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Do We Need Jerusalem 'and' Athens? A Straussian Reflection on the Role of Religion and Medievalism

María Alejandra VANNEY¹

Abstract:

Leo Strauss, rejecting modernity advocates for a remaining tension between reason, understood according to the classical greek and medieval tradition – not modern – and revelation as the only way to maintain the vitality of Western civilization. According to his reasoning there is no possible synthesis among both spheres, and this dialectical situation is fruitful, affirms Strauss, for the development of the West. Both, revelation and reason, says Strauss, are “incommensurables” and, as such, any of them can know the “Whole” which is the same as considering each ones’ autonomy and, from another perspective, each ones’ limitation.

There are many reasons – his own cultural and religious tradition, certain animadversion to Aquinas, a kind of fear about losing philosophy’s own field of study, etc – but it is interesting to consider that both areas (reason and religion) at the very end are for Strauss, necessary factors, considered more in terms of functionality rather than regarded as valuable on themselves. On the other hand, this raises the interrogation if he really succeeded in avoiding voluntarism which is the source of all the modern philosophical trends that he criticizes.

To the end, Strauss remains within a modern conception that cannot affirm one truth. For religion this means that he failed to recognize it - within its scope - advocates for the importance of reason, recognizing natural right (known by man when exercising his rationality), the respect of the rightful autonomy of the political and civil spheres - in which scopes of prudence and rationality are assumed, thus honoring practical rationality - and by pointing out limits of the intolerable, from those that in law are defined as public order and gives existence and life to law, who’s reason of existence resides in the establishment of convictions according to an existing order.

From a practical point of view, this reasoning is faithful to the dogma by which the presence of religion in a political scenario is an attack on a State’s sovereignty and an intolerable intrusion in the independence of a democratic and laicist

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State. For this reason those who have faith must keep it undercover and in secret, without any manifestation whatsoever in social and political life. This pretense clearly shows that for the State, believers are not free individuals but are rather subjects under a regime that intends to govern their actions and influence their consciences.

When all is said and done, the question that arises is whether Caesar can play God, if the State is the last horizon in personal life and most intimate realities, or if there is more; and if that "more" is within the freedom of each individual, of his legitimate way of living within the family, profession and public scopes without the intromission of Caesar.

Keywords:

Political Philosophy, Leo Strauss, Reason and Revelation, Athens and Jerusalem.

1. Introduction

Leo Strauss, a German philosopher of Jewish origin, is especially known for his work as professor in the History of Political Ideas in the University of Chicago, dedicated primarily to commenting classical authors. He was born in Hessen and studied philosophy in Marburg and Hamburg, where he completed his doctorate under the guidance of Ernest Cassirer. In 1922 he assisted to the courses given by Heidegger in the University of Freiburg-im-Breisgau, where he had as co-disciples Hans George Gadamer, Hannah Arendt and Karl Löwith. It was then where he came in touch with the classical way of thought. After completing a series of studies in Paris, where he wrote about Arab and Jewish medieval philosophers, he traveled to London and Cambridge to study Hobbes' political philosophy. During his years of study in England, he became vividly interested in the classical way of thought, especially in Plato and Aristotle. In 1938 he moved to the United States, where he taught at the University of Columbia and at the New School of Social Research and, in 1948, he taught History of Political Ideas at the University of Chicago until he retired in 1967. After a brief period of time in California, Strauss passed away in Annapolis in 1973.

Leo Strauss, his acquired fame left apart, does not appear as a univocal author. The "reading" that Strauss performs on the various philosophers with whom he deals is equivocal, and therefore it can be easily taken and used for ideological purposes, or admits diverse interpretations that create hermeneutic difficulties. This is why his

political philosophy has been considered, in many aspects, all the way from classical realist to nietzschean. This article refutes both extremes, and defines his stand as an intent to return to the classical rationalism by omitting the contributions made by Western Middle Ages, and in this way differentiating himself from the classic way of defining rationalism. This road, without a doubt, brings consequences that make it difficult when having to rank his philosophy.

Strauss faces with all seriousness the central problem in political life, that is the question about *the political*, understood –just as Carl Schmitt- “as the order of human things”, referring to the organizing principles that set up the different ways of life.² According to Strauss, there are only two alternatives that represent the best way of life: life dedicated to perfecting ones’ own reason, that is the philosophical life, and the one dedicated to biblical faith based on obedience. It is clear therefore, that Strauss starts from a dualism that does not admit half way points or grey areas on what he considers *the* issue: the theological-political matter. According to our author, this consists in intending to reveal the roots of Western philosophy, that is to say the question about the relationship between philosophy and religion, reason and revelation, or “Athens” and “Jerusalem”, both realities aim –as the author indicates– at giving a global and all inclusive explanation on man and the end result of his actions.

