Scholarly and journalistic interest in Leo Strauss has increased in recent years. But as the attention Strauss has garnered reminds us, being a person of interest is at best a mixed blessing. Much of this attention has flowed from the ill-informed and incredible belief that Strauss is somehow responsible for master-minding the Bush administration’s approach to foreign policy and its use of military force in the Middle East. If it were not for the dishonor these kinds of frenzied machinations heap upon Strauss’s life and his own thought, such portrayals would be laughable.

Fortunately, the past several years have also witnessed the publication of a number of serious books that seek to engage Strauss critically as a thinker in his own right. Several of these works, most notably Heinrich Meier’s *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem* and Daniel Tanguay’s detailed and impressive *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, provide the important service of placing front and center what Strauss himself thought to be at the center of his own thought: the question of God and politics. Strauss repeatedly emphasized that “the question *quid sit deus*” is “coeval with philosophy.” Paradoxically, Strauss at the same time went out of his way to emphasize that the classical political philosophers did “not frequently pronounce” this “all-important question.” Unlike their modern counterparts, the classical political philosophers tended to approach the question cautiously, raising it only indirectly through dialectical inquires into the “roots” of the city’s alleged authoritative divine law. Strauss, in other words, appreciated that the question *quid sit deus* is as much a moral and political question as it is theological.
or philosophical one. As he succinctly put it, “The fundamental question, therefore, is whether men can acquire knowledge of the good without which they cannot guide their lives individually or collectively by the unaided effort of their natural powers, or whether they are dependent for that knowledge on Divine Revelation. No alternative is more fundamental than this: human guidance or divine guidance.” It is not surprising then that Strauss identified the theologico-political problem as the overarching theme of his studies.

Strauss did not formulate his understanding of the nature and scope of the theologico-political problem all at once. Rather, it took form gradually and was deepened by his sustained investigations into the ways in which that problem was articulated and debated by modern, medieval, and classical political philosophers. *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* (1930) contains Strauss’s first sustained treatment of the theologico-political problem. That work examined the role that Spinoza’s bold treatment of the essential relation of philosophy, religion, and politics played in modernity’s original argument in favor of liberal democracy. Looking back at his argument in that work some thirty-two years later, Strauss concluded that he “understood Spinoza too literally because I did not read him literally enough.” In part because Strauss had yet to discover esoteric writing and thus to think through the various implications of that “peculiar technique of writing,” he had not broken free from the characteristically late modern “premise, sanctioned by powerful prejudice, that a return to premodern philosophy” or for that matter to traditional biblical faith is impossible.

The premise that ostensibly precluded any return to premodern thought had its roots in and was “expressed . . . in its simplest and strongest form, in Descartes’ resolve to doubt everything in order to free himself once and for all from all prejudice.” Allegedly “erected on foundations” that were “absolutely certain,” modern rationalism asserted that it “no longer left any place for doubt.” It claimed to be able to liberate reason and mankind from the realm of opinion and darkness that resulted from man’s prescientific
adherence to the moral and doctrinal tenets of biblical faith. Spinoza himself proclaimed in the preface to the *Theologico-Political Treatise* that his overarching aim in that work was to overcome the “obstacle to others who would philosophize more freely if this one thing did not stand in their way: they deem that reason has to serve as handmaiden to theology.” Because it did not dialectically question but rather radically doubted the claims of common opinion, modern rationalism, in contrast to premodern or Socratic philosophy, dared to conceive of “philosophy . . . as [a] completed system.” According to its proponents, the possession of such a system and the inevitability of consequent scientific progress would show that modern rationalism, not the God of the Bible, was the true benefactor of man.

From the beginning, Strauss understood modern rationalism to be “caused, or at least facilitated, by anti-theological ire.” In his view, modern philosophy was essentially Epicurean in its intention. However whereas ancient Epicureanism sought to liberate individual men of “good natures” from the tyranny of the gods and religion, modern Epicureanism expressly sought to free men and political societies from revealed religion and its fearful and tyrannical invocation of what Hobbes rather bluntly called “powers invisible.” Beginning with Machiavelli, early modern philosophers labored to bring into existence a new form of rationalism and republicanism. To this end, they advanced rationalistic critiques of biblical faith and formulated arguments that were designed to show that modern reason could provide the true grounds of civil society. As Strauss pointed out, “political atheism is a distinctively modern phenomenon.”

But Strauss gradually came to see that the purported solution that modern rationalism offered in place of “theology” was equally opposed to the claims of Socratic philosophy. To begin with, like biblical faith, Socratic philosophy emphasized the indispensability and non-constructed nature of morality in general and justice in particular. Moreover, each affirmed that morality must be tethered to a transcendent order that supplements and grounds morality. Lastly and most importantly for
Strauss, both the Bible and Socratic philosophy, in their own ways, claim that man is incapable of comprehending the whole. Modern rationalism’s attack on biblical faith was therefore equally an attack on the foundations of Socratic philosophy. To the extent that it was successful in discrediting the grounds of biblical faith, it was also successful in discrediting the foundations—and therewith the very possibility—of Socratic philosophy.

Strauss consequently began to see that the only way in which an authentic “return” to orthodoxy, and by extension to Socratic philosophy, could be justified was to show that, contrary to its claims, modern philosophy had not proven that “the world and human life are perfectly intelligible without the assumption of a mysterious God.” At the very least, this argument required one to show that modern rationalism and science were not in possession of a complete and coherent philosophic system. Put somewhat differently, Strauss recognized that a return to the shared ground of either orthodoxy or Socratic philosophy was truly impossible only if modern philosophy had in fact succeeded in its effort to formulate “a philosophic system [in which] man has to show himself theoretically and practically as the master of the world and the master of life; the merely given world must be replaced by the world created by man theoretically and practically.” Absent a systematic— i.e., a complete rationalistic account of the universe—modern rationalism’s alleged victory over orthodoxy was unwarranted on its own terms.

