as the man who became a saint but wanted to see justice done to the devil² was revered as a “Catholic Reformer,” venerated as a “Christian humanist,” and marked as “another Lucian,” along with being described as a “Platonist,” his “piece of indirect and ambiguous fiction” has not only been admired as a “protest against undue ‘emancipation,’” appreciated as a “humanist critique of humanism,” and denounced as a “holiday work, a spontaneous overflow of intellectual high spirits, a revel of debate, paradox, comedy and...invention,” but also characterized as a “free imitation” of the *Republic*, a rethinking of the “implications of Plato’s *Republic* under the influence of Holy Scripture.”³

¹ When referring to More’s text, I refer to the page and line number of vol. 4 of *The Complete Works of Thomas More*, ed. Edward Surtz and J. H. Hexter, 12 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961–1997). All translations as well as all emphases are mine. For references to other works by More published in the Yale edition I use the abbreviation CW, the volume number, and the page number.

² Or so his son-in-law William Roper tells us (*The Life of Sir Thomas More*, in *Two Early Tudor Lives*, ed. Richard S. Sylvester and Davis P. Harding [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967], 220).

³ Edward Surtz, *The Praise of Pleasure: Philosophy, Education, and Communism in More’s Utopia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 6; J. H. Hexter, *More’s Utopia: The Biography of an Idea* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 157; John Frith, “A Mirror, or Glass, to Know Thyself,” in *The Works of the English Reformers: William Tyndale and John Frith*, ed. Thomas Russell (London, 1833), 3:267; Leo Strauss, “An Untitled Lecture on Plato’s *Euthyphron*,” *Interpretation* 24, no. 1 (1996): 20; Sir Geoffrey R. Elton, *Reform and Reformation: England, 1509–1558* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 42; R. W. Chambers, *Thomas More* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1935), 131; Quentin

But whereas the truth about Thomas More himself may be destined to remain “secret in [his] own conscience,” the fact that the English apologist decided not to “helpe to burne” his own “bokes...wyth [his] owne hands,” since he believed there was “none harme therin,”⁴ already invites us to look with a less fatalistic eye upon his *Utopia*. The present essay claims that such guarded optimism is not unwarranted. But it also claims that the way out of the abyss of scholarly confusion necessarily goes through a serious study of *Utopia*’s least appreciated aporia: the aporia which consists in the compound observation that the island which constitutes the “best” or “only” state of a commonwealth for Raphaël Hythlodæus (236.32–33), a man who appears as a philosopher (50.1, 56.9, 86.10–13), is judged “inconvenient” by Thomas More (106.4), a man who appears to have been a philosopher,⁵ and who by repeating his judgment after having heard a report about communism in motion (244.13–21) indicates that he goes much beyond the scope of the criticism of Plato put forward by a man commonly known as “the Philosopher.”⁶ As it was More’s “emulat[ion]” of Plato’s *Republic* (20.5) which inaugurated a literary genre that is modern beyond debate, and of which Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, a modernization of Plato’s *Critias*, is the philosophical offspring, solving *Utopia*’s key aporia thus entails the promise not only of providing the first coherent interpretation of the work itself, but also of making a significant contribution to answering the much-debated question to what extent it was philosophy that inaugurated Modernity.⁷

Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 1, *The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 257; C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1954), 169; Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), 61; J. H. Hexter, *CW*, 4:xl. Colin Starnes calls *Utopia* “the *Republic* recast in a new mould applicable to the demands of contemporary Christianity” (Starnes, *The New Republic: A Commentary on Book One of More’s “Utopia” Showing Its Relation to Plato’s “Republic”* [Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1990], 3).

⁴ Thomas More to Dr. Nicholas Wilson, 1534, in *St. Thomas More: Selected Letters*, ed. Elizabeth F. Rogers (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 232; and More, *The Confutacyon of Tyndales Answer*, Part One, in *CW*, 8:179.

⁵ Although Gerard B. Wegemer seems to take seriously what one might call the “two-philosophers paradox,” he appears not to have confronted the question which one of the two “philosophers” would actually be justified in claiming the epithet which is explicitly claimed only in the case of Hythlodæus. For he solves the problem in terms of “two distinct philosophies of life” (Wegemer, *Thomas More On Statesmanship* [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996], 91–108).

⁶ Aristotle, *Politics* 1261a1–1264b25. To the extent that Aristotle’s criticism of Plato concerns the practicability of communism it lies outside the scope of this essay. The most influential reading of *Utopia* as a work of political theory rather than of political philosophy is George M. Logan, *The Meaning of More’s “Utopia”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), a commentary which, significantly enough, starts with the claim that *Utopia* is a “serious work of political philosophy,” although it ends with the statement that More’s masterpiece is a “serious work of political theory” (ix and 255; cf. 100, 131).

⁷ The question of philosophy’s role in the inauguration of Modernity is treated at greater length and

I. CONSCIENCE

It is in the awareness of raising eyebrows but with a view to gaining a better understanding of the difference between *Utopia's* two main protagonists that we begin our inquiry into the reasoning underlying their common appearance by turning our attention to the title, subtitles, and external structure of the work which is characterized as a *libellus* (1, 38.3), and which can therefore be read either as a “petition,” or merely as a “little book”—a choice, we notice in passing, which is as little devoid of consequences as the relationship between Hythlodæus and More is essential for the understanding of a work not only containing speeches of two protagonists, but also consisting of two books.⁸ The work as a whole is “on the Best State of a Commonwealth *and* the new island of Utopia” (1), although in the preface to the first edition (Louvain, 1516) we read that *Utopia* has “the best state of a commonwealth” as its theme, and the first sentence of the Letter to Giles tells us that the little book is “on the commonwealth of Utopia” (38.4). As appears from its title, Book One is the “first book of the speech [*sermonis*] held by Raphaël Hythlodæus on the best state of a commonwealth, as given by Thomas More” (46.1–7). The book itself, however, only gives the first half of this speech (56.18–84.20–21),⁹ which in its turn is delivered in the form of (e.g., 84.19), and is surrounded by (cf. 40.16, 50.21), a conversation (*sermo*); a conversation, moreover, which primarily seems to have a preparatory function to the extent that the best state of a commonwealth is to be equated with the island of Utopia (54.5–8; cf. 100.7). At the end of Book Two, which gives Raphaël’s actual “description” of Utopia (236.31) before it ends with concluding critical remarks made by More, we learn that we have just finished reading the second book of the “afternoon speech of Raphaël Hythlodæus on the laws and institutions of the island of Utopia, as given by Thomas More” (246.4–5). At the beginning of the book whose announced subject matter is the “image” of the best state of a commonwealth (106.13), on the other hand, we are told that we are about to read the “second book of the speech held

in greater depth in *On the Unity of Knowledge: The Political Philosophy of Francis Bacon*, a book that I hope to publish in the near future. The connection between *Utopia* and *New Atlantis* will be referred to at the end of the fourth and final part of the present essay.

⁸ Although I am aware of the scholarly convention of distinguishing between “More” the author on the one hand, and “Morus” the protagonist on the other, I do not comply with it, not only because I believe that the—partly fictionalized—autobiographical beginning of the book primarily serves the purpose of identifying the two, but also because—as I will attempt to prove below—I take all apparent differences between “More” and “Morus” to be ultimately nothing more than *apparent* differences.

⁹ In the editions of 1516 (Louvain) and 1517 (Paris) the title of Book One reads: “The speech of Raphaël Hythlodæus on the best state of a commonwealth, as given by Thomas More.”

by Raphaël Hythlodæus on the best state of a commonwealth, as given by Thomas More” (110.1–6).¹⁰ Since we do not believe paradoxes visible to the many to be insoluble to the few, or labyrinths anticipated by all to be impassable by some, we believe we are invited to draw the provisional conclusion that *Utopia* as a whole somehow reflects Thomas More’s thoughts on the best state of a commonwealth, the island of Utopia, and their mutual relationship, and that the person of Raphaël Hythlodæus as well as his speeches on the best state of a commonwealth and the island of Utopia, taken in conjunction, read in context, and interpreted through the medium of the speech of their author (38.12), are instrumental to disclosing these thoughts.¹¹

This conclusion is a commonplace only to the extent that it is narrowed down to the assumption that neither the opinions of Hythlodæus nor the political order of Utopia can without further thought be taken to represent More’s political views; an assumption which defies fashionable recourse to a mind split in two—as it is not once but twice that More explicitly objects to Hythlodæus’s statements—and which must have led the authoritative nineteenth-century editor of *Utopia* to observe that it “would be preposterous to maintain” that all views presented in *Utopia* are “all alike seriously propounded, as held by [More] himself.”¹² This is not the place to discuss how, on the contrary assumption, we are to harmonize the fact that in his polemical works More maintained that the “burnynge of heretykes” is sometimes “lawfull / necessary / and well-done,”¹³ with the fact that in Utopia those who “speak publicly of the cult of Christ” with “more zeal than prudence” are tried, convicted, and sentenced to exile on political grounds

¹⁰ In the editions of 1516 and 1517 the title of Book Two reads: “The speech of Raphaël Hythlodæus on the best state of a commonwealth, as given by Thomas More. Second Book.”

¹¹ The paradoxes conveyed by *Utopia*’s title, subtitles, and external structure eluded the attention of one of the very few scholars to combine a close reading of *Utopia* with a keen eye for some of its paradoxes, an omission which may not be wholly unrelated to this scholar’s observations being “framed by a literary” rather than a philosophical “perspective”: Elizabeth McCutcheon, *My Dear Peter: The “Ars Poetica” and Hermeneutics for More’s “Utopia”* (Angers: Moreanum, 1983), 5.

¹² Joseph Hirst Lupton, editor’s introduction to *The Utopia of Sir Thomas More* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1895), xli. According to another nineteenth-century scholar *Utopia* “intimates a variety of doctrines, and exhibits a multiplicity of projects, which the writer regards with almost every possible degree of approbation and shade of assent; from the frontiers of serious and entire belief, through gradations of descending plausibility, where the lowest are scarcely more than the exercises of ingenuity, and to which some wild paradoxes are appended, either as a vehicle, or as an easy means (if necessary) of disavowing the serious intention of the whole of this Platonic fiction” (James Mackintosh, *The Miscellaneous Works of the Right Honourable Sir James Mackintosh* [London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1854], 1:425–26).

¹³ Thomas More, *Dialogue concerning Heresies*, IV.13, in *CW*, 6:405.

(218.20–29),¹⁴ or why it is that in Utopia those who outlive their deaths are encouraged to voluntarily end their lives (186.9), whereas in his devotional works More argued that he who is “moved to kyll himselfe” is moved by the “devilles perswasion.”¹⁵ We therefore turn our attention to the very first page of *Utopia* itself in order to prove the derivative character of both assumptions. For it is in this place that we find More saying that although “in this work” he was relieved of the “labor of inventing,” and had to give “no thought at all” to the arrangement of the matter, since he only had to “repeat” what he had “heard Raphaël relate” (38.6–8), he did not send the piece to Peter Giles until after almost a year, although Giles had expected it within six weeks (38.4–5). He explains his tardiness by referring to his public and private duties (38.22–40.9), but before doing so he goes out of his way to say what he would have had to do if things had been different. Thinking out (*excogitatio*) or arranging the matter might have demanded “no little time and application even from a talent neither the meanest nor wholly ignorant.” Moreover, if it had been required that the matter be written down “not only truthfully but also eloquently,” More could not have performed the task “without any amount of time and application” (38.16–20). Mindful and appreciative of the Morean wit of which the explanation following is indicative (e.g., 38.28–40.3), and of which Erasmus said that it was “wont to differ considerably from the vulgar,”¹⁶ we take the previous remarks to be More’s indirect way of saying that it was because he had to think out, arrange, and eloquently write down

¹⁴ We confine ourselves to referring the reader to a remark from another polemical work, a remark which may explain why More considered private conscience to present a political problem (More, *The Confutacyon of Tyndales Answer*, Part One, in *CW*, 8:31): “Nowe when [the heretics] falsely tell [the people] that they be not bounden to obaye theyre gouernours lawfull commaundementes / and thenne holyly counseyle them to obay theyr vnlawfull tyranny (for by that name call they the lawys) what effecte wene y^e they wolde that theyr aduyce sholde haue? They knowe theym selfe well ynough and the maner of the people to / and be not so madde I warraunte yowe but that they perceyue full well, that yf they can perswade the people to belyue y^t they be not in theyr conscyence bounden to obay y^e laws and preceptys of theyr gouernours / theym selfe be no such precyouse apostles, that folke wolde forbere theyre awne ease or pleasure, for the faynt fayned counseyle of a few false apostatas. And thus ys y^t sure, that by theyre false doctrine they must yf they be belyued, brynge ye people in to the secrete contempte, and spyrytuall dysobedyence, & inwarde hatred of the lawe / wherof muste after folowe the outwarde brech, and theruppon outwarde ponyshement & parell of rebellyon / wherby the pryncys sholde be dreuen to sore effusyon of theyr subiectes blood.”

¹⁵ More, *Dialogue of Comfort*, II.16, in *CW*, 12:129. But cf. More’s letter to Dr. Nicholas Wilson, which forces us to ask ourselves what it was that moved More to allow himself to be killed: “As touching the oath [of supremacy of the Crown in the relationship between the kingdom and the church in England], the causes for which I refused it, no man wotteth what they be for they be secret in mine own conscience, some other peradventure, than those that other men would ween, and such as I never disclosed unto any man yet nor never intend to do while I live” (*Selected Letters*, 232).

¹⁶ ΜΩΡΙΑΣ ΕΡΚΩΜΙΟΝ: *Stultitiae Laudatio, Praefatio*, in *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami Colloquia Familiaria et Encomium Moriae* (Leipzig, 1829), 2:294.

the matter of his little book that he did not deliver what his addressee, political man of “prudent simplicity” (48.10; cf. 48.2–5), had expected.¹⁷

But before turning to the matter’s fictional form, a few words about what one might call the matter of the fictional form. According to its subtitle, *Utopia* is a work “no less salutary than cheerful” (1). The Letter to Giles adds that the work may be either “useful” or “pleasant” (42.31).¹⁸ But although it may be true—as our discussion of Utopian virtue and pleasure will show—that eloquence can also consist in making cheerful or pleasant what is salutary or useful (cf. 192.13), Morean rhetoric’s not being coextensive with making sour apples taste sweet already appears from the fact that whereas *Utopia* is described as a “truly golden little book,” in the course of the little book itself we learn that gold is not only useless but also shameful (148.12–150.26). More’s second letter to Peter Giles, which was suffixed only to the 1517 edition of *Utopia*, an edition which Erasmus tells us was printed “full of mistakes,”¹⁹ may shed some light on this dark issue. For it is in this letter that More points out that if he had determined to write “about the commonwealth,” and a fable like that of *Utopia* had come to his mind, he “might not have shrunk from a fiction through which the truth, as if smeared with honey, would slide into men’s minds a little more sweetly.” He adds that in that case he would “certainly have tempered the fiction a little,” so that, if he had wanted to “abuse the ignorance of the vulgar,” he would have “prefixed some hints in order at least for the more learned to easily search out [his] purpose” (250.5–11). By way of illustration More gives the examples of the Greek neologisms by means of which he indicated in *Utopia* that the eponymous island does not exist (250.11–18). These examples place beyond doubt that all the while More had indeed been talking about himself as they confirm that figuring out their etymology is indeed the prerogative of the more learned. But that the examples given indeed only hint at More’s purpose, that, in other words, the sour fact that *Utopia* is a non-place is still too sweet to be abusive of the ignorance of the vulgar, is put past dispute not until one thinks through the blunt fact that even without the help of Morean neologisms the

¹⁷ This conclusion is confirmed, in different ways, by the ancillary materials: for example, William Budé to Thomas Lupset (12.16–21); Peter Giles to Jerome Busleyden (20.19–23, 22.5–14); Jerome Busleyden to Thomas More (32.18–21, 34.6–7, 14–15, 23–24); Beatus Rhenanus to William Pirckheimer (252.20–32); Poem by Gerhard Geldenhauer (30.7–8).

¹⁸ Cf. William Budé to Thomas Lupset (4.5); John Desmarais to Peter Giles (28.7–9); Poem by Gerhard Geldenhauer (30.3–6).

¹⁹ Erasmus to More, March 5, 1518, in *Erasmi Epistolae*, ed. P. S. Allen et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906–1955), 3:239.

vulgar knew that Utopia is a place that exists only in speech or in the imagination. Thus concluding that the publication of More's second letter to Giles may have been a mistake, we turn once more to the undersheriff of London's first letter to Antwerp's notable resident, where we read that just as More shall take the "utmost care that there is nothing false [or deceitful: *falsi*] in the book, so if anything should be ambiguous," he shall "rather tell a falsehood [*mendacium*] than lie [*mentiar*]," for he would "rather be good than prudent" (40.27–29). Strangely enough though, throughout Book One the notion of prudence is given a positive connotation by More (e.g., 48.10, 54.8, 84.31), and the only person who is described as a "good man" is Raphaël Hythlodæus (86.10; cf. 156.24, 224.8). A few lines further down More asks Giles to get in touch with Hythlodæus in order to make sure that his work "neither contains anything false [or deceitful: *falsi*] nor omits anything true" (42.15–17). But the man who is referred to by his last name only in the preface, only in indirect speech, and only in the context of a discussion of matters of truth and falsehood (40.19, 42.15, 44.22), is knowing (δαίος) in nonsense (ῥθλος). The vital clue to the solution of the aforementioned paradoxes is given by the marginal gloss which induces us to "note the *theological* difference between lying and telling falsehoods" (40.24–27),²⁰ a difference which is founded on a difference in intention, which can be restated as the difference between intentional and unintentional falsehoods, and which enables us to reconcile the fact that Hythlodæus says that it is "certainly not for [him]" to "tell falsehoods [*falsa*]" (100.6–7) with his actually telling falsehoods. For he who is telling unintentional falsehoods is not aware that he is telling falsehoods. And everything Hythlodæus will tell is true, if only in his imagination (cf. 106.13), and if only by virtue of hope, and in an anticipatory sense. The decisive importance of a good conscience for the man who throughout the books containing his speeches is referred to by his first name, which means "healing god" (רפאל) (48.31),²¹ is further underscored not only by his approving reference to Christ's "forb[jidding] us to dissemble" his doctrines "to the extent that what he had whispered in the ears of his disciples he commanded to be preached openly from the housetops" (100.19–22), but also by the fact

²⁰ Giles's remark (letter to Busleyden, 22.20–1) that he "appended some brief annotations in the margins" has almost unanimously been taken to imply that the glosses go back either to him or to Erasmus. But even if this were true, which we doubt to be the case, they would still contain More's signature of approval, as they are to be found in all the editions the English philosopher oversaw, although some were added, whereas others were removed; cf. 48.2–3, 82.32–33, 96.31–32, 206.9.

²¹ On the theological history of the name Raphaël, see Elizabeth McCutcheon, "Thomas More, Raphael Hythlodæus, and the Archangel Gabriel," *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 9, no. 1 (1969): 21–38.

that he was one of the “24 Christian men” Amerigo Vespucci had left behind on his fourth voyage (1503–1504),²² as More obliquely suggests (50.4–9; see 72.17, and cf. 72.7 with 74.2). But although telling lies may be abhorred by the Christian sailor who added that “telling lies [*falsa*] may be the part of the philosopher” (100.6–7) to his remark that telling falsehoods was certainly not for him, the man whom we are now in a position to describe as the only philosopher in *Utopia* does not shrink from lying in order to make his fiction slide into the vulgar’s mouths like truth smeared with honey. This was already suggested by his ambiguous remarks on telling falsehoods and lying, and it will be confirmed by his commending “oblique guidance” (98.30).²³ For it will turn out to be by means of Raphaël’s falsehoods, whose underlying lies are sweet inasmuch as they suggest that the truth is identical to its fictional presentation (cf. 40.13 with 50.30, and 52.2–4 with 108.2), that he who was “less guided by the judgment of the vulgar” than anyone else, yet than whom no one else was “closer to common sense,”²⁴ tells the sour truth; an observation whose truth in its turn is illustrated by our author’s own remark that the closer his speech (*oratio*) would be to Raphaël’s “negligent simplicity,” the “closer [*propior*] it would be to the truth,” which is the “sole thing” for which the philosopher “should” care and “intends” to care in his book (38.12–14).²⁵ More’s first serious lie thus revolves around the common appearance of his protagonists. But what its implications are, and whether it is his last or most radical lie, remains to be seen.

²² Amerigo Vespucci, *Lettera delle Isole Nuouamente Trouate* (Florence, 1505–6), 32. Although it is highly doubtful whether the fourth voyage actually took place, this question has no bearing on our interpretation of *Utopia*, since the material that sheds doubt on the authenticity of Vespucci’s account was rediscovered and published only in the eighteenth century; cf. Luciano Formisano, editor’s introduction to *Letters from a New World: Amerigo Vespucci’s Discovery of America*, trans. D. Jacobson (New York: Marsilio, 1992), xix.

²³ In a way our suggestion is also confirmed by the following remark from *The Last Things* (CW, 1:136–37): “Whansoeuer ye communication is nought and vngodly, it is better to holde thy tong & thinke on some better thing the while, than to geue eare therto & vnder pinne the tale. And yet better were it then holdyng of thy tong, properly to speake, & with som good grace and pleasant fashion, to break into some better matter: by which thy speache and talking, thou shalt not onely profite thy selfe as thou sholdest haue done by thy well minded silence, but also amende the whole audience, which is a thyng farre better and of much more merite.”

²⁴ Erasmus to Ulrich Hutten, July 23, 1519, in *Erasmi Epistolae*, 4:16.

²⁵ More’s concern to blur the difference between lying and telling falsehoods is illustrated by his substitution of *Amaurotico* (146.25) for *Mentirano*, which was the name of the capital of Utopia in the first edition of the work. It is of the utmost importance, however, to distinguish the often observed Morean irony (of which having one’s protagonist tell falsehoods is only a part) from More’s telling of lies, although the former can be in the service of masking the latter. After all, one can “saye full soth in game” (*The Apologye of syr Thomas More knight*, in CW, 9:170).

II. ATHENS, JERUSALEM, AND ROME

Having concluded that we are not yet in a position to assess the implications of More's first philosophical lie, we find that the analogy between the man who was to become the "noble, newe, christen Socrates"²⁶ and the philosopher who made noble lies famous is introduced on the second page of Book One of the work in which the author mentioned most frequently is Plato.²⁷ For as the Platonic dialogue on justice began after Socrates had come back from the Piraeus to observe a festival performed for a foreign goddess, and was compelled by Polemarchus to accompany him to his home (*Rep.* 327a), its Morean counterpart commences when, after having attended divine service in Notre Dame, More happened to see Peter Giles in conversation with a stranger (48.15–21). More's having performed his old religion's duties at the beginning of a work on a new kind of commonwealth, on the other hand, taken in conjunction with the fact that his conversation with Hythlodæus on philosophy's political action will take place before dinner but on a voluntary basis, subtly allude to the nominal truth of one scholar's claim that More "stood on the margins of Modernity,"²⁸ a movement whose precursors prepared the ground for philosophy's politicization in speech before its inaugurators turned political in deed. But irrespective of this allusion and its bearings on the question as to the nature of "modern" philosophy, the dialogue of Book One of *Utopia* will turn out to be as necessary with a view to justifying the founding of an island in the imagination as the dialogue of Book One of the *Republic* was needed for the founding of a city in speech, if only because, contrary to the city that was founded in dialogue, the island of Utopia will be founded in monologue. We are put on the track of this observation by the remark of Erasmus that after Book Two had already been written, Book One was added "by reason of occasion,"²⁹ although we do not find it confirmed until More himself remarks that the "purpose of the work" is *not* the description of "right and prudent provisions" which Hythlodæus observed among "nations living together in a civilized way." Rather, the work's "intention" is to relate what the man knowing in nonsense told about the "manners and institutions of the Utopians," after having "given the conversation that as it were drew him into [*tractu*] what led to [*deventum*] his

²⁶ Nicholas Harpsfield, *The life and Death of Sr Thomas Moore, knight, sometymes Lord high Chancellor of England*, ed. Elsie Vaughan Hitchcock (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), 199.

²⁷ No fewer than six times in Book One (48.31, 86.10, 86.16, 100.9, 102.14, 104.4), the book in which More speaks eleven times.

²⁸ J. H. Hexter, "Thomas More: On the Margins of Modernity," *Journal of British Studies* 1 (1961): 29.

²⁹ Letter to Hutten, 21.

mentioning that commonwealth” (52.24–54.8).³⁰ It is therefore this conversation that is to provide us with an answer to the question why the speech into which More will draw his interlocutor, and which will lead to the latter’s speech on the island of Utopia, is “for the sake of” the “healing god who is knowing in nonsense,” “if you knew him” (48.25; cf. 108.23).

But what do we know about the man whose name is a compound of Greek and Hebrew words? We learn relatively soon that his “negligent simplicity” has something to do with his being “not so well-versed in Latin as in Greek” (38.11–12). For the reason why Raphaël had studied Greek more than Latin was that he “wholly devoted himself to philosophy,” and “in that subject he found nothing of value in Latin, *except* certain works of Seneca and Cicero” (50.1). Strangely enough though, in Book Two we find not only that the Portuguese traveler had not brought with him any books of Cicero and Seneca, although he did bring “most works” of Plato (180.27–28), but also that “apart from poetry and history” there was “*nothing* in Latin which seemed likely to gain great approval” from the people who had heard about the “literature and learning of the Greeks” from none other than Raphaël himself (180.2–5). We begin to suspect that one of the main reasons why More falsely made his protagonist appear as a philosopher while himself abstaining from making a philosopher’s appearance is that by the example of what one may tentatively call Raphaël Hythlodæus’s “Hebrew Greekness” (cf. 48.31–32) the man who was to broaden the margins of Modernity wanted to suggest that philosophy having been theologized is in need of a certain kind of “Romanization” found in or exemplified by Cicero and Seneca. Briefly looking ahead to our suspicion’s confirmation by the introduction of the distinction between “scholastic philosophy” and a philosophy “more civil” (98.9–12), we turn to its preparation by the question put to Raphaël by Peter Giles. Being capable not only of “entertaining a king with your learning and experience of men and places, but also of instructing him by your examples and assisting him with your counsel,” why, so the political man asked the philosophic devotee, do you not “attach yourself to some king” (54.13–19)?

³⁰ This cumbersome sentence, read in the context of a certain interpretation of Erasmus’s remark on the coming into being of the work as a whole, and taken in conjunction with the fact that in what follows More seems to make Hythlodæus act contrary to his stated intention by having his protagonist give the “nonutopian” examples of the Polylerites (74.19–78.31), the Achorians (88.24), and the Macarians (96.12–31), culminated in the almost universally accepted genealogical thesis of Hexter (*More’s Utopia*, 11–30, and *CW*, 4:xviii–xxiii): the thesis according to which More “opened a seam” in the first version of *Utopia*; a thesis which we will discuss only indirectly, but which we cannot accept, if only because the Polylerites “pertain to much nonsense” (πολύς λήρος ἴτης), the Achorians, who are “without a place” (ἄχωρος), “live on the south-southeast of the island of Utopia” (88.25–26), and the Macarians, a people “not very far distant from Utopia” (96.12–13), are “blessed” (Μάκαρ).

Giles emphasized that Raphaël would thus be able to “profit others both in their private and in their public capacity,” but also to render his own “condition more happy” (54.30–32), an addition in response to which the stranger not only exposed to view his “Greek” lack of awareness of the conditions and the precariousness of a philosophic devotee’s happiness, but also gave a first sign of what would turn out to be his “Hebrew” spirit of moral pride. For he asked whether he should make his condition more happy by doing something his “spirit [animus] abhors.” As it is now, he “live[s] as [he] please[s]” (54.32–56.1). Having had his political friend awaken Raphaël’s pride, More himself stirs it up by pursuing the first of two lines of argument contained in Book One of *Utopia*, and giving what one might call the first part of a two-fold “Roman” admonition.³¹ He says that Raphaël will do what is “worthy of [him] and [his] generous and truly philosophic spirit” if he so orders his life as to apply his “talent and industry to public affairs, even if it involves some personal inconveniences,” adding that the way to do this with “great profit” would be to “become part of a council of some great prince,” persuading the latter—as More is “certain” his interlocutor would—to “straightforward and honorable” actions (56.8–14).³² It is by means of this, his very first intervention in the work on the best state of a commonwealth, that More drew his protagonist into the speech that would lead to the latter’s description of the island of Utopia.

But remaining, for now, within the boundaries of the first line of argument, at the end of Raphaël’s speech we find More taking up and elaborating on the first part of his Roman admonition by saying that if the proud sailor “cannot bring [his] spirit not to shun the courts of kings,” he could do the “greatest good to the public weal by [his] counsel,” which is the “most important part” of his “duty” as a “good man” (86.7–20).³³ Obliquely indicating that the private and the common good coincide in the case of a man to whom the good consists in his being recognized as such, the English philosopher goes on to paraphrase Raphaël’s (*tuus*) Plato, suggesting that the Greek philosopher confined himself to saying that “commonwealths will finally be happy only if either philosophers rule or kings turn to philosophy” (86.10–13; cf. *Rep.* 473d). “How distant a thing will happiness be,” More concludes, “if philosophers will not deign even to impart their counsels on

³¹ This admonition immediately follows on More’s interlocutor himself having paraphrased Cicero (*De officiis* 1.20.69–70).

³² Cf. Cicero, *De officiis* 1.7.22, 1.21.74–78, 1.26.92.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1.6.19, 1.9.28, 1.41.149, 1.43.153.

kings?” (86.14–16). Putting aside, for the rest of Book One, the first of the two possibilities suggested by his Plato, Raphaël responded by saying that “without doubt” Plato “rightly foresaw that if kings themselves did not turn to philosophy, they would never approve of the counsel of philosophers, having from their youth onwards been thoroughly saturated and infected with perverted opinions.” By way of illustration he refers to Plato’s experience with Dionysius the Younger of Syracuse (86.16–20), an experience which suffered the historical fate of becoming paradigmatic of philosophy’s desire and failure to rule. Strangely enough though, it was Raphaël’s own journeying that was compared to that of Plato earlier in the book (48.30–31), and it was Raphaël of whom it was said that he was “more anxious about travel than about the grave” (50.10), a remark which we read in conjunction with the Christian sailor’s own “constant” references to “heaven” and the “highest beings” (*superos*) (50.11–12) before restating that Raphaël in fact traveled for the sake of transcending the grave.³⁴ Apart from intimating that in light of its theologization philosophy’s need for a Romanization primarily consists in its need for a public-spirited and self-forgetful appearance³⁵—an appearance which was to be exemplified by that Italian contemporary of More’s who appeared to go back to the Roman sources—these cross references thus seem to confirm what the implications of the description of Raphaël as a “good man” had already led us to suspect: that the proud voyager indeed desires to rule. But the latter’s own conclusion that there is “no room for philosophy with rulers” (98.8–9), and that Plato makes it clear that the “wise are right in abstaining from entering the commonwealth” (102.14–15), points to a rule whose principal domain is the imagination (cf. 150.6–9).

It is around this point in the dialogue that More shifts perspectives by opposing to the “scholastic philosophy” of Raphaël, which thinks that “everything is suitable for every place,” a philosophy “more civil,” which “knows its stage, adapts itself to the fable in hand, and performs its part elegantly and gracefully” (98.10–15). For, as he goes on to argue, “if you

³⁴ Raphaël substitutes *superos* for *inferos*, the word used in the original version of the proverb which was “constantly on his lips” (Cicero, *Disputationes Tusculanae* 1.43.104).

³⁵ That More indeed considered Cicero and Seneca ultimately derivative appears also from the Letter to the University of Oxford (1518), in which the English philosopher says that “apart, at the most [*duntaxat*], from the works left by Cicero and Seneca, in philosophy the schools of the Latins have nothing which is not either Greek or translated from Greek” (CW, 15:142). This judgment, in conjunction with the fact that More counsels a “Romanization” of philosophy primarily in light of philosophy’s theologization, causes the “Romanization” spoken of in this essay to differ considerably from the one discussed most authoritatively by Skinner, “Thomas More’s Utopia and the Virtue of True Nobility,” in *Visions of Politics*, vol. 2, *Renaissance Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 213–44.

cannot pluck up depraved opinions by the root, if you cannot remedy long-standing vices according to your mind's [or spirit's: *animi*]³⁶ determination, you must not on that account desert the commonwealth." However, "you must not impose a strange and extravagant speech [*sermo*] which you know will carry no weight with those of an opposite persuasion, but by oblique guidance seek and strive to the best of your ability to treat matters conveniently. What you cannot turn to good you must at least make as little bad as you can. For it is impossible to make all things good unless all men are good" (98.24–100.3). This counsel has almost universally been taken as proof of More's decision in favor of the *vita activa* over the *vita contemplativa*, of the life of *negotium* over the life of *otium*, and of his devotion to what historians of political theory have come to understand as "civic humanism"; an impression which is supported by no less a person than the philosopher who in the immediate aftermath of the publication of *Utopia* began his serious political career,³⁷ who dedicated his "Romanized" work to a political man, who ordered Erasmus to take care that his book be "embellished with extraordinary and splendid praise...not only from the learned, but also from distinguished statesmen,"³⁸ and who ended the counsel quoted above with an implicit call to political action (100.3). But we can refrain from having recourse to the consideration that in the case of a prudent man the good may very well coincide with looking after his own conveniences (cf. 40.27–29 with 164.24) when trying to make plausible the possibility that More's oblique guidance ultimately had a suprapolitical aim. For we find our author commending political guidance in the very context of criticizing the man who by means of his speech will attempt to exercise political guidance (100.7–9), and who explicitly rejects More's commendation of oblique guidance (100.3–6) in favor of the "straightforward and honorable" actions to which his interlocutor was "certain" he would persuade before himself seeming to persuade to actions roundabout and deceitful.³⁹ The plausibility of More's oblique

³⁶ Whereas in the case of More the ambiguous Latin word *animus* seems to have a predominantly rational connotation, Raphaël's *animus* is primarily spiritual, as is hinted at by his equation of *spiritus* and *animus* in the Utopians (210.13, 16).

