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# Spinoza's Critique of Religion: Reading the Low in light of the High

Steven Frankel

*Xavier University - Cincinnati*

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## CHAPTER 2

# *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* : Reading the Low in light of the High \*

Steven Frankel

**S**trauss's early studies of Spinoza, including his first book, *Spinoza's*

*Critique of Religion* (1930; henceforth *SCR*), have been largely neglected in favor of his later work. Such neglect is understandable: Strauss's work on Spinoza spans his entire career as a scholar and thinker, and includes his discovery of esotericism—which played a critical role in his most authoritative analysis of Spinoza. In addition, Strauss privately conceded problems with the work. In a letter to Gerhard Krüger in 1930, Strauss conceded that he had been compelled to remain silent in public about the presuppositions that were the point of departure for *SCR*.<sup>1</sup> Later he criticized the work publicly for not taking seriously the possibility of return to premodern philosophy (§§21, 42). It is somewhat surprising then that more than 30 years later, after its publication in German, Strauss decided to have the book translated into English. Ostensibly to explain his decision, Strauss prefaces the translation with an autobiographical account of the genesis and development of his early views as well as the inclusion of a later essay on Carl Schmitt (1932). One can recognize many of the themes in *SCR*—for example, the tension between Athens and Jerusalem, the inadequacy of the Enlightenment's critique of religion, and the development of Epicureanism, and others—which would preoccupy Strauss over the course of his career. Still, Strauss's decision to resurrect this early work is puzzling.

The studied carelessness with which Strauss handles his autobiographical account is in striking contrast to the attention he pays to the substance of the preface. This becomes clear when we contrast the literary form of the essay with the substantive argument: The literary form is an autobiographical narrative of a young German Jew who seeks to escape the “theological-political predicament” by either returning to the form of Jewish belief or else discovering a political alternative, such as Zionism or liberalism (see §§1–13). After pointing to the difficulties with both of these political alternatives, Strauss seeks a qualified return to Jewish belief mediated by modern thought (see §§14–23). When this proves unworkable,

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he considers the return to “unqualified Jewish belief” or orthodoxy. This leads him to consider Spinoza's critique of Judaism, and this is presumably the context within which *SCR* was written (see §§24–39). Ultimately, Strauss concludes that Spinoza's critique undermines not only Judaism but also philosophy, and he decides to return to “Jewish medieval rationalism and its classical (Aristotelian and Platonic) foundation” (see §§40–42).

This straightforward account of his intellectual development is undermined by the substance of his argument. Toward the center of his essay, Strauss confounds the account of his development.<sup>2</sup> For example, as a young man, Strauss reports that he was still considering the possibility of return to Jewish thought as mediated by modern rationalism, particularly in the thought of Franz Rosenzweig. According to his autobiographical narrative, he has not yet considered the possibility of return to premodern forms of rationalism, and in fact would not do so until after the completion of *SCR*. This is the conclusion of his autobiographical account: “I began therefore to wonder whether the destruction of reason was not the outcome of modern rationalism, as distinguished from pre-modern rationalism” (§42). However, in §21 Strauss breaks dramatically from the autobiographical narrative

to assert the conclusion of the autobiographical account. After he criticizes Rosenzweig's new thinking, he writes: "One begins to wonder whether our medieval philosophy, and the old thinking of Aristotle, of which it made use, was not more 'empirical' . . . than an unqualified empiricism" (§21). In effect, Strauss has moved the conclusion of the autobiography to the middle of the argument. This casts doubt on the central claim of the autobiography, which presents Strauss as gradually discovering the inadequacy of modern reason and the relevance of the ancients. Even if we read this claim as merely an aside or parenthetical remark so that it does not disturb the overall narrative, it is difficult to deny that Strauss is more concerned with emphasizing his conclusions than with giving an account or exploring the historical development of his thought. <sup>3</sup> Throughout the essay, he presents several more examples of interrupting the narrative to emphasize mature judgments that, though they shape his account, emerge only after the biographical period portrayed in the essay. One example, which we shall discuss in greater detail below, is Strauss's hermeneutical maxim of reading the low in light of the high (§7). This principle supersedes the autobiographical narrative in terms of shaping the content of the essay. Strauss's goal is not to encourage further reflection upon his autobiography or offer an account of his intellectual development, but rather to guide our attention toward his mature thought.

### **The Theologico-Political Problem**

Strauss begins the preface by referring to himself as "a young Jew born and raised in Germany who found himself in the grips of the theologico-political predicament." <sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, Strauss does not explain the nature of the theologico-political predicament, or indicate what specifically about the predicament constrained him.

This is less of a mystery than it appears since the preface itself is devoted to explaining how to read Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (henceforth *TTP*), which in term is intended as an introduction to Strauss first book on the same topic. In order to see what is at issue, it is useful therefore to remind ourselves of the main themes of the theologico-political predicament as presented by Spinoza.

The *TTP* begins with an account of the role of superstition in political life.

The perdurance of superstition creates a theological problem because men imagine

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a divine source to explain their fortunes, and it also creates a political problem because religious and political leaders are eager to manipulate them in order to solidify their own power. <sup>5</sup> Spinoza focuses on the particular theologico-political problem in Christendom and asks his readers to consider why Christians preach love and practice hatred (P.4.1–2). He goes on to suggest that Christianity has been hijacked and vulgarized by unscrupulous men who pervert its teachings in order to satisfy their ambitions for the wealth and power of ecclesiastical offices. Among their most insidious methods for obscuring and twisting the word of God is the importation of foreign or superstitious ideas into the Bible, particularly "the theories of Aristotelians and Platonists" (P.4.7). <sup>6</sup> Spinoza's account assumes that reason can identify superstition because reason can in principle provide a full account of nature; nonetheless, philosophy is unable to adjudicate disputes among superstitious, passionate individuals. To the contrary, philosophy is quickly transformed into yet another instrument to bolster superstition. The power of superstition also poses a political problem, because as superstitions gain in intensity, the passions that accompany them also increase and threaten the stability of the state.

The theologico-political predicament refers to the superstitious condition of mankind and the subsequent manipulation of those superstitions by religious and political leaders. Spinoza's solution to the problem has both political and theological elements. Theologically, he distinguishes the essential teachings of Christianity so that they can be purged of superstition, and restored in authority. The essential teaching of the Bible, and the minimum requirement for salvation, is the practice of charity and love toward all men. With her foundations restored, Christianity can once again contribute to the peacefulness of society. These few dogmas of Christianity do not exhaust our knowledge of God. Some men may seek and achieve greater knowledge of God; however, such knowledge is not a theological

or political requirement for salvation. Politically, the pursuit of this knowledge is irrelevant since it is available to only a few individuals (14.1.49–51). The state needs only to secure safety and security for its citizens. For the most part, it leaves the citizens free to pursue knowledge of God as they see fit—as long as that pursuit is consistent with *caritas*. Spinoza envisions freedom, rather than reason or virtue, as the cornerstone of political life with the hope that reason will flourish under such conditions. 7 Strauss describes this regime as liberal democracy, and identifies Spinoza as its founder. 8

The general analysis of the theologico-political predicament, directed toward a larger Christian audience, was not the same problem faced by Strauss, “a young Jew in Germany.” The version that Strauss inherited reflected the success of Spinoza’s political solution in Germany, as well as its particular reception in the Jewish community. Spinoza’s analysis was attractive to German Jews for several reasons: First, Spinoza himself was born a Jew and his argument involves a deep knowledge of Jewish commentaries on the Hebrew Bible. Strauss writes that many of his contemporaries in the Jewish community celebrated Spinoza “on purely Jewish grounds” (§§28, 26). Second, Spinoza’s solution to the theologico-political predicament provides for a society where both Jews and Christians can live together in freedom despite differences in their private beliefs. Strauss reports that many German Jews believed that, thanks to Spinoza, “the millennial antagonism between Judaism and Christianity was about to disappear” (§127). The reason for this confidence is that Spinoza had shown Jews that their religious law was purely political, and as a result, had become obsolete with the destruction of the Jewish state. This provided the theological argument for assimilation. Third, Spinoza’s analysis of the Jews in

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Chapter three of the *TTP* not only envisions Jews and Christians living together but also considers the possibility that Jews might rebuild their former state. Certainly, this argument was meant to complement his analysis of the destruction of the Jewish state and not as a political strategy; nonetheless, Spinoza was celebrated by some Jews as the founder of Zionism (cf. §11).

