

Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy by Leo Strauss



Leo Strauss

When we attempt to return to the roots of Western civilization, we observe soon that Western civilization has two roots which are in conflict with each other, the biblical and the Greek philosophic, and this is to begin with a very disconcerting observation. Yet this realization has also something reassuring and comforting. The very life of Western civilization is the life between two codes, a fundamental tension. There is therefore no reason inherent in the Western civilization itself, in its fundamental constitution, why it should give up life. But this comforting thought is justified only if we live that life, if we live that conflict, that is. No one can be both a philosopher and a theologian or, for that matter, a third which is beyond the

conflict between philosophy and theology, or a synthesis of both. But every one of us can be and ought to be either the one or the other, the philosopher open to the challenge of theology or the theologian open to the challenge of philosophy.

There is a fundamental conflict or disagreement between the Bible and Greek philosophy. This fundamental conflict is blurred to a certain extent by the close similarity in points. There are, for example, certain philosophies which come seemingly close to the biblical teaching – think of philosophic teachings which are monotheistic, which speak of the love of God and of man, which even admit prayer, etc. And so the difference becomes sometimes almost invisible. But we recognize the difference immediately if we make this observation. For a philosopher or philosophy there can never be an absolute sacredness of a particular or contingent event. This particular or contingent is called, since the eighteenth century, the historical. Therefore, people have come to say that revealed religion means historical religion, as distinguished from natural religion, and that philosophers could have a natural religion, and furthermore, that there is an essential superiority of the historical to the natural. As a consequence of this interpretation of the particular and contingent as historical, it came to be held, and that is very frequently held today, that the *Bible* is in an emphatic sense historical, that the *Bible*, as it were, discovered history (or the biblical authors), whereas philosophy as philosophy is essentially non-historical. This view is underlying much of present-day interpretation of biblical thought. What is called existentialism is really only a more elaborate form of this interpretation. I do not believe that this approach is very

helpful for the understanding of the *Bible*, at least as far as its basic parts are concerned; and as an explanation, I will suggest here only one consideration: that these present-day concepts, such as History with a capital “H”, are very late concepts, very derivative, and by this very fact not as capable of unlocking to us early thought, thought which is in no way derivative, but at the beginning of a tradition.

One can begin to describe the fundamental disagreement between the *Bible* and Greek philosophy, and doing that from a purely historical point of view, from the fact that we observe first a broad agreement between the *Bible* and Greek philosophy regarding both morality and the insufficiency of morality; the disagreement concerns that “x” which completes morality. According to Greek philosophy, that “x” is *theoria*, contemplation, and the biblical completion we may call, I think without creating any misleading understanding, piety, the need for divine mercy or redemption; obedient love. To be more precise (the term morality itself is one of these derivative terms which are not quite adequate for the understanding of earlier thought), we may replace the term morality by the term justice, a term common to both sources; and justice means primarily obedience to law, and law in the full and comprehensive sense, divine law. Going even back behind that, we suggest as a starting point of the whole moral development of mankind, if we may say so, a primeval identification of the good with the ancestral. Out of this primeval equation which we still understand, of which we still make use in actual life, the notion of a divine law necessarily arose. And then in a further step, the problem of divine law: the original notion of a divine law or divine code implies that there is a large

variety of them. The very variety and, more specifically, the contradiction between the various divine codes makes the idea of a divine law in the simple and primary sense of the term radically problematic.

There are two diametrically opposed solutions to this problem possible, the one is the philosophic and the other is the biblical solution. The philosophic solution we may describe in the following terms: The philosophers transcend the dimension of divine codes altogether, the whole dimension of piety and of pious obedience to a pre-given code. Instead they embark on a free quest for the beginnings, for the first things, for the principles. And they assume that on the basis of the knowledge of first principles, of the first principles, of the beginnings, it will be possible to determine what is by nature good, as distinguished from what is good merely by convention. This quest for the beginnings proceeds through sense perception, reasoning, and what they called *noesis*, which is literally translated by “understanding” or “intellect”, and which we can perhaps translate a little bit more cautiously by “awareness”, an awareness with the mind’s eye as distinguished from sensible awareness. But while this awareness has certainly its biblical equivalent and even its mystical equivalent, this equivalent in the philosophic context is never divorced from sense perception and reasoning based on sense perception. In other words, philosophy never becomes oblivious of its kinship with the arts and crafts, with the knowledge used by the artisan and with this humble but solid kind of knowledge.

