LEO STRAUSS AND THE THEOLOGICO-POLITICAL PROBLEM

This book, by one of the most prominent interpreters of Leo Strauss's thought, is the first to address the problem that Leo Strauss himself said was *the* theme of his studies: the theologico-political problem or the confrontation with the theological and the political alternative to philosophy as a way of life. In his theologico-political treatise, which comprises four parts and an appendix, Heinrich Meier clarifies the distinction between political theology and political philosophy and reappraises the unifying center of Strauss's philosophical enterprise. The book is the culmination of Meier's work on the theologico-political problem. It will interest anyone who seeks to understand both the problem caused by revelation for philosophy and the challenge posed by political-religious radicalism in current events. The appendix makes available for the first time two lectures by Strauss that are immediately relevant to the subject of this book and that will open the way for future research and debate on the legacy of Strauss.

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HEINRICH MEIER

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Tanto amico nullum par elogium

CONTENTS

Preface to the American Edition *page* xi

I. THE THEOLOGICO-POLITICAL PROBLEM: ON THE THEME OF LEO STRAUSS

1. The Theologico-Political Problem 3
2. On the Genealogy of Faith in Revelation 29
3. Death as God: A Note on Martin Heidegger 45

II. THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY AND THE INTENTION OF THE PHILOSOPHER: REFLECTIONS ON LEO STRAUSS 53

III. WHAT IS POLITICAL THEOLOGY? 75

IV. WHY POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY? 89

APPENDIX: TWO UNPUBLISHED LECTURES BY LEO STRAUSS

1. The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy (1940) 115
2. Reason and Revelation (1948) 141

Index of Names 181

PREFACE TO THE AMERICAN EDITION

Leo Strauss found his task in the recovery of political philosophy, and, like no other philosopher of the twentieth century, he engaged in the confrontation with the challenge of revelation. Both are intimately bound together: the grounding of political philosophy and the confrontation with faith in revelation are two sides of one and the same endeavor. What is at issue in both is the rational justification and the political defense of the philosophical life. For this issue, Strauss introduced the concept of the theologico-political problem.

To realize his endeavor, Strauss drew on the entire tradition of political philosophy, which he traced back to its Socratic beginning and whose history – in its continuity, as well as its turns and breaks – he made the object of penetrating studies. Strauss affirmed the tradition when he grasped philosophy as a way of life, and he returned to its Socratic origin when he reawakened the awareness that philosophy has to prove its rationality elenctically, in confrontation with the most demanding alternative. But like every philosopher, he chose the ways and means, the concepts and the rhetoric, that in his judgment were best suited for his task. These included deliberate deviations from the tradition. One was, for instance, his exposure of the exoteric-esoteric art of writing, of which philosophers had availed themselves for more than two millennia. In Strauss's oeuvre, it is given an emphasis that is without example in the history of philosophy. And this holds no less for the concept of political philosophy itself, to which he gave prominence as no other philosopher had before. In his writings, Strauss made the concept a focus of attention. He used it in 1936 in the title of the first book he published in English, *Hobbes' Political Philosophy*, and in the title of his last book, posthumously published in 1983, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, as well as in the titles of nine essays from the years

between 1945 and 1971.[1] Together with Joseph Cropsey, he edited the monumental *History of Political Philosophy*, which first appeared in 1963 (and then in a revised and expanded version in 1972) and to which a number of his students contributed. Yet even before that, he had given a collection of his own essays the programmatic title *What Is Political Philosophy?* The title of the book, from 1959, raised the concept of political philosophy to the level of classical distinction: it made the cause[2] of political philosophy the object of a Socratic question, a cause for which the concept was missing in Socratic philosophy.[3]

If Strauss granted the concept "political philosophy" a weight and visibility that it had never had before, he did so neither to put philosophy in the service of politics nor to encourage that it be put in the service of politics but, quite the reverse, in order to sharpen the understanding of the tension that by necessity exists between philosophy and the political community and to demand emphatically and to promote vigorously philosophy's reflection on its political presuppositions and its rational foundations. And if he dealt more intensively than any other philosopher of his age with the biblical position of faith, he did not do so in order to clear the way to a "Jewish philosophy," which for him was just as much a wooden iron as was a "Christian philosophy": on the contrary, because he took radically seriously revelation's claim to truth, he insisted on the incompatibility of faith in revelation and philosophy.

