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052186156X - Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy and the Politics of Revelation

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LEO STRAUSS AND EMMANUEL LEVINAS

Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas, two twentieth-century Jewish philosophers and extremely provocative thinkers whose reputations have grown considerably over the last twenty years, are rarely studied together. This is due to the disparate interests of many of their intellectual heirs. Strauss, or at least a popular neo-conservative interpretation of his work, has influenced political theorists and policy makers on the right, whereas Levinas has been championed in the humanities by different cadres associated with postmodernist thought.

In *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy and the Politics of Revelation*, Leora Batnitzky brings together these two seemingly incongruous contemporaries, demonstrating that they often had the same philosophical sources and their projects had many formal parallels. Batnitzky situates Strauss in the context from which he emerged – early twentieth-century German-Jewish thought – to reveal that he was a far more complex and nuanced thinker than both his enemies and allies currently recognize. Her fresh reading of Levinas questions those who see in his work the revival of the Jewish tradition in an overtly postmodern framework. While such a comparison is valuable for a better understanding of each figure, it also raises profound questions in the current debate on the definitions of “religion,” suggesting new ways that religion makes claims on both philosophy and politics.

Leora Batnitzky is Associate Professor of Religion at Princeton University. She is the author of *Idolatry and Representation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig Reconsidered* and editor of the forthcoming *Martin Buber: Schriften zur Philosophie und Religion*. She is co-editor of *Jewish Studies Quarterly*.

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To Bob, with gratitude and love



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List of Abbreviations

WORKS BY LEVINAS

- AM “L’actualité de Maïmonide,” *Paix et Droit* 15(4) (April 1935).
- AQ *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974.
- AT *Alterity and Transcendence*. Michael B. Smith, trans. London: The Athlone Press, 1990 ; M. Nijhoff, 1974.
- AUP “Totalité et infini.” *Annales de l’Université de Paris* 31 (1961): p. 386.
- BV *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*. Gary D. Mole, trans. London: The Athlone Press, 1982.
- CPP *Collected Philosophical Papers*. Alphonso Lingis, trans. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1988.
- DE *De l’évasion*. Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1992.
- DF *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. Seán Hand, trans. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990.
- DH *Discovering Existence with Husserl*. Richard Cohen and Michael B. Smith, trans. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998.
- DI *De Dieu qui vient à l’idée*. Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1986.
- DL *Difficile Liberté, Essais sur le judaïsme*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1963.
- DU *Du Sacré au Sainte*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1977.
- EI *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Richard A. Cohen, trans. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985.
- LR *Levinas Reader*. Seán Hand, trans. New York: Blackwell, 1990.
- NP *Noms propres*. Paris: Livre de Poche, 1987.
- NTR *Nine Talmudic Readings*. Annette Aronowicz, trans. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.

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- OTB *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Alphonso Lingis, trans. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981.
- PN *Proper Names*. Michael B. Smith, trans. London: Athlone Press, 1996.
- RHW Review of H. A. Wolfson's *The Philosophy of Spinoza*. In *Revue des Études Juives* 51 (1–2) (1937), pp. 114–19.
- RPH “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism.” *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1990), pp. 62–71.
- Tel *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961.
- TI *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Alphonso Lingis, trans. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
- TIHP *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*. Andre Orianne, trans. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1987.
- TN *In the Time of the Nations*. Michael B. Smith, trans. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- TO *Time and the Other*. Richard A. Cohen, trans. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987.
- US “Useless Suffering.” In *The Provocation of Levinas*, R. Bernasconi and D. Wood, eds. London: Routledge, 1988, pp. 156–67.