2. How to study Medieval Philosophy according to Strauss

Strauss raises the question about how to study medieval philosophy. We cannot discuss that question without saying something about how to study earlier philosophy in general and indeed about how to study intellectual history in general.

In a sense, for him the answer to our question is self-evident: if we have to study medieval philosophy at all, we have to study it as exactly and as intelligently as possible. As exactly as possible means that we are not permitted to consider any detail however trifling, unworthy of our most careful observation. As intelligently as possible: in our exact study of all details, we must never lose sight of the whole; we must

²Cf. H. Meier, *Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss y “El concepto de lo político”*. *Sobre un diálogo entre ausentes*, Buenos Aires, Katz, p. 95.

never, for a moment, overlook the wood for the trees. But these are trivialities, although we have to add that they are trivialities only if stated in general terms, and that they cease to be trivialities if one pays attention to them while engaged in actual work: the temptations to lose oneself in curious and unexplored details on the one hand, and to be generous as regards *minutiae* on the other, are always with us.

Strauss touches upon a more controversial issue when he says that the understanding of medieval philosophy must be *historical* understanding. Frequently people reject an account of the past, not simply as unexact or unintelligent, but as unhistorical. What do they mean by it? What ought they to mean by it?

According to a saying of Kant, it is possible to understand a philosopher better than he understood himself. Now, such understanding may have the greatest merits; but it is clearly not historical understanding. If it goes so far as to claim to be the true understanding, it is positively unhistorical. Historical understanding means to understand an earlier philosopher exactly as he understood himself. The task of the historian of thought is to understand the thinkers of the past exactly as they understood themselves, or to revitalize their thought according to their *own* interpretation of it. To sum up this point: the belief in the superiority of one's own approach, or of the approach of one's time, to the approach of the past is fatal to historical understanding.

For, to repeat, to understand a serious teaching, one must be seriously interested in it, one must take it seriously. But one cannot take it seriously, if one knows beforehand that it is "dated". To take a serious teaching seriously, one must be willing to consider the possibility that it is simply *true*. Therefore, if we are interested in an adequate understanding of medieval philosophy, we must be willing to consider the possibility that medieval philosophy *is simply true*, or, to speak less paradoxically, that it is superior, in the most important respect, to all that we can learn from any of the contemporary philosophers. We can understand medieval philosophy only if we are prepared to learn something, not merely about the medieval philosophers, but from them.

It remains then true that if one wants to understand a philosophy of the past, one must approach it in a philosophic spirit, with philosophic questions: one's concern must be primarily, not with what

other people have thought about the philosophic truth, but with the philosophic truth itself. But if one approaches an earlier thinker with a question which is not his central question, one is bound to misinterpret, to distort, his thought. Therefore, the philosophic question with which one approaches the thought of the past, must be so broad, so comprehensive, that it permits of being narrowed down to the specific, precise formulation of the question which the author concerned adopted. It can be no question other than the question of the truth about the whole.

True historical understanding of medieval philosophy presupposes that the student is willing to take seriously the claim of the medieval philosophers that they teach the truth. Now, it may justifiably be objected, is this demand not most unreasonable? Medieval philosophy is based, generally speaking, on the natural science of Aristotle: has that science not been refuted once and for all by Galileo, Descartes and Newton? Medieval philosophy is based on practically complete unawareness of the principles of religious toleration, of the representative system, of the rights of man, of democracy as we understand it. It seems to be based on a firm belief in the verbal inspiration of the Bible and in the Mosaic origin of the oral Law. It stands and falls with the use of a method of Biblical interpretation, affirms Strauss, as unsound as the allegoric interpretation. In brief, medieval philosophy arouses against itself all convictions fostered by the least indubitable results of modern science and modern scholarship. Nor is this all. Medieval philosophy may have been refuted by modern thought, and yet it could have been an admirable and highly beneficial achievement for its time. But even this may be questioned.

With all due caution necessitated by our insufficient information about what had happened in the Hellenistic period of Jewish history, one may say that the Middle Ages witnessed the first, and certainly the first adequate, discussion between these two most important forces of the Western world: the religion of the Bible and the science or philosophy of the Greeks. It was a discussion, not between ethical monotheism and paganism, i.e. between two religions, but between religion as such and science or philosophy as such: between the way of life based on faith and obedience and a way of life based on free insight, on human wisdom alone. What was at stake in that discussion, were not so much the

religious sentiments or experiences themselves, as the elementary and inconspicuous presuppositions on the basis of which those sentiments or experiences could be more than beautiful dreams, pious wishes, awe-inspiring delusions or emotional exaggerations.