When, in looking back on his path of thought, Strauss named the theologico-political problem as the theme of his studies, he said in almost as many words that his entire work revolved around philosophy as a way of life and that he had its justification in view. If philosophy is able to justify its right and its truth only elenctically, it has to concentrate on that way of life that might defeat its own answer to the question of

1 "On Classical Political Philosophy" (1945), "On a New Interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy" (1946), "Political Philosophy and History" (1949), "On the Spirit of Hobbes' Political Philosophy" (1950), "On the Basis of Hobbes's Political Philosophy" (1954/1959), "What Is Political Philosophy?" (1955/1959), "The Liberalism of Classical Political Philosophy" (1959), "The Crisis of Political Philosophy" (1964), "Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy" (1969/1971).

2 The German word *Sache* is difficult to translate in a uniform way. Although 'cause' is the best rendering here, elsewhere in this book it is also translated as 'matter at issue', 'issue', or 'substance' (translator's note).

3 The concept does not occur in Plato's and Xenophon's writings. In Aristotle, we find φιλοσοφία πολιτική just once in *Politics* III, 12, 1282b23 (William of Moerbeke translated the important passage as *philosophia politica*). In *De oratore* III 109.4, Cicero speaks of political philosophers (*politici philosophi*). The Emperor Julian cites the concept πολιτικὴ φιλοσοφία in *Epistulae* 61 c. 23.

what is right. If philosophy is able to demonstrate its rationality only by knowing how to repel and refute the most powerful objection to philosophy, it has to seek out that objection and make it as strong as it possibly can, as strong as only philosophy can make it. It is in this sense that Strauss turned to the political life and the life of the obedience of faith in his theologico-political treatises. It is in this sense that he sought out the challenge of revelation and made it strong for philosophy. For there is no more powerful objection to the philosophical life imaginable than the objection that appeals to faith in the omnipotent God and to his commandment or law.

The present book seeks to elucidate the unifying center of Strauss's philosophical endeavor by making the cause at which his endeavor aimed its own. The four chapters of the book are closely connected with the writings that I have published over the past two decades, and they bring to a provisional conclusion the confrontation that I conducted in *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue*[4] and *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt: Four Chapters on the Distinction between Political Theology and Political Philosophy*.[5] Chapters I and II address Strauss's philosophy directly, whereas Chapters III and IV deal with two concepts whose distinction is imperative for the clarification of the theologico-political problem.

Chapter I is a tripartite treatise.[6] The first part, "The Theologico-Political Problem,"[7] states what the problem involves and which approaches to its solution Strauss's oeuvre contains. It explains how and why the challenge to, and the critique of, the philosophical life posed by politics and religion must be grasped as *the* theme of Leo Strauss's work and why Strauss takes the philosophical refutation of faith in revelation to be a theologico-*political* problem. The commentary "On the Genealogy of Faith in Revelation" attempts, by way of an example

4 Translated by J. Harvey Lomax (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). The American edition was based on *Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss und "Der Begriff des Politischen". Zu einem Dialog unter Abwesenden* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1988; expanded ed., 1998).

5 Translated by Marcus Brainard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). The translation was based on *Die Lehre Carl Schmitts. Vier Kapitel zur Unterscheidung Politischer Theologie und Politischer Philosophie* (Stuttgart/Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 1994; 2d ed, with an afterword, 2004).

6 The original German version was published as *Das theologisch-politische Problem. Zum Thema von Leo Strauss* (Stuttgart/Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 2003).

