

# Interpretation

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# Interpretation

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# Reason and Revelation in the Thought of Leo Strauss

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While Leo Strauss presented himself as a thinker on politics, he came to politics through what he called the “theological-political problem” *PPH*, pp. 1–3. See also Preface, p. 1). It is certainly not clear at the outset what exactly this means, but it does prepare us for the fact that Strauss had some interesting things to say about religion and its relation to both politics and philosophy. It also prepares us for the fact that those who write about Strauss often find it necessary to try to understand Strauss’s theological position.

Stanley Rosen, in his recent book *Hermeneutics as Politics*, tells us in the introduction to that work that Strauss was an atheist (p. 17). This is surprising because, as Rosen points out, Strauss explicitly argues that reason cannot refute revelation. Equally surprising, because it conflicts with Strauss’s stated claims, is Rosen’s revelation that, since Strauss’s atheism is not a reasoned conclusion, then Strauss must understand his own position, which he presents as being reasoned or philosophic, as being, in fact, an act of the will, i.e., a choice for which there is no rational ground (*HP*, pp. 110–11, 122–23, 127, 137. cf. Preface, p. 30). Rosen’s view of Strauss moves from the question regarding Strauss’s theological position to the question whether reason or theory is not rooted in a practical act, an act of the will. In this way Rosen raises the question of the proper relationship between theory and practice. The following essay will address both of Rosen’s points; in so doing, it will move from the question about God as the basis for human knowledge and action to the question whether it is at all possible to formulate, on a merely human basis, a coherent view of the relationship between theory and practice. The inability to formulate a strictly human view of this issue would have obvious implications, it would seem, for a return to a theological position. Indeed, the question of God’s existence and his relation to humanity is urgent in the extreme because of its bearing upon the practical question of the right or best way of life. Indeed, the viability of philosophy as an alternative answer to the question of the best way of life is very much at issue here (see Strauss, *MI*, p. 113).

Strauss cannot be a reasoned atheist, we are told, for a reason that Strauss himself makes clear. Rosen succinctly summarizes Strauss’s argument by saying that since wisdom is impossible, reason, and philosophy as the life devoted to reason, can never refute religion (*HP*, p. 110). Let us assume for the mo-

Strauss’s and Rosen’s writings are cited by abbreviations noted in the reference list.

ment that wisdom is impossible.<sup>1</sup> What is the significance of this fact for the debate between philosophy and religion? Any attempt by philosophy to refute revelation is based on the assumption that rational arguments are true. But the believer need not, and in fact does not, grant the validity of this assumption. Wisdom, as the perfectly intelligible account of the world and of the place of reason in the world, would provide proof that rational argument, based on experience and logic, is valid, i.e., does lead to truth. Philosophy needs to become wisdom because, in the absence of wisdom, the believer is free to begin with faith rather than with rational argument. For faith, all things are possible. But if revelation is possible, then philosophy, as the life of inquiry through unassisted human reason, cannot be known to be the right or best way of life. If the decision in favor of philosophy is not based on knowledge, then that decision becomes another kind of faith or belief. The fact that philosophy cannot refute religion undermines the fundamental claim of philosophy to be based on reason or knowledge. On the other hand, the believer cannot get beyond the assumption that reason is misleading or, at least, incomplete; he cannot prove that assumption without using reason. Indeed, since the believer himself insists that the object of his belief is not rational but is mysterious, i.e., beyond human reason, it follows that he himself cannot claim to understand fully what it means to believe. (Kierkegaard might serve as an example of a believer who fully acknowledges the unintelligible or even irrational character of the truly mysterious. See also *HP*, p. 112.) Hence, the rational point of view cannot be rationally or intelligibly refuted. But this situation is not damaging to religion, since the inability of revelation to refute philosophy merely confirms that religion is based on faith. In this crucial respect, then, the believing way of life seems more consistent, more rational, than the philosophic way of life (*NRH*, p. 75). Philosophy can receive only cold comfort from the observation that the apparent victory of revelation has been achieved by means of a reasoned argument. Philosophy as the quest for actual wisdom here and now contains the seed of its own negation. Philosophy thus understood self-destructs.

Since Strauss was an atheist who could not by his own admission know that the claims of religion are false, Rosen concludes that Strauss's dedication to the life of reason was itself based on an irrational choice or an act of the will. Rosen makes it clear that he does not see himself as drawing out implications that Strauss himself did not recognize. He is not bound, however, by "Strauss's reluctance to make too explicit his Nietzschean conception of philosophy as an act of the will" (*HP*, p. 137. For Rosen's own Nietzschean views, see p. 126, top).