3. The Gnoseologic Status of Philosophy and Revelation

When Leo Strauss confirms the incompatible claims of Athens and Jerusalem he is “open to both a willing to listen to each” and with this attitude, “we ourselves are not wise but we wish to become wise. We are seekers of wisdom”, he is saying that only then man is truly searching for wisdom, he is a philosopher. “By saying that we wish to hear first and then to act to decide, we have already decided in favor of Athens against Jerusalem”.³ The point is that had Strauss not made a declaration from a very start as we have seen, he would continuously leave the reader perplexed about the grounds that he has built his thought on: whether it is from the theological or philosophical point of view. Such a declaration is needed from the moment that Strauss continues saying, “yet our intention to speak of Jerusalem and Athens seems to compel us to go beyond the self-understanding of either. Or is there a notion, a word that points to the highest that the Bible on the one hand and the greatest works of the Greeks claim to convey? (...). We must then try to understand the difference between biblical wisdom and Greek wisdom. We see at once that each of the two claims to be the true wisdom, thus denying to the other its claim to be wisdom and highest sense. According to the Bible, the beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord; according to the Greek philosophers, the beginning of wisdom is wonder. We are thus compelled from the very beginning to make a choice”.⁴

In this text, Strauss has taken a stance; the same question that he asks himself about the source of truth for man implies in itself and for itself a practical truth. Having said this, wisdom is considered as *phronesis*, and not as *theoria*. This situation makes it necessary to know the basis of Strauss’s choice.

³ L. Strauss, “Jerusalem and Athens”, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1983, pp. 149-150.

⁴ L. Strauss, “Jerusalem and Athens”, pp. 149-150.

In general it can be said that, according to Strauss's approach, the basis of morality can be seen in four mutually exclusive sources: human reason, human will unassisted of reason, divine revelation, and any combination of the three.

When our author faces this artificial compartmentalization, he sees himself obligated to choose one of them, creating a very serious problem when he decides to suppress the fourth option, being the combination of the three where none of the options would be the stronger one. Strauss gives us the impression that he cannot tolerate the presence of an *irrational* element in the basis of his choice, because of this, besides rejecting the fourth choice he would not be able to accept as valid the second one, seeing as it advocates any type of voluntarism.

Strauss sees himself in the situation described by Boudon, when he says that some of the philosophers consider that "a) either all the statements of a scientific theory are logically or empirically grounded, and the theory is objective, or b) they are not, and the theory is not objective, and historical and social factors must be evoked to explain why people endorse the theory"⁵. In this situation his scientific rigor leaves him with two possibilities: reason or revelation, this is, philosophy or religion.

Now then, we can also describe in this last situation the logical framework on which Strauss builds his reasoning: "When two theories are available there must be objective ways of preferring one of them. If not, there are several truths. Hence, there is no truth. These principles are themselves grounded on the more basic principle that truth is unique or, if not, non-existent. They imply a preference between two theories can always be clearly and —this is more important— immediately expressed. In other words, this framework can be described in the following fashion: a) either a unique answer can be given to any question raised by a given discipline; b) or several answers can currently be proposed and accepted; c) in the latter case, objectivity is a mere illusion"⁶. The most profound choice is simply the one that supposes that the truth can be reached because it *is*, because it has a *reality*;

⁵ R. Boudon, "Should we Believe in Relativism?", en: A. Bohnen y A. Musgrave (eds.), *Wege der Vernunft. Festschrift zum 70 Geburtstag von Hans Albert*, Tübingen, JCB Mohr, 1991, p. 116.

⁶ R. Boudon, "Should we Believe in Relativism?", p. 121.

Boudon's logical analysis is interesting to understand the Straussian point of view which seems to inherit the scientific objectivity from Husserl. In his article *Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy*,⁷ it is evidenced that Strauss, paradoxically as another modern, aims to justify from all point of views an only source for the moral life.

Moreover, Strauss presents himself in this issue as all rationalists do, considering reason as the only source of knowledge, even in moral subjects, without being able to convert it in a pattern for decisions. The fact that all men desire, naturally, to know, means that man is a rational being, although this rationality needs to be used in the realm of virtues. Man finds himself installed in the realm of rationality and therefore, it is not within his decision making ability. A solution to this dilemma is the immediate knowledge of the first principles, and because of this comprehension we can find a solution to the basis of knowledge without having to turn to faith, being natural or supernatural. As we can see, Strauss presupposes faith when he stereotypes both the "pure" philosopher, as well as the theologian; this is because the first will base his teachings on the belief that all that it created is rational, whereas the second will trust in the word of God that has been revealed.

Strauss thinks science and philosophy are one, and it was not until the revolution of modernity that this union was broken: "Science is the successful part of modern philosophy or science, and philosophy is the unsuccessful part —the rump. Science is therefore higher in dignity than philosophy. The consequence, which you know, is the depreciation of all knowledge which is not scientific in this peculiar sense. Science becomes the authority for philosophy in a way perfectly comparable to the way in which theology was the authority for philosophy in the Middle Ages. Science is *the* perfection of man's natural understanding of the world."⁸ Leo Strauss aims to give philosophy its original status back along with its leadership in the life of all man, primarily in the political life.