7 The lecture was first given at the international symposium "Living Issues in the Thought of Leo Strauss" at the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Foundation in Munich on June 19, 2002.

that is more than an example, to show how the four approaches that "The Theologico-Political Problem" outlines for the encounter with faith in revelation are to be developed. The essay "Death as God" presents observations on a revealing note by Strauss on Martin Heidegger. This brief text glances at a philosopher on whose thought the theologico-political problem cast its long shadow – without its ever having been a theme of any importance to him, or rather because it was not a theme of any importance to him.

Chapter II presents reflections on "The History of Philosophy and the Intention of the Philosopher."[8] It seeks to make understandable why Strauss engaged in historical research ranging from Heidegger via Machiavelli and Alfarabi to the pre-Socratic philosophers in order to answer questions that are inseparable from the theologico-political problem, such as "What is the right life?" "What is the good?" and "*Quid sit deus?*" – questions that are by no means intrinsically historical questions. For anyone who seriously studies his oeuvre, the focal point becomes the intention that the philosopher Strauss pursues when he directs his undivided attention, so it seems, to the history of philosophy and presents his philosophy in the guise of interpretations of past writings.

Chapter III, "What Is Political Theology?"[9] traces the incisive change in the history of the concept "political theology" caused by Carl Schmitt's 1922 writing of the same name, and gives a nonpolemical definition of the concept, which shows it to be the symmetrical counterconcept to "political philosophy." The concluding Chapter IV, "Why Political Philosophy?"[10] identifies the place accorded to the confrontation

8 The lecture was delivered on November 16, 1994, as the conclusion of the lecture series "The Legacy of Leo Strauss," which the University of Chicago organized in honor of Strauss on the twentieth anniversary of his death. Seth Benardete had opened the series with the brilliant lecture "Strauss on Plato" in autumn 1993. The German version of my lecture was published in *Die Denkbewegung von Leo Strauss. Die Geschichte der Philosophie und die Intention des Philosophen* (Stuttgart/Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 1996), 17–43.

9 First published in *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 30, no. 1 (Fall 2002), 79–91. It is reprinted here with kind permission of the editor. The original German version was published in Jan Assmann, *Politische Theologie zwischen Ägypten und Israel* (Munich: Carl Friedrich von Siemens Foundation, 1992; 2d, expanded ed., 1995), 7–19.

10 First published in *The Review of Metaphysics* 56, no. 2 (December 2002), 385–407. It is reprinted here with kind permission of the editor. The original German version was published in *Warum Politische Philosophie?* (Stuttgart/Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 2000; 2d ed., 2001). The English version was presented as the Georges Lurcy Lecture at the University of Chicago on May 4, 2000. The German version was read as my inaugural lecture at the University of Munich on February 16, 2000.

with the theologico-political problem in the inner structure of political philosophy.

The Appendix makes two lectures by Strauss that are highly relevant to the subject of this book available for the first time.[11] "The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy,"[12] from April 1940, gives an extremely instructive account of the intellectual milieu and the philosophical discussions in Germany during the twenties and thirties, the period in which Strauss first set out on his path of thought. More than two decades before his well-known "autobiographical preface" from 1962, Strauss outlined in the lecture he gave before the Creighton Philosophical Club at Syracuse University[13] an intellectual autobiography of his early years, where the emphasis was on his confrontation with historicism and his encounters with both Nietzsche and Heidegger. In "The Living Issues," Strauss takes up the concept "political theology" and employs it in a precise sense for the first time (5 recto). It comes as no surprise that the concept that Strauss uses only rarely, and therefore all the more significantly in his published writings,[14] occurs after

11 Both texts will be included in Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften,* vol. 4. They are published with the kind permission of Professor Joseph Cropsey, literary executor of the estate of Leo Strauss.

12 The manuscript is located in Leo Strauss Papers, Box 8, Folder 14, Department of Special Collections, University of Chicago Library. It is written on eight oversized sheets of paper. Sheets 1 through 7 are written on both verso and recto, but sheet 8 only recto. The fair copy is in ink with corrections and additions in pencil. My transcription follows the wording of the manuscript; any deviations from it are recorded in the editorial notes. The orthography – which is partly British – has also been retained.