Strauss understood Spinoza to be the modern philosopher who made the grandest attempt to articulate a philosophical system that would definitively disprove the notion of revelation and therewith the existence of the biblical God. Yet his attempt to formulate “a clear and distinct account of everything,” Strauss concluded, ultimately rested on premises that remained “fundamentally hypothetical.” The “cognitive status” of the philosophic system he constructed remained in the decisive respect no different from the theoretical grounds of the orthodox position it originally set out to overcome. Strauss understood each to be grounded in “an act of the will.” Despite its efforts first to argue
and later to “mock” orthodoxy out of existence, modern rationalism and modern science could not “legitimately deny the possibility of revelation.” 23 Strauss concluded from this that the modern “antagonism” between Spinoza and Judaism, “between unbelief and belief, is ultimately not theoretical but moral.” 24

At the same time, Strauss also recognized that modern rationalism “still had a highly consequential and positive result.” 25 “The quarrel between Enlightenment and Orthodoxy made clearer and better known that the presuppositions of Orthodoxy (the reality of Creation, Miracles, and Revelation) are not known (philosophically or historically) but are only believed and thus lack the peculiarly obligatory character of the known.” 26

Having shed light on the basic presuppositions of the life of biblical faith, modern rationalism’s polemical attack and attempted refutation of orthodoxy eventually paved the way—through the progressive radicalization of the modern desire for certainty in philosophers like Kant and Hegel—for the emergence of what Strauss calls “the atheism from intellectual probity.” 27 This form of atheism represented the ultimate consequence of modern rationalism’s critique of revealed religion and biblical faith. Unlike the early modern critique, it did not attempt polemically to disprove the possibility of divine revelation. 28 Rather, on the grounds of “intellectual honesty,” it limited itself to assuming that the proof of such things as miracles and God’s revelation finally could not be scientifically established according to criteria that would be acceptable to the “positive mind.”

Strauss, however, also rejected the argument from intellectual probity. It represented neither the vindication of modern rationalism nor that of Jewish orthodoxy, since it reduced the cognitive grounds of every revealed religion indeed every particular claim to truth finally to a matter of willful belief. That reduction not only relativizes the claims made by any form of orthodoxy but in grounding all claims to truth in the act of “probity” or intellectual honesty it also finally proves “fatal to any philosophy.” 29 Strauss argued that when the founding premises of modern rationalism were followed to their logical conclusions—
as they ultimately were in Nietzsche’s intransigent insistence on the requirements of “probity” and his teaching on the “will to power”—they resulted in the self-destruction of reason. Strauss’s studies in the early modern attempts to resolve the theologico-political problem led him to conclude that “irrationalism” is only a variety of modern rationalism.” 30 In its dogged pursuit of absolute certainty and ruthless efforts to overcome the very grounds of biblical faith, modern rationalism sowed the theoretical seeds for the self-destruction of reason and the eventual emergence of radical historicism or nihilism. Put somewhat differently, Strauss concluded that modern rationalism—and not rationalism or Socratic philosophy per se—provided the moral and intellectual foundations of the present-day “crisis of the West.”

Strauss’s study of the early modern political philosophers led him to discover that the modern Enlightenment had been preceded by a medieval Enlightenment, what he in Philosophy and Law provisionally called the “Enlightenment of Maimonides.” 31 Unlike its modern counterpart, that Enlightenment was not rooted in a fatally exaggerated conception of the limitless powers of reason. Nor did it believe in the inevitability of moral, political, and scientific progress. And yet it was simultaneously more daring in its thought and more sober in its expectations than the modern Enlightenment. Medieval rationalism neither dogmatically truncated the scope of philosophic inquiry nor imprudently lost sight of the fact that philosophy necessarily poses a “grave danger” to the political order. 32 Resting on “classical (Aristotelian and Platonic) foundations,” 33 it did not seek to re-create the whole of social and political life along the lines of philosophic knowledge. Over and against the modern Enlightenment’s insistence on the public dissemination of knowledge, it emphasized the “duty to keep rationally recognized truths secret from the unchosen many.”34

Contrary to many of his contemporaries who interpreted medieval thought to be chiefly concerned with reconciling biblical revelation with the now allegedly discredited natural science and cosmology of Aristotle, Strauss recognized that that conventional
approach wittingly or unwittingly preceded from the prior assumption that philosophy was a legitimate activity for the man of biblical faith. Taking the thought of medieval Islamic and Jewish thinkers on its own terms, he questioned the validity of that assumption. Strauss thus viewed the subject of divine Law—a revealed law that spoke directly to all aspects of man’s religious, moral, and political life—to provide the necessary point of departure for medieval rationalism.

Through its emphasis on the centrality of Law, medieval rationalism represented “the first, and certainly the first adequate, discussion . . . between the way of life based on faith and obedience and a way of life based on free insight, on human wisdom, alone.”35 Most immediately, that discussion required philosophy to justify itself before the tribunal of an all-encompassing, perfect Law. Whereas modern rationalism took the legitimacy, indeed the practical necessity, of philosophy for granted, medieval Islamic and Jewish thinkers recognized that faced with an authoritative divine Law philosophy necessarily had to justify its own legitimacy.36 Medieval Jewish thinkers such as Maimonides and Halevi—to say nothing of Islamic thinkers like Al-farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes—“took it for granted being a Jew and being a philosopher are mutually exclusive.”37 For this reason, Strauss understood the “issue of traditional Judaism versus philosophy [to be] identical with the issue of Jerusalem and Athens.”38

Medieval Islam and Judaism typically viewed philosophy differently than Christianity traditionally did. Religion for the Christian, unlike the Jew or Muslim, is primarily “a faith formulated in dogmas.”39 Given the nature of Christian revelation, the religion eventually came to see philosophy as a legitimate science that could be used to clarify and defend the revealed teachings of the faith. The Jew and the Muslim, on the other hand, principally encountered revelation and hence religion as a matter of Law, that is, as a divinely revealed “code” that regulated all aspects of human life, individually and collectively. The divine Law was distinguished from human laws inasmuch as it aimed not merely
at the well-being of the body but “above all at the well-being of the soul.” There was or appeared to be no need for philosophy in this scheme and many saw it as unjustified in that light.

The precarious state of philosophy in Islam and Judaism, however, was not altogether detrimental to philosophy, according to Strauss. Christianity traditionally cast philosophy in the role of theology’s handmaiden. Such an official arrangement required philosophy to be under the watchful eye of ecclesial supervision. Conversely, the suspicion with which philosophy was viewed in medieval Islam and Judaism guaranteed it a greater degree of “inner freedom.” Philosophy’s status “in the Islamic-Jewish world” therefore resembled “its status in classical Greece.”

For in Strauss’s view, the “guiding idea upon which the Greeks and the Jews agree is precisely the idea of the divine law as a single and total law which is at the same time religious law, civil law, and moral law.” Strauss in fact suggests that it finally was the appearance of the “New Testament” that “brought about the break with ancient thought” on this matter.

