

○ CHE VUOI?

POLITICO-PHILOSOPHICAL REMARKS ON LEO STRAUSS' *SPINOZA*

Matthew Sharpe, Deakin University

Correspondence to Matthew Sharpe: msharpe@deakin.edu.au

Rumors surrounding the Hebraic-American classical philosopher Leo Strauss' supposed influence on leading neoconservative politicians and commentators make reconsidering Leo Strauss' thought and legacy a philosophical task of the first political importance today. A host of articles have appeared by students and (more recently) books by Stephen Smith (2006), Heinrich Meier (2006) and Catherine and Michael Zuckert (2006). This essay is proffered as a critical contribution, by a non-Straussian student, to this literature. Its methodology and justification is to return to and reconsider Strauss' earliest works, on the 'political theology' of Benedict de Spinoza. The paper argues two theses. The first is that the popular depiction of Strauss as an esoteric Nietzschean hiding behind a 'noble' classical or theological veneer importantly misses the mark. The second is that Strauss' early work shows his proximity, via Jacobi, to the Heideggerian disclosure of the groundless grounds of philosophical reason, given which one must extrarationally choose reason over faith. One striking implication of this argument, in the contemporary political climate, is to underscore the unlikely convergence between the philosophical sources of neoconservative and the 'post-structuralist' thought associated with much of the intellectual left in France and the Anglophone world. Yet in contrast to the widespread image of Strauss, I argue that the mature Strauss' continuing commitment to this decisionistic framework is in fact most clear is his 'exoteric,' public statements on religion – i.e. it is not the 'esoteric' purloined letter Strauss' critics seek out. The reason for Strauss' continuing public advocacy of the impossibility of reason's disproving faith, I propose, highlights the primarily political (versus philosophical) nature of this turn: in Strauss' conservative acceptance of the political necessity of religion for social order, framed in terms of a revised commitment to the 'medieval' (versus modern) enlightenment of Maimonides and Farabi.

APOLOGY / FRAME

Leo Strauss' first book was *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. Written between 1925 and 1928 and published in 1930, it belongs to the period of what one critic has called 'Strauss before Straussianism' (Gunnell 1994). Yet its importance for Strauss' entire *oeuvre*, and thus the career-long importance of his encounter with Spinoza, is underscored by Strauss' re-presentation of the work in the 1962 anglophone edition. Strauss 'book-ends' the 1962 edition with an autobiographical 'Preface' which is as close to an 'Apology of Strauss' as Strauss ever came (and which is celebrated as such by students or acolytes) (eg Meier 2006: 1–17; Smith 2006: 75–77). Strauss (1962) adds as an Appendix what the 'Preface' announces to be the first manifestation of his 'changed orientation', his 1932 'Comments' on the German authoritarian theorist Carl Schmitt's *Der Begriff des Politischen* (Strauss 1962: 31). The 1962 'Preface' to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* opens, finally, by stating that his 1930 book had been written by a young man in the grips of the 'theologico-political predicament' (Strauss 1962: 1). This nominally Spinozian problematic, Strauss confesses, has remained at the heart of all his later or 'mature' writings, however far he had otherwise wandered from this early text.

Nevertheless, to consider Strauss' *Spinozabuch* in the contemporary conjuncture, as I propose to do here, is a fraught thing, for reasons that need to be mentioned at the start. The first reason is that Strauss' book on Spinoza, much more directly than many of his later texts, reflects Strauss' abiding self-positioning as both a philosopher and an 'Hebraic sage', to invoke Harold Bloom's telling description (Smith 1994: 81). *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* is the work of a young author who writes, avowedly, from within the particular tradition of his birth (Strauss 1924), as well as a philosopher. It is written at the time that the young Strauss' was passionately engaged in debates concerning the fate of his people, coming to political self-consciousness through and against the Zionism of Pinsker and others (Zank 2002: 3–33). Now: if you 'google' or 'nexus' Strauss and/or 'neo-conservatism', you will find that conspiracy theories *à la* Lindon La Rouche about the latter as a Zionist conspiracy are generally about *two* mouse clicks away. Especially since anti-semitism is one charge that some of Strauss' neoconservative defenders have not failed to level against critics (eg Muravchik 2004: 249¹), the author has no more desire than anyone else to enter into these troubled waters. More gravely than this, defenders of Strauss against Drury and others' charges of concealed Machiavellianism (Drury 1988) often point towards Strauss' grounding in the pre- or post-modern tradition of 'political theology'. As Taubes has argued, and as we will see, the founding supposition of this 'tradition' is the non-autarky of human reason, or the inability of humans alone to found lasting political institutions and community (cf. Hartwich et al. 2004: 140). The author not only has profound hesitations about the political legacy, suppositions, and possibilities of 'political theology' as a possibility, by whomever it is espoused. I also am not convinced that recourse to it ultimately deflects the charges of Machiavellianism against Strauss, however much an unbeliever the Florentine secretary allegedly was (Strauss 1958: 31–32, 51–52, 185–191). The idea of rendering theology a *political* thing, on the contrary, would seem to represent its ultramodern instrumentalization, as *political theology's* founder, Carl Schmitt's, defining relation with *Hobbes* would indicate (Schmitt 1996a; 1996b).

Secondly: to write on Strauss in 2006, even in Australia, is not a particularly rewarding venture², and certainly not one conducive to the philosophical *acquiescentia* Spinoza for one valorises for theorists or philosophers, in allegiance with the classical heritage. If one writes *critically* on Strauss, one risks exposing oneself to tirades from acolytes accusing one of 'seeking the limelight, not the light', belonging to the 'chattering classes', and – by implication – much worse than any of that (Clarke 2004). On the other side, to write on Strauss *at all*, even critically, seems inevitably to encourage suspicions among academic contemporaries that one is a 'Straussian', although even Strauss' *avowed* followers do not agree on what this finally means.