Therefore, if philosophy stops being science's waste and it turns into *the science*, its conclusions should be totally rational, and therefore

⁷ L. Strauss, *Interpretation 2* (summer 1971), pp. 1-9.

⁸ L. Strauss, "Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization", in: H. Giddin (ed.), *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, Detroit, Wayne University Press, 1989, p. 266.

sharable and communicable: we are faced with the clamor of universality and necessity in human knowledge, taught by Kant. The claim for universal and necessary knowledge is essential in Strauss' approach; hence, if it were not this way there would be no possibility to leave behind an irrational or voluntaristic morality, which in consequence would be individualistic or emotional.⁹ This is why Strauss says that "even science with its enormous prestige —a prestige higher than any other power in the modern world— is also a kind of giant with feet of clay, if you consider its foundations. As a consequence of this chain of scientific development the notion of a rational morality, the heritage of Greek philosophy, has, to repeat myself, lost its standing completely; all choices are, it is argued, ultimately non-rational or irrational".¹⁰ In light of this situation, Strauss criticizes science with the purpose of justifying moral in a rational way. It is precisely that omnipotence of science that Strauss mentions which became one of the factors that motivated him to criticize modernity, when he tried to discover the giants with feet of clay that stood before him¹¹

Once the previous premises have been exposed, we should question the basis that led Strauss to postulate not only the incompatibility of the proposals of philosophy and revelation, and also try to understand the rationalism that appears in Strauss' works.

Leo Strauss maintains a distinguished point of view when it comes to religion and reason, it can be schematized in the following way:

- Philosophy and revelation try to give a solution to mans' problems, seeing that they offer guidelines or standards to reach the good life, to lead man to his moral end;

⁹Cf. A. MacIntyre, *After virtue*, South Bend, University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

¹⁰ L. Strauss, "Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization", p. 267.

¹¹ There is no doubt that Strauss was influenced by the political situation during the 1940's, were the political theory characterized by scientific rigor and method was in no way able to morally condemn the Bolsheviks, fascists and nationalists. The reason behind this impossibility is due to the fact that it is not possible to morally condemn actions without taking into consideration a system of values appealing only to the individual subjectiveness. With this in mind, we can see that for the scientific method, condemning or approving lacks any sort of objective validity because of its own inability to be shared by all men; in this sense, any judgment passed based on a scientific basis is useless. Cf. A. Brecht, *Teoría Política. Los fundamentos del pensamiento político del siglo XX*, Barcelona, Ariel, 1963, Preface tot he German edition, p. XVII.

- It starts from the fact that the explanation that philosophy and revelation propose disqualify each other as a solution to the problem;
- There is not a time where one of the two (revelation or philosophy) triumphs in trying to deny the other, thus man finds himself in a perplexed and unbeatable state, seeing as he cannot make a definite decision.

If philosophy and revelation give different answers to the problem regarding the best way for man to live life, it is because between them there is an essential disagreement; but this estrangement cannot be of such a category that it avoids establishing any type of dialogue between them. If this were so, it would make impossible any type of treatment for this dilemma, in consequence, there should exist common ground from where both can begin.

In Wilhelmssen's opinion, Strauss assumes "that reason is only reason at its best when untainted by revelation and revelation is only revelation at its purest when unmixed with reason".¹² In other words, Strauss thinks that philosophy is exclusively Greek starting from Socrates, and revelation is nothing but the biblical narration contained in the Old Testament. According to him, both of these are opposed and need to fight mutually to survive, unable to overcome the contrary, nor be defeated. This is why Strauss cannot reach a synthesis—not even in the moral field. According to this point of view, the theoretic incompatibility has already been discarded; such as, for example, the one reached by Tomas Aquinas, "who was able to synthesize both traditions (Augustinian and Aristotelian) thanks to the strength of his metaphysical realism and theology, being rooted in the primary and canonic narration, which is the Bible"¹³, logically disqualified with vehemence by Strauss.

Out of all the work written by our author, the one that makes most reference to Tomas Aquinas is *Natural Right and History*. However, Strauss refutes the thomistic synthesis¹⁴ and does not preoccupy himself

¹² F. Wilhelmssen, *Christianity and Political Philosophy*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1978, pp. 216-217.

¹³ A. Llano, "Presentación", in: A. MacIntyre, *Tres Versiones Rivalentes de la Ética*, Madrid, Rialp, 1992, p. 16.