³⁷ According to Erasmus (letter to Hutten, 20), "no man ever as vehemently entreated to be admitted to court as [More] was eager to avoid it."

³⁸ More to Erasmus, September 20, 1516, in *Erasmi Epistolae*, 2:346.

³⁹ Cf. in this context More's addition to his translation (ca. 1510) of Pico della Mirandola's *Letter to Andrea Corneo* (CW, 1:86, 350): "I am content ye study / but I wolde haue you outwardly occupied also. [And I desire you not so to embrace Martha that ye shulde vtterly forsake Mari.] Loue them & vse them both aswell study as worldly occupation," with William Roper's remark that More compared the "devil and his temptations" to an ape. "For, like as an ape, not well looked unto, will be busy and bold to do shrewd turns and contrariwise, being spied, will suddenly leap backward and adventure no

guidance consisting first and foremost in adapting to the fable of Raphaël for purposes of his own convenience is further sustained by the fact that in his letters prior to the publication of the first edition of *Utopia* More consistently referred to his work as “Nowhere” (*Nusquama*),⁴⁰ by the fact that at the end of the work we find the ironic remark that there are “very many features” in the Utopian commonwealth which our philosopher would “rather wish than hope for” (246.1–2), and by the fact that More ends his Latin poem entitled “What is the Best State of a Commonwealth” with a question.⁴¹ This question will receive an answer by means of a Christian “Socratic’s” monologue on an island located in the imagination, a procedure which allows More to obliquely suggest that the way of Plato is in need of a Morean correction.⁴² But although its implications may be Roman, the answer itself will turn out to be as Greek as the question that underlies it.

III. JUSTICE

Now that we have identified More’s second lie as confusing actual with apparent Platonists, we should take a closer look at the second line of argument of the first book, the line of argument which commences with the speech that led Raphaël into giving a description of Utopia. For it is in the speech that occupies the central part of the first book that Raphaël’s spirit of “philosophic” pride is traced back to his desire for political justice (70.7–8), which will prove to underlie his image of the best commonwealth.⁴³ Immediately after having been made to suggest that the reason why he abstains from directly involving himself with politics is that he can thus live his life “pure of injustice and unholy deeds” (cf. 102.14–20 with *Rep.* 496d), Raphaël picks up the thread of the argument of his speech on justice in order to prepare for the satisfaction of his pride in Utopia. To “tell what truly moves my spirit,” he says, “wherever possessions are private,” it is “scarcely possible for a commonwealth to be just *or* prosperous” (102.20–23). When in his “spirit” he ponders the “most prudent *and* holy institutions of the Utopians, among

farther, so the devil finding a man idle, slothful, and without resistance ready to receive his temptations, waxeth so hardy that he will not fail still to continue with him until to his purpose he have thoroughly brought him” (Roper, *The Life of Sir Thomas More*, 211–12).

⁴⁰ Cf. for example letters to Erasmus from September 20, October 31, and December 4, 1516, in *Erasmii Epistolae*, 2:346, 372, 414.

⁴¹ *CW*, 3:229–30.

⁴² Cf. Alfarabi, *The Philosophy of Plato*, sec. X.36.

⁴³ Book One can be divided into the following five parts: (1) Introduction (46.8–54.8); (2) Counsel I (54.8–56.18); (3) Justice (56.18–84.20); (4) Counsel II (84.20–102.20); (5) Transition to Book Two (102.20–109.31).

whom, with very few laws, affairs are ordered so conveniently that virtue is its own reward, yet everything is shared equally, and everyone has plenty," he becomes "more partial to Plato, and less surprised at [the latter's] refusal to make laws for those who reject laws which give to all an equal share in *all* things." This "most prudent man easily foresaw that the one and only path to public welfare lies in an equality of things being determined" (102.27–104.6). The impression is beginning to force itself upon us that what one might call the "economic" layer is not the only layer of Raphaël's argument, a burden which becomes heavier when we read in the next sentence that Raphaël does "not know" whether equality can be preserved where the "individual's possessions are his private property" (104.7–11). But although this aporetic sentence subtly prepares us for the situation in which it is precisely the individual's most private possession that commands public equality, what the more fundamental layer of Raphaël's argument consists in does not become clear until we read his general conclusion a few lines further down. For it is there that the man whose author's masterpiece was received as a product of the "social grievances and incipient economic tendencies of the early modern era"⁴⁴ states that he is "fully persuaded" that "no equal and just distribution of goods can be made *and* no happiness can be found in human affairs, unless private property is utterly abolished. As long as it lasts, there will always be a distressing and inescapable burden of poverty *and* miseries on the greatest *and* the best part of mankind" (104.15–20). It is thus on the presupposition of his having divided humanity into two groups, its greatest and its best part, that Raphaël's discussion of justice is made to take place on two layers (cf. 56.18–19 and 56.21 with 56.26), an economic and a "spiritual" layer; an observation which causes us to add yet another indirection to the round-about route that will lead us to the center of *Utopia*, but which first of all presents us with the question why Raphaël fuses the greatest part of mankind with the part to which he himself believes he belongs. This has everything to do with his pride.

We have already encountered Raphaël's spiritedness or thymos (θυμός; cf. 180.22–23), that part of his soul which was awakened by his need for justice, which caused his desire for recognition, and which made him willing to serve in order to rule (cf. *Rep.* 375b, 545b). What we have not yet considered, however, is that with the coming of Christianity thymos became identical to self-assertion or pride, which implies not only that we are to distinguish between spiritedness as inherently natural, self-assertion

⁴⁴ Karl Kautsky, *Thomas More und seine Utopie* (Stuttgart, 1888), 335.

as potentially philosophical, and pride as actually moral, but also that the Christian sailor experiences his own spiritedness as a sin.⁴⁵ Nor have we yet had reason to observe that in the Platonic scheme spiritedness is needed for the rule of philosophy (*Rep.* 439d), whereas it is precisely Raphaël's claim to "philosophic" rule which is not recognized by others (84.24–30). Since a proud man who hates pride would rather rule over pride than not rule at all, the only way for Raphaël to satisfy his pride thus seems to be to rule by means of his own suppressed pride, especially since Christians tend to pride themselves on not being proud, and distinction is the foundation of rule. That Raphaël indeed rules over pride is made explicit at the end of his account of the Utopian regime (242.23–26). And that the proud traveler impedes the way to philosophy is intimated by the fact that his "partiality" to Plato consists in a universalization of communism, whereas Plato's remark that it is a "community of pleasure and pain" which binds the community together (*Rep.* 462b; cf. *Laws* 739c–e) was confined to the class of the guardians. But that the healing god suppresses self-assertion by means of conscience does not become apparent until we realize that he is unaware of the reason underlying his fusion of the best and the greatest part of mankind. After all, as a Christian he believes pride to be the "very hed and rote of al sinnes," the "mischieuos mother of al maner vice," and therefore also of sins like greed and avarice (cf. 138.4–9). A different question, however, albeit a question which prepares us for the problem of morality's sanction, is whether it is because he is too proud to be honest or because he is not proud enough to become philosophical that the Greek Hebrew does not seem to believe "spiritual pride" to be "so much y^e more pestilent, in yⁱ it carieth wⁱ it a blindness almost incurable."⁴⁶

But we should leave the discussion of revealed religion for the place to which it belongs, and go on to observe that the unification of moral and political rule in the person of Raphaël Hythlodæus is illustrated by the latter's presentation of the regime of Utopia, a presentation in the context of which we learn that a ruler is appointed out of four candidates named by the people (122.15–17). He is chosen from the class of the learned, who in their turn owe their "perpetual freedom from discipline" to the people having been persuaded by the priests (130.31–34). The priests themselves are

⁴⁵ Cf. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 14.13.

⁴⁶ To his remark that spiritual pride "carieth wⁱ it a blindness almost incurable saue gods gret mercye," More adds that "against this...braunch of pride, of such as repute themself for holy wⁱ the disdain of other, & an inward liking of al their spiritual vices, which they commend vnto themself, vnder y^e cloke & shadow of some kind of virtue, moste hard it is to take remedy by the remembrance of deth, foras-much as they reckon themself therby redy to go strayt to heuen" (*The Last Things*, in *CW*, 1:153–55).

chosen by the people, out of the class of the learned (132.5–6). A Pontiff (*Pontificis*) is appointed as superintendent over the others (226.24.25). When we observe the unity of learning, belief, and popular dependence in the rulers of Utopia; when we consider that only four of the six left-behinds of Vespucci's fourth voyage remained when a priest was needed (cf. 218.10–13 with 50.32),⁴⁷ that More mentions a "pious man and theologian by profession" who wanted to be sent to Utopia by the Pope (*Pontifice*) in order to be appointed Bishop of the Utopians (42.5–13), that Raphaël is said to have re-migrated to Utopia after having been "moved by his desire for that country" (24.2–3), and that he would "never have wished to leave [it] except to make known that new world" (106.15; cf. 50.16); when we discern that whereas the ruler of Utopia is distinguished not by a "robe or a diadem," but by the "carrying of a handful of grain" (194.4–5), More elsewhere wittily imagines himself as the ruler of the Utopians, "crowned with a diadem of grain, striking in his Franciscan cloak," and "carrying a handful of wheat as [his] reverend scepter";⁴⁸ when we notice how "well-disposed" the Utopians were towards joining the Christian religion (218.2); and when we remark that although in their more recent language the ruler of the Utopians is called Ademos ("people-less"; α-δῆμος) (132.7–9), in their ancient tongue—the tongue which the man with a Hebrew and Greek name himself consistently employs (cf. 122.10 with 11, and 12–13 with 21; cf. 24.6)—he is named "Barzanes," meaning "son (בר) of God (Zάvoς)"; when we observe, consider, discern, notice, and remark all these points, we conclude what we had already been led to suspect: that ruler and Pontiff are one and the same person: Raphaël Hythlodæus (cf. 140.14).⁴⁹

Having thus been enabled to draw the more general as well as more specific conclusion that in the country with "very few laws," in which "virtue is its own reward," but in which "honors are offered to invite to virtue" (102.28–29, 192.25, 194.6), political rule ultimately resides with the magistrates to whom most honor is given (228.19–20; cf. 142.24–26), we postpone

⁴⁷ Our attention to the cross-referential significance of the number four is drawn by the fact that whereas Raphaël points out that of the four candidates for rulership one is selected "out of each of the four quarters of the city to be commended to the senate" (122.17–19), he later says that three are sent annually from every city, "as was said before" (146.25–26).

⁴⁸ More to Erasmus, December 4, 1516, in *Erasmi Epistolae*, 2:414.

⁴⁹ Our conclusion that Raphaël is indeed the Pontiff is further underscored when we read that there are thirteen priests in Utopia, and that in the case of war seven priests go out with the army; a fact which forces us to wonder which of the seven priests would be sent a second time in case of a second war. It is precisely at the point where we expect an answer to this question that we learn that a Pontiff is appointed as superintendent over the other priests (226.19–25), although a few pages earlier we were told that there are no pontiffs in Utopia; cf. 218.15 with 12, 13, 16.

the discussion of our conclusion's implications before going on to observe that in order to illustrate the suppression of pride in Utopia our learned theorist employs the image of the coming into being of spiritedness used by Plato in Book Two of the *Republic* (372e; cf. 467e with 114.24–26). The most obvious explanation for this procedure is that only on the basis of the Platonic genealogy can Raphaël continue to argue on an economic layer, seeing that in the Platonic scheme the “true and healthy” city is followed by the “luxurious” city, the city that is open to the “unlimited acquisition of money” (cf. *Laws* 679b–c, 705a–b). The return to Plato's “true and healthy” city had already been prepared by the speech on justice in Book One (56.23–24, 62.3–20 and 21–2, 64.20, 66.11, 68.3, 20, and 25, 70.3), before towards the end of that book the healing god talked explicitly about a return to a “healthy” condition (104.31), and before he would do his utmost to mimic such a condition by means of his image of Utopia in Book Two (e.g., 114.1–3, 124.20–25). But although Raphaël's reference (120.27–28) to the date of the founding of Utopia (244 BC) strengthens the overall impression of a retrograde movement, as it was King Agis IV of Sparta (244 BC) who responded to the problem of excessive wealth and luxury by proposing egalitarian reforms⁵⁰ (cf. 182.2), the fact that the latter was put to death for his efforts already causes us to look with a certain willingness upon one scholar's description of Utopia as Sparta's “purer and stabler double,”⁵¹ a willingness which will come close to agreement by the time we connect Agis's failed attempts to return to Spartan virtue with the Utopian attempts to make moral virtue pleasurable. That there is indeed more going on than a simple return to the “true and healthy” city is hinted at, for that matter, by the fact that whereas Hythlodæus seems to emulate what Glaucon called the “city of pigs” by turning to the ancient language when referring to Utopia's lowest magistrate as “Syphogrant” (122.10), meaning “sty-elder” (συφός γέροντες), the ancient name of the person set over ten Syphogrants is “Tranibor” (122.12), which is to be translated as “bench-eater” (θρᾶνος βορός), a clear allusion to the couch-eaters who in Plato's *Republic* prepared the transition to the luxurious city and therefore to spiritedness (*Rep.* 372d–e). And there is spiritedness in Utopia. For there is war in Utopia (cf. 136.14, 148.28, 198.30–216.5 with *Rep.* 373e), as well as shame (124.16, 150.5, 152.25, 202.13, 208.23–30, 201.5, 226.28–29), anger (200.30–31, 202.11, 210.13, 236.7), and a desire for glory (200.1–2, 202.16 and 31).

⁵⁰ Plutarch, *Life of Agis* 3–7, 18–21.

⁵¹ Eva Brann, “An Exquisite Platform: Utopia,” *Interpretation* 3, no. 1 (1972): 10.

The problem underlying a canalization of pride by means of suppressed pride will be made explicit by the time we arrive at the problem of Utopian honors, but it is already allegorized by the role of iron in the place that is nowhere. For although we learn from Plato that iron pulls the regime towards money making and the possession of land, houses, gold, and silver (*Rep.* 547a), Raphaël explicitly concedes that without iron mortals “cannot live,” after saying that it is “almost” the only thing lacking in Utopia, and after comparing it to the elements, which nature, like a “most indulgent parent,” “placed out in the open” (150.20–25, 148.12–13). When we add to the foregoing, however, that at the end of his description of the country of abundance the proud man who prefers to argue on an economic layer says that a mass of crimes was “eradicated” with the “abolition” of the use of money (240.31–242.2), we are led to find that the solution of our problem is to be sought in an equation of suppressed pride with the external pride that is needed in order for the Utopians to live with their suppressed pride.

But before turning to religion, let us first take a closer look at the argument whose preparatory function is indicated by the title of the section in which it is contained. For it is in the section headed “On Utopian Travel” (130.27), the only section whose title does not immediately disclose its subject matter, that the Christian traveler who will as it were trade iron for honor (184.3–12; cf. 216.9–11) prepares his own spiritual arrival by arguing that the useful is not intrinsically pleasurable. To this end Raphaël begins by saying that the Utopians “*seem* to be too much inclined to the view that defines pleasure as either the whole *or the major part of human happiness*” (160.20–23). We on our part begin by observing that it is this statement, added to Vespucci’s remark that the manner of the people on whom the Utopians were apparently modeled was to be judged “Epicurean,”⁵² and in conjunction with the fact that, contrary to Plato’s *Republic* (cf. 328a, 352b, 354a–b), the description of Utopia is given in a garden and after dinner, that has led the vast majority of scholars to conclude that the Utopians are Epicureans. More’s success in continuing to create an impression of Romanism—an impression which he will further corroborate by referring to an “opposite faction” which “wholly attributes happiness to virtue,” glossing that this is “close to” the Stoics (162.17–19)—appears most clearly from one scholar’s denouncement of the part of *Utopia* treating the “essence of religion” as “nearly contra-Christian,”⁵³ although as far as Raphaël’s preparation

⁵² Vespucci, *Lettera delle Isole Nuouamente Trouate*, 7.

⁵³ Reinhold Baumstark, *Thomas Morus* (Freiburg: Herder, 1879), 108. *Utopia* was put on the Index

of the coming of Christianity is concerned, More's contemporary Rhenanus's observation that the lessons of *Utopia* are "perhaps less philosophical" but "more Christian" than Plato's (253.17–20) seems to be somewhat closer to the truth. We leave aside the fact that the epithet "Epicurean" is never used in *Utopia*, that Vespucci makes his remark in the context of his first and not of his fourth voyage, and that a monologue taking place after dinner may very well be not so much more Epicurean as less philosophical than the much more austere dialogue it emulates (cf. 116.2 with *Laws* 637d).⁵⁴ For a careful reading of our voyager's opening statement on human happiness itself in conjunction with the qualifying adjective "honorable" in its accompanying gloss (160.21) already leads us to look upon one scholar's observation that it is "very strange that [Raphaël] should make Hedonism the philosophy of the Utopians," seeing that "Epicurus was not regarded by most Christians as the highest example of the natural light,"⁵⁵ as an observation that is only partly invited by the text itself. This judgment is proved correct when we read in the text that what is even "more astonishing" than their philosophy is that the Utopians seek protection for their "soft" view that pleasure is the major part of earthly happiness from their religion, which is "grave and severe, almost harsh and inflexible" (160.23–25). They never have a discussion about happiness without "uniting principles taken from religion with philosophy, which uses rational arguments." Raphaël emphasizes that without these principles the Utopians believe reason "insufficient and weak by itself for the investigation of true happiness" (160.26–31). For, he explains, once these principles are abolished, the Utopians do not hesitate to maintain that it would be "stupid" not to seek pleasure "by lawful or unlawful means," and that it would be the "extreme of madness" to pursue "hard and painful virtue," and not only to "banish the sweetness of life," but also to "willingly suffer pain from which no profit is expected." And "what profit can there be if after death you gain nothing for having spent your whole present life unpleasantly, that is, wretchedly?" (162.5–15).

We combine the previous remarks with Raphaël's opening statement before observing that it must somehow be the very same grave and severe religion which demands moral virtue of the Utopians that is or is potentially soft and flexible enough to make this virtue pleasurable to them,

("nisi expurgetur") in Portugal (1581) and Spain (1583) by the archbishop of Toledo.

⁵⁴ On the assumption of a somewhat more austere view of Epicureanism this conclusion is reinforced rather than undermined by the fact that the family is the cornerstone of the Utopian community (148.3, 186.22–190.14, 208.30–210.8).

⁵⁵ Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, 168.

and that in the strict sense it is thus as much pain as pleasure that constitutes or leads to Utopian happiness. Anticipating our observation's confirmation by Raphaël's confession that a "religious fear towards the highest beings [*superos*]" is the "greatest and almost only stimulus to the practice of the virtues" (234.6–7)—the smallest and almost negligible one will turn out to be honor or the pleasure of public recognition—we go on to notice that by way of example of principles concerning these highest beings the proud sailor mentions the "immortality of the soul," the soul's being "born for happiness by the beneficence of god," and the belief that "after this life rewards are appointed for our virtues and good deeds, and punishments for our crimes" (160.31–162.2). He adds that although these principles are "derived from religion," reason "leads men to believe and to yield to them" (162.3–5). But that in fact it is only instrumental reason that can lead one to believe these principles before yielding to them on the basis of rational arguments, in other words, that belief is the presupposition of the natural religion of the Utopians, and that in the Utopian language unification actually means supervision, already appears from what we learn immediately prior to the discussion of "morals" (160.14). For as to the "causes of all things" and the "origin and nature of the heavens and the earth," the Utopians, in bringing forward "new accounts of things," disagree with "all ancient philosophers" (160.7–12)—philosophers of whom they knew none before the arrival of Raphaël (158.15–17), and of whose "several" works the learned Hebrew most certainly had not brought with him Aristotle's *Physics*, seeing that physics is the "most uncertain" of all studies (160.7–13). Moreover, as we read immediately posterior to the healing god's attempt to prove philosophy unable to provide a reasonable foundation for moral virtue, it is medicine whose knowledge the Utopians consider among the "finest and most useful parts of philosophy." When "with the help of" medicine they explore the secrets of nature, they "appear not only to themselves to feel astonishing pleasure, but also to gain the highest favor from the author and maker" of these secrets (182.11–16). For "by far the majority" of the Utopians believe in a "certain single being, unknown, eternal, immense, and inexplicable, which is beyond the reach of the human mind" (216.11–15). In their native language, which resembles the Persian (180.23–24), they call this being "Mithras" (216.21), a Grecification of the name of the god of the Persians, who were not so much explorers as worshipers of nature, or so we learn from Herodotus.⁵⁶ And indeed, like the Persians, the Utopians "presume" that the author of nature "exposed to view the visible mechanism of the world

⁵⁶ Herodotus, *History* 1.131.

for man,” and that he prefers a “careful and solicitous beholder and admirer of his work” to someone who “like an animal destitute of mind passes by such a wonderful spectacle stupidly and neglectfully” (182.13; cf. 224.15–19). The most far-reaching illustration of the subservience of reason in Utopia follows, however, from the fact that our island is primarily an improved version of Sparta on account of belief. For whereas the laws of Sparta were good because its lawgiver was beloved by the gods,⁵⁷ the lawgiver of Utopia made one exception to his rule—which was in the interest of religion (220.10)—of leaving open the “whole matter” of religion and superstition, and of leaving everyone “free to choose what he would believe”: in the interest of peace (220.8) he “solemnly and severely prohibited anyone to sink so far below the dignity of human nature as to *believe* that the soul perishes with the body, or that the world is ruled by chance, and not by providence” (220.20–24). This prohibition may explain why “all” Utopians “*agree* that there is a supreme being to whom are due both the creation and the providential government of the universe” (216.17–20). But it already points to its own solution by our Christian voyager, if only because the Utopians are persuaded that it is “in nobody’s power to believe whatever he wants” (222.7–8). And it is he who “*believes* otherwise [that] is not regarded as a member of mankind,” seeing that he has “lowered the sublime nature of his soul to the level of a beast’s miserable body.” For, Raphaël concludes, “who can doubt” that he who has “no fear but the laws and no hope beyond the body” will strive to “evade the public laws” in order to “serve his private desires” (220.25–222.3)?

We notice in passing that the truth contained in Raphaël’s remarks on the insufficiency of human law may have added to More’s reasons for stating in one of the works in which he argued against those who relied solely on divine law that reason must “not resyst fayth but walke with her / & as her handmayde so wayte vpon her / y^t as contrary as ye take her / yet of a trouthe fayth goth neuer without her,”⁵⁸ before returning to our argument by observing that it is on the presupposition of natural religion that Raphaël furnishes pleasure with the adjectives “good and honest” (162.16). It is to such “true and natural” pleasure (130.24), to which, “as to the supreme good” that is the object of religion, that Raphaël will define as “beatitude” (222.20), and that we identify as utopian happiness, “our nature is drawn by virtue itself,” a concept which the voyager is now in a position to define as “living according to nature, since to this end we were created by god.” Following the

⁵⁷ Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* 5.

⁵⁸ *Dialogue concerning Heresies*, I, 23, in *CW*, 6:131.

guidance of nature means “submitting to reason” in desiring one thing and avoiding another. First of all, reason “inflames us to love and veneration of the divine majesty, to whom we owe both our existence and our capacity for happiness,” and secondly, it “incites and urges us to lead a life as free from grief and as full of joy as possible, and, because of our natural fellowship, to help other men too to attain that end” (162.21–28). The Christian sailor goes on to indicate, however, that even submissive reason’s incitement and admonishment may not be enough to actually bring about the love of our neighbor, to put it differently, that natural religion may not be the efficient cause of the fulfillment of Christ’s second commandment. For he suddenly inverts his argument, stating that it is by practicing the virtue of humanity that we restore others to joy and therefore to pleasure, before inferring that, if we are “obliged” to bring about “as being good” a pleasurable life for others, we should do so “first of all” for ourselves (162.28–164.13). That Raphaël is indeed arguing that it is precisely from practicing the highest moral virtue (1 Cor. 13:13) and thus from providing joy and pleasure to others, that we are to derive joy and pleasure for ourselves, becomes apparent when we read the traveler’s conclusion that nature “prescribes” pleasure as the end of “all our actions,” and that living according to nature’s “prescription” is to be defined as virtue (164.11–13). This restatement not only brings virtue and pleasure closer together as it both objectifies and personifies nature, but it also leaves ambiguous whose pleasure is actually meant. Increasing as well as diminishing this ambiguity, Raphaël goes on to underscore the absence of a solid basis in nature for Christian communism by suggesting that nature “invites everyone to help one another to a merrier life” primarily on account of natural necessity and self-interest (164.13–18), before inferring that there need to be “public laws” for the distribution of the “conveniences of life,” that is, for the “matter of pleasure” (164.20–23). Seeing that Utopia is a country of “very few laws,” where, since “nothing is private,” everybody “seriously concerns themselves with public affairs” (238.2, cf. 236.32), where honors are offered to invite men to virtue (192.25), where being “under the eyes of all” must lead to an “abundance of all things” (146.20–21), and where it is competition that brings profit and pleasure together (120.17–21), the conclusion seems justified that what the matter of pleasure actually consists in is honor as a reward for virtue (cf. 142.11, 170.16–28). But in preparation of his conclusion that the existence of a public conscience in addition to the unwritten public laws of natural religion is still insufficient for securing the practice of charity, Raphaël hastens to add that as long as the laws are not broken, it is “prudence” to look after one’s own “conveniences,” but “piety” to look

after those of the public in addition (164.24–25). This distinction is repeated later in the book, when those who avoid pleasure only if it “interferes with their labor” are described as “the more prudent,” and those who “entirely reject the pleasures of the present life as harmful, and long only for the future life,” are characterized as the “more holy” (226.2–12). And although Raphaël emphasizes that to deprive others of their pleasure in order to pursue one’s own is a “true injustice” (164.25–27), it needs no argument that such injustice cannot be avoided in a situation characterized precisely by a competition for the pleasure that ensues from honor, especially if external honor is the reward for a moral virtue which hardly knows visible gradations on account of its suppressed pride. It thus seems to be with a view to bringing the solution of Christianity nearer that after saying that to “take away something from yourself and to give it to others” is a “duty of humanity and benignity which never takes away as many conveniences as it brings back,” Raphaël explains that such a deed is “compensated by the return of benefits,” the “actual consciousness of the good deed,” and the “remembrance of the love and benevolence of those whom you have benefited.” Not surprisingly, the Pontiff adds that “religion easily persuades a spirit which freely assents that God repays with immense and never-ending gladness” (164.28–166.3). But it is only after having “carefully considered and weighed the matter” that we understand that it is because the pleasure of a good conscience anticipates its own fulfillment and utopian happiness is only by virtue of its promise that the Utopians are of the opinion that “all actions, *even* the virtues exercised in them, *at last* look to pleasure *and* happiness as to their end” (166.3–6).

Contrary to its first part, the second half of Raphaël’s argument on moral happiness presupposes the internalization of pleasure, a shift which is subtly indicated by the fact that only in this place in the book does More insert a new paragraph.⁵⁹ By pleasure the Utopians understand “every movement and state of body or mind in which, under the guidance of nature, man delights to dwell” (166.7–9). Raphaël adds that “not without reason” do the Utopians “include natural desires.” For “sense and right reason aim at whatever is joyful by nature” (166.10–13). But although the desires underlying conscience may themselves be natural (cf. 126.12, 128.2), their object is ultimately conventional, as is illustrated most vividly by the fact that immediately prior to the discussion of morals we learn that the “disposition of spirit” of the Utopians towards gold is created by custom (152.26–27, 14–15;

⁵⁹ In the 1516 edition of *Utopia* this paragraph is the thirteenth and central paragraph of the work as a whole as well as the central paragraph of the section on Travel. The two paragraphs of the section on Travel taken together constitute the twin center of Books One and Two of the edition of 1518.

cf. 106.17, 128.20, 150.32–33, cf. 220.26 with 28), but as can also be inferred from the sailor's remark that what is "joyful by nature" is "whatever is neither striven after by injustice nor involves the loss of something more pleasant or is followed by pain" (166.10–12). For it is only a few pages further down that we read that "in everything" the Utopians observe the rule that "pleasure is not to produce pain as a consequence," and that pain is a "necessary consequence if the pleasure is dishonorable" (176.33–35). Moreover, although Raphaël says that there are "very many things which of their own nature contain no sweetness," but are regarded as the "highest pleasures" and "counted among the primary reasons for living" merely through the "perverse attraction of bad desires" (166.19–23), he goes on to state that the fact that these things cause "feelings of enjoyment" does not make the Utopians alter their "opinion" that the enjoyment arises from "perverse custom" and not from the "nature of the thing itself" (170.31–172–1). In unwitting conformity with his own conclusion that it is "not possible for a judgment depraved by disease or habit to change the nature of pleasure any more than that of anything else" (172.5–7), the traveler next points out that the Utopians "allow" as "true" pleasures the "understanding and sweetness derived from contemplation of truth," the "sweet recollection of a life of good actions," and the "certain hope of future good" (172.7–12), pleasures the central one of which not only presupposes the three principles of Utopian natural religion, but also that which will set conscience in motion. And although the healing god continues to discuss "bodily pleasures," it seems to be primarily with a view to indicating the divisive potential of conscience as well as its foundation in natural desire that More makes him fuse them with the "pleasures of the spirit." For Raphaël first says that "almost all Utopians" regard a "calm and equanimous state of the body" as the "foundation of *all* pleasures" (172.23–24, 30–31; cf. 238.13), before restating that the Utopians cling "above all to the pleasures of the spirit, which they consider the first and principal of all pleasures" (174.29–30)—a restatement which harmonizes with the islanders' belief that the "happiness of life" consists in the "freedom and culture of the spirit" (134.19–20). And it is also in harmony with medicine being the foundation of Utopian philosophy that Raphaël concludes that of the pleasures of the spirit the "principal part arises from the practice of the virtues and the consciousness of a good life," and that of the "pleasures which the body supplies, the palm is given to health" (174.31–176.1).

By returning to his opening conclusion as to what would happen if the principles of religion were abolished, Raphaël comes full circle. But this time he places beyond doubt that natural religion does not suffice for

bringing about what the public laws of Utopia prescribe. For this time he calls “injuring oneself for a vain and shadowy reputation of virtue to no good” the “extreme of madness,” and the sign of a spirit which is “both cruel to itself and ungrateful to nature” (178.4–7). And as could already have been inferred from their inability to rule out prudence, it was precisely public honors failing to ground the belief that obedience to the public laws is pleasing in the sight of the god of natural religion that constituted the predicament of the Utopians. Having thus taken the final step of his preparation for the transition to revealed religion, the Christian voyager concludes that the Utopians believe that “human reason can reach no truer view, *unless* religion sent from heaven inspires man with something more holy,” a statement the importance of which More underscores by glossing that this point must be noted “carefully” (178.9–12). “Whether in this matter they are right or wrong, time does not permit us to examine. Nor is it necessary” (178.12–14). But how necessary for the effectiveness of virtue it is in truth to present moral man with its holy image follows from the fact that along the way of his own announcement at the end of the chapter on travel (184.3–12) Raphaël picks up the thread of his argument in the very last section of the book, the section entitled “On Utopian Religions.” He says that the Utopians are “gradually” beginning to depart from their “variety of superstitions,” and are coming to “unite in that religion which *seems* to surpass the others in reasonableness” (216.25–27). Upon first reading this statement seems to pertain to some version of the natural religion of the Utopians (216.6–32). But the fact that “not a few” Utopians joined Christianity upon the coming of Raphaël (218.8–9) already sheds doubt on the truth of this impression; doubt which increases when we read that there is “no doubt” that the other religions “would have disappeared long ago, had not whatever unfortunate accident that befell whomever was considering changing his religion been interpreted not as having happened by chance, but, out of fear, as having been sent from heaven, as if the deity whose cult was being abandoned was thus avenging an impiety against himself” (216.28–32). For at the end of Book One we learn that 1200 years ago (AD 316), just before the conversion of the emperor who considered changing his religion, a ship driven by a tempest was wrecked on the island of Utopia. Some Romans and Egyptians were cast on shore never to leave the island. Raphaël emphasizes that the Roman Empire possessed “no art...capable of any use” which the Utopians did not either learn from the shipwrecked strangers or “discovered for themselves after having received the seeds for investigation” (108.4–10). But considering that the fame of none of the celebrated philosophers had reached Utopia before Raphaël provided the island

with the Christian religion (158.16–17), this not only suggests that philosophy was on the wane when Christianity was on the rise, and that the question as to the usefulness of Christianity is dependent on time and perspective (cf. 108.10); it also confirms that Christianity only *seems* to surpass the other religions in reasonableness, if only because not even the transmission of its seeds in the Roman Empire sufficed for it to take root in a country living under a religion employing reason.⁶⁰ Among the reasons why the Utopians may have been so well disposed towards joining the Christian religion after having heard the name of Christ Raphaël mentions the following two: either the Utopians thought it “nearest to that heresy which was strongest among them,” or they had heard that the “communal way of life of his disciples had been pleasing to Christ” (218.2–8). But although More confines himself to making his protagonist say explicitly that he believes the second reason was “of no small weight” (281.5), in fact the only way to understand the second reason is on the presupposition of the first. For it was precisely the internal dialectic of their natural religion, its demands on man and the remoteness of its god, that had caused the Utopians only to need God’s private approval by means of his public appearance in Christ in order for them to look upon their prescribed way of life as pious (cf. 180.7–23). Raphaël himself in a way brings the two reasons together by saying that he does not doubt that “either a man’s concern for his own convenience or the authority of Christ the Savior” would long ago have brought the whole world to adopt the laws of the Utopian commonwealth if it had not been for pride (242.20). But in truth it is only because of pride that “none are more truly Epicureans than those Christians who lead sacred and pious lives.” For as we learn from More’s Christian friend, Christ alone “showed the way to the sweetest of lives, fullest of true pleasure.”⁶¹

⁶⁰ In the dedicatory letter (to Thomas Ruthall) to his translations of *Lucian* (1506)—the 1517 edition of which was still “indubitably authorized” by More—More says about the *Philopseudes* that that dialogue will certainly bring the profit of teaching us that we “should be free from the superstition which obtrudes everywhere under the guise of religion,” and that we should “not be surprised if the minds of the vulgar are impressed by the fictions of those who think they have done a great work, and who put Christ in their debt forever...with pious intent, to be sure; for otherwise there would be the danger of truth not being sufficient by itself, unless it were supported by falsehoods [*mendacijs*]....wherefore I have often suspected that a large part of such fables has been concocted by certain crafty, wicked wretches and heretics, whose object was partly to derive pleasure from the thoughtless credulity of the simple-minded rather than of the prudent, and partly to undermine faith in the...true stories of Christians by traffic in false fables” (*Translations of Lucian*, in *CW*, 3:lxvii, 4–6).

