

Interpretation

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Clarifying Dire Misunderstandings: Reply to Marco Menon

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[For Socrates] to understand the whole...means...to understand the unity that is revealed in the manifest articulation of the completed whole...The ascent to the truth proves to be guided by the self-subsistent truth which all men always divine.

—Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*

My critique of Menon and Cubeddu targets primarily the lesson emerging from their pages to the effect that Strauss was *after all* a modern who returned to Hobbes (superficial methodological divergences notwithstanding), most notably by restricting our knowledge to what we make, or by viewing human *praxis* as radically cut off from divine(d) transcendence (Menon 44–45).¹ I object that for Strauss, rather than trying to “perfectly understand the limits [of *praxis*],” the Socratic philosopher attains to “the essence” of *praxis* as radically open to the divine: what Strauss is up to is not the relegation of revelation to radical immanence, or within a dimension of being where

¹ A stepping-stone to Menon's conclusion is his subtle shift from Strauss's conception of a fundamental dualism *in man*, to one “in human experience of all times” (*nell'esperienza umana di tutti i tempi*—Menon 44). On the basis of this latter formulation, it may be possible for us to sever one of the terms constituting the dualism from the other. This would be impossible if the dualism were integral to the constitution of the human as such, in other words, if man were necessarily defined by the two mutually irreducible poles of deed and thought (thus if man were essentially *social and* if sociability necessarily exposed us to philosophical truth). What Strauss is articulating is a *dialogue* between the two, *represented* pedagogically by Greek philosophy and the Hebrew Bible. Compare, for instance, Matthew Arnold's articulation of the terms Hellenism and Hebraism.

revelation may be successfully refuted (*ibid.*, after Heinrich Meier), but the “elevation” (if I may echo Giambattista Vico) of divine transcendence at the very heart of political life. Far from being cut off from *praxis*, *theoria* is, so to speak, rediscovered as the soul of *praxis*.

Now, of the three objections of mine that Menon refers to, the first pertains to Menon’s claim that Strauss “surely shared” Hobbes’s destructive attitude towards *premodern* theology, which Menon’s Strauss critiques for having obscured a call to obey. I object that (1) Strauss’s destructive criticism is not of medieval Christianity, but of modern and late/post-modern readings of Christianity, and that (2) medieval Christianity hardly obscured the authoritative character of the Bible.

Let us return to the fourth chapter of *Natural Right and History* (*NRH*) where Strauss addresses Thomism most systematically (*esp.* 157–64). Strauss recognizes that for Saint Thomas man is inadequately understood simply as a being naturally tending towards divinity: man is also *called* by divinity to his natural tending; our conscious yearnings are our responses to a hidden (intelligible) call. Thus, prior to seeking the divine, the philosopher is sought by the divine. It is this presupposed search or call that allows us to make sense of medieval Christianity’s appeals to *synderesis*, or to what is divine in man.

Now, in the chapter in question, Strauss is critical of the political repercussions of the Thomistic/Christian presentation of human nature as dependent upon divinity. Simply stated, insofar as it tends to acquire the character of undoubtable law, Thomism’s defense of natural right (and therewith of philosophy) carries as side-effect both the narrowing and the endangering of natural right. In the first case, moral/political action is restricted by precognized all-too-general doctrines; in the latter, it is obscured by doubts concerning religious authority (*NRH* 164; compare 130, 144, and 166). Yet, as my earlier critical review suggests, Strauss is a friend of Thomism insofar as it attempts to show that revelation does not stand against reason, and that religious authority thus does not represent an impenetrable fortress for philosophy as such. My objection is to a presentation of Strauss (Menon 30–31) as attacking *medieval* theology for having “falsified” revelation as dependent upon human reason. Such a modern or “relativistic” characterization places Strauss *eo ipso* in the company of Spinoza, for whom faith has no essential need for reason (as in Menon 31), which amounts to saying that religious authority is essentially irrational. My response to such a view, which seems to further ground Menon’s latest reference to *NRH* 92, is that Strauss “faults” medieval learning, not for having endangered religious authority, but for

having contributed to the eclipse of philosophy as original juggler of reason and authority, as opposed to the representative of either pole (*NRH* 92).²

Strauss's criticism of medieval Christianity is both incisive and mild, stressing as it does the danger of taking right for granted, or of depicting the ideal regime of philosophy as natural, or ready-at-hand. While Strauss does not stop at medieval Christianity (*NRH* 164), neither does he read human reason independently of divinity *tout court*. As apologist of ancient Socratism, Strauss seeks the divine at the very heart of the political (122–23), which is to be understood, in turn, in the light of the political's perfection in speech (135, 139). Such a perfection does not depend upon any creation *ex nihilo* (144), for it is compatible with imperfection or evil (139); indeed, it is seated, as if in the "twilight," at the very heart of human imperfection (157).

Turning to the question of miracles, my review addressed a reference to "the doctrine of miracles" that in Menon 25 Hobbes *subverts*. Menon had *not* attributed that doctrine to Hobbes, even as the doctrine described entails explicitly an opposition between "a fixed and stable, natural order" and nature's creator (*ibid.*). Furthermore, in the p. 32 passage that I had referred to critically, Menon does not merely recount Gogarten's position, but presents a view that Gogarten is said to have modified, namely that of a creation *ex nihilo, as if* (here is the target of my criticism) Strauss had assumed that such a view was affirmed by the Bible. Similarly, the target of my criticism of Menon 34 is not Menon's mere reporting, but an assumption that Menon imports as *fact*, namely that *for Strauss* "soteriology...cannot renounce to the story of creation to be understood as historical fact, that really happened." I object that for Strauss what "really happened" is not to be understood as "historical fact."