However empty the latter types of charges are, I want to frame my reading of 'young Strauss' here around them. Because it seems to me that they *do* reflect at least three things that are important in assessing Strauss' work in today's political conjuncture. Firstly – and I will be trying to substantiate this as we proceed below³ – the political suspicion of Strauss' work which they bespeak *is* defensible and salutary in a modern liberal nation-state such as the Australia of the early twenty first century. Secondly, the supposition on which these accusations of 'Straussianism' are based – namely, that to *know* someone's thought is to *believe* as a disciple might in the revealed word of one's master – is exactly what should be at stake in reading Strauss' *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, or any of his other works. Thirdly, if one thing Strauss' work throughout his career highlights is that philosophy has always operated by suspending or contravening widely-accepted

doxai (opinions), one thing that strikes a contemporary reader of Strauss – despite signature neoconservative attacks on ‘relativism’, ‘historicism’, or ‘postmodernism’ in the academic ‘new class’ – is how closely many of his ideas mirror many of the *widely*-accepted ideas of the ‘post-post-structuralist’ left. In particular, although Strauss’ analyses are framed very differently, Strauss *agrees* with the post-structuralists (for example, Lyotard or Derrida) that modernist political rationalism is largely an ill-conceived, if not dangerous, venture whose most horrific manifestation was the *Shoah*. Following 1928, around the time Strauss completed *Spinoza’s Critique of Reason*, furthermore, Strauss – no less than the French post-structuralists – radically turned his back on the possibility of any form of modern, dialectical or other ‘internalizations’ of the distinctions between the competing sources of the modern age (Strauss 1935: 3–19), which like Shestov Strauss names ‘Athens and Jerusalem’. As Strauss’ important criticisms of Kojève would attest – the very same teacher of modernity and the ‘end of history’ against whose heterodox Hegelianism Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard and others also largely set their backs – Strauss’ critique of the modern ‘universal and homogenous state’ is conceptually and genealogically an uncannily close theoretical cousin of the new left he and his followers abhor (Strauss [and Kojève] 2000: 177–314).

As a Jewish thinker, Strauss came from around 1930 to reject either liberal assimilation for his people (the position of someone like Freud (Strauss 1928/2002)), or merely political Zionism – however ‘honorable’ (Strauss 1935: 19). The latter Strauss now argued was another form of modernist assimilation, as if a restored Jewish homeland could become a secular nation like any other (Smith 2006: 78–79). As a philosopher, Strauss now argued that what he calls ‘orthodoxy’, whether Jewish or Christian (see anon), stands in what we might term after Lyotard an irresolvable ‘differend’ *vis-a-vis* reason or philosophy (Lyotard 1988). The claims of revelation as such, and of the Jewish people in particular, Strauss instead comes to argue, stand as emblematic of the most fundamental philosophical problem of all – that of the relation between the particular and the universal, the one and the many, or ‘the absence of redemption’ as such (Smith 2006: 65). The ‘tension’ between reason and revelation, Strauss comes to argue until his very last texts, is at the root of the peculiar ‘vitality’ of the West (Strauss 1989: 289, 295). More than this, ethically or existentially:

No one can be both a philosopher and a theologian or, for that matter, a third which is beyond the conflict between philosophy and theology, or a synthesis of both. But every one of us can and ought to be either the one or the other, the philosopher open to the challenge of theology or the theologian open to the challenge of philosophy (Soffer 1994: 173).

CONFRONTING SPINOZA AND THE ‘THEOLOGICO-POLITICAL PREDICAMENT’

With this much of the mature Strauss’ position established, we can begin to see why Spinoza *must* assume such decisive importance for him, throughout Strauss’ career. On the one hand, as Spinoza’s embrace by liberal German Jews in the nineteenth century attests (Smith 2006: 75), Spinoza is the first philosopher to defend a form of *political* liberalism, predicated on the freedom of conscience, if not of action (cf. (eg) Scruton 1986: 6–99), as the best political regime. To quote Strauss:

The new society, constituted by the aspiration common to all its members towards the True, the Good, and the Beautiful, emancipated Jews in Germany. Spinoza became the symbol of that emancipation which was to be not only emancipation but secular redemption [see anon]. In Spinoza, a thinker and a saint who was both a Jew and a Christian and hence neither, all cultured families of the earth, it was hoped, would be blessed (Smith 2006: 76).

As this implies, Spinoza is also a figure who, at the heart of the enlightenment, *did* in his way try to ‘synthesise’ philosophy and revelation. He did this by submitting the claims of the latter to the principles or court of the former in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. According to Strauss, to quote from the important ‘Preface’ to his 1935 text, *Philosophy and Law*:

If ... the basis of the Jewish tradition is belief in the creation of the world, in the reality of biblical miracles, in the absolute obligation and the essential immutability of the Law as based on the revelation at Sinai, then one must say that the Enlightenment has undermined the foundation of the Jewish tradition. The radical enlightenment, *Spinoza comes to mind*, did just this from the beginning, with full consciousness and full intent (Strauss 1935: 5 [italics mine]).

