I

THE THEOLOGICO-POLITICAL PROBLEM

On the Theme of Leo Strauss

Philosophieren ist: im Bewusstsein der schlechthinnigen Vergänglichkeit *alles* Menschlichen, aber gleich als ob einem die ganze Ewigkeit zur Verfügung stände, nach der Wahrheit suchen – mit vollkommener Ruhe, ohne jegliche Eile – stets dringlich, aber niemals eilig – mit dem Mut zum schönen Wagnis, und beständig bereit, ganz von vorn anzufangen.

(To philosophize is to be conscious of the absolute transitoriness of *all* that is human, but at the same time as if one had all eternity at one's disposal, to search for the truth – with complete calm, without any hurry – always with urgency, but never hurried – with the courage for a graceful venture, and constantly prepared to begin from the very beginning.)

– Leo Strauss, Note from April 1, 1937

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THE THEOLOGICO-POLITICAL PROBLEM

Nothing is as controversial in the thought of Leo Strauss and nothing is as central to a proper understanding of it as the theologico-political problem. Not only is the position that Strauss takes on the theologico-political problem controversial. The controversy already concerns what position he in truth took. And since the theologico-political problem lies at the center of Strauss's political philosophy, the controversy shapes the confrontation with all the great themes of Strauss's oeuvre, ranging from the dialogue between the ancients and the moderns via philosophy as a way of life and the exoteric-esoteric art of writing to the critique of historicism.

In 1964, Strauss himself made clear beyond all doubt the centrality of the theologico-political problem in one of his not exactly numerous autobiographical remarks. The statement, which long received next to no attention, though it succinctly names the internal unity of his works in a single sentence, is prepared for by the opening of the "Preface to the English Translation" that he wrote in August 1962 for the American edition of his first work, *Die Religionskritik Spinozas*. The first paragraph reads: "This study on Spinoza's *Theologico-political Treatise* was written during the years 1925–28 in Germany. The author was a young Jew born and raised in Germany who found himself in the grip of the theologico-political predicament."[1] In October 1964, shortly after his sixty-fifth birthday, Strauss once again looked back at the beginnings of his path of thought in Germany, this time in the preface to *Hobbes*'

1 *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, trans. E. M. Sinclair (New York: Schocken, 1965), 1. This is a translation of *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft. Untersuchungen zu Spinozas Theologisch-politischem Traktat* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1930), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Heinrich Meier, vol. 1 (Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler, 1996; 2d, expanded ed., 2001), 55–361. Unless otherwise noted, all texts cited are by Leo Strauss.

politische Wissenschaft, the German edition of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes.* Here he recalls his early study of the biblical criticism that began in the seventeenth century, particularly of Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus,* and the challenge that the theology of revelation has posed for him since the twenties: "The reawakening of theology, which for me is epitomized by the names Karl Barth and Franz Rosenzweig, seemed to make it necessary for one to study the extent to which the critique of orthodox – Jewish and Christian – theology deserved to be victorious." And then he adds: "The theologico-political problem has since remained *the* theme of my studies."[2]

This statement, which is as laconic as it is characteristic, appears in the first and, at the same time, last text with which Strauss, after an interruption of nearly three decades, addresses German-speaking readers. To understand correctly the perspective from which the preface to *Hobbes' politische Wissenschaft* was conceived, one must know that 1965, the year in which the volume would appear that comprised both the first publication of the German original of the Hobbes book he had finished thirty years earlier and the reprint of his "Anmerkungen zu Carl Schmitt, *Der Begriff des Politischen*" (first published in September 1932), was the same year for which Strauss had accepted an invitation to return as visiting professor to the University of Hamburg, where in 1921 he had received his doctorate, under the direction of Ernst Cassirer, with a dissertation on the problem of knowledge in Jacobi. At the last moment, health reasons ruined his plans to teach philosophy in Hamburg. A brief visit in 1954 – which took him to Freiburg im Breisgau, Heidelberg, Frankfurt am Main, and his birthplace, Kirchhain in Hessen – was thus to be Strauss's only stay in Germany after he had left Berlin in 1932 for Paris and later continued on to London and Cambridge.