⁶¹ Erasmus, *Colloquia Familiaria*, 245–46.

IV. THOMAS MORE'S UTOPIA AS THE STATE FOR PHILOSOPHY?

Having defined More's third and final lie as suggesting the inherent reasonableness of Christianity, we return to the beginning of our essay, where we pointed out that the English philosopher judged Utopia "inconvenient." It is not difficult to see why. For to leave aside the suffocating tendencies of conformism (112.18, 116.22, 126.2, 132.34), almost every action on the island is supervised by the priests, who are the "censors of morals" (226.28), and to whom the education of children is entrusted. They take the greatest pains to instill into children's minds "good" opinions (228.10–12). And although Raphaël says that they regard a concern for morals and virtue only as "no less important" than learning (228.9), in fact learning is either wholly devoted to morals and virtue, or discouraged as such (cf. 224.19–226.2). For no one "sits idle" (126.20–21), and what at first sight may seem to be idleness (cf. 146.20–21, 178.30) in reality consists of moral activity, seeing that the time free from work, to be spent on "some occupation according to one's spirit's propensity," is commonly devoted to attending public lectures overseen by the priests (126.32–128.5; cf. 144.7). Moreover, those "spirits which do not reach the level of the intellectual disciplines" are "praised as useful to the commonwealth" (128.10–12). As far as the learned themselves are concerned, they are not actually learned (cf. 106.30, 202.22). For they are those in whom the priests have "from childhood detected an outstanding character, a first-rate intelligence, and a spirit inclined towards the good arts" (158.7–8; cf. 144.12), and who, if they "fail the hopes" entertained of them, are reduced to the class of the craftsmen (132.1–2). Finally, although—contrary to the virtual inhabitants of the *Republic* (434a–b)—the Utopians learn two crafts (124.27), the *raison d'être* of this procedure seems to be primarily to make upward movement to the class of the priests possible: for a craftsman can advance to the class of the learned, and it is from this class that the priests are chosen (132.2–6).

On the other hand, not all is lost for those who neither know shame nor are afraid of hell. For the priests have "not been invested with any power except that which derives from honor" (228.29–30). And although it is not considered "honorable" (140.23–24), nobody is prohibited from dining at home, and therefore from being "licen[tious]" (cf. 142.33). Only taking counsel outside the senate or popular assembly on "matters of common interest" is considered a capital offence (124.1–2). Leave for travel is "easily obtained," unless "need" prevents it (144.28–30). Pleasure is taken in "fools" (*moriones*)

(192.7–14), and “no one suffers for his religion” (218.30). Individuals who have “no fear but the laws, and no hope beyond the body” are “offered no honors, are entrusted with no offices, and are given no public responsibilities.” But despite the fact that such atheists are “universally despised as being of a dull and low nature,” they are “not punished in any way,” nor are they forbidden to “argue in support of their opinion” in private, among priests and “grave men” (222.4–14).⁶²

The paradox of philosophy being possible in a country which attempts to suppress it is captured by the central lines of the “Quatrain in the Utopian Vernacular,” where we read that “Alone of all lands without philosophy I have described to mortals the philosophic city” (18.24–25); a paradox which comes close to becoming a contradiction when we find that the thirteenth and central word of the poem, the word which translates “philosophy,” is *gymnosophon*. For it is this word, the only word in the language which—like Hebrew—consists of 22 characters⁶³ that is indubitably Greek in origin (γυμνοσοφισταί), that refers to the “naked sages” of India, accustomed self-tormentors of whom Cicero said that they were merely “held to be wise.”⁶⁴ The danger of philosophy not springing up in a country in which its fountain source is covered with Platonic grain as well as biblical mustard seeds becomes somewhat more visible when we take a closer look at the ambiguity of gold in Utopia. For although we read that the reason why gold is devalued is that it “keeps in bondage many good *and* wise men” (156.24), we learn from Plato that gold leads souls towards virtue, and that it is mixed in rulers (*Rep.* 415a), an image to which More himself seems to subscribe in his *Epigrammata*, a work which was published in the same volume as *Utopia*.⁶⁵ This ambiguity can be solved though, if we take it to mean that if gold is valued it holds lovers of wisdom in bondage inasmuch as it blurs the difference between political and transpolitical virtue, but if it is devalued it keeps them in servitude to the extent that it denies the similitude between political virtue and a virtue that is potentially transpolitical. In both cases gold thus seems to represent the price that is to be paid for looking at the happiness of the city as a whole (cf. *Rep.* 420b). But the price may not be equally high. For More qualifies his remark that the common way of life of the Utopians

⁶² We therefore disagree with Ralph Lerner, according to whom Utopia’s philosophy may have been a “philosophy to end all philosophizing” (*Playing the Fool: Subversive Laughter in Troubled Times* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009], 27).

⁶³ Including the title page and the ancillary materials, the 1518 edition of *Utopia* consists of 22 parts.

⁶⁴ Cicero, *Disputationes Tusculanae* 5.27.77.

⁶⁵ *Latin Poems* nos. 21 and 142, in *CW*, 3:110–12, 178–80.

“utterly destroys all nobility, magnificence, splendor, and majesty” by saying that these qualities are the “true graces and ornaments of a commonwealth” only in the “opinion of the public” (244.19). But as a true Platonist he knew that it is precisely the questioning of conventional nobility that commonly gives rise to philosophy. Iron is not the only thing that is lacking in Utopia.

In what sense, then, is Utopia to be looked upon as the “philosophic city”? Not, in any case, in the sense that it is the “city of philosophy,” seeing that More decided to argue in a direction opposite to Plato’s, as is subtly hinted at by the fact that *Utopia* has two books, and philosophy does not become prominent until Book Three of the *Republic*.⁶⁶ A whole series of thinkers were to follow More and his Italian contemporary in this distinctly modern political approach to philosophy, an approach caused or occasioned by philosophy having become too prominent to still remain philosophical. Similar to his Greek predecessor, however, the English philosopher published *Utopia* “with the purpose of showing which things cause a commonwealth to become less convenient” (cf. 26.27–28).⁶⁷ This is not to say that More did not consider his island the “city for philosophy” in the sense that he thought or foresaw that a commonwealth employing suppressed pride would be less inconvenient for philosophy than one that gives pride free reign. But it is unclear in what colors he would have painted pride’s natural, philosophical, and theological faces. In any event, More’s oblique guidance consisted primarily in treating harsh matters conveniently for the sake of philosophy’s convenience. The thesis that the Utopians “pursued such institutions of life as have laid the foundations of a commonwealth not only most happily but also so as to last forever, as far as human prescience can forecast” (244.2), is thus to be attributed to Raphaël Hythlodæus. Luther was yet to enter the stage, an event which may not have altered More’s understanding of the indispensability of revealed religion with a view to the demands of genuine morality, but which does seem to have caused him to make an externalizing movement, a movement culminating in the apology of institutions for which he is best known among Catholics.⁶⁸ Irrespective of all this, however, and despite the

⁶⁶ The fact that More substantially criticizes Plato by means of *Utopia* has been noted by others, although typically More’s “fundamental reformation of the Platonic tradition” is equated with the transition from natural to revealed religion in Utopia, before this transition is itself traced back to the “depth of More’s own Christianity” (John A. Gueguen, “Reading More’s *Utopia* as a Criticism of Plato,” *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, vol. 10 [1978]: 50, 53).

⁶⁷ Erasmus, letter to Hutten, 21.

⁶⁸ The common tendency to read the later More into *Utopia* appears most clearly from Richard Marius’s account of “Utopia’s Religion and Thomas More’s Faith,” one of the very few accounts which not only is sensitive to the caesura that seems to have occurred in More’s political self-understanding

fact that More merely expressed his “first and coolest thoughts” in that “short, but extraordinary book” in which “he gave his mind full scope, and considered mankind and religion with the freedom that became a true philosopher,”⁶⁹ David Hume seems to have been right in saying that the principles advanced in the “little book” that was to be read as a “petition” were “somewhat too free,”⁷⁰ if only in the sense that their mode of conveyance gave rise to a genre whose less philosophical offspring considered philosophy essentially a means to the end of political freedom. Our author himself almost confesses as much by stating, seventeen years after it had become “too late to be wise” (44.24), that he would “neyther vse [his] selfe nor aduise no frende” of his “*out of tyme and place conuenient* to put the defautes of y^e laws abrode among the people in wrytynge and wythoute any surety of the chaunge geue the people occasyon to haue the laws in derysyon, vnder whyche they lyve, namely syth he y^t so shal vse to do may somtyme myssetake the mater, and thynke the thyng not good wherof the chaunge wolde be worse.”⁷¹ But although the man who entered the annals of the history of political theory as a reactionary Catholic ends *Utopia* with the admonition to his philosophic reader to “think about these matters more deeply” (244.29), his Latin poem entitled “What is the Best State of a Commonwealth” ends with the question whether it would be “expedient” to “convey sovereignty” if one “had the ability.”⁷² And More answers this question in the negative, unlike that other Lord Chancellor, who was to counsel philosophers to rule by means of kings before a plebeian from Malmesbury erected a “Mortall God” which was not to be counted among “the Platonic, the Utopian, and the Atlantic Commonwealths.”⁷³ But this story requires another work.

on the occasion of the arrival of Protestantism, but which also conceptually distinguishes between the “natural religion” of the Utopians, the “revealed religion” of Christianity, and the “faith” of More himself (*Thomas More: A Biography* [New York: Knopf, 1984], 171–88).

⁶⁹ Gilbert Burnet, *The History of the Reformation of the Church of England* (London, 1839), 3:44, 47.

⁷⁰ David Hume, *The History of England, from the invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688* (London, 1773), 132.

⁷¹ *The Apology of syr Thomas More knight*, in *CW*, 9:97.

⁷² *CW*, 3:230.

⁷³ Thomas Hobbes, *Opera Philosophica quae Latine Scripsit Omnia*, vol. 3, *Leviathan sive de Materia, Forma, et Potestate Civitatis Ecclesiasticae et Civilis*, ed. William Molesworth (London, 1841), 263–64.

Leo Strauss, Gershom Scholem, and the Reason-Revelation Problem¹

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Gottes-Erkenntnis ist nicht da, wo keine Frömmigkeit ist.

I

The present article is mainly about Leo Strauss and Gershom Scholem's debate on religious experience and revelation, as it can be reconstructed from their correspondence and published writings. Its principal aim, however, is to shed light on "the theme" of Leo Strauss's investigations, namely the theologico-political problem.² Although this problem, once attentively addressed, shows itself to be many sided, its core is no doubt the relationship between reason, or better philosophy, and revelation, that is, what Strauss often metaphorically refers to with the expression "Jerusalem and Athens."³

¹ This is the expanded version of a presentation I delivered at the conference "Leo Strauss, Religion, and Liberalism," organized by the Magna Carta Foundation in Rome on May 13–14, 2011. I wish to thank Amy Rosenthal and Lynn Phalen, as well as the anonymous reader of *Interpretation*, for reading a draft and for their useful suggestions. I also wish to dedicate this article to the memory of Flavio Baroncelli, on the sixth anniversary of his death.

² Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, ed. Heinrich Meier and Wiebke Meier, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 2008) (hereafter *GS*), 8; cf. Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) (hereafter *LAM*), 224; Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, ed. H. Meier (Stuttgart: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 1997), 30n2; Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997) (hereafter *JPCM*), 458; *GS*, 3:xxiv–xxvii.

³ Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) (hereafter *SPPP*), 147–173; Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) (hereafter *PAW*), 20; Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*,

It is within this relationship that, if available, one can find Strauss's true justification of philosophy. As stated in the most emphatic manner in "Reason and Revelation":

If it is confronted with the claim of revelation, and only if it is confronted with the claim of revelation, philosophy as a radically free pursuit becomes radically questionable. Confronted with the claim of revelation, the philosopher is therefore compelled to refute that claim. More than that: he must prove the *impossibility* of revelation. For if revelation is *possible*, it is possible that the philosophic enterprise is fundamentally wrong.⁴

As a result, it is only by focusing on the reason-revelation problem that one can get to the root of Strauss's philosophical thought and find a reliable indication regarding his "esoteric" view.

II

At the end of a very obscure essay entitled "Perspectives on the Good Society,"⁵ we find one of Leo Strauss's most interesting but enigmatic statements. After comparing the Jewish and Christian faiths in order to show their mutual exclusivity from the point of view of the true believer,⁶ he nonetheless points out that they would have to be at one in countering the perspective of what is defined by one of the speakers as "the good big society."⁷ Against this perspective, promptly labeled by Strauss "universal philistinism" and for him almost equivalent not only to the "universal and homogeneous state" debated with Alexandre Kojève but also to the triumph of Friedrich Nietzsche's "last man" (i.e., to a society merely based on secular

ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) (hereafter *RCPR*), 245; *GS*, 3:663. Regarding philosophy as "the perfection of reason and therefore the perfection of man" within the problem of reason and revelation, see Leo Strauss, "Reason and Revelation," in Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 141.

⁴ Strauss, "Reason and Revelation," 150. Cf. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965) (hereafter *NRH*), 75; *SPPP*, 210–11; *LAM*, 255; Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934–1964*, ed. Peter Emberley and Barry Cooper (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004) (hereafter *FPP*), 232–33.

⁵ *LAM*, 260–72. It is the "requested report" of a Jewish-Protestant colloquium at the University of Chicago, whose enigmatic character was already highlighted by Arnaldo Momigliano (*Essays on Ancient and Modern Judaism* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994], 187n22), and recently reasserted by Raimondo Cubeddu (*Tra le righe: Leo Strauss su Cristianesimo e Liberalismo* [Lungro di Cosenza: Costantino Marco Editore, 2010], 30–34, 62n66).

⁶ *LAM*, 266.

⁷ *LAM*, 272. The speaker in question, Nathan Glazer, is the American sociologist and coauthor of such books as *The Lonely Crowd* and *Beyond the Melting Pot*, who at the time of the colloquium was serving the US government at the Housing and Home Finance Agency.

economism or on what Strauss himself defines as “political hedonism”),⁸ he suggests that Jews and Christians would have to take the side of “anarchism or secession.” “The reason why I believe this,” Strauss continues in an apparently hieratic manner, “is Exodus 13:17.” And after quoting this passage of the Bible in which God himself is said to lead the Jewish people out of Egypt “not through the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near,” he enigmatically adds:

The land of the Philistines is perhaps nearer today than it ever was. The meaning which we ascribe to the scriptural verse may not be its literal meaning; it may nevertheless be its true meaning. For, as Jews and Christians agree, the literal meaning isolated from everything else “killeth.” Pharisaic rabbinical Judaism always held that the written Torah must be understood in the light of the oral or unwritten Torah, and the most profound reason for this is that the most profound truth cannot be written and not even said: what Israel heard at Sinai from God Himself “was nothing but that [inaudible] *Aleph* with which in the Hebrew text of the Bible the First Commandment begins” (Gershom Scholem, *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik* [Zürich: 1960], 47).⁹

Isolated from its context, the sentence “the most profound truth cannot be written and not even said” can be interpreted as an indication that when dealing with religion or other issues of political relevance, Strauss prefers to be “moderate” and to resort to an exoteric style of writing.¹⁰ The somewhat hieratic tone of the first part of the aforementioned passage may perhaps be interpreted in this way. But at the end of the quotation, it seems that we also get a very important hint into Strauss’s real view of religion, and in particular “revelation,” which is worth highlighting here.¹¹ Within Strauss’s quotation of Gershom Scholem’s passage, taken from *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik*, between square brackets we read the adjective “inaudible,” which undoubtedly leads to the debunking of the *aleph* with which the revelation at Sinai is said to begin. In a nonobvious manner for him, in this context Strauss gives full bibliographical reference as if he wanted the reader to check the

⁸ Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*, rev. ed., ed. V. Gourevitch and M. S. Roth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) (hereafter *OT*), 208–9; *RCPR*, 40; *SPPP*, 32–33; *LAM*, viii; *NRH*, 169; cf. Leo Strauss, “German Nihilism,” *Interpretation* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 358–60, 363, 371; *GS*, 3:224–25.

⁹ *LAM*, 272.

¹⁰ Although without reference to the sentence quoted, a persuasive example of this kind of interpretation is to be found in Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 22–24. Regarding Strauss’s particular view of moderation, see Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) (hereafter *WPP*), 32, 94; Leo Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) (hereafter *SA*), 32–33; *GS*, 3:567.

¹¹ See *WPP*, 135; cf. *GS*, 3:748.

source of his quotation. Upon doing so, we realize that the adjective “inaudible,” as indicated by the square brackets, is an interpolation by Strauss. Scholem’s original sentence, which is part of his description of Maimonides’s interpretation as “daringly” developed by Rabbi Mendel of Rymanów, is the following: “All that Israel heard was the *aleph* with which in the Hebrew text the first Commandment begins, the *aleph* of the word *anokhi*, ‘I.’”¹²

To be fair to Strauss, we have to recognize that his meaningful insertion is partly prepared by Scholem himself. If we read the latter’s analysis further, we discover the following eloquent comment regarding the abovementioned interpretation: “This strikes me as a highly remarkable statement, providing much food for thought. For in Hebrew the consonant *aleph* represents nothing more than the position taken by the larynx. . .when a word begins with a vowel. Thus the *aleph* may be said to denote the source of all articulate sound. . . . To hear the *aleph* is to hear next to nothing; it is the preparation for all audible language, but in itself conveys no determinate, specific meaning.” And in a note at the beginning of the paragraph under consideration, when he traces the origin of this kind of interpretation of the revelation at Sinai to Maimonides, Scholem explains that “Maimonides puts forward the opinion that wherever, in passages dealing with the revelation on Mount Sinai, the children of Israel are said to have heard words, it is meant that they heard the (inarticulate) sound of the voice, but that Moses heard the words (in their meaningful articulation) and communicated them.”¹³

As far as we understand, it seems as if Strauss has just changed the parenthetical “inarticulate” to “inaudible” and has then inserted it in Scholem’s statement regarding the revelation at Sinai. The result, nonetheless, is apparently a further debunking of revelation and, as I will try to show, a meaningful statement from the philosophical point of view, especially if read in its context, that is, as a statement introduced by such sentences as “the literal meaning isolated from everything else ‘killeth’”¹⁴ or “the most profound truth cannot be written and not even said.”

III

In order to fully grasp the philosophical significance of Strauss’s interpolation, one could begin by making reference to his

¹² Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 30.

¹³ *Ibid.*; cf. *PAW*, 51.

¹⁴ 2 Cor. 3:6 (cf. Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, ed. H. Meier, 3rd ed. [Stuttgart: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 2008], 251n255); Scholem, *Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 50–51; cf. *PAW*, 83, 85, 88.

interpretation of Maimonides, especially as formulated in some letters to Jacob Klein from 1938.¹⁵ In that context, Maimonides is no longer presented as a “believing Jew,” as in *Die Religionskritik Spinozas*,¹⁶ but as an “Averroist,” who “in his belief was *absolutely* no Jew” and whose *Guide of the Perplexed*, once its esoteric kernel is grasped, can be compared to the “unobtainable” radically irreligious treatise *De tribus impostoribus*.¹⁷ But here I prefer to follow an alternative path, and to focus on Strauss and Scholem’s dialogue in relation to the theme of religious experience and revelation as it can be reconstructed from their most interesting correspondence.¹⁸

A first exchange undoubtedly worth considering is that which takes place shortly after the publication of *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik*. On October 27, 1960, Scholem writes Strauss in order to make sure that he received his new book and to express his certainty that the “philosophic and nihilistic implications” of its second chapter, namely the part which immediately follows Scholem’s statement that was not only cited, but also interpolated by Strauss in “Perspectives on the Good Society,” will not escape his friend’s notice. Replying on November 22 of the same year, Strauss initially praises Scholem’s capacity to vividly represent the world of the Jewish religious traditions, in which, even though “in utter ignorance of their background,” he himself was brought up.¹⁹ Then, explicitly assuming the philosophical point of view, he continues by stating unequivocally: “Unfortunately, I am constitutionally unable to follow you—or if you wish, I too have

¹⁵ GS, 3:544–54.

¹⁶ GS, 1:238.

¹⁷ GS, 3:549–50, 553; cf. GS, 2:xxiii–xxv; Laurence Lampert, “Strauss’s Recovery of Esotericism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, ed. Steven B. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 64. On the atheism of the *falasifa*, and of Averroes among them, see GS, 2:197: “As was clearly recognized by such contemporary and competent observers as Ghazzali, Maimonides, and Thomas Aquinas, the Islamic philosophers did not believe in Revelation properly speaking. They were philosophers in the classical sense of the word: men who would hearken to reason, and to reason only.”

¹⁸ Despite the profound difference between them, Strauss and Scholem had friendly relations and esteemed each other highly. Strauss once tried to describe this difference as the one between the philosopher and the historian (see GS, 3:770–71). Regarding their mutual esteem, see, e.g., Scholem’s 1935 letter to Walter Benjamin (Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin, *Correspondence* [New York: Schocken Books, 1989], 156–57)—in which Scholem clearly praises Strauss’s moral and intellectual attitudes, even though on that occasion their outcome was the imminent publication of *Philosophie und Gesetz* that Scholem considered, given the profession of atheism it conveyed in his opinion, an almost insurmountable obstacle regarding the hoped-for appointment of Strauss as a professor at Jerusalem—and Strauss’s letters to Scholem on 11 August 1960, 22 November 1960, and 7 July 1973 (GS, 3:740, 742, 769). For a thoughtful comparison between Strauss and Scholem, see Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 43–64.

¹⁹ GS, 3:742.

sworn to a flag, the oath to the flag being...: *moriatur anima mea mortem philosophorum* (may my soul die the death of philosophers).²⁰ The reason for this constitutional inability—which can also be documented with reference to Strauss’s earlier utterances and which was perfectly known to Scholem and some of his contemporaries²¹—is subsequently provided. After explaining Scholem’s antiphilosophical stance in light of the fact that “philosophy is as such beyond suffering, more akin to comedy than to tragedy”—whereas “moral man as such is the potential believer”²²—Strauss comes to the core of the issue:

The only difficulty which I still have concerns the truth. This difficulty is concealed, I suspect, by the terms “myth” and “symbol”: it may be that certain things can properly be said only mythically or symbolically but this presupposes a non-mythical and non-symbolic truth on the ground of those things. You yourself, I suppose, would not say that the assertion “God is” is a myth, or that God is a symbol. It may be that mystical experience confirms a particular religion—but, as you admit, it confirms every religion....The preference given to any one religion is due to initial *belief* as distinguished from mystical experience....What remains as common to all the experiences in question is a pure *x* or *apeiron* or Nothing or the inarticulated; every articulation is questionable.²³

Making reference to the concept of truth, Strauss implicitly points out that even when one deals with religion in the form of “mystical experience,” as far as an *experience* in the precise sense of the term is involved,²⁴ one has to focus on its cognitive value. The emphasis on the claim

²⁰ Ibid. Cf. GS, 3:676.

²¹ In a letter to Gerhard Krüger on 7 January 1930, in which Strauss further explains the positions expressed in *Die Religionskritik Spinozas*, he clearly affirms: “Only one thing was clear to me: that I cannot believe in God” (Mir war nur Eines klar: dass ich nicht an Gott glauben kann) (GS, 3:380; cf. GS, 1:431–39). Regarding outside evidence of Strauss’s atheism, in addition to Scholem’s aforementioned letter to Benjamin, see, e.g., Scholem’s letter to George Lichtheim on 21 October 1968 (in Gershom Scholem, *Briefe II, 1948–1970* [Munich: Beck, 1995], 214–18), Hannah Arendt’s letter to Karl Jaspers on 24 July 1954 (in Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, *Correspondence, 1926–1969* [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992], 244), and Hans Jonas, *Memoirs* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2008), 49; cf. Eugene R. Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2006), 120–21. With regard to the “radically atheistic” character of genuine philosophy according to Strauss, see “Reason and Revelation,” 145–46.

²² GS, 3:743; RCPR, 206; Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) (hereafter *CM*), 61; PAW, 140. Cf. Heinrich Meier, *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 86.

²³ GS, 3:743.

²⁴ “Experience” comes from the Latin *experientia*, which in its turn derives from the ancient Greek *peira*: proof.

to truth of religion in general, and of religious experience in particular, is a constant trait of Strauss's thought, already detectable in a clear manner in *Die Religionskritik Spinozas* or *Philosophie und Gesetz*.²⁵ This emphasis is, on the one hand, the cause of his preliminary rejection of the categories of "myth" and "symbol," once precisely interpreted, when applied to revelation and the God of revelation.²⁶ On the other hand, it explains his critical stance on what can be truly obtained through that specific experience—here defined as "mystical," and in other writings as "absolute" or "religious," as well as the experience of "the Call"²⁷—which shows itself to be the only possible path to faith from the philosophical point of view, as being immune to the circularity of pure fideism (such as that of Calvin), which, as Heinrich Meier points out, merely "believes" to believe in the true God.²⁸ Moving from the constitutional inability to believe ("Only one thing was clear to me: that I *cannot* believe in God"), for Strauss, after all, a low but solid ground of knowledge also has to be searched for with reference to religion and revelation.²⁹

In light of this theoretical background, we can thus fully understand such quoted statements as "mystical experience. . . confirms every religion" or "the preference given to any one religion is due to initial *belief* as distinguished from mystical *experience*."³⁰ The reason is that, when assuming a truly theoretical point of view regarding religious experience, what finally stands the test of critical analysis is only the experience of an unknown—of a problem, undoubtedly a fundamental one, rather than an answer.³¹ If so, the specific religious assumptions, that is, the articulations characteristic of every religion, of every one of the *facta bruta*, are "questionable";³² and precisely the

²⁵ See, for example, GS, 1:251, and GS, 2:13–15. Cf. LAM, 266; Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) (hereafter *TM*), 51.

²⁶ Regarding the difference between myth and biblical revelation in Strauss, see "Reason and Revelation," 164–65 (see also 31–32 for Meier's comment); RCPR, 256–57; SPPP, 162–63.

²⁷ LAM, 165, 232–36; "Reason and Revelation," 146; RCPR, 252.

²⁸ Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 19.

²⁹ For a clear indication of the necessity of at least this low but solid ground of knowledge, also with reference to the fideistic point of view, see "Reason and Revelation," 177–78. See also FPP, 219, where the formula "humble but solid kind of knowledge" is explicitly used by Strauss, and above all 224–25, where, after raising the problem of the different interpretations of the call of God in the various religions, he explicitly affirms: "Yet only one interpretation can be the *true* one. There is therefore a *need for argument* between the various believers in revelation, an argument which cannot help but to allude somehow to *objectivity*" (my emphasis).

³⁰ GS, 3:743 (my emphasis).

³¹ OT, 196; "Reason and Revelation," 148; NRH, 24; FPP, 89. Cf. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss*, 103.

³² The meaning of the expression *factum brutum*, more than once used by Strauss (GS, 2:51; GS, 3:663; "Reason and Revelation," 142, 161), is all the more revealing: in his view, it is not only a reference

questionable character of every human interpretation of the “wholly other,” that is, of what in Strauss’s letter is defined as “a pure *x* or *apeiron* or Nothing or the inarticulated,” comes out to be a complete rational justification for posing the fundamental philosophical question *quid sit deus*.

That Strauss’s radically skeptical interpretation of the kind of knowledge which can be obtained through the mystical or religious experience is to be interpreted not so much in a nihilistic perspective as in a perspective which, in his view, is the truly philosophical one, is all the more evident in another paragraph of his letter, which is again worth quoting. Following Scholem’s suggestion not to overlook the “philosophic and nihilistic implications” of his book, Strauss replies by firmly distinguishing the two perspectives apparently equated by Scholem:

Your justification in your letter to me includes the sentence that the “philosophic and nihilistic implications” of your second chapter were not likely to escape me. As you see from what precedes, indeed they did not. I was very much impressed by them and confirmed in what a simple man would describe as *apiquorsut* [radical unbelief]. Still, you confirm my diagnosis of you by using “philosophic” and “nihilistic” synonymously: what you call *nihil*, the *falāsifa* call *physis*. Period.³³

Although, as we have noticed, the experience of the wholly other can also be described as that of Nothing, of the *nihil* which the human being experiences especially by facing death,³⁴ according to Strauss’s inter-

to the alleged fact, reported by a tradition which vouches for itself (“Reason and Revelation,” 173), of the historical revelation. The adjective *brutum* means indeed that this *factum* is also completely inaccessible to reason: “There is only *one* objection [*Einwand*] against Plato-Aristotle: and that is the *factum brutum* of revelation, or of the ‘personal’ God. I say *factum brutum*—for there is *no* argument *whatsoever* [*keinerlei Argument*], theoretical, practical, existential...not even the argument of paradox...from the *ἄγνοια θεοῦ*, which characterizes the genuine philosopher, to belief” (Leo Strauss and Karl Löwith, “Correspondence concerning Modernity,” *Independent Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 5/6 [1988]: 108; GS, 3:663). This specific meaning, always clearly indicated by Strauss, is unfortunately not adequately underlined by Daniel Tanguay, who, precisely when defending his view of Strauss as unable to fully refute revelation, omits the whole second part (Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: Une biographie intellectuelle* [Paris: Grasset, 2003], 345–46). Consider also *FPP*, 228, where revelation interpreted as a “brute fact” is described as “an oddity of no human importance.”

³³ GS, 3:743. Regarding Strauss’s diagnosis of Scholem, see GS, 3:740, where Strauss defines Scholem as “the only antiphilosophic contemporary...from whom I learn something with pleasure.” See also Scholem’s reply at GS, 3:741. What philosophically speaking is *physis*, or better the “zetetic” inquiry into *physis*, for Strauss is nonetheless dangerously close to *nihil* from the political point of view, which for this reason demands “noble rhetoric” and alleged *theioi nomoi* (see *JPCM*, 327–28; Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss*, 82–83; Tanguay, *Leo Strauss*, 342–43; Alberto Ghibellini, *Al di là della politica: Filosofia e retorica in Leo Strauss* [Genova: Genova University Press, 2012], 235–318).

³⁴ See again Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 45–51. Regarding the decisive role of death even for classical philosophy in Strauss’s view, see GS, 3:567; cf. Lampert, “Strauss’s

pretation of premodern philosophy—in this specific case of the *falsafa*—this does not mean to exclude the possibility of the philosophical enquiry. Quite the opposite: it is precisely because the “wholly other” is experienced in such a way—as an *apeiron* or inarticulated which can be experienced as such only in opposition to what is limited and articulated—instead of in terms of a God who is a “person,” that the *skepsis* or *zetesis* which in his view is philosophy can, or better, has to begin.

This interpretation is already foreshadowed in a previous letter from Strauss to Scholem, dated March 23, 1959. In this letter, commenting on the sentence, taken from Scholem’s *Zehn unhistorische Sätze über Kabbala*, “The Torah is the medium in which *all* beings know what they know,” he rhetorically asks his friend: “What is the status of the Jewish premise in Jewish mysticism as compared with the different premises in different mysticisms? ... Or to put the same thing very differently, what gives the certainty that a Who, as distinguished from a What, is ‘the last word of all theory?’”³⁵ In addition, a quite similar question can be found in a subsequent letter to Scholem, on November 5, 1966, in which, referring this time to *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* and noticing that there Scholem shows “the great *multiplicity* [*Mannigfaltigkeit*] of the mystic doctrines,” with the consequence that “they somewhere *contradict* each other,” he asks: “To what does the mystic B appeal, in order to prefer [*vorziehen*] his doctrine to that of the mystic A? What *arguments* (if any) are used?”³⁶

However, it is in two letters written by Strauss—almost *in limine mortis*—at the beginning of 1973 where we find the clearest confirmation of the interpretation of mystic or religious experience outlined above. On February 26, at the end of a letter focused on the interpretation of messianism, Strauss mentions the figure of Emil Fackenheim, whose book *Encounters between Judaism and Modern Philosophy*³⁷ he had recently received. In his opinion, Fackenheim is a “serious and respectable man, surely the best among the American ‘Jewish philosophers,’ but”—adds Strauss—“very influenced by Buber [*sehr verbubert*].”³⁸ As we will see better further on, this reference to Buber does not make us wander from our main subject, as Buber, along

Recovery of Esotericism,” 70–71.