Strauss was in the grips of the theologico-political predicament as described by Spinoza. The various solutions that Spinoza suggests, namely secular liberalism, religious liberalism, and Zionism, appear to be the only options available to the young Strauss. The organization of the essay adopts the framework set out by Spinoza, considering each possibility in turn. As we shall see, each solution falls short and the thread connecting these failures is the audacious confidence in the power and capacity of reason to recognize and redress superstition. Spinoza’s solutions are political solutions to the problem of superstition since they concede that most people will remain superstitious; nonetheless, they offer strategies for prudently managing superstition. By framing the issue in this way, as a matter of reason ameliorating superstition, Spinoza suggests the political value of religion for a stable community, while undermining the philosophical basis for revelation. The result is that we are left with only unpalatable options. After turning to Spinoza’s solutions to the theological political problem, Strauss next considers the modern variants of Spinoza’s analysis, Heidegger’s atheism, and Rosenzweig’s piety. Both fail to resolve the tension between politics, religion, and philosophy: either we reject reason and embrace revelation, or else we reject revelation and, with it, the well-being of our political communities.

### **Liberalism in Weimar**

Strauss reports that the majority of German Jews celebrated Weimar and its historical founder, Spinoza. Although Weimar originated with the defeat of Germany and his humiliation in the Treaty of Versailles, she could trace her roots to a nobler, deeper heritage in the French Revolution, and ultimately Spinoza’s account of the theological-political problem. From their point of view, liberal democracy had deep roots in Germany so that their Jewish faith presented no obstacle to assimilation. They interpreted Weimar in the best or highest light, emphasizing its moderate character and its attempt to integrate the “principles of 1789” with the “highest German tradition” (§12). This tradition includes the recognition of the rights of

man and a well-organized government of highly trained civil servants. Under this regime, Jews flourished and participated in the cultural life of the Republic, and Jewish life was strong; it even developed a new “science of Judaism” (§7). Although the German tradition also included strong anti-Jewish sentiments that dominated medieval society, liberalism corrected this situation by protecting the rights of religious minorities and purging the government of superstitious and irrational goals. No wonder Weimar appeared to German Jews all the more precious and noble. 9 In direct contrast to this view, the Zionists, with whom Strauss openly sided, viewed Weimar as weak at its very foundations and unable to defend itself when challenged by ruthless enemies who viewed the Jews as outsiders who threatened German *Kultur* with foreign culture and “*Civilisation*.” 10 Strauss presents quotations from Goethe, Nietzsche, and Heidegger that demonstrate the resilience of anti-Jewish feelings in Germany (§8). Ignoring their “precarious situation,” the Jews of Weimar clung to the vain hope that liberalism would somehow prevail. Strauss suggests that the election of Hindenburg in 1925 “showed *everyone who had*

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eyes to see that the Weimar Republic had only a short time to live,” because the nonliberal tradition was “stronger in will” (§3, emphasis added, S.F.). Strauss’s phrase suggests that the weakness and vulnerability of Weimar were obvious, yet few, particularly within the Jewish community, recognized it. The problem of superstition comes to light in the first instance as the belief in the durability of liberalism in Weimar.

History appears to have vindicated this Zionist critique of German Jewry.

Weimar is likely to be remembered as a cautionary tale of democracy without strength, “of justice without a sword” (§3). However, the Zionist vision was also limited by the fact it is the product of the liberalism that it criticizes, rather than of the Jewish tradition (cf. §11). The difficulty of making a balanced judgment on Weimar is that it requires measuring the low elements against the higher ones. Strauss suggests the following rule of thumb: “It is safer to understand the low in the light of the high than the high in the light of the low. In doing the latter one necessarily distorts the high, whereas in doing the former one does not deprive the low of the freedom to reveal itself fully as what it is” (§5). 11 To judge Weimar only on its sorry record of weakness and collapse ignores its deeper and nobler roots and “its moderate, non-radical character” (§2). As a principle of interpretation, taking one’s bearings from the highest rather than the lowest possibilities seems to be a prudent rule of thumb.

But this principle is hardly self-evident. Strauss’s justification of this principle on the grounds of safety raises the question: safer for whom? In the context of the preface, where Strauss discusses repeatedly the “precarious” situation of the Jews in Weimar and Europe, the primary consideration appears to be the safety of the Jews in the Diaspora (§§6–8). His subsequent analysis highlights the dangers involved in ignoring the lowest political elements in favor of dreams about perpetual peace. He takes a particularly severe view of Hermann Cohen’s faith in progress and his unwillingness to confront the less palatable side of power and coercion in politics (cf. §§32–33). Cohen was so concerned with interpreting the high in light of the low that he underplayed the reality of the low. He condemned Spinoza “for his Machiavellian-inspired hard-heartedness” only to fall victim to “the opposite extreme” (§32). But even Cohen appears to be a sober realist compared to the “fantastic flights” that mesmerized those German Jews who feted Spinoza as a savior (§29). Strauss openly sides with the Zionists’ interpretation of the Jewish Question, a position that confirms the wisdom of neglecting the high in politics in order to protect oneself from the low. Nonetheless, as we shall see, his analysis ultimately reveals the serious flaws with its neglect of the high.

### **Zionism as a Political Solution to the “Jewish Problem”**

Spinoza inspired the Zionist movement by suggesting that there is a political solution to the Jewish problem, which involves giving priority to politics over religion. 12 In his critique of purely political Zionism, Strauss draws our attention to the work

of Ahad Ha'am (Asher Ginsberg, 1856–1927), "the founder of cultural Zionism." For Ahad Ha'am, the theological questions had been already settled by Darwin and science, both of which had allegedly proven that revelation was false (§15). This distinction helps to understand Strauss's critique, specifically how Zionism was largely correct in its analysis of liberalism in Germany and yet not able to offer Jews a completely satisfying account of Judaism. In addition, this analysis of a political solution that is theologically inadequate casts the theologico-political

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problem in sharper relief. The political situation of the Jews involves questions of power and safety as well as theoretical questions about the meaning of Judaism. To read the low in light of the high means to judge political solutions in light of their higher, theoretical considerations. Strauss's analysis shows that, while it is dangerous to ignore practical political concerns, they need to be separated from the higher theological questions. His critique of both the Zionists and the assimilationists confirms this reading.

While Zionism has the virtue of grasping the limitations of liberalism in Europe (cf. §6), it does not reject liberalism itself. Instead it attributes the failure of liberalism to the fact that the Jews were at the mercy of other nations. Strauss quotes Herzl on the failure of assimilation: "We are a nation—the enemy makes us a nation whether we like it or not" (§10). The assimilationists abandon Judaism in the vain hope that they will be welcomed into a universal society. Political Zionism exposes the fact that liberalism, despite its promise of a universal solution to the Jewish Question, cannot create a view of justice strong enough to overcome discrimination. Liberalism cannot eliminate hatred or superstition; at best, it can provide only legal—rather than social—equality. But Strauss does not stop there. He argues that Zionism also betrays Judaism in the belief that it can resolve the Jewish Question by treating it merely as a problem of power, not divine punishment. The virtue of Zionism was its sober claim that the Jewish Question could be solved by power alone. Even cultural Zionism attempts to combine this view with a project for the revival of Judaism, but its account of the high is vague and unsatisfying. As a result, cultural Zionism tends to slide in opposite directions, "politics (power politics) and divine revelation" (§12). This result follows from Spinoza's account of the Jewish Question. Cultural Zionism attempts to escape the theologico-political grip of Spinoza, but it cannot explain the basis of the high; instead it either ignores the high in the case of political Zionism or reads the high in light of the low in the case of cultural Zionism.