While Rosen's Strauss is a willful or dogmatic atheist, Strauss is also presented as a philosophical skeptic. Rosen quotes him to the effect that "philosophy is knowledge that one does not know" (*NRH*, p. 32, quoted at *HP*, p. 118). At the same time, Rosen recognizes that to assert or will the superiority of the philosophic way of life over the believing or orthodox way of life is an instance

of “claiming to know what [the philosopher] does not and cannot know” (*HP*, p. 111).

The apparent contradiction between Strauss’s atheism and the understanding of philosophy as skeptical inquiry is the product of Rosen’s assumption that Strauss is an atheist. Thomas Pangle, in his introduction to *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, does not make this assumption. For Pangle, Strauss remains true to the vision of philosophy as the lifelong quest for a wisdom one will never have. Pangle presents Strauss as an agnostic—through Pangle does not use this word—whose philosophizing consists above all in thoughtful dialogue with the believer or with the believing point of view (Pangle, p. 22, bottom). Rosen rejects this modest or moderate conclusion. He sees Strauss’s interest in religious authors as a deliberate red herring (*HP*, p. 112). But Rosen goes beyond this, to question even the possibility of a strictly skeptical or zetetic point of view. Knowledge that one does not know is not simply ignorance. (Strauss, by the way, would agree with this. *WIPP*, p. 38, bottom.) If philosophy as the never-to-be-completed quest for wisdom is to make a claim to being the best or highest way of life for man—a claim Strauss surely made—then knowledge of ignorance must be knowledge of the irresolvable character of the most important or highest questions, of what Strauss called “the fundamental and permanent problems” (*WIPP*, p. 39 quoted at *HP*, p. 119). But if it is impossible to achieve answers to any of these problems, how can we know that they are either fundamental or permanent? If we cannot know this, “it reduces our knowledge of the fundamental problems themselves to the level of opinion.” Once again we are in the presence of “an act of the will,” this time of one that interprets or creates the world in a way that supports one’s own view of philosophy. Strauss must create the eternal problems in order for philosophy to be the purposeful yet never-to-be-completed quest for their answers. In Rosen’s hands, Pangle’s open, ever-questioning Strauss turns into the willful creator of his own zetetic world. (Rosen leaves it open whether Strauss sanctions this view “or cannot defend himself against being taken to sanction” it. *HP*, pp. 121–22.)

It is difficult to accept Pangle’s view that Strauss simply had an open mind on issues of religion. We need not rely here on Rosen’s personal testimony (*HP*, p. 112) or on the publication of Strauss’s private correspondence in *The Independent Journal of Philosophy*. In 1945, Strauss published an article called “Farabi’s *Plato*,” in which he makes quite clear both the views of Farabi on religion and his endorsement of those views. Philosophy is incompatible with religion, and the choice of philosophy as the best way of life is based on knowledge, not belief (*FP*, pp. 372–73, 389). The relative status of philosophy and religion is not treated as an unanswered question. Strauss may have become more discreet in later years (*PW*), but there is no reason to think that he changed his mind.

Even so, Rosen seems to agree with Pangle that Strauss did not know or

claim to know the ultimate superiority of philosophy to religion. Rosen, to repeat, says that Strauss countenanced an atheism based on an act of the will. He further claims that if Strauss's private views cannot be inferred from his published works, then those views are irrelevant. "I must rest my case on the evidence" (*HP*, p. 123). But if Strauss did consciously base philosophy on an act of the will, this was surely a private view that left no trace in the published record. Whenever Strauss publicly makes the argument that reason cannot refute religion, his own explicit conclusion is that, in this case, reason and philosophy self-destruct (Preface, pp. 29–30; *MI*, pp. 117–18). The assumption leading to this conclusion is obviously that philosophy based not on reason but on an act of the will is no longer philosophy.

Rosen is tacitly asking us to consider the possibility that the conclusion Strauss draws in public is in a way the opposite of the one he drew in private. Esoteric writing, on which Strauss was clearly the foremost expert of our time, often works in exactly this way: a publicly stated false conclusion is used to conceal a valid but unstated conclusion of a publicly stated argument. Since the reasoning of such an argument leads logically to the unstated conclusion, the author can assume that in at least some cases the reader will follow the argument rather than the words on the page. (Descartes' analysis of the metamorphosis of wax in the second of his *Meditations* is an example of such an esoteric presentation.) This kind of writing assumes the intention to communicate a rational conclusion. The reader must be able to see the logical, though unstated, implication. But the conclusion Rosen wants to draw from Strauss's argument and actions is that philosophy should be pursued as an act of the will. To pursue philosophy as an act of the will, however, is to take a leap into the irrational. It is hard to see how this could be the rational conclusion of any argument.