Spinoza in these ways indeed becomes *the* figure whose legacy Strauss has to *overcome* in order to launch *own* ‘theologico-political’ project, as both a philosopher and a Jewish thinker. As Heinrich Meier has argued in his most recent book, indeed, Strauss’ 1962 autobiographical ‘Preface’ to *Spinoza’s Critique of Revelation* certainly encourages the hypothesis that all of Strauss’ work can be read as a kind of repetition and undoing of Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political* treatise, and the like treatises of Hobbes and the other great, modern enlighteners. (Meier 2006, 3, 9-18) *What* then does Strauss say concerning Spinoza in *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* and elsewhere? And – which will be my more specific question, because one which we will see is also inescapably (at) the basis of Strauss’ *own* response to Spinoza – *che vuoi?*, that is: what is it that Strauss *wants*, or which ‘powerful prejudice’ *might he want us to want*, by way of his reading[s] of Spinoza? (Strauss 1935: 4).

Strauss’ proximate interlocutor in *Spinoza’s Critique of Spinoza* is his teacher, the Marburg neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen, author of *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*. In ‘*Spinoza Uber Staat Und Religion ...*’ [1915, 1924] Cohen had argued that Spinoza’s very title in his *Theologico-Political Treatise* already indicates the former’s elision of the one theoretical element, namely philosophy, which might mediate between Spinoza’s theological concerns, and the book’s defense of political liberalism. In the absence of ‘the link of philosophy’ (Strauss 1924: 141), Cohen contended that Spinoza’s critiques of Judaism and of Maimonides in the *Treatise* could only have been motivated by a theoretically groundless, ‘humanly incomprehensible’ hatred of his own people, if not the all-too-human desire to exact vengeance on the Jewish people for his ban of 1670. Already in Strauss’ 1924 response, ‘Cohen’s Analysis of Spinoza’s Bible Science’, by contrast, the broad parameters of Strauss’ career-long, *politico-philosophical*, hermeneutic are evident. Strauss does not begin, *a la* Cohen, in purely theoretical concerns, and then descend to an historical or psychological ‘conjecture’ about Spinoza’s motives (Strauss 1924: 143). Strauss argues that the connection between political theory and critique of the bible is ‘sufficiently mo-

tivated' by ascending *from Spinoza's historical or political context*, 'whether or not he was full of hatred towards Judaism' (Strauss 1924: 143, 147). In particular, Strauss points out, Spinoza shared with Maimonides (and we may add, lastingly, with one Leo Strauss) at least this much: the existential conviction that the philosophical way of life or *bios*, characterised by freedom of inquiry, was the highest form of life for 'the few', if not for 'the many' (Strauss 1924: 142). In the political circumstances of seventeenth century Netherlands, Strauss writes:

The combination of the two heterogeneous problems of [Spinoza's] treatise has a deep root, namely, the context from which the separation of the two powers [of the day, State and Church] arises. That is to say: with respect to the state – and since the reference was to a liberal government – the rational construction [of the text] would have sufficed. The claims of the church, however, rested less on reason than on scripture. Therefore it was not enough to prove [in the *Tractatus*] that reason does not acknowledge the tutelage of the Church, it also had to be shown that the Church could not rely on Scripture ... [as] an authority for restricting free inquiry (Strauss 1924: 142).

Strauss makes clear that, by putting the comprehension of Spinoza's 'theologico-political' reflections on their proper footing – as a political defense of philosophy – he intends his critique of Spinoza to be much *more* radical than that of Cohen, his teacher (Strauss 1924: 158–161, 173). Indeed, Strauss' 1932 'Testament of Spinoza' finally proposes that the Jewish people should or *must*, imperatively, as it were 'repeat' Spinoza's 1670 excommunication, although the philosopher in him is unable not to conclude by acknowledging that Spinoza *will* continue to be venerated 'as long as there are men who know what it means to utter [the word] *independence*' (Strauss 1932: 222).⁴

STRAUSS' CRITIQUE OF SPINOZA'S CRITIQUE OF RELIGION

Strauss' *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* begins by aligning Spinoza's treatise with the tradition of the materialist critique of religion beginning with Epicurus in antiquity. This tradition was re-kindled, and given a specifically *political* spin, in the 'great age of enlightenment' by Da Costa, Peyrere, and Hobbes, against the background of the need to overcome the religious conflict that divided Europe (Strauss 1962: 35–106; 1926: 187–196). For all the marked differences between Spinoza's position and those of his predecessors in the materialist tradition, Spinoza shares two tasks with them, Strauss observes: first (1), the critique of the *contents* of religious belief, as teachings laying claim to the truth; second (2), the critique of what Strauss calls the 'interest' in the contents of such religious beliefs (Strauss 1926: 182). It inescapably falls to the radical critic of religion in the first sense, Strauss notes, to explain how or why, if religious beliefs are untrue and/or unverifiable, so many others could have fallen prey to, or *felt the need for*, such untrue beliefs. It is fair to say that the *final force or effect* of Strauss' critique of Spinoza's critique of revealed religion is to argue that *its* potency in the last instance rests, *and can only rest*, on Spinoza's rhetorical – which is to say *sub-philosophical* – discrediting of the *motives* for religious belief, as we shall see. The logic of the *way* Strauss goes about trying to establish this can be signaled by means of a liberal paraphrase of the first of Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*:

The puppet called 'Orthodoxy' is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of the inscrutability of the will or ways of God, which at least until comparatively recently had been wizened by the ridicule of the enlightenment and had to keep out of sight.⁵

The heart of Strauss' *Spinozabuch* has three parts. These examine Spinoza's critique of Orthodoxy or of scripture (1962: 111–146); Spinoza's critique of Maimonides as the highest culmination of Jewish 'theology' (147–192); and Spinoza's critique of the Calvinist anti-philosophy prominent in the Netherlands of his day (193–214).