### **The Highest Goals of Political Life**

Strauss exposes the failure of Zionism to resolve the Jewish Question as part of a broader critique of liberalism. Following Spinoza, liberalism advocated the separation of politics from religion on the grounds that such a separation would allow politics to pursue more effectively the goals of safety and security.<sup>13</sup> By focusing on the low, liberalism promised to leave people the freedom to pursue the high in safety. The problem is that this freedom also allows for superstition, and thus liberalism does not solve the problem of discrimination. To do so, liberalism would have to prevent discrimination by severely limiting freedom of speech in both the public and the private sphere. This would, in effect, destroy the private sphere and, with it, the *raison d'être* for the liberalism. The Zionists recognized that the problem of superstition, and more particularly of anti-Jewish beliefs, was not resolved by freedom of thought in the private sphere. To the contrary, prejudice against Jews seemed to spread all the more widely in liberal democracies. Liberalism cannot resolve the Jewish problem, or more generally the problem of the imagination in political life. In Strauss's words, the Jewish Question is an example of an "infinite, absolute problem [which] cannot be solved" (§12).

The claim that there are permanent problems shifts our attention from the particular perspective of a young Jew in Weimar toward a broader understanding of the limits of liberalism. The Jewish Question is one example of neglecting the high

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to manage the low. By allowing superstitious men freedom of thought, liberalism contributes willy-nilly to the decline of philosophy and reason in political life. Strauss again breaks from the autobiographical chronology with a judgment that shapes the narrative. As with his claim about judging the lower in light of the higher, he forces us to consider the claim more carefully and reflect on the role of reason in political life. The Jewish problem is “the most manifest symbol” of the political dimension of the “human problem,” which cannot be fully resolved (§12). He contrasts this with the problem of the Jewish individual who has become alienated from his faith. This problem can be resolved by rejoining the Jewish community. However, the larger problem of the Jewish community's relation to other, non-Jewish communities cannot be resolved. Liberalism tries to resolve it by finding a common understanding of justice or “a universal human society,” which is united by its vision of justice (§14).

Strauss presents the liberal solution as it appeared to his contemporaries, namely that liberalism was the best solution to the Jewish problem either because Judaism itself had been refuted (§14) or because liberalism simply followed from Jewish principles of justice (§28). Spinoza provides the basis for both claims since his argument is built on the dual premises of criticizing the Biblical teaching while returning to its essential principle, the practice of charity. <sup>14</sup> The principle of charity and toleration has the advantage of a broad consensus among various religious faiths and even nonbelievers. For adherents of the Bible, Spinoza argues that the truest and most accurate reading of the Bible reveals that its deepest teaching, the one most necessary for salvation, is the practice of *caritas*. For all good men—*honestos* as Spinoza calls them—the benefits of this religious view are so apparent that they would embrace it just as enthusiastically whether or not they are believers ( *TTP* 14.1.36). <sup>15</sup> In addition, by subordinating all other religious beliefs to charity, liberalism allows a good deal of freedom of thought. Any views, even atheism, are acceptable if they promote charity. <sup>16</sup>

### The Question of Return

In his critique of Weimar and Zionism, Strauss had cast a doubt on whether Spinoza's strategy of accommodating all views can work effectively without identifying a firmer theoretical basis for the morality of *caritas*. He concludes that “the Jewish problem is insoluble,” by which he means that the “liberal state cannot provide a solution to the Jewish problem” (§13). Strauss qualifies this claim by admitting that liberalism is better than the alternatives of communism and National Socialism, and that it does provide an “uneasy solution to the Jewish problem” (§13). Then, in striking contrast to his previous claims, he declares in the next paragraph: “There is a Jewish problem that is humanly soluble” (§14). This problem, however, is not the wider political problem of the community in a precarious situation, but rather of “the problem of the Western Jewish individual.” The individual can return to traditional beliefs and avoid the illusions of liberalism. In this sense, there is hope for solving our “deepest problem” and “most vital need” theoretically, even if this does not end discrimination or superstition (§14). In moving from the political situation to the question of individual return, Strauss has not entirely freed himself from the grips of the theologico-political predicament. Although he has explained why a political solution cannot fully solve the Jewish problem, he has not yet exposed the theoretical underpinnings of liberalism. These underpinnings are first revealed when Strauss points out that “some

of his contemporaries” believed that return was impossible because the traditional faith “had been overthrown once and for all.” But the theoretical legacy of liberalism is more complicated than simply rejecting revelation. This is indicated by the fact that many more of Strauss's contemporaries believed that it was possible to grant science and history complete authority “without abandoning one iota of the substance of the Jewish faith” (§15). In short, the theologico-political predicament is ambiguous: does it destroy faith or preserve it? In the next section of the essay, Strauss examines the reasons for this ambiguity. As we shall see, both positions are

the result of a deliberate ambiguity about the status of Scripture within Spinoza's argument. As Strauss frees himself of Spinoza's theologico-political grip, he parts company with more of his contemporaries.

The path Strauss follows takes him through the intellectual currents of his time. I emphasize that he *follows* this path, which he describes as a "qualified return" or a return mediated by modernity, because it has already been marked out by its founders including Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig as "new thinking." As the very title of the movement, "new thinking," indicates, the movement represented a conscious departure from the tradition so that the question of return takes on a radical new meaning. The new thinking has several elements that interested Strauss and explains why he chose to pursue it rather than traditional Judaism. For one thing, the movement assigns authority to "present experience" rather than revealed law or tradition. Further, the new thinking relies heavily on a broader critique of reason and philosophy found in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, a seminal thinker for Strauss (§17). Unlike earlier efforts to make Judaism compelling by showing that "the truth of traditional Judaism is the religion of reason," the new thinking rejected reason as a criterion altogether (§15). The movement followed Nietzsche in arguing that the "return to Judaism requires today the overcoming of what one may call the perennial obstacle to the Jewish faith: traditional philosophy" (§16).

This critique of philosophy was based not only on its awareness of the limits of reason but also on its thoroughgoing historicism. Following Nietzsche, Rosenzweig argued that "the human soul has no unchangeable essence or limits but is essential historical" (§20). This claim constitutes the core of historicism's claim to wisdom. The historical dimension of all thought reveals previous claims to wisdom as defective. It allows us to understand previous thinkers better than they understood themselves. Historicism also provides a new approach to tradition: whereas the question of return was also seen as a return to the revealed law, the new thinking claims that we have always selected from the tradition according to the needs of our age; now we can and should do so consciously.

According to the autobiographical account of the narrative, Strauss's turn to the new thinking was motivated by his question of whether a "return to Jewish orthodoxy was not both possible and necessary" (§24). Yet Strauss does not return to orthodoxy. Instead he launches an investigation of Spinoza's critique of religion to see if there are grounds philosophically that prevent a return. The results of this investigation are less clear in terms of orthodoxy, but point instead to the continuing relevance of ancient philosophy. Like Socrates, who claims in the *Apology* that his lifelong philosophical quest began with his pious attempts to understand and verify the oracle of Delphi, Strauss frames his discovery of philosophy in terms of his pious effort to return to orthodoxy. Whereas Socrates had investigated the belief in the gods of the city, Strauss investigates the superstitions of his age, the belief in historicism under the guise of the "new thinking."

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### **The New Thinking**

Strauss begins with Martin Buber's foray into the new thinking in *I and Thou*. Rather than begin with the tradition, he starts with "present experience," which is more immediate and less doubtful. If we are open to an encounter with the divine, that is, if we have not dogmatically accepted the rationalism of Greek philosophy—the path that recognizes only "what man knows by himself"—we may experience an absolute call that comes from outside of man and "goes against man's grain," suddenly becomes more compelling (§16). This experience finds confirmation in the call of the prophets in the Bible. The prophets too have experienced the speechless "call" of God and, in response, offer a human interpretation. Prophecy, the speechless experience of the absolute, is in principle open to everyone. Our return depends on our experience of the absolute and our recognition of this same experience in the Bible.

Buber's analysis places great weight on our interpretation of the absolute divine experience. But which interpretation of this experience is the truest one? Cannot the experience be tampered with? Is not the experience itself determined by our historical



conditions? Buber cannot answer these questions by using reason to judge because he assumes that reason necessarily undermines such an experience. To show us the danger that Buber's position has invited, Strauss invents a dialogue between Buber and Heidegger regarding whether the prophets sought to challenge or affirm the people's security. Although Buber would many years later consider Heidegger's critique, during the 1930s no such dialogue was possible because "[a]t that time, Heidegger expressed his thought about revelation by silence or deed rather than by speech" (§17). To create a dialogue between Heidegger and Buber, therefore, Strauss has to use later writings from each author that he could not have had access to during this period of his development.<sup>17</sup> The confrontation between Buber and Heidegger once again confounds our efforts to trace Strauss's historical development.