David Lowenthal, in his review of Strauss's last book and Pangle's introduction to it, rejects the view of Strauss as a man struggling with an irresolvable conflict between head and heart, reason and faith. But, at least by implication, Lowenthal also rejects the view that Strauss's philosophic position is at bottom an act of the will. In an odd way, Lowenthal's interpretation of Strauss's theological position is the most comforting, because it provides the greatest certainty. It provides the austere comfort of knowing, beyond hope or fear, that we are alone with our thoughts. In contrast to Pangle and Rosen, Lowenthal's argument rests on the assumption that, armed with experience and the principle of contradiction, we can indeed refute the claims of religion (Lowenthal, pp. 315–17. Cf. Preface, p. 28). The all-powerful, all-knowing deity is the absolutely mysterious, the absolutely other, totally transcending all human experience. The believer not only admits these facts but insists on them. God is the absolutely other. But it is a violation of the principle of contradiction to introduce the absolutely other into our experience under the guise of revelation. Whatever is revealed is not the absolutely other. Experience and the principle

of contradiction are sufficient to prove that revelation is impossible. Hence, the divinity that can be known only through revelation can also be known to be impossible. When Strauss says the opposite, Lowenthal seems to assume he is joking.

Certainly one might very much wish to have a rational and conclusive proof of God's existence or nonexistence. Perhaps my own imagination is too full of sinners in the hands of an angry God to be able to grasp a proof that is obvious to calmer and clearer heads. At any rate, proof by experience seems to require that our experience be complete. To know that there is no God, we must have experience of everything, an obvious impossibility. Further, Lowenthal's argument from the principle of contradiction is correct only if the principle is true. As for the principle itself, the best one can say is that an omnipotent God is not bound by the principles of human understanding. The believer need not admit, as Lowenthal claims he must, that God cannot be both God and non-God (Christianity asserts just this conjunction about the God-man, Christ). However self-evident the principle of contradiction may seem to most of us, the believer is bound to view the principle as founded upon and limited by God's power; God is not limited by the principle. Lowenthal's premise seems to be the necessity of asserting that God must either exist or not exist, but the believer might deny even this. The word "exist" simply does not mean the same thing when applied to God rather than other things. In the language of Maimonides, "existence" is an equivocal term (*Guide of the Perplexed*, I 56).

The worst one might say is that if we use the principle of contradiction to prove that there is no God, then we have proved that there can be nothing that is simply different from our ordinary experience; there can be no absolutely other. But the proof that there can be no absolutely other known to us may well involve everything we know in contradiction, since it assumes that every other that can be known must be also somehow the same as the knower.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in order to be known at all a thing must violate the principle of contradiction by being both same and other. The thing known must be both like and unlike the knower. The principle of contradiction cannot be proved, because it can be disproved by experience.

The traditional response to the preceding line of reasoning is that a thing may be the same in some ways and different in others; it cannot be the same and not the same in the same respect at the same time. In the above example, then, the knower could be like the known in some ways and unlike in others without any contradiction occurring. But is this not another way of saying that it is not the same thing which is both same and other? For example, a stick appears to be both long and short. The explanation, according to the principle of contradiction, is that the stick is short compared to a second stick but longer than some third stick. The first stick has disappeared. It has now become two sticks, one in relation to a stick longer than "itself" and yet another in relation to a stick shorter than "itself." The short "itself" and the long "itself" are two

different identities. The stick as short is self-identical only in its absolute difference from “itself” as long. The one thing with contradictory properties has now become two (or more) things with consistent properties. This defense of the principle of contradiction tries to explain away the underlying unity that allowed us to notice a contradiction in the first place. Is not such an explanation itself an example of closing the gate after the horse is out? Have we not seen the contradiction before we begin to explain it away?

Moreover, is not daily life full of instances of things that are in fact contradictory? To take the example of the runaway horse, is it not self-contradictory to close the gate now, when what I really want is to get the horse back in? Yet do we not have plentiful experience of people doing just such contradictory things? Or, to turn to something more important than the inconsistency of individual actions, Strauss’s own thesis that the political problem is insoluble seems to hinge on the existence of an ineradicable contradiction in the nature of things (Preface, p. 6). One might say that from Strauss’s point of view the mistake of Marx was not in announcing the existence of contradictions in society but in thinking that there could ever be a world without contradiction. While Lowenthal wishes to refute religion on the basis of experience and the principle of contradiction, the believer might point out that in fact we commonly use the principle of contradiction to refute our own experience, by interpreting away the manifold contradictions.