Now turning to the biblical alternative, here the basic premise is that one particular divine code is accepted as

truly divine; that one particular code of one particular tribe is the divine code. But the divine character of all other allegedly divine codes is simply denied, and this implies a radical rejection of mythology. This rejection of mythology is also characteristic of the primary impulse of philosophy, but the biblical rejection of mythology proceeds in the opposite direction as philosophy does. To give some meaning to the term mythology which I am here forced to use, I would say that mythology is characterized by the conflict between gods and impersonal powers behind the gods. What is in Greek sometimes called *moira*, for example. Now philosophy replaces this impersonal fate, as we might say, by nature and intelligible necessity. The *Bible*, on the other hand, conceives of God as the cause of everything else, impersonal necessities included. The biblical solution then stands or falls by the belief in 'God's omnipotence. The notion of omnipotence requires of course, monotheism, because if you have more than one God clearly none of them can be omnipotent. Only the biblical authors, we may say, understand what omnipotence really means, because only if God is omnipotent can one particular code be the absolute code. But an omnipotent God who is in principle perfectly knowable to man is in a way subject to man, in so far as knowledge is in a way power. Therefore, a truly omnipotent God must be a mysterious God, and that is, as you know, the teaching of the *Bible*: Man cannot see the face of God, and especially the divine name, "I shall be that I shall be," means it is never possible in any present to know that, what God shall be. But if man has no hold whatever over the biblical God, how can there be any link between man and God? The biblical answer is the covenant, a free and mysterious action of love on the part of God, and the

corresponding attitude on the part of man is trust, or faith, which is radically different from theoretical certainty. The biblical God is known in a humanly relevant sense only by his actions, by his revelations. The book, the *Bible*, is the account of what God has done and what he has promised. It is not speculation about God. In the *Bible*, as we would say, men tell about God's actions and promises on the basis of their experience of God. This experience and not reasoning based on sense perception, is the root of biblical wisdom.

This radical difference between the *Bible* and Greek philosophy shows itself also in the literary character of the *Bible*, on the one hand, and of Greek philosophic books, on the other. The works of the Greek philosophers are really books, works, works of one man, who begins at what he regards as the necessary beginning, either the beginning simply or the best beginning for leading up people to what he regards as the truth. And this one man – one book, was characteristic of Greek thought from the very beginning: Homer. But the *Bible* is fundamentally, as is today generally held, a compilation of sources, which means the *Bible* continues already a tradition with a minimum of changes, and therefore the famous difficulties with which the biblical scholars are concerned. The decisive point, I think, is this: here is no beginning made by an individual, no beginning made by man, ultimately. There is a kinship between this art of writing and the favored form of writing, favored in the Jewish tradition, namely, the commentary, always referring back to something earlier: Man does not begin.

In my analysis I presupposed that the equation of the good with the ancestral is the primeval equation. That may be so in chronological terms, but one cannot leave it at that, of

course, because the question arises, why should this be so, what evidence does this equation have? That is a very long question, and I do not propose to answer it now. I would only refer to a Greek myth according to which *Mnemosyne*, memory, is the mother of the muses, meaning the mother of wisdom. In other words, primarily the good, the true, however you might call it, can be known only as the old because prior to the emergence of wisdom memory occupied the place of wisdom. Ultimately, I think, one would have to go back to a fundamental dualism in man in order to understand this conflict between the *Bible* and Greek philosophy, to the dualism of deed and speech, of action and thought – a dualism which necessarily poses the question as to the primacy of either – and one can say that Greek philosophy asserts the primacy of thought, of speech, whereas the *Bible* asserts the primacy of deed. That is, I know very well, open to misunderstandings, but permit me to leave it at this for the moment.

II.