Strauss's dialogue reveals that Heidegger has a "deeper understanding" of the meaning and implications of the new thinking (§17). Heidegger claims that Buber's interpretation of the absolute is merely wishful thinking. Indeed, against Buber's assertion that the warnings of the prophets do not "go against our grain," Heidegger shows that they merely confirm our wish for security, particularly the security of our moral judgments by providing a "supra-human support for justice" (§18). Rather than dismiss philosophy, he identifies a goal shared by both ancient philosophy and biblical revelation to find or demonstrate "the security of justice." The desire for justice is in turn related to the desire for the eternal, which does not come into being or pass away. But the new thinking exposes this desire as "stemming from 'spirit of revenge'" rather than from either revelation or reason. Buber had dismissed reason with the confidence that revelation could take its place as the basis for justice. But Heidegger's atheism cuts off this possibility and forces us to confront our terrifying condition of insecurity and uncertainty. For him, terror and cruelty are the true signs of "intellectual probity."<sup>18</sup> There is no ultimate ground for its belief in a *summum bonum*; philosophy can no longer pretend to be anything more than an act of will.

Strauss presents Heidegger's critique of revelation in terms of a critique of the high. In an unmistakable attack on Heidegger, he observes that "[n]ot every man but every noble man is concerned with justice and righteousness and therefore

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with any possible or extra-human support of justice, or with the security of justice" (§18). In Strauss's presentation, Heidegger's pursuit of justice takes the form of a demand for "intellectual probity," which in turn attempts to expose every concern for justice with the desire for security.<sup>19</sup> Intellectual probity should not be confused with "the old love of truth."<sup>20</sup> The difference, Strauss, explains, is that probity is more explicit, even dogmatic, about its atheism. As a result, it rejects all attempts to obscure the consequences of atheism, or to pretend that some sort of "semi-theism" is possible.<sup>21</sup> In Heidegger's hands, liberalism's neutrality regarding the high gives way to the explicit rejection of the transcendent and the apparent embrace of the low. Conversely, Strauss shows the common ground shared by reason and revelation, and in fact by all noble men, namely the concern for justice. Strauss's return aims at restoring this common ground rather than showing the victory of one alternative. Of course, this personal attack does not mitigate the force of Heidegger's objections. Instead, it exposes a deeper problem: modern philosophy, which began with a criticism of superstition in favor of reason, now abandons reason as a guide. The result is that philosophy participates in the superstitions that it had previously criticized and the cruelty that it had once abhorred.<sup>22</sup>

Strauss's path of return moves from Heidegger toward the origins of modernity and Spinoza.<sup>23</sup> First, though, he considers a more serious attempt at a qualified return to the Bible offered by Franz Rosenzweig. Paradoxically, Rosenzweig begins his quest to return by denying the possibility of a return to Biblical faith. He draws a distinction between what the authors of the Bible meant and how we understand it today. The former is a historical concern characteristic of what he calls the "old thinking," while the latter is practiced in full awareness of the historical text and our current situation, that is, how the text affects the present situation. It is important

to note that Rosenzweig rejects Spinoza's principle of selecting from the text by distinguishing between its essential and unessential parts. Such a distinction can hardly be as objective as it claims, since it presumes the wisdom that it seeks to find in the Bible. Rosenzweig avoids this problem by admitting that a "force" rather than a principle guides our decision. The past, the "whole reality of Jewish life," offers materials for us to select and by virtue of the selection, transform into a living force in our lives. The past becomes a set of resources for building the future, but we are the ones who select from the past.

But as we scrutinize Rosenzweig's selections, we cannot help but notice that vitality is measured by consistency with modern liberal regimes. Thus, for example, Rosenzweig does not find compelling the orthodox view of the Torah's law, which sees it in terms of prohibition and rejection; instead he interprets the law in terms of liberation and transformation. This represents a far more optimistic view of political possibilities and of the fate of liberal societies. Another example of vitality is Rosenzweig's rejection of Biblical miracles. Here vitality is associated with skepticism and science. Rosenzweig claims he did not believe all the miracles reported in the Torah but, rather, claims to be open to belief.<sup>24</sup> The orthodox approach, in contrast, had far less confidence in the judgment of each individual not only because of the limits of reason but also because such individuality could undermine the cohesiveness of the community.

Like Buber, Rosenzweig wishes to make Judaism more consistent with experience, but in practice this means making it more consistent with liberalism. Instead of beginning from the Torah as law, as does Maimonides, for example, Rosenzweig begins from one's awareness of being a member of the chosen people,

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because such awareness is "the primary condition of the possibility of Jewish consciousness" (§21). This is at odds with the traditional view that the law as revealed is the basis of the community. Strauss suggests that Rosenzweig consciously begins with chosenness rather than law in order to reshape the tradition so that it is more compatible with Christianity. This is in keeping with Spinoza's liberalism, where Judaism and Christianity are assimilated into a universal religion that stresses *caritas* as the sole requirement for salvation. Rosenzweig did not hope to return to traditional Judaism, but to adapt the tradition so that it would be at home in Weimar. Strauss exposes Rosenzweig's effort to reshape the tradition, yet he does not criticize this reform simply as a betrayal of the tradition. Rather, he wonders how to take one's bearing in such a project: how can one know that one's proposals to change the tradition will result in its preservation or deepening? Has Rosenzweig understood "the old in its depth"? His attempt to transform Judaism in order to make it compatible with liberalism, a regime that is ambiguous with respect to a *summum bonum*, suggest otherwise.<sup>25</sup> By transforming Judaism to meet the needs of liberalism, Rosenzweig has lowered the tradition rather than deepened it.

Strauss also suggests that Rosenzweig's proffered reform has not deepened the tradition, by contrasting him with Maimonides, who similarly attempted to alter the tradition's attitude toward philosophy. Curiously, Strauss approaches the superiority of Maimonides in terms of his method for reshaping the tradition. Maimonides was more loyal to the Jewish People, or at least more careful to preserve the appearance of his loyalty to the tradition, than was Rosenzweig. Nothing exemplifies this better than Maimonides insistence on placing Judaism above philosophy and politics. Strauss says that Maimonides, in sharp contrast to Rosenzweig, wrote Jewish books, not philosophical ones, "as a Jew he gives his assent where as a philosopher he would suspend his assent" (cf. *Guide of the Perplexed* 2.16; HBS xiv). In the preface, Strauss makes the same point in order to contrast Maimonides with Rosenzweig. He points out that [w]hereas the classic work of what is called Jewish medieval philosophy, the *Guide of the Perplexed*, is primarily not a philosophic book but a Jewish book, Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption* is primarily not a Jewish book but a "system of philosophy" (§21). The difference between a Jewish book and a philosophic book is that in a Jewish book, the authority of law precedes and

is distinguished from the authority of reason. <sup>26</sup> Rosenzweig, however, has already rejected both ancient philosophy and reason as a guide. To make matters worse from Strauss's point of view, Rosenzweig's philosophy is much more consistent with Christianity than is traditional Judaism because its starting point is not the law, but a secondary category like chosenness. In this sense, he treats the tradition as a quarry, or set of resources, for crafting a Judeo-Christian society. This view is important to keep in mind because Strauss will later call attention to Rosenzweig and Cohen's critique of Spinoza, which essentially claims that he was disloyal to his people by exposing its flaws for all to see. In fact, Strauss here shows that Rosenzweig has essentially done the same thing, with even less consciousness of his debt to Spinoza.