It is nevertheless true that the principle of contradiction—the premise that a thing cannot be its own opposite at one time and in any one particular way or aspect—is the necessary premise for the confrontation Strauss creates between philosophy and religion. Strauss presents philosophy and religion as providing two mutually exclusive answers to the same question, namely, What is the best way of life? Since there can only be one truth (Lowenthal, p. 316), the answer must be one or the other, “either/or” in Kierkegaard’s words. This either/or makes plain that implicit in either the faith in reason or the faith in God is an even deeper faith, dubbed by Nietzsche “the faith in opposite values” (*Beyond Good and Evil*, No. 2)

It is probably correct to assume, as Rosen does, that Strauss and Nietzsche share one or more common assumptions, though the possibility that Strauss regarded philosophy as an act of the will is the most remote. (*HP*, pp. 123, 137). It seems to me much more likely that Strauss shared Nietzsche’s assumption that a healthy human life requires a closed horizon and, hence, a faith in opposite values. Opposite values present us with the possibility of a meaningful choice of goals and standards. They allow us to say yes to some things and no to others. In this way we know where we stand and what we stand for. We can distinguish our friends from our enemies. Nietzsche sees faith in opposite values as a necessary condition for life.

Strauss speaks not in terms of the conditions for life but rather in terms of practice or practical life in contrast to the theoretical life. We can try to under-

stand what Strauss means by practice through looking at his interpretation of the Platonic cave metaphor (*WIPP*, p. 32; *CM*, p. 125). The city, i.e., the political, is necessarily the cave because the political man, the citizen, needs something to believe in, a steady horizon by which to take his bearings. The highest practical need is the need for a closed horizon, and practice is the attempt to satisfy this need. The political man, i.e., almost all of us always and everywhere, cannot lead a healthy, purposeful life either in a world of universal flux where nothing has any permanent value or under the influence of a unifying dialectic for which everything is at bottom the same (Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 67). Without opposite values—without differences that make a difference—we lose the sense of our own identity, of who we are and where we are going. This, I take it, is the issue of nihilism. Nihilism might be defined succinctly as the failure of practice.

With Nietzsche, Strauss recognizes the need for opposite values of the kind the city must have, but he does not think that it is the business of philosophy to provide these values. Philosophy as the never-to-be-completed quest for the truth about the whole is always at work overcoming or transcending any position it might discover. Any possible political truth is only a partial truth. It is for this reason that the Athenian Stranger indicates that he would not remain in even the best possible city that he himself might found (*Laws* 753a).

In Strauss's view, if philosophy itself has an opposite, then it is opposed, in the first place, to the political need for a closed horizon that affirms specific values while rejecting their opposites (*CM*, p. 29). As for the attempt to develop a secular wisdom that would provide a closed horizon by somehow encompassing all opposite values in one comprehensive, circular speech, he seems to have thought this to be impossible. Philosophy has a skeptical or zetetic character for Strauss because it rejects all choice or decision between opposite values without ever claiming to become the wisdom that would supersede the need for choice by comprehending all values in one system. Philosophy is the "gentle, if firm, refusal" (*WIPP*, p. 40) to live within a closed horizon whether that horizon is provided by a religious either/or or by a secular wisdom. As we will try to show, Strauss assumes that while secular wisdom tries to encompass all closed horizons, it in fact becomes simply one more horizon among others, luring us into yet another irrational choice between opposite values. The rejection of all closed horizons becomes the basis for Strauss's distinction between philosophic theory and nonphilosophic practice. Practice must always choose between opposite values; the choice is too urgent to permit delay. Religion and politics share the common need to make such a choice; this I take it is the justification for the hyphen in Strauss' use of the phrase "theological-political problem."<sup>3</sup> While practice demands urgent choice, theory, on the other hand, can and must delay. Fortunately, there is no necessary connection between practical questions and theoretical ones (*CM*, p. 106). Practical decisions can be made without waiting for theoretical answers. This

separation of theory from practice becomes Strauss's way of bypassing the choice between the opposite values represented by two closed horizons, revelation and philosophic wisdom. As Strauss points out, to pass by in this way is to reject (Preface, p. 12). In bypassing the choice or decision between revelation and wisdom, Strauss sees himself as rediscovering a premodern form of rationalism that does not claim wisdom about the whole and, hence, does not become involved in a self-destructive competition with religion (*MI*, p. 114).

Strauss's position as presented here may seem to contain an obvious inconsistency. How can philosophy understand itself as an alternative to politics without seeing these alternatives as requiring a choice between opposite values? My own speculation—it is no more than that—is that Strauss might offer his own description of the choice that lovers make as a playful analogy to the philosophic choice. A choice excludes some alternative, but choices can be exclusive in different ways. The need to choose between two partial or incomplete alternatives will show itself as much in anger at or rejection of the defeated alternative as it will in satisfaction with the one chosen. On the other hand, when one's choice is fully satisfying, it can be made without rejection of or victory over another. I think it is with this in mind that Strauss can write of the exclusivity of lovers that they seclude themselves from the world without opposition to the world or hatred of it (*CM*, p. 111). By analogy, the choice of the philosophic way of life is not for Strauss a choice between opposite values; nothing rejected is of value. Whether anything human can be as satisfying or complete as Strauss seems to claim philosophy is, is another question.