The central role of Law in Judaism and Islam brought into sharper focus for Strauss the importance of medieval rationalism’s subtle treatment of prophecy. The philosophical understanding of Law meant that the Jew or the Muslim necessarily had to elucidate the nature of “prophecy out of the nature of man.” Practitioners of medieval rationalism such as Al-farabi, Avicenna, Averroes, and Maimonides typically interpreted the prophet as a man who was “perfect in philosophy” but who surpassed the man who was merely a philosopher in the perfection of his imaginative faculty. The true or perfect prophet is the “founder of the perfect political community.” Prophecy and Law were here viewed as emphatically political subjects, as themes that were treated by these “philosophers” as a part of political science. But Strauss came to see that medieval Islamic and Jewish thinkers characteristically cast their treatment of Law and prophecy in a decisively more Platonic than Aristotelian light. By so doing, these thinkers reflected an awareness of the precarious position that the philosopher necessarily occupies in a political commu-
nity. Their situation was analogous to Socrates’ in Athens. Illustrative of this fact, as Strauss repeatedly emphasized—most notably in the epigraph to his *The Argument and Action of Plato’s Laws*, was Avicenna’s observation that “the treatment of prophecy and the Divine law is contained in . . . the *Laws*.”

Indeed, Plato’s *Laws* develops a line of inquiry that has no exact parallel in Aristotle’s works. In that dialogue, Plato has the Athenian stranger dialectically investigate the origins of human and divine law as well as the origins of the revelation or prophecy by which these laws are communicated to men. Strauss accordingly understood the *Laws* to be Plato’s most pious and political work. He also emphasized the intimate connection between the *Laws* and the *Apology*: the former is the only Platonic work that begins with the word “god,” the latter is the only dialogue that ends with that word. Strauss saw thematic significance in this apparent unremarkable fact. Indeed, he took it to help one understand why “in the *Laws* the Athenian stranger devises a law against impiety which would have been more favorable to Socrates than the corresponding Athenian law.”

Strauss did not think that the Platonizing approach that medieval Jewish and Islamic thinkers took to the question of the relation of religion, philosophy, and morality simply represented a mere appeal to Platonic political philosophy to supply what was outwardly lacking in Aristotle’s political works. Rather, it signified their awareness of the inherent tension between the moral and theoretical claims of philosophy and those of the Law as well as their recognition of the dangers that threaten the philosopher within a community ruled by divine Law. Simply put, the Platonic character of medieval rationalism finally explained why a thinker like Al-farabi chose to present “the whole of philosophy within a political framework, or why his most comprehensive writings are ‘political books.’” By presenting their teaching on the nature and way to human happiness “politically,” men like Al-farabi or Maimonides neither unnecessarily disturbed the settled opinions of their respective religious and political communities nor unnecessarily drew unwanted attention to themselves.
Within medieval Islamic and Jewish thought, the prophet-founder-legislator was seen as a man skilled in philosophy and the royal art. Given his political role, the prophet had to speak in a way that was less exact than the speech employed by the man who was simply a philosopher. To this end, he invoked images and locutions when speaking about God that were intended to sway the souls of the nonphilosophic citizenry to uphold the moral, religious, and political demands of the Law. Such a legal form of persuasion was used in the first place to moderate and educate citizens' passions and thereby to secure the grounds of moral and political life. At the same time, the Law did more than secure the necessary conditions of the social order; it also sought to protect and to educate the potential philosophers living within the religious community. According to Al-Farabi and Maimonides, the Law spoke differently to different men. To the vast majority of men, the Law promulgated a morally and politically useful code of conduct that should serve as the basis of any decent human society. But to a select few, it articulated the requisite moral claims that the philosopher must adhere to within a religious society which, if left on its own, was naturally hostile to philosophy.

The practitioners of Islamic and Jewish rationalism thus rightly recognized that philosophy presupposes social life. Moreover, this realization led them to seek to have a humanizing effect on social and political life by shedding light on and expanding the political community's imperfect understanding of the demands of justice and morality. Yet, in different ways, they also subtly pointed out that “the philosopher has no attachment to society: his soul is elsewhere.” His ultimate attachment is to an activity that is “essentially private and trans-political: philosophy.” Accordingly, the rules that govern his conduct do not extend past “the minimum moral requirements of living together.”

Strauss jarringly concluded that in its rawest form medieval rationalism held that the philosophers live as it were on the fringes of the religious community, viewing morality and moral virtue not as ends in themselves, but simply as “means to an end, the ultimate end being contemplation.” For thinkers like Maimonides, “mo-
rality, as distinguished from the divine law, is not of capital importance.”61 The philosopher and the adherent to the Law agreed on the indispensability of morality within human social and political life, but they did so for fundamentally different reasons. Al-farabi, Maimonides and the philosopher in the *Kazari*, ultimately viewed morality as instrumental to the transpolitical ends of philosophy. Conversely, the adherent to the Law has “a passionate interest in genuine morality.”62 Viewed from this perspective, the “moral man as such” is seen to be “the potential believer.” 63

As Strauss understood it, medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophers had internalized Plato’s lesson about the need for philosophy to combine “the way of Socrates with the way of Thrasymachus.” Esoteric writing provided just such a way. It allowed an author to engage in the kind of intransigent questioning that is appropriate when addressing other philosophers. At the same time, it communicated in a manner that was “more and less exacting than the former,” and therefore appropriate for the philosopher’s “dealings with the vulgar.”64 By speaking in this way, the philosopher could show the requisite care for both the political community and the community or sect of actual or potential philosophers.

The practitioners of medieval rationalism therefore in the decisive respect did not—nor did they claim to—solve the theologico-political problem. On the contrary, Strauss believed that they showed how one could live a life of Socratic inquiry within a political community that took its bearings from an allegedly all-encompassing Divine Law. Strauss undoubtedly appreciated their salutary if cautious respect for the moral and religious teachings that form the indispensable foundations of any decent political society. At the same time, Strauss admired their unflinching Platonic affirmation of the ultimate superiority of the “life of contemplation” to the life of religious faith and moral virtue.65 For both these reasons, the medieval Enlightenment of Islamic and Jewish rationalism stood in sharp contrast to the modern Enlightenment. 66

But what is it about the life of Socratic inquiry that puts it so
at odds with the demands of both the life of faith and the life of moral and political virtue, according to Strauss? According to a tradition dating back to Cicero, Socrates is said to have been the first person to call philosophy down from heaven and force it to make investigations into the human things. By so doing, he became the founder of political philosophy.  

But as Strauss periodically observes, Xenophon and Plato, not to mention Aristophanes, hint that Socrates was not always a political philosopher. Prior to his “second sailing,” Socrates, like all the early philosophers, initially was preoccupied with the divine and heavenly things, a preoccupation that, according to Xenophon and Plato, Socrates never simply abandoned. Socrates’ turn to the human things marked a new way of studying the whole.