³⁵ GS, 3:738–39.

³⁶ GS, 3:754.

³⁷ Emil Fackenheim, *Encounters between Judaism and Modern Philosophy* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

³⁸ GS, 3:767.

with Franz Rosenzweig, is taken into account by Strauss, for instance in the Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, as a Jewish thinker who deals with revelation by purely relying on interiorization, that is, in a manner of which Scholem himself, making reference to a letter from Rosenzweig to Buber precisely at the end of the first chapter of *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik*, points out the fundamentally mystical traits.³⁹ Now, to return to Strauss's letter to Scholem, always with reference to Fackenheim and his "Jewish philosophy," Strauss significantly continues by noting that "in better times, his efforts would have been defined as *kalâm* (in the strict sense of the *Moreh*), but we do not live in better times."⁴⁰ Then, again associating Fackenheim and Buber, he puts forth the following question: "How do these people really 'experience' [*erfahren*] that God is eternal and not something only coeval with man?"—a question which, with reference to Fackenheim and Buber and their likes, again takes up the analogous ones posed regarding the mystical experience of the Kabbalists.

Owing to Strauss's unclear handwriting, made even worse by his illness, Scholem is unable to decipher precisely the key expressions "eternal God" and "coeval with man."⁴¹ For this reason, Strauss returns to the issue in another letter on March 19, 1973. However, in this fundamental letter he not only restates the unclear question, namely how Jewish thinkers such as Fackenheim, Buber, and Rosenzweig know that what they experience is the God of the Bible and not only the "wholly other"; he also translates that question in a manner that gives it a clearer philosophical meaning and comes to involve the theme of the justification of philosophy as such, faced by the religious claim. "In other words," Strauss continues in his questioning by making reference to Buber's typical expressions, "how is justified the leap [*der Sprung*] from the *overwhelming* [*überwältigend*] Thou to the *eternal*

³⁹ Scholem, *Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 30n3.

⁴⁰ This statement is equivalent to saying that Fackenheim's approach, as every form of "theistic philosophy," is no philosophy at all in Strauss's view: as clearly stated in PAW, 96–98, the *kalâm* as understood by Strauss following Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* is a kind of rational reflection which nonetheless is by no means philosophy strictly understood, but only a form of theology, since, as in the case of Thomas Aquinas within Christianity, it relegates reason to an ancillary position. See also PAW, 105n29. Cf. FPP, 223.

⁴¹ GS, 3:768. Incidentally, in his reply Scholem fully confirms Strauss's assessment regarding his more historical than philosophical attitude. To the question, not perfectly deciphered, how people like Fackenheim and Buber could "experience" that God is eternal and not something only coeval with man, he tentatively replies that they knew it through revelation.

Thou? Does not here philosophy necessarily come in [*Kommt da die Philosophie nicht notwendig herein*], and precisely in the center?⁴²

The adverbial adjective *notwendig*, in our translation rendered as “necessarily,” is the key term here. If philosophy has to find a real justification, Strauss claims in the most emphatic manner in “Reason and Revelation,” it has to show that it is “*the One Thing Needful*.”⁴³ And if there is only the possibility of revelation, that is, of the self-communication of God, qua God, to human beings,⁴⁴ it is not certain that it is. Now, it seems to me that in this last quoted letter to Scholem, especially with the two final questions, Strauss approaches this fundamental theme in a very direct way by dealing with a “religious” or “absolute experience” which, as shown by the reference to such authors as Fackenheim and Buber, though always mystical in a sense, is clearly meant to transcend the specific case of the Kabbalah. If the passage from the *overwhelming* Thou to the *eternal* Thou, that is, from the “absolute experience” of the call to the God of Revelation (but of every revelation), is a humanly unjustifiable leap—if, in other words, the voice of God qua God, and not qua a human interpretation of the call, is *inaudible*, because that call is in itself *inarticulated*—philosophy or the *life* devoted to searching for human wisdom is what is really needed, *the One Thing Needful* and the *right* way of life.⁴⁵ Philosophy, that is to say, is not only intrinsically pleasurable as, thanks to *eros*, it is “graced by nature’s grace,”⁴⁶ but it also comes in necessarily (*notwendig*), as the only consistent way of life for those who *cannot* constitutionally accept to merely believe to believe in the true God.⁴⁷

⁴² GS, 3:769. See also FPP, 224–25.

⁴³ “Reason and Revelation,” 148–50, 174–75, 179n8. Cf. GS, 3:675; Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 22–23; Steven B. Smith, “Philosophy as a Way of Life: The Case of Leo Strauss,” *Review of Politics* 71, no. 1 (2009): 49–50 and n42; and Nathan Tarcov, “Philosophy as the Right Way of Life in *Natural Right and History*,” in *Modernity and What Has Been Lost: Considerations on the Legacy of Leo Strauss*, ed. Pawel Armada and Arkadiusz Górniewicz (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s, 2011), 46n8.

⁴⁴ PAW, 107. See also “Reason and Revelation,” 156, where Strauss says that “pure faith...has no support outside the direct self-communication of God.”

⁴⁵ With reference to the justification of philosophy in Strauss, the emphasis on its being originally a way of life, as distinguished from a set of doctrines, is all the more important. See in particular “Reason and Revelation,” 147, where he clearly states that the philosophic life, that is the life which suspends the judgment in every matter in which it finds no evidence, cannot suspend the judgment on its being the *right* way of life. This judgment, as clearly sustained in that context (notice Strauss’s insistence on the availability of “proof”), is based on the evidence that no other way of life is acceptable as consistent from the rational point of view.

⁴⁶ WPP, 40.

⁴⁷ In order to vindicate the consistency of the philosophical life, it is worth highlighting the involuntary character of *eros*. *Eros is tyrannos* (Plato, *Republic* 573b; cf. Strauss, *On Plato’s “Symposium”*

This being the case, we have to add still further considerations: Is what we have outlined following Strauss's indications not also a proof of the impossibility of "revelation," once we start from the subjective experience and strictly interpret revelation as the *experienced self*-communication of God, qua God?⁴⁸ If that *self*-communication, as interpreted by the believer, is "inaudible," as Strauss maintains following his Maimonides, is not revelation understood as such impossible owing to the fact that, at least on the level of human wisdom, "one does not hear the words of God but only the words of men,"⁴⁹ that is, one is constitutionally unable to *know*, as distinguished from to *believe*, that what is heard in every kind of religious experience is the voice of God himself? And again: Is a demonstration of the impossibility of anything attainable on a level other than that of human thinking, of "human wisdom," for which the rules of logic, necessarily involved in such a demonstration, are meant? If so—and we do not see other possibilities, given the fact that to also refute *faith* in revelation is beyond the reach of human wisdom (*contra negantem principia non est disputandum*), and that only "on the level of 'human wisdom,' the disputation between believer and philosopher is not only possible, but without any question the most important fact of the past"⁵⁰—both the "pre-philosophic proof" of the needfulness of the philosophic life and his "confirmation," within philosophy, based on the analysis of human nature, which Strauss emphatically demands in "Reason and Revelation," are not only suggested, but also clearly presented in his

[Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001], 58–59); *Eros* is the son not only of *Poros*, but also, and especially for Strauss, of *Penia* (Plato, *Symposium* 203b–c; cf. Strauss, *On Plato's "Symposium,"* 196–97); above all, *eros* is a kind of *mania* by which the individual, and also the philosopher when this *mania* is truly divine, is possessed (Plato, *Phaedrus* 244a; cf. Strauss, *On Plato's "Symposium,"* 218–19; *WPP*, 32; *JPCM*, 463). For this reason, we cannot follow Tanguay (*Leo Strauss*, 269) when he claims that "when the philosopher privileges the experience of *eros* at the expense of the fear of God, he *chooses* one experience of the human soul among others," concluding that for this reason Strauss's view of philosophy remains trapped in a "decisionistic" perspective. See also Strauss's letter to Seth Benardete on 22 January 1965, quoted in Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 50.

⁴⁸ See again Strauss's letter to Seth Benardete in Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 50.

⁴⁹ *TM*, 205. Cf. Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 47. See also *PAW*, 105, 107.

⁵⁰ *PAW*, 107. For the request of even refuting *faith* in revelation, see Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 23: "If the choice of philosophy is not to rest on an unevitable decision, if its right and its necessity is to be rationally justified, the refutation of faith in revelation [*die Widerlegung des Offenbarungsglaubens*] becomes the indispensable task." However, in light of what we have noted (and if the translation of *Widerlegung des Offenbarungsglaubens* as "refutation of faith in revelation" is precise), this request appears to be an exaggeration (and perhaps a *lapsus calami* by Meier). This is confirmed by the fact that Strauss himself usually demands that philosophy prove the impossibility of revelation, as distinguished from the impossibility of *faith* in revelation. See "Reason and Revelation," 148, 150, 177, 179 including n8; cf. Ghibellini, *Al di là della politica*, 216n236.

correspondence with Scholem.⁵¹ This is the *reason* why, as far as we understand, Strauss can *coherently* end this exchange—and his life with it—on the one hand, agreeing with Scholem that he remains “with the Jews, no matter the price,” though only with the specification that, paraphrasing Aristotle, “Jew is said in many ways” (Ἰουδαῖος πολλαχῶς λέγεται); on the other hand, repeating more than once Averroes’s motto *moriatur anima mea mortem philosophorum*.⁵² Otherwise, his repeatedly affirmed adherence to philosophy and its radical skepticism would be either a folly or his true “noble lie.”⁵³

IV

Against the interpretation I have just put forth, at least one objection can be raised, namely, that the proofs of the necessity of philosophy as outlined above are meant by Strauss to be valid only for the mystical approach to religion and revelation as particularly represented by Kabbalah.

⁵¹ See “Reason and Revelation,” 147, 149, 142, 161–62; cf. *FPP*, 222–23. In my opinion, the necessity of such a refutation of revelation in justifying philosophy (the philosopher “must prove the *impossibility* of revelation”: “Reason and Revelation,” 150), which for Strauss remains even if we consider philosophy as a way of life (see note 45 above), is not properly underlined by Catherine and Michael Zuckert in *The Truth about Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 150–53, esp. 151, nor by Smith in “Philosophy as a Way of Life,” 52–53.

⁵² *GS*, 3:769, 771. See also *JPCM*, 327–28, where Strauss refers to Judaism as “heroic delusion” and “noble dream,” coming to almost equating it, as Steven Smith acutely observes (*Reading Leo Strauss*, 83), with a kind of Platonic *gennaion pseudos* (noble lie).

⁵³ See Stanley Rosen, *The Elusiveness of the Ordinary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 157. Regarding the issue of reason and revelation, we could finally try to summarize it with an either/or alternative: either philosophy is fundamentally incoherent and so impossible in its deeper sense, as it cannot completely account for its premises, as suggested by Rosen; or philosophy can justify itself and, in one way or another, refute revelation, as suggested by Meier. Every compromise solution seems to be not deep enough. As Meier points out, the attribution to Strauss of a “decisionistic” solution of the stalemate between reason and revelation (cf., e.g., Tanguay, *Leo Strauss*, 269, and the more recent, but much less sober, William H. F. Altman, *The German Stranger: Leo Strauss and National Socialism* [Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011], 267) “has to appear all the more paradoxical as no philosopher denied with greater clarity that a blind, unproven decision can ever be a sound foundation for the philosophical life” (Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 23–24). For this reason, I consider Tanguay’s “weak defense of philosophy” (*justification faible de la philosophie*: op. cit., 362; see also 321–48) too weak to be accepted from a point of view as that of Strauss, as it does not solve the problem of the refutation of revelation on which the vindication of philosophy, also intended as zetetic skepticism, has to be based. Nonetheless, the four “interlocked approaches” to the possible refutation of revelation in Strauss sketched by Meier (op. cit., 24–26), though undoubtedly revealing, seem to be not fully convincing: as formulated, they seem either not to properly consider the question of the mysteriousness and omnipotence of God (cf. “Reason and Revelation,” 153–55, 158) or to take the rational explanation of revelation for its refutation (cf. “Reason and Revelation,” 153), or to relegate philosophical reason to an ancillary role. Different might be a fifth argument, alluded to at 20n25, which, in apparent contradiction with Meier’s surrounding affirmations, underlines the imperativeness of an “in-depth analysis of the content of revelation.” In light of what I have stated, for me it depends on how one interprets the “content of revelation,” that is referring to the dogmas or to the medium. See also notes 63 and 66 below. Cf. A. Ghbellini, *Al di là della politica*, 135–50.

Contrary to this objection we have already noticed, following Strauss's letters and Scholem's remarks in *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik*, that the mystical approach—and along with it the validity of the proofs—has to be considered characteristic also of Buber's and Rosenzweig's stance on religion. To confirm this view with reference to Strauss's published writings, let it therefore suffice to quote the already mentioned Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, where, considering Rosenzweig's and Buber's religious "new thinking," but also Heidegger's atheistic one, we read, inter alia: "Every assertion about the absolute experience which says more than that what is experienced is the Presence or the Call, is not the experiencer, is not flesh and blood, is the wholly other, is death or nothingness, is an 'image' or interpretation; that any one interpretation is the simply true interpretation is not known, but 'merely believed.'"⁵⁴ And perhaps even more important, this time with specific reference to Heidegger's interpretation of the "call of conscience": "The very emphasis on the absolute experience as experience compels one to demand that it be made as clear as possible what the experience by itself conveys, that it not be tampered with, that it be carefully distinguished from every interpretation of the experience"⁵⁵—a statement in which we find clearly expressed the intention of thoroughly analyzing the limits of human nature and the cognitive status of its characteristic experience, that is precisely what has to substantiate the proofs of the needfulness of the philosophic way of life as delineated in "Reason and Revelation."⁵⁶

What is fundamental, however, is to point out that once we replace the scattered elements of Strauss's view, what we have noted regarding the refutation of revelation and the justification of philosophy by the critical analysis of the religious experience also seems to affect revelation as interpreted by tradition. On this aspect Strauss is very clear: an interpretation of revelation exclusively based on absolute experience or on interiorization, such as that of Buber or Rosenzweig, is all the more alien to that characteristic of the

⁵⁴ LAM, 235–36. On the topic of absolute or religious experience in the "new thinking" see Tanguay, *Leo Strauss*, 270–301 (esp. 287–288); John J. Ranieri, *Disturbing Revelation: Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and the Bible* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 39–42; and, on the Heideggerian perspective specifically, Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 45–51. As highlighted by Meier, it is important to recognize the influence of Heidegger's analytic of *Existenz* on Strauss's stance on absolute experience and religion, despite the mature Strauss's clear dissociation from Heidegger in the moral field (given Heidegger's refusal of moderation and of the distinction between esoteric and exoteric teaching; see *NRH*, 26) and in the theoretical one (in light of his interpretation of being as *Ereignis* which appears as a secularization of the biblical conception to Strauss; see *RCPR*, 46, *in fine*). Cf. LAM, 237; *FPP*, 88; *GS*, 3:380, 516–17, 770.

⁵⁵ LAM, 236; *GS*, 3:380. Cf. Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 47–50.

⁵⁶ See note 51 above.

orthodox tradition, which, unlike that subjectivistic perspective, emphasizes the objective aspects of revelation—law and cosmology, including the belief in miracles—and relies on the fundamental dogma of “verbal inspiration.”⁵⁷ However, we have to note that from the very beginning, in Strauss’s view, the only way for orthodoxy to withstand philosophy’s attacks is to take an extreme refuge in a radically fideistic, not to say “misologistic,” stance, which essentially verges on a mystical approach to revelation, as both do not recognize the role of reason in dealing with divine things.⁵⁸ This is the reason why, I think, in a letter to Seth Benardete from 1961 Strauss could consider the idea of using as the motto for his book *Socrates and Aristophanes*—undoubtedly, as Meier suggests, a very important theologico-political treatise of Strauss’s—a remark by Calvin that he had paraphrased, although “en pleine ignorance de la chose” (completely ignoring the question), at the beginning of the third chapter of *Die Religionskritik Spinozas*.⁵⁹ In that letter Strauss does not specify which remark he refers to, but as far as I can see one of the most suitable is the following: “Where there is no piety, there is no knowledge of God” (Gottes-Erkenntnis ist nicht da, wo keine Frömmigkeit ist);⁶⁰ and in light of what has been highlighted, it is not difficult to understand that if *any* knowledge of God presupposes piety, then that knowledge, on the grounds of human wisdom (the only wisdom that the Socratic philosopher can con-

⁵⁷ LAM, 235; FPP, 230; cf. Tanguay, *Leo Strauss*, 286–87.

⁵⁸ The adjective “mystical,” like the terms “mystery,” “mysterious” (“Reason and Revelation,” 154: “a mysterious God may well be the God of revelation”), etc., derive from the ancient Greek *mystes*, “initiate into mysteries,” which in its turn comes from *myein*, “to close (the eyes).” In this sense a mystical approach can be generally defined as that which proceeds blindly (especially with reference to intellect and reason, that is to the mind’s eye). This is precisely the way of Calvin as described by Strauss: “Man is therefore in need of better support than that of the natural light. He needs the word of God, as the witness borne by God about himself.... Man is convinced of the authority of Holy Writ by the *inner* testimony of the Holy Spirit. *The same Spirit that spoke through the mouth of the prophets vouches, by being effective in us [in uns wirkend], for the truth of scripture.* Illuminated by the Holy Spirit, we believe that Scripture is from God, and we believe this with a faith that *makes any form of proof superfluous*, and that indeed cannot be supported by proofs, since *divine authority cannot be based on human testimony*” (Leo Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997], 193; GS, 1:248; my emphasis). If only the inner presence of the Holy Spirit, the same who spoke through the mouth of the prophets, can vouch for the truth of the Bible, it is clear that every believer, who feels that presence inside, finds him- or herself in a mystical condition as that represented by the Kabbalist or new-thinking approach. Cf. LAM, 165–66, 254; GS, 3:325.

⁵⁹ Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 27; SA, 19, 30, 33, 45, 52–53, 143.

⁶⁰ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 194; GS, 1:249 (see also 251); cf. GS, 3:379: “But the miracle, according to its meaning, can only be *experienced* on the grounds of faith as a miracle” (Aber das Wunder ist doch seinem Sinn nach nur auf Grund des Glaubens als Wunder zu *erfahren*) (my emphasis). And since revelation itself is a miracle (“Reason and Revelation,” 151), it cannot be *experienced* as “revelation” without previous faith in revelation.

stitutionally understand),⁶¹ is only alleged knowledge, that is, in reality an unverifiable “interpretation” that makes “philosophy necessarily come in, and precisely in the centre.” The ultimate reason for this is that not only the dogma of verbal inspiration “needs not to be accepted,”⁶² but also that the skeptical considerations advanced with reference to the call or absolute experience of the only alleged “eternal Thou” can be reiterated when dealing with that particular religious experience which is prophecy. Not only is what Israel heard at Sinai nothing but the words articulated by the man Moses, but also the prophet, facing an *aleph* which is humanly inaudible qua *experienced* God’s *aleph*, can be seen—and, philosophically speaking, must be seen—as imprisoned in the same cognitive difficulties explicitly underlined by Strauss in the case of the subjective experience of the believer.⁶³ If Maimonides, as Strauss maintains, is a follower of the *falsafa* and of Averroes in particular,⁶⁴ what the “Averroist” Machiavelli⁶⁵ claims—i.e., to quote Strauss’s precise incidental remark, that “one does not hear the words of God but only the words of men”—can also be projected on his medieval enlightenment.⁶⁶

⁶¹ PAW, 105, 107.

⁶² FPP, 88. Strauss’s precise expression is this: “...in case one does not accept verbal inspiration, which one can, but *need* not.” It is important to highlight that this quotation immediately follows this very significant remark: “There is a fundamental difference between the call of God itself and the human formulation of this call; what we face historically is the latter.” What we face historically are precisely the *facta bruta* of revelations, which are then in Strauss’s view no more than human interpretations, also considered as “objective” revelations. Cf. Zuckert and Zuckert, *Truth about Leo Strauss*, 151.

⁶³ LAM, 165–67; FPP, 220, 224–25; RCPR, 252. Regarding prophecy in particular, a theological problem also arises. It concerns the description of God as not only omnipotent and mysterious—a characteristic of God which, in Strauss’s view, is fundamental for the believer in countering natural theology (see “Reason and Revelation,” 154–55)—but also incorporeal. This being the case, and given the fact that such actions as speaking and writing are corporeal and in apparent contrast with God’s incomprehensibility, one clearly encounters a contradiction within the biblical account itself, from which the acceptance of prophecy depends (cf. GS, 2:20). In this perspective, consider LAM, 167: “As Maimonides explains in the *Guide*, God does not use speech in any sense (I 23), and this fact entails *infinite consequences*” (my emphasis); LAM, 177: “Since God does not speak, Maimonides must therefore open the whole question of God’s speaking, writing, and ceasing to speak or to act”; and, above all, LAM, 178–79, where Strauss, following his Maimonides, goes so far as to implicitly identify “the hidden God who spoke to the Patriarchs and to Moses” with “the notion of something that simply does not exist—of a merely imaginary being, the theme of *deceived* and *deceiving* men” (my emphasis; cf. GS, 3:337–38, 341, 553; SPPP, 179; Ghibellini, *Al di là della politica*, 177–83).

⁶⁴ GS, 3:549.

⁶⁵ TM, 175, 203.

⁶⁶ TM, 205. For another hint that the contradiction inherent in the *self*-communication of God qua God has also to be referred to premodern enlightenment (in this case to that of Farabi), see also Leo Strauss, “The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*,” in PAW, 104–8. In particular, if one carefully follows Strauss’s references to Judah Halevi’s text (see especially those indicated at 107nn34, 35 and at 108n37), one realizes that they all revolve around the impossibility of the direct communication between God and human beings. In this context the emphasis seems to be again on the theological

If so, the main difference between this enlightenment and the modern one, precisely started by Machiavelli, turns out to be that the former, by considering the political sphere from the point of view of the philosophers with their “selfish or class interest,” and by maintaining that the distinction between the wise and the vulgar is one of the insuperable limits of politics, does not embark itself, out of the “understandable” but “unapprovable” passion of the “anti-theological ire,” on a campaign of irreligious propaganda.⁶⁷ For this reason—and to keep coherence, only for this reason—the *falasifa*, including Maimonides, could treat prophecy only within a political framework, coming to implicitly identify their revelation, that is, an all-comprehensive divine law, as a form of deception (*pseudos*) which, as the original Platonic one, is considered not only “useful” (*chresimon*), but also “noble” (*gennaion*) from the practical point of view.⁶⁸

side of the problem: as God has the attribute of incorporeity (*Kuzari* II, 1–6), to hear his word, the latter being a corporeal thing (I, 87), clearly appears as a contradiction.

⁶⁷ *WPP*, 43–46; *NRH*, 143; *TM*, 172–73, 296; *PAW*, 17–18, 33–34. Cf. *FPP*, 98. This is fundamentally the reason why, no matter how it criticizes the utopianism of the classics and, under the influence of the biblical view of man as created in the image of God (but also recalling ancient sophistry: see, e.g., *GS*, 3:516, and *GS*, 2:9–10; cf. Leo Strauss, “On a New Interpretation of Plato’s Political Philosophy,” *Social Research* 13, no. 3 [1946]: 335–45), it becomes subservient to action, in Strauss’s view modern philosophy is no doubt a philosophy in the strict sense of the term, contrary to, e.g., Thomism which is for him nothing but *kalâm* or theology (see *PAW*, 97–98; cf. *LAM*, 169, *PAW*, 40–41). In addition, one has to consider that Strauss’s same use of the expression “medieval enlightenment” is in itself indicative of the fact that he sees a fundamental continuity between the modern enlightenment and the premodern one, despite their differences (see Eve Adler, “The Argument of *Philosophy and Law*,” in *Philosophy and Law*, by Leo Strauss [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995], 14). This continuity, still interpreted in *Philosophie und Gesetz* in light of the common search for the “freedom of philosophizing” (*Freiheit des Philosophierens*) (*GS*, 2:88–89), becomes that of “radical unbelief” after the complete disclosure, in the late 1930s, of the esotericism of both the *falasifa* and Maimonides.

⁶⁸ Plato, *Republic* 389b, 414b–c. Cf. *CM*, 102–3; *RCPR*, 68–69, 159–60; Strauss, *On Plato’s “Symposium,”* 93–94. Regarding revelation and prophecy viewed as strictly political phenomena, see *GS*, 2:111–18, 125–26, 196–98, 425; *GS*, 3:382–83; *JPCM*, 463. Cf. *GS*, 2:xviii–xx; Tanguay, *Leo Strauss*, 92–127; David Janssens, *Between Athens and Jerusalem* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 111–14. With reference to the “noble lie,” it seems to me that the interpretation provided in Zuckert and Zuckert, *Truth about Leo Strauss*, 43–44, is too “edifying”: if it is true, in opposition to the reconstructions à la Drury, that the premodern philosophers do not want to rule and just pursue the theoretical life, it is also true that they are like strangers in the city who take care of their “selfish or class interest” (*NRH*, 143; cf. *GS*, 3:568; *CM*, 230; *SA*, 32–33; *PAW*, 17–18). I also consider too “edifying,” as well as misleading, Tanguay’s reconstruction of Strauss’s philosophical perspective as genuinely affected by “the tears of repentance” (op. cit., 347–48) and characterized by the recognition of an “intrinsic cognitive value,” as distinguished from a purely practical, “pedagogic” function, to revelation, in particular the Jewish one (372–373; for the meaning of “pedagogic” in Strauss see, e.g., *NRH*, 158). For Strauss, on the contrary, not only does revelation have no value from the theoretical point of view, but also philosophy, once its esoteric kernel is grasped, turns out to be “as such transpolitical, transreligious and transmoral,” and comparable to a form of “ἀδικία” (injustice) if considered from the point of view of the polis (*JPCM*, 463; *GS*, 3:568; on this fundamental theme let me again make reference to A. Ghibellini, *Al di là della politica*, 23–71).

V

Regarding the relationship between reason and revelation and the practical role of prophecy in Strauss, one has also to recognize that what we have noted above tallies well with his gnoseological view in general, that is, with that “zetetic skepticism” which is as radical in suspending the judgment on what cannot be evidently understood as it affirms the importance, reality, and eternity of the problems raised.⁶⁹ An indication of this compliance is that, when dealing with religious experience and revelation in the already mentioned letter to Löwith on August 15, 1946, in which the metaphor “Jerusalem and Athens” is already used and the opposition between philosophy and revelation clearly established, Strauss ends a very significant statement on the complete blindness of faith in revelation⁷⁰ with the following remark on Husserl’s phenomenological stance: “Husserl told me once, when I asked him about theology: if there is a datum God, we shall describe it.” Before observing that the difficulty arises that “those who *believe* to know something of God deny that he is a describable datum”—that is, the already considered difficulty of radical fideism—he comments on Husserl’s statement, somehow anticipating the position expressed in his letters to Scholem: “This was really [*wahrafft*] philosophic.”⁷¹ Philosophy, that is to say, cannot avoid being, in a certain sense, “idealistic,” though not in the Kantian one.⁷²

⁶⁹ See *WPP*, 11, where Strauss quotes the following paraphrase of Aristotle made by Thomas Aquinas, though interpreting it, contrary to Thomas, in a strictly philosophical sense: “the minimum that can be obtained in the knowledge of the highest things is more desirable than the most certain knowledge one has of the lowest things” (minimum quod potest haberi de cognitione rerum altissimarum, desiderabilius est quam certissima cognitio quae habetur de minimis rebus) (*Summa Theologica* I, 1.5). Cf. Nasser Behnegar, *Leo Strauss, Max Weber, and the Scientific Study of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 33–34.

⁷⁰ *GS*, 3:663. See note 32 above.

⁷¹ *GS*, 3:663–64; my emphasis. Cf. *JPCM*, 460–61. On Strauss’s critical but essentially positive assessment of Husserl, see “The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy,” in Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 136–37; *SPPP*, 34–37; *RCPR*, 28; *GS*, 3:456; *FPP*, 12, 17, and 35 (where Husserl’s “egology” is considered understandable “only as an answer to the Platonic-Aristotelian question regarding the *Nous*”). Cf. Zuckert and Zuckert, *Truth about Leo Strauss*, 86–87, and K. H. Green’s comments in *JPCM*, 68–70. In very general terms, one could explain Strauss’s interest in Husserl by referring to the latter’s critique of modern science and philosophy, which, contrary to Heidegger’s radically historicist “existentialism,” still stays within a fully “theoretical” framework, with the consequence of remaining open to the possibility of philosophy as originally understood, i.e., as *theoria* (see *FPP*, 63).

⁷² “Reason and Revelation,” 176–77. The specific sense of this “idealism” derives from the literal meaning of the Greek term *idea*: the form, the abstract concept, which can be seen (*idein* means to see, like the Latin *videre*) with the mind’s eye, that is through *noesis*. For Strauss, Kant’s transcendental idealism, based on the distinction between the phenomenon and the thing-in-itself, is an “*attack* on the

It is true that Strauss recognizes the legitimacy of Heidegger's critique of Husserl's phenomenology (which in its turn was a critique of the neo-Kantian theory under which Strauss himself received his first training) because it is based on the interpretation of the objects as "merely sensibly perceived things," as distinguished from *pragmata* (the things viewed as already nonneutral human affairs, i.e., in an originally practical perspective).⁷³ But as it is shown by his interpretation of Heidegger's analytic of existence with particular reference to religious experience,⁷⁴ Strauss tries to remain within a form of "premodern" idealism, that is, an idealism which is critical of the Cartesian dogmatic skepticism (based on the inward analysis of consciousness) as distinguished from the Socratic *dialegesthai*.⁷⁵ For this reason, Strauss is no more obliged to follow Heidegger than he is Kojève in their radical historicism. Against this perspective—fatal for philosophy even understood as only a zetetic way of life, as it denies the very possibility of fundamental and *eternal* problems—he tries to counter Heidegger precisely on his ground.⁷⁶ To the radically historicist assertion that "the highest form of knowledge is finite knowledge of finiteness," an assertion that in Strauss's reconstruction derives directly from Heidegger's analytics of existence, he objects: "Yet how can finiteness be seen as finiteness if it is not seen in the light of infinity? Or in other words, it was said that we cannot know the whole; but does this not necessarily presuppose *awareness* of the whole?"⁷⁷ And referring to the terms used by William Ernest Hocking, who, in Strauss's paraphrase, claims that "*désespoir* [despair] presupposes *espoir* [hope], and *espoir* presupposes love," he adds: "Is then not love"—we could here also use the Greek term *eros*, to make Strauss's intention more explicit—"rather than despair the fundamental phenomenon? Is therefore not that which man ultimately loves, God,

'idealism' of classical philosophy," since, by establishing the complete inaccessibility of the latter (and with this by assuming, by way of secularization, the biblical view; cf. *JPCM*, 393), it denies philosophy the possibility of attaining the being in itself. Following Heidegger's analysis, in this context Strauss maintains that the idealism of the classics relies on the identification of "being" and "evidently knowable." But, as we will see, this seems not to be his last word on this fundamental issue.

⁷³ *RCPR*, 28–29; *SPPP*, 31.

⁷⁴ *FPP*, 88.

⁷⁵ Strauss, "The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy," 136; cf. R. L. Velkley, *Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 3, 134.

⁷⁶ Thomas Pangle correctly highlights the importance of Strauss's confrontation with Heidegger, speaking of "Strauss's lifelong grappling with the awesome challenge of Martin Heidegger—in Strauss's eyes the greatest thinker of the twentieth century and the most powerful advocate of a truly radical historicism and relativism" (*RCPR*, xxix; cf. Velkley, *Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises*, 29). On Strauss and Heidegger see also Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss*, 108–30.

⁷⁷ *RCPR*, 38 (my emphasis).

the ultimate ground?”⁷⁸ That Strauss has philosophy in mind here, as a still open, not to say necessary, path, seems to be confirmed by his conclusion, in explicit disagreement with Heidegger’s view: “The objections mentioned would seem to lead to the consequence that one cannot escape metaphysics: Plato and Aristotle.”⁷⁹

This conclusion is also suggested in a very significant statement which can be found in “The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy”: making reference to the Greek understanding of *theoria* (undoubtedly a central theme for Heidegger as well), and precisely within the consideration of the problem inherent in the contradiction of the various divine laws, Strauss points out that the philosophical solution of this difficulty consists in embarking “on a free quest for the beginnings, for the first things, for the principles,” once the dimension of divine codes is altogether transcended. Now, with reference to this quest, conducive to “what is by nature good, as distinguished from what is good merely by convention,” Strauss notes that it “proceeds through sense perception, reasoning, and what they [the philosophers] called *noēsis*, which is literally translated by ‘understanding’ or ‘intellect,’ and which we can perhaps translate a little bit more cautiously by ‘awareness,’ an awareness with the mind’s eye as distinguished from sensible awareness.”⁸⁰

The final remark on the alternative translation of *noesis* is all the more important. As we have just seen, “awareness of the whole” is precisely what, in the previously quoted passage from “An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism” (I have intentionally emphasized that term), is “necessarily presupposed” by the knowledge that one cannot know the whole. And very significant here, regarding the unavoidable “idealistic” character of philosophy, even though combined with the recognition of the “weakness of reason” (*astheneia tou logou*),⁸¹ is the attribution of this fundamental awareness to the mind’s eye. However, being just an awareness, that is, something different from understanding or intellect, the *noesis* as interpreted by Strauss

⁷⁸ Ibid. Regarding the philosophical relationship between love and the divine, as distinguished from the biblical view based on fear, see Strauss’s very interesting letter to Seth Benardete, dated 22 January 1965, quoted in Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 50.