We are now in a position to reconsider Rosen's observation that for Strauss the inability of philosophy to refute religion stems from philosophy's unsuccessful attempt to become wisdom (*HP*, p. 110). If philosophy were to become wisdom, that is, the complete and comprehensive account of the whole, then religion could no longer claim a place of refuge beyond reason and experience. Wisdom would by definition give the true and final account of everything, including religion. Indeed, in so far as religion has always tried to provide man with answers to the mysteries of life, wisdom would refute religion by replacing religion. How might such wisdom be possible? Since we can fully know only what we ourselves have made (*HP*, pp. 51, 148, 152), wisdom is possible only if man is himself the creator of the world. Wisdom can be completed only if it is united with practice: "man has to show himself theoretically and practically as the master of the world and the master of his life; the merely given world must be replaced by the world created by man theoretically and practically" (Preface, p. 29). Here practice continues to be viewed as the attempt to provide a closed horizon, but now this aim is to be reached through a comprehensive wisdom rather than through a faith in one set of values that implies the rejection of their opposites. As Rosen correctly notes, Strauss regarded as impossible the wisdom that must be the intended outcome of such a project. Strauss speaks of the Hegelian system as the completion of reason, while at the

same time he speaks of the limitations of the Hegelian system (Preface, p. 9). Strauss gives the impression of thinking that the failure of Hegel's wisdom is the failure of wisdom simply.

We have asked, Does the impossibility of wisdom indicate the ultimate failure of philosophy to give a rational self-justification? If so, then the philosophic way of life is reduced to one faith among many. Like other faiths, philosophy would then be based upon an act of the will. I would suggest that we reach this conclusion by asking the wrong question. For Strauss, the right question was, Does the impossibility of wisdom show that the attempt to turn philosophy into wisdom was itself a mistake? An affirmative answer to this question implies that it was a mistake for philosophy to try to replace religion by becoming wisdom. But for Strauss this is another way of saying that it was a mistake for philosophy to try to become practical, i.e., to try to provide a closed horizon in the form of wisdom. Wisdom becomes possible through the conquest of nature because that conquest turns nature into something man himself has made. Theory in the service of practice can become wisdom. The attempt to achieve wisdom through the union of theory and practice is the distinguishing feature of modern philosophy as Strauss sees it (Preface, pp. 2, 12, 15, 29). But this attempt failed. Philosophy as the never-to-be-completed quest for the truth cannot provide the practical answers to the mysteries of life that are needed so urgently here and now. It cannot create a world out of chaos for the sake of the relief of man's estate. When philosophy promises to do these things but fails, then it stands refuted in its own eyes.

What Rosen takes to be Strauss's account of the downfall of philosophy due to its own inability to refute religion successfully is in fact Strauss's bird's-eye view of the confusion of modern philosophy in even attempting to refute religion. Philosophy or philosophers guaranteed their own defeat when they sought to put philosophy in the service of practice or to unite theory and practice. To put this another way, modern philosophy set out to give theoretically correct answers to the pressing questions of life, questions to which religion had always given prophetic or imaginative answers. In Strauss's view, philosophy could not compete at this level while being true to its own fundamental calling as the search for truth.

According to this interpretation, the confrontation with religion that in Rosen's view exposes the willful character of philosophy is, in Strauss's view, an unnecessary confrontation based on a misunderstanding of the nature of philosophy. The misunderstanding stems from the failure to recognize philosophy as a theoretical rather than a practical enterprise. Philosophy cannot be an act of the will because it is not an action or a practical act of any kind. Philosophy is the recognition of a situation in which all attempts at action end in contradiction, failure, or tragedy. Philosophy is more akin to comedy than to tragedy (cf. *CM*, p. 61, with *Republic* 388e5–7). Philosophy does not refute religion by attempting to achieve a secular wisdom. Rather philosophy is the

sympathetic but incorruptible judge of the failure of all attempts at wisdom, sacred or profane. Above all, one does not choose the philosophic way of life as over against any other way of life. Philosophy is the recognition by a few of where we are whether we know it or not. Philosophy is not an act of the will because nothing we can will would alter the fundamental situation. (Anastaplo, p. 273, n. 33 end. The philosophic life is in a way necessary. But are there not practical as well as theoretical necessities? Consider *Republic* 458d.)

How does the interpretation presented here differ from Pangle's agnostic Strauss? Perhaps not at all. His Strauss rejects both rational and prophetic wisdom in favor of continuing inquiry. Yet Pangle gives the impression that Strauss is an agnostic in the sense that he wishes to hold himself open to the possibility of faith. I would make it more clear than Pangle seems to that Strauss is an agnostic because atheism is itself a form of faith. As Rosen points out, atheistic wisdom cannot avoid exposure as an act of the will. Because he is forced to assert what he cannot know, the atheist is as much a believer as is the orthodox adherent of a creed. As I understand it, Strauss's agnosticism, if it may be called that, puts him further from belief than any form of atheism would.