### **The Return to Spinoza**

The second half of Strauss's preface (§§ 24–42) is devoted to Hermann Cohen's analysis of Spinoza. This is surprising, insofar as Cohen predated Rosenzweig and

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Buber. Moreover, his analysis stops short of the new thinking in that he holds reason in high esteem, capable of guiding men and teaching them a universal moral law consistent with Jewish law. Possibly Strauss was genuinely more impressed by Cohen than by Rosenzweig. He describes Cohen as "a Jew of rare dedication" who "symbolized more than anyone else the union of Jewish faith and German culture." Nor did Cohen neglect the high. In fact, he "surpassed in spiritual power" his colleagues in philosophy and theology. However, we must be careful not to overstate the influence of Cohen's critique; after all, Strauss largely rejects Cohen's analysis of Spinoza. His tribute to Cohen is actually a refutation of Cohen's approach to philosophy. Indeed, he raises the question of whether Cohen could even be considered a philosopher, suggesting instead that he is a rather limited, if well-meaning, scholar. <sup>27</sup> In short, his presentation of Cohen is from the point of view of the mature Strauss who has thoroughly rejected him. <sup>28</sup>

Yet Rosenzweig's judgment on Cohen plays an important role in Strauss's presentation. Rosenzweig admits that Cohen's treatment of the evidence may not be just; however, Rosenzweig argues that there is a deeper justification for Cohen's position. Spinoza took "for granted the philosophic detachment or freedom from the tradition of his own people" (§35). Philosophy may appear to confer freedom by detaching one from the community, but this is an illusion on par with the erroneous view that reason provides a liberating vantage point. Rejecting such illusions, Rosenzweig claims that this detachment is nothing more than the rejection of loyalty, love, and sympathy for one's own community. Had Spinoza cared more for his people, he would have helped them reinterpret their tradition "in light of the highest [possibility, or failing that,] if necessary, better than they understood themselves" (§35). Thus, although the explicit topic of this section of the essay is how to read Spinoza (or how Cohen misread Spinoza), the judgment of Rosenzweig opens the radical question about changing a tradition. Cohen, who was temperamentally conservative, was unable to grasp, "the fact that the continuous and changing tradition . . . [depends on] revolutions and sacrileges" (§38).

As for Cohen's critical reading of Spinoza, Strauss does show how Cohen helps expose several central and apparently deliberate contradictions in the *TTP*. These contradictions would reappear in Strauss's mature interpretation of Spinoza; however, Cohen was unable to resolve them correctly because of his conviction that he has understood Spinoza better than Spinoza understood himself. This "idealizing interpretation" is a variety of historicism, which explains an author's work as a product of history rather than deliberate choice. Cohen, for example, did not consider that Spinoza's style reflected a deliberate choice in light of persecution and his political project. Strauss playfully and explicitly refutes this, and suggests instead that Cohen "understood Spinoza too literally because he didn't understand him literally enough" (§37). The difficulty in reading Spinoza correctly is determining whether he means what he says, that is, whether we should read him literally. The question of historical circumstances undoubtedly plays a role in Spinoza's

presentation, but in order to measure this influence, we must understand Spinoza's metaphysical project. If Spinoza's assertions contradict his metaphysical teaching, then we are justified in considering his political circumstances to explain his argument.<sup>29</sup> Thus, Strauss's section is meant to guide the reader away from his historicist prejudice to a more thoughtful reading of Spinoza. The claim of the overall narrative is that one can escape Spinoza's theologico-political grip only by reading him correctly.

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### **The Development of Strauss's Interpretation of Spinoza**

In addressing Cohen's historicist interpretation of Spinoza, Strauss begins by putting aside the autobiographical narrative to offer an account of Spinoza's metaphysics (§27). To see more clearly the defects in Cohen's hermeneutics, Strauss begins with a literal reading of Spinoza's political thought. According to this account, Spinoza must be understood as part of modern philosophy's break with ancient philosophy. Spinoza did not initiate this break, but was "the heir of the modern revolt" (§29). Modern philosophy rejected the theoretical contemplation of nature in favor of a more practical and useful approach. It sought to master rather than contemplate nature. This was part of a political project to improve man's comfort and thereby secure the freedom to philosophize. Spinoza embraces the modern project, but also attempts to restore the "dignity of speculation on the basis of modern philosophy or science" (§29).

Spinoza's metaphysical starting point is also distinctively modern: all things proceed from the one, but the process is not one of decay or descent, neither is it one of creation. Rather it is an unfolding of individual, particular things that we are to understand *sub specie aeternitatis*.<sup>30</sup> The "last word on the subject" is the *Ethics*, where Spinoza argues that the highest form of knowledge is of particular things.<sup>31</sup> In sharp contrast to the Bible, God is not therefore the highest source of knowledge, but the process or unfolding of nature. Thus, on the question of the high, Spinoza's thought is ambiguous. On the one hand, he maintains the view of ancient philosophy that philosophy is the highest activity for man; on the other hand, his view is not grounded in nature but rather in the endless (and directionless) unfolding of nature.

Spinoza's political project, liberalism, reflects his ambiguity about the status of the high. He begins, or appears to begin, from metaphysical axioms that provide no basis or support for justice.<sup>32</sup> In fact, the goal of politics must be understood in light of the mechanical universe within which it operates. Rather than refer to intellectual or moral virtue, the regime must be directed toward security and comfort. Nor can political leaders rely on some absolute standard of justice (from nature or God) to fix their goal. They must guide man but rather by the toughminded control of destructive passions and the fostering of more constructive ones through, for example, a commercial society. Spinoza equates the passions with the right of nature, so as to indicate that they are natural, even if they are not directed toward any end other than the striving to persist.

### **Cohen's Critique of Spinoza**

The celebration of Spinoza by German Jews reflects their appreciation of liberalism as a regime that offered them unprecedented opportunities. Spinoza was the saint who inaugurated "a new religion or religiousness which was to become a wholly new kind of society, a new kind of Church" (§27). That they neglected the Machiavellian elements of his political thought and ignored his rejection of the Biblical God is not surprising given their apparent flourishing in liberal democracy. To his credit, Cohen refused to ignore the less attractive elements of Spinoza's teaching (§29). He was particularly disturbed by the effort to annul the original excommunication, arguing instead that Spinoza had indeed betrayed the Jewish people. Cohen was not concerned, according to Strauss, with violations of ceremonial law or the denial of Mosaic authorship. Instead, he "condemned

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Spinoza because of his infidelity in the simple human sense, of his complete lack of loyalty to his own people, of his acting like an enemy of the Jews and thus giving aid and comfort to the many enemies of the Jews, of his behaving like a base traitor” (§19).

Cohen’s particular charges constitute a damning indictment: Spinoza accepts and extends the Christian critique of Judaism. He falsely accuses Judaism of commanding hatred of the enemy. He presents a picture of Judaism as carnal and particularistic in contrast to the universal and spiritual picture of Christianity. His efforts to show Judaism in a poor light lead him to contradict himself by then claiming that prophecy is universal in order to promote the universalism of Christianity. In Spinoza’s version of Judaism, the law is particularly devalued as having a purely political, rather than moral or spiritual, role. Having reduced the law to a tribal code, Spinoza suggests that the law’s author, the God of Israel, is merely a tribal God. Not only then does Spinoza betray the Jewish people, he also blasphemes God while suggesting that the Torah is “of merely human origin” (§18).

In Cohen’s reading, Spinoza is so filled with malice—“he has no heart for the people, no compassion”—that he grows obsessed with denigrating Judaism by any means necessary (§30). He does not hesitate, for instance, to praise Christianity or encourage the anti-Jewish views of his Christian readers. He ignores contradictions in his own argument if they undermine Judaism. His betrayal of his people and philosophy is “humanly incomprehensible” and even demonic in that it is rooted in a denial of any standard of morality. Cohen also argues that there was a more comprehensible motive for Spinoza’s hostility toward Judaism. Like other Marranos, whose fear of the Inquisition turned into hatred of its causes, namely Judaism, Spinoza aimed his hatred at the victims rather than the perpetrators.

