Interpretation

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An Exchange on Menon's Strauss

Leo Strauss, *Scritti su filosofia e religione* [Writings on philosophy and religion]. Edited by Raimondo Cubeddu and Marco Menon. Translated by Marco Menon. Pisa: ETS, 2017, 274 pp., 25.00€ (paper).

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> It is not sufficient for everyone to obey and to listen to the Divine message of the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City. In order to propagate that message among the heathen, nay, in order to understand it as clearly and as fully as is humanly possible, one must also consider to what extent man could discern the outlines of that City if left to himself, to the proper exercise of his own powers. But in our age it is much less urgent to show that *political philosophy is the indispensable handmaid of theology* than to show that political philosophy is the rightful queen of the social sciences, the sciences of man and of human affairs.
>
> —Leo Strauss, *The City and Man*

Writings on Philosophy and Religion is a collection of Italian translations of writings by Leo Strauss, coedited by Cubeddu and Menon and translated by the latter.[1] While increasing accessibility of Strauss's writings to an Italian

[1] The translated titles are "Hobbes's Critique of Religion" (1933/34), "Reason and Revelation" (1948), "An Untitled Lecture on Plato's *Euthyphron*" (1952), "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy" (1954), and "On the Interpretation of Genesis" (1957). Menon's introduction is titled "Socrates and Jerusalem: Leo Strauss and the Challenge of Revelation" (pp. 9–45).

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readership, Cubeddu (who penned the postscript) and Menon (author of the volume's extended introduction) also foster a reading of Strauss that has become dominant among contemporary academic Strauss supporters, at least in Italy, if not in the United States. The idea, in a nutshell, is that Strauss admitted no "third" position between law (revelation) and reason (philosophy), except for an "exoteric" pretense to piety on the part of reason. On this reading, reason pretends or should pretend to be subservient to law so that it may use law in the interest of both philosophers and nonphilosophers alike, that is, of their relatively tranquil coexistence.

To better understand the problem at stake, we can recast it in terms of the struggle between masters and slaves, where masters would be slaves pretending to be superior to other slaves; or rather, masters would be slaves flattering other slaves (who wished, in turn, to be so flattered) into believing the former slaves to be masters. In any case, humanity or the human world would be disclosed as the arena of two adversaries, one of which was merely pretending to be superior to the other. Such a pretense should be concealed *as pretense* for the sake of the preservation of the *polis*, or civil law and order understood as essentially conflictual, where man would be essentially an animal at war. War should then not be rejected, but cherished, provided at least that it served philosophical endeavors. Such endeavors, in turn, would pertain at once to recognition of the conflictual nature of man and to the effort to mediate or sustain human existence in the interest of the recognition of its true nature.

Two guiding problems arise throughout Menon's introduction: a presentation of Strauss's philosophy as an alternative to theology, and a *modernist* reading of miracles as opposed to nature. Our first objection to Menon's characterization of Strauss stems from our appreciating that Strauss's philosophy is not an alternative to theology (priests), which, in turn, does not entail a corruption of revelation, which in turn is not reason free.

Menon presents Strauss as attempting to destroy theology, where Strauss merely sets out to expose as spurious a (postmodern) postphilosophical theology. Again, whereas Menon writes as if *medieval* (Christian) theology stood as a postphilosophical synthesis of Athens and Jerusalem, medieval Christianity, as Strauss surely appreciated, presents itself as a divine "guidebook" for philosophers—a *sacra doctrina* offering a blueprint of philosophical arguments and opinions *in harmony with biblical revelation*.[2] Saint Thomas's

[2] Strauss makes it amply clear that St. Thomas's work amounts to a defense of biblical revelation before the tribunal of philosophy. Aquinas's *summae* are thus addressed above all (or, "between the lines," to echo Strauss) to philosophers, instructing them as to the legitimacy of human reason, which

summae are de facto defenses of and guides to a philosophy, an approach to philosophy, compatible with political theology, where the latter is compatible with philosophical *eros*.[3] Christian "doctors" establish the superiority of a Bible-friendly philosophy over all alternative approaches to philosophy. Otherwise put, medieval Christianity orients philosophy to the heart of revelation,[4] thereupon admitting only *political philosophy* in its premodern or Platonic character, as opposed to approaches to philosophy for which truth is to be sought aside from the (theological-political) problem of authority. We therefore do not have a medieval attempt to synthesize Athens and Jerusalem, but a medieval attempt to "educate" philosophers in harmony with the Bible, which is to say to promote Platonic political rationalism. Philosophy is seen Socratically, as defensible only in harmony with revealed law or religious authority, or insofar as philosophical desire for truth is oriented towards the depths of religious authority. Here philosophy stands as path of dialogue between "this world" and the otherworldly.[5]

Turning to our second problem, we object to Menon's characterization of miracles as opposed to nature (25 and 32). Strauss rejects the opposition in question in the very act of rejecting a reading of the biblical God as creator of nature or generation.[6] For Strauss, the Hebrew God does not create,

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is to say as to the absolute primacy of a Bible-friendly philosophy over any other philosophy.

