

# Interpretation

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# How To Study Medieval Philosophy

LEO STRAUSS

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The following lecture is one of a number of lectures by the late Leo Strauss which *Interpretation* has undertaken to publish. The editors of these lectures for *Interpretation* have been able to obtain copies or transcripts of the lectures from various sources: none of the lectures was edited by Professor Strauss for the purposes of publication nor even left behind by him among his papers in a state that would have suggested a wish on his part that it be published posthumously. In order to underline this fact, the editors have decided to present them as they have found them, with the bare minimum of editorial changes.

These lectures have all been published once before, at least in part, but in a more heavily edited form intended to make them more accessible to a wider audience (*The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, edited by Thomas L. Pangle [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989]). The University of Chicago Press, which holds the copyright on the materials and which will retain the copyright on them in the version now to be published, has generously given its permission for their republication in *Interpretation*, as has Professor Joseph Cropsey, Leo Strauss's literary executor.

A notice will be attached to each lecture indicating the state in which the manuscript or transcription was found; and a list will be appended to some of the lectures calling attention to divergences from the previously published version.

*Lecture to be delivered on May 16, 1944 at the Fourth  
Institute of Biblical and Post-Biblical Studies.*

## How To Study Medieval Philosophy

LEO STRAUSS

*"How To Study Medieval Philosophy" was available to the editors in Professor Strauss's original typescript, with additions, corrections and alterations added in pencil in his own hand. We are grateful to Heinrich and Wiebke Meier for their most generous help in deciphering Professor Strauss's handwriting and to Hillel Fradkin for help with regard to Hebrew and Arabic words. A few minor changes by the editors in spelling and punctuation have not been noted.*

We raise the question of how to study medieval philosophy. We cannot discuss that question without saying something about how to study earlier philosophy in general and indeed about how to study intellectual<sup>1</sup> *history*<sup>2</sup> in general.

In a sense, the answer to our question is self-evident. Everyone admits that, if we have to study medieval philosophy at all, we have to study it as exactly and as intelligently as possible. As exactly as possible: we are not permitted to consider any detail however trifling, unworthy of our most careful observation. As intelligently as possible: in our exact study of all details, we must never lose sight of the whole; we must never, for a moment, overlook the wood for the trees. But these are trivialities, although we have to add that they are trivialities only if stated in general terms, and that they cease to be trivialities if one pays attention to them while engaged in actual work: the temptations to lose oneself in curious and unexplored details on the one hand, and to be generous as regards minutiae on the other, are always with us.

We touch upon a more controversial issue when we say that our understanding of medieval philosophy must be *historical* understanding. Frequently people reject an account of the past, not simply as unexact or unintelligent, but as unhistorical. What *do*<sup>2</sup> they mean by it? What *ought* they to mean by it?<sup>3</sup>

According to a saying of Kant, it is possible to understand a philosopher better than he understood himself. Now, such understanding may have the greatest merits; but it is clearly not historical understanding. If it goes so far as to claim to be *the* true understanding, it is positively unhistorical. [The most outstanding example of such unhistorical interpretation which we have in the field of the study of Jewish medieval philosophy, is Hermann Cohen's essay on Maimonides' ethics. Cohen constantly refers statements of Maimonides, not to

*Maimonides*<sup>2</sup> center of reference, but to his *own*<sup>2</sup> center of reference; he understands them, not within *Maimonides*<sup>2</sup> horizon, but within his *own*<sup>2</sup> horizon. Cohen had a technical term for his procedure: he called it “idealizing” interpretation.<sup>4</sup> It may justly be described as the modern form of<sup>5</sup> allegoric interpretation. At any rate, it is professedly an attempt to understand the old author better than he understood himself.<sup>6</sup> Historical understanding<sup>7</sup> means to understand an earlier philosopher<sup>8</sup> exactly as he understood himself. Everyone who ever tried his hands on that<sup>9</sup> task, will bear me out when I say that this task is an already sufficiently tough assignment in itself.

In the normal<sup>10</sup> and most interesting case, the philosopher studied by the historian of philosophy is a man by far superior to his historian in intelligence, imagination,<sup>11</sup> subtlety. This historian does well to remind himself of the experience which Gulliver made when he came in contact, through necromancy, with the illustrious dead: “I had a Whisper from a Ghost, who shall be nameless, that the Commentators of Aristotle and other great philosophers always kept in the most distant quarters from their Principals, through a Consciousness of Shame and Guilt, because they had so horribly misrepresented the meaning of those authors to Posterity.” The most *sustained* effort of the most *gifted* historian, hardly suffices to carry him for a short moment to the height which is the native and perpetual haunt<sup>12</sup> of the philosopher: how can the historian even *dream* of reaching a point from which he can look *down* on a philosopher?<sup>13</sup>

For<sup>1</sup> the attempt to understand a philosopher of the past better than he understood himself, presupposes that the interpreter considers his insight superior to the insight of the old author. Kant made this quite clear when suggesting that one can understand a philosopher better than he understood himself. The average historian is much too modest a fellow to raise such an enormous claim with so many words. But he is in danger of doing so without noticing it. He will not claim that his *personal*<sup>2</sup> insight is superior to that of Maimonides e.g. But only with difficulty can he<sup>14</sup> avoid claiming that the *collective*<sup>2</sup> insight available today is superior to the collective insight available in the 12th century. There is more than one historian who in interpreting, say, Maimonides, tries to assess the *contribution* of Maimonides. His<sup>15</sup> contribution to what? To the treasure of knowledge and insight which has been accumulated throughout the ages. That treasure appears to be greater today than it was, say, in the year of Maimonides’ death. This means that when speaking of Maimonides’ contribution, the historian has in mind the contribution of Maimonides to the treasure of knowledge or insight as it is available *today*.<sup>2</sup> Hence, he interprets Maimonides’ thought in terms of the thought of the present day. His tacit assumption is that the history of thought is, generally speaking, a progress, and that therefore the philosophic thought of the 20th century is superior to, or nearer *the* truth than, the philosophic thought of the 12th century. I contend that this assumption is irreconcilable with true historical understanding. It necessarily leads to the attempt to understand the thought of the past *better*<sup>2</sup> than it understood itself, and