When in 1964, with his return to Germany as both author and teacher in view, Strauss named the "theologico-political problem" as the unifying theme of his studies, he apparently assumed that the hint was more likely to be understood and taken up in Germany than anywhere else. However, this formulation of Strauss's for the urgent confrontation with the theological and the political alternative to philosophy could hardly find an echo among the German-speaking audience before a new access to political philosophy had been opened up. His formulation had to

2 *Hobbes' politische Wissenschaft* (Neuwied am Rhein/Berlin: Luchterhand, 1965), 7, in *Gesammelte Schriften,* vol. 3 (Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler, 2001), 7–8.

meet with incomprehension so long as the confrontation with the theological and the political alternative was not grasped as the very heart of political philosophy. In view of the particular circumstances under which Strauss identified the theologico-political problem as *the* theme of his wide-ranging oeuvre, it may be appropriate that a German reader – one who came to know Strauss and engaged him just as he came to know and engaged other philosophers of the past, namely, solely by reading their writings and confronting their thought – makes the theologico-political problem his theme.

Why does Strauss – in the hint from October 1964 about the center and unity of his work, a hint that is unique in his publications – choose the concept "theologico-political problem"? Why does he not have recourse to the formula "Jerusalem and Athens," which he had employed time and again since the mid-forties? Why does he not speak of the conflict between philosophy and revelation? Why not of the tension between the commonwealth and philosophy? Why does he not appropriate the heading "ancients and moderns," under which friends and students had published a festschrift in his honor only a few weeks earlier? Clearly for him, the theologico-political problem designates the fundamental problem, the theme in which the other themes meet, through which they are bound together, and in whose light each is accorded its specific place.

Let us begin by considering the *querelle des anciens et des modernes,* which Strauss rekindled at the beginning of the thirties and which kept him in motion as it did no other philosopher of the twentieth century. For Strauss, the quarrel has its ultimate source in the different stance of the ancients and the moderns towards the theologico-political problem, a stance that in each case rests on different historical situations, is reflected in different political strategies, and, finally, is given expression in different philosophical assessments of the problem. In a lecture about "philosophy and revelation," which he gave in January 1948 at the Hartford Theological Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut, under the prescribed title "Reason and Revelation," Strauss brings the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns to a head in the thesis-like formula: "A philosophy which believes that it can refute the possibility of revelation – and a philosophy which does not believe that: this is the real meaning of la querelle des anciens et des modernes."[3] The

3 "Reason and Revelation," fol. N 5 recto. Leo Strauss Papers, Box 11, Folder 13. My transcription of the text may be found in the Appendix to this book.

theologico-political problem confronts us – we note first of all – with the difficulty of refuting the possibility of revelation.

The conflict between philosophy and revelation, from which arises the task of refuting the possibility of revelation, is articulated by Strauss more sharply in his lecture to the theologians at the Hartford Seminary than in any of his writings before or after. He works out the opposition in which the freedom of questioning and knowing that philosophy requires and the obedience to the sovereign authority that revelation commands stand to one another: "To the philosophic view that man's happiness consists in free investigation or insight, the Bible opposes the view that man's happiness consists in obedience to God." The opposition in principle between philosophy and revelation regarding man's happiness already proves in the next sentence to be the truly radical opposition regarding the right and the necessity of philosophy: "The Bible thus offers the only challenge to the claim of philosophy which can reasonably be made. One cannot seriously question the claim of philosophy in the name, e.g., of politics or poetry. To say nothing of other considerations, man's ultimate aim is what is really good and not what merely *seems* to be good, and only through *knowledge* of the good is he enabled to find the good." Strauss steers from the truly radical opposition directly towards the absolutely fundamental alternative, on which the conflict between philosophy and revelation is based and which concerns man as man: "But this is indeed the question: whether men can acquire the knowledge of the good, without which they cannot guide their lives individually and collectively, by the unaided efforts of their reason, or whether they are dependent for that knowledge on divine revelation. Only through the Bible is philosophy, or the quest for knowledge, challenged by *knowledge*, viz. by knowledge revealed by the omniscient God, or by knowledge identical with the self-communication of God. No alternative is more fundamental than the alternative: human guidance or divine guidance. *Tertium non datur.*"[4] That philosophy can seriously be called into question only in the name of revelation means two things: Revelation appears as *the* challenge to philosophy since it holds the prospect of the fulfillment of the deepest desire that moves philosophy, the knowledge of truth, and at the same time radically negates that desire itself as a free desire. The God of revelation claims to have at his disposal in perfection, without restriction, and without