In contrast to what can paradoxically be called his earlier, pre-Socratic approach, his new method of philosophizing attempted to discover “what each of the beings is.” It appreciated that “to be” means to be “something” and that most fundamentally this means to be different from “something else.” Socrates accordingly began to inquire into the various heterogeneous parts of the whole. This “new approach to the understanding of all things,” according to Strauss, had the two-fold benefit of not reducing the human things to the divine things as well as hopefully uncovering the unity “that is revealed in the manifest articulation of the completed whole.” The change in orientation can be seen most clearly in what Socrates now took as his point of departure. Whereas pre-Socratic philosophers routinely began by investigating what is first in itself, Socrates’ turn to the human things marked philosophy’s move away from the world of theoretical abstractions and its return to the world of common sense.

In keeping with his return to the common-sense perspective, Socrates now began by examining the most reasonable, authoritative opinions about the most important things. The diversity of opinions gives rise to the recognition that one has to sift through the variety of opinions in the hope that this will unearth the truth. One becomes aware of the need to engage in “dialectics” or the “art . . . of friendly dispute.” For opinions about things are only
partially true; they contain only “fragments of the truth.” Yet precisely because the opinions are partly true, they must be taken seriously. As Strauss repeatedly emphasizes, Socrates recognized that the absence of the whole truth need not occasion universal doubt, as the proponents of modern skepticism wrongly believed, but rather points to the need for the dialectical ascent from opinion to truth. Socratic dialectics accordingly is characterized by the effort to transcend the combination of truth and falsehood that is emblematic of opinion.

Socratic dialectics brought to light the actual grounds of classical political philosophy’s teaching on natural right. It was the original form of theologico-political investigation. Prior to the discovery of natural right, “prephilosophic life is characterized by the primeval identification of the good with the ancestral.” The identification of the good with the ancestral is based on the view that “the right way was established by gods or sons of gods or pupils of gods: the right way must be a divine law.”

In his effort to inquire into the moral and political claims of the city’s divine law and to counter the powerful arguments leveled against the citizen’s view of morality by classical hedonism, Socrates became a phenomenologist of the human soul. Socrates’ dialectical examination of the soul aimed to reveal its inherent natural desires or essential “wants.” These “wants” do not represent a mere collection of indistinguishable urges or impulses. Rather they possess a “natural order” that reflects the hierarchical “natural constitution” of the soul. As regards human beings, their natural constitution finds its distinctiveness in the ability to speak and reason.

Socrates understood that to live well, to live in accordance with their nature, human beings have to live within society. For “man is by nature a social being.” Human rationality, the ability to speak and to communicate with others, makes human beings social in the most radical way imaginable. Every human act, every act involving reason and speech, is directed toward another and is therefore in some sense a social act. Following this line of thought, Strauss goes so far as to say that “humanity itself is
sociality” and observes that human sociality has natural goods attached to it such as “love, affection, friendship, and pity.” 74 Socratic philosophy accordingly discovers that it is sociality, a characteristic shared by human beings as human beings, which supplies the basis for natural right “in the narrow or strict sense of right.” 75 This means that the rules that govern human social relations at the very least must recognize that human beings are not free to act in any way they see fit. While human reason obviously allows for an elevated, increased form of freedom, it is also “accompanied by a sacred awe, by a kind of divination that not everything is permitted.” 76 In the final analysis, nature imposes discernable limits on man’s freedom that make life in society both possible and elevated.

Socratic political philosophy consequently recognizes the need for political rulers who are entrusted with a “serious concern for the perfection of the community.” 77 Such human beings possess a greater degree of virtue than ordinary citizens and are motivated by a deep appreciation of the demands of justice and nobility. They are the guardians and the caretakers of the body politic. Unlike modern social science, Socratic philosophy squarely opposes “crypto-materialistic” accounts of statesmanship which seek to explain political action on merely “hedonistic or utilitarian grounds.” The actions of the true statesman are guided by a genuine concern for the common good and cannot be reduced to the mere calculation of self-interest. Viewed on its own terms, political life seems to culminate in the observation that “the full actualization of humanity would then seem to consist, not in some sort of passive membership in civil society, but in the properly directed activity of the statesman, the legislator, or the founder.” 78

But as Strauss repeatedly emphasizes, Socrates ultimately did not limit his analysis of human excellence simply to the moral and political horizon. In so doing, Socrates subtly but radically changed the terms on which the life of virtue was based and thus raised formidable questions about the adequacy of the religious, moral, and political horizon tout court. Socrates ultimately judged the right ordering of the soul not on the basis of justice and
nobility but on the grounds of man’s perfection as a rational being. As a result of this shift of emphasis, Socratic political philosophy eventually replaces the prudent statesman with the wise philosopher as the highest human type.

As Socrates made clear in the *Republic*, the question of who should rule is to some extent identical to the question of the best regime. That question necessarily requires one to recognize that individual human beings have different natural capacities, most notably and decisively in their capacity to reason. Only a few rare souls are blessed with a first-rate intellect and the means to cultivate it. Justice—and nature itself—would seem to demand that those who are superior in wisdom rule those who are inferior in wisdom. As a specialist in the soul, the philosopher knows best what is needed for the perfection of each human being and therefore can best judge what is due to each human being. As Plato’s Socrates strikingly argues in the *Republic*, the regime according to nature, the best regime, would require the rule of the wise.

Yet as Strauss further points out, although the rule of the wise is theoretically the best of regimes, it is a practical impossibility. As Strauss forcefully puts it,

> The wise do not desire to rule; they must be compelled because their whole life is devoted to the pursuit of something which is absolutely higher in dignity than any human thing—the unchangeable truth. . . . If striving for knowledge of the eternal truth is the ultimate end of man, justice and moral virtue in general can be fully legitimated only by the fact that they are required for the sake of that ultimate end or that they are conditions of the philosophic life. From this point of view the man who is merely just or moral without being a philosopher appears as a mutilated human being. It thus becomes a question . . . whether what Aristotle calls moral virtue is not, in fact, vulgar virtue . . . whether by transforming opinion about morality into knowledge of morality, one does not transcend the dimension of morality in the politically relevant sense of the term. 79
The Socratic philosopher radically transcends the moral and political opinions of the city and thus “the dimension of divine codes altogether.” By appealing to and taking its bearings from an essentially transpolitical good, the Socratic way of life reveals the incompleteness of the moral-political horizon. More pointedly, it argues that that horizon is incoherent; it falsely believes that the just and noble things are desirable for their own sake. Socratic philosophy, on the other hand, affirms that the moral life is only capable of being rendered coherent when it is seen as being ordered to and in the service of the transcendent ends of philosophy. In contrast to the moral-political—not to mention religious—horizon, the free life of Socratic inquiry “is not only necessary but sufficient for producing happiness: philosophy does not need to be supplemented by something else, or by something that is thought to be higher in rank than philosophy, in order to produce happiness.”