⁷⁹ RCPR, 38.

⁸⁰ FPP, 219.

⁸¹ “Reason and Revelation,” 176–77. The eventual recognition of the weakness of reason is not, however, the recognition of its “impotence,” as in modern philosophy under the influence of the biblical tradition (cf. Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963], 3, 80–81, 92–93, 107, 158–61; GS, 3:344–45).

(at least this seems to be his aim) shows itself to be able to withstand Heidegger's critique of the ancient Greek philosophers' understanding of Being as "always present" and "ready at hand."⁸²

It is however by making reference to a statement of Strauss's which has understandably become famous and is nowadays often quoted that we can fully comprehend the strict relationship between Strauss's interpretation of the reason-revelation problem and his zetetic skepticism. The statement, not by accident recurrent within a critical assessment of Kojève's historicism, is the following:

The decisive premise of Kojève's argument is that philosophy "implies necessarily 'subjective certainties' which are not 'objective truths' or, in other words, which are prejudices." But philosophy in the original meaning of the term is nothing but knowledge of one's ignorance. The "subjective certainty" that one does not know coincides with the "objective truth" of that certainty. But one cannot know that one does not know without knowing what one does not know. What Pascal said with anti-philosophic intent about the impotence of both dogmatism and skepticism, is the only possible justification of philosophy which as such is neither dogmatic nor skeptic, and still less "decisionist," but zetetic (or skeptic in the original sense of the term). Philosophy as such is nothing but genuine awareness of the problems, i.e. of the fundamental and comprehensive problems.⁸³

Now, from this momentous quotation we can obtain at least two confirmations. The first is that, from the gnoseological point of view, Strauss assumes a kind of weak "idealism" which allows him to maintain a fully philosophical, ahistorical stance, at least in the form of a zetetic skepticism. In this perspective, the central sentence—a sentence which not only calls to mind the Socratic attitude, but also seems to be reminiscent of Hus-

⁸² *RCPR*, 43; cf. *FPP*, 76, and *NRH*, 32, *in fine*, where the expression "awareness of the fundamental problems" recurs precisely within a critical comparison between "philosophy in its original, Socratic sense" and historicism, "theoretical" (Hegel and his interpreter Kojève) and "existentialist" (Heidegger).

⁸³ *OT*, 196; see also "Reason and Revelation," 147–48; *WPP*, 11; *NRH*, 32. The zetetic character of genuine Socratic philosophy according to Strauss, with its "weak" metaphysical requirements, is very clearly outlined by Tanguay (*Leo Strauss*, 360–63). As noted above (see note 53), I only think that his "justification *faible* de la philosophie" (weak justification of philosophy), which relies on the intrinsic pleasurable of the theoretical life, no matter how Sisyphean it could be when answers, as distinguished from questions or problems, are considered, is only one part of its complete justification in Strauss's view, the other part being the demonstration that revelation, viewed as the only alternative able to account for the contradictions between the various divine laws, is impossible. Cf. "Reason and Revelation," 148–49.

serl's phenomenological stance—is that “the ‘subjective certainty’ that one does not know coincides with the ‘objective truth’ of that certainty.”

The second confirmation—the most important one as regards the theme under consideration here, i.e., the opposition between reason and revelation—is that it is precisely Strauss's zetetic skepticism which stands at the basis of his interpretation of religious experience and revelation, and in the end of the problem of God: the subjective certainty that one does not *know* what God is coincides with the *objective truth* of that certainty. If so, one must suspend judgment on the various interpretations of this comprehensive problem; that is to say, one has to transcend the different traditional divine laws as merely *facta bruta*, inaccessible to reason, and to fathom that *x* which, as the only objective certainty for human experience, remains at the basis of all interpretations. In other words, the certainty that the human being is not the maker of his or her mortal lot or the awareness of a wholly other, combined with the certainty that every articulation of that awareness is just a human interpretation, not only preliminarily justifies as “the *right way of life*” the life devoted to questioning, but also makes necessary the “all-important question which is coeval with philosophy although the philosophers do not frequently pronounce it—the question *quid sit deus*.”⁸⁴

⁸⁴ *CM*, 241. See also *GS*, 1:249.

Joshua Parens, *Maimonides and Spinoza: Their Conflicting Views of Human Nature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012, 226 pp., \$35.00 (hardcover).

Rethinking the Relation between Maimonides and Spinoza

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In a certain sense, the difficulties inherent in writing about Maimonides and Spinoza mirror the difficulties inherent in the way the two thinkers organize their most difficult texts. Maimonides tells us, in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, both that he only presents the “chapter headings” of certain topics and that we ought not expect said topics to be found in the chapters claiming to discuss them.¹ Similarly, that Spinoza’s *Ethics* is presented in “geometric fashion” suggests that the understanding of the text need not follow the order in which the text is written. To write about either thinker means having to assume the burden of ministering to his thought in ways that he did not. Writing about both doubles the burden.

Given this situation one can perhaps assess the significance of Joshua Parens’s new book, *Maimonides and Spinoza: Their Conflicting Views of Human Nature*, through a series of counterfactual statements: had Parens written a thoughtful book on Maimonides, it would have been enough; had Parens written a thoughtful book on both Maimonides and Spinoza, it would have been enough; had Parens produced a “defense of [Strauss’s] overall interpretation” of the two thinkers (2),² it would have been enough; had Parens

¹ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 1:6, 10.

² Parenthetical page numbers refer to Parens’s book.

fought against the interpretive procedure of “rational reconstruction” exemplified by the Spinoza commentaries of Edwin Curley and Jonathan Bennett,³ it would have been enough; had Parens sought to recover the Spinoza essays of Richard Kennington⁴ and David Lachterman,⁵ it would have been enough; and had Parens sought to creatively apply Muhsin Mahdi’s important interpretation of Alfarabi⁶ (concerning practical intellect) to Maimonides, it would have been enough. That Parens has embarked on all of these in his new book attests to the magnanimity of his ambition and the seriousness of his purpose. In short, Parens has delivered a book of philosophy in the form of “transhistorical history of philosophy.”⁷ It is as much a meditation on the question concerning the way human nature is articulated—within the dialogues between both the ancients and the moderns and Jerusalem and Athens—as it is a piece of Maimonides and Spinoza scholarship.

In addition to this, Parens has made his intention quite clear by locating the surface of his text precisely on the surface of the actual book. The jacket cover depicts a juxtaposition of busts of both Maimonides and Spinoza that tells the entire story: An elevated Maimonides, standing tall, looking straight ahead (out at the Jewish people? the polis? the diaspora? the intelligible objects?), appears confident and wise. A submerged Spinoza, hunched over, looking down, appears at best to be unconfident, and at worst to be setting his sights low. Parens has here found a set of images that reminds the reader of Strauss’s oft-quoted statement (not coincidentally from his Preface to *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*): “It is safer to try to understand the low in light of the high than the high in light of the low.”⁸ Maimonides is depicted as taking the safe and prudent course out of concern for the people; Spinoza, in sharp contrast, is making the risky (and characteristically modern) move of envisioning the high in terms of the low. This juxtaposition of images is

³ Edwin Curley, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics: An Essay in Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969); Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s “Ethics”* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1984).

⁴ Richard Kennington, “Analytic and Synthetic Methods in Spinoza’s *Ethics*,” in *On Modern Origins: Essays in Early Modern Philosophy*, by Richard Kennington, ed. Pamela Kraus and Frank Hunt (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 205–28.

⁵ David R. Lachterman, “The Physics of Spinoza’s Ethics,” in *Spinoza: New Perspectives*, ed. Robert W. Shahan and J. I. Biro (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), 71–111.

⁶ Muhsin S. Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

⁷ Seth Benardete, *The Archaeology of the Soul: Platonic Readings of Ancient Poetry and Philosophy*, ed. Ronna Burger and Michael Davis (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s, 2012), 375.

⁸ Leo Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, trans. E. M. Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 2.

presented discursively throughout the entirety of the book starting with the first paragraph of the introduction: “One of the key objectives of this book is to challenge the view that Maimonides is in any significant sense a protomodern. I contend that the main value to be derived from studying Maimonides is to gain distance from our own world and viewpoint, which has been so deeply shaped by the thought of Spinoza” (1). The key commentators Parens seeks to challenge in his text are Harry Wolfson, Warren Zev Harvey (whose teacher was Shlomo Pines), and Heidi Ravven (whose teacher was Alexander Altmann) (2).⁹ It is a family disagreement, to be sure, but one which transcends historiological concerns in order to present competing philosophical visions of human nature.¹⁰

One ought to take Parens utterly seriously when he claims that “my reading of these two authors is deeply influenced by Strauss’s—indeed, could even be considered a defense of his overall interpretation” (2). This lends added interest to his text insofar as it asks about the premises of Maimonides’s and Spinoza’s thought, but Strauss’s as well. It is no secret that Strauss’s thought can be said in many ways—which way, and in which sense, of Strauss’s overall interpretation of Maimonides and Spinoza does Parens affirm? One might put the point in an exaggerated form (for the sake of brevity) by construing Parens to be showing that [1] the distinction between Maimonides and Spinoza briefly recapitulates the more general distinction of the ancients and the moderns, and [2] this distinction opens the door for showing how and why Spinoza lacks Maimonides’s appreciation of the distinction between Jerusalem and Athens. Thus construed, Parens remains faithful both to Strauss’s sets of distinctions as well as his procedure of ascending from the historicist concern (Maimonides and Spinoza *simpliciter*) to the philosophical concern (which view of human nature is preferable).

Unless I have misunderstood him, Parens also understands Strauss as not simply affirming and approving of Maimonides’s premodern rationalism, but in fact *preferring it* to Spinoza’s modern rationalism. One

⁹ See, e.g., Warren Zev Harvey, “A Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19, no. 2 (1981): 151–72; Heidi Ravven, “Some Thoughts on What Spinoza Learned from Maimonides about the Prophetic Imagination, Part One: Maimonides on Prophecy and the Imagination,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 39, no. 4 (2001): 193–214. I learned about the respective lineages of these commentators through personal correspondence over the years.

¹⁰ The familial nature of this disagreement comes to sight in, e.g., certain statements of Wolfson that (despite the radically different philosophical horizon) find analogues in Strauss. See, e.g., Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 20, 24–25, 27–28.

would have a hard time disproving this view in Strauss's work, especially when one considers Strauss's statements to the effect that Spinoza was "extraordinarily bold" in expressing his true views about religion in the *Theological-Political Treatise*,¹¹ and that "Maimonides' rationalism is the true natural model, the standard to be carefully protected from any distortion, and thus the stumbling-block on which modern rationalism falls."¹²

Yet Parens does not turn his text into a simple exegesis of Strauss. He turns to those admirers of Strauss who have explicitly dealt with Spinoza's *Ethics* (which, contrary to Strauss, is also Parens's focus)—Lachterman and Kennington.¹³ At this point we can say that both figures interpret Spinoza squarely as an early modern thinker on par with Bacon and Descartes. For Parens, the importance of Kennington's article can be stated as follows:¹⁴ Although he purports to write the *Ethics* by means of the "geometric method," Spinoza actually writes geometrically in Part 1 and analytically in Part 2 (starting in Proposition 13). This procedure constitutes a reversal of the usual order of presentation (analysis constituting the way of discovery via "parts," synthesis constituting the way of knowledge of the "whole"). This reversal leads the attentive reader to suspect that Spinoza is writing esoterically, and this is precisely what Kennington argues. The synthetic beginning serves to mask the bridge in Part 2 of the *Ethics* occurring at Proposition 13—referred to by Kennington and Parens as the "Physical Treatise" and by Lachterman as the "Physical Digression." This "treatise/digression" contains Spinoza's explication of God as nothing other than the laws of nature; Spinoza is, therefore, a modern materialist à la Bacon and Descartes.¹⁵ This would place Spinoza's thought concerning human nature either in the political Enlightenment camp of progressive (and perhaps

¹¹ Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 183.

¹² Leo Strauss, *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors*, trans. Eve Adler (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 21.

¹³ Parens dedicates a useful appendix to Kennington's Spinoza essay. Because Parens's interpretation of Spinoza is so informed by Kennington's essay, I believe that (rather than treat that appendix as a separate entity) it would be more helpful to the reader to summarize its contents prior to and during my discussion of Parens's chapters on Maimonides and Spinoza when relevant.

¹⁴ Unless otherwise noted, I here present a summary of Parens, *Maimonides and Spinoza*, 193–212.

¹⁵ "If God or immanent causality is nothing more than the laws of nature describing transitive causality, then the cleavage Kennington identifies between part 1 (a whole without parts) and part 2 (parts without a whole) breaks apart, leaving part 2 standing on its own. Such laws of nature, or part 2's common notions are less important than the particulars they produce. Contrary to nearly all of the secondary literature on Spinoza, Kennington enables us to see that behind the contemplative façade of Spinoza's concern with God lies a far greater focus on the determination of particular things. Spinoza is no more a throwback to medieval concern with the divine than is Bacon" (211–12).

unending) development or in the scientific Enlightenment camp of unending predictability of events. Kennington's last words on the subject are: "Nature [for Spinoza] is either unilinear development or eternal return of the same."¹⁶ Lachterman's essays on Spinoza express largely the same view. The tendency to view "Maimonides' *derash* [as], at bottom, Spinoza's *peshat*" is incorrect.¹⁷ Spinoza "belongs squarely and self-consciously to the tradition of...the new, mechanistic physics."¹⁸ For this reason, "the Spinozistic *leges et regulae naturae* are not at home in Maimonides' thought."¹⁹

Where is it precisely, then, that commentators like Wolfson, Pines, Harvey, and Ravven have gone astray? For Parens, the error lies in either [1] the interpretation of Maimonides's innovations as leading to modernity²⁰ or [2] the interpretation of Spinoza as being (in any relevant sense) the "last of the medievals." So when Wolfson claims that "all [Spinoza] did was to reinstate, with some modification, the old principles of classical Greek philosophy" in the manner of the medieval thinkers,²¹ Parens takes issue. Harvey's similar claim that Spinoza "was the last of the mediaeval Maimonideans," that "he was, if you will, a decadent Maimonidean, as one might expect from the end of the line, but he was nonetheless a Maimonidean,"²² provokes analogous concern from Parens. Finally, when Ravven holds that the major difference between the two thinkers is only that "for Maimonides...the Bible [both] serves to institutionalize the rich virtuous life that is the highest goal possible for the masses and appropriate to society as a whole, [and] also points beyond itself by offering a glimpse of the theoretical mission of intellectual virtue that is the proper end of the few [while] for Spinoza...the

¹⁶ Kennington, "Analytic and Synthetic Methods," 225.

¹⁷ David R. Lachterman, "Laying Down the Law: The Theological-Political Matrix of Spinoza's Physics," in *Leo Strauss's Thought: Toward a Critical Engagement*, ed. Alan Udoff (Boulder, CO: Rienner, 1991), 124.

¹⁸ Lachterman, "The Physics of Spinoza's Ethics," 75. At the end of his essay, Lachterman simultaneously suggests and dismisses the possibility of understanding both [1] "laws of nature" as expressing something like a "field of force" and [2] geometry as a "function of the play of forces" as a "deliciously seductive anachronism" (*ibid.*, 103). For a response and critique of this dismissal, see Jeffrey Bernstein, "The Ethics of Spinoza's Physics," *North American Spinoza Society Monographs* 10 (2002): 3–17.

¹⁹ David R. Lachterman, "Laying Down the Law," 140.

²⁰ Shlomo Pines, "Truth and Falsehood versus Good and Evil: A Study in Jewish and General Philosophy in Connection with the *Guide of the Perplexed*, I, 2," in *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 95–157, as cited in Parens, *Maimonides and Spinoza*, 4n8.

²¹ Harry Austryn Wolfson, "Spinoza and the Religion of the Past," in *Religious Philosophy: A Group of Essays by Harry Austryn Wolfson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 269.

²² Harvey, "A Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean," 172.

ethical doctrine and virtuous society envisioned in the Bible addresses only practice,”²³ this strikes Parens as failing to address the fundamental differences in Maimonides’s and Spinoza’s respective philosophical construals of human nature.

Against these views, Parens seeks [1] to argue both that Maimonides was less innovative, and that Spinoza was less traditional, than otherwise supposed, as well as [2] to raise the following question: “What if it were the case that the theoretical innovations of modernity were in one way or another misbegotten? Perhaps then Maimonides’s lack of theoretical radicality might prove to be an asset” (4). In this question, one sees the particularity of Parens’s debt to Strauss: Parens takes up the interpretation of Strauss that holds that modernity is a complete and radical rejection of pre-modern understandings of philosophy (and, therefore, human nature). One might, at this point, ask whether a premodern understanding of philosophy is in any affirmative sense transferable to moderns (even at the level of single individuals).²⁴ Parens appears reticent on this question. One thing is certain: for Parens, such transferability does not occur through Spinoza’s thought—except perhaps by means of negation.

Chapter 1, “Desire (*Shahwa*) and Spiritedness (*Ghadab*) vs. *Conatus*,” deals with the question whether all human passions can and ought to be “traced to a single source (Spinoza) or are they irreducible to fewer than two sources (Maimonides)?” (16). Like Kennington, Parens views Spinoza’s *Ethics* as (in Cartesian fashion) aiming “to discover the *mathesis universalis*” (20)—that universal medium (be it understood as mathematical symbolism or more generally as “method”) which will allow for a complete demonstration of all phenomena in their thoroughgoing unity. This, for Parens, is why the *Ethics* utilizes the geometric form: “Unlike the *Guide*, the *Ethics* strives for the compulsory character of deductive argument” (22). This striving for a unified and uniform method is, for Parens, “to some extent obvious—why else would he write a work titled *Ethics* that includes metaphysical and physical parts, unless he held that one method is possible for all of science?” (83). It

²³ Heidi Ravven, “Some Thoughts on What Spinoza Learned from Maimonides on the Prophetic Imagination, Part Two: Spinoza’s Maimonideanism,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 39, no. 3 (2001): 401. Cf. Harvey, “A Portrait,” 172.

²⁴ Cf. Plato, *Menexenus* 240d2–240e; Alfarabi, “The Book of Letters,” in *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Muhammad Ali Khalidi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 21; Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 82, 82n3.

is this “unification of method” which “runs counter to the premodern stress on the ineliminable multiplicity of being underwritten by forms” (84).

The unifying passion that serves as the analogue to Spinoza’s employment of the geometric method is *conatus*—the desire to preserve, and persevere in, one’s being, and for Parens, this is more than just an innate tendency.²⁵ Unlike Maimonides’s construal of human nature, which (in good Platonic and Aristotelian fashion) is rooted both in desire and in anger/spiritedness (thus allowing for moral and intellectual improvement), Spinoza’s rendition is reductive and deterministic (21). For Parens, this has drastic consequences for living the philosophical life: “The old erotic, educative story about philosophy must be supplanted by a far colder and ‘more realistic’ story: love of wisdom is the endeavor to preserve oneself, even if by other, more complex means” (22). One might, on this account, even go so far as to wonder whether a contemplative life is at all possible in Spinoza’s modern construal of human nature.

In keeping with the unity/plurality distinction which Parens points to between Spinoza and Maimonides, is the question of the “speaking voice” present in each text. The *Guide* is a dialogue between Maimonides and his student Joseph (27). This means that its very texture is pedagogic: Maimonides makes use of desire and anger/spiritedness in order to help Joseph’s moral and intellectual ascent; he also “rein[s] in desire” when he finds it necessary to do so (28). Moreover, since the *Guide* is a written text, it carries with it the memory of Plato’s famous statements about the dangers of writing (in, e.g., *Phaedrus*). In other words, Maimonides is communicating one thing to Joseph and another to the routinely nonphilosophic readers of the *Guide*. While Parens does not say as much, the reader is led to the conclusion that the style of *Ethics* is the result of Spinoza’s attempt to reconceive the root of human passion in a uniform and more nonpurposive manner. If all other desires are products of the imagination rather than of reason (25, 45), and if human passion (rationally conceived) ultimately amounts to *conatus*, it follows that [1] human passion amounts to “compulsion and force” (22), and [2] the possibility of human aggression due to differing aims and ways of life can be averted by dispelling products of the imagination and replacing them with reason (45). That the discussion of *conatus* does not occur before Part Three of the *Ethics* suggests to Parens that Spinoza’s interest is less traditionally educative than it is coercive or compulsory (22).

²⁵ “*Conatus* [in Spinoza] is the force ‘behind’ all being and becoming—which really is to say that it is that force itself. Ultimately, *conatus* is the efficient cause of all activity whether viewed physically, metaphysically, or epistemologically” (19).

About what does Maimonides seek to educate and Spinoza seek to compel? Following Strauss, Parens holds that the *Guide* “intends to establish the belief in God’s incorporeality as a belief upon which all Jews should come to agree....In the process, he appeals to philosophic views without the readers’ necessarily detecting them” (28). Differently stated, by beginning with a root belief of Judaism and moving the reader towards concern with the contemplative life, the *Guide* “is in the first instance enlightened *kalām*, [while] in the second instance it is political science or political philosophy”;²⁶ this, perhaps, shows that Maimonides’s “heart was in Jerusalem” just as “his head was in Athens.”²⁷ In sharp contrast, by [1] holding universals to be merely products of the imagination rather than reason (48), and by [2] illustrating the rational conception of God (as given in the Physical Treatise) as amounting to “an array of the laws of nature” consisting ultimately of “the ratio of bodies in motion and rest” (49), Spinoza seeks to compel his readers to construe God as nothing other than “the matrix of physical causes” (50). Even Spinoza’s third kind of knowledge (i.e., intuition, *intellectus*) attests to this insofar as it remains a knowledge “of particulars” (50). In short, while Parens’s Spinoza (in good early modern fashion) employs a uniform and universally applicable method, it does not (and cannot) for all that bring about knowledge of the whole.

Chapter 2, “Veneration vs. Equality,” traces the movement by which Spinoza replaces Maimonides’s emphasis on veneration/wonder with an emphasis on equality. Parens continues his reading of Spinoza as an early modern thinker by noting that “According to Bacon, wonder is the experience of premodern man before the ceaseless cycles of eternal nature. ...Of course, Spinoza does not declare forthrightly that veneration is bad—though he implies as much by the end of Part 3 by doubting whether wonder even qualifies as an affect” (51–52). For Parens, this too is a mark of Spinoza’s fundamental rejection of premodern thought.²⁸ Whereas Maimonides’s emphasis on veneration and wonder expresses and teaches a humility in the face of what one cannot know, Spinoza’s refusal to acknowledge the limits of

²⁶ Joshua Parens, “Escaping the Scholastic Paradigm: The Dispute between Strauss and His Contemporaries about How to Approach Islamic and Jewish Medieval Philosophy,” in *Encountering the Medieval in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. James A. Diamond and Aaron W. Hughes (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 223.

²⁷ Aviezer Ravitzky, “Maimonides: Esotericism and Educational Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, ed. Kenneth Seeskin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 315.

²⁸ “That wonder’s main consequence is not vigorous action but contemplation is both the intention of Aristotle and the target of early modern attack....Veneration feeds humility. Spinoza’s democratic teaching is diametrically opposed to such submission to authority” (52).

human cognition amounts to what one might call a “democratic arrogance.” This arrogance is of a piece with Spinoza’s replacement of the (divinely oriented) contemplative life, as the highest human life, with the (humanly oriented) practical life.²⁹ Thus, Spinoza’s replacement of veneration/wonder and contemplation with equality and praxis correlates with his replacement of “theocracy” by “democracy”—he has substituted old values or prejudices for “the new prejudices of the new liberal democratic state” (56).

Parens speaks unequivocally: “With the demise of wonder and veneration comes the rise of materialism” (61). The replacement of the contemplative life (oriented as it is by the divine which eludes human cognition) by practical life can only mean the substitution of the sense of human limits with a sense of human perfectibility. This perfectibility, given that it is a practical virtue, can only take the body (and not the soul or mind) as its *topos*: “If form is nothing but a constellation of bodies (2P13lem4),³⁰ then how can soul, thought, or intellect be more than an epiphenomenon of such a constellation?” (61). That Spinoza does not announce this effect of his substitution is simply another example of the esoteric character of the *Ethics* (as well as of other early modern works): “Works like Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy* and Spinoza’s *Ethics* are...Trojan horses. That is, they present themselves as fully compatible with premodern philosophy while thoroughly undermining that very philosophy” (57). The major difference, however, does not go unnoticed by the careful reader: “Bacon, Descartes, and Spinoza form a united front against premodern wonder at formal wholes.... Conatus is incompatible with a desire to know natural wholes. For Spinoza, souls or forms are imagined because of a prejudgment or anticipation that a mere composite individual is somehow more than a composite” (60). But (as mentioned above) “the [Spinozan] intellect’s supposed ability to perceive this unity in body flies in the face of the Physical Treatise” (63). “God is the laws of nature (*Natura naturans*) and includes ‘within’ Him the particular beings that are the expression of those laws (*Natura naturata*) (1P29)” (74). This means that, for Spinoza, the attribute of extension is not simply one attribute among other equal attributes of God, but rather is granted a distinct, if tacit,

²⁹ “[Spinoza’s] use of the opposition between democracy and theocracy in the closing chapters of the *Theologico-Political Treatise* (as well as his *Political Treatise*) establishes his credentials as a philosophical proponent of liberal democracy. To break free from the hold of premodern political elitism, Spinoza links that elitism to theocracy and throws his lot in with democracy and the people” (56).

³⁰ I.e., *Ethics*, Part 2, Proposition 13, Lemma 4; likewise throughout this review (a *D* in these abbreviations means “Definition”; an *s* means “Scholium”; and “app” means “Appendix”).

priority: “Spinoza is more deeply materialist in his conception of both God and human being than he is often thought to be” (54).

Chapter 3, “Forms vs. Laws of Nature,” is in a certain sense the heart of the book, insofar as, for Parens, Spinoza’s substitution of laws of nature in place of Maimonidean intellectual forms constitutes the greatest break with premodern conceptions of human beings and philosophy: “The main difference between a ‘form’ and a ‘law of nature’ is that the former is, above all, an object of intellectual intuition; the latter is a (discursive) description most recognizable eventually in formulas such as $E = mc^2$ ” (76). Not only is perception of intellectual forms “its own reward” (76)—in the sense of the Aristotelian “activity” which needs no other end outside of itself—but such perception additionally indicates the priority of intellect, soul, and the contemplative life. The perception of the laws of nature can only be a practical activity insofar as it is a rational and instrumental activity. This is a strong and innovative reading of Spinoza on Parens’s part—effectively, he argues that Spinozan intellectual intuition is not in any significant sense different from reason; while it may be the case that reason indicates generality and (Spinozan) intellect indicates particularity, the two express an alienation from, and rejection of, premodern perception of wholes.³¹ Hence, for Parens, the conception of Spinoza as “the last of the medievals” has to do with his inability “to part with deduction as the preferred method of premodern science” (80) and not his preserving of intellect/understanding as higher than reason (in contradistinction, e.g., to Kant).³²

For Parens, it is his materialism—here understood as the ontological coincidence of God and (the laws of) nature—which allows Spinoza to collapse the premodern distinction between the order of being and the order of knowing: “The coincidence of the two orders leads to and supports Spinoza’s corporeal account of God, as well as the deterministic account of God and man that flows from it” (85). Again the reader sees that the Spinozan attribute of extension, when applied to God, is prioritized over any

³¹ Ratios of bodily motion and rest, therefore, “can be formulated by a law of nature. [They] cannot be intuited intellectually. . . . To be truly capable of being intuited, something needs to be a whole or unity that transcends numerical ratio. *Ratio*, as the Latin of *logos*, is characterized essentially by discursivity, not intuition” (78).

³² One of Kant’s signal innovations, with respect to the issue of human cognition, is to reverse the epistemological priority of reason (*Vernunft*) and understanding (*Verstand*). In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant construes reason as the systematic unity of principles, while he relegates understanding to a subsidiary role concerned specifically with the production and construction of empirical/scientific cognition.

other attributes. Moreover, since wholes are ultimately intellectual and not corporeal, Spinoza's ontology amounts to a nominalism of particulars. One might think that this is a similarity with Maimonides (who devotes the entire first book of the *Guide* to illustrating the equivocality of language, and who says in the *Eight Chapters* that souls are of individuals),³³ but this is incorrect on Parens's account. Maimonides's ontology only appears nominalist if one forgets the radical difference between human cognition and divine cognition; humans know things posterior to their creation—that is, one first comes to perceive particulars, with universals arising in the soul only subsequently;³⁴ divine cognition, on the other hand, is precisely what causes things to be (105). Therefore, species do not exist only in human cognition; they also exist in divine cognition. Or better, it is precisely because it is a characteristic of human cognition that it must always already be a characteristic of divine cognition (105). Moreover, for Maimonides, this is less a metaphysical point than a claim referring to providence.³⁵ In short, by allowing room for particulars and universals in his account, Maimonides is able to explain how humans admit of a different and higher level of perfection and providence than other living things. By extension, it also suggests that there is room for differing levels of perfection and providence within the human realm.

Chapter 4, "Freedom vs. Determinism," provides Parens's account of Maimonides as an advocate of human freedom and Spinoza as an advocate of determinism. That Spinoza's account of freedom is not transcendental or unconditional (again, contra Kant) is clear; one has only to recall Spinoza's definition of freedom as existing from the necessity of one's own nature alone (1D7) to see that whatever Spinoza means by freedom, it is not pure autonomy and self-determination. Parens's claim, however, is that Spinozan freedom is absent in Spinoza because he fails to admit any distinction between potency (matter) and act (form).³⁶ While not "naïvely fatalistic"

³³ Moses Maimonides, *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, ed. Raymond L. Weiss and Charles Butterworth (New York: Dover, 1975), 61–62.

³⁴ Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* 100b4.

³⁵ "Maimonides is not attempting to deny the reality of species, or rather, forms. Rather, he is trying to insinuate some notion of particular providence into an account of divine providence for human beings that so far has highlighted the connection between human intellectual perfection and divine providence (3.17–end)...Maimonides' intention is to highlight...the inequality in God's providence for human beings, as opposed to his species-wide providence for other living things" (104).

³⁶ "Without form, there can be no choice between good actuality and the many bad actualities.... Unless one maintains these distinctions, between potency and actuality (or form), there cannot be any room for possibility.... One thing is amply evident when we turn to Spinoza: he has no room for the Aristotelian space between potency and act. That space has been eliminated along with the demise of form and actuality. As conatus ascends, the distinction between potency and act fades away" (124–25).

(125), Spinoza is committed to a type of determinism (in keeping with the trajectory of his thought as exemplified in the *Physical Treatise*) that makes a robust conception of freedom impossible. The matter can also be seen from the standpoint of Spinoza's conception of passive and active affects. If Spinozan freedom (as articulated in Parts Four and Five of the *Ethics*) requires the transformation of passive affects into active affects, then what, Parens asks, is one to make of Spinoza's claim that passive and active affects stem from different origins?³⁷ Freedom, thus understood, would be nothing other than a changed construal of one's particular nature as it relates to the "whole" of Nature (which "whole" would be nothing other than a rational account of the aggregate of bodies explained in mechanistic physics).

Just as Spinoza does not embrace naïve fatalism, so Maimonides "does not embrace strong libertarianism [or even] milder doctrines such as an Augustinian conception of free will" (106). Nonetheless, Spinozan freedom would be deeply problematic at least on the popular level: insofar as the Law appears to "require something like the Greek understanding of choice" (123), the collapsing of potency and act would foreclose the possibility of freedom. In arguing against three determinist views—astral determinism, al-Razi's conception of evil, and Ash'arite conceptions of providence³⁸—Maimonides dialectically favors a conception of free choice, based on the distinction between potency and act, which is necessary for the adoption of, and adherence to, Law. Thus Maimonides "extols freedom from the rooftops in a bid to extricate the Jewish people from its tendency to drift into fatalism" (137). This raises an interesting issue (especially in light of Parens's stated aim to defend Strauss's interpretation): is Maimonides's account of freedom a philosophical account or merely a religiously edifying one?³⁹ We will return to this question.

³⁷ "There is no indication...that a passive affect can be *turned into* an active one. Indeed to claim that they have different origins seems to imply that the one is unlikely to turn into the other....One wonders how knowledge of an affect can transform its character....It is far more likely that Spinoza intends a change in point of view" (133–34).

³⁸ For the purposes of this review, I will forgo discussing his complete construal of Maimonides's arguments against these three determinisms, other than to say that I agree with Parens that (especially with reference to the Ash'arite conception) Maimonides's treatment is both fascinating and "sophisticated" (137).

³⁹ Whether one construes Strauss's famous statement about philosophy being "of necessity edifying" as either (1) a retrospective claim about how philosophical insight happens to be received or (2) a claim about the political character of philosophy, it still remains the case that the *telos* of philosophy qua philosophy would not be edification. See Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 299.

Chapter 5, “Teleology vs. Imagined Ideal,” responds both to Warren Zev Harvey’s account of Maimonides as nonteleological (like Spinoza) and to Edwin Curley’s and Jonathan Bennett’s accounts of Spinoza as embracing minimal forms of teleology (in Bennett’s case, this embrace is unbeknownst even to Spinoza himself!). It is also something of a gateway chapter to the final battle against Harvey and Ravven on whether prudence or imagination reigns in Maimonides and Spinoza. Foreshadowing this battle, Parens takes issue with Harvey’s construal of Maimonides as adopting proto-Spinozan views on good and evil: “For Maimonides to deny solidity to ‘good’ [as a *telos*], in the way that Harvey ascribes such a denial to him, he would need to leave good up to the imagination alone” (140).