[3] If, as Strauss would note, in the Middle Ages the philosopher often appears as a mystic, we have good reasons to state that Thomas leaves "space" for the exercise of philosophy as a way of life. On the distinction between Platonism and "philosophy" as prohibited by the Bible, see Leo Strauss, "On the Interpretation of Genesis," in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 373. The Middle Ages inherit and reinforce an older distinction between prepolitical and political philosophy, typically under the respective headings of Epicurus and Plato. Accordingly, for Aquinas there is a correct understanding of philosophy, as opposed to false approaches to philosophy; there is, to wit, the way of Epicurus, which is indefensible, as opposed to the way of Platonists including Aristotle, who are seen as compatible with the Bible (since they can be easily read in harmony with *the* Book).

[4] To be sure, Aquinas's "philosophy" needs a divine supplement, or divine authority, falling short of which philosophy would be utterly ineffective in practical or political matters, or in relating to a nonphilosophical audience.

[5] See Strauss, "On the Interpretation of Genesis," 373, where Strauss rejects the "happy synthesis" of Bible and philosophy, leaving open the possibility of classical *political* philosophy, or a philosophy that, prompted, even spurred by biblical or biblical-like injunctions, no longer takes its bearings from the conventionally visible, but from a permanent order presupposed by the visible universe.

[6] Ibid., 362–63 and 369. The conclusion that in (medieval) Christian doctrine God's omnipotence does not entail God's creation of nature (at most nature could appear as God's *art*) is invited by a few considerations. To begin with, while to this day the Catholic *credo* invokes a *Deus omnipotens*, it does so in the wake of Roman imperial paganism's *Deus optimus maximus* (whose foremost representative is a *pontifex maximus*), who, being infinitely strong and infinitely great, is necessarily *invictus*, or all conquering. We stand here before the God of Rome *caput mundi*, where *mundus* is "poetically" understood as the world that *counts* for Rome, the world under Roman law (*as if* anything beyond were not

but presupposes and dominates nature (as he does all "previous" Gods); he orders nature, through a kind of *diaeresis*, or noetic "separation," in testimony to Adam's (the human being *as such*) guardianship over all generation. Generation or *genesis* is not given by the Hebrew God, who intervenes upon generation to establish it as stage/occasion for man's mission. Nature is tacitly presupposed by the Hebrew God in a *bereshit* (legal "heading/beginning," rather than any "genesis") that is in no manner eager to "name" any order of things that the revelation of the Hebrew God is supposed to supplant—as if prior to the Hebrew God, or beyond the (new) beginning he marks, there had been mere dark chaos. What for the Hebrew Bible is not worthy of a title, is, for philosophers, *nature* (*phusis*), although for the Greeks at large, nonphilosophical Greeks, nature is necessarily ordered by Gods. It is only with Christianity that nature *appears to be* created by God (Christianity brings out the implicit of the Hebrew Bible, thereby marking a shift with respect to both paganism and Hebraism). Such is the crucial import of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*: God is supposed to have created "generation" itself (cf. Dante, *Paradiso* XXXIII.1–12), as opposed to merely ordering it, especially in function of human life. As we read in the "Philosophy and Revelation" text translated by Menon (182), for the Hebrew Bible and pagan religion alike, generation as such is simply uncreated, even as generation entails Gods, much as existence entails essence (both have always been, neither has a beginning in time, so both are "immortal"). Accordingly, Strauss stresses that nature is invented by philosophers, in the respect that "natural philosophers" are the first to "abstract" nature out of a "city" in which Gods are unavoidable. The pre-Socratic philosopher imagines a world that has no need for Gods—a poetic world in which man may live as a God, or *as if he were* the ruler or measure of all generation (taking advantage of the absence of any other ruler). Socrates's return to the city is then to be understood in terms of a return of generation (nature) to the Gods: generation does not occur for the sake of mere or mortal philosophers, but of immortal minds (Gods). By the same token, all of the divine "ideas" of previous philosophers are restored in relation to man. Socratic divinities are intimately bound to political problems, as opposed to being apolitical self-projections of philosophers who have rejected political

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worthy of mention; *as if*, beyond Rome, *nulla salus*). Again, to return to the Apostle's Creed, God's *omnipotentia* is to be understood in terms of the forging of every discrete thing (*omnium*, rather than *omnia*), clearly not including *Dominus Jesus Christus* and his *generation* (a veritable *natura naturans*). The Christian God's power may then be understood as pertaining to all that falls under *his* authority or jurisprudence, where "falling under" presupposes a generative context. For a more thoroughgoing examination of the problems at hand, see Vico's *Principii di Scienza Nuova* (1744), which also helps us best understand the meaning of "world" in Dante's *Monarchia*.

life and order as an imposture. By drawing *divine* Epicurean "ideas" back into the *polis*, Socrates shows at once that Gods are entailed by the very notion of generation/nature, and that Gods are necessarily "caring" or *providential* for man (given that they belong to a world in which generation and authority, as reason and law, are inextricable, or at least never autonomous of each other).[7]

For Strauss, the Hebrew Bible's innovation with respect to paganism does not consist of the introduction of a God that creates generation or physical time itself, but of a God whose "art" (*techne*) consolidates that of all other Gods to focus on and best govern over specifically *human* generation, as opposed to the generation(s) of plants, beasts, or even planets. The Hebrew Bible is thereby more rational than pagan cosmological accounts. By considering generation within human, political, or even legal boundaries, the Hebrew Bible purges pagan stories of the element of "magic" dominating them. For where generation transcends human conventions, our accounts of generation must be at best tentative, conserving the dreamlike character proper of pagan divination.