¹⁴ Cf. L. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, pp. 163-5 y 157-9; L. Strauss y J. Cropsey, *History of Political Philosophy*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987, pp. 248-275.

in deepening his thoughts on Aquinas. As Jaffa has lucidly said, Leo Strauss “did not believe that the principles of reason and revelation could ever be reduced one to the other. Hence he did not believe in the possibility of a synthesis, since any synthesis would imply a higher principle than either, a principle which regulated the combination. Catholic Christianity, which found its highest expression in Thomas Aquinas, attempted such a synthesis. Strauss admired the magnificence of Thomas' efforts, and saw in them a great humanizing and moderating of Catholic theology. Perhaps the greatest gain from the thomistic synthesis was that Aristotle, from being a forbidden author, became eventually a recommended one. But only in traditional Judaism did the idea of revelation, and of a tradition undivided and uncompromised by syncretism, find its full expression”.¹⁵

Although this quotation contains many controversial ideas, the text sums up very well Strauss' attitude towards the thomistic teachings. It also helps to understand why Strauss qualifies Thomas Aquinas' point of view as apt for being considered as a refuge; it would be very comfortable –we could say with Strauss– to benefit from that point of view in which everything could be explained by revelation, and reason would need to have in mind the data revealed in its philosophical work.¹⁶

Strauss' disciples also understand it this way, who –following their teachers' philosophy–, cannot conceive a different relationship to the mutual exclusion between faith and reason; hence Nathan Tarcov and Thomas Pangle state that “it seems unlikely that metaphysical or cosmological or psychological speculation by itself can definitively decide the most important and urgent question: whether our lives can and should be guided by human reason alone, or whether the God or gods revealed by Scripture or the poets exist and therefore demand from us that we follow their laws and piously seek illumination from them”.¹⁷

James V. Shall, in an article titled “A Latitude from Statesmanship? Strauss on St. Thomas”, constructs a profound study on

¹⁵ H. Jaffa, “The Achievement of Leo Strauss. III”, *National Review* 25 (December 1973), p. 1354.

¹⁶ In this sense, it seems that from Strauss' point of view, Thomas Aquinas has made no other contribution to philosophy more than permitting -by Aristotle influence- the return to the Greek classics.

¹⁷ N. Tarcov y T. L. Pangle, “Epilogue: Leo Strauss and the History of Political Philosophy”, in: L. Strauss y J. Cropsey, *History of Political Philosophy*, p. 991.

Strauss' attitude towards Aquinas' reasoning. One of his conclusions was that although "Strauss claimed that his position was based on Aristotle, while he thought that St. Thomas went beyond Aristotle and deprived him of his «flexibility» in dealing with wickedness,"¹⁸ Thomas never contradicted Aristotle's, seeing as his labor was aimed at concluding with the arguments originated by him.

According to Thomas Aquinas' philosophy, in its search for the first principles, he starts from the assumption of the rationality of the world, without questioning it for a second. On the other hand, according to Strauss, the understanding of the nature of things, and consequently the nature of mankind, "cannot be fully clarified except by an understanding of the nature of the whole. Therefore, the right way of life cannot be established metaphysically except by a completed metaphysics, and therefore the right way of life remains questionable".¹⁹ As has been pointed out, the theoretical truth will never be certain, because its evidence is always compared less to the problems that it tries to solve. Starting off from a determined metaphysics, all the conclusions reached will suffer the insecurity that any knowledge has in the Straussian perspective.

With this approach –which has an air of Kants' agnosticism in reference to the possibilities of man to know God, the soul and the world– Strauss aims at concluding his speech by proving that the impossibility of philosophy to reach a true knowledge, which would not prevent the fact that "the very uncertainty of all solutions, the very ignorance regarding the most important things, makes quest for knowledge the most important thing, and therefore a life devoted to it, the right way of life".²⁰

On the other hand, seeing as revelation contains intrinsically an answer to that intellectual anxiety, the upright lifestyle proposed by religion would be, according to Strauss, life according to the law. Now, if a general agreement could not be reached before (about the philosophical knowledge in this case) due to the lack of rational evidence

¹⁸ James V. Schall, "A Latitud from Statemanship? Strauss on St. Thomas", *The Review of Politics* 53, (Spring 1991), pp. 126-146, here p. 134.

¹⁹ L. Strauss, "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy", *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 3, (1979), p. 113

²⁰ L. Strauss, "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy", pp. 113-114.

of the solution and, because of this, to its distinctiveness and contingency, the problem is that revelation is always particular, and the only evidence of its existence would be a personal experience with God, on the one hand, and on the other –not least important– the negative evidence of insufficiency for non-believers.²¹ Both would be extremely vulnerable from the rationalistic point of view, but Strauss defends this position.

Strauss' criticism towards natural theology is based on the natural law doctrine as it is understood by scholastics; mainly those who uphold the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas.²² This begins with an analysis of the notion of synderesis and alleging that it is so powerful in marking what is permitted and that which is forbidden, that there would be no room for a rational interpretation. In other words, this notion is based on a revealed doctrine. This last affirmation is opposing the noble simplicity of the ancient philosophers, mainly Plato, Aristotle and the stoics.

