

KENNETH HART GREEN'S JEW AND PHILOSOPHER: THE RETURN TO MAIMONIDES IN THE JEWISH THOUGHT OF LEO STRAUSS

Laurence Berns

In his book on Leo Strauss, Jew and Philosopher..., Kenneth Hart Green has provided the first serious study of the development of Strauss's thought. Strauss's fundamental thought that revealed theology and philosophy are mutually irrefutable takes the form in Maimonides of a cosmological opposition between creation and eternity. Philosophy's incapacity to refute its revealed counterpart requires recognition of that counterpart as a possibility. Green's Strauss's Maimonides' prophetology articulates human perfection as a reconciliation of reason and revelation, a reconciliation of prophet and philosopher-king. The mature Strauss does not deny, but questions, those conclusions. To qualify Green's account: Strauss's opening a way of return to classical philosophy relies less on radical historicism and more on "the evidence of those simple experiences of right and wrong which are at the bottom of the philosophic contention that there is a natural right." Strauss never ceased to be concerned with the question of the relation between the Platonic-Aristotelian forms and the formulas of modern mathematical physics. A brief account of the basic difference between these kinds of "forms" is presented.

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We are very grateful to Kenneth Hart Green for what may be the first truly competent single author book-length study of the thought of Leo Strauss. Green's argument that Strauss's early studies of Jewish thought were fundamental for his thought as a whole became clear to me, after some years of studying with him, upon reading *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* and *Philosophy and Law*. My reading of *Philosophy and Law* crystallized an idea that many years of study and conversations with Strauss had been leading me towards, namely, that a powerful motive, ultimately derived from biblical religion, permeates "modern philosophy from its beginning, even in its antitheological stances:" to make man fully at home in the world, not subordinate to an indifferent nature, but as if he were in "his Father's House," or, by extension, in his own custom-built house made from materials supplied by a nature over which science had provided him with expanded mastery. On its moral and political side this is necessarily connected with a new *secular* sanctification of individuality, i.e., "rights" philosophy. Strauss's remark at the end of *Natural Right and History* about concern for the status of individuality in contrast with the concern for virtue being the nub of the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns, points, in my opinion, to this attempt by modern philosophy and science, in contrast to ancient philosophy, to achieve on a completely rational and secular basis some equivalent to revealed religion's sanctification of the individual.¹

Green carefully takes us through, not only *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, but also those untranslated early works of Strauss, from 1924 to 1928, where some of his major positions can be seen to be in formation. One great merit of Green's work is the way he enters into the spirit of and explicates each work in its own terms without bringing in the qualifications Strauss's later thought would entail, so that one gets a very clear picture of what he found especially convincing at each stage. This is the first published speculation on the stages of Strauss's thought that I have been able to take seriously. Every major qualification which I thought was required turned out to be fully explicated, and in its proper place. This continual deepening of Strauss's thought that Green describes could be observed even on a day to day basis. In many classes begun with what appeared to be merely a summary of the previous class's discussion, Strauss would often go deeper, incorporating what had been worked out in conversation after class and at his desk that night after class.

Before taking up some topics of special interest, it might be useful to briefly survey the book as a whole. It is very fully referenced and annotated. Much of the now extensive scholarly literature on Strauss is reviewed in the notes, including, for example, judicious

comments on those who exaggerate the influence of Nietzsche on Strauss.