Protecting the Hebrew People from politically destabilizing incertitude, or the threat of anarchy, the Hebrew Bible gives the impression of admitting generation only for human beings (there is thus no "natural history," no modern-style "evolution," in the Bible), or rather for those swearing by the one God of the Bible (Gen. 4:26, 5). We do not yet face, here, a doctrine of "creation out of nothing." Instead we stand before a defense of religion or sacred law in the face of skepticism born of reflection upon the plurality of legal constitutions or orders. This latter reflection exposes generation as a "threat" surfacing through the interstice separating conflicting legal orders, or Peoples.[8] Where generation or "nature" (birth) surfaces as unruly, or rather, where the philosophically fostered suspicion of a nature independent of Gods surfaces as a threat to legal life and order, thereupon a thought arises

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7 Authors such as Aristophanes make it amply clear that Socrates's contemporary Athenians were by and large skeptical of divine providence. In the face of a general loss of confidence in the metaphysical grounding of morality, Socrates emerges as a defender of piety. Plato himself is and is traditionally understood as a defender of providence.

8 See Strauss's Introduction to so-called "Genesis" ("On the Interpretation of Genesis") and Strauss, "Progress or Return?," in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, 87–136, especially with respect to the crucial difference between pagan myths and the biblical account of origins. The biblical account is an essentially legal one; the order of things in the Bible is a legal order. This does not mean that the Bible is not, or is no longer, "poetic." The Bible *is* poetry, to be sure, but poetry of poetry, or poetry above all poetry (not the imitation of *natura naturata* but of *natura naturans*). Its God is likewise the God above all other Gods, or the God of all Gods. Now, this biblical innovation is a response to the problem of the plurality of legal/moral codes. The Bible's "solution" to political conflict is the one God over all Peoples.

among defenders of law, the thought of a divine "art" (*techne*) above all other particular legislative acts. The divine art in question must be the prerogative of *the* true God choosing *one* People as his representative witness (God speaks through His chosen People). This new God marks a new beginning, or *bereshit*, virtually eclipsing the scenario of conflicting legal orders (polytheism), and especially the one in which nature surfaces as threat. At this point, there is no need for God to "fix" nature into His own eternity. The God of the Hebrews is not yet a creator of nature; generation in its primal sense, generation as a "generative" context half-tacitly presupposed by divine creation itself, occurs even without Him, even as He is needed for the sake of guiding generation to a good end, at least as far as the Hebrews are concerned. Yet, in virtue of what is the Hebrew God *the* true one? He is the true one insofar as He is the ruler of *all* nations: He governs the lives of all Peoples;[9] he must thus be more *rational* than all other Gods, given that he must speak not merely relatively to one political climate or other, but relatively to or for all.[10] Yet, how is the Hebrew God going to convince all Peoples? He does not, of course. Nor are the Hebrews especially disturbed by their God's "failure" to be heard by all nations. They are guided by Him in mysterious ways, ways that most of us ignore.

The call for a God creating *ex nihilo* arises only where the need is perceived of a Hebrew God convincing all Peoples. Hence the Christian tendency to view generation as "fixed" into divine or pure eternity. Only where God creates generation can all nations be reconciled (their "differences" no longer constituting a problem). It remains to be seen, however, if or to what extent Christianity does actually espouse the doctrine of a *creatio ex nihilo*.[11] Amidst and above a great variety of theological disquisitions, however,

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[9] On the meaning of "nation," see Vico, *Principii di Scienza Nuova* (1744). Vico brings to light the essential link between nature, birth, and nation (*nature*, *nascimento*, *nazione*): a nation is a fatherland. Vico further argues that God is "true" in the respect that he is the single foundation of a People.

[10] One implication of the Hebrew God's not creating *ex nihilo* is that his creation is to be understood properly relatively to the Hebrew People. The divine creative act itself speaks primarily to one People among others (there are Peoples/Nations already in Genesis 4; in 4:17 it is clear that there are foreign "cities"); the human emerges as key to the physical universe. If the Hebrew God creates the universe, then he does so only relatively to human, political life. The universe in question exists relatively to the Hebrew People (potentially to all Peoples), whose prophets can thereby stand "at the beginning" (*en archē*). See Strauss, "On the Interpretation of Genesis," 370. What makes the biblical God "true" is not his rulership over the sky and the earth, but his rulership over a whole *civil* order that, somehow, includes both heaven and earth.