Spinoza's avowed aim in the *Theologico-Political Treatise* was 'to liberate men's minds, held fast in ... prejudice, so that they might philosophise freely' (Strauss 1962: 144, 111–113). It is this abidingly political aim, Strauss proposes, that allows us to explain the structure of the text's theological and philosophical contents. In the *Tractatus*, Spinoza could not *presuppose* 'the constitution of philosophy', or the teachings of his own metaphysics in the *Ethics* (Strauss 1962: 144). Just as Hegel's *Phenomenology* or the Platonic dialogues differently start with the pre-philosophic *doxa* of contemporaries, so Spinoza had to begin by the 'immanent' (or even broadly 'proto-deconstructive') critique of the dogmatic teachings of accepted scripture. By donning the cap of Orthodoxy, and posing the scriptures 'as throughout and in every respect divine' (Strauss 1962: 115), though, Spinoza's goal was to 'limit the authority of Scripture *in its own realm*,' and in this way to persuade those who had the ears to hear to cast aside the *talit* altogether (Strauss 1962: 114). Spinoza attempted this, first, by showing how scripture *itself* contains contradictory statements on 'all the theological tenets over which philosophy and religion are in conflict'.⁶ The implication would be that, on all such matters, there is space within the bounds of received religion for philosophical reason to assume interpretive authority (Strauss 1962: 120, 138–139). Secondly and centrally, Spinoza adopted the accepted theological doctrines of the identity of the will and intellect of God, and of His omnipotence, in order to try to reduce to absurdity orthodox beliefs about the activity, revelation and sovereign decrees of God (Strauss 1962: 147–156; Soffer 1994: 148–151). For Spinoza, as many readers will know, to talk of God's will or decree as if this might be something different from the laws timelessly comprehended in the Divine 'Intellect', is both to diminish the latter, and to submit to a false conception of God *sub specie durationis* (cf. Scruton 1986: 93–96). From these 'pious' considerations, though, Spinoza purports to show that deeply impious consequences follow: that both exceptional revelation to inspired prophets (Strauss 1962: 183–185) and miraculous events in general are impossible. The reason is that both these possibilities would presuppose that God's transcendent will was capable of *interrupting* the laws of His own creation (Strauss 1962: 123–136, 185–191; Soffer 1994: 145–155). Equally foreclosed, more deeply than this, is the prophets' founding conception of divine *law*. The *hallakab*, Spinoza notes, is ordinarily understood as a set of proscriptions which humans might freely violate. Yet such human freedom to act in ways (*ex hypothesi*) unforeseeable by the Divine Mind again implies the impious conclusion that this Mind cannot be omniscient, or at least not equivalent to God's will (Strauss 1962: 154–155).

Readers familiar with the Cartesian argument for the Infinity of God in Descartes' *Meditation III* will recall how the argument effectively devolves upon the rigid designation of God as in the first instance that which the *cogito* can say absolutely nothing determinate (or 'finite') about, beyond affirming: 'Of God: *That He Exists*' (Sharpe 2006c). Strauss' *critique* of Spinoza's critique

of religion ironically recalls the method, if not the content, of Descartes' meditation. At each point Spinoza believes he has been able to find enough *common ground* between philosophy and revelation to allow the former to meaningfully engage with the latter, Strauss draws the ground from beneath Spinoza's feet (cf. Strauss 1989: 305–309). Spinoza's critique of the inconsistency of the bible presupposes for its effect acceptance of the one axiomatic proposition which 'sums up all the presuppositions of Spinoza's bible science': 'the Bible is a Human book' (Strauss 1962: 258; 143, 144–146). Yet, argues Strauss, it is exactly this proposition that the believer *as believer* will deny. Spinoza's 'positive' critique of miracles, which purports to show the unknowability of (imputed) miracles on the basis of all human knowledge acquired *hitherto* can, as such (Strauss 1962: 123–136), at most show the *improbability* of miraculous suspensions of natural law. Again, though, the improbability of God's miraculous action approaches an adequate description of their specifically *miraculous* nature for believers (Strauss 1962: 135–136). The appearance of piety informing Spinoza's denial of the difference between the will and intellect of God, Strauss notes most decisively of all, conceals Spinoza's impious presumption to be able to speak meaningfully at *all* about the Divine (Strauss 1962: 152–153). Maimonides' alleged conception of this 'identity', by contrast, was instead an expression of his avowed inability to predicate concerning God (Strauss 1962: 152). The latter's defense of the possibilities of prophecy, miracles and *lex divina*, in turn, were predicated – *contra* Spinoza – on the wholly consistent prioritization of the spontaneous *will* of God over what we take to be his Divine Mind. The reason is that to speak of the Divine Will, or so contends Strauss, is '... the surpassing means of adumbrating [exactly] the *incomprehensibility* of God' (Strauss 1962: 154 (italics mine); 1989: 307).

'RIDICULE'? YOUNG STRAUSS' JACOBIAN (AB)GRUND FOR THE CRITIQUE OF MODERN ENLIGHTENMENT

What then can we say concerning the results of Strauss' critique in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*? Figures including Smith and Zank have noted that the mediate interlocutor of Strauss' 1930 book, beyond Hermann Cohen, was F. H. Jacobi, on whom Strauss had written his dissertation (under Ernst Cassirer) in 1921 (Smith 2006: 67–71; Zank 2002, 15–26, 34–35). In the famous German 'pantheism' debate (with Mendelssohn) in the 1780s, Jacobi had argued that Spinoza's rationalist system of ethics denied the possibility of free human will, and hence the possibility of morality (Smith 2006: 69–71). Strauss' move in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* is to effectively 'bid up' Jacobi's radical opposition between reason and/or 'nihilism', and 'faith' and/or morality. The argued failure of Spinoza's immanent critique of scripture and theology means for Strauss that, in the last instance, Spinoza's critique of religion must rest on the demonstrable sufficiency of reason, and so Spinoza's system in the *Ethics*, to demonstrate the philosophic comprehensibility of God (Strauss 1989: 307). Yet, as Strauss was to argue fully only *after* his *kehre* in the early 1930s (in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Soffer 1994: 165–167), 'Progress or Return?' (Strauss 1989: 307–309) and elsewhere) Strauss maintains that a careful reading of Spinoza's *Ethics* in the light of Spinoza's *Correspondences* shows that the opening definitions of this text are 'arbitrary', 'and since the definitions are arbitrary, so are the conclusions' (Strauss 1994: 308). In Spinoza's letters to Meyer, Strauss observes, Spinoza argued for the final priority of analytic philosophical method, as 'the method by which truth is discovered' on the basis of perceived phenomena, over synthesis, as that method 'by which it [analytic truth] is set in order