Now we are at any rate confronted with the fact that there is a radical opposition between *Bible* and philosophy, and this opposition has given rise to ineluctable conflict from the very beginning. This conflict is characteristic of the West, the West in the wider sense of the term including even the whole Mediterranean basin, of course. It seems to me that this conflict is the secret of the vitality of the West. I would venture to say that as long as there will be a Western civilization there will be theologians who will suspect the philosophers and philosophers who will be annoyed or feel annoyed by the theologians. But, as the saying goes, we have to accept our fate, and it is not the worst fate which men

could imagine. We have this radical opposition: the *Bible* refuses to be integrated into a philosophical framework, just as philosophy refuses to be integrated into a biblical framework. As for this biblical refusal, there is the often – made remark, that the god of Aristotle is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and therefore any attempt to integrate the biblical understanding into philosophic understanding means to abandon that which is meant by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. As for philosophy, that is perhaps a little bit obscured by a number of facts and therefore we must dwell upon it for a moment. The obscuration, I believe, is ultimately due to the fact that in the discussions regarding the relation of theology and philosophy, philosophy is identified with the completed philosophic system, in the Middle Ages, of course, primarily with Aristotle – by which I do not mean to say that Aristotle has a system, although it is sometimes believed that he had – but certainly with Hegel in modern times. That is, of course, one very special form of philosophy: it is not the primary and necessary form of philosophy. I have to explain that.

In a medieval work, the *Kuzari*, by Yehuda Halevi, we find this statement: “Socrates says to the people, ‘I do not reject your divine wisdom, I simply do not understand it. My wisdom is merely human wisdom.’ Now in the mouth of Socrates, as in this apophthegm, human wisdom means imperfect wisdom or quest for wisdom, that is to say, philosophy. Since he realizes the imperfection of human wisdom, it is hard to understand why he does not go from there to divine wisdom. The reason implied in this text is this: as a philosopher, he refuses assent to anything which is not evident to him, and revelation is for him not more than

an unevident, unproven possibility. Confronted with an unproven possibility, he does not reject, he merely suspends judgment. But here a great difficulty arises which one can state as follows: it is impossible to suspend judgment regarding matters of utmost urgency, regarding matters of life and death. Now the question of revelation is evidently of utmost urgency. If there is revelation, unbelief in revelation or disobedience to revelation is fatal. Suspense of judgment regarding revelation would then seem to be impossible. The philosopher who refuses to assent to revelation because it is not evident therewith rejects revelation. But this rejection is unwarranted if revelation is not disproved. Which means to say that the philosopher, when confronted with revelation, seems to be compelled to contradict the very idea of philosophy by rejecting without sufficient grounds. How can we understand that? The philosophic reply can be stated as follows: the question of utmost urgency, the question which does not permit suspense, is the question of how one should live. Now this question is settled for Socrates by the fact that he is a philosopher. As a philosopher, he knows that we are ignorant of the most important things. The ignorance, the evident fact of this ignorance, evidently proves that quest for knowledge of the most important things is the most important thing for us. Philosophy is then evidently the right way of life. This is in addition, according to him, confirmed by the fact that he finds his happiness in acquiring the highest possible degree of clarity which he can acquire. He sees no necessity whatever to assent to something which is not evident to him. And if he is told that his disobedience to revelation might be fatal, he raises the question, what does fatal mean? In the extreme case, it would be eternal damnation. Now the philosophers of the past

were absolutely certain that an all-wise God would not punish with eternal damnation or with anything else such human beings as are seeking the truth or clarity. We must consider later on whether this reply is quite sufficient. At any rate, philosophy is meant, and that is the decisive point, not as a set of propositions, a teaching, or even a system, but as a way of life, a life animated by a peculiar passion, the philosophic desire or *eros*, not as an instrument or a department of human self-realization. Philosophy understood as an instrument or as a department is, of course, compatible with every thought of life, and therefore also with the biblical way of life. But this is no longer philosophy in the original sense of the term. This has been greatly obscured, I believe, by the Western development, because philosophy was certainly in the Christian Middle Ages deprived of its character as a way of life and became just a very important compartment.