Strauss agrees with Cohen’s overall judgment that Spinoza is “amazingly unscrupulous”; indeed, he argues that his own judgment is “in some ways even stronger than Cohen’s” (§31). But Cohen reads the *TTP* too literally and therefore mistakenly thinks that Spinoza genuinely prefers Christianity to Judaism because it appears more spiritual and universal. In his view, Spinoza wishes to ennoble Christianity by convincing Christians to purge themselves of carnal relics of Judaism, that is, by liberating Christianity from Judaism. This is where “Cohen fails” to follow Spinoza’s argument. <sup>33</sup> Spinoza’s goal according to Strauss was to fashion a liberal society that embraced the freedom to philosophy. The argument that he crafted was not a betrayal of the Jewish people, nor does his primary allegiance to philosophy mean that he is indifferent to the Jewish people. <sup>34</sup> To the contrary, Spinoza provides a society wherein they could be citizens. In addition, the universal dogmas of catholic faith in *TTP* Chapter 14 “are equally acceptable to both Jews and Christians” (§31). Such a society requires the abrogation of the Mosaic law, but this law had become obsolete with the destruction of the state. Strauss’s defense of Spinoza amounts to this: he “liberated Jews in the only way he could think of” given his philosophy (§31).

Strauss’s critique of Spinoza is stronger than Cohen’s because Strauss does not ignore the Machiavellian core of Spinoza’s project. Cohen was committed to a theologico-political view that combined the Bible with Kant, who viewed God as an “idea” that guarantees the existence of a universal moral law discoverable by reason. The “idea” of God is the basis of morality, as well as of the optimistic belief in the ultimate triumph of Good over Evil. <sup>35</sup> Kant’s moral law is realizable first only in particular states, but it points toward a universal moral order, grounded in international law and enforced by a league of nations. In Cohen’s version of creation and

providence, the politics generates the theology. In other words, we need the “idea” of God to justify a certain political order. Reason comes to theology’s aid to help determine the requirements of a universal and just political order, and instructs theology on its presuppositions.

But all of these beliefs are exposed as superstitions, albeit salutary superstitions, within the confines of Spinoza’s metaphysics. Cohen’s thought and his interpretation

of Spinoza have a clear sense of the high, and he seeks wherever possible to read the low in light of the high. According to Strauss, this leads to various problems within Cohen's own thought. For example, he tends to cover over the criminal violence and destruction that attend revolutions. Similarly, he sees the purpose of punishment solely in terms of promoting the well-being of the criminal. In his single-minded attention to the high, Cohen appears to ignore the low altogether. He "ignored the harsh political verities which Spinoza had stated so forcefully" (§36). In this, one wonders whether he did not help to prepare the generation of Jews who did not have "eyes to see" the disaster that was approaching. In any case, this tendency to neglect the low renders Cohen a woefully inadequate interpreter of Spinoza because "the kind of interpretation which Spinoza calls for is not idealizing, since his own doctrine is not idealistic" (§36).

Strauss focuses our attention on two related problems in Cohen's interpretation that expose the problem that emerges with his idealizing philosophy. First, Cohen is unable to conceive of the relation between reason and revelation as anything other than harmonious. In addition, Cohen cannot grasp the meaning of Spinoza's denial of any natural support for the high. Both examples point us directly to Maimonides and imply that not only did Cohen misinterpret Spinoza and Maimonides incorrectly but also that Maimonides's point of view was superior.

Cohen claims that Spinoza's interpretation of Judaism does not recognize the universalism of the prophets. For instance, Spinoza draws our attention to Maimonides's claim that a person cannot be saved unless he believes in Mosaic revelation. This view suggests that obedience rather than reason is primary to piety. Similarly, Maimonides claims that a non-Jew can be considered pious if he performs the Noahide commandments as commandments of God, adding that if a non-Jew performs them because they are rational, he is neither pious nor wise. Its wisdom teaches that reason cannot supplant piety as a source of political authority. Finally, Maimonides suggests that the Torah's commandments themselves are not rational, but are meant to address and cure idolatry, "an irrational practice." Maimonides begins from the opinions of the community before determining the best way to enlighten the tradition. Irrational opinions may justify the commandments while reason itself may not.<sup>36</sup> Leaving aside Spinoza, Strauss reports that the Jewish tradition, as per Joseph Caro, confirms this view. Cohen ignores those elements of the Jewish tradition, which suggests a tension between wisdom and piety because he overestimates the power of reason and its compatibility with the law. The other example that Strauss chooses focuses on the question of the highest good. Cohen points out the following contradiction in the *TTP*: Spinoza claims that Moses' law is a divine law, that is, it points man toward the highest good or intellectual love of God; yet, he denies that the Mosaic law aims at the highest good. Strauss denies that this is a contradiction, because Spinoza does not mean the law is divine in the sense of aiming toward salvation or even intellectual knowledge of God. Rather, Spinoza means that the law is divine because it is *believed to be divine* by Christian readers whom Spinoza addresses. There is no divine law in the sense of a law with natural or rational ends. Cohen has not come to grips with

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the fact that neither God nor reason supports the moral law. Spinoza's morality is always tied to a relentless egoism. Following his teacher Machiavelli, Spinoza conceives of nature in terms of individuals struggling to persist in their own being. Nothing stands apart from or above this struggle that would allow us to judge it in moral terms.

Cohen wants to understand the tradition as something that we can shape by understanding the low or superstitious in light of reason, or the high. Despite Strauss's insistence on understanding the low in light of the high, he rejects Cohen's reading of the Jewish tradition. The reason for this is that Cohen has not escaped the horizons set out by Spinoza. He "does not come to grips with the fact that Spinoza's critique is directed against the whole body" of Jewish teachings and tradition (§39). He believed that Spinoza had refuted orthodoxy, especially miracles and law. Furthermore, Cohen agrees with Spinoza's opposition to rabbinical

Judaism, which put great emphasis on ceremonial law. Modern Judaism has liberated itself from the rabbinical view of law. Cohen's understanding of Judaism, by virtue of which he attacks Spinoza, is grounded in the "historical understanding of the Bible," which in fact was originated by Spinoza. Cohen recognizes that his understanding of Judaism, for example, his distinction between mythical and historical elements of the Bible, is not consistent with "our traditional exegesis." In short, Cohen offers a more positive view of Judaism as rational, but ultimately his understanding of Torah is consistent with, and rests on Spinoza. Cohen's attempt to understand Spinoza better than he understood himself failed; in fact, Spinoza understood Cohen better than Cohen understood himself.

### **Strauss's Judgment on Spinoza**

Strauss concludes the Preface by summarizing his argument in *SCR* on the consequences of Spinoza's critique of religion. Spinoza claims to refute orthodoxy, and its particular claims about the divine inspiration of every word of the Bible, that Moses was the author of the Torah, the account of miracles as violations of natural law, etc. The *TTP* did succeed in refuting orthodoxy, but only if orthodoxy makes claims that it cannot defend. But if Orthodoxy responds by making less ambitious claims, for example, by admitting that such claims "cannot claim to possess the binding power peculiar to the known," than Spinoza has not refuted orthodoxy (§40). Biblical religion ultimately rests on the claim that God's will is unfathomable. This is the premise by which all orthodox claims are possible.

Spinoza has succeeded only in showing that there are contradictions in the Biblical narrative but this only undermines an overly ambitious variety of orthodoxy, which claims paradoxically to know the ways of God. Traditional Judaism, however, makes no such claims and thus "cannot be refuted by experience or by recourse to the principle of contradiction" (§40). Spinoza was forced to overreach by claiming to know more than he could about the whole of things, and he had resort to mockery and ridicule in the place of argument to unseat religion. This reveals his critique as fundamentally resting on an act of will or a decision rather than reason. By exposing the defects of Spinoza's critique, Strauss does not mean to suggest that orthodoxy has triumphed over philosophy. Rather, he wishes to show the defects inherent in the Enlightenment's political project, which leaves men freedom without guidance. The "self-destruction of reason" in modernity invites another kind of return, a return to a preliberal thought. Such a return requires an

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investigation into method by which "heterodox thinkers of earlier ages wrote their books" (§42).

### **Conclusion: Progress or Return?**

As we have seen, Strauss presents an autobiographical account meant to explain the development of his understanding of Spinoza in the Preface to the translation of his first book on Spinoza. But a careful examination of the Preface reveals the fact that Strauss is neither explaining the development of his thought, nor simply giving an account of his life as a young man. This becomes clear when we pay attention, for example, to the fact that Strauss's mature judgments guide his presentation of the autobiographical materials. His assertion that it is safer to understand the low in light of the high is particularly important in this regard. But what does Strauss mean by the "high"? Strauss forces the reader to puzzle out this critical question, which is the key to understanding the essay.