(Soffer 1994: 165–166). If this is so, argues Strauss, then the groundlessness of the initial axioms of the synthetic system of the *Ethics* must follow:

They are not evident in themselves but they are thought to become evident through their alleged result: they and only they are thought to make possible the clear and distinct account of everything; [and] in the light of the clear and distinct account, the Biblical account appears to be confused. The *Ethics* [thus] begs the decisive question, the question as to whether the clear and distinct account is as such *true*, and not merely a plausible hypothesis (Strauss 1962: 29).

Jacobi accepted, in fear and trembling, that Spinoza's rational account of the whole might be *true* and *comprehensive* in order to advocate the *possibility* of an 'arbitrary' decision against it. We see now that, by contrast, Strauss goes one step further. Spinozism itself, Strauss argues, far from *establishing* universal determinism on grounds of reason alone, *itself* rests on a necessary act of 'arbitrary' or existential *choice* (cf. Smith 2006: 80–81). Such a choice might be more or less 'plausible,' but this cannot obscure the fact that the adjudication of its 'plausibility' can only take place *after* one has opted for reason, and within reason's terms. The non-availability of knowledge of the whole, as we might put it, means that if one *opts* for philosophy, one exactly *opts* for it, and so might equally have wagered otherwise. As Strauss' 1962 'Preface' to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* is still able to affirm, reflecting upon the results of his pivotal early encounter with Spinoza:

The genuine refutation of orthodoxy would require the proof that the world and human life are perfectly intelligible without the assumption of a mysterious God. ... Spinoza's *Ethics* attempts to be that system but it does not succeed; the clear and distinct account of everything which it presents remains fundamentally hypothetical. As a consequence its cognitive status is not different from that of the orthodox account. Certain it is that Spinoza cannot deny the possibility of revelation. But to grant that revelation is possible means to grant that the philosophic account and the philosophic way of life are not necessarily, nor evidently, the true account of everything: philosophy, the quest for evident and necessary knowledge, *rests itself on an unevident decision, on an act of will, just as faith does* (Strauss 1962: 29 [italics mine]; 1989: 304–305, 309–310).

So what then does Strauss take himself to have disclosed, by way of his theological-philosophical engagement with Spinoza? And: what should we say concerning what Strauss' critique of Spinoza might say of or to *us* today?

Strauss' 1962 'Preface' explains that his 1925–1928 study of Spinoza had been 'based on the premise, sanctioned by powerful prejudice, that a return to pre-modern philosophy is impossible' (Strauss 1962: 31). If this premise had animated Strauss' early reading of Spinoza, it is certain that Strauss' argument in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* served to convince him that, at the very least, the modern enlightenment had not succeeded in refuting revelation on the basis of reason alone. To ironically adopt what Strauss was to say concerning Spinoza, Strauss rather took himself to have overcome the modern enlightenment radically by understanding it radically

(Strauss 1962: 30). At the root even of Spinoza's attempt to refute Orthodoxy was allegedly an unevident decision, 'just as in faith', Strauss argues. In other words, the deepest question we will always be entitled to ask of a philosopher is *che vuoi?* (what do you want by choosing philosophy?), rather than the already-philosophical question *why do you hold to some one or other opinions, beliefs, etc.?* '[T]he antagonism between Spinoza and Judaism, between belief and non-belief, is ultimately not theoretical, but *moral*', Strauss can thus claim in his later 'Preface' to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (Strauss 1962: 29; 1989: 297–298).

In the same way, Strauss came to argue, the great enlighteners *can only have been* motivated by an ethical or existential *choice* against what they perceived to the 'kingdom of darkness' of religious societies, *not* the pure insight they valorised and advertised (Strauss 1962: 28–29, 178–182; 1936/1976, esp. viii–xii, 1–5, 29). In the same way, despite Strauss' own cautioning of Cohen against psychologizing Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Tractatus*, he argues that the *success* of this historical opposition to revelation can ultimately have rested less on reason than on rhetoric and 'ridicule':

From this point of view, it is easy to understand how mockery played so great a role in critique of religion in the Age of Enlightenment. The Enlightenment, as Lessing put it, had to laugh orthodoxy out of a position from which it could not be driven by any other means .../ The critique has a prospect of success, not by direct argumentation, but only by virtue of the mockery that lends spice to the arguments, and lodges them firmly in the hearer's mind ... (Strauss 1962: 143, 145–146).

CRITIQUE AND CONSEQUENCES: COMMENTS AGAINST SEVERAL ACCEPTED (ANTI-)STRAUSSIAN *DOXA*

In the contemporary conjuncture, when debates concerning Strauss have become so Manichean or polemical, what consequences or conclusions can we glean from undertaking a study of his earliest book on Spinoza?