Strauss presents an account of the conflict between philosophy and religion in which religion triumphs over philosophy. But the argument as Strauss presents it applies only to philosophy that attempts to become practical wisdom by giving rational answers to the questions that religion answers only in a mysterious or prophetic way. It applies only to those philosophies that try to unite theory and practice in such a way as to achieve a comprehensive wisdom capable of refuting orthodox belief. Strauss's own philosophy is unaffected by the triumph of orthodoxy over a failed wisdom, because Strauss steadfastly refuses to adhere to the wisdom offered by the union of theory and practice. Rosen's conclusion—that Strauss wants to will philosophy—is wrong. At least in his own view, the separation of theory and practice delivers Strauss as philosopher from the need to will anything at all.

We can agree with Strauss that philosophy cannot become wisdom. But if this is the case, why should we resist the temptation to find solace in the answers to the human mystery provided by revelation? If philosophy has disappointed our deepest hopes, then why not find support where it is in fact offered, not as knowledge but as faith? Is the refusal to succumb to the security of faith itself a mere act of the will? Is Rosen right after all? If Strauss has an answer, it seems to be this.

Revelation is always so uncertain to unassisted reason that it can never compel the assent of unassisted reason, and man is so built that he can find his satisfaction, his bliss, in free investigation, in articulating the riddle of being.<sup>4</sup>

One cannot but wonder by whom "man is so built?" Is there a builder? Or is man built in a certain way "by nature?" Strauss certainly thinks that there are

intelligent men—Averroes and Dante—who found the justification for philosophy in what they would have called natural science (Strauss and Cropsey, pp. 267–68). Does Strauss, too, rely on nature to provide natural kinds, for example, the human kind, that have natural ends, discoverable by reason (*HP*, p. 130; cf. p. 133)? Nature surfaces explicitly in Strauss's observation that philosophy "could appear as Sisyphean or ugly, when one contrasts its achievement with its goal. Yet it is necessarily accompanied, sustained and elevated by eros. It is graced by nature's grace" (*WIPP*, p. 40). Here Strauss appeals to nature, to what is simply given without any human choosing or making, as the support for the goodness of philosophy. As what is simply given, nature is the proper object of theoretical contemplation, not of practical knowledge or deliberation. Nevertheless, Strauss only seems to claim to know, in both of the passages quoted, that philosophy as theory is good, not in itself, but only for us. Theoretical contemplation satisfies our eros given the way we are built. Philosophy is good not because the truth is what it is but because we are what we are. The truth is good because we love it. (Consider Plato's *Euthyphro*, where we are asked whether the gods love what is pious because it is pious, or alternatively, whether something is pious only because the gods love it.)

It seems to me that this argument makes the goodness of philosophy depend upon the philosopher's self-knowledge of his own self-interest. While there is certainly nothing wrong with such an argument (*Republic* 580d–583a), it is not clear that an appeal to one's own self-interest, however natural, is properly or necessarily described as theoretical rather than practical.<sup>5</sup> To be sure, philosophy cannot be practical if practice is limited to the business of willfully creating a closed horizon, but why think of practice only in this way? There are other reasons as well for questioning the separation of theory and practice. We must put the question whether self-interest or desire or eros, as the natural basis of our philosophizing, does not necessarily play a role in the formation of the categories of our theoretical understanding. If so, then the categories themselves have a practical basis in the satisfaction of our eros. Moreover, it is not clear that in order to find satisfaction, or even bliss, in philosophic inquiry, one need only have theoretical insight. Some truths might not be comforting or reassuring. If this is in fact the case, then a man who is fearless, who does not sense the danger, has simply for the moment forgotten himself and where he is. (Strauss, of course, has no intention of forgetting human finitude. See *RCPR*, p. 27.) Perhaps human beings are built in such a way that the courage we must have if we are to overcome our fear and take pleasure in the truth is just as much a potential of our nature as is the intelligence to perceive the truth. Such courage would be ancillary to knowledge and desire; while being necessary to man's highest end it could not be said to create or will that end. Still, there would be a philosophic courage, a spiritedness compatible with reason.<sup>6</sup> Along the same lines, philosophy as the refusal to think that one knows what one does not know requires a certain kind of moderation.<sup>7</sup> Philosophy as a way of life, the practice of philosophy, requires theoretical as well as other virtues. The

achievement of this combination of virtues in any particular case is not simply given by nature; it is the practical achievement of a thinking and desiring human being. Man's highest end is the practice of philosophy, which requires a combination of theoretical and other virtues. If this is a correct description of the philosophic way of life, then it seems correct also to say that that way of life requires to the highest degree the union or cooperation of theoretical and practical virtues. That Strauss understands philosophy as a purely theoretical activity and explicitly rejects an understanding of philosophy as both theoretical and practical, seems to be a consequence of his identification of the practical with "an act of the will or a decision" (Preface, p. 12).