I must therefore try to restate why, according to the original notion of philosophy, philosophy is necessarily a way of life and not a mere discipline, if even the highest discipline. I must explain, in other words, why philosophy cannot possibly lead up to the insight that another way of life apart from the philosophic one is the right one. Philosophy is quest for knowledge regarding the whole. Being essentially quest and being not able ever to become wisdom, as distinguished from philosophy, the problems are always more evident than the solutions. All solutions are questionable. Now the right way of life cannot be fully established except by an understanding of the nature of man, and the nature of man 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. But 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. So philosophy in its original and full sense is then certainly incompatible with the biblical way of life. Philosophy and *Bible* are the alternatives or the antagonists in the drama of the human soul. Each of the two antagonists claims to know or to hold the truth, the decisive truth, the truth regarding the right way of life. But there can be only one truth: hence, conflict between these claims and necessarily conflict among thinking beings; and that means inevitably argument. Each of the two opponents has tried since millenia to refute the other. This effort is continuing in our day, and in fact it is taking on a new intensity after some decades of indifference.

III.

Now I have to say a few words about the present-day argument. The present-day argument in favor of philosophy, we can say, is practically non-existent because of the disintegration of philosophy. I have spoken on a former occasion of the distinction between philosophy and science as understood today, a distinction which necessarily leads to a discrediting of philosophy. The contrast between the lack of results in philosophy and the enormous success of the sciences brings this about. Science is the only intellectual pursuit which today successfully can claim to be the perfection of the human understanding. Science is neutral in regard to revelation. Philosophy has become

uncertain of itself. Just one quotation, a statement of one of the most famous present-day philosophers: “Belief in revelation is true, but not true for the philosopher. Rejection of revelation is true for the philosopher, but not true for the believer.” Let us turn to the more promising present-day argument in favor of revelation. I shall not waste words on the most popular argument which is taken from the needs of present-day civilization, the present-day crisis, which would simply amount to this: that we need today, in order to compete with communism, revelation as a myth. Now this argument is either stupid or blasphemous. Needless to say, we find similar arguments also with Zionism, and I think this whole argument has been disposed of in advance a long time ago by *Dostoievsky* in *The Possessed*.

Now the serious argument in favor of revelation can be stated as follows: there is no objective evidence whatever in favor of revelation, which means there is no shred of evidence in favor of revelation except, first, the experience, the personal experience, of man’s encounter with God, and secondly, the negative proof of the inadequacy of any non-believing position. Now as to the first point – there is no objective evidence in favor of revelation except the experience of one’s encounter with God – a difficulty arises. Namely, what is the relation of this personal experience to the experience expressed in the *Bible*? It becomes necessary to distinguish between what the prophets experience, what we may call the call of God or the presence of God, and what they said, and this latter would have to be called, as it is today called by all non-orthodox theologians, a human interpretation of God’s action. It is no longer God’s action itself. The human interpretation cannot be, authoritative.

But the question arises, is not every specific meaning attached to God's call or to God's presence a human interpretation? For example, the encounter with God will be interpreted in radically different manners by the Jew on the one hand, and by the Christian on the other, to say nothing of the Muslim and others. Yet only one interpretation can be the true one. There is therefore a need for argument between the various believers in revelation, an argument which cannot help but to allude somehow to objectivity. As for the second point – the negative proof of the inadequacy of any non-believing position – that is usually very strong in so far as it shows the inadequacy of modern progressivism, optimism, or cynicism, and to that extent I regard it as absolutely convincing.

But that it not the decisive difficulty. The decisive difficulty concerns classical philosophy, and here the discussions, as far as I know them, do not come to grips with the real difficulty. To mention only one point, it is said that classical philosophy is based on a kind of delusion which can be proved to be a delusion. Classical philosophy is said to be based on the unwarranted belief that the whole is intelligible. Now this is a very long question. Permit me here to limit myself to say that the prototype of the philosopher in the classical sense was Socrates, who knew that he knew nothing, who therewith admitted that the whole is not intelligible, who merely wondered whether by saying that the whole is not intelligible we do not admit to have some understanding of the whole. For of something of which we know absolutely nothing, we could of course not say anything, and that is the meaning, it seems to me, of what is so erroneously translated by the intelligible, that man as man necessarily has an

awareness of the whole. Let me only conclude this point. As far as I know, the present-day arguments in favor of revelation against philosophy are based on an inadequate understanding of classical philosophy.