13 That is clear from the following note in the *Philosophical Review* 49, no. 4 (1940), 492: "The Creighton Philosophical Club held its thirty-ninth meeting at Syracuse University, on April 27 and 28. Dr. Leo Strauss, now lecturing at Hamilton, Colgate, and Amherst, read a paper on 'The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy' with special reference to Husserl's phenomenology, and Dr. Julius Kraft of Rochester University read one on 'The Philosophy of Existence', with special reference to Heidegger and Jaspers." My thanks to Emmanuel Patard, Paris, for drawing my attention to this note.

14 The most important passage in the published writings reads: "We are compelled to distinguish political philosophy from political theology. By political theology we understand political teachings which are based on divine revelation. Political philosophy is limited to what is accessible to the unassisted human mind." *What Is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (New York: Free Press, 1959), 13. Cf. "Marsilius of Padua," in Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, eds., *History of Political Philosophy* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1963), 227 and 236 (reprinted in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* [New York: Basic Books, 1968], 185 and 193). In the manuscript *Die Religionskritik des Hobbes,* Strauss had spoken in 1933–34 of the "tradition of theological politics, which appeals to *revelation,"* and contrasted it with the "tradition of philosophical politics." *Gesammelte Schriften,* vol. 3 (Stuttgart/Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 2001), 270.

a discussion of *Der Begriff des Politischen* and unmistakably in reference to Carl Schmitt.

Under the title "Reason and Revelation," Strauss gave a lecture at the Hartford Theological Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut, in January 1948 in which he dealt with the theologico-political problem in a more outspoken way than at any time before or after. There are several lectures in which he took up the biblical alternative to philosophy. The best known are the two lectures held on March 13 and 15, 1967, at the City College of New York and published under the title *Jerusalem and Athens: Some Preliminary Reflections* in the same year.[15] The lecture "On the Interpretation of Genesis," which was made available posthumously,[16] was presented at the University College of the University of Chicago on January 25, 1957. The first public treatment of the theme I know of dates from November 13, 1946, when Strauss spoke in the General Seminar at the New School for Social Research in New York on "Jerusalem and Athens."[17] The three texts from 1946, 1957, and 1967 overlap extensively since all three center on an interpretation of the book of Genesis, the account of the creation of the world and the story of the fall of man, or – in the case of the first lecture – culminate in such an interpretation. The text published in the Appendix differs from all Strauss's other published and unpublished treatments of the theme with which I am familiar both in the overall approach that Strauss chose and in numerous arguments, hints, and examples he gave. However, we do not know exactly what Strauss said to the theologians in Hartford. For we are faced here with two manuscripts: On the one hand, with the lecture "Reason and Revelation" written out at least up to page 9 verso; on the other, with a text that begins in the form of shorthand notes and, as it develops, overlaps partly with "Reason and Revelation," a text for which I have chosen the title "Notes on Philosophy and Revelation"

15 The City College Papers no. 6 (New York: The City College, 1967), 28 pp. Strauss included this text from 1967 in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 147–73.

16 First published in *L'Homme: Revue française d'anthropologie* 21, no. 1 (January–March 1981), 5–20.

17 I have in my possession a copy of a typescript with the title "Jerusalem and Athens. (Lecture to be delivered in November 1946 in the General Seminar.)" comprising twenty-seven typed and three additional handwritten pages, as well as a later version of its first part with the title "Jerusalem and Athens. (Lecture to be delivered in the General Seminar on November, 13, 1946)." comprising five typed pages with handwritten emendations by Strauss.