The first three chapters are entitled "'In the Grip of the Theological-Political Predicament': The Crisis of Reason and Revelation in Modern Jewish Philosophy"; "Is a 'Return' to Maimonides Possible?: The Obstacles and Their Surmounting"; "The Gradual Awakening: The 'Pre-Maimonidean' Strauss." They describe how the predicaments of modern non-orthodox faintly believing Jews who had tied their hopes to Spinozistic modern rationalism and the modern liberalism it supported led Strauss to inquire into the adequacy of modern rationalism in particular and rationalism in general vis-à-vis revelation. He concluded that Spinoza's "demonstrations" succeeded only by negatively begging the fundamental question: Is revelation possible?; and, most importantly, that revelation and reason, revealed theology and philosophy, are mutually irrefutable. He began to inquire into the possibility of adhering both to Jewish revelation and to rational philosophy through a return to Maimonides. The first sentence of Strauss's *Philosophy and Law* reads, "According to Hermann Cohen, Maimonides is 'the classic of rationalism' in Judaism." Further, "Maimonides's rationalism is the truly natural model, the standard, carefully to be protected from any adulteration, and therewith the stumbling block on which modern rationalism comes to fall." The foundation of Maimonides' rationalism is classical Platonic-Aristotelian rationalism, or, as Strauss and Green come to call it, "Platonic political philosophy." Both in print and in conversation Strauss liked to recall how things opened up for him when he first read in Avicenna that "...the treatment of prophecy and the Divine law is contained in...the *Laws* [of Plato]": that statement also serves as the epigraph to his last book.

Chapters 4, "Maimonides as Philosophical Theologian: Strauss's Turn to Medieval Jewish Theology," and 5, "Maimonides as Platonic Philosopher-Satesman: Strauss's Argument for the Necessarily Political Basis for the Jewish Philosophic Life," show, according to Green, how Maimonides' prophetology was understood by Strauss to provide us with a view of human perfection that reconciles reason and revelation. The mutual irrefutability problem in Maimonides assumes the form of a cosmological opposition: eternity or creation? Philosophy and science's failure to "demonstrate" its fundamental hypothesis, require that it remain open to the fundamental alternative. Since the cosmological question remains open, Maimonides can utilize both traditions in his treatments of the fundamental human problems of morality, religion and politics. The prophet, who not incidentally is also "philosopher-king," becomes paradigmatic for the best way of life for man. Those capable of it are obliged by

Scripture to perfect their intellects, that is, they are divinely ordained to join in the quest for knowledge of the whole and to pursue a life of virtue, (i.e., to philosophize). They receive divine illumination of rational truths the unaided human reason could not attain: their heightened powers of imagination (subordinate to and in cooperation with their intellects) allow them to present convincing imaginative versions of recondite rational truths to the larger society in the form of divine law. The more a society's political order and the moral opinions governing it adhere to the "truth and justice apprehended in illumination by the prophet who gave it its law," the better it is (p. 40).

The sixth and seventh chapters, "Maimonides as Esoteric Writer: Strauss's Rediscovery of the Philosophers' Categorical Imperative in Maimonides' *Guide*," and "Conclusion: Maimonides and Strauss," show how Strauss, still philosophizing as, and in the guise of, a historian of philosophy, does not deny but calls into question all the foregoing conclusions. They deal with why he thought that these fundamental "commitments," while able to cooperate on one level, are most adequately understood when their separateness is preserved "in full consciousness of the contradictions between them" (p. 136). The cognitive status of Strauss's thoughts on these matters is shown to be that of opinion, not unevident, but well-grounded opinion.

In what follows my aim is to supplement what has been treated by Green. In general, it seems to me that Strauss worked his way towards the idea of a revival of classical philosophy, perhaps primarily through his Jewish studies, and the problems of revelation and reason, theory and practice that they raised, but not solely through those studies. The idea is expressed in a fairly mature form in his Ebbinghaus review of 1931. He praises Ebbinghaus for "dispensing with modern preconceptions, in that he abandons *the* modern prejudice, namely, the prejudice that claims that *the* truth has not already been found in the past." He recurs to Socrates's remark about knowing that one does not know as the beginning of philosophizing, but "the actual not-knowing of present day philosophizing is not at all the natural not-knowing with which philosophizing must begin; for first of all it requires a long detour, a great effort to come back at all to the state of natural ignorance." Reflecting on Plato's Cave "we find ourselves today in a second, much deeper cave than the lucky ignorant ones with whom Socrates had to deal; we require History first of all just in order to reach *up* to the cave out of which Socrates can lead us to the light; we need a propaedeutic that the Greeks did not need."² The most important biographical point one can make about Strauss, in my opinion, is that at some point in his

early twenties he became the kind of man for whom no generally accepted opinion could be simply authoritative, no matter how illustrious the holders of such an opinion might be.

