

Author's Response

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I thank the contributors for their thoughtful remarks. It is encouraging to have careful readings of my book by distinguished scholars. Their comments are perfect companion pieces that shed light on different aspects of my book and help other readers identify some of its major aspects.

Andrew March correctly writes that one of the objectives of the book is to show that “Strauss has valuable insights and methods and should not be categorically ignored and erased from scholarly debate” (531). For him, I would be successful in this project if I show that “Strauss’s basic positions [are] original and add something to our appreciation of medieval Islamic political philosophers” (531). There are certainly original ideas in Strauss’s writings but Strauss repeatedly claimed that his most important task is to recover what has been forgotten rather than to be an original thinker. He did not claim that he was the first to discover esoteric writing but only that he wanted to remind contemporary scholars of what he believed to have been well known to previous generations: that not all writers are forthcoming in their writings and that some of the thinkers who seem to have subscribed to the opinions common among their contemporaries were in fact dissidents who communicated heterodox ideas between the lines to avoid persecution.

March claims that Strauss’s practice of esoteric reading does not add to the knowledge we can obtain through nonesoteric reading of Alfarabi’s writings. Which is Alfarabi’s teaching that March believes is accessible also through a nonesoteric reading of his works? Heretical views including denial of the supernatural character of prophecy—the dogma considered one of the principles of Islamic faith without believing in which one cannot be considered a Muslim. And yet, March claims, “this heretical view is presented explicitly and exoterically” (533) in Alfarabi’s writings. March’s claim puts me in an uncomfortable position: On the one hand, I completely agree that Alfarabi subscribed to the thesis that March attributes to him. On the other hand, March’s comment requires me to make the case that Alfarabi did everything to look like an orthodox Muslim. Fortunately, the idea of Alfarabi as a faithful Muslim is so predominant in the scholarship that I can excuse myself from performing this task.

Nonetheless, the evidence marshaled by March provides me with a good opportunity to showcase the importance of esotericism. Alfarabi provides us

with one of the most explicit presentations of what Strauss called esotericism right at the beginning of his *Summary of Plato's Laws*. We must account for this point in our interpretations. Furthermore, the most urgent point for us here is the question of revelation itself: it is reinterpreted by Alfarabi to such a degree that one wonders why the term itself is not simply dropped. In the passage quoted by March, a natural process is depicted in which man reaches perfection in practical and theoretical faculties. Then immediately that man is described as the one "who receives Divine Revelation" (532). Elsewhere Alfarabi says that this man "is the one of whom it ought to be said that he receives revelation."¹ It is not clear how we should understand this curious statement ("it ought to be said") but one might even ask why anything about revelation should be said at all here. Doesn't adding a reference to divine revelation cause perplexity? After all, if we take Alfarabi's complete silence about Islam, the Prophet, and the Qur'an as a sign of his orthodoxy, his statements suggest that the prophet of Islam was also an example of such philosophic accomplishment and, more radically, that Plato and Aristotle were prophets and received revelation!

We here observe much confusion about the philosophic status of the Muslim Lawgiver and the religious status of Greek philosophers. Contrary to March's claim, the main issue is not that Alfarabi subordinates religion to philosophy but that this subordination goes hand in hand with a systematic obfuscation of the status of Islam, leading to the idea that Islam was a religion founded by a philosopher-king-prophet. Alfarabi's strict silence about Islam and his suggestive and perplexing formulations need an explanation that is absent from March's nonesoteric reading. Furthermore, Alfarabi is not the only figure whose orthodoxy is questioned in Strauss's writings. What about Averroes, whose heterodoxy is also prominent in my book, or even Avicenna? I doubt that many scholars would easily concede that these "Muslim" philosophers openly exposed their unbelief; then one must have recourse to something like Strauss's esoteric methods to expose their true teachings.

Beau Shaw rightly concentrates on my interpretation of "Farabi's *Plato*," the study of Strauss's that I have identified as one of his most personal and complex writings. Shaw also correctly identifies a critical aspect in my interpretation by which I try to indicate what I find problematic in Strauss's thought. My interpretation tries to bring to the fore Strauss's Janus-like character: Strauss the historian and Strauss the philosopher. My whole book is an effort to introduce Strauss as a historian engaged in a thought-provoking interpretation of Islamic thinkers; the philosophical side of Strauss does not occupy the same amount of space; after all, "who could say everything without being tedious?"² Nevertheless, the major points when it comes to

¹Alfarabi, "Political Regime," in *The Political Writings*, vol. 2, *Political Regime and Summary of Plato's Laws*, trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 69.

²Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xlv.

this issue are easy to identify in my book and Shaw has found them. It is not easy to connect the two aspects of Strauss's thought: where does he stop being a historian of Alfarabi and set out on his own philosophical journey? I believe this happens in the passage quoted by Shaw, where Strauss distinguishes between Alfarabi's "definite convictions" and what he later described as zetetic philosophy, the same thing he points at by mentioning "σκέψις in the original sense of the term."³ Strauss is not here a historian anymore but a philosopher who benefits from the occasion to introduce his own thoughts about the proper philosophic method, that is, zeteticism.