not *as*<sup>2</sup> it understood itself. For: it is evident that our understanding of the past will tend to be the more *adequate*, the more we are *interested* in the past; but we cannot be seriously interested, i.e. passionately interested in the past, if we know beforehand that the present is, in the most important respect, superior to the past. It is not a matter of chance that, generally speaking, the historical understanding of the continental romantics, of *the* historical school, was superior to the historical understanding of 18th century rationalism; it is a necessary consequence of the fact that the representatives of the historical school did *not* believe in the superiority of their time to the past, whereas the 18th century rationalist believed in the superiority of the Age of Reason to all former ages. Historians who start from the belief in the superiority of present-day thought to the thought of the past, feel no necessity to understand the past by itself: they understand it as a preparation of the present only. When studying a doctrine of the past, they do not ask primarily: what was the conscious and deliberate intention of its originator? They prefer to ask: what is the contribution of the doctrine to *our* beliefs? what is the meaning, unknown to its originator, of the doctrine from the point of view of the present? what is its meaning in the light of *later* developments? Against this approach the historical consciousness rightly protested in the name of historical truth, of historical exactness. The task of the historian of thought is to understand the thinkers of the past *exactly*<sup>2</sup> as they understood themselves, or to revitalize their thought according to their *own*<sup>2</sup> interpretation of it. To sum up this point: the belief in the superiority of one's own approach, or of the approach of one's time, to the approach of the past is fatal to historical understanding.

We may express the same thought somewhat differently as follows. The task of the historian of thought is to understand the thought of the past exactly as it understood itself; for to abandon that task is tantamount to abandoning the only practicable criterion of objectivity in the history of thought. It is well-known that the same historical phenomenon is interpreted in most different ways by different periods, different generations, different types of men. The same historical phenomenon appears in different lights at different times. New human experiences shed new light on old texts. No one can foresee e.g. how the Bible will be read 100 years hence. Observations such as these have led some people to adopt the view that the claim of any one interpretation to be *the*<sup>2</sup> true interpretation is untenable. Yet the observations in question do not justify such a view. For the infinite variety of ways in which a given text can be understood, does not do away with the fact that the author of the text, when writing it, understood it in one way only provided he was not muddle-headed.<sup>16</sup> The light in which the history of Samuel and Saul appears on the basis of the Puritan revolution e.g., is not the light in which the author of the Biblical history understood that history. And *the* true interpretation of the Biblical history in question is the one which restates, and makes intelligible, the Biblical history as understood by the Biblical author. Ultimately, the infinite variety of inter-

pretations of an author is due to conscious or unconscious attempts to understand the author better than he understood himself; but there is only one way of understanding him *as*<sup>2</sup> he understood himself.<sup>17</sup>

To return to the point where I left off: The belief in the superiority of one's own approach, or of the approach of one's time, to the approach of the past, is fatal to historical understanding. This dangerous assumption which is characteristic of what one may call progressivism, was avoided by what is frequently called historicism. Whereas the progressivist believes that the present is superior to the past, the historicist believes that all periods are equally "immediate to God". The historicist does not want to *judge* of the past, by assessing the contribution of each period e.g., but to understand and to relate how things have actually been, *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*, and in particular how the *thought*<sup>2</sup> of the past has been. The historicist has at least the *intention*<sup>2</sup> to understand the thought of the past exactly as it understood itself. But: he is constitutionally unable to live up to his intention. For: he knows, or rather he assumes, that, generally speaking and other things being equal, the thought of all epochs is equally true, because every philosophy is essentially the expression of the spirit of its time. Maimonides e.g. expressed the spirit of his time as perfectly as, say, Hermann Cohen expressed the spirit of *his* time. Now, all philosophers of the past claimed to have found *the* truth, and not merely the truth for their *time*.<sup>2</sup> The historicist however asserts that they were mistaken in believing so. And he makes this assertion the basis of his interpretation. He knows a priori that the claim of Maimonides e.g. that he teaches *the* truth, the truth valid for all times, is unfounded. In this most important respect, the historicist, just as his hostile brother the progressivist, believes that his approach is superior to the approach of the thinkers of old. The historicist is therefore compelled, by his principle, if *against*<sup>2</sup> his intention, to try to understand the past better than it understood itself. He merely repeats, if sometimes in a more sophisticated form, the sin for which he is used to blame the progressivist so severely. For, to repeat, to understand a serious teaching, one must be seriously interested in it, one must take it seriously. But one cannot take it seriously, if one knows beforehand that it is "dated". To take a serious teaching seriously, one must be willing to consider the possibility that it is simply true. Therefore, if we are interested in an adequate understanding of medieval philosophy, we must be willing to consider the possibility that medieval philosophy is simply true, or, to speak less paradoxically,<sup>18</sup> that it is superior, in the most important respect, to all that<sup>19</sup> we can learn from any of the contemporary philosophers. We can understand medieval philosophy only<sup>20</sup> if we are prepared to learn something, not merely *about* the medieval philosophers, but *from* them.

It remains then true that if one wants to understand a philosophy of the past, one must approach it in a *philosophic* spirit, with *philosophic*<sup>2</sup> questions: one's concern must be primarily, not with what other people have thought about the philosophic truth, but with the philosophic truth itself. But: if one approaches

an earlier thinker with a question which is not *his* central question, one is bound to misinterpret, to distort, his thought. Therefore, the philosophic question with which one approaches the thought of the past, must be so broad, so comprehensive, that it permits of being narrowed down to the specific, precise formulation of the question which the author concerned adopted. It can be no question other than the question of *the*<sup>2</sup> truth about the whole.