Green, I believe, gives too much credit to what he calls "radical historicism's...insight" (p. 37), or "the discovery that modern natural science is only 'one historically conditioned form of "interpretation of the world" among others'" (p. 30). Strauss did seek historical understanding, "the revitalization of earlier ways of thinking...as a corrective for the specific shortcomings of the modern mind." He did not need historicism, "which is nothing other than the petrified and self-complacent form of the self-criticism of the modern mind," (PAW, p. 158) to free himself from "*the* modern prejudice." The opening of a way of return to the classical natural perspective can rest primarily on the evidence which is itself presented within that perspective and especially the evidence that comes to light in the study of human beings and human affairs, "the evidence of those simple experiences regarding right and wrong which are at the bottom of the philosophic contention that there is a natural right."³ Human, animal and plant behavior can, surely, be described in part by material and efficient ("mechanical") causes, but they can be accounted for far more adequately when formal and final causes are also brought into the picture. And 2) secondarily the return to the classical perspective could be prompted, not only by the study of modern philosophy and its shortcomings, but also by the study of the history of modern natural science itself, which leads not to a denial of the truths it has discovered, but rather to the denial of its universality. The work of his good friend Jacob Klein exemplified this approach for Strauss. Galileo, Descartes and Newton declared that the language of nature was written in mathematical characters, that the foundations of natural philosophy were mathematical principles.

Strauss's critique of Spinoza can be applied exactly to modern mathematical physics. Even if one assumes that they have provided us with a mathematically clear and distinct account, have they done so by simply abstracting from everything that cannot be made to fit in to such an account? The claims of contemporary physicists are often more modest: "Physics, indeed, should recognize that it is not in any useful sense the fundamental science, since that peculiarity which makes it fundamental, the fact that its laws are, we believe, applicable in principle to the systems which other sciences investigate, is achieved by adopting an attitude of exclusive concentration on certain approved aspects of the phenomena."⁴ The mathematically clear and distinct account is one part of a more comprehensive, true, and adequate account: Strauss could speak of "the true univer-

sal science into which modern science will have to be integrated eventually.”⁵ My word “adequate” is ambiguous. It may be that no human account of the whole can be fully adequate cognitively to its object; it may never rise above the status of opinion. But certainly there are better and worse grounded opinions, even true, as well as false, opinions. If it is the case that “the human soul is the only part of the whole which is open to the whole and therefore more akin to the whole than anything else is” (pp. 37-38), one might opine that the whole is characterized by noetic heterogeneity as reflected by the order of the human sciences, that is, that the distinctions between the human sciences correspond to the natural articulation of the whole.⁶ If man is understood by modern science in the light of the subhuman (sensible and material heterogeneity), by classical philosophy in the light of the superhuman (noetic homogeneity, the object of mathematics and the mathematical arts; and noetic heterogeneity, the “ideas,” or fundamental problems,⁷ the whole encompasses all three parts. Since he was a philosopher and not a sage, Leo Strauss questioned the alternative he considered most plausible, that the whole is fundamentally characterized by Platonic-Aristotelian noetic heterogeneity. In a question period at one of his weekly classes at St. John’s during his last years, a student asked him: “If you had a chance now to talk to Plato and Aristotle what would you ask them?” Strauss hesitated for a moment, pursed his lips as he often did when gathering his thoughts, and then said, “I think I would ask them whether the development from Galileo and Newton would cause them to modify in any way their teaching about the forms.”