Behind this criticism lays an erroneous notion as to what Thomas Aquinas sought to explain in the doctrine of the synderesis; it is not about substituting a rightful reason for revealed concepts, but about emphasizing the fact that there are principles both in practical and theoretical reason. Without a doubt, an Aquinas follower is fully conscious of the difference that exists between theoretical and practical reason: the conclusions arrived by theoretical reason refer to something necessary and universal, whereas conclusions arrived by practical reason always refer to something concrete and contingent.²³

Due to the aforementioned misunderstanding, it is understandable that Strauss attributed Thomas Aquinas' security to the fact that in his natural law doctrine, natural law is not a law that can be known merely through human reasoning, strictly speaking. The problem presents itself, from Strauss' stance, in the following terms: "The natural law which is knowable to the unassisted human mind and which prescribes chiefly actions in the strict sense, is related to, or founded upon, the natural end of man; that end is twofold: moral perfection and intellectual perfection; intellectual perfection is higher in dignity than

²¹ L. Strauss, "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy", p. 114.

²² Cf. L. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 163 y ss.

²³ S. Vanni Rovighi, "Legge e coscienza in San Tommaso", *Studi di Filosofia Medioevale*, Milan, Vita e Pensiero, 1978, T. II, p. 153.

moral perfection; but intellectual perfection or wisdom, as unassisted human reason knows it, does not require moral virtue”.²⁴

On the one hand, a law whose main objective is to prescribe actions, becomes empty of any end, at the very moment that the end becomes an impossible goal or, at least, by an indifferent wording as to the actions commanded by the law itself. In the first scenario, the existence of an impossible goal, Strauss and Aquinas would agree because both are aware that it is not possible to obtain a fully perfected intellect; but each scholar sustains this conclusion with different arguments.

The solution brought forth by each one is of a very diverse nature. Strauss indicated that the intellectual end-means would be the search itself –philosophy– rather than the seeking of the truth. This is the precise reason why Strauss accuses Thomas Aquinas of affirming that “the natural end of man is insufficient or points beyond itself or, more precisely, that the end of man cannot consist in philosophic investigation, to say nothing of political activity”²⁵, thus openly contradicting what he regards as philosophical activity.

This is the path by which, searching for a supernatural end which would be the reason behind a prescribed action, that Aquinas will arrive –according to Strauss interpretation of Aquinas– to claim that the supernatural end is man’s only end. Hence, he would be making an uncalled for presumption of divine-law, supposing without basis that this would complete or facilitate man’s capacity to obtain his only end: the supernatural one.

As a form of concluding, we may draw attention upon the consequences of what was previously mentioned: if the only true end for man is the supernatural one, and natural law fulfills its role only in helping man reach it end, then the intellectual conception of natural law would be inseparable from knowing the supernatural end.

Now, if that end, because it’s supernatural character, can only be known through revelation, and as long as this holds true, in that very same proportion would natural law depends on revelation, as so would do all of man’s life, especially his political life. In the end Strauss accuses the medievalists of understanding natural law as inseparable from natural

²⁴ L. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 163.

²⁵ L. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 163.

theology²⁶, and, even more, based on revealed theology. This equals to, in accordance to Strauss's premise, the discrediting of these individuals as philosophers.²⁷

4. Conclusion: Love to Wisdom and Religion

Philosophy, to remain true to itself, must switch from the admiration produced by the being, to love for what *is* real. It is an unavoidable step; only that way, philosophy will not be a self-absorption of reason drifting apart from reality—such as the point of view paradoxically proposed by Strauss when he invokes the Classic and criticizes the modernity—but will be the love for that what *is*. And the more that what is real is loved; the best it can be known. In summary, philosophy cannot exist without trusting reality. It is a trust that does not deprives the philosopher from its science, but allows him to increase it more profoundly.

Herein lays the path traveled by those looking for the truth of what is real: from admiration, they switch to love; from this—by means of trust²⁸—they approach faith, conceived as the search for the being's most intimate ultimacy. And love is what finally, guarantees philosopher's life—although its quest will be unable to *fully* comprehend reality—not be tragic, because love never is.²⁹

²⁶ For Strauss, natural theology is based on revelation because the very idea of God cannot be demonstrated rationally (the same goes for explaining the soul and the world) and thus any rational claim is nothing more than an intellectual mask disguising an argument based on faith.

²⁷ L. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 164.

²⁸ Confidence always implies “going out of oneself” towards the other. That is why it is indispensable for all approach towards beings' ultimacy, which cannot be found in an introspective attitude. Thus, the importance of the greatness of spirit pointed out by Seneca, which supposes “being open to everything”. Cf. R. Alvira, “Figures of Time in Human Life”, *Revista Empresa y Humanismo*, vol XIV/1, 2011, p.15.