The historian of philosophy must then undergo a transformation into a philosopher or a conversion to philosophy, if he wants to do his job properly, if he wants to be a competent historian of philosophy. He must acquire a freedom of mind which is not too frequently met with among the professional philosophers: he must have as perfect a freedom of mind as is humanly possible. No prejudice in favor of contemporary thought, even of modern philosophy, of modern civilization, of modern science itself, must deter him from giving the thinkers of old the *full*<sup>3</sup> benefit of the doubt. When engaging in the study of the philosophy of the past, he must cease to take his bearings by the modern signposts to which he has grown familiar since his earliest childhood; he must try to take his bearings by the signposts which guided the thinkers of old. Those old signposts are not immediately visible: they are concealed by heaps of dust and rubble. The most obnoxious part of the rubble consists of the superficial interpretations by modern writers, of the cheap clichés which are offered in the textbooks and which seem to unlock by one formula the mystery of the past. The signposts which guided the thinkers of the past, must be *recovered*<sup>4</sup> before they can be used. Before the historian has succeeded in recovering them, he cannot help being in a condition of utter bewilderment, of universal doubt: he finds himself in a darkness which is illumined exclusively by his knowledge that he knows nothing. When engaging in the study of the philosophy of the past, he must know that he embarks on a journey whose end is completely hidden from him: he is not likely to return to the shore of his time as the same man who left it.

II. True historical understanding of medieval philosophy presupposes that the student is willing to take seriously the claim of the medieval philosophers that they teach *the* truth. Now,<sup>21</sup> it may justifiably be objected, is this demand not most unreasonable? Medieval philosophy is based, generally speaking, on the natural science of Aristotle: has that science not been refuted once and for all by Galileo, Descartes and Newton? Medieval philosophy is based on practically<sup>1</sup> complete unawareness of the principles of religious toleration, of the representative system, of the rights of man, of democracy as we understand it. It is characterized by an indifference touching on contempt, toward poetry and history. It seems to be based on a firm belief in the verbal inspiration of the Bible and in the Mosaic origin of the oral Law. It stands and falls with the use of a method of Biblical interpretation as unsound as the allegoric interpretation. In brief, medieval philosophy arouses against itself all convictions fostered by the least indubitable results of modern science and modern scholarship.



Nor is this all. Medieval philosophy may have been refuted by modern thought, and yet it could have been an admirable and highly beneficial achievement for its time. But even this may be questioned. A strong case can be made for the view<sup>22</sup> that the influence of philosophy on medieval Judaism was far from being salutary. Most of you will have read the remarkable book by Dr. Scholem on *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. Dr. Scholem contends that from the point of view of Judaism, i.e. of Rabbinical Judaism, the Kabbalah is by far superior to Jewish medieval philosophy. He starts from the observation that “both the mystics and the philosophers completely transform the structure of ancient Judaism”. But “the philosopher can only proceed with his proper task after having successfully converted the concrete realities of Judaism into a bundle of abstractions . . . By contrast, the mystic refrains from destroying the living structure of religious narrative by allegorizing it . . .” [“The difference becomes clear if we consider the attitude of philosophy and Kabbalah respectively to the two outstanding creative manifestations of Rabbinic Jewry: Halachah and Aggadah, Law and Legend. It is a remarkable fact that the philosophers failed to establish a satisfactory and intimate relation to either . . . The whole world of religious law remained outside the orbit of philosophic inquiries which means of course too that it was not subjected to philosophic criticism . . . For a purely historical understanding of religion, Maimonides’ analysis of the origin of the religious commandments is of great importance, but he would be a bold man who would maintain that his ideology of the Mitzvot was likely to increase the enthusiasm of the faithful for their actual practice . . . To the philosopher, the Halachah either had no significance at all, or one that was calculated to diminish rather than to enhance its prestige in his eyes.” “The Aggadah . . . represents a method of giving original and concrete expression to the deepest motive powers of the religious Jew, a quality which helps to make it an excellent and genuine approach to the essentials of our religion. However, it was just this quality which never ceased to baffle the philosophers of Judaism . . . Only too frequently their allegorizations are simply . . . veiled criticism”].<sup>23</sup> Scholem does not leave it at suggesting that our medieval philosophers were, qua philosophers, blind to the deepest forces of the Jewish soul; he suggests also that they were blind to the deepest forces of the soul of man as man. Philosophy, he says, turned “its back upon the primitive side of life, that all-important region where mortals are afraid of life and in fear of death, and derive scant wisdom from rational philosophy”. The Kabbalists on the other hand “have a strong sense of the reality of evil and the dark horror that is about everything living. They do *not*,<sup>2</sup> like the philosophers, seek to evade its existence with the aid of a convenient formula”.

We ought to be grateful to Dr. Scholem for his sweeping and forceful condemnation of our medieval philosophy. It does not permit us any longer to rest satisfied with that mixture of historical reverence and philosophic indifference which is characteristic of the prevailing mood. For Scholem’s criticism, while

unusually ruthless, cannot be said to be paradoxical. In fact, to a certain extent, Scholem merely says quite explicitly what is implied in the more generally accepted opinion on the subject. The central thesis underlying the standard work on the history of Jewish philosophy, Julius Guttman's *Philosophy of Judaism* is that our medieval philosophers abandoned, to a considerable extent, the Biblical ideas of God, world and man in favor of the Greek ideas, and that the modern Jewish philosophers succeed much better than their medieval predecessors in safeguarding the original purport of the central religious beliefs of Judaism. In this connection we might also mention the fact that Franz Rosenzweig considered Hermann Cohen's posthumous work (*Religion der Vernunft*) definitely superior to Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*.

Criticisms such as these cannot be dismissed lightly. Nothing would be more impertinent than to leave things at<sup>24</sup> a merely dialectical or disputative answer. The only convincing answer would be a real *interpretation*<sup>2</sup> of our great medieval philosophers. For it would be a grave mistake to believe that we dispose already of such an interpretation. After all, the historical study of Jewish medieval philosophy is of fairly recent origin. Everyone working in this field is deeply indebted to the great achievements of Salomon Munk, David Kaufmann and Harry A. Wolfson in particular. But I am sure that these great scholars would be the first to admit that modern scholarship has not yet crossed the threshold of such works as Halevi's *Kuzari* and Maimonides' *Guide: BEN ZOMA 'ADAYIN BACHUTZ*.<sup>25</sup> We are still in a truly preliminary stage.