A first striking, and perhaps surprising, consequence of a close study of Strauss' writings of Spinoza, is to immediately reverse the widespread suspicion of Strauss as 'esoterically' a Nietzschean relativist posing nobly to the non-philosophical public as a classical rationalist or orthodox theologian (eg Drury 1988). Such a position underlies much of the contemporary *animus* towards Strauss' work. Yet here as elsewhere, I would argue that *les non-dupes errant* (Sharpe 2006a, 2006b). To be sure, there are the famous, deeply compelling arguments Strauss puts against historicism and decisionism concerning ultimate values in the opening chapters of *Natural Right and History*. These would suggest Strauss' *exoteric*, later or mature opposition to any position, like that of his youthful writings, which would draw our attention to the groundless or abyssal basis of arguments concerning the whole and the good. Yet, as Strauss' defense of the conclusions of *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* in his late 'Preface' indicates, the whole truth concerning Strauss' position is more complex. As Catherine Zuckert has noted, it remains that when Strauss spoke *publicly* on political questions, and in particular – as in his famous address 'Why We Remain Jews?' (Strauss 1994) – when Strauss spoke concerning the political prospects of his own, particular people, that Strauss *always* defended the fundamental 'differend' between reason and revelation.⁷ Again and again in these texts, like a good Nietzschean, Strauss openly highlights the

‘conflict’, ‘antagonism’, ‘fundamental tension’ at the basis of the West as what above all the modern age has failed to accommodate, or by ‘dialectically’ accommodating it, has denatured:

The recognition of two conflicting roots of Western civilization is, at first, a very disconcerting observation. Yet this realization has also something assuring and comforting about it. The very life of Western civilization is the life between two codes, a fundamental tension. There is, therefore, no reason inherent in Western civilization itself, in its fundamental constitution, why it should give life. But this comforting thought is justified only if we live that life, if we live that conflict. Living the conflict may not be the ideal situation for human beings, but we must be prudent and accept our fate, with the realization that ‘it is not the worst fate which men could imagine’ (Strauss 1989: 289–290, 298).

If we are to properly understand the nature of Strauss’ later *kehre* away from his earlier work, then, we must note the *continuity* in Strauss’ emphasis on the inability of reason alone to decide the question between reason and revelation between young and mature Strauss. The question is of how this continuity can be understood, on the basis of Strauss’ texts. There are at least two consequences of noting this continuity I want to highlight to conclude, in terms of contemporary debates in political or critical theory.

The first point is that any progressive critiques of Strauss or ‘Straussianism’ that would pass beyond the level of ridicule or mockery – thereby performatively confirming Strauss’ hyper-Jacobian critique of enlightenment – will first have to come to terms with the *unheimlich* proximity between Strauss’ position and many of the leading positions hailed as politically of the left, if no longer in the van of progress. Strauss’ Jacobian or Heideggerian position that the question *che vuoi?* is ultimately deeper than all questions of *why?*, that all philosophical positions are hence as ultimately groundless as the decision in favor of philosophy itself, and that one can only ask after reasons *after* one has supra-rationally opted *for* reason against faith, etc., is after all not only a position held by Leo Strauss and ‘Straussians’. Although in other contexts we would need to specify between the letters of their texts, it is true to say that such a ‘pure insight’ is close to central propositions in the later Derrida, Alain Badiou, or Slavoj Žižek, to invoke only three proper names. For the later Derrida of *The Gift of Death*, for instance, every decision that is not simply an exercise in reading off a conclusion from preexisting parameters allegedly must involve what Derrida calls a decisionistic ‘madness,’ a groundless leap across an abyssal ‘undecidability’ (Derrida 1992: 26; 1995: 65, 77–80). For Žižek, despite his many polemics against post-structuralism, the decisive Act to which his political work pushes us would create, *ex nihilo*, the very grounds in whose light it would take on sense, on the model of traversing the fundamental fantasy at the end of the psychoanalytic cure (Žižek 1993: ch. 2; 1999: ch. 1; 2002: ch. 5). For Badiou, again, the ‘Truth Event’ – which is more like the messianic redemption envisioned in the bible than the Marxian revolution it seeks to displace (cf. Scholem 1971: esp. 10) – can in no way be espied in advance. Individuals’ ‘fidelity’ to it must be groundless, and involve ‘forcing’ others to recognise its transformative subjective Truth *after it has occurred*, on the model of Saint Paul’s missionary proclamation of the (for Badiou) fictitious resurrection of Christ (Badiou 2003: 2–17, 77–95).

The second thing then that Strauss' public defense of such a decisionistic position concerning philosophical and ethical grounds shows us – although Carl Schmitt's name might have been sufficient – is that it is a falsified prejudice that decisionism based on non-availability of knowledge of the whole is necessarily politically progressive, or politically of the 'left' in any other way. The logic behind this widespread prejudice again exactly doubles that underlying Strauss' critique of Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*. Strauss points to the argued impossibility of the modern enlighteners to ground their own rational systems as a means of questioning the 'powerful prejudice' in favor of philosophical and historical modernity. Equally, the post-structuralist critiques which uncover the abyssal undecidability (and hence need for one – or the Other – to have decided) at the bases of dominant Western philosophemes (Derrida), metanarratives (Lyotard), law (Agamben, later Derrida) or symbolic orders (Žižek) aim to show thereby the possibility of challenging these dominant structures. Yet, here where the post-structuralist positions halt, I would argue that the difference of Strauss' neoconservative position, and the precise nature of his later *kehre*, can be precisely stated.