The dual senses in which morality can be viewed are reflected in Strauss’s two related yet distinct descriptions of political philosophy. One takes politics as its subject and offers a philosophic reflection on political life. Political philosophy in this sense remains in genuine dialogue with civil society and attempts to moderate it by informing human action with human wisdom. It distinguishes between good and bad actions and articulates the various virtues and vices as well as the political facts that are constitutive of political life. Political philosophy here is marked by Aristotelian sobriety and as a result discusses political life “on its own terms . . . refus[ing] to be drawn into the dialectical whirlpool that carries us far beyond justice in the ordinary sense of the term toward the philosophic life.” In this presentation, the political philosopher is the “umpire” who humanizes the political order by mediating between the various political parties and goods that inevitably come into conflict in political life.

But Strauss also describes political philosophy as primarily being a politic presentation of philosophy. Political philosophy thus understood retains a greater distance from actual political life. The political philosopher is still concerned with the human
things, but no longer as the umpire much less artisan of the political community. His studies of the distinctively human things are instrumental to his supra-political concerns. Political philosophy here represents the politically responsible presentation of philosophy “as quest for wisdom . . . the attempt to replace opinions about the whole by knowledge of the whole.” The political philosopher turns to the city’s authoritative opinions because they provide him with the greatest access to the divine or the eternal things, to the nature of the whole. The particularities that come to light in political life serve as a means of access to the universals. On the other hand, the turn to the human things allows the political philosopher to point out the tensions inherent in the moral-political horizon and thus to alert others with “good natures” of the ultimate superiority of the philosophic life. In this sense, a work of political philosophy is a “speech caused by love” intended to benefit the “puppies” of the philosophic race.

It is undoubtedly tempting to view these different descriptions as finally offering two opposing accounts of political philosophy. But if we look at what Strauss does and not merely at what he says, one can argue that the relation between political philosophy and political philosophy is more dialectical than would appear at first glance. Strauss noted that Machiavelli’s explicit teaching finally could not account for the public spiritedness that animated Machiavelli as a political philosopher. A similar claim can be made about Strauss. For while he published many works that seem to have little connection to any immediately recognizable political concern, Strauss also wrote many things whose concern with moral and political matters cannot simply be reduced to mere veiled pleas for the superiority of the philosophic life. For Strauss, then, political philosophy arguably means something more than either the philosophic reflection on politics or the politic presentation of philosophy. In his practice, political philosophy combined both of these elements in a way whose theoretical coherence somehow denies any straightforward presentation.

Strauss’s most extended and comprehensive treatment of the
“conflict between” biblical faith and Socratic philosophy occurs in his three-part essay “Progress or Return?” 90 According to Strauss, that conflict revolves around the question of what way of life is most natural to man, about what way of life is best able to bring about genuine human happiness or wholeness. Because it is based on ultimately irreconcilable principles, it is therefore a “necessary conflict.” It is a conflict between the two great “alternatives” for the human soul over the true grounds of “the right way of life” for human beings. 91

The antagonism between the biblical and the Socratic way of life does not rule out a prior “implicit” agreement, an important agreement that unites both parties in their “opposition” to the reductionist “elements of modernity.” 92 The Bible and Socratic philosophy agree “regarding the importance of morality, regarding the content of morality, and regarding its ultimate insufficiency.” 93 The antagonism between the two has to do with the “X” that each sees as completing and grounding morality. Socratic philosophy views “autonomous understanding” as this “X,” whereas the Bible claims that morality is supplemented by man’s “obedient love” of God. Confronted with the mystery of the whole, the Socratic life begins in wonder. In a state “above fear and trembling as well as above hope,” the Socratic philosopher seeks to come to know the whole through his own efforts. 94 On the other hand, the biblical way of life begins in the fear of the Lord. The man of biblical faith lives in a state of “fear and trembling as well as in hope” and therefore rejects the proud and vain notion that man can know the whole or can find adequate guidance apart from God’s revelation. 95

Strauss repeatedly emphasizes that the God of the Bible is not like the gods of ancient Greece. Contrary to the gods of Greek poetry, the Biblical God is a personal God who creates the world and exercises providence over His creation. Moreover, unlike the impersonal necessity recognized by classical philosophy, the God of the Bible has an absolute concern with man. 96 The “one particular divine law” revealed by this God is believed to be the only divine Law precisely because, in contrast to the gods of the
poets, the biblical God is said to be “omnipotent, not controlled and not controllable.” The implication of this omnipotence, according to Strauss, is that the “absolutely free” God of the Bible is unknowable apart from His act of self-revelation. Inasmuch as the biblical God and the way of life that He ordains for man represents “the one thing needful,” the life of biblical faith overcomes the problem posed by an absolutely free, omnipotent, personal God through the establishment of the covenant. The biblical notion of the covenant, established by God and resting on man’s faith in His promise, responds directly to the problem of the one true God singling out “one particular, and therefore contingent, law of one particular, contingent tribe.”

The inscrutability and omnipotence of the biblical God means that man is in the end totally dependent on divine revelation for knowledge of the one thing needful. In Strauss’s reading, the author of Genesis insists that man is not created to be a theoretical or contemplative being; in fact, it forbids his efforts at “free inquiry.” For Strauss, this fact is “fundamental” to the life of biblical faith, in both its Jewish and Christian presentations. Man is meant to live righteously in loving childlike obedience to God. Only if it begins in God’s revelation and is dedicated to His service is the pursuit of knowledge “necessary” and thus “good.” Without that dedication, the pursuit of theoretical knowledge represents a “rebellion,” a proud calling into question of the authority and completeness of God’s revelation. “Man was given understanding in order to understand God’s commands.” Understanding is thus not something man can or should arrive at on his own. Nor is it something pursued for its own sake. On the contrary, God gives man understanding so that he can be freely obedient to God’s revealed commands.

The Socratic way of life, in turn, is animated by an erotic desire for knowledge about the whole. Incapable of coming into possession of complete wisdom, Socratic philosophy remains aware “that the problems are always more evident than the solutions.” Lacking complete knowledge of the whole, man
necessarily remains ignorant of the most important things and
thus lacks definitive knowledge of how he should live. Faced with
such ignorance, the life of philosophic inquiry is a reasonable and
justifiable response. Through such investigations, the Socratic
philosopher attempts to gain some, albeit partial and therefore
incomplete, knowledge of the whole and therewith knowledge
about the right way of life. The elusive character of the whole,
according to Strauss, provides the first—indeed the final—
justification of the philosophic way of life.