and placed after "Reason and Revelation."[18] Whereas Strauss did not write a concluding part for "Reason and Revelation," the "Notes on Philosophy and Revelation" lack an opening part. They start abruptly under the heading "The Biblical argument." Strauss noted at the top of the first page, "(typescript p. 22 para 2 ff.)." The reference points to the typescript of the lecture "Jerusalem and Athens" from November 13, 1946. Indeed, the ten points in which Strauss develops the biblical argument on the first three pages of the "Notes" contain a compressed, partly refined and expanded version of the presentation given in "Jerusalem and Athens" on the last six pages of the typescript and the two pages of handwritten additions to the text. It is possible that we have in the "Notes on Philosophy and Revelation" the first version of the Hartford lecture. In that case, Strauss would have begun afresh, writing the talk "Reason and Revelation" and then drawing on the argumentation and the conclusion of the "Notes" in order to supplement the unfinished talk. It is conceivable that Strauss read the talk up to page 9 recto or 9 verso and continued with page N 3 recto or N 3 verso. Another possibility is that he wrote the "Notes on Philosophy and Revelation" in 1947 for an occasion about which we know nothing and then used them for the Hartford lecture as just described. Regardless of how Strauss may have used the two manuscripts in Hartford, given the line of thought that they both contain and the period in which they were written, it is certain that they are closely connected and need to be studied together.

To conclude this preface, I want to address two questions that arise from a statement I make in "The Theologico-Political Problem" and that I do not discuss there. They concern the institution of the philosophical school, which has played an important role in the reception of Strauss's philosophy. In the essay, I remark that the sole political act of consequence that Strauss brought himself to launch was to found

18 Both manuscripts are located in Leo Strauss Papers, Box 11, Folder 13, Department of Special Collections, University of Chicago Library. "Reason and Revelation" comprises twelve sheets, which are numbered 1–4 and 4a–11; with the exception of the last sheet, on which there are only ten lines, both sides of all the sheets have been written on. The fair copy is in ink, and additions are in pencil. The second manuscript comprises five sheets in a somewhat smaller format, which are numbered 1–5 and are written on both recto and verso. The fair copy is in ink, and there are numerous additions in pencil.

a school, which the offer of a professorship in political philosophy at the University of Chicago in 1949 provided him the opportunity to do. I add that Strauss surely was aware of the price he had to pay for making this political decision. What can move a philosopher to found a school? And in what sense does that founding involve a political decision?

The school has uncontestable advantages for the development of a comprehensive teaching, for the pursuit of a research project, and for the formation of an interpretive approach. It makes it easier to test philosophical arguments and to experiment with rhetorical figures. It makes possible both the thorough differentiation of an edifice of thought in directions and the application of an interpretation to objects, the pursuit or execution of which would surpass an individual's powers. In the best case, the semipublic sphere of the school permits the combination of the playful treatment of possible answers that presupposes the release from the demands of public self-assertion, and the serious involvement with the true questions that requires agreement about the fundamental points of a common agenda. The institution of the school helps to gain an audience for a new orientation of philosophy and to lend it stability. It is the means of choice when the aim is to found a tradition and thereby to make it more likely that an oeuvre will remain accessible to future generations. The school offers, not least, the possibility of making some citizens familiar with philosophy and educating them in such a way that, when they later assume responsibilities in the commonwealth, those citizens will treat philosophy favorably or at least respectfully and, if necessary, grant it protection and support.

Strauss used all of these advantages of the school. He also took the opportunity – following Plato's and Aristotle's example – to foster the politically gifted and the gentlemen among his students. As a citizen of the United States of America, he was loyal to the country that had given him refuge from persecution. He showed himself to be a friend of the liberal democracy that allowed him to lead a philosophical life. He prompted a number of his students to investigate the historical, constitutional, and political foundations of the United States and encouraged them to defend those foundations. He respected their patriotism and taught them to understand the dignity that is proper to the political life. Yet he made it clear: "patriotism is not enough";[19]

19 Cf. *Xenophon's Socrates* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1972), 179.

and he – no less than Socrates, the citizen of Athens – left no doubt about the fact that he did not consider the political life to be the best life.