Strauss himself comments in his 1962 'Preface' to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* that 'other observations and experiences confirmed the suspicion that it would be unwise to say farewell to reason,' as he implicitly acknowledges this early analysis might have done (Strauss 1962: 31). We can see one measure of what Strauss means by this by reflecting that, in this 1930 book on Spinoza, the pre-destinarian Protestant John Calvin is the figure who emerges most clearly ascendant, untouched by the barbs of Spinoza's rationalism because of his fundamental or fundamentalist Pauline choice against rationalism[s] as such (Strauss 1962: 193–214). As Heinrich Meier notes, Strauss' description of faith as grounded in the *will* certainly describes the position of a pre-modern believer much less adequately than the religion of the contemporary 'man from Missouri', as Strauss once described the American everyman from the Bible belt (Meier 2006: 16). What emerges from Strauss' 1932 'Comments' on Schmitt's *Concept of the Political* that Strauss says marked the first expression of his 'change of orientation' – and so come to append the 1962 version of *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* – is that young Strauss' critique of reason in order to make room for faith in no way returned him to the orbit of the German idealism of his teachers. Rather, what emerged at this point of Strauss' trajectory was his own take on the admonition of '*caute*' [cautiously] of Spinoza's signet ring, which Strauss praises at the end of his other 1932 essay, 'The Testament of Spinoza'. Namely, Strauss came now to accept the pre-modern distinctions between philosophy and politics, the many and the few, and with it the twin justifications of guarded, esoteric writing analyzed later in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. On the one side, Strauss could never renounce his *own* philosophic path, and so the desire to protect and promote the fearless freedom of inquiry dear to Spinoza (and Nietzsche and all the other philosophers). On the other side, as the 1932 'Comments' on Schmitt make clear, the mature Strauss' distance from Spinoza's modern 'theologico-political' synthesis is played out on the basis of Strauss' accepting, in a way that pushes him beyond the horizon of modern liberalism, the need to 'take evil seriously' (Shell 1994: 175). If philosophy can not disprove revelation, for the mature Strauss, it also has a public *duty* not to undermine its bases. The reason is that revealed religion is both salutary for non-philosophers, and necessary for the political order which would make philosophy possible, given the overwhelming historical and existential reality of what

Strauss calls, with and against Schmitt, ‘evil as *moral* depravity’ (Strauss 1962: 345; Shell 1994: 189).⁸

It goes without saying that it is with this *political* turn that the convergence between Strauss’ neo-conservatism and post-structuralism ends, exactly where Strauss’ solution to his own ‘theo-
logico-political predicament,’ and his specifically political philosophy, began.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ See Muravchik (2004: 249): ‘there is however one thing Strauss and Trotsky did have in common, and one thing that may get us closer to the real reason their names have been so readily invoked. Both were Jews. The neoconservatives, it turns out, are also in large part Jewish – and this, to their detractors, constitutes evidence of the ulterior motives that lurk behind the policies they oppose.’
- ² This paper was originally presented at a conference on Spinoza at the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne in September 2006.
- ³ As I have done elsewhere. See Sharpe 2006a and Sharpe 2006b.
- ⁴ Leo Strauss, ‘Testament of Spinoza’ (1932) ends, in full, as follows: ‘And still we ask whether we owe him veneration? Spinoza will be venerated as long as there are men who know how to appreciate the inscription on his signet ring (‘caute’ [cautiously, safely]) or, to put it plainly, as long as there are men who know what it means to utter [the word] independence’ (in Leo Strauss 1932/2002). And see below.
- ⁵ To underscore: the substitution of ‘Orthodoxy’ for ‘historical materialism’ in Benjamin, and of ‘the inscrutability of the will or ways of God’ for ‘theology’ in Benjamin, aims principally just to highlight the logic of Strauss’ argument. We cannot pursue here the question, nor do we mean to robustly suggest, the parallels between Strauss’ and Benjamin’s positions as young German Jews in Weimar. This logic at stake in Strauss’ critique of the ability of Spinoza’s critique of the bible to touch upon what is at stake in religious faith is made clear in ensuing paragraphs.
- ⁶ And, per absurdum, the contents of the various ‘revealed’ religions contradict each other.
- ⁷ Again, the first two parts of ‘Progress or Return?’ were adapted from a speech Strauss gave in November 1952 to Hillel House at the University of Chicago. These two parts are where Strauss highlights the ‘two roots of Western civilization’, and the vitality of their tension.
- ⁸ As Shell shows, the meaning of Strauss’ enigmatic closing remarks to his ‘Comments on Der Begriff der Politischen’ – that Schmitt needs to more radically overcome liberalism – is this. Schmitt acknowledges the ‘authoritarian’ conviction that man is evil and in need of domension. However, as his recourse to Hobbes would indicate, Schmitt figures this ‘evil’ in terms of man’s being the cunning and dangerous animal of the liberal state of nature: namely, as fundamentally ‘guiltless’ (as of course Spinoza also did). What Strauss proposes, that is, if Schmitt is to overcome the ‘systematics’ of liberal thought, is for him to ‘work his way back to the conception of evil as moral depravity (Schlechtigkeit).’ (Strauss 1962: 345).

REFERENCES

- Badiou, A. 2003. *Saint Paul: The Foundations of Universalism* translated by Ray Brassier Stanford University Press: Stanford, California.
- Clarke, B. 2004. ‘Leo Strauss and the Straussians’ (Letter to the Editor). *Quadrant Magazine*, November.
- Derrida, J. 1992. *The Gift of Death*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Drury, S. 1988. *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.
- Franklin, H. 1994. ‘Philosophy and Law: Leo Strauss as a Student of Medieval Jewish Thought’, *Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker* ed. Deutsch, K., Nicgorski, W. USA: Rowman & Littlefield.