Now, to find our bearings, let us return to a more elementary stratum of the conflict. What is truly significant in the present-day argument will then become clearer, and we shall understand also the reasons for the withdrawal from objectivity in the argument in favor of revelation in present-day theology. The typical older view regarding revelation and reason is today accepted fully only by the Catholic Church and by Orthodox Jews and orthodox Protestants. I speak of course only of the Jewish version. The question is, how do we know that the *Torah* is from Sinai or the word of the living God? The traditional Jewish answer is primarily that our fathers have told us, and they knew it from their fathers, an uninterrupted chain of a reliable tradition, going back to Mount Sinai. If the question is answered in this form, it becomes inevitable to wonder, is the tradition reliable? I will mention only one specimen from the earlier discussion. At the beginning of his legal code, Maimonides gives the chain of tradition from Moses down to Talmudic times, and there occurs the figure of Ahijah the Shilonite who is said to have received the *Torah* from King David and also is introduced as a contemporary of Moses, who had received the *Torah* from Moses. Now, whatever Maimonides may have meant by the insertion of this Talmudic story, from our point of view it would be an indication of the fact that this chain of the tradition, especially in its earlier parts, contains what today is called “mythical,” that is to say, unhistorical elements. I shall not dwell on the very well-

known discrepancies in the *Bible*. The question, who wrote the Pentateuch, was traditionally answered, as a matter of course, by Moses, so much so that when Spinoza questioned the Mosaic origin of the *Torah* it was assumed that he denied its divine origin. Who wrote the Pentateuch, Moses himself, or men who knew of the revelation only from hearsay or indirectly? The details are of no interest to us here; we have to consider the principle.

Is an historical proof of the fact of revelation possible? An historical proof of the fact of revelation would be comparable to the historical proof of the fact, say, of the assassination of Caesar by Brutus and Cassius. That is demonstrably impossible. In the case of historical facts proper, or historical facts in the ordinary sense of the term, there is always evidence by impartial observers or by witnesses belonging to both parties. For example, here, friends and enemies of Caesar. In the case of revelation, there are no impartial observers. All witnesses are adherents and all transmitters were believers. Furthermore, there are no pseudo-assassinations or pseudo-wars, but there are pseudo-revelations and pseudo-prophets. The historical proof presupposes, therefore, criteria for distinguishing between genuine and spurious revelation. We know the biblical criterion, at least the decisive one in our context: a prophet cannot be a genuine prophet if he contradicts the preceding classic revelations, the Mosaic revelation. Therefore, the question is, how to establish the classic revelation?

The usual traditional answer was, “miracles.” But here the difficulty arises in this form: miracles as miracles are not demonstrable. In the first place, a miracle as a miracle is a

fact of which we do not know the natural causes, but our ignorance of the cause of a given phenomenon does not entitle us to say it cannot have been produced by any natural cause but only supernaturally. Our ignorance of the power of nature – that is Spinoza's phrasing of the argument – our ignorance of the power of nature disqualifies us from ever having resource to supernatural causation. Now this argument in this form is not quite adequate for the following reasons: because while our knowledge of the power of nature is certainly very limited, of certain things we know, or at least men like Spinoza believed to know, that they are impossible by nature. I mention only the resurrection of a dead man, to take the strongest example, which Spinoza would admit could never have taken place naturally.

Therefore, the argument taken from the ignorance of the power of nature is supplemented by the following argument: that it might be possible theoretically to establish in given cases that a certain phenomenon is miraculous, but it so happens that all these events regarding which this claim is made are known only as reported, and many things are reported which have never happened. More precisely, all miracles which are important, certainly to the Jew and even to the Protestant (the case of Catholicism is different), took place in a pre-scientific age. No miracle was performed in the presence of first-rate physicists, etc. Therefore, for these reasons, many people today say, and that was also said by certain famous theologians of the past, that miracles presuppose faith; they are not meant to establish faith. But whether this is sufficient, whether this is in accordance with the biblical view of miracles, is a question. To begin with, one could make this objection: that if you take the story of the prophet Elijah on Carmel, you see that the issue between

God and Baal is decided by an objective occurrence, equally acceptable to the sense perception of believers as well as unbelievers.