The elementary meanings of the word form, Greek *eidos*, are looks and class character. Socrates in the *Meno* [72c] speaks of the *eidos* as that through which things are what they are and that towards which one looks in order to give an account of what they are. It is that which determines the being of the object of knowledge at the same time that it constitutes in the knower the knowledge of the object. The *eidos* is what all the instances of a class point to by defect. In modern mathematical physics we have a new kind of formal cause. It is primarily an explanatory principle, the objects of knowledge in certain ways conform to it, or it applies to them, but it no longer is in them. It is a symbolic representation, iconic or non-iconic, which describes the quantitative or measurable relations between those factors in its instantiations which can be represented together in mathematical symbols. A line would be an iconic representation of a distance, a geometric area of a physical area. The non-iconic symbolizations, however, are most revealing and most troublesome: for example, the Galilean representation of velocity by a line and distance by an area, Huygens’s representation of energy by a solid

geometric cube, Newton's solid, a computational device for determining laws of centripetal force,⁸ and contemporary physics's representation of simple harmonic motion by the paradigm or reference circle. Quantitative relations between different factors constituting corporeal or physical reality, especially the manipulable aspects of that reality, are discovered and explained with unprecedented precision. While the detailed study of modern science does provide all sorts of interesting answers, it also opens up even more interesting questions, especially those concerning the relation between its mathematical symbols and what they represent.

The central idea behind any consideration of Strauss as "Jew and Philosopher," in my opinion, is the mutual irrefutability of reason and revelation. Although every revelation is some particular and contingent revelation among other revelations, which means that it cannot meet the canons of philosophic and scientific evidence, Strauss could never leave it at a reduction of prophecy and preaching to poetics and epideictic rhetoric. Particular and contingent revelations of the type of biblical monotheism implicitly deny the relevance of those canons. Such irrefutability obliges philosophy to grant the *possibility* of revelation. This state of things Strauss says "seems to decide irrevocably against philosophy and in favor of revelation."⁹ If the philosopher cannot establish demonstrable grounds for the choice of the philosophic life, is not the cognitive status of that choice exactly equivalent to an act of religious faith? In the Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (p. 29) Strauss writes: "But to grant that revelation is possible means to grant that the philosophic account and the philosophic way of life are not necessarily, not evidently, the true account and the right way of life: philosophy, the quest for evident and necessary knowledge, rests itself on an unevident decision, on an act of the will, just as faith does." This argument bears close analysis. There would be a *non sequitur* if Strauss had only said "not necessarily." But even if the choice of philosophy were not necessarily, i.e., demonstrably, right, it need not be an unevident decision. It could be an "evident" decision, a decision based on the best evidence available, the best supported opinion. Strauss avoids contradicting himself by also saying "not evidently." This argument is a critique of Spinoza, if not a critique of modern philosophy as a whole: the choice for philosophy was not evident in Spinoza's sense of "evident," i.e., indisputable, demonstrative. But "necessarily" and "evidently" are not necessarily equivalent. We note the change of order in Strauss's statement of "necessary" and "evident," placing "evident" in the middle. The philosopher's awareness of the cognitive status of his views pre-

vents him from becoming a “boaster”;¹⁰ it does not prevent him from making a well-informed reasonable decision.

This last argument is meant to be an intra-philosophic argument. It does not, and was not intended to obviate the consequences of the mutual irrefutability of philosophy and revealed religion.

Notes

1. Laurence Berns, “The Relation Between Philosophy and Religion: Reflections on Leo Strauss’s Suggestion Concerning the Source and Sources of Modern Philosophy,” *Interpretation* (Fall, 1991): 52-58.
2. This image and argument is, perhaps, most fully developed in Strauss’s *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, pp. 154-158.
3. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 31-32.
4. A. Brian Pippard, F.R.S., *Reconciling Physics with Reality*, an Inaugural Lecture (Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 35.
5. Leo Strauss, “Social Science and Humanism,” *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 8.
6. *Op. cit.* note 3, above, p. 123.
7. Cf. Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1959), pp. 38-40; Strauss-Kojeve Correspondence in Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*, (New York: The Free Press, 1991), p. 277; and Jacob Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1968), pp. 88-93. (Available now in a Dover Edition reprint.)
8. It is only a “solid,” that is a quantity to the third power, when it is “upside down” ($SP^2 \cdot QT^2 / QR$), when it gives the inverse of the centripetal force. See *The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, Book I, Proposition VI, Corollary 1.
9. *Op. cit.* note 3, above, p. 75.
10. *On Tyranny*, cited in note 7, above, pp. 196, 201.