But quite apart from this perhaps decisive consideration, the critical remarks quoted can be answered to a certain extent<sup>26</sup> without raising the gravest issue. Dr. Scholem takes it for granted that our medieval philosophers intended to express, or to interpret, in their philosophic works, the living reality of historical Judaism, or the religious sentiments or experiences of the pious Jew. Their real intention was much more modest, or much more radical. The whole edifice of the Jewish tradition was virtually or even actually under attack from the side of the adherents of Greek philosophy. With all due caution necessitated by<sup>1</sup> our insufficient information about what had happened in the Hellenistic period of Jewish history, one may say that the Middle Ages witnessed the first, and certainly the first *adequate*,<sup>2</sup> discussion between these two most important forces of the Western world: the religion of the Bible and the science or philosophy of the Greeks. It was a discussion, not between ethical monotheism and paganism, i.e. between two religions, but between religion as such and science or philosophy as such: between the way of life based on faith and obedience and a way of life based on free insight, on human wisdom *alone*.<sup>2</sup> What was at stake in that discussion, were not so much the religious sentiments or experiences *themselves*,<sup>2</sup> as the elementary and inconspicuous *presuppositions*<sup>2</sup> on the basis of which those sentiments or experiences could be more than beautiful dreams, pious wishes, awe-inspiring delusions or emotional exaggerations. It was very well for the Kabbalist Moses of Burgos to say that the philosophers

end where the Kabbalists begin. But does this not amount to a confession that the Kabbalist as such is not concerned with the *foundations*<sup>2</sup> of belief, i.e. with the only question of interest to the philosopher as philosopher? To deny that this question is of paramount importance is to assert that a conflict between faith and knowledge, between religion and science is not even thinkable, or that intellectual honesty is nothing to be cared for. And to believe that the specific experiences of the mystic are sufficient to quell the doubts raised by science or philosophy is to forget the fact that<sup>1</sup> such experiences guarantee the absolute truth of the Torah in no other way than that<sup>27</sup> in which they guarantee the absolute truth of the Christian dogma or of the tenets of Islam; it means to minimize the importance of the doctrinal conflicts between the three great monotheist religions. In fact, it was the insoluble character of those doctrinal conflicts which engendered, or at any rate strengthened, the impulse toward philosophic studies. [It is perhaps not altogether insignificant that Jewish philosophy has proved to be much more impervious to the influence of the Christian dogma than the Kabbalah.]<sup>28</sup>

One may say of course—and this is the implication of the view taken by Guttmann and Rosenzweig in particular—that modern Jewish philosophy has discussed the question of faith and knowledge, of religion and science, in a much more advanced, in a much more mature way than medieval Jewish<sup>1</sup> philosophy. At the root of all our internal difficulties is after all the conflict between the traditional Jewish beliefs, not with Aristotelian metaphysics, but with modern natural science and with modern historical criticism. And this conflict is being discussed of course, not by *medieval*<sup>2</sup> Jewish philosophy, but by *modern*<sup>2</sup> Jewish philosophy. Yet there is another side to this picture. Modern Jewish philosophy from Moses Mendelssohn to Franz Rosenzweig stands and falls with the basic premises of modern philosophy in general. Now, the superiority of modern philosophy to medieval philosophy is no longer so evident as it seemed to be one or two generations ago. Modern philosophy led to a distinction, alien to medieval philosophy, between philosophy and science. This distinction is fraught with the danger that it paves the way for the admission of an unphilosophic science and of an unscientific philosophy: of a science which is a mere tool, and hence apt to become the tool of any powers, of any interests that be, and of a philosophy in which wishes and prejudices have usurped the place belonging to reason. We have seen modern philosophy resigning the claim to demonstrable truth and degenerating into some form of intellectual autobiography, or else evaporating into methodology by becoming the handmaid of modern science. And we are observing every day that people go so far in debasing the name of philosophy as to speak of the philosophies of vulgar impostors such as Hitler. This regrettable usage is not accidental: it is the necessary outcome of the distinction between philosophy and<sup>29</sup> science, of a distinction which is bound to lead eventually to the *separation*<sup>2</sup> of philosophy from science. Whatever we might have to think of Neo-Thomism, its considerable success

among non-Catholics is due to the increasing awareness that something is basically wrong with modern philosophy. The old question, discussed in the 17th century, of the superiority of the moderns to the ancients, or vice versa, has again become a topical question. It has again become a *question*: only a fool would presume that it has already found a sufficient answer. We are barely beginning to realize its enormous implications.

But the mere fact that it has again become a question, suffices for making the study of medieval philosophy a philosophic, and not merely a historical, necessity. [—I would like to stress one point which is of particular significance for the right approach to our medieval philosophy. The development of modern philosophy has led to a point where the meaningfulness of philosophy or science as such has become problematic. To mention only one of its most obvious manifestations: there was a time when it was generally held that philosophy or science are, or can, or ought to be the best guide for social action. The very common present-day talk of the importance and necessity of political *myths*<sup>2</sup> alone suffices to show that at any rate the *social*<sup>2</sup> significance of philosophy or science has become doubtful. We are again confronted with the question “Why philosophy? why science?” This question was in the center of discussion in the beginnings of philosophy. One may say that the Platonic dialogues serve no more obvious purpose than precisely this one: to answer the question why philosophy, why science? by justifying philosophy or science before the tribunal of the city, the political community. In fundamentally the same way, our medieval philosophers are compelled to raise the question why philosophy, why science? by justifying philosophy or science before the tribunal of the law, of the Torah. This most fundamental question of philosophy, the question of its own legitimacy and necessity, is no longer a question for modern philosophy. Modern philosophy was from its beginning the attempt to replace the allegedly wrong philosophy or science of the Middle Ages by the allegedly true philosophy or science: it did not raise any longer the question of the necessity of philosophy or science *itself*:<sup>2</sup> it took that necessity for granted. This fact alone can assure us from the outset that medieval philosophy is distinguished by a philosophic radicalism which is absent from modern philosophy, or that it is, in this most important respect, superior to modern philosophy.]<sup>30</sup> It is then not altogether absurd that we should turn from the modern philosophers to the medieval philosophers with the expectation that we might have to learn something *from* them, and not merely about them.