[11] Thomas Aquinas's argument for creation *ex nihilo* is based on the understanding of "creation" as free "emanation" of divine being (*Summa theologiae*, part 1, Q. 45, Art. 1 and Q. 75, Art. 6, reply to Objection 2); for the universe to have been created by God *ex nihilo*, is for universal order to depend unambiguously upon intellect. Aquinas's argument points to the irreducibility of art to nature, rather

stands the doctrine of the Incarnation, which is absolutely critical to a correct understanding of Christian appeals to creation "from nothing," which is usually read as implying that the creator creates the very material conditions for his specific creations. The doctrine of the Incarnation entails the elevation of the generative act into the very heart of God's creative act. By generating the Christ *eternally*, God the Father is not creating generation. On the contrary, generation or nature's "holy ghost" (sacred *pneuma*, or secret breath) is raised to the status of an *uncreated*, unbound act, third constituent of the Trinity. The Christian God must create out of an uncreated "nature," predating, as it were, any creation, including the "totality of (discrete) being." It is the mysterious generative act binding the Father and the Son eternally that grounds the material context or "environment" of any creation. Or rather, in the Third Person of the Trinity, our material context is revealed as a hidden generative act (one that we can encounter consequently only through faith) at work at the heart of all creative acts. In sum, with Christianity, as opposed to Islam, God in his absolute singularity cannot fully account for nature/generation (he can create heaven and earth, or all beings, but he cannot create generation itself, which is to say the generative context of all beings).[12]

Representing a modernist reading of miracles, Menon writes as if biblical "objectivity" is to be equated with "historical" objectivity (34–35). Indeed, Menon writes as if biblical miracles entailed at once both nature and history: nature as a static order reminiscent of a Deist reading, and history as the

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than to the reducibility of nature to art, while suggesting that prior to God's intervention, the totality of being is not itself (*creatio, quae est emanatio totius esse, est ex non ente quod est nihil*). Such a proposition makes sense on an understanding of God as most perfect being (*ens perfectissimus*). If God is the perfection or first instantiation of being, clearly prior to or independently of his "emanation" all other beings qua beings would not be what they are. Indeed, nothing could *be* "prior to" being itself, "just as the generation of man is from not-being which is not-man" (*sicut…generatio hominis est ex non ente quod est non homo*). Thus Aquinas's "nothing" (*nihil*) indicates, not absolute nothingness, but "absence of something" prior to the something's establishment (prior to its being established, "creation" is "nothing," simply in the sense that it is not "creation"). This applies to the whole universe, the order of which is defined by God. Prior to Being's intervention, the universe is not *itself*. Aquinas's quasi-Parmenidean formulations invite the thought that creation's coming into being (as "emanation of the totality of being") presupposes (and eclipses) something other than itself, which is to say "something" other than "the totality of being" (*totius esse*). It remains to be seen what the actual content is of God understood as *divine* Being presupposed by "the totality of being." For the *nihil* out of which "the totality of being" is emanated must be God himself.

Aquinas writes in the wake of the 1215 Fourth Lateran Council (Consitutiones 1: *De fide catholica*) affirming that God established from nothing both spiritual/angelical and corporeal/worldly creaturehood (*utramque de nihilo condidit creaturam, spiritualem et corporalem, angelica videlicet et mundanam*); on the Augustinian distinction between *condere* and *facere/creare*, see Anthony Moon, *The "De Natura Boni" of Saint Augustine*, Patristic Studies 88 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1955), 181.

[12] See Strauss, "On the Interpretation of Genesis," 361–62 and 364.

realm of real facts. We are here at the antipodes of Strauss's reading of the Bible. Strauss sought (of course?) to save the Bible, no less than reality itself, from any "historical" reading, showing that genuine reality is disclosed at the depths of any literal or historical *surface*. The modern "subjectivist" reduction Strauss sought to save biblical revelation from does not contradict, but complements, a "historical" reading of the Bible. Accordingly, in critiquing subjectivists, Strauss does not seek refuge in historical/superficial objectivity, but in the *interpretation* of the historical understood as signaling a deeper, permanent message. What Strauss's "sociology of religion" entails is a turn to discover the original motives of biblical narrations. What these communicate to us is not merely surface "records," but an authorial intent, a lesson concerning irreducible theological-political problems. The literary/historical surface is thus not to be understood, as Menon presents it, in modern terms, as if history constituted the horizon of facts exploding mere subjectivity; history is rather understood as a *poetic* stage for the communication of messages deserving to be called "metaphysical."[13] The question of miracles is thus not settled, or even safeguarded, with respect to historical criteria, but with respect to openness to divine irreducibility.