WORKS BY STRAUSS

- AAPL *The Argument and Action in Plato's Laws*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975.
- CCM Leo Strauss and Karl Löwith. “Correspondence Concerning Modernity.” Susanne Klein and George Elliot Tucker, trans. *Independent Journal of Philosophy/Unabhängige Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 4 (1983), pp. 105–19.
- CCWM Leo Strauss and Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Correspondence Concerning *Wahrheit und Methode*.” *The Independent Journal of Philosophy/Unabhängige Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 2, pp. 5–12.
- CLS “Correspondence of Karl Löwith and Leo Strauss.” George Elliot Tucker, trans. *Independent Journal of Philosophy/Unabhängige Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 5/6 (1988), pp. 177–92.
- CM *The City and Man*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- EW *Leo Strauss: The Early Writings (1921–1932)*. Michael Zank, trans. and ed. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002.
- FPP *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934–1964*. Barry Cooper, trans. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004.

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- GN “German Nihilism.” *Interpretation* 26(3) (spring 1999), pp. 353–78.
- GS 1 *Leo Strauss Gesammelte Schriften. Band 1, Spinozas und zugehörige Schriften.* Heinrich Meier, ed. Stuttgart, Germany: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 2001.
- GS 2 *Leo Strauss Gesammelte Schriften. Band 2, Philosophie und Gesetz Frühe Schriften.* Heinrich Meier, ed. Stuttgart, Germany: Metzler, 1997.
- GS 3 *Leo Strauss Gesammelte Schriften. Band 3, Hobbes’ politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften – Briefe.* Heinrich Meier, ed. Stuttgart, Germany: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 2001.
- IPP *An Introduction to Political Philosophy.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989.
- JPCM *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity.* Kenneth Hart Green, ed. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997.
- LAM *Liberalism Ancient and Modern.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- MIPT “The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy.” *Independent Journal of Philosophy/Unabhängige Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 3 (1979), pp. 111–18.
- NCP “Notes on the Concept of the Political.” In *Heinrich Meier, Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue.* J. Harvey Lomaz Meier, trans. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- NRH *Natural Right and History.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952.
- OT *On Tyranny.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- PAW *Persecution and the Art of Writing.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- PG *Philosophie und Gesetz: Beiträge zum Verständnis Maimunis und seiner Vorläufer.* Berlin: Schocken, 1935. As reprinted in GS 2.
- PL *Philosophy and Law.* Eve Adle, trans. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1995.
- RCPR *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism.* Thomas Pangle, ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.
- RMF “Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi.” Robert Bartlett, trans. *Interpretation* 18(1) (fall 1990), pp. 3–30.
- SA *Socrates and Aristophanes.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- SCR *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997. Translation of *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage*

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ABBREVIATIONS

seiner Bibelwissenschaft Untersuchungen zu Spinozas Theologisch-Politischem Traktat. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1930.

SPPP *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*. Thomas Pangle, intro. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

WPP *What Is Political Philosophy and Other Studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

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Preface

Talk of the crisis of the west and of the future of western civilization has only increased in recent years, as the horrors and destruction of the twentieth century continue to extend into the twenty-first century, albeit in new forms. This book is a study of two twentieth-century thinkers who, writing immediately prior to and after the Nazi genocide, consider the parameters of the west to restore what both claim is western civilization's universal glory and moral importance. Significantly, the philosophies of Leo Strauss (1899–1973) and Emmanuel Levinas (1906–95), while particular to their place and time, both have contemporary resonance in present debates about the crisis and status of “the west.” Strauss, especially, has become, depending on one's political commitments, the hero or the villain of the United States' war on terror.¹ This is the case despite the fact that Strauss's thought in no way concerns concrete public policy. Less in public political debate, but more in academic political debates, Levinas's thought, or the purported implications thereof, has become a rallying cry against the arrogance of the powerful oppressing weaker “others” precisely because the powerful are unable, or unwilling, to affirm the “alterity” of the “other.”² And this is the case despite the fact that Levinas, far more than Strauss, defended “the west” against its “oriental” others.³ This study questions both of these views of Strauss and Levinas, not only because, as I will argue, they are incorrect, but also, and in fact more so, because the philosophies of Strauss and Levinas deserve greater attention for their contemporary significance.