Instead of identifying the meaning of the "high," he provides an account of his efforts to escape "the grips of the theologico-political predicament" bequeathed to modernity by Spinoza. This escape or liberation initially takes the form of return, particularly a return to revelation. But this attempt to return proves exceptionally difficult because Spinoza's critique of revelation profoundly shapes the way subsequent thinkers understand the tradition. Significantly, Spinoza is ambiguous about the source and meaning of "the high"; specifically, he is unclear whether the divine law is in some sense true or whether it is merely the product of superstition. This ambiguity allows for a variety of readings of Spinoza, which were pursued by Strauss's community in Germany. The more optimistic interpretation affirmed the

divine foundation of morality, while others took Spinoza's atheism as corroborating the new virtue of "intellectual probity." Neither view, however, managed fully to escape Spinoza's grip and appreciate the possibility of return. Strauss suggests that the liberation from Spinoza is possible if we read Spinoza carefully, that is, if we understand his political project, including his ambiguous treatment of the high, in light of his metaphysics that denies the possibility of the high. In other words, the political project must be understood as an attempt to obscure Spinoza's view of nature, which is entirely indifferent to human flourishing.

To liberate oneself from the grip of Spinoza means to understand his project and also to recognize an alternative to his metaphysical and political views. Strauss suggests that this is possible because Spinoza has not succeeded in refuting revelation. "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. . . . [M]an has to show himself theoretically and practically as the master of the world and the master of life" (§140). Spinoza has not done this; instead, in his attempt to do so he has overstated the capacity of reason to provide a full account of the whole and thereby rendered it questionable as a rational activity. To the clear-sighted descendants of Spinoza, philosophy appears to be the result not of rational inquiry, but an act of will. This permits the provisional triumph of orthodoxy, but without reason. Invariably, orthodoxy descends into fanaticism. Strauss envisions a "return" to a piety that is checked by reason, and a philosophy that is mindful of its limitations. Thus the restoration of the "high" requires the simultaneous recovery of reason and revelation as potential candidates for the best life. Nor is the possibility of such a recovery a matter for despair. Since we have the important

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works of medieval and ancient philosophy, we need only to excavate how such issues appeared to thinkers before Spinoza. In teaching us to read Spinoza carefully, Strauss also teaches us to read his predecessors carefully.

Since Strauss himself was not an observant Jew, it is easy to conclude that philosophy has, in his eyes, already ultimately overcome revelation in its claims to the high.<sup>37</sup> In fact, Strauss appears to say as much: "Philosophy or science, the highest activity of man, is the attempt to replace opinion about 'all things' by knowledge of 'all things'; but opinion is the element of society; philosophy or science is the attempt to dissolve the element in which society breathes, and thus it endangers society." The result is that philosophy "must respect the opinions on which society rests" without "accepting them as true."<sup>38</sup> Thus, even if we attribute to Strauss the view that philosophy is the highest or best activity for man, we cannot avoid the political problem of accommodating this view to our community, which rests on a settled standard of justice. This tension between conventional opinion and philosophy resembles the Platonic cave. Yet this tension has been entirely obscured by modern philosophy, as exemplified in Spinoza's metaphysics, which claims that nature offers no support to either reason or revelation. In this sense, believers and philosophers are in the same predicament: in order to restore a sense of the high, they must first liberate themselves from the cave beneath the cave.<sup>39</sup>

## Notes

\* Strauss published two editions of the autobiographical preface: the first as a preface to the translation of *SCR* and the second as part of a collection of essays in *LAM*. The two versions are nearly identical except that in the latter version Strauss divides several of the longer paragraphs into shorter ones so that where there are 42 paragraphs in the original essay, while there are 54 paragraphs in the later edition. Another important difference is that in the later edition, Strauss refers to himself as being in the "grips" of a theologico-political problem. This change, from "grip" is discussed below (see note 22). This essay uses the paragraph numbering from the original essay in *SCR*. My thanks to Professors Terence Marshall, Thomas Meyer, Richard Polt, Timothy Sean Quinn, John Ray, and Martin D. Yaffe for their thoughtful comments (and objections) to this essay.

1. Strauss's letter to Krüger is dated January 7, 1930 (GS-3 380-81). He blames his "boss,"



Julius Guttmann, for preventing him from writing more explicitly. For an overview of the correspondence between Krüger and Strauss, see Thomas L. Pangle, "Light Shed on the Crucial Development of Strauss's Thought by his Correspondence with Gerhard Krüger," chapter 3 of the present volume.

2 . One of Strauss's central hermeneutical principles is that careful authors have developed their own manner of writing by studying other careful writers. In general, therefore, "we learn to write by reading. A man learns to write well by reading well good books, by reading well most carefully books which are carefully written" ( PAW 144). Strauss's commentaries on philosophical texts offer guidelines for reading carefully. One method that he frequently employs, for example, is counting the number of paragraphs to determine the central paragraph (cf. PAW 24–25).

3 . A good example of this is David Janssens's fine study, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Philosophy, Prophecy, and Politics in Leo Strauss's Early Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press 2008), 8–26. Janssens begins by attempting to follow Strauss's preface as an account of his early thought, but is quickly forced to cite other materials and sources to fill in the

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picture even to explain the meaning of Strauss's description of the "theological-political predicament."

4 . The original essay indicated that Strauss was in the "grip" of the theologico-political predicament. Strauss decided to make "grip" plural in the subsequent edition. His choice may reflect the fact that he believed the theologico-political predicament had multiple sources and expressions. I wish to thank Thomas Meyer for directing me to this difference and its possible meaning.

5 . For a more extended analysis of the theologico-political predicament, see my "Politics and Rhetoric: The Intended Audience of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*," *Review of Metaphysics* 52 (1998–99): 897–924.

6 . See my "Review Essay of Martin D. Yaffe's translation and commentary of Spinoza's *Tractatus*," *Interpretation* 32, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 171–78.

7 . Spinoza also hoped to mitigate the damage done by theology, by creating a universal faith whose only requirement was the practice of charity. In addition, he prescribed political institutions based on power rather than theology, which were more consistent with the natural asocial nature of man. Finally, by liberating philosophy from politics and theology, he enlisted the help of science in promoting the well-being of the citizens.

8 . Spinoza "was the philosopher who founded liberal democracy, a specifically modern regime" (§27).

9 . Allan Arkush, "Leo Strauss and Jewish Modernity," in *Leo Strauss and Judaism: Jerusalem and Athens Revisited*, ed. David Novak (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 115.

10 . See Steven Smith, "How to Commemorate the 350th Anniversary of Spinoza's Expulsion," *Hebraic Political Studies* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 173.

11 . Emil Fackenheim also identifies this passage as critical to understanding Strauss, but Fackenheim thinks that Strauss has not fully confronted the loss as revealed in the Holocaust. See his "Leo Strauss and Modern Judaism," in Emil Fackenheim, *Jewish Philosophers and Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Michael Morgan (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1996), 103, 104.

12 . Contrast this position with Hannah Arendt's critique of Zionism. After the war, Strauss continued to defend Israel on the grounds that it restored national pride (see his letter to *National Review* in *JPCM* 413–14.). The preface was written in August 1962, less than 3 months after Eichmann was hung in Jerusalem. Strauss's endorsement of Zionism on the grounds of restoring Jewish pride stands in sharp contrast to Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, written during the same period.

13 . See *TTP*, chapter IV.

14 . Strauss explains in his 1959 Spinoza seminar: Spinoza insists that "[w]e must go back to the Scriptures. And this Scripture is the document of revealed truth, and forget everything which the theologians claim to know. And in that moment—up to this point he says, by implication, there is only one authority: the word of God as delivered in the Bible. Then he turns it around. We must even examine the authority of the Bible. . . . That the Bible itself is true and divine cannot be assumed. It must be found out. Perhaps it is not true and divine, or is only partly true and divine. Therefore, to repeat, the argument of this work is ambiguous throughout. There is a Biblicist argument, based on the accepted authority of the Bible, but only of the Bible, as the word of God, and there is another argument which questions

this very premise. The real teaching of Spinoza is not the Biblicist argument, but the other one" (29).