²⁹ As Alvira points out, “only the one that loves the truth finds it, but love is supratemporal energy. A love with a before and after cannot be true love. One finds something or someone because one *recognizes*: in a mysterious way it was already in me, and that is why I was able to recognize it. And if it transcends time, it cannot end. Plato insisted (...) in the idea that truth and love are eternal and indissoluble realities: only the authentic love finds truth (hence, philosophy as the method of knowledge), and only the spirit of truth can find love. Truth is presented to whom wants (loves) and likes

The personal tragedy of the philosopher —that Strauss tries to avoid by means of an absolute separation between the philosophical and the theological fields— is manifested mainly in two ways: skepticism and epicureism. The skeptic doubts of everything, but he does so because he eventually wants to find the truth; however, not being able to overcome the doubt's realm, the only way to prevent the intellectual and vital tragedy that would inevitably come is by seeking out a *forgetfulness escape* —by either entertainment, or quest for a superficial encyclopedia-like knowledge, or work for work itself. In the second option, the epicurean, avoids tragedy by searching pleasure as an end by itself —as truth cannot be known, epicureans aim towards enjoying a good life—. In this case, reality can be loved but the doubt remains and is pointed towards the most hurtful condition— will the object of my love be eternal? And when the question is whether that love will last, the latter appears to be unreal. Here lays the Nietzschean conclusion that denies eternity because everything is time, which leads to his theory of the eternal return— a temporalized and meaningless version of eternity. Why care about the permanence of species —a posterity that would perpetuate myself— if that eternity finishes with my death? Nietzsche had the courage to go on asking himself about time, and also to realize and admit that an eternity that feeds itself with time is a false eternity. Thus, he tries to find a way to flee from the unavoidability of time by means of considering freedom as the original being of all things—a beginning with no beginning. Thus, Nietzschean freedom is infinite, because the being is the will of power. Therefore, the superhuman's eternity lays in the act of choosing and it is bound to the instant of that choice: what has been decided is somehow eternal. It is clearly seen that Nietzsche is a desperate man not convinced by hedonism as the easy way to avoid tragedy³⁰.

something, but to whom searches with the spirit of truth is the only one that can love truthfully”, in: R. Alvira, “Figures of time in the human life”, p.11.

³⁰ A manifestation of the Nietzschean acuity is his affirmation that “all pleasure asks for eternity, and it is not strange that he asks for it, as he tries to be its substitute, and, cannot obtain it, because according to Nietzsche, there is no eternity, only time (...). That is why the non-technological strong man does not aspire, according to the author Zarathustra, to happiness, which is necessarily eternal. He aspires only to his work”: the superman. In: R. Alvira, “Figures of Time in the Human Life”, p. 13.

The concept of religion, particularly in Christianity, invites philosophy to reflect upon what has been received, contrary to Hegel's stance of "not taking anything for granted"³¹. That is because the faith consists in believing because *that what is stated*—and, even more, because *Who states it*—persuades the human reason. From this point of view, revelation does not deprive the philosopher from its science, but gives him new elements upon which he may reflect.

It is not about, as Strauss seems to contend, closing the eyes of reason before revelation in a blindfolded acceptance, but the opposite: if philosophy is love of wisdom, and if revelation gives reason new elements that are reasonably acceptable, then revelation is trusted and loved; therefore, it becomes an object of study. It is useful here to quote Anselm of Canterbury, who affirms that *fides quaerens intellectum*, because faith, precisely because it is not irrational, demands further study, which is provided by philosophy³².

On the contrary, if a particular religion is not revealed, then the question for its intrinsic justification appears: where does the authority of a religion proceed if it does not proceed from a God revealing Himself? It is undeniable that a religion that is not revealed is not a religion; it is to say, that ultimacies' explanations remains in the field of philosophy.

In summary, the great question asked by ancient and modern philosophers and somehow eluded by Strauss is how philosophy can explain the reality of God, the world and the man. And it is a question that needs to be answered because man, in order to have a good life—a classical concern that is attended by Strauss—, needs to know and understand rational reasons, solid convictions and values that are not fully attainable by philosophy. Reason itself does not have the strength necessary for life: if God is a personal being that rewards and punishes, then enough theoretical knowledge is had; however, if the only known concept of God is him as a general Practical Reason, the effort to obey it is not clearly compensated. It seems to be a paradox: at the same time, Philosophy is sovereign and free from everything but from truth.

³¹ Cf. G. W. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philophischenWissenschaften* § 1, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1986, p. 41.

³² Anselm of Carterbury, *Proslogion*, Madrid, Tecnos, 2009, c.2. It is necessary to clarify that although Anselms's idea invites for closer examination on the revelation, reason cannot by this way, demonstrate nor justify faith, as the author aims to do.

On the other hand, there stands the inquiry about the existence of revelation. It seems reasonable to suppose that if God has revealed some truths to certain beings capable of knowing the truth, did it to allow man to understand, step by step, more about himself, the world, and the One that is, at the same time, its cause and its end.