The second ordinary traditional argument in favor of revelation is the fulfillment of prophecies. But I need not tell you that this again is open to very great difficulties. In the first place, we have the ambiguity of prophecies, and even in cases like unambiguous prophecies – for example, the prophecy of Cyrus in the fortieth chapter of *Isaiah*, that is today generally taken to be a prophecy after the event, the reasoning being that such a prophecy would be a miracle if established: but it is known only as reported and therefore the question of historical criticism of the sources comes in.

Much more impressive is the other line of the argument which proves revelation by the intrinsic quality of revelation. The revealed law is the best of all laws. Now this, however, means that the revealed law agrees with the rational standard of the best law; but if this is the case, is then the allegedly revealed law not in fact the product of reason, of human reason, the work of Moses and not of God? Yet the revealed law, while it never contradicts reason, has an excess over reason; it is supra-rational, and therefore it cannot be the product of reason. That is a very famous argument, but again we have to wonder what does supra-rational mean? The supra has to be proved and it cannot be proved. What unassisted reason sees is only a non-rational element, an element which, while not contradicting reason, is not in itself supported by reason. From the point of view of reason, it is an indifferent possibility: possibly true, possibly false, or possibly good, possibly bad. It would cease to be indifferent if it were proved to be true or good, which

means if it were true or good according to natural reason. But again, if this were the case, it would appear to be the product of reason, of human reason. Let me try to state this in more general terms. The revealed law is either fully rational – in that case it is a product of reason – or it is not fully rational – in that case it may as well be the product of human unreason as of divine super-reason. Still more generally, revelation is either a brute fact, to which nothing in purely human experience corresponds – in that case it is an oddity of no human importance – or it is a meaningful fact, a fact required by human experience to solve the fundamental problems of man – in that case it may very well be the product of reason, of the human attempt to solve the problem of human life. It would then appear that it is impossible for reason, for philosophy, to assent to revelation as revelation. Moreover, the intrinsic qualities of the revealed law are not regarded as decisive by the revealed law itself. Revealed law puts the emphasis not on the universal, but on the contingent, and this leads to the difficulties which I have indicated before.

Let us turn now to the other side of the picture; these things are, of course, implied in all present-day secularism. Now all these and similar arguments prove no more than that unassisted human reason is invincibly ignorant of divine revelation. They do not prove the impossibility of revelation. Let us assume that revelation is a fact, if a fact not accessible to unassisted reason, and that it is meant to be inaccessible to unassisted reason. For if there were certain knowledge, there would be no need for faith, for trust, for true obedience, for free surrender to God. In that case, the whole refutation of the alleged rejection of the alleged

objective historical proofs of revelation would be utterly irrelevant. Let me take this simple example of Elijah on Carmel: were the believers in Baal, whom Elijah or God convinced, impartial scientific observers? In a famous essay, Francis Bacon made a distinction between idolators and atheists and said that the miracles are meant only for the conviction, not of atheists, but of idolators, meaning of people who in principle admit the possibility of divine action. These men were fearing and trembling, not beyond hope or fear like philosophers. Not theology, but philosophy, begs the question. Philosophy demands that revelation should establish its claim before the tribunal of human reason, but revelation as such refuses to acknowledge that tribunal. In other words, philosophy recognizes only such experiences as can be had by all men at all times in broad daylight. But God has said or decided that he wants to dwell in mist. Philosophy is victorious as long as it limits itself to repelling the attack which theologians make on philosophy with the weapons of philosophy. But philosophy in its turn suffers a defeat as soon as it starts an offensive of its own, as soon as it tries to refute, not the necessarily inadequate proofs of revelation, but revelation itself.

IV.