I have tried to bring forth the problematic character of zeteticism. Shaw is correct that neither Strauss nor Alfarabi seem to be zetetics but this is in fact the basis of my own criticism. Zeteticism is a problematic position, trying to find a breathing space between dogmatism and skepticism, borrowing some elements from the former while being in debt to the latter. Zeteticism does not rest satisfied with the received or new arguments and constantly tries to show their weaknesses: it fights in the camp of skepticism. But it also fights in the enemy camp, that of dogmatism, by granting the soundness of some essential truths, including the philosophic life as the only life worth living or philosophic knowledge as obtainable, the "truths" without which the whole zetetic enterprise would appear absurd. This position is not, I believe, tenable, and if Strauss subscribed to it I am not persuaded by it. But did Strauss subscribe to it? In the passage quoted by Shaw, the decisive word is not "actual," as Shaw believes, but rather "conviction," or as I have put it, "hope." Strauss thought that the proper philosophic attitude was beyond "hope and fear."⁴ Did Strauss fall victim to the unphilosophic hope? But perhaps he shared Nietzsche's view of skepticism and conviction (*Antichrist*, aphorism 54). This I believe is the central issue when it comes to evaluating Strauss's status as a philosopher: Was he a man of zetetic conviction or a radical skeptic?

Mahmoud Youness concentrates on two main points. First, he insinuates that Strauss is my master and my book is that of a disciple. As Youness mentions, I have been explicit in my critical comments on Strauss's work. I believe this sufficiently proves my impartiality and Youness's unfairness. Youness is also concerned that Strauss was involved in some form of esoteric writing for political reasons. I have discussed this point at some length in my book and can only summarize the main points: many thinkers throughout history subscribed to ideas like the distinction between the multitude and the philosophic elite, the dangers of expression of radical ideas for the political health of society, and necessity of hiding one's true thoughts from the multitude. This fact is historically documented and undeniable, especially in the

³Leo Strauss, "Fârâbî's *Plato*," in Louis Ginzberg: *Jubilee Volume on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Saul Lieberman et al. (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1945), 393.

⁴Leo Strauss, "An Untitled Lecture on Plato's *Euthyphron*," ed. David Bolotin, Christopher Bruell, and Thomas L. Pangle, *Interpretation* 24, no. 1 (1996): 21.

case of Muslim philosophers. When Strauss began discussing these ideas some scholars rejected them, apparently because they were hearing them for the first time, but now it is proven that Strauss was entirely right.

The old objections to Strauss's historical thesis have become untenable and instead, a new form of criticism has appeared which claims that Strauss himself subscribed to these ideas and pursued a political project using esoteric writing. It seems not to matter to these readers that Strauss was documenting a historical fact; for them, if Strauss wrote about esotericism and its necessity according to other thinkers, he must have believed in them too! I have tried to show, on the basis of Strauss's writings and his explicit words, that Strauss did not consider political esotericism relevant in the contemporary world. He clearly rejects the use of esoteric writing for political purposes in the contemporary world by saying that this type of political esoteric writing belongs to "a society which is not liberal"; esotericism is pointless in our liberal regimes.⁵ Strauss also says that Rousseau's thesis about the existence of dangerous truths has no relevance to modern societies.⁶ These are statements that must prevent any impartial reader from attributing political esoteric writing to Strauss.

Humeira Iqtidar's comments turn around perhaps the central issue implicit even in the title of my book: What distinguishes Islamic from non-Islamic political thought? Isn't the distinction of a somewhat arbitrary character? As Iqtidar rightly observes, one can "recognize Europe as a sub-continent of Asia without a clear border dividing the two." (543) Aren't then the disciplinary distinctions between the study of European and non-European thought remnants of an outdated Eurocentric perspective? Iqtidar and I seem to agree on a positive response to this question. What is valuable in Strauss's scholarship is that he also did not treat Muslim thinkers as outsiders or relics of a past only suitable for historical studies but rather figures on the same level as and in dialogue with the greatest minds of so-called Western thought. But Strauss was here also following in the footsteps of his Muslim models; some Muslim traditionalists did find the interest of Muslim thinkers in non-Muslim Greeks problematic, but Muslim philosophers themselves did not. Al-Kindi eloquently described the attitude that we can today recommend to Western scholars when approaching non-Western thought: "We must not be ashamed to admire the truth or to acquire it, from wherever it comes. Even if it should come from far-flung nations and foreign peoples, there is for the student of truth nothing more important than the truth, nor is the truth demeaned or diminished by the one who states or conveys it; no one is demeaned by the truth, rather all are ennobled by it."⁷

⁵Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1952), 36.

⁶Leo Strauss, "On the Intention of Rousseau," *Social Research* 14, no. 4 (1947): 467.

⁷Al-Kindi, "On First Philosophy," in *The Philosophical Works of Al-Kindi*, trans. Peter Adamson and Peter Pormann (Karachi: OUP Pakistan, 2012), 12.