15 . After quoting this passage, Strauss observes that the dogmas of universal piety "must be of such a kind that all moral men, all decent men, regardless of whether

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they are Confucians or Christians, or Greek pagans for example, would never disagree. But this must somehow be in accordance with the Bible. That is the difficulty. The dogmas must be acceptable to all decent men. Now I hope the philosophers are decent men. Must they not also be dogmas which are acceptable to the philosophers? And philosophers according to Spinoza cannot believe in a legislating God, in a God who exercises providence. That's the problem. . . . after having said that the Bible demands nothing but charity, meaning love of neighbor—therefore, opinions are free. But Spinoza knows that this principle . . . necessarily has theoretical premises. . . . If that is so, the denial of these theoretical principles must be prevented. And if the philosophers by definition deny these principles, the philosophers must be persecuted" (Lecture 9, p. 172). The solution, Strauss suggests, is that philosophers must pay lip-service to the essential dogmas, even if they do not believe in them (cf. 176–77).

16 . See *PAW* 193–96.

17 . Richard Velkley shows how Strauss's thought acquired a "renewed and deeper engagement with Heidegger in the 1950s as Strauss acquired the publications of [Heidegger's] later thought." See *Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 69.

18 . See Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* , sec. 120 and 227.

19 . "Heidegger's political engagements show that the furthering of [the renewal of the question of being] takes precedence over any considerations of the good, the moral, and the just, as these have been understood in the philosophic tradition as having some universal articulation, reflecting ends (happiness, perfection, virtue) inherent in human nature or reason" in Velkley, *Heidegger* , 93.

20 . See *PLA* 137–38 (endnote 13).

21 . *Ibid.*

22 . Strauss makes this point quite sharply in *WIPP* 26–27: "The crucial issue concerns the status of those permanent characteristics of humanity, such as the distinction between the noble and the base." He goes on to associate the neglect of these characteristics with Heidegger: "It was the contempt for these permanencies which permitted the most radical historicist in 1933 to submit to, or rather to welcome, as a dispensation of fate, the verdict of the least wise and least moderate part of his nation which it was in its least wise and least moderate mood, and at the same time to speak of wisdom and moderation. The biggest even of 1933 would rather seem to have proved, if such a proof was necessary, that man cannot abandon the question of the good society, and that he cannot free himself from the responsibility of answering it by deferring to history or to any other power different from his own reason."

23 . Strauss will argue that "the ultimate justification of Spinoza's critique is the atheism from intellectual probity, which overcomes orthodoxy radically by understanding it radically, i.e., without the polemical bitterness of the Enlightenment and the equivocal reverence of romanticism" (§39).

24 . Buber and Rosenzweig did not succeed in preserving the substance of the Jewish tradition. Their strategy, which Strauss describes in *Philosophy and Law* as "internalization," manages to reinterpret the claims of the Jewish tradition (e.g., creation, miracles, revelation, and prophecy) so that they would no longer conflict with "intellectual probity." For a lucid outline of *Philosophy and Law* , see Eve Adler, "Translator's Introduction," *PLA* 1–20.

25 . Hobbes is less ambiguous and therefore more revealing than Spinoza on the question of the greatest good. See *Leviathan* , chapter 11 .

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### *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* • 53

26 . As Hillel Fradkin points out: “there are according to Maimonides different sciences of the law, or more precisely two: the legalistic science of the law or jurisprudence and the true science of the law. The *Guide* is devoted to the latter.” See Fradkin, “A Word Fittly Spoken: The Interpretation of Maimonides in the legacy of Leo Strauss,” *Leo Strauss and Judaism: Jerusalem and Athens Revisited*, ed. David Novak (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 59.

27 . “Cohen commits the typical mistake of the conservative, which consists in concealing the fact that the continuous and changing tradition . . . [depends on] revolutions and sacrileges” (§38). By “conservative,” Strauss does not mean politically conservative. (Cohen’s left-wing political views, including his endorsement of socialism and his hostility to capital punishment, are well known.) Rather, Strauss means by “conservative” a strong orientation toward preserving the tradition that precludes questioning and challenging it.

28 . As Strauss admits in 1972, it had been many decades since he had read Cohen seriously: “I grew up in an environment in which Cohen was the center of attraction for philosophically minded Jews who were devoted to Judaism; he was the master whom they revered. But it is more than forty years since I last studied or even read the *Religion of Reason*, and within the last twenty years I have only from time to time read or looked into some of his other writings.” See “Introductory Essay to Hermann Cohen,” *JPCM* 267.

29 . This also explains a host of apparent contradictions in Strauss’s explanation of Spinoza. For example, Strauss says that the *Ethics* is the first and last word of Spinoza, but he praises Cohen for beginning with the *TTP*, which he says is more revealing.

30 . See Richard Kennington, “Analytic and Synthetic Methods in Spinoza’s *Ethics*,” in *On Modern Origins: Essays in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Pamela Kraus and Frank Hunt (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 205–28. For an extended discussion of Kennington’s argument, see Joshua Parens, *Maimonides and Spinoza: Their Conflicting Views of Human Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 193–212.

31 . But Strauss praises Cohen for focusing his study on Spinoza’s *TTP* rather than the *Ethics*, a method that Strauss himself follows in his own writing and teaching (§39). In his seminar on Spinoza in 1959 at the University of Chicago, for example, Strauss promises to turn to the *Ethics* after reading the *TTP* and the *Political Treatise*, but does not do so.

32 . The ambivalence runs throughout Spinoza’s critique of the Bible. Spinoza wishes to use the Bible to establish a liberal society, which in turn, calls into question the very foundations of that society. As Strauss wrote in his 1936 study of Hobbes: “Exactly as a Spinoza did later, Hobbes becomes an interpreter of the Bible . . . to make use of the authority of Scriptures for his own theory, and then . . . to shake the authority of Scriptures themselves.” Cited in Leora Batnitzky, “Leo Strauss and the ‘Theologico-Political Predicament,’” in *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, ed. Steven B. Smith (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 47.

33 . In *PAW* 187, after claiming that Spinoza deliberately contradicts himself and that we should always resolve these contradictions by accepting the “the statement most opposed to what Spinoza considered the vulgar view,” Strauss says that “[o]nly by following this rule can we understand Spinoza’s thought exactly as he himself understood it and avoid the danger of becoming or remaining the dupes of his accommodations.” Here Harry Wolfson takes the place of Cohen as an author who explains Spinoza’s contradictions with historical reasons, that is, reasons “primarily

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based, not on Spinoza's explicit statements, but on the history of the author's life." Wolfson "admits that he is trying to understand Spinoza better than he understood himself" ( *PAW* 188).

34 . "[T]he *Treatise* is linked to its time, not because Spinoza's serious or private thought was determined by his 'historical situation' without his being aware of it, but because he consciously and deliberately adapted, not his thought, but the public expression of his thought, to what his time demanded or permitted. His plea for 'the freedom of philosophizing,' and therefore for 'the separation of philosophy from theology,' is linked to its time in the first place because the time lacked that freedom and simultaneously offered reasonable prospects for its establishment" ( *PAW* 192).

35 . See also "Introductory Essay to Hermann Cohen," *JPCM* 280: Cohen's "'optimism' was too strong."

36 . On the importance of the distinction between wisdom and piety in Maimonides, see Raymond Weiss, *Maimonides' Ethics: The Encounter of Philosophic and Religious Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

37 . This is Werner Dannhauser's argument in "Athens and Jerusalem or Jerusalem and Athens" in *Leo Strauss and Judaism: Jerusalem and Athens Revisited*, ed. David Novak (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 155–71. See Hilail Gildin's useful rejoinder, "D é j à Jew All Over Again: Dannhauser on Leo Strauss and Atheism," *Interpretation* 25, no. 1 (Fall 1997): 125–33.

38 . See "On a Forgotten Kind of Writing," in *WIPP* 221–22.

39 . Philosophy may not disagree with Spinoza's conclusions as much as his presentation of those conclusions. In his essay on Kurt Riezler, Strauss presents a disagreement between Socrates and Thucydides on whether the high is supported by nature, or whether it is vulnerable precisely because it lacks support. Thucydides appears to deny the existence of such support, but nonetheless is not indifferent to its existence. See "Kurt Riezler," *WIPP* 260.

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