This misconstrual is bound up with a narrative about Aristotle, Maimonides, and Spinoza which Parens began to address in his introduction and which he has been building up to throughout the rest of the book: It is a mistake to overemphasize the role of imagination in Aristotle and thus to overattribute it to Maimonides. In so doing, one fails to appreciate the radical break that occurred in the seventeenth century, and in which Spinoza’s thought moves: “Maimonides’s twentieth-century readers adopt an all-too-traditional reading of Aristotle. They fail to appreciate the ways in which Maimonides, like Alfarabi before him, provides novel insights into how to read Plato and Aristotle. Maimonides’s own antiteleological views would be more accurately described as in harmony with...Aristotle’s more moderate teleological views” (156). That this “moderate teleology” is attributed (by Maimonides) to Aristotle means that there is some evidence (within Aristotle’s thought) of a cosmic teleology.⁴⁰ What matters most, for the present discussion, is that Maimonides (for Parens) reads “good” in Aristotle in a nonnominalist manner. Maimonides’s hierarchy even appears to extend to the cosmos to the extent that he holds the heavenly bodies to be superior to earthly creatures; this, for Parens, is “in keeping with the philosophical spirit of Maimonides’ own views on final causes” (158). If Maimonides does not seem to follow Aristotle all the way, but instead argues against the Aristotelian cosmology of an eternal universe, it is “because of the harm it does to ‘the Law in its principle,’ namely, creation” (155). Nevertheless, in his acceptance

⁴⁰ “Although it is impossible to determine the purpose for which all (or the whole) of the beings exist, it is possible to determine that some beings exist for the sake of others and some exist for their own sake but most clearly that each exists for the perfection of its species....Maimonides claims that for Aristotle ‘first finality’ (*al-ghāya al-awālī*), namely, that the individual exists to achieve its species form, is clear and evident. However, the ‘ultimate finality’ (*al-ghāya al-akhīra*) is far from clear or evident” (154).

of the reality of “good,” Maimonides accepts a version of natural teleology that does not relegate final causality to the imagination.

In sharp contrast, Spinoza (in 1app) holds that all final causality is a product of imagination. As with the status of teleology in Maimonides, the status of imagination in Spinoza also needs to be wrested from the aforementioned narrativist misconstrual.⁴¹ Spinoza’s critique of final causality mirrors his critique of forms—they both stem from the imagination *as opposed to* reason, and thus do not express nature in any of its laws. For Parens, this means that “Spinoza seems intent on presenting the first wholly consistent antiteleological teaching in modernity” (161). Like forms, teleology/final causality is merely an imagined ideal.

Chapter 6, “Prudence vs. Imagination,” fleshes out Parens’s claim that Maimonides’s practical thought (contra Spinoza’s) depends not upon imagination but instead upon practical intellect. This is in contradistinction to commentators like Ravven (Parens also mentions Pines, Altmann, and Klein-Braslavy [164–70]⁴²). Because this is a new and provocative claim, a few words ought to be said regarding how Parens arrives at it.

In his essay “Prudence, Imagination, and Determination of Law in Alfarabi and Maimonides,”⁴³ Parens extends Muhsin Mahdi’s significant reading of Alfarabi (concerning practical intellect) to an interpretation of Maimonides. Mahdi’s claim is that Alfarabi grants a particular importance to prudence (and therefore practical intellect or reason) concerning the question of human perfection—i.e., revelation.⁴⁴ Now it is beyond doubt that Maimonides was deeply influenced by the thought of Alfarabi (explicitly acknowledged in his letter to Ibn Tibbon⁴⁵). It should also be clear from the

⁴¹ “Spinoza means by imagination something other than the Aristotelian power that mediates between sensation and intellection. In the *Ethics*, images do not mediate between sense particulars and intellected forms or universals—since forms themselves are merely imagined....As part and parcel of the attack on forms, Spinoza severs the connection between images and ideas. On the one hand, ‘images’ (*imago, imagines*) are strictly bodily....On the other hand, ‘imaginings’ (*Mentis imaginationes*) are merely inadequate versions of that which the mind or thought can possess adequately” (147–48).

⁴² See Pines, “Truth and Falsehood versus Good and Evil”; and Sarah Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides’ Interpretation of the Adam Story in Genesis: A Study in Maimonides’ Anthropology* (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, 1987), as cited in Parens, 164n4.

⁴³ In *Enlightening Revolutions: Essays in Honor of Ralph Lerner*, ed. Svetozar Minkov and Stéphane Douard (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006), 31–55.

⁴⁴ Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*, 163. See generally 161–65. See also Parens, “Prudence, Imagination,” 31, 38.

⁴⁵ See Pines, editor’s introduction to *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1:lix–lx.

aforementioned discussion of Parens's book that he views Maimonides to have a non-nominalist and moderately teleological conception of "good" (i.e., that "good" is real). However, as Parens points out, "If human beings possess within them the power to determine the fitting action, namely, prudence, then there is some reason to doubt the necessity of obedience to the Law. The extent of this danger, and thus the reason for Maimonides' practiced downplaying of the role of prudence is evident in the most pious interpretations of his silence about prudence."⁴⁶ Careful readers are thus able to see that [1] for Maimonides, humans are not merely passive recipients of goodness—that is, they have to choose between alternative possibilities in any given situation; [2] insofar as the imagination is a passive faculty, it forecloses this possibility; [3] humans' ability to choose is thus (at least partly) active, thus rational; [4] to the extent that it is *at all* rational, it threatens to undermine the Law; therefore [5] one must write about it with caution. One must be prudent about prudence. When one takes these aforementioned points into account, Parens concludes, a strong case can be made for Maimonides's (silent) preference for prudence/practical intellect over imagination.

As stated above, this claim is in contradistinction to Ravven's claim that the function that Maimonides ascribes to practical intellect in the *Eight Chapters* is taken over by imagination in the *Guide*. In that text, "the imagination also encompasses practical wisdom and convention, i.e., knowledge applied by the ruler and the Law to social praxis and political life in historically particular circumstances in order to ensure the survival of both the individual and the group."⁴⁷ Parens notes that if this is indeed the case, then it would make sense to view Maimonides as a proponent of determinism (165). In response, Parens first notes that Maimonides never assigns cognition of the Law to the appetitive part of the soul (in the *Eight Chapters*) but only the obedience and disobedience of the Law (166); to ascribe the Law itself to the appetitive part would be to acknowledge complete human passivity concerning praxis. Mind, for Parens's Maimonides, "possesses a ruling power" incompatible with such passivity (185). In a particularly provocative passage concerning the story of Adam and Eve, in *Guide* 1.2, Maimonides refers to "desires of the imagination," which (on Parens's account) has led to the misconstrual of Maimonides as locating "fine and bad" (i.e., "good and evil") within the imagination. The Maimonidean passage runs as follows:

⁴⁶ Parens, "Prudence, Imagination," 35.

⁴⁷ Ravven, "Some Thoughts on What Spinoza Learned from Maimonides about the Prophetic Imagination, Part One," 198.

“when man was in his most perfect and excellent state, in accordance with his inborn disposition and possessed of his intellectual cognitions...he had no faculty that was engaged in any way in the consideration of generally accepted things, and he did not apprehend them. So among these generally accepted things even that which is most manifestly bad...he did not apprehend that it was bad. However, when he disobeyed and inclined toward his desires of the imagination and the pleasures of his corporeal senses...he was punished by being deprived of that intellectual apprehension.”⁴⁸ Insofar as “fine” and “bad” do not “belong to things cognized by the intellect,”⁴⁹ readers such as Harvey and Ravven take this to mean that the practical realm is the province of imagination for Maimonides.

For Parens, the phrase “desires of the imagination,” or “imaginary desires,” ought to be read less literally: “The true meaning of ‘imaginary desires’ is desires without any control or guidance. The imagination does not guide desire so much as offer it an unlimited array of means by which to fulfill unregulated desire. Although the imagination and practical intellect appear to be similar because both supply means, their relation to desire differs” (168).⁵⁰ Practical intellect/prudence allows humans a measure of activity—i.e., rationally ordered freedom—which allows them the *possibility* of making the right choices. This possibility extends all the way up to the question of which life one ought to lead.⁵¹ One way to sum up the differences between Ravven’s and Parens’s respective approaches to Maimonides might be to say that the former approaches Maimonides’s surface by means of what he says whereas the latter approaches Maimonides’s surface by means of what he does not say. At any rate, for Parens, practical intellect or prudence is what ultimately allows humans the freedom (in the language of the *Eight Chapters*) to attain the moral virtues in their possible ascent to attainment of the theoretical virtues. Whereas Maimonides holds that prophecy involves both intellect and imagination, Spinoza locates it solely in the latter’s realm (184). For Parens, the consequences of this difference are straightforward: the location of prophecy within the realm of imagination amounts to “the single most important indicator that he means to impugn prophecy...Maimonides

⁴⁸ Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, ed. Pines, 25.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵⁰ Cf. Parens, “Prudence, Imagination,” 37 and 41.

⁵¹ “Whether someone should lead a philosophical life in pursuit, above all, of theoretical knowledge is a matter for practical intellect, not theoretical intellect...Questions of happiness are questions for political philosophy or ethics. In brief, it would appear that Maimonides refers implicitly to the practical employment of reason” (174).

seeks to preserve and purify revealed Law; Spinoza seeks to achieve the opposite effect—he seeks to discredit the Law” (184).

The upshot of Parens’s argument is this: Spinoza’s concern with finding a uniform method through which one might demonstrate the laws of nature, coupled with his desire for religious tolerance (in the context of a democratic form of government), leads Spinoza to reject the contemplative way of life with its emphasis on perception—and veneration—of the whole: “‘Laws of nature’...are nothing but descriptions of the simplest bodies in motion-and-rest. Such laws are not teleological objects of intellectual intuition, like premodern forms—rather, they are mere descriptions of bodies in motion” (190). We might exaggerate Parens’s point for the sake of clarification: instead of philosophy as a way of life, Spinoza gives us democratic religious tolerance. If the only passion is *conatus*, human beings lose the spiritedness—or “what Rousseau calls ‘fanaticism...a grand and strong passion which elevates the heart of man’”(188)—which would provide the possibility of wholeheartedly affirming either Athens or Jerusalem (let alone affirming either one in the subtle manner in which Parens’s Maimonides does). Liberal democracy can be many things; one thing it cannot be (from a premodern standpoint) is its own *telos*.

If readers believe this review to have exceeded expectations concerning length, I assure them that I have barely scratched the surface of Parens’s substantive and thought-provoking book. I will now present my concerns schematically where they involve Parens’s construals of Spinoza, Maimonides, and Strauss (as I understand them). I do not treat them in historical order because I believe that Parens develops his reading of Maimonides largely as a response to Spinoza (insofar as he seeks to dismantle the “overly Spinozan” character of many contemporary readings of Maimonides). In truth, his Maimonides and Spinoza are in such close dialogue that (given more space and time) one could just as easily play them off one another in like manner.

1. *Spinoza*. As I stated above, Parens is to be commended for his bold and new reading of Spinoza (over and against what he takes to be a tradition of Maimonides-Spinoza commentary) while making use of the underappreciated work of Kennington and Lachterman. Kennington’s and Lachterman’s essays are wonderful texts which can be read, with profit, by anyone wishing to view brilliant minds at work. Insofar as no text can present a perfect illustration of the whole, it should not surprise us that both texts have “blind spots” as well. For Kennington and Lachterman both, the

assumption is that they present the reader with a Spinoza fully in line with early modern sensibilities about physics and method. The idea that Spinoza does in fact strive to vindicate a *mathesis universalis* allows Kennington the interpretive ability to wonder at the different usages of analysis and synthesis in the text. This, in turn, allows Kennington to claim that Spinoza's text "fails to justify its own method" (207n36) and thus to present (rightly, in my view) the claim that the *Ethics* is an esoteric work. Put together with Lachterman's emphasis on the absolute reduction of Spinoza's thought to early modern conceptions of physics, we end up with a materialist Spinoza who leaves little room for soul/mind and whose "method" amounts (as Parens states above) to little more than descriptions of bodies in motion and rest. It seems, however, that all this is premised on the assumption (nowhere proved) that Spinoza, in fact, *does* strive for a uniform method. But the *Ethics* is written "in geometric style/fashion" (*more geometrico*)—that is, there is neither a generally philosophical nor a particularly early modern philosophical necessity to the style of Spinoza's text. This *in no way* denies the exoteric character of the geometric style; on the contrary, one might suggest that Spinoza writes the *Ethics* in this manner in order to please his less careful readership (which is made up largely of Cartesians and Scholastics) so that *they* will not see what he is doing. In this sense, Wolfson is not wrong when he states the following: "Spinoza's thought is not obvious, for it is obscured by the artificial form in which the *Ethics* is written—the geometrical form."⁵² Moreover, if one takes seriously Strauss's statement to the effect that Spinoza's models were Plato, Alfarabi, and Maimonides,⁵³ one begins to see a wedge opening up precisely between Spinoza and early modern thought (generally understood).

Coupled with this is the assumption that the Physical Treatise or Digression (2P13) cannot accommodate intuition. Parens holds that Spinoza's third kind of knowing (*intelligere*) is knowledge of particulars (50), and he cites 5p36s for support. I believe that he is referring to the following passage: "the knowledge of singular things (*rerum singularum*) I have called intuitive or (*sive*) knowledge of the third kind."⁵⁴ Had Spinoza said "particular things" here, he would certainly have been placing the third kind of knowledge under the purview of reason, as Parens holds, because particulars are always instances of universals. It is this replacement of "singularity"

⁵² Wolfson, "Spinoza and the Religion of the Past," 247.

⁵³ Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 182.

⁵⁴ Benedictus de Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 613.

by “particularity” that allows Parens to make the claim that “laws of nature” (because universal) fall under the purview of discursive cognition rather than intellectual intuition or perception. If all that exists are particular instances of universal laws, then the inquiry in question is a numeric one; Parens would then be absolutely correct in stating that a numeric aggregate does not (and cannot) amount to a whole.

For Spinoza, however, perception of singular things means undergoing the affective force of the singular but in a manner that is active rather than passive. If one completes a math problem and sees both *that* the answer given is correct and *why* it is so, one has (momentarily) reached the third kind of knowledge. Intuition is immediate knowledge of singulars and their order and connection in and as the whole of God or Nature. Parens could presumably disagree with this formulation as well, insofar as perception of singulars does not a whole make—especially if these singulars are ultimately ratios of “simplest bodies” (190) in motion and rest. It is unclear what Parens means when he refers to “simplest bodies” in Spinoza; in 2D7, Spinoza gives the following definition of individual or singular things: “By singular things I understand things that are finite and have a determinate existence. And if a number of Individuals so concur in one action that together they are all the cause of one effect, I consider them all, to that extent, as one singular thing.”⁵⁵ As he notes in the Physical Treatise, the aim of his philosophy is to be able (to the extent possible) to perceive all of nature (i.e., God) as one single individual “whose parts, i.e., all bodies, vary in infinite ways, without any change of the whole Individual.”⁵⁶ Spinoza’s conception of individual or things, based as it is in the modal efflux of cause-and-effect relations, not only extends up to God, but calls into question early modern atomistic conceptions (whether physically, metaphysically, or ethically understood). Lachterman may view this construal of Spinoza as a “deliciously seductive anachronism.”⁵⁷ That wonderful phrase does not constitute a demonstration against the view that Spinoza is here conceiving something like relations of force that continually reconstitute themselves now in one way (*modus*) now in another. This is, in fact, the fundamental import of Spinoza’s account of modes: being can be said in many ways. God or Nature, therefore, would be

⁵⁵ Ibid, 447.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 462.

⁵⁷ Lachterman, “The Physics of Spinoza’s Ethics,” 103.

“related to the world as a form is related to a ‘thing.’”⁵⁸ If this does not suggest a similarity to Maimonides’s radically transcendental God, it does suggest one to Aristotle’s eternal universe. And while we can never adequately know the whole, for Spinoza, we nonetheless undergo the relations of the whole more intensely as we understand more of the whole.

The question of modality in Spinoza—i.e., in Aristotelian parlance, that the same thing can be both *a* and *non-a* at different times and in different respects—has a direct bearing on Parens’s claim that the attribute of extension does a bit more work, concerning Spinoza’s God, than other attributes do. Contrary to Haserot, Curley, and Bennett,⁵⁹ Parens rightly holds that Spinoza is a nominalist. But he is not a radical nominalist of the type that holds that universals exist in names only. Rather, he follows Aristotle and Maimonides (at least with respect to *human* cognition) in holding that universals have no existence outside the human soul. Universals, therefore, are either beings of reason or imagination. In contemporary parlance, one would refer to this as “conceptualism.” Under a nominalist/conceptualist reading of Spinoza, attributes (insofar as they are universal) exist in the human mind. This means that none of them has any ontological priority. [1] They are all in the soul/mind, and [2] to the extent that we conceive of them as if they inhere in finite modes, they differ only by respect. This is what allows Spinoza to say that affect and intellect, or body and mind, admit solely of a modal distinction. The same can be said for the question of potency and act—i.e., passive affects and active affects—in Spinoza; they are only modally distinct. When, therefore, Parens claims that they have different origins, one has to ask whether “origins” (in this context) refers to the ontological or modal level. Ontologically, they are the same insofar as they are both modes of God or Nature. Parens, however, is correct to state that the change from passive affects to active ones amounts to a change in viewpoint. Does this change amount simply to a changed understanding of an ultimately unchangeable natural matrix? I do not believe so. If anything, it suggests a continuously changing modal order where the only thing that doesn’t change is the “form” of that order (i.e., God or Nature). Depending upon one’s sensibility, one might put the question of freedom in Spinoza this way: how can humans preserve their finite freedom amidst an overwhelming world of change? The

⁵⁸ Carlos Fraenkel, “Maimonides’ God and Spinoza’s *Deus Sive Natura*,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44, no. 2 (2006): 190.

⁵⁹ See, e.g., Francis Haserot, “Spinoza and the Status of Universals,” in *Studies in Spinoza: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, ed. S. Paul Kashap (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 43–67; Edwin Curley, *Spinoza’s Metaphysics*; Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s “Ethics.”*

sober answer (one which applies also to Parens's concern over how there can be any transformation between passive and active affects in Spinoza) is the Aristotelian-Maimonidean one: education and habituation.

2. *Maimonides*. Given the profoundly substantive work that Parens has already completed on Alfarabi and Maimonides, it should come as no surprise that his reading of Maimonides is on even sturdier ground than his foray into Spinoza. I begin, therefore, with two minor points that lead into my penultimate concern.

First, Parens correctly follows an illustrious tradition of focusing on the dialogical character of the *Guide*. As mentioned earlier, Parens seems to suggest (or rather, everything in his discussion of Spinoza leads to the conclusion) that Spinoza's *Ethics* is a uniform monologue. Even if we grant that the *Ethics* is not specifically written as one, certainly texts such as the *Metaphysical Cogitations* are.⁶⁰ But given that Spinoza (like Plato and Maimonides before him) believed that one of the greatest dangers came from the "mimetic adherence to authority"⁶¹ (hence, in Spinoza's case, religious toleration became a crucial issue in a country racked by sectarian violence), it is not unreasonable to suggest that Spinoza's *Ethics* was written for "the single virtuous man."⁶²

Second, the way in which Parens is able to distance Maimonides from a Spinozan type of nominalism is by means of balancing Maimonides's account of human cognition with his account of divine cognition—i.e., even if the category "species" is only a being of reason, it still exists in God's mind as well and, therefore, must admit of reality. This is a nice counterweight to the desire of many commentators (which, I confess, I share) to read Maimonides as a straight nominalist. This leads me to wonder about Parens's discussion of Maimonides's account of God: Parens holds that Maimonides gives two different accounts of God in *Guide*: "In the negative theology of the *Guide* 1.52–62, God is portrayed as the being beyond human

⁶⁰ *Collected Works of Spinoza*, 299–346; Carlos Fraenkel, "Maimonides' God," 213.

⁶¹ Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, "The Ambiguity of the Imagination and the Ambivalence of Language in Maimonides and Spinoza," in *Maimonides and His Heritage*, ed. Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, Lenn E. Goodman, and James Allen Grady (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 101. See also Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, "Maimonidean Aspects in Spinoza's Thought," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 17, nos. 1–2 (1994): 161; Leo Strauss, "On a New Interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy," *Social Research* 13, no. 3 (1946): 351. One should note, in this context, that Spinoza's critique of the theologians and metaphysicians is analogous to Maimonides's critique of the rabbis and Mutakalimun. See Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, "The Ambiguity of the Imagination," 97.

⁶² Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1:16.

knowledge, identified properly only through the negation of attributes and through His mysterious name, YHVH—who is particularly provident. In the Aristotelian theology of *Guide* 1.68–69, God is the knowable being—who is only generally provident” (178).⁶³ By means of this dual account, Parens can show why Maimonides sometimes seems nominalist but actually is not—i.e., it allows Maimonides to distinguish particulars (individuals) from generals (species) in order to accommodate different kinds and levels of perfection within the created order. It is not clear to me, however, why these two accounts need be different. In the “negative theology,” Maimonides holds that the only attributes predicable of God are attributes of action (i.e., how God causes, and acts in, the world). In the “Aristotelian theology,” Maimonides (in an analogous account to that contained in chapter eight of *Eight Chapters*) illustrates the unity of God—i.e., God the knower is identical to the process of knowing and the knowable objects (this holds for any predicate as well). It seems to me, however, that these two accounts express the same insight—i.e., that there are specific and pronounced limitations on human knowledge. To say that one cannot know God except insofar as God affects us is to say that one knows only the worldly effects but not the cause; thus, in the first account one simply does not know God. To state the thesis of the “unity of God” is to state that however God is, God in no way resembles humans. Stated differently, it would seem that both accounts fall under what Harvey has referred to as Maimonides’s “critical epistemology.”⁶⁴ This phrase has a decidedly Kantian ring, and it is therefore understandable why Parens’s suspicion would be aroused. Nonetheless, the point that Maimonides holds God to be radically transcendent to human cognition does not seem to be terribly controversial.

The fact that Maimonides *appears* to be nominalistic (but is not), and that he *appears* to give two accounts of God (though the distinction between them is in question), has consequences for Parens’s reading of Maimonides in general and for his reading of Maimonides’s account of freedom in particular. When Maimonides argues in favor of freedom and

⁶³ Upon reading this, I wonder whether Parens’s account depends (for this formulation) on Ibn Tibbon’s reading of *Guide* 2.24, i.e., that the priority of the heavens “indicate the existence of their Mover, but the knowledge of other matters concerning them cannot be reached by human intellects.” See Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 2:327n12. If this is true, Parens’s reading of Maimonides would be more radical than otherwise suspected. Cf. Aviezer Ravitzky, “Samuel Ibn Tibbon and the Esoteric Character of the ‘Guide of the Perplexed,’” *AJS Review* 6 (1981): 87–123; Aviezer Ravitzky, “Aristotle’s *Meteorology* and the Maimonidean Modes of Interpreting the Account of Creation,” *Aleph*, no. 8 (2008): 361–400.

⁶⁴ Warren Zev Harvey, “Maimonides’ Critical Epistemology and *Guide* 2:24,” *Aleph*, no. 8 (2008): 213–235.

against determinism so that the Jewish community will avoid slipping into fatalism, does he express his real views, or those that will be useful to the community? Are his views on freedom philosophical or religiously edifying? This matters only insofar as the appearance–reality distinction has some bearing when it comes to understanding Maimonides’s writings. Parens does not seem to choose between these two options. *This* matters only insofar as it places a stumbling block in front of the reader who wishes to understand Parens’s writing. Parens seems to spend more time arguing for the import of Maimonides’s thought as regards the needs of the Jewish community than in addressing his philosophical views (to the extent that we know them). Would Parens (contra Strauss) hold this to be a false dichotomy? It seems unlikely. Might Parens himself be trying to get the careful reader to notice certain omissions in his text?

One such apparent omission, concerning the question of freedom, is *Guide* 2.48. Parens does not include a reference to it in chapter 4 (during his discussion of Maimonides’s arguments against the astrologers, Al-Razi, and the Ash’arites) but provides something like a hint to its existence: “We will leave aside for now what Maimonides says about the Law of Moses regarding the will in animals” (123). No certainty can be claimed for the view that Parens is writing between the lines, but it would amount to an extreme coincidence if he were not aware of the following statement: “Inasmuch as the deity is, as has been established, He who *arouses a particular volition* in the irrational animal and who has *necessitated this particular free choice* in the rational animal and who has made the natural things pursue their course—chance being but an excess of what is natural, as has been made clear, and its largest part partakes of nature, free choice, and volition—it follows necessarily from all this that it may be said with regard to what proceeds necessarily from these causes that *God has commanded that something should be done in such and such a way or that He has said: Let this be thus.*”⁶⁵ In short, this passage appears to constitute evidence that Maimonides adheres to determinism. In contrast, I hold that this passage illustrates a Maimonides who believes in qualified or conditioned human freedom with its source ultimately in God, like Spinoza (though unlike Spinoza, Maimonides believes the source of human freedom is transcendent). Maimonides’s emphasis on freedom, as Parens has articulated it, would then amount to a merely edifying doctrine. Is that all it is? Might it not be the case that divine knowledge, in its utter difference from human knowledge, solves the contradiction between

⁶⁵ Maimonides, *Guide*, 2:410; my italics.

human freedom and divine causality by relegating each term to distinct realms—i.e., divine causality is eternal whereas human freedom only makes sense in a temporal context?⁶⁶ I admit that, if Parens has written between the lines, it will take a more careful reader than I to uncover his intentions.

Finally, returning to the question of the imagination, we revisit the phrase “desires of the imagination” or “imaginary desires.” For Parens, this refers not specifically to a teaching about the imagination, but rather to the means by which desires are structured—in this case, “without any control or guidance” (168). This is, to be sure, a possible reading of *Guide* 1.2 and it is certainly strengthened by Parens’s suggested parallel—if not outright connection—with Alfarabi (as Mahdi sees him). However, we are led to ask whether this passage gives rise to an equally plausible interpretation under the more ordinary conception of imagination. Differently stated, the imagination is not anarchic: it operates by means of “representations and symbols and...particularities and conventionalities”—in short, by images.⁶⁷ Even if, as Ravven states, the origin of such images is the body,⁶⁸ this in no way obviates the need for (or possibility of) practical wisdom. Such wisdom would occur subsequently to the acquisition and communication⁶⁹ of the images that serve as sensible raw materials for practical knowledge. In fact one might make the argument (for both Maimonides and Spinoza) that prudence must play a necessary role in *evaluating* at least some ideas, insofar as the source of error stems (not simply from the imagination but rather) “from the confusion between a true and an imaginative idea.”⁷⁰

3. *Strauss*. Much of the aforementioned discussion dovetails into Parens’s reading of Strauss insofar as (if I haven’t misunderstood Parens) he takes up an interpretation of Strauss which holds that [1] Maimonides’s medieval rationalism is preferable to modern rationalism, [2] modernity is a radical rejection of premodernity, and [3] certain modern texts are written to give the appearance of affinity with premodern thought. As stated above, there are clearly moments in Strauss that affirm any and all three of these claims. Given this review’s length, I can do no more than raise the following questions which, for me, also emerge from Strauss’s thought: [1] Is Spinoza

⁶⁶ Cf. Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 203–4.

⁶⁷ Ravven, “Some Thoughts, Part One,” 209.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Dobbs-Weinstein, “The Ambiguity of the Imagination,” 104.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

really an early modern, or is this precisely his exoteric cover? [2] If political philosophy is transferable to different contexts, what would prevent Spinoza from being one of the possible recipients of classical and medieval political philosophy? [3] If the very historical account in which the early modern authors knew premodern thought in order to reject it allows for such transferability, what (aside from generalities about the early modern period) would account for such rejection in any particular case? [4] If said generalities about the early modern period are deliberate abstractions from details, what might this mean for our understanding of the early modern period? Finally, [5] how might we begin to think about this “period” in a non-historical, but rather philosophical, manner—i.e., might it not mean (for all the possible protest against it) investigating how these thinkers exceed their determinations as “premodern” and “early modern”?⁷¹ That Parens’s book has helped to raise these important questions means that (as mentioned above) it has in fact moved beyond a historical commentary and shows us flashes of philosophy as a way of life.⁷²

⁷¹ Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 192.

⁷² Maimonides, *Guide*, 1:7.

Ernest L. Fortin, *Ever Ancient, Ever New: Ruminations on the City, the Soul, and the Church*. Edited by Michael P. Foley. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007, xxxiv + 352 pp., \$48.95 (paper).

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There are two ways one could interpret the Roman Catholic Church's reaction to the Enlightenment, modernism, and all that shaped liberalism that present the institution as less antiquated than commonly perceived. On the one hand, it could be viewed as a predictable reflection of a traditional institution anchoring itself in slow, deliberate processing. On the other, it could be seen as simply representative of the critical reaction to liberalism expressed during the second half of the twentieth century from all corners of the field of political theory that endeavored to dismantle the self-defeating nature of modern rationalism.

The former explanation resembles Paul Feyerabend's philosophy of science description of the church's reaction to Galileo's teaching of the Copernican doctrine. Galileo boldly asserted the world was spherical rather than flat as a matter of truth, not simply a hypothesis that had yet to be proven. Feyerabend compared the church's rejection to the processes in modern scientific institutions, universities, and research institutes that often result in long waiting periods before new ideas are incorporated into the curricula. In short, the church wanted "proof—scientific proof in scientific matters."¹

If the latter approach is given earnest consideration and the church's motivations do in fact resemble those of many contemporary thinkers, the Vatican's criticism of liberalism finds itself unwittingly ahead

¹ Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: Verso, 1993), 132.

of its time since its position predates contemporary political theory by two centuries. However, this proclamation becomes problematic considering that the post-Vatican II church, including the Benedict XVI era which just ended, took many steps toward accepting modernism and constructing new bridges to accommodate the Enlightenment.

To navigate this complex story, one needs a guide whose expertise overlaps the political and theological spheres of academia. The works of the late Father Ernest L. Fortin fulfill this need, as he understood as well as anyone the church's perennial challenge of integrating the rationalism of the modern age with church theology. *Ever Ancient, Ever New: Ruminations on the City, the Soul, and the Church*, the fourth installment of Fortin's collected essays, offers many gems in cataloging the church's reaction to the modern world. Discussion of this reaction today often results in assessments of the great dynamic between revelation and reason. In political philosophy, this relationship was notably described by Leo Strauss as the tension between Athens and Jerusalem. Given Fortin's tutelage under Strauss, this connection is unavoidable in reviewing this collection, especially since the topic of Athens-Jerusalem resurfaces throughout the essays and symbolizes Fortin's approach to politics, religion, and liberal arts education.

In Strauss's examination of the theological-political problem, he posited that both reason (Athens) and revelation (Jerusalem) are methods that one must be open to in matters of speculation since neither approach is capable of achieving knowledge of the whole by itself. Even the use of philosophy requires a certain level of faith.² The theological-political problem was not resolved in the West because it had two roots of civilization and codes of conduct—the biblical and the Greek philosophic—and this prevented anyone from being both a philosopher and a theologian, or a synthesis of both.³ However, Strauss did hope that both camps would be open to each other's challenges. The unresolved tension between Athens and Jerusalem allowed the problems of the ancients to resurface again and again. At some point, whether before or after his contact with Strauss, Fortin too became well aware of this issue and it no doubt had an impact on him.

² Leo Strauss, "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy," in *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin*, ed. Peter Emberley and Barry Cooper (University Park: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 233.

³ Leo Strauss, "Progress or Return?," in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 117.

Ever Ancient, Ever New is aptly titled as it describes Fortin's approach to teaching political philosophy which demands establishing the relevancy of the classics to each new generation of students. Fortin's solution was to reformulate classical problems with accessible terms, while preserving the original message. To do justice to classical authors, one cannot "simply repeat what Aristotle had said; one has to formulate or reformulate his ideas in the light of the situation created by the emergence of modern thought" (325). There are too many obstacles in the minds of students that prevent them from understanding the classics. If one can peel back the barriers, students will understand the ancients as they understood themselves, ultimately presenting old problems as timeless subjects of investigation. In the study of political philosophy, a teacher must travel through the centuries to construct a building-block, dependency-driven macro-level picture of the history of thought, without fixating on any particular era, especially if he considers himself a specialist on modern or contemporary thought. This holds true both for the falsification of old theories and for borrowing from the collective knowledge-base of previous thinkers. Fortin, then, does not view himself as operating in a vacuum or as detached from generations of thought development. Indeed, the writings in this collection show an author with the ability to speak to his world citing the necessary theoretical lineage to do so.