Strauss is often viewed as having professed an opposition between reason and revelation. Had he done so unqualifiedly, he would have trodden in the

² What Strauss writes on p. 29 of *The City and Man* is best understood in the light of the preceding page, where Strauss defends the fundamental bond between virtue and goodness: you cannot be strong unless you are good, nor good unless strong. Surely this implies that *praxis* and *theoria* cannot be understood apart from each other, and thus that the limits of one cannot be understood apart from the other (Menon 45). As for philosophy and revealed religion, *both* stand for a reality transcending political life, or "the cave," so that when Strauss speaks of "the only serious alternative to the philosophical life [being] the political life," he is not, as Menon's text seems to suggest, pitting philosophy against revelation. As for Menon's citation concerning the primacy of thought versus that of deed, Strauss qualifies said distinction as "open to misunderstandings," setting out then to praise the conflict between thought and deed as "the secret of the vitality of the West." Of course, the West in question is primarily or overall Christian or of Christian derivation. The conflict heralded by Strauss is the conflict that Christianity has been far from smothering.

shadow of Tertullian, rather than of Maimonides—of Spinoza, rather than of Lessing. My review has pointed to a Strauss for whom reason and revelation, as the human and the divine, or even freedom and authority, are superficially, or “historically,” irreducible.³ The irreducibility in question, however, presupposes a common ground, which is not merely a problem beyond both the human and the divine (such as may be the idea of justice), but a living—or philosophically *lived-out*—crossroads or intersection between the human and the divine, that appears on the surface as a tension, even an outright conflict, but that is inherently a harmony, even a coincidence. Modernity first opposes the human and the divine inviting, more or less explicitly, a resolution to the opposition on *historical* grounds, which is to say, in terms of human existence. It is in the context of his opposition to the modern (and post/late-modern) resolution that Strauss reaffirms the conflict between reason and revelation, thereby drawing our attention to the dawn of modernity. Yet, Strauss’s unearthing of the dawn of modernity points “backwards” to a *classical* (ancient and medieval) answer to the opposition between the human and the divine, an answer that is Jewish to the extent that it steps back with respect to its Christian *revelation*, or quasi-universal exposition. For Strauss, the “solution” to the opposition between the human and the divine is *sacred* or secret—*privatissima*, not in the sense that it is “subjective,” but in the sense that it is seated at the heart of any and all identity (as the original foundation of the *modern* opposition between subject and object).

Strauss’s final discovery was not that of exotericism, but of the grounds for our ceasing to conceive of the conflict between religion and philosophy in terms of the opposition between “belief” and “knowledge.” Religion now stands upon faith exposed as a trust inviting comprehension (“inward” vision) beyond any mere apprehension (“outward” vision), a knowledge transcending modern superficialities. In order to transcend the modern, that is, modernity’s bankruptcy, we must regain access to a *pietas* opening us *phenomenologically* to the self-disclosure of things themselves, or of things as *original contents of the mind*. Hence Strauss’s invitation to reappraise common sense as *the*

³ Menon’s citation of Strauss’s text on Genesis is originally framed by the characterization of philosophy as “contemplation of heaven.” What is at stake is a *superficial* conflict between freedom and authority, which is overcome with the Socratic “turn,” or where philosophy ceases to be “natural philosophy.” Socratic irony renders man’s imitation of the divine (poetic theology) compatible with the highest demands of revelation. Hereupon, *political* philosophy emerges, as per Strauss, as “the indispensable handmaid of theology,” not in the sense that philosophy is to be used by theologians, but in the sense that all theological authority is to be guided by an internal philosophical principle, at work in “the twilight,” between the lines, or beneath “the letter” lest it killeth.

foremost question mark. What Strauss ultimately points (us) to is what we *believe* to know, as something that somehow, we know *originally*. Hence Gildin's reading of Strauss's Platonism in terms of a return to common sense (compare *NRH* 123), not as a self-evident answer, but as a fundamental riddle.

Properly understood, religion and philosophy are open to each other, just as divinity and humanity are. Religion as such introduces us to the art of receiving things as "gifts," understood in turn as challenges for philosophy. As long as we do not regain access to the necessary *religious* preface to philosophy, we cannot overcome the collapse of modern science as privileged knowledge. When properly understood, religion allows us to know the contents of "the world," not, as it were, from without (in modern terms), but from within, or as *immediate* or intimate disclosures, which is to say, as disclosures originally within the mind. The gift we receive here is irreducible to what we ordinarily grasp, in the sense that "grasping" blinds us to its target. The gift we receive is an "internal" vision that, far from precluding any faith, makes sense of it, again in terms of trust. What is more, the philosopher animated by "internal vision" sets out *by nature* to encourage trust in others, as radical openness to the language or *logos* of things themselves, distinguished from the "logic" we might otherwise attribute to nature from without, or superficially (as in the case of those moderns defining the language of nature as that of mathematics).

How then are we to understand Strauss's invitation of a reason and a revelation open to each other? The two are challenges to each other in the respect that (A) revelation compels reason to come face to face with things themselves, rather than imposing "models" upon things, and (B) a reason pointing to the *noetic depths* (essence) of things compels us to rise above the temptation of believing as alternative to knowing—of believing so as not to have to think.