But what is the Socratic philosopher’s response when con-
fronted with the Bible’s claim to the authoritative and comprehen-
sive account of the whole? Despite his many remarks about
the distinctive challenge Biblical revelation poses to philosophy,
Strauss nonetheless thinks that the philosopher’s response is
essentially the same as the one that Socrates gave to Athens’ theos
nomos. The difference between the gods of the poets and the God
of the bible—a difference that Strauss often outwardly stressed
and clarified—is finally a difference of degree, not kind.104
Confronted with an allegedly authoritative divine revelation, the
Socratic philosopher can say that revelation is “nothing but a
factum brutum, and in addition an uncertain one.” 105 The Socratic
philosopher necessarily “suspends judgment.” 106 He is and always
remains a philosophic agnostic.

The philosopher that Strauss describes is not primarily con-
cerned with the content of any particular divine revelation. To
him the substantial differences between the various revealed
religions are finally of secondary importance. What ultimately
matters is that they all have their “roots” in man’s obedience to
divine Law. Biblical revelation in general and Christian revela-
tion in particular does not, in other words, change or alter
Socratic philosophy’s original formulation of the theologico-
political problem. This helps explain why Strauss pays so little
attention to Christianity’s claim about the integrity and intelligi-
bility of the created natural order or why, despite his admittance
of the fact, he does not emphasize Christianity’s teaching on the
transpolitical end of man. Rather, what is essential for Strauss is
the *phenomenon* of divine revelation. According to Strauss, revelation remains an unproven “possibility,” a hypothetical whose cognitive status Plato satisfactorily showed, before the emergence of biblical revelation, was ultimately rooted in belief and in certain of the soul’s longings. Implicit in Strauss’s position is the breathtaking claim that Socratic philosophy, or at least Plato’s presentation of it, revealed all of the possibilities that are open to man within the natural world. 107 Socratic philosophy is not able to refute the possibility of revelation but it *is* able to show that the arguments in favor of divine revelation are circular and not rationally compelling since they are grounded in faith.

Strauss occasionally suggests that Socratic philosophy’s inability to disprove the very possibility of revelation means that philosophy would seem to be “based on faith.” 108 Such claims could suggest that Strauss finally accepted the partially Nietzschean inspired argument for atheism from intellectual probity. But that conclusion would be incorrect. Strauss’s statements about philosophy resting on an “unevident, arbitrary, or blind decision” all occur when he addresses the relation of reason and revelation from the perspective of contemporary social science or philosophy. 109 Within the framework of “present-day philosophizing,” every choice is viewed as a commitment, as a groundless act of will. That framework reductively views biblical faith and philosophy only formally, as two equally arbitrary and thus equally defensible (or indefensible) sets of propositions.

Conversely, Socratic philosophy proceeds from the recognition that the right way of life cannot be positively established, that is, irrefutably demonstrated, apart from the possession of a demonstrable metaphysics that renders the whole fully intelligible. Absent that completed metaphysics, which for Strauss is not possessed by either modern philosophy or biblical revelation, “the quest for knowledge of the most import things” is seen to be the “most important thing for us.” 110 Socratic or zetetic philosophy is therefore presently possible even though modern science has seemed to discredit the various ancient cosmologies including Aristotle’s. In short, given the permanently elusive character
of the whole, philosophy is “evidently the right way of life.” 111 A
final justification of the philosophic life that Strauss cited was
Socrates’ consistent claim that he found “his happiness in acquir-
ing the highest possible degree of clarity which he can acquire.” 112
The Socratic way of life is the most natural life for man since it,
Strauss maintains, best satisfies man’s natural, that is, erotic
desire for happiness. 113

Strauss’s account of the lives of Biblical faith and Socratic
philosophy is in many respects similar to the views he attributed
to medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers like Al-farabi and
Maimonides. Like them, Strauss affirms that political life neces-
sarily relies upon a religiously based morality that the Platonic
philosopher must outwardly respect and seek to humanize. What
is more, he also affirms a deep and ultimately unbridgeable chasm
to exist between the biblical and the Socratic ways of life. Lastly,
Strauss also finally privileges the life of unfettered Socratic
inquiry to the life of lawful obedience to a personal God.

At the same time, one cannot help but notice that Strauss
chooses to make explicit what Al-farabi and Maimonides chose to
veil, namely, the “fundamental tension” between the lives of faith
and philosophy. In the concluding paragraph of “Progress or
Return?” Strauss explicitly gives one reason as to why he would
do this. By bringing to the fore the conflict between biblical faith
and philosophy, Strauss claims to expose the enduring “vitality of
Western civilization.” While initially disconcerting, the recogni-
tion of the conflict between the two “roots” of Western civiliza-
tion is also “reassuring and comforting.” For that recognition
carries with it the further realization that there is no inherent
reason why Western civilization should give up on itself. The
exposure of the conflict that forms the nerve of the West is thus
in some sense a high-minded political act, a prudent calling of
attention to the fact that Western civilization has within itself the
means to overcome late modernity’s disenchantment with the
world.

Strauss also intimates that by exposing this conflict one
glimpses the nerve of “Western intellectual history, Western
spirituality.” That exposure paves the way for late modern human beings to transcend the intellectual and spiritual limitations of their age. It also allows them to see that philosophy, in its original Socratic sense, remains possible. At the least, by making the conflict that lies at the heart of the theologico-political problem explicit, Strauss contributes to a recovery of what he elsewhere described as “a nonhistoricist understanding of nonhistoricist philosophy.”

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NOTES
3. Ibid.
6. Leo Strauss, Spinoza’s Critique of Religion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). Strauss states in the “Preface to the English Translation” to this book that his work was written by “a young Jew born and raised in Germany who found himself in the grip of the theologico-political predicament” (1).


11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 172-82.