Editor Michael Foley has assembled a well-ordered collection of Fortin's work, which touches on political philosophy, theology, church history, and the dim future of higher Catholic education. Volume 4's mix of essays, lectures, reviews, and speeches is organized in seven sections: The Early Church and the Wisdom of the Greeks; Philosophical Cultures in the Middle Ages; Biblical Faith and Modern Philosophy; Catholic Education: Its Past and Its Future; Ecumenical Dialogue; Selected Responses and Remarks; Selected Reviews; and the Wit of Ernest Fortin, a collection of pep-rally speeches at Assumption College and an autobiographical epilogue. One challenge in evaluating a collection of essays, especially one from an author whose well has been tapped for the previous three volumes, is distilling this into a unified theme that connects not only the collection here, but also the larger output from the author. That said, the collection thoughtfully weaves these pieces together, touching on faith and reason, Catholic education, ecumenism, the American political experiment, and the Enlightenment, liberalism, and modernity. We also see a lighter side of Fortin in the "Wit of Ernest Fortin" section which contains several inspirational speeches that he delivered at the all-male Catholic liberal-art school Assumption College while serving as both teacher and tennis coach. One has to appreciate Fortin's

self-deprecating humor as he draws on St. Augustine for a pep-rally speech prior to facing off with local Jesuit rival Holy Cross: “My master St. Augustine once wrote a treatise to prove that the soul has its own greatness, which has nothing to do with physical greatness, and I like to think that this is the kind of greatness we cherish” (312). If one is looking for new works by Fortin, this edition delivers—twelve of the essays are previously unpublished, printed with the permission of the US Region of Assumptionists. Most notable in this collection is an unpublished autobiographical essay by Fortin, which pulls back the curtain to reveal how his time spent with Strauss in Chicago influenced his scholarship.

Although Strauss’s work is the centerpiece of discussion in only two of the collection’s thirty-one essays, the esoteric approach linked to Strauss is present throughout Fortin’s writings here. Yet Fortin’s fondness for John Henry Newman gives rise to the notion that he was equally influenced by Newman’s discussion of “the Reserve,” possibly more since he encountered Newman first. At the very least, Newman set the stage for Fortin to easily absorb Straussian esotericism upon introduction. Whether one considers Fortin a Straussian or not, he certainly applied the esoteric method when reading the church fathers (authors belonging to the period immediately following the Apostles), recognizing the economy in writing (Economy) that many of them practiced in their Christian teachings and writings. Economy, or “the Reserve” as Newman called it, was the phenomenon of layered or tiered writing. Fortin was particularly drawn to Newman’s works, insofar as they “shed an abundance of light on the extraordinary and often overlooked sophistication of the works of the Church Fathers” (26). From Newman, Fortin took seriously that the fathers were trained in pagan antiquity, became masters of “the art of persuasion and of self-expression, and they put this art to good use in their efforts to disseminate the truths of their Faith” (26). Given this training, there is strong reason to believe that the fathers also utilized these methods in their writings. Fortin provides specific evidence of this practice in “Rhetoric and the Church Fathers” where he elevates the fathers to “writers, and not merely as theologians or witnesses of the Faith,” using Socratic rhetoric to explain their writings. This method was built on the premise that “it is exceedingly dangerous to speak the whole truth to all persons at all times” and supported by a conviction among the ancients that “all men do not have the natural endowments or the intellectual formation required to understand the highest truths” (52–53). Given these premises, Socratic rhetoric created books with two teachings: “one, an exoteric teaching remains on a more superficial and reasonably safe level, and the second,

a more profound and although I dislike the word, esoteric teaching” (53–54). Can one believe that Fortin claimed he did not like the word “esoteric”? Perhaps it was a disagreement over nomenclature, but he does accept the general principle.

One implication this has for defining Fortin’s approach and of great importance when reading any Catholic philosopher is that one should ask: what value does philosophy hold for him in relation to his theology? Is it subordinate? Is it the hand that guides his theological speculation? In Fortin’s case, one might be better served by looking at how his reading of the church fathers influenced him. This likely explains the placement of the first four essays in the collection, “The Rebirth of Patristic Studies,” “The Church Fathers and the Transmission of the Christian Message,” “The Nature of the Christian Message,” and “‘Rhetoric’ and the Church Fathers.”

Fortin’s writings on the church fathers allows one to consider whether his interpretive approach was steered by Strauss or, what is more likely, it fostered a predisposition in Fortin for esotericism. In “The Church Fathers and the Transmission of the Christian Message” he concedes that just as the act of concealing the truth occurs in the political realm, this also happened in early Christian writings. One reason for this was that the resistance early Christianity encountered “made it impossible for an author to speak his mind freely and openly at all times without prejudice to the truth or scandal to hearer” (16).

Surrounding the church’s written works was an oral tradition handed down by word of mouth over a number of generations, as well as disagreement over how this should be handled. Some argued that the oral tradition not only existed but represented “the best thinking of the Fathers on the most important theological questions”; unfortunately, “the reader, having no access to the tradition, is doomed to remain forever in the dark as to its contents” (20). However, Fortin notes that while the content of the oral tradition found its way into written texts in a manner that is “missed by the casual reader,” there are still more skilled readers for whom “a few indications are all that is needed to discover the truth itself” (20). One should note that Fortin’s sentiments in this essay were expressed in 1961, which is one year before Fortin went to Chicago to work with Strauss.

The connection to Strauss is a subject that even the collection’s editor felt compelled to address in the book’s forward. Noting a 1984 letter to associate Max Stackhouse, Foley cites Fortin as writing: “I have

enough respect for his memory not to call myself a Straussian....He would probably turn over in his grave if he knew that I was being passed off as a disciple” (xiii). In speaking of Strauss, Fortin performs a delicate balancing act between stepping outside of Strauss’s shadow and acknowledging the great respect he had for Strauss as well as the influence Strauss had on his intellectual development. If Fortin distances himself from Strauss at all, it is only to do what any scholar would do—establish one’s own legacy—and Fortin does this well, but he openly honors his time spent with Strauss. The golden nugget in this collection is a previously unpublished autobiographical essay that allows Fortin to clarify his own account of Strauss. After being introduced to Strauss by Allan Bloom, Fortin states: “For years I had felt that I was cheated out of something important. Strauss revealed to me that missing dimension, the other side” (324). This essay suggests that the Athens-Jerusalem relationship was also passed down through Strauss to Fortin, as he writes:

At the risk of considerable oversimplification, I can say that I learned two things from Strauss: the difference between the classical heritage and the Christian, and the difference between the “Great Tradition” (classical and Christian combined) and modern thought. From that moment on, my own thinking acquired a new orientation. (324)

Fortin dialogues directly with Strauss’s work in “Men of Letters: The Little-Known Correspondence Between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin” and “A Comment on Hughes: Regarding the Strauss-Voegelin Correspondence.” In “Men of Letters” Fortin asks why in the fifty-one letters of correspondence between the two (twenty-seven by Strauss and twenty-four by Voegelin) the substance of the letters fizzled out in their final exchanges and why Voegelin seemed to become less civil. Fortin finds the two authors differing little from when they began the dialogue, resulting only in confirmation of the convictions they had prior to their exchange (172). In the second essay on the Strauss-Voegelin correspondence, Fortin confirms one of the effects Strauss had on him—the need for the great study of the ancients to be complemented with the insights of modern philosophy (277). Lastly, the two essays on the correspondence also show that Fortin viewed it as a demonstration of esotericism as he so aptly describes it: “With Strauss as with Voegelin, nothing is ever as simple as it appears to be” (278).

Another fruit of this collection is the way Fortin presents the church’s historical reaction to modernity. In the essays “Christianity and the Enlightenment: A Forward” and “The Enlightenment and the Church: Changing Configurations,” Fortin chronicles the church’s reaction and

relationship with modernism, which he sees as an initial denouncement that begins at about the Congress of Vienna in 1815, evidenced in the encyclicals *Mirari vos* (1832) and *Syllabus Errorum* (1870), and extending to the eve of Vatican II in the early 1960s, with the encyclicals *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) and *Dignitatis Humanae* (1965) as examples of attempts to reconcile modernity and liberalism with the church. Fortin refrains from an “uncritical rejection” or “uncritical acceptance” of the Enlightenment. Instead, he calls for a reformulation of Christian doctrine in a way “that is both true to its native inspiration and appropriate to the needs of our age” (133). This approach he says would be similar to the way theologians of the Middle Ages examined Aristotle. Moving past Vatican II, he agrees with John Paul II that “it would be futile to seek to live in a ‘pre-Constantinian,’ or ‘pre-Kantian,’ or ‘pre-Einsteinian’ world” (133). This sounds like a political theory equivalent to the *living and breathing* theory of legal interpretations advocated by some in public law, but is really a call for objective, timeless standards to be reapplied to conditional situations. He writes: “Ours is a living tradition that must not only be maintained in its purity but constantly revitalized through its interaction with the best insights of modern science and scholarship” (133).

Fortin is also not about to throw the Enlightenment under the bus, and is careful to distinguish it from modernity, especially when it comes to Rousseau. In an essay that responds to a presentation given by Ernest Van Den Haag at the Claremont Institute in 1990, Fortin takes Haag to task for “refusing to take the Enlightenment philosophers more seriously,” in doing which he “left himself open to the subtle pressures their thought continues to exert on us” (268). While acknowledging that he is a “conservative among conservatives” with his own reservations regarding the Enlightenment, Fortin has little patience for those who dismiss the movement altogether or even conflate this era of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that sought to construct a “perfectly rational society thanks to the popular enlightenment of the ever wider diffusion of science and scientific knowledge” (268). This regard for judicious and comprehensive scholarship is most forward in this essay when he differentiates himself from Van Den Haag and others who simply say the Enlightenment project failed without giving the philosophers of this era “more credit for trying” (270).

Fortin’s discussion of the modern era paves the way for his analysis of the American political experiment in two essays, each of which logically follows a corresponding essay on the Enlightenment (“A Tocquevilian Perspective on Religion and the American Regime,” in the *Biblical Faith*

and Modern Philosophy section, and “Religion and the American Regime,” in the Responses and Remarks section). Fortin understands the gap between theologians and political theorists, and knowing this challenge, appreciates Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. He writes: “Tocqueville occupies a privileged position as one of the few writers to combine a genuine appreciation for the merits of the American regime with a profound insight into the nature of the Christian faith” (148). As Fortin writes about Tocqueville, one wonders whether Fortin is writing about his own challenge as a man of faith in political-science academia.

He also calls on fellow Christian scholars to widen their sources of knowledge by reading *Democracy* not only for “concrete political analysis, unmarred by the abstractions of modern science or the constructs of modern social theory, but for its “pre-eminent theological significance, which unfortunately has yet to be acknowledged as such by contemporary ecclesiastical scholarship.” He holds *Democracy* in such high regard that he ranks it alongside other classics such as Augustine’s *City of God*, Dante’s *Comedy*, and Shakespeare’s theater (148–49). His praise for *Democracy* is likely a result of the way the book allows itself to be projected forward as parallel commentary on twentieth-century America when Fortin was writing. One sees this in his response essay “Religion and the American Regime,” where Fortin is heavy-handed in his description of America’s cultural achievements, sounding very much like Allan Bloom:

America, Tocqueville declared wistfully, has not produced any Pascals. The observation remains unchallenged. In the century and a half that has elapsed since it was made, not much has happened that would cause us to doubt its validity. Our European forebears built cathedrals; their American descendants are more famous for building hospitals and taking care of our bodily needs. (274)

If patriotic pride can be set aside, one will see that what Fortin is getting at here is that contemporary humans (in this case Americans) have left behind the beautiful actions advocated by the ancients, in favor of survivalist ends produced by middling motivations, which no doubt shows the serious consideration given to Tocqueville’s work. Tocqueville deplored this observation of early America, but saw that it was inevitable and also likely to dominate in the future. In the same essay Fortin is able to get at the heart of America’s challenges with liberalism, even sounding a bit communitarian in his assessment of what he saw as the two major forces in the American regime working against one another—“freedom and the dedication to virtue or the common good” (275).

Fortin's explanation of why America has taken this turn looks like an American counterpart to what Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI) once called a loss of a *sense of the sacred* (values, codes, and beliefs that a society holds in high regard and that shape behavior) in Europe.⁴ The Founding Fathers did not intend to remove religion from public life. Rather they merely sought to separate church and state to avoid needless conflicts. Unfortunately, Fortin finds that "the signs of the sacred are gradually disappearing from our midst, and our cities continue to take on an ever more secular aspect" (274).

In discussing Catholic higher education, Fortin somehow finds a way to employ Strauss's Athens-Jerusalem lens by acknowledging that as the church made room for philosophy, it "was able to assert and exercise its custody over" philosophy while also allowing it to contribute to scientific theology (188). Through this process, both philosophy and theology benefited from their contact with one another. Fortin believes Catholic institutions of higher education hold a special place for keeping great philosophical discussions alive since "they are practically the only ones in which philosophy has more or less retained its original place as the unifying, ordering, and perfecting element of the entire liberal arts curriculum" (186). According to Fortin, the two most important subjects taking place during his years in academia were the theistic classical-Christian heritage and the atheistic modern heritage; the Catholic college has a great stake in both, and an institutional commitment that it "should at least provide its students with an opportunity to become acquainted with these issues" (326). Overall, Fortin fears the current Christian world has not done enough to find a meaningful place for political philosophy.

As scholars now work to put together a comprehensive picture of the Benedict XVI era of the Catholic Church, Fortin's essays prove an invaluable resource for unpacking the works of Benedict XVI and others in the post-Vatican II era that have done much to accommodate philosophy and reason within its faith. Fortin sees the "Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns" as the same issue Strauss described as Athens and Jerusalem (180). The work in this collection does much to show how Fortin projected this understanding to all areas of his scholarship. True to the topics listed in the collection's title—the city, soul, and the church—Fortin addresses

⁴ Joseph Ratzinger and Marcello Pera, *Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Christianity, Islam* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

each of these in a timeless manner that can be presented as new to each new generation's particular issues and circumstances. This collection is highly recommended for political theorists looking for a wider understanding of theology and a sampling of work by a notable political philosopher significantly influenced by Strauss, as well as those teaching in political science departments privileged enough to offer a graduate course on Catholic political philosophy. One will find the stock Thomas and Augustine pieces, but also the church's long-standing dance with liberalism. Those teaching courses on American political development will also find some essays useful for supplementing lessons on American exceptionalism.

Chilton Williamson Jr., *After Tocqueville: The Promise and Failure of Democracy*. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2012, xxii + 264 pp., \$27.95.

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Some twenty years ago, Francis Fukuyama earned the distinction of publishing what became perhaps the most refuted American book of his generation. Thinly disguised as an exercise in German historicism (beginning with its evocation of Hegel and Nietzsche in the title), *The End of History and the Last Man* finally defends liberal democracy as the best practicable regime under modern circumstances in the name of the stubbornness, not the malleability, of human nature. In his central chapter, “The Beast with Red Cheeks,” Fukuyama insists on the stubbornness of stubbornness itself, identifying the crux of political life as *thymos*—the part of the soul that both wants to rule and needs to be ruled. Even the historicists, he insists, inadvertently make “history” dependent upon nature; in a witty reversal, he maintains in effect that he (thanks to Plato) understands historicists better than historicists understand themselves. Hegel’s defense of liberal republicanism institutionally crowned with constitutional monarchs requires a concept of a trans-historical human good.¹

This defense of liberal democracy founded upon the nature of human beings is precisely what irks Chilton Williamson, who brings natural right and democracy to the bar of tradition and aristocracy. Like many traditionalists, he must answer the question: By what criteria do I select a given principle, thinker, or book for placement in “the tradition”?

¹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), esp. 145–52 and 171–80.

This becomes clear as early as the preface. In it he cites Graham Robb's *The Discovery of France*, an account of a young man's journeys through the France of the 1990s in search of the remnants of the France of the 1780s and earlier—i.e., France before the French Revolution. By this means he studiously ignores the argument of Tocqueville—otherwise prominently featured—who famously maintained that the Bourbon monarchy and not the republicans or Bonaparte began the centralization or “modernization” of the French state under the watchful eye of Cardinal Richelieu, that so-to-speak Catholic Machiavel.² In ignoring Tocqueville's claim, Williamson can attribute the birth of statism in France to republicanism and democracy, rather than to monarchism or to the peculiar features of French aristocracy.

Williamson divides his book into three parts: “Democracy after Tocqueville,” “Democracy and Civilization,” and “The Future of Democracy and the End of History.” These parts consist of three, eight, and three chapters, respectively. In the first chapter he continues his uneasy relationship with Tocqueville, claiming incorrectly that “Tocqueville was ever at pains to remind himself, as well as readers of *Democracy in America*, that the subject of his book was *American* democracy, not democracy as a generalized system of government and society” (4). But quite on the contrary, Tocqueville writes, “I saw the equality of conditions that, without having reached its extreme limits as it had in the United States, was approaching them more each day; and the same democracy reigning in American societies appeared to me to be advancing rapidly toward power in Europe.”³ And further, “I confess that in America I saw more than America; I sought there an image of democracy itself, of its penchants, its character, its prejudices, its passions; I wanted to become acquainted with it if only to know at least what we ought to hope or fear from it.”⁴ Williamson further claims that Tocqueville saw *democracy* in America maintained by decentralization, religious faith, the civilization of the original colonizers, and their similarity of stock and of language, but Tocqueville there is talking about the *republicanism* of the Americans—their political institutions—not their social condition. Democracy defined as social equality or the absence of an aristocratic class might support either of two principal regimes: republicanism or despotism. When Fukuyama calls the liberal-democratic regime the “end of history” he means

² Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, trans. Alan S. Kahan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), book 2, chap. 2.

³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

broadly the same kind of commercial-republican regime advocated by the American Founders. It was surely *not* Fukuyama “who popularized the neo-conservative mantra that democracies do not make war on one another and that universal peace has consequently become, for the first time in history, something more than a wishful vision” (6). The idea that commercial republics don’t make war on one another dates back at least as far as Montesquieu; among the Americans, Franklin, Washington, and Madison concurred, leaving only Hamilton in *Federalist* No. 6 to demur (with a sophisticated argument in hand, it should be noted).⁵

None of these scholarly complaints should be allowed to obscure Williamson’s main point in this opening chapter. “For Alexis de Tocqueville, democracy was a political phenomenon, not a faith” (13). Tocqueville (who detested Hegel for his historical determinism) did not suppose that Providence brought republicanism as democracy’s inevitable companion, and that is what Williamson quite rightly wants to say, too. He makes this clear in his second chapter, “The Momentum of Monarchy,” where he classifies Tocqueville among the “aristocratic liberals” (they include Mill, Burckhardt, Bagehot) who searched for ways to defend liberty in the increasingly democratized social order of the nineteenth century. “Aristocratic liberalism envisioned a society that would be at once free, ordered, and, in the classical European sense of the word, civilized” (34). Just so, though in tracing the origins of aristocratic liberalism to Machiavelli, Williamson overlooks the fact that Machiavelli was no friend of the aristocracy, no classical humanist, and no Christian. *Virtù* is not exactly virtue. And his centralized state—*lo stato*—leaves no room for such social and political middlemen as aristocrats and priests independent of prince or parliament.⁶

In chapter 3, “Democracy’s Forked Road,” Williamson offers a non-Tocquevillian account of democracy as “the rival of Christianity and inherently its enemy” (38). Whereas “Tocqueville thought that the Christian religion and Christian civilization, taken together (and, as far as the thing is possible, separately) constitute the ground for democratic government

⁵ For discussion see Will Morrisey, *A Political Approach to Pacifism* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1996), 1:6–14. Briefly, Hamilton argues that commercial republics *will* fight one another because countries that have commerce with one another fight and countries that are republics fight: an obvious instance of the fallacy of composition. One may respect Hamilton’s intelligence too much not to suppose that he knew what he was doing, namely, deploying superficially plausible rhetoric in his effort to strengthen of the federal union.

⁶ See Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, comparing chaps. 2 and 9; for commentary see Harvey Mansfield, *Machiavelli’s Virtue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), chap. 12.

and the necessary condition for its success,” Williamson maintains that the decline of Roman Catholicism and the rise of Protestant churches oriented toward nations and (to some degree) controlled by states turned Christianity toward a secularism inflected by “the new Promethean science”—effectively a God-substitute (38–45). In the United States, nationalism played out in “Jefferson’s unconstitutional Louisiana Purchase. . . [which] has been called the death knell of republicanism,” and the bell continued to toll through the Mexican War, “the War between the States” (by which he apparently means the American Civil War), Progressivism, and the two World Wars (41, 54–55). Today, gripped by “a kind of nationalist mania,” America is neither democratic nor republican (63). Its rapid democratization in the years after the War of Independence caused it to abandon the Founders’ attempt to establish a republican regime.

What is today’s American regime, then? Williamson begins Part II, “Democracy and Civilization,” by arguing that the two contradict one another. Republicanism requires “a middle-class society founded on an agrarian tradition that does not hold one man’s living at the expense of another man” in a “small-scale community” characterized “by minimum government” by “the consent of the governed” and “whose governors are morally and intellectually prominent people”—not at all the Madisonian “extended republic.”⁷ Republicanism comports with civilization (77). But the “modern liberal state is identical with the managerial society” described by James Burnham in his 1941 book *The Managerial Revolution*. This bureaucratic form of government has since been replaced by the even more radical “advanced liberalism” consisting of the self-deification of man and particularly of those men who most successfully pursue the power to remake human societies and their moralities (79). We thus incline toward proletarianized, ethnically mongrelized societies ruled by “statocrats.” Tocqueville “never imagined the rise in America of an activist ideological minority, similar to the French revolutionary class, devoted exclusively to the radical destruction of existing social and political institutions and standing above the mass of the people, whose sole desire is to be left in peace to make more money and acquire more comforts for themselves and whose reluctant and sporadic political involvement is mainly a reaction against government’s intrusions on free commercial activity” (97).

But as a matter of fact Tocqueville did imagine exactly such a thing, regarding it as one of the several wrong turns democracy might very

⁷ Indeed, Williamson asserts, the America of the Articles of Confederation was already far too big to sustain genuine republicanism (94–95).

well take. In volume 2, part 4, chapter 6 of the *Democracy*, “What Kind of Despotism Democratic Nations Have to Fear,” Tocqueville describes “a herd of timid and industrious animals of which the government”—“a vast tutelary power”—“is the shepherd.” What is more, “The vices of those who govern and the imbecility of the governed would not be slow to bring it to ruin; and the people, tired of their representatives and of themselves, would create freer institutions or soon return to lying at the feet of a single master.”⁸ America’s realization of Tocqueville’s dystopia leads Williamson to his central and most valuable chapters: “The Business of Aristocracies” and “Christianity: The Vital Spot.”

Whatever one might say of America, the business of aristocracies is most assuredly not business. Williamson regards “Thomistic civilization,” with its blend of “Aristotelian principles” animating “government whose aim was human excellence” and “Christian principles,” as the “presumed ideal” of the old European aristocracy (99). He contrasts Fukuyama’s characteristically modern view, “that the achievement of political and social liberty and economic affluence are the highest aim and responsibility of government” (99). He readily concedes that the classical-Christian ideal was not the real, although he does not admit that the modern ideal has been substantially realized—denying, for example, that human beings now enjoy more political or social liberty than they did under the old regime. But he has a more subtle point to make: yes, the titled aristocrats were not Aristotelian (or Jeffersonian) natural *aristoi*—“aristocrats have not ordinarily been associated with such mental achievement” as “serious intellectual or artistic accomplishment.” But they “have usually proved more or less apt at preserving tradition and maintaining ideals” (107). The problem with modern plutocrats and bureaucrats (“meritocracy’s two faces”) is that they fail to inculcate the heritage of civilization upon which any *civitas*—whatever its characteristic political regime—depends. Democracy cannot survive without certain intellectual and moral virtues, but modern democratic capitalism wastes the cultural “capital” it did not and cannot produce by itself (108). In America, “whatever one’s opinion of the old [untitled] WASP aristocracy—its culture, values, and ideas—it succeeded for three and a half centuries in preserving and transmitting the tradition that formed it, while exercising an ethic of civic responsibility and noblesse oblige in a society lacking a titled

⁸ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 663, 665. For an extended, learned recent meditation on Tocqueville’s argument, see Paul Rahe, *Soft Despotism, Democracy’s Drift: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Tocqueville, and the Modern Prospect* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), which Williamson himself cites later (215).

nobility” (108). By contrast, meritocracy “enjoys power and wealth without the corresponding responsibilities that aristocracy and membership in an establishment entail” (110). Aristocracy requires landed wealth—the habits of cultivation not only in the agricultural but in the cultural sense—and this is “impossible in modern capitalist-industrialist societies” (111). This means that “aristocracy is dead forever in the developed world—unless, somehow, modern democracy should prove itself capable of developing during the next century or two, a postindustrial form of aristocracy from the crude materials provided by the plutocratic meritocracy that presently rules it.” “The odds are long against it,” he estimates (112).

Aristocracy hands down culture in the Aristotelian sense of the cultivation of human excellence. Williamson emphasizes that by culture he also means *cultus*—“religion is culture,” a set of practices, habits—a way of life marked out by God, not man. But modern state-builders like Henry VIII and the Bourbons wrenched that form of cultivation into service of the modern state, as did the Lutherans further east. Following their lead, “seventeenth-century liberalism scarcely concealed its rationalist bias, and liberalism in the eighteenth century flaunted its anti-Christian and anti-monarchical prejudice” (113). The European and American liberals and socialists of today hate “Christianity and its satellite institutions because they represent metaphysical reality which leftists have always despised, denied, and labored tirelessly to overthrow, for the purpose of supplanting it with a synthetic version of their own construction” (115). Insofar as it really has created such a comprehensive, artificial “reality,” the left has given us democracy not simply as a social condition or even as a regime type but as *ideology*—a “false religion” (115). Scarcely better, the modern “political Right” offers Americans “a fusion of small-government-in-theory-and-big-government-in-practice with an aggressive nationalism that is contradicted, theoretically and in fact, by its commitment to global democratization” (116). “The problem with ideological democracy is that democracy is a form of politics, and politics can never be wholly separated from religion.” But any self-consciously invented religion that rigorously separates politics from religions that are “given” rather than professedly invented and then claims for itself exclusive legitimacy as the moral compass of a centralized state will fail to convince even its own proponents. This may lead to nihilism or to nihilism’s twin, utopianism. Utopianism is finally unbelievable, aiming at “a world without conflict and therefore without politics, which is essentially conflictual” (117)—as seen in the mixed-regime republicanism upheld by “classical political philosophy” (125). So-called postmodern utopianism must collapse of its own unbearable weightlessness, all the while denying that foundations really exist.

Williamson rejects any republicanism founded upon the principles of natural right. Although liberals claim (or have in the past claimed) that they intend to realize and ensure “the natural rights of mankind,” these have served instead as a mask for their atheism (119). The putatively natural right to religious freedom has itself begun to lose its status as a right: “The new democratic state is its own god, and that god is a jealous god” (120). Along with religion, “The Western world has banished classical political philosophy from its intellectual precincts, and modern—democratic—man regards himself as a fully autonomous being, endowed with no fixed nature that he may not alter to suit himself and no fixed role to play in the world. He is, instead, a world unto himself” (125). But in “traditional Christianity” under the old aristocracy, “human dignity” derives from “the divine spark each person carries within himself and to his place in the hierarchical chain of being. Such a creature has no need of ‘rights’ or of ‘freedom,’ though certain liberties, recognized over the centuries by both the church and the state, are certainly appropriate to his nature” (123). Such regimes of Christian love contrast fundamentally with modern statism:

Democracy, to succeed, must be more than self-government. It must be the love of self-government, inducing an affection even for government itself. Yet the greater and more expansive government produced by that affection, and by engendered trust, in the end produces love’s opposite—hatred of government, and the refusal to cooperate with or tolerate it. There may be no way around this fundamental paradox of the democratic system. (153)

Jesus of Nazareth understood this: “Christ Himself appears to have limited His audiences to five thousand people, while saving His choicest teachings for private discussions with the Twelve” (140). When it comes to the important things, government small enough to sustain personal relations works best for, well, persons. Such government cannot sustain itself under the modern state, especially in its more recent forms. The ideology of progressivism (especially as exercised by the judiciary), with its claim to speak for large and impersonal historical forces; reliance upon information technology (which has not “raised the level of human wisdom in any appreciable degree” [174]); and the Faustian ambition to impose control over nature, including human nature—all result in a decline in prudential reasoning and in “the entrustment of the all-powerful state with sole discretion to determine moral value, which in turn becomes purely a matter of efficiency” [180]). Against such a self-divinizing entity, natural right—with its leveling inclination to declare all men equal—is not merely a weak barrier but a wide patch along the road

to serfdom. (Or it would be, if modern serfs still enjoyed a personal relationship with the lords of the manor.)

In Part III, “The Future of Democracy and the End of History,” Williamson foresees a rather different world than the one proffered by Fukuyama. He predicts “an age of extreme global instability that will impose a radical need for enhanced political and social order at the national and international level; a need that the eroding institution of the nation-state, to say nothing of ‘democracy,’ will be hard pressed to meet” (196). Already, the trend toward liberal democracy seen by Fukuyama has halted, as many societies neither especially want it nor find themselves capable of governing themselves by it. This is not surprising, if democracy is incoherent to begin with. Founded “on an illusory concept of metaphysics, human nature, the essence of the good, and the nature of evil,” the latest version of liberalism—an unstable combination of progressivism and “postmodern” moral relativism, not to say nihilism—simply cannot do what it most wants to do: rule (219). But democracy suffers less from contradictions—as Marx asserted—than from entropy. “Hedonistic, selfish, and narcissistic,” modern human beings can no longer muster anything more than the passive resistance born of resentment; their disillusionment with the modern project in its latter-day form makes the prospects for continued social order uncertain. “Whatever democracy is,” Williamson concludes, “there is likely to be a great deal less of it in the decades and centuries to come” (229). We now live *after* Tocqueville; after the democratic tendency of modern life has crested, and long after his well-intended cures—the guiding aristocratic prudence, federalism sustaining genuinely political life on all levels of government, civil and political association standing between local communities and the centralized state—have failed.

Williamson thus gives not a rigorous, scholarly account of Tocqueville or a philosophic analysis of the modernity Tocqueville considered as a well-crafted expression of an aristocratic sensibility responding to and often recoiling from the atheism and egalitarianism that prevail in large swathes of today’s world. Like Nietzsche’s aristocrats, he prefers not to argue but to exemplify, judge, and “carry on.”

Like most men of sensibility he prefers not to define things so much as to perceive and to appreciate their refinement. Definition would introduce too much abstraction into the nuanced richness of social life and its subtle gradations of rule. As against the simplification introduced by Kantian categories of *rights*, Williamson upholds

traditional Christianity, which attributes human dignity to the divine spark each person carries within himself and to his place in the hierarchical chain of being. Such a creature has no need of “rights” or of “freedom,” though certain liberties, recognized over the centuries by both the church and the state, are certainly appropriate to his nature. But their liberties are hardly contingent on liberal democracy, which they precede by millennia. (123–24)

He goes so far as to claim (following Russell Kirk) that the American founders “did not really believe their own rhetorical flourishes” in the Declaration of Independence, “the intent of which was to impress a world skeptical of the American colonists’ intentions” (174).⁹

Kirk’s claim is insupportable. True enough, the Declaration appeals to “a candid world,” very much including the French monarchy that would intervene militarily with considerable effect in the War of Independence. But with the exception of Franklin, every important founder consistently referred to natural rights as the standard for civil rights within the modern state.¹⁰ This can and has been demonstrated at length, although the best demonstration remains reading their writings for oneself.

The problem of the centralized and potentially overbearing modern state requires another definitional distinction that Williamson doesn’t quite get right—that between *state* and *regime*. In the Aristotelian terms that Williamson and many of us esteem, the regime or *politeia* consists of three elements: the *politeia* strictly speaking, which consists of the ruling institutions of the political community; the *politeuma* or ruling body, consisting of the persons who rule that community; and the *bios tis*, the way of life of the community.¹¹ This definition enables Aristotle to offer his well-known regime typology, which includes the regime itself called “regime” or *politeia*—the “mixed regime” that balances the rule of the few who are rich and

⁹ See Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind* (Chicago: Regnery, 1960), 82–83; Russell Kirk, introduction to *Mr. Jefferson*, by Albert Jay Nock (Delavan, WI: Hallberg, 1983).

¹⁰ On Franklin see Jerry Weinberger, *Benjamin Franklin Unmasked: On the Unity of His Moral, Religious and Political Thought* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 226–27, 232–34, 265; Lorraine Pangle, *The Political Philosophy of Benjamin Franklin* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 140–48. On the Founders generally, see Thomas G. West, *Vindicating the Founders: Race, Sex, Class and Justice in the Origins of America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997); Michael P. Zuckert, *Natural Rights and the New Republicanism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). On Madison, see Colleen A. Sheehan, *James Madison and the Spirit of Republican Self-Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 83, 142, 153 (this last, incidentally, on the Declaration of Independence).

¹¹ Aristotle, *Politics* 1275b35–42, 1275a22–32, 1275b18–20, 1276b1–15, 1278b8–12, 1279a23–40, 1279b1–5, 1323a14–23.

the many who are poor. This is the republicanism Williamson esteems—with the caveat that the wealth of the rich be landed, entailing active, prudential, patient cultivation of the soil and the soul and vigilant protection of the persons who work it. As Williamson also stipulates, and as Aristotle remarks, such a regime supports a substantial middle class.

Distinct from the concept of the regime, the concept of the *state* classifies political communities in terms of their size and degree of centralization. The ancient *poleis* that Aristotle describes were small in size but centralized; even the regimes with the largest ruling bodies—the mixed regimes and democracies—could fit all their rulers into one place at one time in order to deliberate on public concerns. The vast empires Aristotle also saw but did not describe were large in size but decentralized—precursors of the federal states. The feudal monarchies and aristocracies of medieval Europe ruled territories and populations somewhere between those of the ancient *poleis* and empires but were as decentralized as the latter. The “modern” or Machiavellian state which Williamson excoriates combines impressive size with centralization made possible by bureaucracies staffed by “meritocrats” rather than by landed aristocrats; notice that *regime* and *state* overlap here because no matter what its formal regime the modern state needs bureaucrats trained in a modest sort of virtuosity: efficiency.