While Strauss clearly distinguishes between the ancient and modern views of theory, he seems to take practice as meaning essentially the same thing for the ancients as it means for the moderns. For example, the end or perfection of man as understood by the moderns is not something imposed by nature but rather something figured out by man, a project designed and willed by man, an "ideal" (Preface, p. 16). But this is exactly what Strauss says about the practical or political reflections on the best regime in classical political philosophy. The best regime of Plato and Aristotle is an "ideal," something figured out; this is what Strauss means by saying that the best regime exists only "in speech" (*CM*, p. 44; cf. p. 121). It does not come into being or have its being by nature. Even the best regime is still the cave; it is still a closed horizon to be created by man (*CM*, p. 125: ". . . even political life at its best is like life in a cave, so much so that the city can be identified with the Cave."). To bring it into being (were this possible), the best regime would have to be willed. But this is true of anything that is figured out by man; its coming into being depends on a human decision. Strauss at least leads the reader to consider the possibility that he is being asked to conclude that since practice always involves something figured out, a human project, it therefore always involves an act of the will. Ancient practice seems to have the same status as modern practice. Strauss distinguishes the pure theory of the ancients from modern theory, the latter being essentially united to practice, but he does not seem to distinguish ancient practice from modern practice. Practice, it would seem, always means for Strauss, not a dictate of nature, but an "ideal," and, hence, something essentially dependent on man's will. Since will is arbitrary, groundless, practice lacks the dignity of theory. But is every human project an act of the will? We may, indeed, ask whether any human project is an act of the will in the sense of a free or arbitrary decision. Is this kind of freedom, pure spontaneity, intelligible or possible? If not, then practice restricted to acts of the will either evaporates altogether or else becomes indistinguishable from fate or accident. Certainly Plato did not unite theory with practice rooted in arbitrary wilfulness, but it is not merely tendentious to ask whether Plato had a conception of practice different from the modern one with which Strauss works.

Our reservations concerning Strauss's view of the relation between theory and practice can be stated from the perspective of the difference between phi-

losophy and religion. As suggested earlier, in Strauss's view philosophy is not an act of the will because nothing we can will would alter the fundamental situation. Religion seems to assume that man, by his faith, can alter his fundamental situation. Strauss causes us to wonder whether modern philosophy does not share with religion the assumption and the hope that fundamental change is possible, albeit by means other than faith. Is this assumption the ground upon which one must stand in order to pose the question of a life and death choice between philosophy and religion? Does this question assume that man can, by his choice, alter his fundamental situation? In making this assumption, does the question presuppose the religious point of view so that the triumph of religion becomes inevitable if the question is asked in this way? We can agree with Strauss in thinking that classical philosophy assumes that there is no choice to be made but only the never-to-be-completed effort to understand where and what we are. Contra Strauss, such knowledge is both theoretical and practical. It is theoretical because it does not alter the fundamental situation, but it is practical because it cannot avoid taking the fundamental situation to be what is fundamental *for us*. The fundamental situation thus understood is the human situation. As knowledge of the human situation, philosophy is self-knowledge. As a never-to-be-completed situation, the human situation cannot help being changed in some ways, including, among others, the change from ignorance to self-knowledge. It is of the highest practical importance to know which changes are impossible. Philosophy is both theoretical and practical because it is necessarily knowledge not only of the unchanging or impossible but also of the always-being-completed as the highest possible human desire.

As the preceding remarks make clear, in our interpretation Strauss's argument depends, at least in part, on his ability to separate theory and practice. We would seem to have come full circle from Rosen's interpretation, since if Strauss bases philosophy on an act of the will, then his argument depends on his ability to achieve the unity of theory and practice in will. Oddly enough, Rosen also criticizes Strauss for separating theory and practice. Strauss, we are told, "did not fully appreciate the deep connection between theory and practice" (*HP*, p. 140). It is not clear how this criticism can be reconciled with an interpretation of Strauss as the philosopher for whom even the questions theory raises and explores are themselves self-conscious acts of the will. How could the union of theory and practice be closer than in such a conception of philosophy? It is at least logically possible, however, that a failed attempt to make theory self-sufficient might end in fact as an unintentional act of the will. If knowledge that philosophy is the best way of life is necessarily somehow practical knowledge, then the attempt to separate philosophy from this practical knowledge might indeed reduce philosophy as a way of life to an act of the will. If this were the case with Strauss, then, Rosen notwithstanding, the result would clearly be contrary to Strauss's own intention.