Now there is today, I believe, still a very common view, common to nineteenth and twentieth century free-thinkers, that modern science and historical criticism have refuted revelation. Now I would say that they have not even refuted the most fundamentalistic orthodoxy. Let us look at that. There is the famous example which played such a role still in the nineteenth century and, for those of us who come from conservative or orthodox backgrounds, in our own

lives. The age of the earth is much greater than the biblical reports assume, but it is obviously a very defective argument. The refutation presupposes that everything happens naturally; but this is denied by the *Bible*. The *Bible* speaks of creation; creation is a miracle, the miracle. All the evidence supplied by geology, paleontology, etc., is valid against the *Bible* only on the premise that no miracle intervened. The freethinking argument is really based on poor thinking. It begs the question. Similarly, textual criticism – the inconsistencies, repetitions, and other apparent deficiencies of the biblical text: if the text is divinely inspired, all those things mean something entirely different from what they would mean if we were entitled to assume that the *Bible* is a merely human book. Then they are just deficiencies, but otherwise they are secrets.

Historical criticism presupposes unbelief in verbal inspiration. The attack, the famous and very effective attack by science and historical criticism on revelation is based on the dogmatic exclusion of the possibility of miracles and of verbal inspiration. I shall limit myself to miracles, because verbal inspiration itself is one miracle. Now this attack, which underlies all the scientific and historical arguments, would be defensible if we knew that miracles are impossible. Then we would indeed be able to draw all these conclusions. But what does that mean? We would have to be in possession of either a proof of the non – existence of an omnipotent God, who alone could do miracles, or of a proof that miracles are incompatible with the nature of God. I see no alternative to that. Now the first alternative – a proof of the non-existence of an omnipotent God – would pre suppose that we have perfect knowledge of the whole, so as it were

we know all the corners, there is no place for an omnipotent God. In other words, the presupposition is a completed system. We have the solution to all riddles. And then I think we may dismiss this possibility as absurd. The second alternative – namely, that miracles are incompatible with the nature of God – would presuppose human knowledge of the nature of God: in traditional language, natural theology. Indeed, the basis, the forgotten basis, of modern free thought, is natural theology. When the decisive battles were waged, not in the nineteenth century, but in the eighteenth and seventeenth, the attempted refutation of miracles, etc., were based on an alleged knowledge of the nature of God – natural theology is the technical name for that.

Let us sketch the general character of this argument. God is the most perfect being. This is what all men mean by God, regardless of whether He exists or not. Now the philosophers claim that they can prove the incompatibility of revelation and of any other miracle with divine perfection. That is a long story, not only in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but of course also in the Middle Ages. I will try to sketch this argument by going back to its human roots. Fundamentally, the philosophic argument in natural theology is based on an analogy from human perfection. God is the most perfect being. But we know empirically perfection only in the form of human perfection, and human perfection is taken to be represented by the wise man or by the highest human approximation to the wise man. For example, just as the wise man does not inflict infinite punishment on erring human beings, God, still more perfect, would do it even less. A wise man does not do silly or purposeless things, but to use the miracle of verbal

inspiration, for example, in order to tell a prophet the name of a pagan king who is going to rule centuries later, would be silly. I mean that is the argument underlying these things or something of this kind. To this I would answer as follows: God's perfection implies that he is incomprehensible. God's ways may seem to be foolish to man; this does not mean that they are foolish. Natural theology would have to get rid, in other words, of God's incomprehensibility in order to refute revelation, and that it never did.

There was one man who tried to force the issue by denying the incomprehensibility of God's essence, and that man was Spinoza. [May I say this in passing that I have leaned very heavily in my analysis of these things on Spinoza.] One can learn much from Spinoza, who is the most extreme, certainly of the modern critics of revelation, not necessarily in his thought but certainly in the expression of his thought. I like to quote the remark of Hobbes, you know, a notoriously bold man, who said that he had not dared to write as boldly as Spinoza. Now Spinoza says, "We have adequate knowledge of the essence of God," and if we have that, God is clearly fully comprehensible. What Spinoza called the adequate knowledge of the essence of God led to the consequence that miracles of any kind are impossible. But what about Spinoza's adequate knowledge of the essence of God? Let us consider that for one moment, because it is really not a singular and accidental case. [Many of you will have seen Spinoza's *Ethics*, his exposition of that knowledge.] Spinoza's *Ethics* begins, as you know, with certain definitions. Now these definitions are in themselves absolutely arbitrary, especially the famous definition of substance: substance is what is by itself and is conceived by