From the very brief description of Strauss's and Levinas's rather different current receptions, it should be clear already that they aren't often considered together. One of the main arguments of this book is that Strauss and Levinas ought to be studied together because their projects bear a broad formal similarity to each other and not accidentally so. Strauss and Levinas emerge from the same intellectual context: the interwar period of Weimar Germany. While Levinas was born and raised in Lithuania and Strauss in rural Germany, their

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shared intellectual coming of age took place under the tutelage of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. As importantly, both experienced as Jews the trauma of the Second World War. The respective exile imposed on both, the question of Jewishness as it relates to the Second World War, and the meaning of European civilization generally became paramount to Strauss's and Levinas's intellectual development. While Strauss went on to become one of the most important voices in political philosophy in America in the twentieth century and Levinas one of the most important philosophers in the French phenomenological tradition, the center of each of their respective intellectual projects, I will argue, consists in grappling with the meanings of persecution generally, and Jewishness, particularly. And while both remain in the throes of Husserl and Heidegger, even when they try to transcend them, they each grapple with these questions in dialogue with previous Jewish thinkers, including first and foremost Moses Maimonides, Baruch Spinoza, Hermann Cohen, and Franz Rosenzweig.

Recognizing Strauss's and Levinas's shared intellectual horizon, I argue, allows us to appreciate and, in fact, understand their respective thoughts differently and, I contend, better than they have been understood until now. My claim is historical and philosophical. While it remains a common place of much of the study of philosophy and political theory that historical contextualization is at best complementary and at worst irrelevant to philosophical understanding, my claim in this study is that historical contextualization helps us to understand philosophy and to philosophize better. In this, I follow Strauss's view that contemporary readers all too often assume that they can understand an author better than he understood himself and in doing so only impose their own view of the world onto the great texts of the past. Historical contextualization is a first step to philosophical thinking because to understand the problems of the present we need to understand our own assumptions, which we can only begin to recognize by appreciating assumptions other than our own.

To be sure, the relation between philosophical thinking and historical study is not as easily resolved as the preceding might imply. Indeed, Strauss shares with Levinas an aversion to "historicism," by which both mean the view that philosophical truth is inextricably imbedded within history. In fact, the formal philosophical similarity of Strauss's and Levinas's respective projects begins here: with each of their attempts to consider the possibility of a nonhistoricalist, that is an acontextual, morality after the Nazi genocide. One of the aims of this study is to clarify Strauss's and Levinas's respective moral criticisms of the challenge of *historicism*, a complex and contentious term whose relevance has only increased in academic and popular debate.⁴

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When I began working on this project a number of years ago, I described some of my ideas to a rather well-known political theorist who has some interest in Strauss. He responded with great enthusiasm, followed by the exclamation that “now Strauss’s thought will be exposed for what it really is: ethnic pride.” A similar assumption sometimes operates among Levinas’s interpreters, who seem to fear that if the place of Judaism in Levinas’s thought is central, his philosophy might be rendered ineffective or even untrue. These assumptions and conclusions could not be farther from the argument and intention of this study. An appreciation of the importance of Judaism in both Strauss’s and Levinas’s thoughts coheres with what I am claiming is a central part of their intellectual task, which is to insist on the historical and spiritual importance of Judaism (and not of particular Jewish people) for understanding the development and indeed the vitality of western civilization. If some find this claim suggestive of “ethnic pride,” I suggest they examine the details of Strauss’s and Levinas’s philosophical, historical, and philological claims and develop their objections on this basis. The assumption that an interest in the intellectual and historical importance of Judaism for understanding western civilization is *by definition* suspect bespeaks a powerful prejudice (both thinking and unthinking) against which Strauss and Levinas consciously argue.