Finally, if Strauss affirms that the modern world has been constituted as it is because of the biblical tradition³³and, at the same time, he criticizes modernity, then the conclusion and question that appears is if the latter criticisms also entail a criticism against the biblical teachings. It is not an easy question to answer. However, it is curious that an author as Strauss, who thinks that the tension between Athens and Jerusalem is the central theme of the Western civilization, pays so little attention to the analysis of the Bible.³⁴

In fact, what can be said about an author that, having devoted three books to the Xenophon' Socrates and other essays on thinkers such as Thucydides and Aristophanes, gives to the Bible only an essay on the Genesis' first two chapters? This lack of balance it is especially problematic because of the Straussian insistence in maintaining alive the question about the relationship between the Greeks and the biblical tradition. His reticence to dealing with biblical texts —particularly with New Testament texts— is, on the least, rare. This way, Strauss' reader is left with the doubt of whether Strauss' observation on Machiavelli is applicable to himself: "The silence of a wise man is always meaningful. It cannot be explained by forgetfulness"³⁵.

³³ Thus, Strauss argues that the option for Jerusalem risks the Western civilization's vitality, because of the lack of balance between reason and revelation. And so, a return to Athens is needed. Cf. K. Löwith y L. Strauss, "Correspondence Concerning Modernity", *Independent Journal of Philosophy*. IV, 1983, p. 111.

³⁴ Strauss has only written an essay about a book of the Bible. ("On the interpretation of Genesis", reedited in S.Orr, *Jerusalem and Athens: Reason and Revelation in the Works of Leo Strauss*, Lanham, Rowman& Littlefield, 1995, pp. 209-225). Some of these issues are dealt with in "Jerusalem and Athens: Some Preliminary Reflections", in: *The City College Papers*, 6, 1968 (reedited in S.Orr, *Jerusalem and Athens*, pp. 179-208), where Strauss includes some brief quotations of Amos, Isaac and Jeremiah. Strauss also deals with the influence of the Bible in "Progress or Return". However, in his works there is no relatively extensive treatment on any of the books of the New Testament.

³⁵Cf. L. Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 30.

Strauss' attitude is, however, extremely cautious. Almost never does he criticize the Bible, but merely suggests possibilities to his readers. His reticence is likely a reflection of his own ambiguous relationship with the Bible. As it is known, Strauss tends to stress the biblical topics related with Law, punishment and penance. These are issues that apply to the non-philosophers' lives—most of the people—and, thus, may be useful for society.³⁶ However, Strauss also knows the Judaic prophetic-messianic tradition—and its importance for Christianity—which accent resides in the transformation of the world by means of God's action in History. It is this aspect of the biblical message what Strauss relates with modernity, and whose importance he de-emphasizes when referring to the Bible. Therefore, stressing the connection between modernity and the biblical message too much conveys the risk of harm the reputation of the Bible as a whole, including those elements that Strauss see as valuable.

Strauss knows that it is impossible to provide answers to every problem. Nevertheless, he is wrong when he somehow diminishes the possibilities of philosophy's cognoscitive power and when he tries to introduce, in the revelation, elements not related to its ultimate reason of being. In some way, the Straussian message seems to suggest that the tension between Athens and Jerusalem is needed not only because both of them have valid elements to guide civilization, but rather because modernity represents Jerusalem's triumph, which must be necessarily, counterattacked in order to allow the rebirth of classical wisdom. Otherwise, the biblical message—states Strauss—will mean the end of philosophy, which will be unable to defend itself from the accusations from the political instances.³⁷ Athens' teachings, therefore, must be rehabilitated in order to avoid Bible's triumph. Besides, philosophy must never appear contradicting biblical teachings because, whether being true or false, the city needs deeply rooted "opinions" to guide and unite the people. Thus, the choice for Jerusalem must also be defended.

³⁶ L. Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, pp. 19-20.

³⁷ About the danger that philosophy towards the hegemony of politics, cf. L. Strauss, *On Tyranny. Revised and expanded edition including the Strauss—Kojève correspondence*, in: V. Gourevitch and M Roth (eds), New York, Free Press, 1991, pp. 133 and ff; *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, pp. 23 and ff.

The heart of the Western world, in Strauss' thought would reside in the permanent tension between a life governed by laws, prohibitions and obedience to the inscrutable will of God, and another one characterized by a life of quest for wisdom, freedom of thought, and moderation. It is a duality that, according to Strauss, determines the constitution of today's *poleis*, and which needs a return to classical rationalism in order to cure their excesses and defects.

Although Strauss' clear diagnosis of the crucial problems of modernity and his big efforts to counteract them, it is his moderate skepticism the cause his rejection of any synthesis between reason and revelation. However, his incomplete comprehension of the biblical message made it impossible for him to reach the revealed truth, in spite of the religious longing that inspires his whole work.

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