Under these modern conditions, the assertion of natural rights makes a good deal of sense. The Declaration of Independence—no mere series of rhetorical flourishes but a logical syllogism in which Creator-endowed and unalienable rights form a major premise—denounced as part of British tyranny the regime’s attempt to make the empire into a centralized Machiavellian state, the kind of entity that sends swarms of tax collectors to eat out the substance of the republican middle classes.

To this line of argument Williamson wants to reply: Yes, but the very condition is what I reject—the condition of modern statism and its social foundation, social egalitarianism or democracy. This *cri de coeur* begs the indispensable question that Williamson does not address, namely, the arguable *necessity* of the modern state, given both the preexisting tendency away from aristocracy and towards social equality and the human fact of warfare, at which aristocrats had long excelled. A student of Aristotle might observe with irony that by ignoring the fact of warfare Williamson commits

the mistake Aristotle identifies in the thought of Phaleas of Chalcedon, a utopian democrat.¹²

Consideration of war seldom intrudes itself into Williamson's book, except as an instrument of democratic-nationalist madness or folly. But the very Machiavelli whom Williamson lauds bases his argument upon exactly the requirements of warfare. Christianity—for example, the Catholic Christianity of Pope Julius II and others—worships the Prince of Peace. But the prince who guides himself by Christian principles walks the path to ruin, not salvation. Accordingly, Machiavelli's prince studies the art of war. The lion and the fox share one salient characteristic in this regard: they are predators. Once organized (and as Machiavelli foresees) *lo stato* will destroy not only the remaining, small *poleis* but also feudalism. Machiavelli's state will rival the feudal communities in size yet enjoy centralized rule seen previously only in the *polis*. Eschewing Christian and Aristotelian virtues alike for *virtù*, the new statesmen will defeat the old priests and aristocrats, and the new state will defeat any other state. Aristocrats had been the warriors and the priests had been the ones who appealed to God for protection and victory in war; the political authority of such men rested in part upon their claim to protect the people they ruled. By 1776 the modern state had defeated the old regimes and the old states at a crucial part of their own game, even as the Americans were defeating the aristocratic warrior-Indians.¹³ Any attempt to rescue modern political life from Machiavellianism must address the question of war. Washington did, as did Publius. But Williamson merely deplors it.

This also points to another lacuna in Williamson's presentation. Despite his insistence on the importance of religion to any decent political community, and his preference for the Christian Aristotelianism of Thomas as the best theology, Williamson does not acknowledge Tocqueville's claim that Christianity itself served as the architectonic principle, the forming origin of democracy.¹⁴ Only by fully confronting the theological-political question as posed by Machiavelli and (in a different way) by Tocqueville could one begin to form a countervailing strategy against the malign effects of Machiavellianism in principle and in practice. For that task, a noble and humble traditionalism can get us only so far.

¹² Aristotle, *Politics* 1267a16–36.

¹³ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 314.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

Jeffrey Edward Green, *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, ix + 284 pp., \$49.95 (hardcover).

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In modern democracies the supposedly sovereign people do not rule but merely choose their rulers at infrequent intervals. Most of the time they experience politics as a spectacle, as something seen but not directly participated in. The vast majority of political theorists have considered this to be a serious, even potentially fatal, problem with modern mass democracy. However, the author of the present book suggests that it may not be such a deleterious phenomenon. Why? How? Are his arguments robust? Are his claims correct?

Jeffrey Edward Green's work questions the hegemonic discourse prevailing in contemporary democratic theory according to which democracy is conceptualized as a vocal, decision- and law-centered form of government, and a dominant thread running throughout political thought over the last 150 years—from the late nineteenth-century liberal ideal of a “government by speaking/by discussion”¹ to the deliberative arena presupposed

¹ See Thomas B. Macaulay, *William Pitt (1857)*, in *The Miscellaneous Writings and Speeches of Lord Macaulay*, vol. 3 (London: Longmans, Green, 1889); John Stuart Mill, *Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform* (1859), in *Dissertations and Discussions, Political, Philosophical and Historical*, vol. 3 (London: Longmans, 1867), 1–46; Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1991 [1861]); Walter Bagehot, *Physics and Politics* (Boston: Beacon, 1956 [1872]). On their conceptualization of representative governments as “government by discussion,” see Kari Palonen, “Speaking *pro et contra*: The Rhetorical Intelligibility of Parliamentary Politics and the Political Intelligibility of Parliamentary Rhetoric,” in *The Parliamentary Style of Politics*, ed. Suvi Soininen and Tapani Turkka (Helsinki: Helsinki University Print, 2008), 82–105.

by most post-Habermasian theorists.² Reclaiming a realistic approach that focuses on the “is” rather than the “ought to be,” he seeks to understand how real democracy works and is experienced on a day-to-day basis by the vast majority of citizens, who enjoy no institutional power but for the political right to periodically elect their representatives. Against the supremacy of *voice* as the mean for the exercise of popular sovereignty, Green suggests that *gaze* be reinstated at both normative and ethical levels as a crucial channel for empowering the People in their everyday condition of spectatorship vis-à-vis institutional politics in contemporary mass democracy. Such a “Copernican revolution” springs from a threefold dissatisfaction. First, Green believes that a suitable theory of political representation must develop principles that at least resemble the daily practices of citizenship: hence, close correspondence between the descriptive and prescriptive levels must be pursued. Secondly, he argues that a collective notion of the democratic People, as distinct from the sum of selfish, interest-led atoms, is much needed in contemporary political theory beyond the traditional framework of liberalism.³ Finally, the democratic gaze through which, in a Benthamian-Foucaultian vein, the People subjects the public actions of their representatives to perpetual scrutiny significantly contributes to readjusting the intrinsic asymmetry within the dualism of governors and governed.

On these bases, the first three chapters of the book juxtapose two diverging conceptualizations of democratic life: the deliberative and the plebiscitary notions, the former based on the primacy of the voice, and the latter on the primacy of the eye. These two understandings of how democracies are run on a daily basis differ on three levels: the object, the channel, and the fundamental idea that orients their practice. In particular, plebiscitary, ocular democracy relocates the object of popular power in the leader, rather than the law; its organ in the People’s gaze, rather than its decision; its critical idea in leaders’ candor (i.e., the institutional prerequisite of leaders not being in control of the conditions of their public activity) rather than the People’s autonomy. As a result, Green’s democratic government lives in and through “the eyes of the People.” Truly democratic masses collectively and constantly

² For a significant sample, see *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

³ On the multiple readings of the notion of “the People” that have been developed throughout the history of political thought, see Margaret Canovan, *The People* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005); for a reconceptualization of the same notion in contemporary democratic theory from an opposite perspective to Green’s, see Paulina Ochoa Espejo, *The Time of Popular Sovereignty: Process and the Democratic State* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011).

test the legitimacy of those whom they elect, through an enquiring gaze that holds leaders accountable to the People for their institutional actions. Sharply put, plebiscitary ethics understands popular sovereignty as a “negative” power, preventing the elected minority from acting in its own interests and bargaining behind closed doors, thereby flouting democratic responsiveness. Instead of the citizen-judge, empowered to pursue the public good and contribute to the legislative process through the exercise of autonomy and reciprocity, Green rehabilitates the citizen-spectator as the main actor in contemporary mass democracy. The readjustment of the institutional imbalance of power and the preservation of the substantial homogeneity of the people vis-à-vis their representatives emerge as the twofold mission that any plebiscitary reconceptualization of democracy must finalize. The author labels it “a reverse Machiavellianism” or “a Machiavellianism for the people” (23–26), referring to a form of sovereignty that both elaborates on the existing political order (unlike the Marxian, revolutionary paradigm) and makes the politics/morality dilemma a matter of daily, collective choice against any monopoly of decision making on the part of the elected few. He thus accepts the disproportion between disorganized majorities and organized minorities that Gaetano Mosca revealed as an inescapable feature of liberal, mass politics; however, the author points at the opposite yet converging dynamics of spectatorship and candor as vehicles for redistributing power and attaining a collective understanding of citizenship against and beyond liberal individualism. In particular, candor empowers the democratic People as an entity that collectively exercises sovereignty on four levels. On the intellectual level, it suggests a “post-/non-representational” (17–19) model of democracy that overcomes the ideal of self-legislation entrenched within political representation; on the aesthetic level, it assists the prioritization of the “watchability” of actions within a public-political sphere that is increasingly chaotic and artificially inundated with events (“eventfulness”); on the egalitarian level, it activates a perpetual readjustment of power and legitimacy between the representatives and their constituents; finally, it also works as a mechanism for solidarity among individuals sharing the condition of spectatorship, in turn leading liberal society (*Gesellschaft*) to evolve into a homogeneous community (*Gemeinschaft*).

The third and fourth perspectives undoubtedly stand out as the most original features of this reshaping of today’s mass democracy, and render Green’s book a thought-provoking contribution to mainstream contemporary democratic theory. Against both the fractioning of the people due to private (either corporate or individual) interests and the paradox of

an intermittently hyperelectoralized yet mostly passive form of citizenship, the emphasis on candor allows for perpetual redistribution of sovereignty between the “macro-” and the “micro-demos,” i.e., the majority of citizens and the elected minority. Being constantly reallocated through the candor/gaze binomial logic, democratic power also reveals the Janus-faced nature of legitimacy in the construction of mass politics: on one hand, there is a *political* form of legitimacy that periodically invests the institutional elites, through elections; on the other, there is also a *moral* legitimacy that must be continuously recreated and sustained as a bridge connecting the representatives and the People, beyond elections. Finally, by providing a spectatorship- and not will-based conception of democracy, Green argues that there is nothing to be ashamed of, in political or normative terms, in recognizing sight and hearing as founding pillars of democratic citizenship today. When reinterpreted as potential means for the exercise of popular sovereignty, and not merely as passive sensory organs, they prove that the vast majority of citizens are not doomed to apathy or inevitably excluded from any process of decision making. By typifying the widespread condition of democratic men and women vis-à-vis institutional politics, the notions can engender a sense of solidarity among the People and activate an agonistic feeling of surveillance on part of the People, among their leaders.

However, as Green himself admits, “plebiscitary democracy has its theorists but not its theory”: hence its being almost unanimously dismissed by scholars engaged in the normative understanding of democracy. This is the missing piece that *The Eyes of the People* seeks to recover and develop through a historical-philosophical genealogy of democratic plebiscitarianism. Chapters 4 and 5 tell the story of a dual-track conceptualization of democracy: the Aristotelian understanding of politics, centered on the complementarity between the citizen-governor and the citizen-to-be-governed experienced by every Athenian man, and the development of modern citizenship in the context of enlarged territorial states that made the fiction of representation an indispensable requirement for governments to function. Aristotle—as Green recalls—ascribed two different virtues to the conditions of ruling and being ruled, based respectively on *phronēsis*, i.e., the active search of the means through which to pursue the public good, and *doxa alēthēs*, i.e., the passive reception of decisions taken by others and assumed to be the wisest possible. However, while these two paradigms presupposed opposite sensorial aptitudes, that is, speaking and hearing, the ancient model of democracy epitomized by fourth- and fifth-century BC Athens understood them as being closely intertwined. It was impossible for the ancients to correctly exercise the art of ruling—speaking and making

decisions—without having previously experienced that of being ruled, i.e., listening: the former embodied the *telos*, the ultimate purpose of the latter; the rotation of offices, together with the small dimensions of the *polis*, made it likely that each citizen would pass from being governed to governing at least once in his lifetime. A lifelong process of education to the art of ruling: this was the normative trajectory followed in the Aristotelian understanding of democratic communities as places of both hearing and speaking and of democratic individuals as political animals.

This kind of transition and coimplication of the two sides of ancient democratic citizenship collapsed at the dawn of modernity, when the Assembly as the locus of both rulers and those being ruled was dismantled in favor of a corporatist, hierarchical organization of the political order, first during the Middle Ages and later through the construction of state sovereignty. Yet, although the theorization of plebiscitary democracy is the offspring of early twentieth-century Continental political thought, its dramatization—i.e., the portrayal of the People in its capacity as a spectator—may be traced back to Shakespeare’s Roman plays, *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* in particular. Taken together, these two works not only constitute an organic study of the history of political corruption but, most importantly, in Green’s opinion, they also disclose a clear reconceptualization of popular power as presenting an ocular, rather than a vocal, dimension. Green recalls that, even within different settings and historical frameworks, both plays resort to the metaphor of the People’s “bad breath,” thus conveying a devaluation of any substantial contribution that the crowd may bring to decision making, and downplaying any notion of the popular will as a substantive, ontological entity capable of emerging through the deliberative exchange of ideas. In both cases, the works’ dramatic core unveils the People’s authentic nature and reveals that apathy and indecision, rather than autonomy, orient the behavior of “the many-headed multitude.” Furthermore—states Green—*Coriolanus*’s public appearances are regulated by the moral ideal of humility, symbolized by the white robe (*candidatus* in Latin, hence “candor” in English) as a sign of transparency and frankness. According to Green, not only does such a demand for publicity as the framework through which the People may supervise and survey their leaders set “the moral landscape of the play” (134). Most relevantly, it makes *Coriolanus* a still significant contribution to a postrepresentational theory of plebiscitarianism, i.e., the dramatization of candor and gaze as marks of popular power that are alternative to, and independent from, political representation.

The strengthening of the People (the non-governors) as a collective, politically relevant entity that places behavioral constraints upon their governors, and the chance to evaluate and reform institutional politics through an empowered form of popular sight, constituted the Shakespearean legacy that early twentieth-century European theorists inherited and developed. Although Green deciphers traces of a protoplebiscitary theory of public investigation in Constant's *Principles of Politics Applicable to All Representative Governments* (1815), it is Weber, Schmitt, and Schumpeter that emerge as leading figures in the Greenian genealogy of plebiscitarianism. Both Weber and Schmitt were highly influenced by Shakespeare's work and transposed his emphasis on leaders' appearances before the People to a mass politics innervated by charismatic leadership and yes/no acclamations. However, according to Green, both Schmitt and Schumpeter proved to be bad disciples of Weber. On one hand, the German jurist twisted the nature of the Weberian, charisma-based *Führerdemokratie* by inscribing his normative model within a vicious circle: he made plebiscites and instinctual acclamations an ordinary instrument for the exercise of popular sovereignty, thus rooting plebiscitary government in the vocal ontology of power that intrinsically pertained to liberal ideology. On the other, the Austrian economist looked at mass democracy from a purely procedural perspective, conceptualizing the People as a semidormant actor that periodically elected its representatives but was, for the most part, abeyant between elections. Both failed to explore the potential of the *demos* as a meaningful source of power once ballots have been cast and the asymmetry between the few and the many has been established. On this level, Green concludes that Schumpeter stands as "the mirror image of Schmitt" (177). However, as early theoreticians of plebiscitarianism, they contributed to rephrase the language of democratic theory and unveil the relevance of political spectatorship as a channel for the everyday exercise of popular sovereignty.

As Green further clarifies in the final two chapters of his book, "putting candor first" (178) means to institutionalize the actuality rather than the superiority of the citizen-spectator perspective; to acknowledge that the traditional democratic ideals of self-ruling and autonomy are not only excessively demanding, but also do not exhaust the variety of strategies available to the masses for participating in the daily ruling of democracy. The section entitled "In Advance of My Critics" (201–11) points out that the ocular and vocal conceptualizations of mass democracy interact at three different levels, depending on whether the former supplies, supplements, or supplants the latter. The ambition of *The Eyes of the People* is thus to suggest

a third kind of democratic citizenship, one that mediates between the cynical realism that delegates decision making to a restricted elite and the political idealism that intoxicates individuals with an excess of participation.

However, the goal of developing a postrepresentative/non-representative theory of democracy raises, upon conclusion of this fascinating book, a number of concerns. The combined logics of candor and gaze end up strengthening, rather than overcoming, the representative/represented dichotomy. Moreover, Green does not develop the ethical potential of the People's spectatorship: he does not specify whether, and how, the process of ocular surveillance of elected leaders is linked to a moral evaluation first, and a political initiative second, in response to any eventual break in legitimacy.⁴ If the People is called upon to constantly and publicly survey institutional actors, to what is their gaze functional? To what kind of critical thoughts, if any, does it lead? What kind of opinion-formation process does it activate? Such issues are not substantially dealt with in the seven chapters, sometimes leaving the reader with the impression that ocular democracy is an aesthetic, rather than an authentically political, exercise in plebiscitarianism.

⁴ On the notion of "democratic legitimacy" in contemporary representative governments, political theory has been investigating intensively throughout the last decade: see especially Pierre Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Rosanvallon, *Democratic Legitimacy: Impartiality, Reflexivity, Proximity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Nadia Urbinati, "Continuity and Rupture: The Power of Judgment in Democratic Representation," *Constellations* 12, no. 5 (2005): 194–222; Urbinati, *Representative Democracy: Principles and Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Urbinati, "Unpolitical Democracy," *Political Theory* 38, no. 1 (2010): 65–92.

Sharon Portnoff, *Reason and Revelation before Historicism: Strauss and Fackenheim*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011, 395 pp., \$70.00.

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How best to summarize Portnoff's closely reasoned book about alternative responses to the problems and crises created by historicism? Perhaps in the dilemma faced by the poet-traveler in Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" and his reflection on the choice he made:

I shall be telling this with a sigh
 Somewhere ages and ages hence:
 Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
 I took the one less traveled by,
 And that has made all the difference.

Like the poet, Portnoff has taken a less traveled road in engaging in a comparative analysis. Like a philosopher, however, in doing so she has actually explored both the road of philosophy and the road of theology as Strauss and Fackenheim found them—in exile—and how each sought to find its proper home.

Portnoff's courageous pursuit of the similarities and differences in the thinking of the two men includes thoughtful observations about the eventful "turns" taken by each. Strauss's "turn" took place when he read and responded to Carl Schmitt's pamphlet *The Concept of the Political*. He came to realize that in his earlier studies of Spinoza (leading to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*), he had not read Spinoza literally enough. He also reconsidered his earlier studies of Hobbes and Locke. As a result, he also read Plato and Xenophon differently. Similarly, Portnoff reveals how Fackenheim too had a "turn"—at first rejecting Hegel for his shift from "nature" to "history"

as the ground of philosophy, and later adopting Hegel as his model for the recovery of Jewish thought in a post-Holocaust world.

Portnoff's study demonstrates that rather than being a defect, the fact that both men "turned" signals their continuous openness to the quest for truth. She also demonstrates her own openness to new discoveries.

While there is a large body of commentary on the work and intentions of Strauss and Fackenheim individually, Portnoff argues that "an in-depth study of their affinities and differences is long overdue" (8). That is because a comparative study reveals that there are two serious alternative responses to the distortions of philosophy and revelation brought about by historicism. At the base of her study is the assumption that if a writer is to be more fully understood as he understood himself, then his self-understanding is best illuminated by a study that contrasts him with those concerned with the same subject matter but who take a different path. In raising this issue, Portnoff's study is also a study of the challenges of any hermeneutical principle.

Having accepted the argument of both Strauss and Fackenheim that the viability of Western civilization has been corroded by the redefining of both philosophy and revelation by historicism, Portnoff lays out the options open to anyone who is in search of what it will take to restore the authority of both philosophy and revelation and in particular their teachings regarding the nature of justice.

I find Portnoff's book to be not just of intellectual interest, but of personal interest as well. Raised in an assimilating orthodox Jewish family during the 1940s, the son and grandson of immigrants, and schooled in Torah in cheder and in a newly formed Jewish day school, I began to move away from my upbringing when I attended the University of Chicago as an undergraduate in the mid-1950s. Much to my surprise, when in 1964 I was introduced to Leo Strauss's *Natural Right and History*, I found passages that indicated that, although there was a tension between reason and revelation, it might be possible to return to my childhood way of living. Yet my return to Judaism, in the form of modern orthodoxy, was unsettling. I followed Mr. Strauss's return to Plato, but wavered in my commitment to abiding fully with Revealed Law. Portnoff's book led me to a better understanding of the problems one faces when one attempts to return to orthodoxy with a historicist mindset.

The book is divided into five parts: (1) Background and Introduction; (2) Strauss's Formulation of the Relationship between Reason

and Revelation in Modern Thought and His Rejection of a Practical Synthesis; (3) Fackenheim's Formulation of the Relationship between Philosophy and Revelatory Theology in Modern Thought; (4) The Problem of Historicism; and (5) Reason and Revelation: Jewish Thought after Strauss and Fackenheim.

From its structure, one can infer that the book is Platonic in character. Portnoff explores the thought of both Strauss and Fackenheim as they reflect on philosophy and revelation from the perspective of both humanity and citizenship. It cannot go unsaid, then, that this book indirectly grapples with the perpetual questions that were derived from Socrates's fate, as those questions might also be asked about the fate of reason and revelation in a post-Holocaust world. Simultaneously, this book is a dialectical encounter of two responses to the problems and crises created by modernity.

Readers, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say devotees, of one but not the other of the two thinkers will be treated to an adventure. The book makes a strong case for the claim that, given the topic of reason and revelation, a more profound understanding of each thinker becomes possible when one compares the rationale for the choice that the favored author made as a form of therapy for the crisis, based on the grounds upon which he accounted for the problem, with the other thinker's. As Portnoff describes the difference, "Strauss accounts for historicism historically; Fackenheim accounts for it metaphysically" (176). Thus, the book opens a vista for followers of each thinker to consider the rationale for the road not taken by either of them.

It begins with a personal vignette by the author. During an interview she had with Fackenheim, he told her of the beginning of his relationship with Strauss. As a young scholar living in Toronto he visited Strauss, who at the time was teaching at the New School in New York City. He sought out Strauss in order to get his opinion as to whether what various philosophers wrote was "right." Concerned with what he had learned, from Strauss's writings, as the problems created by historicism, he went to learn more about Strauss's judgments concerning what modern philosophers had gotten "right." His goal was to reaffirm the possibility of Jewish revelation in a secular world and in the aftereffect of the Holocaust on Jews' desire to remain Jewish.

From this entry point, the book begins philosophically with the agreement of both Strauss and Fackenheim that historicism—"the idea that changes in human thinking literally change the object of thought or that

the foundations of thought are rooted in particular historical circumstances” (153)—had undermined the belief that there is a natural morality grounded in a fixed human nature. Historicism had instead spawned the now dubious belief that progress, in the form of increasing freedom from nature and tradition, was both possible and salutary.

That belief emerged from the fact that historicist philosophers claimed to have resolved the conflict between philosophy and theology, but in seeming to have succeeded in that effort undermined the authority of both. The authority of reason being challenged, the possibility of philosophy came under attack; the authority of revelation being challenged, God was internalized and man became self-creating, thus morally autonomous. After God ceased to be “Other,” it was no longer possible to test the claims of false prophets—religious and secular. Modern philosophy, in the form of historicism, and the attempts at a synthesis of reason and revelation, prepared the ground for modern idolatry: the work of men as though they were the all-wise and all-powerful God.

Portnoff examines Strauss’s critique of modern philosophy (Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Heidegger) and of modern Jewish thought (on the Bible, as well as Spinoza, Cohen, and Rosenzweig themselves). She places Spinoza among the modern Jewish philosophers out of her recognition that Strauss learned to read the Bible by having read and reflected on Spinoza’s own reading of the Bible. He discovered, on his second and more literal reading, that for all of his boldness, Spinoza was an esoteric writer: he purposefully omitted his most important points, among which was that the biblical author (or authors?) was an esoteric writer as well. Esoteric writing was the result of either fear of censorship or recognizing the danger of readers’ making harmful choices for themselves and their successors if they were exposed to the truths publicly espoused by philosophers from Machiavelli onward. (Portnoff herself sometimes hides her own opinions. Because they could distract her readers from the thrust of her analyses, she constructs footnotes that contain what might be considered impious insights and observations.)

Strauss’s discovery of esoteric writing led him to recognize how modern philosophy had created a second, “unnatural” cave, beneath the natural cave, in which images directly seen are mistaken for the things themselves. In this under-underground cave, interpretations of things that provide answers, rather than posing questions, prevent philosophers, and even nonphilosophers, from seeing things (and even the images of things) directly.

The other fundamental issue addressed by Portnoff is why Strauss sought a response to historicism by attempting to recover ancient natural right. Her answer is that in *Nature*, Strauss found a principle that was directly connected to the idea of a human being's perfection, or the "process of self-construction as a process of the actualization of potentialities implicit in permanent human nature" (193). This idea which he had found in Plato, "and with variations, [in] Aristotle, the Stoics, and Thomas Aquinas" (43), implied that there were limits to human perfectibility which were imposed by the unsolvable mystery of being.

Strauss recognized another limit. Spinoza had broken with traditional Judaism in an effort to create conditions for Jews to live in a liberal democratic state—in a condition of tolerance. But the cost of this break was that, as Portnoff states it, "Jews, after Spinoza, no longer have a tradition to which to return" (66).

On completing her presentation of Strauss's thought, Portnoff asks what for most readers would be the most important question: Did Strauss choose Athens or did he choose Jerusalem? Her question is not a reflection of her belief that Strauss actually made a choice; rather, it is meant to lead her readers to wonder whether or not he would have been able to make such a choice. But in addition, her question leads readers to consider whether or not Strauss himself was an esoteric writer, and if so, in what sense.

Portnoff concludes that "Strauss allows one to live as a Jew and think as a philosopher" (211). But such an observation leads one to inquire what that would mean in practical terms. She hints at an answer by observing that Strauss found in his studies of both ancient philosophy and ancient Judaism that each in its own way rejected idolatry or the worshiping of a human being. But such a discovery poses yet another complicating issue: Is the worship of Socrates by philosophers a form of idolatry?

Portnoff demonstrates that Fackenheim was profoundly influenced by Strauss's critique of the "idealism inherent in the modern liberal state" (308). Unlike Strauss, however, who looked to the ancients' discovery of natural right, Fackenheim sought to take on the moderns directly. Portnoff adeptly reviews Fackenheim's interpretations and critiques of Kant, Hegel, Schelling, and Heidegger. She reveals that Fackenheim grew doubtful about Kant's enterprise when he discovered that Kant recognized the existence of evil but denied that it had any independent ontological existence. Morality, for Kant, was grounded in human consciousness and was thus not a

permanent part of human nature. It could not account for the Nazi Holocaust as anything more than a historical accident.

Fackenheim's writings devoted to Hegel attempt to prove that Hegel was wrong in concluding that Christianity is the Absolute Religion. At the same time, Fackenheim found that Hegel's thought allowed a place for Judaism because it allowed for the possibility of rediscovering God as an Absolute Other. The same rejection/attraction dynamic is at work in his views of Schelling and, perhaps more surprisingly, Heidegger.

Portnoff's treatment of Fackenheim's reading of the latter provides her readers with an insight into the complex nature of his thought. At first, he tried to refute Heidegger, but after Strauss suggested to him that he had failed to do so, Fackenheim adopted some aspects of Heidegger's thought and, as a result, his work stands in direct opposition to Strauss's total rejection of historicism.

Her analyses of Fackenheim's struggles with Christian or post-Christian philosophers prepare her reader for her examination of how he read Jewish thinkers—the Bible, Spinoza, Rosenzweig, and Buber—and how he sought to construct his own synthesis of revelatory religion and philosophy. It is grounded on what he called a “historical dialectical approach.” By that term, Fackenheim meant that he was seeking to return not to biblical Judaism but to rabbinic Judaism. Specifically, he sought to restore the prominence of Midrash, the rabbinic telling of stories and parables about God's interaction with humans.

But, as Portnoff observes in one of her many informative footnotes, Fackenheim's understanding of rabbinic Judaism was “not altogether traditional” (242). As she says, Fackenheim interpreted the concepts of *teshuvah* (return) and *tikkun* (mending) as action-concepts that he believed were suitable for addressing and confronting the Holocaust. These provide the ground for her conclusion that Fackenheim is best described as a Jewish existentialist—one who involved himself in Jewish history while at the same time evaluating that history philosophically.

Portnoff completes her analysis of Fackenheim by exploring the rationale for his desire to create a new theology, one grounded on the experience of the Nazi Holocaust. That historical event provided evidence to him that thought can destroy empirical reality. His new theology involved a commitment to think about the Transcendent while at the same time preserving the present. Fackenheim's political theology sought to balance

worship and self-defense, God and secularism, ever mindful of the reality of evil, but optimistic about the ability of humans to restore themselves.

It might be said, based on Portnoff's analysis, that Fackenheim's new theology is a political theology aimed at refuting the claims of Carl Schmitt's political theology, which grounded the latter's support of the Nazi regime. Perhaps it is with this in mind that she concludes, not with an answer, but with another question: "given that reason and revelation cannot be synthesized, and are not synthesized, can one be 'too optimistic' within the terms of philosophy? or 'too hopeful' within the terms of revelational theology?" (152). These questions point to Portnoff's sensitivity to the difficulty that any philosopher or theologian has in escaping the grasp of historicism.

While she directly addresses the problem faced by Fackenheim's response to historicism, she does not address this difficulty directly with respect to Strauss. This does not mean she skirts that issue. Rather, by posing the questions at all, she opens the door to tailoring them to the way Strauss attempted that escape. The reader is left to determine how he was able to make a successful escape, if indeed he was totally successful in doing so. She indirectly addresses the issue by arguing that Strauss read the Bible as he read the great philosophers, rather than through the eyes of the rabbis. He chose to give philosophy the advantage over revelation because he concluded that

the Bible does not include the mystery of being itself, one may recognize its authority as the record of the mystery of being. The Bible's authority is necessarily translated into what is accessible to common sense. When Strauss translates revelation into the idea of revelation—or strips from revelation its "historical" component—he is not diminishing but rather augmenting the claims of revelation and the claims of the mystery of being itself. (210)

Having accepted the argument of both writers that the viability of Western civilization rests on the mutual recognition of the legitimacy of the claims of both reason and revelation, as based on the recognition that neither can truly refute the claims of the other, Portnoff has done more than provide her readers with an inquiry into the thoughts of Strauss and Fackenheim. She has written a book that lays out the options open to anyone who is in search of what it will take to restore the authority of both philosophy and revelation and in particular their teachings regarding the nature of justice.

Fackenheim rejected Strauss's concern with recovering esoteric writing as a response to historicism's failings. He did so because he was focused on the historical results that followed from literal readings of

modern philosophers' exoteric meanings by their successors. Some truths, when made public, have had harmful results. The question this poses for Strauss is whether or not there are even more harmful truths to be discovered by philosophers that will accelerate the decay in the West. Were one to discover in Strauss's esoteric writing that this were true, one would be duty bound to conceal them. One might speculate that any truth that defies the self and secularism might be an example of a decay-accelerating truth.

Portnoff reveals another problem created by historicism: it has buried any sensitivity to the reality of irony. While this word is often used to describe Socrates's purposeful dissembling, there is a larger meaning that Portnoff's book invites one to consider. That fuller appreciation of irony is unearthed from consideration of the claim, by revealed theology, of the limits of human knowledge. Those limits are exposed by the sudden appearance of unanticipated incongruities or paradoxes.

Historical thinking has obscured the possibility that apparently fortuitous incongruities in life occur. But as the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr observed, what appears to be incongruous, when carefully examined, uncovers a hidden relationship existing in the incongruity. Once that relationship is revealed, a virtue can become a vice when a hidden defect is discovered in the virtue; strength can become a weakness when the strength leads to vanity; wisdom can become foolishness when it does not know its own limits.¹

Strauss's freeing philosophy from the sediment that had buried that sensitivity opens up for us the possible insight that we are exposed to the possibility that irony, even more than fear, is the most profound cause of caution and esoteric writing. He argued that, for example, Machiavelli's evil can be traced to the fact that he made public what had, among the ancients, been esoteric. In doing so, Machiavelli abandoned their caution, leading to a philosophic writing that increasingly emphasized the extremes rather than the mean. This transformation took place because the successors of Machiavelli, Spinoza, Hobbes, and Locke either failed to recognize that they too wrote esoterically or else chose to ignore what they discovered in those esoteric writings.²

¹ See the preface to *The Irony of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), xxiv.

² Strauss, in his "Preface" to the English translation of *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 31, admitted that when he wrote the original book, he had not yet discovered that Spinoza wrote esoterically.

In summarizing her own effort, Portnoff wrote that “this book, by looking at what [Martin] Yaffe has called Fackenheim’s ‘self-distancing’ from Strauss...is, perhaps, a bridge by which one might discover Strauss’s thought” (238–39).³ This conclusion exposes us to the problem of any hermeneutic: can a reader ever be certain that he or she has reliably read a writer as that writer understood himself without engaging in a comparative study of that writing with the writing of one who began on the same path, but when two options arose about how to continue, chose another path?

In light of the development of modern science and modern philosophy, after reading this book it would be difficult not to infer that Fackenheim’s quest for a ground for the recovery of a tradition-oriented Judaism is the result of a historical moment. By the same token, one is entitled to ask whether or not Strauss’s quest for the recovery of natural right was due to a specific historical moment or a symptom of a philosopher’s natural skepticism. A reader is better prepared to seek an answer to this question after having read this book.

³ See Martin D. Yaffe, “Historicism and Revelation in Emil Fackenheim’s Self-Distancing from Leo Strauss,” in *Emil Fackenheim: Philosopher, Theologian, Jew*, ed. Sharon Portnoff, James A. Diamond, and Martin D. Yaffe (Boston: Brill, 2008), 107–24.

I N S T R U C T I O N S F O R C O N T R I B U T O R S

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