It is well known that classical Jewish texts and themes are important to both Strauss and Levinas. But Levinas increasingly is thought of as a defender of the veracity of Jewish revelation, while Strauss continues (with a few notable exceptions) to be thought of an atheist who clearly chose, to use Strauss’s terms, Athens over Jerusalem. Levinas emphasizes the harmonious interchange between Judaism and philosophy. Strauss, on the other hand, famously claims that “Jews of the philosophic competence of Halevi and Maimonides took it for granted that being a Jew and a philosopher are mutually exclusive.”⁵

In the following pages, I argue in great detail that the particular readings of Levinas as a philosophical defender of revelation and Strauss as a defender of philosophy against revelation are imbedded in a post-Christian philosophical framework in which the tasks of philosophy and revelation are fused together. It is true that Levinas emphasizes the harmonious interchange between Judaism and philosophy, while Strauss emphasizes their profound if not irreconcilable tension. But, I argue, Levinas appears as a philosophical defender of revelation only because there is an unacknowledged assumption about the mutuality between philosophy and revelation. The first contention of this study is that we ought to rethink this assumption about the fusion of philosophy and revelation philosophically, theologically, historically, and politically. Once we do so, it becomes clear that the argument between Levinas and Strauss is an argument about the status of modern philosophy.

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And by implication, much of the contemporary philosophical discussion of “religion,” especially in continental philosophical circles, is less about the meaning of “religion” than about the meaning and scope of philosophical inquiry in the modern world. Only once we recognize this central concern with the status of contemporary philosophical thought can we begin to appreciate the implications of Levinas’s and Strauss’s arguments (as well as many arguments within continental philosophy) about not just Judaism but religion generally.

Levinas, I will argue, is a defender of a particular modern philosophical project that endows philosophy with social and political capabilities, while Strauss is a critic of this project. It is for this reason, I will show, Levinas ultimately fails to defend the philosophical possibility of *Jewish* revelation, for his arguments remain mired in a faith in philosophy. But as importantly, Levinas ultimately fails to defend the possibility of philosophical rationalism. Levinas throws out what he doesn’t like about liberal modernity and modern rationality, but because he is tied to a modern faith in philosophy, he is unable to save philosophy for critical purposes. The result is that Levinas’s philosophical program cannot maintain a coherent conception of philosophy, revelation, or politics.

To be sure, part of the difficulty of the arguments that follow in this book is that they go against the grain of some of Levinas’s own self-presentation and the interpretations of his followers. I attempt to offer a suggestively fresh reading of Levinas, thereby calling into question the three dominant strands of Levinas interpretation: the first that sees him as a reviver of a Jewish philosophical tradition, the second that understands him in strictly phenomenological terms, and the third that views him as a postmodern philosopher. While Levinas’s engagement with German-Jewish philosophy, and the philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig in particular, is better known than Strauss’s, the straightforward acceptance of his claims by his interpreters about this relation continues to obscure Levinas’s more complex relation to this body of thought and his complicated relation to the German metaphysical tradition more broadly defined. Seen in these contexts, I maintain that Levinas emerges not as a philosophical defender of “Judaism,” but as a defender of the need for philosophical activity for social and political purposes after Heidegger. Levinas’s *messianic* (a term he uses) faith in philosophy renders his philosophical relation to Judaism and a “Jewish philosophical tradition” problematic. At the same time, the tensions, if not contradictions, in his social and political claims for philosophical activity make it difficult to view him strictly from within the phenomenological tradition and his attempt to restore the modern subject after Heidegger calls into question his affinity with postmodernism.

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A reconsideration of Levinas's thought is significant not only in and of itself but also, if not more so, because of the appeal his thought has for so many. This appeal derives from the very impetus that drives it: despair with liberal politics and strictly rational modes of analysis in an only increasingly violent world and the subsequent rejection of politics in favor of nonpolitical, what Levinas calls *ethical*, ways of being. In this sense, Levinas's thought coheres with late-twentieth-century despondency about politics generally, coupled with the simultaneous desire to respect others as "other" by way of interpersonal relations. However, Levinas's philosophy, like much of late-twentieth-century thought, remains mired in the very premises it seeks to overcome. The result is not merely philosophical incoherence, but a weakening of the critical potential to speak meaningfully about concrete political realities and also the lived realities of religious life.