- Gunnell, J. 1994. 'Strauss Before Straussianism: Reason, Revelation, and Nature', *Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker* ed. Deutsch, K.; Nicgorski, W. USA: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Hartwich, W. et al. 2004. 'Afterword'. In *The Political Theology of Paul*, by Taubes, J. Stanford University Press: Stanford.
- Liotard, J. 1988. *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. Translated by Van Den Abbeele, Georges. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Meier, H. 2006. *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Joshua Muravchik. 2004. 'The Neoconservative Cabal'. In *The Neocon Reader*, edited with an Introduction by Stelzer, Irwin. Grove Press: New York.
- Scholem, G. 1971. *The Messianic Idea in Judaism, and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Scruton, R. 1986. *Spinoza*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- Sharpe, M. 2006a. 'The Philosopher's Courtly Love? Leo Strauss, Eros and the Law'. *Law and Critique* 17: 357–388.
- Sharpe, M. 2006b. 'The Sphinx's Secret? Or How We Learnt to Stop Worrying and Believe Through the Hoi Poloi'. In *Arena Journal* 27 (September): 123 ff.
- Sharpe, M. 2006c. 'In the Name of the Father. Descartes, Reality, Madness, and God'. *Journal of Lacanian Studies* 4 (2) (December): 214–232.
- Shell, S. 1994. 'Taking Evil Seriously: Schmitt's "Concept of the Political" and Strauss' "True Politics"'. In *Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker*, edited by Deutsch, K.; Nicgorski, W. USA: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Smith, S. 2006. *Reading Leo Strauss. Politics, Philosophy, Judaism*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago.
- Smith, S. 1994. 'Leo Strauss: Between Athens and Jerusalem', *Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker*, edited by Deutsch, K.; Nicgorski, W. USA: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Schmitt, C. 1996. *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes: Meaning and Failure of a Political Symbol*. Translated by Schwab, G.; Hilfstein, E. Westport: Greenwood. (Originally published in 1938).
- Schmitt, C. 1996. *The Concept of the Political*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. ('Foreword' by Tracy Strong and includes 'Comments on *Der Begriff des Politischen*' by Leo Strauss. Originally published in 1932).
- Soffer, W. 1994. 'Modern Rationalism, Miracles, and Revelation: Strauss' Critique of Spinoza', in *Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker*, edited by Deutsch, K.; Nicgorski, W. USA: Nicgorski Rowman & Littlefield. pp. 143–174.
- Strauss, L. [and Kojeve, A.]. 2000. *On Tyranny. Including the Strauss-Kojeve Correspondence*. Edited by Gourevitch; Roth, M. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Strauss, L. 1994. 'Why We Remain Jews: Can Jewish Faith and History Still Speak to Us?'. In *Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker*, edited by Deutsch, K.; Nicgorski, W. Rowman & Littlefield: USA. pp. 43–80.
- Strauss, L. 1989. 'Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis of Western Civilization'. In *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, edited by Griblin, H. Wayne State University Press: Detroit. pp. 249–310.
- Strauss, Leo. 1983. 'Jerusalem and Athens: Some Introductory Reflections', in Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* ed. Thomas Pangle. University of Chicago Press: Chicago.
- Strauss, L. 1962. *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Strauss, L. 1958. *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Strauss, L. (1948) 1997. 'How to Study Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*', in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity. Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, edited with an Introduction by Hart Green, Kenneth. State University of New York Press: New York. pp. 181–234.
- Strauss, L. (1936) 1976. *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes. Its Basis and its Genesis*, translated by Else M. Sinclair. University of Chicago Press: Chicago & London.

- Strauss, L. (1935) 1987. *Philosophy and Law: Essays Towards an Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors*, translated by Baumann, Fred. Jewish Publication Society of America: Philadelphia.
- Strauss, L. (1932) 2002. 'The Testament of Spinoza', in *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, translated and edited by Zank, Michael. State University of New York Press: New York.
- Strauss, L. (1930) 1982. *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. Schlocken Books, New York.
- Strauss, L. (1928) 1997. 'Freud on Moses and Monotheism', in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity. Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, edited with an Introduction by Hart Green, Kenneth. State University of New York Press: New York.
- Strauss, L. (1928) 2002. 'Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*'. In *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, translated and edited by Zank, Michael. State University of New York Press: New York.
- Strauss, L. (1926) 2002. 'On the Bible Science of Spinoza and His Predecessors'. In *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, translated and edited by Zank, Michael. State University of New York Press: New York.
- Strauss, L. (1924) 2002. 'Cohen's Analysis of Spinoza's Bible Science', in *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, translated and edited by Zank, Michael. State University of New York Press: New York. pp. 140–172.
- Strauss, L. (1921) 2002. 'The Problem of Knowledge in the Philosophical Doctrine of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi'. In *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, translated and edited by Zank, Michael. State University of New York Press: New York.
- Taubes, J. 2004. *The Political Theology of Paul*. Stanford University Press: Stanford.
- Zank, M. 2002. 'Introduction'. In *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, translated and edited by Zank, M. State University of New York Press: New York. pp. 1–52.
- Žižek, S. 2002. *For They Know Not What They Do*. London: Verso.
- Žižek, S. 1999. *The Ticklish Subject* London: Verso.
- Žižek, S. 1993. *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood*. London: Routledge.
- Žižek, S. 1992. *Enjoy Your Symptom!* London: Routledge.
- Zuckert, C. 1996. *Postmodern Platos*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago.
- Zuckert, C.; Zuckert, M. 2006. *The Truth About Leo Strauss. Political Philosophy and American Democracy*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago.

Cite this article as: Sharpe, Matthew. 2007. 'Che Vuoi? Politico-philosophical remarks on Leo Strauss' Spinoza'. *The Bible and Critical Theory* 3 (3): pp. 41.1–41.14. DOI: 10.2104/bc070041.