4 "Reason and Revelation," fol. 4 recto/4 verso; cf. *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 74–75.

distortion, precisely that at which the eros of philosophy aims; but he makes access to it subject to his sovereign decision to reveal the truth he harbors within himself to whom he wishes, when he wishes, where he wishes, and how he wishes in the bounds that his will establishes and to the ends that his judgment determines. For philosophy, revelation represents both a theoretical and an existential challenge. Revelation challenges philosophy theoretically by confronting philosophy with the question of whether the truth, the all-important truth, is not missed when it is sought after freely by man, whether the sole possible access to truth does not instead consist in its devout acceptance of him who *is the* truth. Revelation challenges philosophy existentially by confronting philosophy with the commandment of obedience, which rejects the philosophical life in the name of the highest authority conceivable and imposes on that life the severest sanction imaginable. Politics or poetry are incapable of *seriously* calling philosophy into question since they – or so long as they – do not negate the philosophical life by appealing to the knowledge, truth, and power of the omniscient, the omnipotent, the unfathomable God and cannot add weight to their objection to philosophy with the prospect of eternal salvation or eternal damnation. The theologico-political problem draws our attention – we note secondly – to the requirement to defend the right and the necessity of philosophy against the double challenge that revelation and the life based on it, the life of the obedience of faith, represents for philosophy.

The tension between the political community and philosophy precedes the conflict between philosophy and revelation, and the same holds for the requirement to justify the right and the necessity of philosophy rationally and defend them politically. The philosophical life, which has its raison d'être in the fact that it is based on unreserved questioning and does not rest satisfied with any answer that owes its authentication to an authority, does not find itself in a precarious situation only with the appearance of revealed religions. As a distinct way of life that rests on a conscious choice and is held fast in the face of all resistance, philosophy is an answer to the question of what is right, an answer that is always already confronted with authoritative answers to the question of what is right and just for man. It meets the political obligations and moral demands that oppose it with the will to enforcement. It is subject to the law of the commonwealth, divine or human commandments and prohibitions. In the confrontation with the *theios nomos* of a given polis, it discovers *physis* and finds itself. So much for the situation of philosophy and the horizon in which the alternative of a

life of human guidance or a life of divine guidance naturally arises. Has the tension between the commonwealth and philosophy been superseded by the conflict of philosophy with revelation? Does it, in view of the new, far more serious challenge lose any of its interest? Or how is the relationship of the truly radical opposition regarding the right and the necessity of philosophy to the absolutely fundamental alternative for man to be determined more precisely? In one of his latest and most important essays, his "Note on the Plan of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*," Strauss says of Nietzsche in 1973: "Philosophy and religion, it seems, belong together – belong more closely together than philosophy and the city. . . . The fundamental alternative is that of the rule of philosophy over religion or the rule of religion over philosophy; it is not, as it was for Plato or Aristotle, that of the philosophic and the political life; for Nietzsche, as distinguished from the classics, politics belongs from the outset to a lower plane than either philosophy or religion."[5] When Nietzsche – in contrast to the political philosophers of antiquity, but in agreement with those of modernity – focuses on the question of whether religion should rule over philosophy or philosophy over religion, he takes account of the changed historical situation, which came about for philosophy through the rise of revealed religions and in particular through the ascent of Christianity. Strauss is far from placing in doubt the urgency or even the legitimacy of the question of rule. Rather than contesting that the vital interest of philosophy is to assert itself against a sovereign religion with a universal claim, which has the theological and the political means at its disposal to make philosophy subservient to it, Strauss instead subjects to an emphatic critique the more than millennium-long accommodation of a philosophy petrified in the tradition of its doctrinal contents to a powerful tradition of obedience or, in his words, the "perverse interweaving of a *nomos*-tradition with a philosophical tradition."[6] What objection does Strauss raise, then, against the alternative he attributes to Nietzsche? As we have seen, for Strauss, philosophy meets the decisive challenge in revelation. In the end, philosophy cannot be shaken in its ownmost claim by

5 "Note on the Plan of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*" (1973), in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 176.