The founding of a philosophical school, however, becomes a political decision not only insofar as the founding makes it possible to exert a salutary influence on the commonwealth – no matter how mediate, no matter how variously refracted that influence may be. It is a political decision already insofar as the school like the commonwealth comprises quite different natures, it too consists of philosophers and nonphilosophers who (bound together to varying degrees) cooperate in different ways, and therefore the central determinations that apply to the tension between the political community and philosophy remain valid in the relationship of the school to philosophy. For the school, no less than for the commonwealth, it holds true that different addressees have to be addressed differently, that they grasp the teaching differently and pass it on differently. The school demands political action and is fraught with political risks.

If the school gains a larger audience for the philosophical teaching, it also contributes to strengthening and oversimplifying the doctrinal content of philosophy, to emphasizing everything that allows of being taught and reduced to formulas, and, without any in-depth confrontation with the cause or the matter at issue, can be repeated, applied, and communicated. And if the school is able to exert some political influence, then it is in danger of accommodating philosophy to a particular regime or underscoring its closeness to this regime in such a way that the philosophically gifted in the future or in other regions of the world who have a genuine philosophical interest in that teaching must once again loosen the link to that political regime in order to free the teaching from the odium of being bound to an order prevailing at a certain time and in a certain place or being subservient to an ideology.

The founding of the school will be successful only if the teacher adapts his oral teaching to his students' ability to understand. It is very likely that he will entrust his farthest-reaching reflections, his most profound thoughts, and his most challenging considerations to his carefully written books. Members of a school, however, are inclined to value the oral tradition more highly. They tend to overestimate or to regard as absolutely indispensable what for them was of enormous significance. This may explain in part why the school is so susceptible to apologetic tendencies regarding the teacher's philosophical radicality, why

precisely in its orbit his thought is often rendered innocuous, and why pieties of all kinds are able to take root there.

Strauss was as familiar as anyone with the problem of the school and the tradition in philosophy. He knew the history of Platonism, of the Aristotelian, Epicurean, and Stoic schools, their successors and their latest heirs. In his dialogue with Alexandre Kojève on tyranny and the politics of the philosophers, he commented in no uncertain terms in 1950 on the formation of sects and drew a sharp line between the philosopher and the sectarian.[20] Precisely because he had confronted the philosophical tradition so intensively, he was aware that the petrification of philosophy in the tradition can be cleared away again and again, he was aware that philosophical energy can be set free ever anew from its encapsulation in doctrines. And precisely because he was familiar with the history of the schools of the ancients, he was also aware that those schools helped essentially to make philosophy conspicuous as a way of life. In modernity, Rousseau and Nietzsche attempted to give the philosophical life a visible shape by emphatically drawing attention to their own lives.[21] The alternative was the founding of a school, which does not have to produce only members of a school. Aristotle was a member of Plato's school for twenty years, nearly twice as long as he was able to teach in his own school, the Lyceum. Aristotle left the Academy as a philosopher, and from his school emerged other philosophers in turn, just as from the school that Strauss founded philosophers have emerged – and by no means only "Straussians."

Since the end of the 1980s, I have had many conversations with my friends Seth Benardete and Christopher Bruell on the theme of this book and on the lectures by Strauss that are published in the Appendix. The same is true of Thomas L. Pangle, who has, in the meantime, published his confrontation with the biblical argument under the title *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham,* to which I wish to refer the

20 *On Tyranny: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 194–96.

21 I hope in the not too distant future to publish two books that, with constant attention to the question of the philosophical life, confront Rousseau's *Rêveries* and Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo.* For the time being, I refer the reader to my essay *"Les rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire." Rousseau über das philosophische Leben* (Munich: Carl Friedrich von Siemens Foundation, 2005).

reader. Without Nathan Tarcov's friendly critique and thoughtful suggestions on how to improve the American edition of my studies on the theologico-political problem, this book would not be as close to the German original as it is now.

H.M.
Munich, June 2005