21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 12.
29. Ibid.
31. Ibid., 19.
38. Ibid., 20.
43. Ibid., 4. Strauss qualifies this remark with a “perhaps.” He goes on to state that this break was “certainly” brought about—undoubtedly in different ways and to different degrees—by both “the Reformation and modern philosophy.”
45. See, for example, Maimonides’ description of Moses, the prophet par excellence, in The Guide of the Perplexed, II. 40.
47. Ibid.
48. Strauss notes that while this view takes center stage in medieval Islamic and Jewish rationalism, it “appears in the Christian Middle Ages only at their fringes,” and even here only indirectly in thinkers such as Marsilius of Padua (“How to Begin to Study Medieval Philosophy,” 224). See also Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing, 95-97, 136; Leo Strauss, “Marsilius of Padua,” Liberalism Ancient and Modern, 185-202.
49. See, for example, Averroes’ Decisive Treatise and The Incoherence of the Incoherence.
52. Ibid., 2. Indeed, through the establishment of the Nocturnal Council, the philosophers in the regime described in the Laws indirectly exercise a kind of rule that is similar to the overt form of rule that the philosophers exercise in the Republic’s “city in speech.” Partly for this reason, Aristotle notes that the regime in the Laws gradual turns around again to the regime in the Republic. See Aristotle, Politics, 1265a 1-4.
53. Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing, 18.
54. See, for example, Alfarabi, Political Regime, 49-50; Maimonides, The Guide of the Perplexed, I. 63, II. 35, 39, 40.
56. Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing, 17.
57. Ibid., 139.
58. Ibid., 21.
59. Ibid., 139. Strauss notes in the introduction to *Persecution and the Art of Writing* that Al-farabi insists that “conformity with the opinions of the religious community in which one is brought up, is a necessary qualification for the future philosopher” (17). It is worth noting that for all of his boldness, Descartes makes a nearly identical claim in the moral provisions he lays out in his *Discourse on Method*.

60. Ibid. Strauss repeats this line almost verbatim twice in his commentary on the *Kuzari*, a work which contains some of his most jarring statements about the relation of religion, morality, and philosophy in medieval rationalism. The first time Strauss makes this remark he observes that “from the philosopher’s point of view, goodness of character and goodness of action is essentially not more than a means towards, or a by product of, the life of contemplation” (*Persecution and the Art of Writing*), 114. (Italics added.)


63. Ibid.

64. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 16.


68. See, for example, Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, IV. 7.5.

69. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 122.

70. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 122-23. Whereas Strauss here speaks openly of the merits of Socrates’ new method of philosophizing, elsewhere he is less sanguine about its ability fully to elucidate the nature of the whole. Strauss in fact goes so far as to say that the kind of knowledge that comes from knowledge of the parts “is not knowledge of the whole. It seems that knowledge of the whole would have to combine somehow political knowledge in the highest sense with knowledge of homogeneity. And this knowledge is not at our disposal. Men are therefore constantly tempted to force the issue by imposing unity on the
phenomena, by absolutizing either homogeneity or knowledge of ends. Philosophy is characterized by the gentle, if firm, refusal to succumb to either charm” (What Is Political Philosophy?, 39-40).

71. Ibid., 83.
72. Ibid., 84.
73. Ibid., 129.
74. Ibid.
75. Ibid.
76. Ibid., 130. Strauss also speaks of the importance of sacred restraints in his “Restatement on Xenophon’s Hiero.” Strauss there states that Hobbes, Hegel, and Kojève are able to construct their accounts of human life only by denying the existence of such sacred restraints. See What Is Political Philosophy?, 111.

77. Strauss, Natural Right and History, 133.
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid., 151-52. Shadia Drury points to this statement as alleged proof of Strauss’s Epicureanism. See Drury, The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss (New York: St. Martin’s Press 1988), 105; “Leo Strauss’s Classic Natural Right Teaching,” Political Theory, 15.3 (August 1987) 308. Harry V. Jaffa counters Drury’s charge by noting that Strauss taught that both the biblical and the Greek philosophic traditions acknowledge that morality needs to be perfected by something higher, piety or faith for the former and wisdom for the latter. Jaffa rightly concludes that “morality cut off from transcendence sinks into Kantian absurdity” (“Dear Professor Drury,” Political Theory, 15.3 [August 1987] 321). Though Jaffa’s argument provides a reasonably compelling response to Drury’s claim, it also tends to soften Strauss’s statement. While Jaffa notes the need for morality and justice to be informed by something higher, he finally sidesteps the question of whether or not Strauss thought that moral virtue can be an end in itself or whether apart from the philosophic life it remains vulgar virtue.

Cooper (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1993), 219.

81. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 12-13. While it is undoubtedly tempting, Christian thinkers do not have to doubt the very existence of the Socratic philosopher that Strauss describes. Nor for that matter do they necessarily have to make recourse to Christ’s teaching on humility to criticize the exorbitant pride that resides in Strauss’s philosopher. The questionable character of Strauss’s admittedly conditional claim can be seen on its own grounds. In its extreme formulation, Strauss’s exhortation of the Socratic way of life tends to reduce man to a purely or wholly rational being. Such a presentation parodies the classical teaching on the right ordering of the human soul by finally not permitting man to recognize the inherent desirability of anything other than the act of philosophic contemplation. It seeks to quiet the undeniable restlessness of human beings that Augustine movingly describes in the opening of his *Confessions* by pitting human sociality against human rationality in way that can affirm the latter only at the expense of the former. One can argue that reason is the highest thing in us. But it is equally clear that reason is not the only thing in us. In the name of defending philosophy, Strauss at times interprets the end of human life through a lens that necessarily crops out of the picture anything that is humanly desirable other than man’s rational perfection. By so doing, Strauss brackets all that we know to be truly human about human life and exaggerates the degree to which the Socratic life is genuinely satisfying for embodied social beings.

82. See, for example, Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 93-94, and *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 35-37.

83. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 156.


86. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 36. Strauss makes a similar argument in his “Restatement.” Yet there he adds that the philosopher “is attached to a particular type of human being, namely to actual or potential philosophers or to his friends.
... he cannot help being attached to men of well-ordered souls; he desires 'to be together' with such men all the time... the philosopher therefore has the urge to educate potential philosophers simply because he cannot help loving well-ordered souls” (What Is Political Philosophy?, 120-21). In light of what Strauss says about philosophers not going with their families, perhaps, on the deepest level, the philosopher's “kin” would not be determined by the natural ties of blood but by the social and philosophic ties of thought.


88. David Lowenthal makes a similar point when he notes that Strauss combines the “divergent dispositions” of political and philosophic responsibility “perhaps more naturally than Shakespeare’s Prospero” (“Leo Strauss’s Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy,” Interpretation, 13.3 [September 1985], 305). I would add that inasmuch as these two things need to be combined in Strauss suggests that for him they do not go together theoretically, that is, that they point to a tension in Strauss’s deeds that is perhaps never fully resolved in his thought.