III. The student of medieval philosophy is a modern man. Whether he knows it or not, he is under the influence of modern philosophy. It is precisely this influence which makes it so difficult, and to begin with even impossible, really to understand medieval philosophy. It is this influence of modern philosophy on the student of medieval philosophy which makes an *unhistorical*<sup>2</sup> interpretation of medieval philosophy to begin with inevitable. The understanding of

medieval philosophy requires then a certain *emancipation*<sup>2</sup> from the influence of modern philosophy. And this emancipation is not possible without serious, constant and relentless *reflection*<sup>2</sup> on the specific character of *modern* philosophy. For knowledge alone can make men free. We modern men understand medieval philosophy only to the extent to which we understand *modern*<sup>2</sup> philosophy in its specific character.

This cannot possibly mean that the student of medieval philosophy must possess a complete knowledge of all important medieval and modern philosophies. The accumulation of such a vast amount of knowledge, of factual information, if at all possible, would reduce *any*<sup>2</sup> man to a condition of mental decrepitude. On the other hand, it is impossible for any genuine scholar to rely on those "fables convenues" about the difference between medieval and modern thought which have acquired a sort of immortality by migrating from one textbook to another. For even if those clichés were true, the young scholar could not know that this is the case: he would have to accept them on trust. There is only one way of combining the duty of exactness with the equally compelling duty of comprehensiveness: one must start with detailed observations at strategic points. There are cases e.g. in which a medieval work has served as a model for a modern work: by a close comparison of the imitation with its model, we may arrive at a clear and lively first-hand impression of the characteristic difference between the medieval approach and the modern approach. As an example one could mention Ibn Tufayl's *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Defoe's work is based on the Latin translation made in the 17th century, of the work of the Arabic philosopher. Both works deal with the question of what a solitary human being can achieve with his natural powers, without the help of society or civilization. The medieval man succeeds in becoming a perfect philosopher; the modern man lays the foundation of a technical civilization. Another type of strategic points is represented by modern commentaries on medieval texts. A comparison of Mendelssohn's commentary on Maimonides' *Treatise on Logic* with the Maimonidean text itself could well perform the function of an entering wedge into our subject. The third type would be detailed modern polemics against medieval teachings. Take Spinoza's critique of Maimonides' teaching and method in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*. By observing what theses of Maimonides' are misunderstood or insufficiently understood by Spinoza, one is enabled to grasp some of the specifically modern prejudices which to begin with prevent us at least as much as they did Spinoza from understanding Maimonides. Yet, all examples of the three types mentioned are open to the objection that they may mislead the unwary student into taking the difference between these specific modern and medieval philosophies for *the* difference between modern philosophy as such and medieval philosophy as such. To grasp that general difference, there is, I think, no better way than a precise comparison of the most typical divisions of philosophy or science in both the Middle Ages and the modern period. It is easy to compile a

list of the philosophic disciplines which are recognized today, from the curricula of present-day universities, or from the title-pages of systems of philosophy composed in the 19th and 20th centuries. Compare that list with, say, Alfarabi's or Avicenna's division of philosophy. The differences are so big, they are so appallingly *obvious*<sup>2</sup> that they cannot be overlooked even by the most shortsighted person; they are so obtrusive that they compel even the most lazy student to *think* about them.<sup>31</sup> One sees at once e.g. that there do not exist in the Middle Ages such philosophic disciplines as esthetics or philosophy of history, and one acquires at once an invincible and perfectly justified distrust against the many modern scholars<sup>32</sup> who write articles or even books on medieval esthetics or on medieval philosophy of history. One becomes interested in the question when the very terms esthetics and philosophy of history appeared for the first time; one learns that they make their first appearance in the 18th century; one starts reflecting on the assumptions underlying their appearance—and one is already well on one's way. Or take the absence of a discipline called philosophy of religion from medieval philosophy. How many books and pamphlets have been written on Jewish philosophy of religion in the Middle Ages, on something, that is, which strictly speaking, does not exist. Something must be basically wrong with all these books and pamphlets. In the place of our modern philosophy of religion, we find in medieval philosophy: theology as a philosophic discipline, *natural* theology as it was formerly called. There is a world of difference between natural theology,<sup>33</sup> the philosophic<sup>1</sup> doctrine of *God*, and philosophy of religion, the analysis of the *human*<sup>2</sup> *attitude*<sup>2</sup> toward God. What is the meaning of that difference? What does it mean that the greatest work of medieval Christianity is entitled *Summa Theologica* whereas the greatest work of the Reformation is entitled *Institutio Christianae Religionis*? And what does it mean that Maimonides excludes the discussion of *religious* subjects from his *Guide*? This is exactly the type of questions with which one has to *start* in order to arrive eventually at a true, exact, historical understanding of medieval philosophy.

[Many scholars consider the type of questions which I have mentioned, as pedantic, not to say bureaucratic. They would argue as follows: why should we not describe a medieval philosopher's remarks on poetry e.g. as his contribution to esthetics? The medieval philosopher would have considered those remarks as belonging to poetics, or to ethics, or perhaps even to political science. He conceived of poetry as an essentially purposeful activity, as an activity destined to please by instructing or to instruct by pleasing. He conceived of poetics as a technical art destined to teach how to make good poems etc. He considered poetry essentially subservient to ulterior purposes such as moral improvement. In short, he had a terribly narrow view of poetry. Thanks to our modern philosophers, we know better: we know that poetry is something existing in its own right, and that esthetics far from teaching a poet how to make poems, is the analysis of poetic productivity and of esthetic enjoyment or ap-

preciation or understanding. The modern view being so manifestly superior to the medieval view, why should we hesitate for a moment to refer the medieval philosopher's remarks on poetry to *our* center of reference, and hence to describe them as belonging to esthetics? Well, this is precisely the mental habit<sup>34</sup> which makes impossible historical understanding of medieval philosophy. If we know from the outset that the medieval view of the matter is wrong or poor, we should not waste our time in studying it, or if someone does not mind wasting his time, he simply will not command the intellectual energy required for truly understanding a view for which he cannot have any real sympathy. Since I mentioned this example of esthetics vs. poetry, I may be permitted to add that the medieval view of poetry ultimately goes back to Plato's Republic, i.e. to the work of a man who cannot be accused of having had a monkish lack of sense of beauty.]<sup>35</sup>