6 Letter to Gerhard Krüger from November 17, 1932, in *Gesammelte Schriften* 3, 406; cf. "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy" (1952), *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 3 (1979), 113; *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1952), 19–21, 168, 179; *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1958), 184–85, 231; *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 193.

politics, and its deepest desire is incapable of finding fulfillment in the political life. Yet if philosophy is to be in a position to respond appropriately to the challenge of revealed religion, it must seriously engage the expectations and demands that distinguish the political life, and it must confront the moral obligations, the notions of the common good and of the just rule of God or of men, that determine that life. What Strauss has in view when he accuses Nietzsche of regarding politics as belonging from the outset to a lower plane than philosophy and religion is the requirement that one start more radically with politics, with the commonwealth, with the foundations of its existence, with its vital element, the opinions and valuations of its citizens, in order to find the horizon in which philosophy and religion can begin their dispute with one another and carry it out.[7] The fundamental alternative – as we may put Strauss's objection – does not concern the question of whether philosophy or religion should rule. The fundamental alternative is opened up only by the question: *What is the right life?* And at stake in it is an eminently political question. The precise formulation with which Strauss chooses to characterize the unifying theme of his studies, namely, as a theologico-*political* problem – we note thirdly and finally – contains a hint about the path on which the right and the necessity of philosophy are capable of being justified and on which the confrontation with revelation is capable of being carried out successfully.

What is most conspicuous in Strauss's formulation I have yet to touch on. His mention of the "theologico-political problem" immediately calls to mind the theologico-political enterprise that drove modern philosophy forward. From Strauss's perspective, this enterprise was unsuccessful in at least one respect: it was unable to settle the theologico-political *problem*. The political success of the enterprise, the establishment of liberal society, gave the problem merely, but consequentially, a new twist: the old theological difficulty was left unresolved, whereas the new political challenge consisted henceforth in restoring the rank of the political and in making the dignity of the political life visible once again. The

7 An implication of his objection that Strauss did not spell out is the criticism that Nietzsche did not free himself to the extent necessary from the valuations of the political life because he did not take them seriously enough philosophically, and this holds first and foremost for the will to rule itself. Whether this criticism reaches the center of Nietzsche's philosophy or whether it bears only on his exoteric teaching, Nietzsche's project of rule by philosophers of the future, need not occupy us here. More important for us is the clue concerning the direction in which Strauss pursues a solution to the theologico-political problem.

historical process initiated by the theologico-political enterprise of modern philosophy led to the parceling of human life into a multiplicity of "autonomous provinces of culture." In the supposedly amicable cooperation and coexistence of the economy, politics, religion, art, science, and so on, philosophy loses the serious alternatives, and with them fades the awareness that philosophy is a special way of life. In the world of modern culture that it decisively helped to bring about, philosophy is less equipped than ever to carry out the confrontation with revelation successfully and to justify its right and its necessity rationally.

It is here that I come to the third or the first passage in which Strauss employs the epithet "theologico-political" in his own name to characterize his historical situation, his theme, and his endeavor. In 1935, in an enigmatic footnote to *Philosophie und Gesetz,* he raises in passing, as it were, the question of the appropriate philosophical treatment of the theologico-political problem. A radical critique of the modern concept of "culture" – as one crux of which he names the "fact of religion" and as its other crux the "fact of the political" – is possible, Strauss says, only in the form of a "theologico-political treatise." However, such a treatise would have to have, "if it is not to lead once again to the founding of culture, exactly the opposite tendency of the theologico-political treatises of the seventeenth century, especially those by Hobbes and Spinoza."[8] The thrust of the theologico-political treatises of the seventeenth century aimed at the recovery and the persistent safeguarding of the *libertas philosophandi* by means of an effective separation of politics from theology. Peace and security – thus read philosophy's conceptual offering in its secular alliance with the political sovereign – could be achieved on the path of the progressive domination of nature and the transformation enabled thereby of human living conditions in general. Philosophy would supply the reliable and manageable knowledge required for the methodical conquest of nature and the rational reorganization of society, while the sovereign would have to take care of political protection. With this comprehensive project, the battle of the theologico-political treatises against the "kingdom of darkness" and "superstition" took the lead. What begins with the emancipation of politics from theology results ultimately, after the successful unleashing of

8 *Philosophie und Gesetz. Beiträge zum Verständnis Maimunis und seiner Vorläufer* (Berlin: Schocken, 1935), 31, in *Gesammelte Schriften,* vol. 2 (Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler, 1997), 30–31 n. 2; cf. "Jerusalem and Athens" (1967), in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy,* 147–49.