While I am critical of Levinas's project, the task of this study is not to defend Strauss's positions, but rather to present his thought as important and challenging, philosophically, theologically, and politically. In terms of his political relevance, Strauss, of course, has many proponents (many of whom bitterly disagree with one another) and, increasingly, many foes. But I argue that a full appreciation of the relevance of Strauss's view of politics requires a deeper understanding of the centrality of religion, and of Judaism in distinction to Christianity, to Strauss's project. This is not to imply that Strauss was a believer in biblical revelation, but only (and sufficiently) that his own arguments show that this possibility cannot be denied philosophically.⁶ At the same time, Strauss's own view of philosophy suggests a fundamental limitation to philosophy in and of itself, not just from a social or political perspective, but from a philosophical one also. I suggest that Strauss's claim for a fundamental limitation to philosophy increases the critical import of philosophy, while the overinflated claims for what philosophy can accomplish that Strauss criticizes only diminish what is philosophy's truly critical potential. While Drucilla Cornell has suggested that Levinas's philosophy can contribute to contemporary legal interpretation as a "philosophy of the limit,"⁷ I argue that the problem with Levinas's thought, despite his contention that his thought overcomes a "totalizing" image of philosophy, is that it doesn't recognize a limit to philosophy and thereby has difficulty making a critical contribution to arguments about religion and politics.

Following Strauss I maintain that the possibility of philosophical, religious, and political rationalism depends on the *analytic separation* and subsequent *practical coordination* of philosophy and revelation, which concerns addressing primarily the question of political arrangements in general and the authority of law in particular. In this context, I examine what I take to be Strauss's model

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of religious rationalism from the perspective of contemporary Jewish law (i.e., law that lacks a political dimension), and suggest that Strauss's thought should be the starting point for Jewish philosophical thinking in the late twentieth century because Strauss gives a better account of the scope and nature of Jewish thought, of the content of Jewish thought, and the needs of post-Emancipation Jewry than other contemporary thinkers who are actually engaged in constructive Jewish thought. This isn't to argue for the veracity of Strauss's positions, however complicated they may be, but rather to claim that any constructive attempt to articulate a Jewish philosophy in the twenty-first century must begin by responding to the questions and framework raised by Strauss's thought.

Finally, given what only seems to be increasing controversy about Strauss – about whom perhaps the one thing that everyone can agree on is that there is no agreement – a few more words are in order about the perspective I take in this book. Despite claims to the contrary, I do not believe that Strauss's views are hidden and mysterious. As I will argue in great detail in the chapters that follow, Strauss's interest is in problems and not solutions. This is particularly ironic given that he is so often presented, with sometimes contradictory characterizations, as the dogmatist par excellence. Some of the continued perplexity about Strauss may be due to the fact that he insists on the complexity of the human predicament, maintaining that there are multiple human goods whose competing claims are not easily if even possibly resolved. Strauss's writing on many different subjects and in many different contexts reflects an engagement with this multiplicity. This makes Strauss a challenging writer and thinker, but not one who is given easily to simplification or, as importantly, one who is impossible to understand.⁸

Like Strauss's own project, this book is not a constructive attempt to erect a system of philosophy, theology, or politics. Instead, following Strauss, my aim is to raise questions about a number of assumptions in contemporary academic life, some of which rightly spill over into discussion of contemporary politics, ethics, and theology. These include first and foremost questions about the relations among philosophy, religion, and politics, in some of their historic and current constructions. Appropriately then, we begin to examine in Chapter 1 Strauss's and Levinas's conceptions of Athens and Jerusalem.