While Menon and Cubeddu are right in distancing Strauss from religious "orthodoxy," they fail to note that for Strauss premodern or genuine orthodoxy does not call us to have faith in the *letter* of any account of miracles, as if miracles were *in time*, as opposed to being *between* time and eternity, as a communicating door opened between the two. Likewise, *pace* Menon (34–35), Strauss's *Bereshit* ("Genesis") offers not a temporal but a logical account of things.[14] Nor does Strauss's Hebrew Bible reject Platonism (as Menon 37 would have it), but *natural* philosophy ("Philosophy and Revelation," in Menon 183). Nor is Strauss's "original" Bible ultimately a call to "obedience" entailing "submission" of reason to authority (35–38), insofar as reason is invited to examine the depths of authority (183–84): far from entailing a drive to reduce natural reason to an instrument of law enforcement (38), biblical obedience (*ob-audire*, entailing etymologically a "listening" to what

[13] We need not have read Boccaccio to realize that the Bible is a poetic book, a book filled with poetic, metaphoric expressions. In distinguishing the Bible from "myth" or ordinary poetry, Strauss leaves the door open to reading the Bible as divine/authoritative poetry.

[14] Strauss, "On the Interpretation to Genesis," 367–69. Strauss reads "Genesis" as the articulation of the permanent world presupposed by any explanation, be it mythical or scientific. The Bible begins with a pious "hearing" of a permanence presupposed by all that we ordinarily see, a *phenomenal* permanence that man knows *as man*, but that we may, so to speak, forget, beneath various types of representations. Biblical "hearing" may then be understood as a fundamental mode of seeing, a seeing of order usually concealed by fleeting visions.

stands "over and against") serves as "phenomenological" preface to a thought aimed at the truth about all authority, rather than as sign of renunciation of a reason capable of questioning authority (as of struggling with angels). Again, even Socrates serves his God (the A-Pollon who mandates him to philosophize); Platonism's sole (self-)justification or apology is that the Socratic's investigative life is one of service to the divine (of the God of the *polis*, where men live as puppets of Gods), as opposed to being in the service of the exposure of a nature ("cosmology") overturning any and all appeal to divinity. Cosmology is unessential, not merely for the Bible, but for Socratism, as well.

The two questions explored above, being those of the conflict between reason and revelation, and of the nature of miracles, serve Menon and Cubeddu as stepping stones to a general assessment of Strauss's own general thought-orientation. Thus Menon (at 41–42) highlights three usual readings of Strauss (besides an "unusual" one on account of which Strauss would have chosen Jerusalem over Athens, notably by showing the limits of human reason while exposing us to the mysterious living depths of faith). Strauss would be a zetetic, a voluntarist, or a rationalist. In the first case, he would cherish reason's openness to truth, or truth as reason's own openness; in the second ("Nietzschean"), he would read truth as a function of our will; in the third, he would swear by reason's *dominium* over nature. Yet Menon considers the three stands in question especially in relation to the possibility of refuting religious revelation: only for the rationalist Strauss would a refutation be possible.

It is not clear why, however, Strauss could not be at once a zetetic and a rationalist, which is to say, ultimately a Socratic, or a thinker for whom reason's primary task consists, not in solving problems once and for all (thereby eradicating the distinction between "practice" and "theory"), but in *living* at the heart of problems understood, ultimately, in metaphysical terms, or as permanent "ideas." Accordingly, Menon makes no reference to the work of Hilail Gildin, who pointed to a Strauss who was zetetic, not in the respect that he relegated reason to what we merely believe to know (refuting presumed knowledge), but in the respect that his reason is not limited to or by what we know (including what we know about our presumed knowledge).

Menon assumes that in order to ground philosophy rationally, we would need to refute the possibility of revelation.[15] Yet, it is not clear that philosophy and revelation are *fundamentally* at odds with each other, or that they do

[15] The assumption in question is expressed most vividly in Menon 42, where "to ground [*per fondare*] philosophy rationally it would be necessary…to refute the possibility of revelation"; whence Menon's presentation of Strauss as a "rationalist" (43), as opposed to either a zetetic or a voluntarist.

not share a common ground.[16] The Straussian admirer of medieval theology, just as the Socratic defender of common sense, exposes himself to a reason grounded in an ignorance (Platonically speaking, a forgetfulness) preceding any acceptance of a revelation; a prereflective, imaginative common ignorance or "sense" in the light of which revelation emerges as invitation to live in the depths of reason, or at the heart of thought, thereby contravening the Kantian abolition of any exploration of the natural or necessary content of freedom.

Menon, however, points to Strauss's "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy" as confirming that Strauss was a rationalist believing that revelation had been refuted, if only "between the lines." Yet, in the text in question (117), Strauss concludes that "philosophy has never refuted revelation."

Beyond a "vulgar" sense of philosophy, philosophy does not even attempt to refute revelation, insofar as revelation is interpreted unto its very depths, if only in the mirror of our (blessed) ignorance. The only philosophy free from perplexities (not one shunning or fearing them), or not presupposing faith (ibid.), is a philosophy that grounds itself in the mysterious depths of authority, including the authority of common sense. What we lack is a "demonstration" of the primacy of either reason or revelation; what we do not lack is access to a fundamental, mysterious harmony between reason and revelation, or an understanding of revelation as the horizon crossed by a reason that, rather than trying to "prove" (assert) itself over and against any God, desires dispassionately God as its own necessarily hidden identity.