The implication of the point I have been trying to make, is that *terminology*<sup>2</sup> is of paramount importance. Every term designating an important subject implies a whole philosophy. And since to begin with, one cannot be certain which terms are important and which terms are not, one is under an obligation to pay the utmost attention to any term which one reads, or which one uses in one's presentation. This naturally brings us to the question of *translations*.<sup>2</sup> There is no higher praise for a translation of philosophic books than that it is of utmost literalness, that it is in ultimate literalitas, to avail myself of the Latinity of those wonderful medieval translators whose translations from the Arabic into Hebrew or from either language into Latin infinitely surpass most<sup>36</sup> modern translations I know:<sup>37</sup> although their Latin in particular is frequently in ultimate turpitudinis. It is difficult to understand why many<sup>1</sup> modern translators have such a superstitious fear of translating literally. It leads to the consequence that a man who has to rely entirely on modern translations of philosophic works, is unable to reach a precise understanding of the thought of the author. Accordingly, even the poorest linguists (such as the present speaker) are compelled to read the originals. This was not so in the Middle Ages. Medieval students of Aristotle, who did not know a word of Greek, are by far superior as interpreters of Aristotle, to modern scholars who possess a simply overwhelming knowledge of Greek antiquities. This superiority is decisively due to the fact that the medieval commentators disposed of most literal translations of the Aristotelian text and that they stuck to the text and the terminology of the text.

IV. The foregoing remarks apply to the study of medieval philosophy in general. Now let us turn to Jewish medieval philosophy in particular. Medieval Jewish philosophy consists broadly of two types, an earlier type which flourished in an Islamic environment, and a more recent type which emerged in a Christian environment. I shall limit myself to the older type which is more interesting from the point of view of our methodological question, to say nothing of other considerations. There are specific difficulties obstructing our un-

derstanding of Arabic-Jewish as well as of the Islamic philosophy on which it is dependent. History of philosophy, as distinguished from doxography, is an outgrowth of the modern world. Its program was stated for the first time by Francis Bacon. Originally it was considered as something outside of philosophy proper, as a pursuit for antiquarians rather than for philosophers: it became an integral part of philosophy in the 19th century only, owing to Hegel in particular. History of philosophy, being an outgrowth of Christian Europe, has a congenital inclination to take its bearings as regards the study of medieval philosophy, by the standards of Christian or Latin scholasticism. The student of medieval philosophy, as a modern man, is prevented by the influence of modern philosophy on his thought, from understanding medieval philosophy, if he does not coherently reflect on the difference between modern and medieval philosophy. Similarly, the student of Islamic and Jewish philosophy, who as a historian of philosophy participates in a tradition of *Western*<sup>2</sup> origin, is prevented by that tradition from understanding Islamic and Jewish philosophy, if he does not coherently reflect on the difference between Christian scholasticism and Islamic-Jewish philosophy.

One has to start from the difference between Judaism and Islam on the one hand, and Christianity on the other. For the Jew and the Muslim, religion is primarily not, as it is for the Christian, a *faith*<sup>2</sup> formulated in dogmas, but a *law*,<sup>2</sup> a *code*<sup>2</sup> of divine origin. Accordingly, *the* religious science, the *sacra doctrina* is, not dogmatic theology, *theologia revelata*, but the science of the law, Halachah or Fikh. The science of the law thus understood has much less in common with philosophy than has dogmatic theology. Hence, the status of philosophy is, as a matter of principle,<sup>38</sup> much more precarious in the Islamic-Jewish world than it is in the Christian world. No one could become a competent Christian theologian without having studied at least a substantial part of philosophy; philosophy was an integral part of the officially authorized and even required training. On the other hand, one could become an absolutely competent Halachist or Fakih without having the slightest knowledge of philosophy. This fundamental difference doubtless explains the possibility of the later complete collapse of philosophic studies in the Islamic world, a collapse which has no parallel in the West in spite of Luther. It explains why, as late as 1765, the Ashkenazic Jew Mendelssohn felt compelled to offer a real apology for recommending the study of logic, and to show why the prohibition against the reading of extraneous or profane books does not apply to the study of works on logic. It explains at least partly why Maimonides' *Guide* in particular never acquired the authority enjoyed by Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*. Nothing is more revealing than the difference between the beginnings of these two most representative works. The first article of Thomas' great *Summa* deals with the question as to whether theology is necessary apart from, and in addition to, the philosophic disciplines: Thomas<sup>39</sup> defends theology before the tribunal of philosophy. Maimonides' *Guide* on the other hand is explicitly<sup>40</sup> devoted



to the science of the law, if to the *true*<sup>2</sup> science of the law; it opens in the form of<sup>1</sup> a somewhat diffuse commentary<sup>42</sup> on a Biblical verse;<sup>43</sup> it opens as a defense of philosophy before the tribunal of traditional Jewish science rather than as a defense of traditional Jewish science before the tribunal of philosophy. Can one even imagine Maimonides opening the Guide with a discussion of the question as to whether the Halachah is necessary in addition to the philosophic disciplines? Maimonides' procedure is illustrated by a treatise of his contemporary Averroes the explicit purpose of which is the *legal* justification of philosophy: it discusses in *legal*<sup>2</sup> terms, in terms of the Islamic law, the question as to whether the study of philosophy is *permitted*<sup>2</sup> or *forbidden*<sup>2</sup> or *commanded*.<sup>2</sup> Philosophy was clearly on the defensive, not so much perhaps in fact, but certainly as far as the legal situation was concerned. There is more than one parallel to Averroes' argument in Jewish literature.