89. Strauss himself adds a curious wrinkle to this entire discussion. At the end of the paragraph in Natural Right and History in which he suggests that the person who is just and moral but not a philosopher is a mutilated human being, Strauss references fourteen books and one article. All of the books that Strauss there references are classical works except for one. The exception is David Grene’s Man in His Pride: A Study in the Political Philosophy of Thucydides and Plato. The lone article that Strauss cites is his review of that book. (The review was first published in Social Research, 18.3, 394-97. It was later republished in What Is Political Philosophy?, 299-302). In his review, Strauss praises Grene for seeing the tension that exists between Plato’s presentation of the life devoted to justice and the life devoted to eros and regards this as “an important insight” (What Is Political Philosophy?, 301). But Strauss goes on to question whether Grene does not exaggerate that tension. Despite this
concern, Strauss concludes his review with the curious observation that “today it is perhaps better thus to overstate Plato’s thesis regarding the disproportion between philosophy and politics than to follow the beaten path by failing to see a problem between philosophy and politics” (What Is Political Philosophy?, 302). If nothing else, Strauss’s remarks here raise the question of whether he too may self-consciously exaggerate the tension between the philosophic and the moral-political life. Strauss may have thought that such exaggeration is needed today to counter modernity’s efforts to resolve any such tensions—especially, since as we have seen, Strauss understood that approach to culminate in both the political crisis of the West and radical historicism’s denial of the very possibility of Socratic philosophy.

90. Leo Strauss, “Progress or Return?,” The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism, 260.
91. Ibid. Strauss acknowledges that “harmonizations and synthesizations” of biblical and Greek philosophic thought are possible. “Greek philosophy can use obedient love in a subservient function, and the Bible can use philosophy as a handmaid; but what is so used in each case rebels against such use, and therefore the conflict is really a radical one” (“Progress or Return?”), 246.
92. Ibid., 246.
93. Ibid.
94. Ibid., 251.
95. Ibid.
96. Ibid., 252.
97. Ibid., 256.
98. Ibid., 256-257. For Strauss, the omnipotence and inscrutability of the biblical God is reflected in the divine name that God reveals to Moses in Exodus 3:14. Whereas this name is commonly translated as “I am who am,” Strauss typically uses the alternative translation of “I shall be who I shall be.”
99. Ibid., 256.
100. Ibid., 257.
101. Ibid., 258.
102. Ibid., 260. Viewed from the perspective of the Bible, the
philosophic life is seen to begin in rebellion for Strauss. Man’s capacity for understanding, Strauss argues, is said to allow him “to emancipate the understanding from . . . the subservient function for which it was meant, and this emancipation is the origin of philosophy or science from the Biblical point of view” (“Progress or Return?”) 258. See also the quotation of W. E. H. Lecky that Strauss places before chapter 2 of *Persecution and the Art of Writing*.


104. Thomas Pangle has, in my view, given the best and most persuasive account of Strauss’s position on this matter. See Pangle’s introduction to *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, chapter two of his *Leo Strauss: An Introduction to his Thought and Intellectual Legacy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), and his “The Platonism of Leo Strauss: A Reply to Harry Jaffa,” *Claremont Review of Books* 4 (1985). In making this argument, I presently argue for an interpretation of Strauss that I previously have argued against. See my “Leo Strauss and the Christian Academy,” *Religious Studies and Theology*, 15 (2-3) 1996, 19-29. I have come to accept this view in part by reflecting more deeply on Strauss’s own argument against the atheism advanced by probity and his insistence upon the justification of philosophy as a way of life.


106. Strauss, “Progress or Return?,” 259. Drawing on the thought of Bernard Lonergan, S.J., Frederick Lawrence suggests that in making this claim Strauss collapses the distinction between understanding and judgment. According to Lawrence, Strauss here conflates the “what is” question with the “is it so” question. See Lawrence, “Leo Strauss and the Fourth Wave of Modernity,”
107. Commenting on the “exorbitant claim for philosophy” made here, Werner Dannhauser notes that according to Strauss the “philosopher, Plato in this case, claims to know in a decisive way what can and cannot happen in human history even in the future” (Dannhauser, “Athens and Jerusalem or Jerusalem and Athens?,” Leo Strauss and Judaism: Jerusalem and Athens Critically Revisited, 168).

108. Ibid., 269. See also Natural Right and History, 74-76.

109. Strauss, Natural Right and History, 75.

110. Strauss, “Progress or Return?,” 259.

111. Ibid.

112. Ibid.

113. Christian thinkers in general and Catholic Thomistic thinkers in particular have often criticized Strauss for what they see as his adherence to voluntarism. See for example Frederick Wilhelmsen, Christianity and Political Philosophy (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978). Strauss’s voluntarism is here said to lead him to interpret Christian faith along the lines of a teen-aged Lutheranism: the Christian lives a life that clings obediently and hence uncritically to the requirements of faith alone. To be sure, Strauss frequently describes the God of the Bible in terms that are reminiscent of the voluntaristic depictions of God given by medieval Islamic philosophers, e.g., Strauss characterizes the God of the Bible as being marked by an “unfathomable will.” Yet such criticisms typically do not take Strauss’s argument on its own terms and consequently soften the truly jarring character of his thought on this matter. The full force of Strauss’s claim comes into view not when one examines his formal account of the relation of reason and revelation but rather when one recognizes that Strauss claims that the philosophic life alone is capable of rendering morality coherent and making men live genuinely happy lives.

114. Strauss, Natural Right and History, 33. Strauss’s pro-
posed return to and an engagement with “classical political philosophy” is in part designed to help recovery a non-historicist understanding of philosophy. But it must also be noted that one can more readily distinguish the dissimilarities between classical and modern political philosophy than one can distinguish the dissimilarities between the classical political philosophers themselves. Simply put, “classical political philosophy” does not present itself or understand itself as a unified front. Notwithstanding their obvious agreements, there are significant, substantive disagreements among the various classical political philosophers—as Aristotle’s criticisms of Plato’s idea of the good in the *Nicomachean Ethics* makes particularly clear. Yet by falling back upon general terms such as “classical natural right” or “classical political philosophy,” Strauss is able to pass over these differences in relative silence. In this, Strauss seems to have followed Al-farabi’s example. Commenting on Al-farabi’s *On the Purpose of Plato and of Aristotle*, Strauss notes that Al-farabi there states that “Plato and Aristotle . . . ‘have given us philosophy’ together with ‘the ways toward it and the way toward its introduction after it has been blurred or destroyed.’” Strauss further observes that Al-farabi states that “the purpose of Plato and Aristotle was one and the same.” Strauss subsequently concludes that “two points in Farabi’s *On the Purposes of Plato and of Aristotle* strike one most. The work owes its origin to the concern of the restoration of philosophy ‘after it has been blurred or destroyed’; and it is more concerned with the purpose common to Plato and Aristotle than with the agreement or disagreement of the results of their investigations. What Farabi regarded as the purpose of the two philosophers . . . [was that] philosophy . . . is not only necessary but sufficient for producing happiness: philosophy does not need to be supplemented by something else, or by something that is thought to be higher in rank than philosophy, in order to produce happiness” (*Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 12-13).