Deeper than the formal divide between reason and revelation lies, as Strauss's work shows systematically, the one between the few and the many, including the divide between a vulgar and a serious understanding of the divide between the few and the many (particularly given that the few, properly understood, live at the heart of what is vulgar or common). Menon, however, reads Strauss as retracing the dichotomy Jerusalem/Athens to a fundamental opposition between moral and epistemic ends (43–44). Referring to p. 29 of Strauss's *The City and Man*, Menon argues that Strauss ultimately saw philosophy as exposing, beyond ordinary antitheological "naturalism" (44), the "immanence" of revelation, or the ultimate autonomy of *praxis* with respect to intellectual or noetic transcendence (45). In other words, rather than merely dismissing revelation (along the lines of modern "Enlightenment" liberalism at large, per 30–31), Straussian rationalism would be exposing revelation as

[16] This is in keeping with Strauss's insistence that "there seems to be no ground common to both" ("On the Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy," *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 3 [1979]: 17).

a merely political problem shut off from any genuine transcendence (at once notwithstanding and *via* an alleged Straussian formal concealment of the lie of religious transcendence). Yet, the page of *The City and Man* Menon refers to diverges radically from Menon's Machiavellian reading.[17] On pp. 28–29 of the volume in question, Strauss stresses the radical incompatibility between ancient (Platonic-Aristotelian) and modern (Machiavellian-Rousseauian) political philosophy: whereas the former opened morality to *onto-noetic* transcendence (the transcendence of intelligible being), the latter shut virtue to goodness. Modern virtue is, in other words, fundamentally *apolitical*, or grounded in selfishness (see Hobbes, cited in Menon 92), as opposed to ancient virtue understood as the proper vehicle for the opening of morality to its transcendent ground (or rather, for sustaining morality in its original openness to transcendence).[18] Far from returning to Hobbes's relegation of human knowledge to what we make (as Menon 45 concludes, after 21), Strauss is returning to a Socratic opening of human *pretended* knowledge (in fact, customs, opinions, or "the unwritten *nomos*" of ancient statesmen) to what is above any human making, namely, "the good" itself, "and not [merely] the human good" (*City and Man*, 29; compare "Reason and Revelation" in Menon 183, where modernity can claim knowledge refuting revelation only by blinding itself to the hidden dimension of revelation: for the Bible, human "knowledge" is limited in the respect that it does not overcome the hiatus between appearance and being, and thereby, too, between revelation and its hidden ground).[19] There is then no reason for Strauss's Platonism to flee political life, as if it were a "cave"; accordingly, Strauss fights against a false or illusory approach to political life as "cave," opening it to what transcends it,

[17] At the beginning of p. 28, Strauss stresses the point of divergence between Plato and Machiavelli/Rousseau. The ancient stands for the bond between the Good and virtue, where the Good is not merely human; it is primarily "the idea of the Good" (29): moral virtue is bound to intellectual virtue, as moral order is to truth. Strauss's "wall" is the "unwritten nomos" of p. 28, that is, opinion/custom that philosophy attempts to replace with knowledge proper. (While morality may point to philosophy, the latter points beyond itself, suggesting that somehow morality points beyond philosophy, as well.)

[18] The antiquity in question stands for the bond between virtue and the idea of the Good. The political rejection of the transcendent ground of morality is modern. What does Platonic "virtue" do? What does Socrates achieve? It opens the nonphilosophical world to its noetic ground, which is one with philosophy.

[19] On Strauss's rejection of the Hobbesian relegation of knowledge to that which is made, see my "Strauss's Second Cave: Explanation of a Critique" at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kljOtdBDEBg. Strauss's "On the Interpretation of Genesis" highlights the "hidden" character of biblical vision, a "hearing" of a permanent world in which nothing precedes man: far from being part of the whole, man is ultimately presupposed by the whole; yet, man would not know this, or, Platonically speaking, he would not recall this, if he were not reminded by (or if he did not remind himself through) an inhibiting divine prohibition (371). In this respect, the Bible corrects philosophical inclinations reflecting our common desire to reach the heavens.

namely, "the idea of the good." This is precisely what Strauss is showing on pp. 28–29 of his *City and Man*, against moderns who teach that philosophy takes place outside, if only behind the stage of political life.