As we have seen, much in fact does depend on Strauss's effort to separate and hence free theory from the concerns of practice. One conclusion we have

reached is that Strauss rejects both religious and secular claims to wisdom—claims to knowledge no finite knower could in fact have. It is also clear that Strauss ties this rejection to the separation of practice or practical demands from pure theory. It is not clear whether it would not be possible to reject the human claim to wisdom without also following Strauss in interpreting this as a rejection of practice in favor of theory alone. Be that as it may, Strauss does interpret the first rejection in terms of the second. The second rejection—in other words, his attempt to separate theory and practice—raises some questions. For example, what does theory mean for Strauss? Is theoretical knowledge indifferent to the human good? Is it concerned with the idea of the good but not with the human good (*CM*, p. 29)? While an affirmative answer to the last two questions would support the separation of theory and practice, it would also seem to confirm that the human good is inevitably a choice, an act of the will. On the other hand, if knowledge of the human good is theoretical knowledge, then the pursuit of that good is not an arbitrary act; the pursuit of one's own good would seem, however, to be an eminently practical pursuit based on an eminently practical kind of knowledge. This very important kind of knowledge, knowledge of one's own good or of the best way of life, might be practical and have practical consequences without being the product of arbitrary or groundless will. In this case, is it not misleading to speak of pure theory in preference to a combination or union of theory and practice? Is the separation of theory and practice tenable? Is there in fact a deep connection between theory and practice that is eschewed by Strauss? This question is explored most openly by Strauss himself in the article on "Farabi's *Plato*." It is to that article that we must turn in order to continue our inquiry with respect to Leo Strauss and, therewith, into the relationship between theory and practice.

#### NOTES

1. An argument on this point is presented in Rosen, *N*, pp. 228–29. It is not clear to me, however, whether Rosen proves the impossibility of the complete speech (= wisdom) or, alternatively, states the problem of the complete speech. In other words, if the complete speech were to be possible, it would of necessity explain the contradictions Rosen finds in the idea of the complete speech. Rosen assumes that no speech could provide this explanation, but in so doing he assumes the conclusion he wishes to prove. The existence of the contradictions Rosen develops proves only the inadequacy of incomplete speech and not, as Rosen thinks, the impossibility of the complete speech.

2. In this light, not the principle of contradiction (as per Lowenthal) but rather the alleged overcoming of that principle leads to the death of God, i.e., the final and certain atheism. God cannot be the absolutely other because the absolute is not other; I take this to be Hegel's view. A more Platonic position might be that there can be for us no absolutely other because nothing absolute is known to us. This interpretation of Plato is supported by two views of those absolutes called by Socrates "the ideas." Farabi "writes of Plato as if Plato had no doctrine of ideas" (Pangle, p. 2, n. 1). Strauss writes of Socrates' doctrine of ideas that it is "utterly incredible," "appears to be fantastic," and has never been given "a satisfactory or clear account" (*CM*, p. 119). Cf. Rosen, (*HP*), p. 205, n. 77, with p. 130 bottom.

3. The necessary limits to the horizons of politics and religion alike indicate that in Strauss' view the attempt, which is at the core of liberalism, to separate politics and religion can be only partially or superficially successful (Preface, pp. 6, 20–21). Does Strauss wish to transform the modern project by replacing the separation of religion from politics with the separation of the theological-political sphere from the strictly private domain of philosophy or theory?

4. *NRH*, p. 75. While revelation is uncertain, Strauss would agree that revelation seeks both certainty and security (Preface, p. 10). Is it Strauss's view that philosophy is superior to revelation because philosophy is more certain than revelation? Or does he mean to say that philosophy is superior to revelation because it eschews the certainty and security of revelation?

5. Strauss describes the philosopher's self-knowledge (i.e., his knowledge of the dignity or superiority of the philosophic way of life) as theoretical knowledge or "rigorous science" in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, pp. 36–37. On the other hand, in "Farabi's Plato," written thirty years earlier, Strauss treats the philosopher's self-knowledge as practical, not theoretical. A review of this article is necessary if we are to gain a more complete assessment of Strauss' attempts to interpret the relation between theory and practice.

6. Cf. *CM*, pp. 110–11 with Rosen, (*HP*), p. 140, and with *Republic* 440b. Spiritedness or *thumos* would seem to be the closest Platonic equivalent to will. At least after Hume and Kant, however, reason seems to be a tool of the will; will is fundamental. By contrast, Plato seems to admit the possibility of *thumos* in the service of reason.

7. This is another way of saying that a certain kind of courage and moderation is always necessary because nothing human is fully satisfying or truly complete. There is no unassisted human bliss. On the unfinished character of human nature, see Rosen, (*HP*), p. 146. For Strauss, moderation is not a virtue of thought, and fearlessness takes the place of the need for courage (see *WIPP*, p. 32).

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