itself. Once you admit that, everything else follows from that; there are no miracles possible then. But since the definitions are arbitrary – the conclusions are arbitrary. The basic definitions are, however, not arbitrary if we view them with regard to their function. Spinoza defines by these definitions the conditions which must be fulfilled if the whole is to be fully intelligible. But they do not prove that these conditions are in fact fulfilled – that depends on the success of Spinoza's venture. The proof lies in the success. If Spinoza is capable of giving a clear and distinct account of everything, then we are confronted with this situation. We have a clear and distinct account of the whole, and, on the other hand, we have obscure accounts of the whole, one of whom would be the biblical account. And then every sane person would prefer the clear and distinct account to the obscure account. That is, I think, the real proof which Spinoza wants to give. But is Spinoza's account of the whole clear and distinct? Those of you who have ever tried their hands, for example, at his analysis of the emotions, would not be so certain of that. But more than that, even if it is clear and distinct, is it necessarily true? Is its clarity and distinctness not due to the fact that Spinoza abstracts from those elements of the whole which are not clear and distinct and which can never be rendered clear and distinct? Now fundamentally, Spinoza's procedure is that of modern science according to its original conception – to make the universe a completely clear and distinct, a completely mathematizable unit.

Let me sum this up: the historical refutation of revelation [- and I say here that this is not changed if you take revelation in the most fundamentalist meaning of the term -]

presupposes natural theology because the historical refutation always presupposes the impossibility of miracles, and the impossibility of miracles is ultimately guaranteed only by knowledge of God. Now a natural theology which fills this bill presupposes in its turn a proof that God's nature is comprehensible, and this in its turn requires completion of the true system of the true or adequate account of the whole. Since such a true or adequate, as distinguished from a merely clear and distinct, account of the whole, is certainly not available, philosophy has never refuted revelation. Nor, to come back to what I said before, has revelation, or rather theology, ever refuted philosophy. For from the point of view of philosophy, revelation is only a possibility: and secondly, man, in spite of what the theologian, say can live as a philosopher, that is to say, untragically. It seems to me that all these attempts, made, for example by Pascal and by others, to prove that the life of philosophy is fundamentally miserable, presuppose faith: it is not acceptable and possible as a refutation of philosophy. Generally stated, I would say that all alleged refutations of revelation presuppose unbelief in revelation, and all alleged refutations of philosophy presuppose already faith in revelation. There seems to be no ground common to both, and therefore superior to both.

If one can say colloquially, the philosophers have never refuted revelation and the theologians have never refuted philosophy, that would sound plausible, considering the enormous difficulty of the problem from any point of view. And to that extent we may be said to have said something very trivial; but to show that it is not quite trivial, I submit to you this consideration in conclusion. And here when I use the term philosophy, I use it in the common and vague

sense of the term where it includes any rational orientation in the world, including science and what have you, common sense. If this is so, philosophy must admit the possibility of revelation. Now that means that philosophy itself is possibly not the right way of life. It is not necessarily the right way of life, not evidently the right way of life, because this possibility of revelation exists. But what then does the choice of philosophy mean under these conditions? In this case, the choice of philosophy is based on faith. In other words, the quest for evident knowledge rests itself on an unevident premise. And it seems to me that this difficulty underlies all present-day philosophizing and that it is this difficulty which is at the bottom of what in the social sciences is called the value problem: that philosophy or science, however you might call it, is incapable of giving an evident account of its own necessity, I do not think I have to prove that showing the practical usefulness of science, natural and social science, does not of course prove its necessity at all. I mean I shall not speak of the great successes of the social sciences, because they are not so impressive; but as for the great successes of the natural sciences, we in the age of the hydrogen bomb have the question completely open again whether this effort is really reasonable with a view to its practical usefulness. That is of course not the most important reason theoretically, but one which has practically played a great role.

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<https://matiane.wordpress.com/2020/04/08/mutual-influence-of-theology-and-philosophy-by-leo-strauss/>