A far cry from the "autonomous reason" of modernity (whether in its hardcore Hobbesian dimension, or in its historicist derivative fashion), the rationalism of Strauss's ancient classics (Menon 21) stands as the attempt to replace the prejudicial "wall" (let us call this "false religion") separating the artful from the natural, with knowledge proper, and yet, not so as to overcome revelation (by rendering divine revelation or "miracles" radically incomprehensible, as Strauss's Hobbes does "successfully" in Menon 23–25), but so as to better understand its irreducibility to the human (not to speak of the subhuman), or more precisely, so as *to open the human to the divine*, the political to the purely theological (let us call this "true religion").[20] This opening, rather than any closure, is what constitutes, for Strauss, the essence of philosophy, or genuinely enlightened philosophy.[21]

When presenting Strauss as returning to Hobbes's critique of revelation, or more generally of the miraculous, as ultimately successful, Menon betrays a lack of understanding of Strauss's Socratism, or Socratic "exotericism," which entails the primacy of *theorein* over *praxis*, of noetic insight over its practical relevance. The coherence of word and deed is "ironic" in Socrates, who "condescends" to the plane of perplexity of his interlocutor. This condescending entails a *logos* in which speech and action are one, an *active* discourse, what the ironic Dante would call *visibile parlare* ("visible speech"). What is at stake, here, is not merely the descent of speech onto the plane of *mere* deed (as if deed were more important than speech, or as if speech were fulfilled or realized in deed, whereby resoluteness would be of paramount importance), but the elevation of deed unto the "heavenly" heights of speech: speech drawing the visible within itself, or rather, through itself (through its "incarnation" or, to echo Dante's *Comedy*, its poetic transposition), back

[20] The human closed to the divine is corrupt, or barbaric. Man as such (in his essence) is open to the divine, though not relatively to his corruption. There is an obvious "closing" to the divine (signaled already by the biblical account of Eden), which philosophy remedies to the extent that it takes seriously the question of the nature of the divine—the question *quid sit deus*, which for Strauss is philosophy's foremost concern.

[21] In "Reason and Revelation" (Menon 182–83), Strauss speaks of the serpent of Eden in a manner that recalls the way he speaks of Spinoza (or more generally, the rationalism of the early modern critique of religion): the snake is not completely wrong, yet he is wrong "decisively" in the respect that he ignores the hidden *reason* of God's speech, a reason tied to the miraculous, or to a right transcending positive right and thereby *revealed* law, itself. Revelation, then, points beyond itself (its manifest being, or surface) to what *appears as* "will."

into the mind or thought. Thus it is that, *pace* Menon, the Christian miracle of the "Incarnation" is not absurd, which is to say that it does not overturn (nature's) order, but fulfills it. Why, we are now speaking of the miracle of the *logos* itself, the *truth* of (rational) discourse. Prior to appearing outside of speech, the visible is within speech, as speech is within the mind. *En archē*.

Menon (as well as Cubeddu) fails ultimately to concede that Strauss set out to defend a *philosophical* sense of the miraculous, *against* all imputations of "atheism" (257). Accordingly, while referring to imputations (most notably those of Dannhauser, Lambert, and Scholem), Menon and Cubeddu make no reference to Hilail Gildin's defense of Strauss against the charge of atheism.[22] How then are we to understand what Cubeddu calls "Strauss's appreciation for the Maimonidean solution" to the conflict between philosophy and revelation (257)?

In the concluding pages of his "On the Interpretation of Genesis" (Menon 256), Strauss had characterized the crucial difference between Athens and Jerusalem, between Greek philosophy and Hebraism (if we may echo Matthew Arnold), by juxtaposing the divine with the human. On the face of things, Strauss sees no third alternative to the two conflicting authorities. Menon and Cubeddu say nothing, however, of a Strauss for whom the human author is de facto imitating a divine one (ibid.). To leave matters, as our editors do, at a theological-political conflict secretively conceived on atheistic grounds, is to fail to understand Strauss's Platonism, his candid, even naive inviting collaboration between theology and philosophy (theology's "handmaid," as we read in the opening page of *The City and Man*), whereby philosophy would enter the universe of the meaning of a revelation that would otherwise fall into the hands of Tertullian-like irrationalists.[23]

Menon might object that, after all, Strauss stands for Athens rather than Jerusalem, that he wrote and lived as a philosopher rather than as a theologian. We answer that Strauss's Maimonides does not write as a philosopher and that Strauss denies being a philosopher. In both cases, what Strauss distances himself (and his medieval precursor) from is pre-Socratic or "natural" philosophy

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[22] See Gildin's "Déjà Jew All Over Again: Dannhauser on Leo Strauss and Atheism," *Interpretation* 25, no. 1 (1997): 125–33. In the volume under review, Gildin is mentioned only once in a cursory bibliographical reference to his edition of Strauss's works.

[23] Contrary to what modern expectations might lead us to conclude, the opening argument of Strauss's *City and Man* does not point away from the necessity it refers to. Whence Strauss's appeal to philosophy's regaining the status of queen of social sciences: only as queen can philosophy make sense as "handmaid," as irreducible, rational interpreter, of revelation.