The problematic status of philosophy in the Jewish Middle Ages finds its most telling expression in the use of the terms "philosophy" and "philosopher". We take it for granted that men such as Maimonides and Halevi were philosophers, and we call their respective books without hesitation philosophic books. But do we act in agreement with their view of the matter by doing so? In their usage, philosopher designates normally a man whose beliefs are fundamentally different from those of the adherents of any of the three monotheist religions, whether he belongs nominally to one of these religions or not. The philosophers as such are supposed to form a group, a *sect*,<sup>2</sup> fundamentally distinguished from the group of the Jews, that of the Muslims and that of the Christians. By calling thinkers such as Halevi and Maimonides "philosophers", we implicitly deny that there is a *problem*<sup>2</sup> in the very *idea*<sup>2</sup> of a Jewish philosopher or of Jewish philosophy. But of nothing were these men more deeply convinced than of this that Jewish philosophy is, as such, something problematic, something precarious.

Now let us consider the other side of the picture. The official recognition of philosophy in the Christian world had doubtless its drawbacks. That recognition was bought at the price of strict ecclesiastical supervision. The precarious position of philosophy in the Islamic-Jewish world, on the other hand, guaranteed, or necessitated, its *private*<sup>2</sup> character and therewith a higher degree of inner *freedom*.<sup>2</sup> The situation of philosophy in the Islamic-Jewish world resembles in this respect its situation in classical Greece. It has often been said that the Greek city was a totalitarian social order: it comprised, and regulated, not only political and legal matters proper, but morality, religion, tragedy and comedy as well. There was however one activity which was, in fact and in theory, essentially and radically *private*,<sup>2</sup> trans-political and trans-social: philosophy. The philosophic schools were founded, not by authorities civil or ecclesiastical, but by men *without*<sup>2</sup> authority, by private men. In this respect, I said, the situation of philosophy in the Islamic world resembles the *Greek*<sup>2</sup> situation

rather than the situation in Christian Europe. This fact was recognized by the Islamic-Jewish philosophers themselves: elaborating on a remark of Aristotle, they speak of the philosophic life as a radically *private*<sup>2</sup> life: they compare it to the life of a hermit.

Religion is conceived of by Muslims and Jews primarily as a law. Accordingly, religion enters the horizon of the philosophers primarily as a *political* fact. Therefore, the philosophic discipline dealing with religion is, not philosophy of religion, but political philosophy or political science. The political science in question is a specific one: Platonic political science, the teaching of Plato's Republic and of his Laws. No difference between Islamic-Jewish philosophy on the one hand and Christian scholasticism on the other is more palpable than this: whereas *the* classic of political science in the Western world was Aristotle's Politics, the classics of political science in the Islamic-Jewish world were the Republic and the Laws. In fact, Aristotle's Politics were unknown to the Islamic-Jewish world and the Republic and the Laws made their appearance in Christian Europe not before the 15th century.—The Islamic law as well as the Jewish law is of course considered a divine law, a law given by God to men by the intermediary of a prophet. The prophet is interpreted by Alfarabi, Avicenna and Maimonides in terms of the Platonic philosopher-king: as the founder of the perfect political community. The doctrine of prophecy as such is considered by these philosophers a part of political science. Avicenna describes Plato's Laws as the standard work on prophecy. This view of the essentially political character of prophecy influences the very plan of Maimonides' *Sefer Hamitzvot* and of his *Sefer Hamadda*. Its implications appear from Maimonides' remark that the neglect of the arts of war and of conquest in favor of astrology led to the destruction of the Jewish state.

The difference between Islamic-Jewish philosophy and Christian scholasticism shows itself most clearly in the field of practical philosophy. As regards theoretical philosophy, both Islamic-Jewish philosophy and Christian scholasticism build on substantially the same tradition. But in political and moral philosophy, the difference is fundamental. I have mentioned the absence of Aristotle's Politics from the Islamic-Jewish world. Equally significant is the absence from it of the Roman literature, of Cicero and the Roman Law in particular. This leads to the consequence that the doctrine of natural law, so characteristic of Christian scholasticism, and indeed of Western thought up to the end of the 18th century, is completely lacking in Islamic-Jewish philosophy: it appears in some later Jewish writers only under the influence of Christian thought. It is true, the Islamic theologians, the Mutakallimun, had asserted the existence of rational laws which were practically identical with what were called natural laws in the Occident; but the Islamic-Jewish philosophers reject this view altogether. The rules of conduct which are called by the Christian scholastics natural laws and by the Mutakallimun rational laws, are called by the Islamic-Jewish philosophers:

Generally accepted opinions. This view appears in the Christian Middle Ages only at their fringes as it were, in the teaching of Marsilius of Padua, the most energetic medieval opponent of clerical claims.

This leads me to the last point which I would like to make in order to indicate the extent and bearing of the difference separating Islamic-Jewish philosophy from Christian scholasticism, and in order to justify my contention that a genuine understanding of Islamic-Jewish philosophy must be based on constant awareness of that difference. That<sup>44</sup> school of Christian scholasticism which was most deeply influenced by Islamic philosophy, was Latin Averroism. Latin Averroism is famous for its doctrine of the double truth, for its assertion that a thesis may be true in philosophy but false in theology and vice versa. The doctrine of the double truth does not occur in Averroes himself or in his predecessors. Instead, we find in Islamic philosophy a relatively ample use of the distinction between exoteric teachings, based on rhetorical arguments, and the esoteric teaching based on demonstrative or scientific arguments. Up to now, students of Islamic philosophy have not paid sufficient attention to this distinction which is evidently of absolutely decisive importance. For if the true, scientific teaching is an esoteric, a *secret*<sup>2</sup> teaching, we have no right to be as<sup>45</sup> certain as we are accustomed to be, that the public teaching of the Islamic philosophers is their real teaching. We would have to acquire a special technique of reading not necessary for the understanding of books which set forth the views of their authors directly, without any concealment or circumlocution. It would be wrong to trace the esotericism in question to certain spurious phenomena of dying antiquity: its origin has to be sought in Plato himself, in the doctrine of the Phaedrus concerning the superiority of oral teaching to teaching by writings, in the doctrine of the Republic and the Laws concerning the necessity of noble lies, and, above all, in the literary technique used by Plato himself in all his works. One may safely say that before this<sup>46</sup> *Platonism*<sup>2</sup> of the Islamic philosophers has been duly studied, our understanding of Islamic philosophy rests on extremely shaky foundations. Similar considerations apply to the Jewish philosophy which is dependent on Islamic philosophy. Everyone who has read the Guide, knows how emphatically Maimonides insists on the secret character of his own teaching: he warns his reader from the outset that he has set forth only the chapter headings of the secret teaching, and not the chapters themselves. In the Kuzari, we are confronted with a similar situation: the final conversion of the Kuzari to Judaism is the consequence of<sup>47</sup> his listening to a highly secret interpretation of the secret teaching of the Sefer Yetzirah. It was with a view to phenomena such as these that I ventured to say that<sup>48</sup> our understanding of medieval philosophy is<sup>1</sup> still in a truly preliminary stage. In making this remark I do not minimize the debt which we owe to Wolfson and Isaac Heinemann in particular, who have spoken on the peculiar literary technique of our medieval<sup>49</sup> philosophers on various occasions. What is required beyond the general observations, is a coherent and methodic application of those observa-

tions to the actual interpretation of the texts. Only after this interpretation has been completed, shall we be in a position to judge of the *value*,<sup>2</sup> of the *truth*<sup>2</sup> of our medieval philosophy. For the time being, it is good policy to suspend our judgment and to *learn*<sup>2</sup> from our great teachers.<sup>50</sup> For there are many important<sup>1</sup> lessons which modern man can learn only from pre-modern, from un-modern thinkers.

## NOTES

1. Word added in pencil.
2. Underlining added in pencil.
3. Sentence added in pencil.
4. "interpretation" added in pencil to replace "procedure" which has been crossed out.
5. "of" supplied by the editors: a word has been lost where a corner of a page has been torn off.
6. The brackets in which this passage is enclosed were added in pencil. There was apparently also a word or note of explanation supplied in the margin, all but an unintelligible portion of which was on the page-corner which has been lost (see note 5).
7. The words "on the other hand" following "understanding" have been crossed out.
8. "an earlier philosopher" added in pencil to replace "Maimonides e.g." which has been crossed out.
9. Brackets have been placed in pencil around "that"; the alternative "such a" has been written above the line in pencil.
10. "typical" has been added, or perhaps substituted, above the line.
11. The words "judgment, taste, and" after "imagination" have been crossed out.
12. "haunt" replaces "abode" which replaced "domicile"; both "abode" and "domicile" have been crossed out.
13. This entire paragraph was added (on a separate sheet) in pencil for insertion after the end of the preceding paragraph, either as a part of that paragraph or, as we have it, as a separate paragraph. It was not included in the previously published version of the lecture.
14. "only with difficulty can he" added in pencil to replace "he can hardly" which has been crossed out.
15. "His" added in pencil to replace "The" which has been crossed out.
16. "provided he was not muddle-headed" added in pencil.
17. A note has been attached to this sentence or paragraph and added in pencil at the bottom of the page, as follows: "Application to *sociological* interpretation: it is an attempt to understand the past better than it understood itself—it has its merits—but it is not historical understanding in the precise sense of the term."
18. "to speak less paradoxically" added in pencil.
19. "that" added by the editors to replace "what" in the text.
20. A comma after only has been deleted by the editors.
21. "Now" added in pencil to replace "But" which has been crossed out.
22. "view" added in pencil to replace "assertion" which has been crossed out.
23. The brackets in which this passage is enclosed were added in pencil and an arrow has been drawn from the last word preceding the brackets to the first word following them.
24. "to leave things at" added in pencil.
25. Dr. Fradkin, to whom we owe the transliteration of the Hebrew in the text, informs us that the meaning is "Ben Zoma is still outside," a phrase from the Babylonian Talmud (Hagigah 15a) that is quoted by Maimonides in the *Guide* (III-51).
26. "to a certain extent" added in pencil.
27. "than that" added by the editors.

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28. The brackets in which this sentence is enclosed were added in pencil.
29. "and" added by the editors to replace "or" in the text.
30. The brackets in which this passage is enclosed were added in pencil.
31. The sentence, "Such a study is even more exciting than the reading in a first class historical dictionary" following "them" has been crossed out.
32. The words, "(nomina sunt odiosa)" following "scholars" have been crossed out.
33. The word "between" following "theology" has been crossed out.
34. The word in the text was originally "habitude"; "ude" has been crossed out.
35. The brackets in which this paragraph is enclosed were added in pencil.
36. "most" added in pencil to replace "all" which has been crossed out.
37. The words "with the exception of Schleiermacher and Salomon Munk" following "know" have been crossed out.
38. "as a matter of principle" added in pencil to replace "to begin with" which has been crossed out.
39. "Thomas" added in pencil to replace "he" which has been crossed out.
40. "is explicitly" added in pencil to replace "claims to be" which has been crossed out.
41. Above the line containing the words "it opens in the form of" which have not been crossed out, an alternative has been written in pencil: "Its first chapters look like".
42. At this point an alternative is added in pencil above the line: "(a *midrash*)"
43. At this point the following is added in pencil above the line: "*which verse*"
44. "That" added in pencil to replace "The" which has been crossed out.
45. Above "as" which has not been crossed out, an alternative has been written in pencil: "so"
46. The word "the" has been replaced by "this" by crossing out "e" and adding "is" in pencil above the line.
47. "of" added in pencil to replace "to" which has been crossed out.
48. The words "we are in" following "that" have been crossed out.
49. Brackets have been placed in pencil around "our medieval"; the alternative "earlier" has been written above the line in pencil.
50. "our great teachers" added in pencil to replace "them" which has been crossed out.