(or even Epicureanism, as the Strauss cited in Cubeddu 267 would confirm), a philosophy falling short of one seated at the heart of *poetic theology*, or a writing explicitly *imitating*, not replacing, that of God. As "philosopher," Strauss sets out not to displace/replace "the theologian," but to mediate between the two roles, to live out their conflict (Menon 219 and 260). This "middle" life is one of deepening awareness of the meaning of revelation, as opposed to a "materialist" one of departure from revelation for the sake of "direct" knowledge of the nature of things. Strauss is, then, far from rejecting transcendence, whether along the lines of ancient or of modern, "historicist" Gnostics. In reading revelation, Strauss does not attempt to reduce its language to that of philosophy (for example, à la Hegel), but to speak in the shadow of revelation, and yet, not as a parasite, but as a guest invited by the very condition of man as man, a condition of natural ignorance, or of embodiment. The language of philosophy emerges as the language of natural interpretation of revelation, which is to say, the *civil* language of *natural reason*, of a reason seeking transcendent, theological truth at the heart of the political—a *logos* seeking the divine at the abysmal heart of the human.

The language in question, the language occupying the hiatus between philosophy/humanity and revelation/divinity, as between freedom and necessity,[24] is not silenced by medieval Christianity, as Cubeddu's Strauss would believe (261), but by dogmas pretending to be at once all-encompassing and of immediate applicability. Thus, in referring to Thomas Aquinas, Strauss (see for instance *Natural Right and History*) does not present any established "synthesis" of reason and revelation, but a *leaning towards* a synthesis.[25] To be sure, Saint Thomas intimates a synthesis, which, however, must be strictly otherworldly, and thus politically unavailable or inapplicable. The *tension* between reason and revelation survives in (medieval) Christianity, where the revelation or incarnation of the "synthesis" between the two poles warns not to hold fast to it, as of yet, stating, "*noli me tangere!*"

For an attempted synthesis in the *hic et nunc* of ordinary experience, we must turn beyond Christianity to Islam and modern secularism, thus either to a reduction of reason to revelation, or to a reduction of revelation to reason—of man to God, or of God to man. In either case, we stand before a rejection of the religion of the Incarnation and of its posthistorical "Second Coming."

Cubeddu's claims notwithstanding, Strauss does not speak of modernity as *more* than a secularization of Christianity; nor does Strauss indict

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[24] On the nexus Judaism-Necessity, see Strauss, "Progress or Return?"

[25] Our objection to Menon and Cubeddu applies eo ipso also to Clark A. Merrill, "Leo Strauss's Indictment of Christian Philosophy," *Review of Politics* 62, no. 1 (Winter 2000): 77–105.

Christianity for *never* having understood Judaism at least ever since Saint Paul (Cubeddu 261–62 attributes to Strauss views Strauss merely *reports*). What Strauss argues for in the cited "Perspectives on the Good Society" is a positive conflict between Christianity and Judaism, an "antagonism" open to a transcendent, mystical "truth." Just as with the conflict between Reason and Revelation, with the one between Christianity and Judaism the key problem is that of interpretation, and thus of the hiatus between "traditional views" and a thought transcending them.[26]

While fairly highlighting Strauss's critique of the reduction of Socratism to an authoritative solution to the conflict between religion and philosophy, Cubeddu (264) leaves us with a Strauss denying the very possibility of a solution. Yet such a denial would seem to be predicated on a *materialist* reading of the foundations of both religion and philosophy, and thus of the theological-political problem seated at the heart of Strauss's concerns. What Cubeddu, no less than Menon, turns his back to is the possibility of a *mystical* dimension to Strauss's appeal to the antagonism between the divine and the human; as if, in critiquing modernity's "political hedonism," or modernity's attempt to establish a universal society on the basis of "natural science" (read, Epicureanism), Strauss had nevertheless accepted the truth about that *materialistic* basis.

Cubeddu's argument ends with a double warning, *against* any "transformation of philosophy into a handmaid of theology" (269) and *for* philosophy to be guided by the imperative to refute revelation once and for all (270). Here Cubeddu exposes himself to two crucial objections. On one hand, Strauss *appeals* to philosophy as "indispensable handmaid of theology" (*City and Man*, 1); on the other hand, the passage of "Reason and Revelation" that Cubeddu cites *conclusively* to the effect that philosophy must refute revelation, is followed *in Strauss* (Menon 165) by the emphatic title, "Philosophy cannot refute Revelation." One "alternative" Menon and Cubeddu leave out (beyond any philosophical neutralizing or taming of revelation) is that of philosophy as a purely rational (nonreductive) investigation of the *meaning* of revelation.[27]

[26] Leo Strauss, "Perspectives on the Good Society," in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 266, 267.

[27] While the "taming" or "disposing" of revelation by a philosophy making use of it to justify itself does not yet amount to a "refutation," it does neutralize the deep and enlightening conflict between reason and authority. If *political* philosophy distinguished itself from apolitical philosophy simply by its capacity to justify itself, or to appear pious, in the face of nonphilosophers, then the gap between Plato and Hobbes would be easily bridged. That gap would be insurmountable, however, where the ancient would approach political theology (as the question or problem of authority) as philosophy's necessary medium, rather than as a preface to *natural* philosophy. Compare Timothy Burns, "Ancient and Modern Political Rationalism in the Thought of Leo Strauss," in *Gladly to Learn and Gladly to Teach: Essays on Religion and Political Philosophy in Honor of Ernest L. Fortin*, ed. Michael P. Foley and Douglas Kries (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002), 145–62.