

Persecution of the Art of Writing

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An awareness of the controversy surrounding Strauss pervades Namazi's work. His apologia is a labor of love: erudite, painstaking, uncompromising. Namazi highlights Strauss's contribution to Islamic political thought and argues for the continued relevance of the Straussian approach. There is much to recommend in the book but I restrict myself to what I take to be its more problematic aspects.

While many of Strauss's advocates deny the charge of esotericism, Namazi sees no reason to (43). Unlike Al-Farabi's pious ascetic, Strauss need not hide his teachings—he need not wear “the garment of vagabonds” (175)—to escape persecution. But he could still write esoterically for educational reasons: “philosophers embrace obscurity and refrain from conveying their true teachings directly. . . in order to educate their students and to train future philosophers” (13). Oddly enough, however, Namazi ends up eliding the difference between educative esotericism and other forms of persecution-induced esotericism: “educative esotericism protects the philosopher who is teaching ‘an approximation of the truth’ or ‘an imaginative representation of the truth’ to the vulgar” (140). I hope that this contradiction is not an invitation to esoterically read Namazi as he esoterically reads Strauss as Strauss esoterically reads Islamic political philosophers—I am not qualified to navigate that vortex.

If indeed “the principal requirement [for the success of esoteric teaching] is to *not present it as an esoteric teaching*” (38, emphasis original), then we may rule out the possibility that Strauss has something to hide. But perhaps the analogy with the pious ascetic is too simple. Consider the story of Ibn Al-Jaṣṣās, who was with the wazir Ibn Al-Furāt when he spat in the wazir's face and threw a pouch of camphor (intended as a gift) into the river: “Oops, I wanted to spit in your face and throw the pouch in the Tigris,” he said, owning his insolent gesture under the guise of innocent folly.¹ An esoteric teaching could be hidden in plain sight precisely by being presented *as an esoteric teaching*.

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¹Ibn Al-Jawzī (d. 1201), *Akhbār al-Ḥamqā w-al-Mughaffalīn*, Sharḥ ‘Abd al-Amīr Muḥannā (Beirut: Dār Al-Fikr Al-Lubnānī, 1990), 52, my translation.

Strauss's "twofold speech" (181) presupposes a distinction between the "philosophical" few and the "non-philosophical" many. What the many do not know is that the theologico-political whole that determines their way of life cannot withstand philosophy's critique. Philosophy therefore protects itself *and* the vulgar when it keeps its critique "between the lines," something that modern philosophy forgets. Religion is the religion of the vulgar and philosophy the courtesy of their opposite number. Philosophy is a group marker. It marks a group, one suspects, that sees itself above the demos.² By leaving the door to esotericism open, Namazi cannot quell the suspicion that a remnant of preemigration authoritarianism lingered on in Strauss's heart.³

Now, a more sophisticated understanding of religion and philosophy might see them operating on a higher plane where they do not necessarily conflict (63, 80). But our "philosophy," for all its denial of "definitive answers" (150), insists that it is "radically atheistic" (148n41, emphasis original). Surely, such a conclusion presupposes "definitive answers" about the nature of beings and the limits of the human capacity to know. Likewise, the denial of revelation must presuppose that the inquiry into the grounds of belief has come to definite conclusions. Unfortunately, whenever a proper philosophical investigation is called for, we are offered dogmatic conclusions supported by esoteric techniques. Whether the world is eternal assumes an understanding of time, as Averroes well knew.⁴ It also assumes an understanding of necessity. Surely, more can be said about this modality than that it is "blind" (198). Sorabji finds ten categories of necessity in Aristotle alone.⁵ But Strauss took no interest in speculative philosophy, Namazi reminds us (53), and we have to accept "philosophical" conclusions on the strength of prephilosophical notions.

We are told that philosophy is a demonstrative science concerned with the nature of beings, that it is "zetetic" and not dogmatic (148ff., 186). Judging, however, by Strauss's reading of Al-Farabi, his approach cannot be said to be philosophical. Strauss questions Al-Farabi's statement that he only saw nine books of Plato's *Laws*—Dimitri Gutas is not entitled to question Al-Farabi's statement about having read Plato's *Laws* (30)—on the basis that it cannot be an "'accident' that the correct number of the books of the *Laws* is the middle of ten and fourteen, which Alfarabi mentions as the number of the books related by others" (174). Namazi serves more of the same: "Is it also an accident that the correct number is the number of the central

²Anne Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

³John McCormick, "Political Theory and Political Theology: The Second Wave of Carl Schmitt in English," *Political Theory* 26, no. 6 (December 1998): 830–54.

⁴Averroes, *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*, trans. Simon van den Bergh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 1:9ff.

⁵Richard Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause, and Blame: Perspectives on Aristotle's Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 222–24.

paragraph of Strauss's own essay?" (ibid.). To insist that this style of arguing is philosophical or demonstrative is indefensible. But this is how Namazi sees the philosophical vocation—"It is through thinking out the problems, contradictions, half-arguments, slight changes in the enumerations, repetitions, and such esoteric clues that the student is trained in the ways of philosophic thinking" (43)—and this is how he reads Strauss (45).

The enterprise may be cast in better light if seen as a training in the ways of exegetical thinking. An exegete works in a closed universe of meaning accessed not by *ratio* but by *nous*. What carries the weight of the inquiry is not argument (in the philosophical sense) but what the Sufis call "taste."⁶ Hence the deference owed to the master whose insight reveals and enlightens. One of the main concerns of the exegete is to "save" the text. The writer is taken to be nearly infallible and his intention is meant to be "consummate[d]" (179). The unity that now permeates the text, the seriousness with which it is approached, the desire to dig deep and understand—all of this never fails to highlight aspects of the text that we tended to overlook and to reveal meanings that we couldn't access before.

The risk is overdoing it. "Fârâbî's *Plato*" in particular is an interpretive overkill (see, especially, the discussion of "spiritual things" at 132–34). Not only are we asked to accept a tenuous interpretation, we are also told that this "very minor treatise of less than twenty-one pages in Arabic with obscure and perplexing content" (119) should take "precedence over all other writings of Alfarabi" (127), that "we must scrupulously avoid having recourse to other writings of Alfarabi" (ibid.). Other than being the word of the master, this injunction has little to speak for it.

The insistence on reading a text "philosophically," on its own merits, derives from an animus towards approaches that emphasize context or structure, that are merely historical or philological. Not all historical readings are blinkered, but the cruder ones do sap the poetic out of the poem. It is Strauss's great merit to redirect us to the philosophical value of historical texts, including ones unfairly marginalized. Unfortunately, the "truly philosophical treatment" (68) of the kind he advocates is not without its defects. Consider Strauss's reading of *Arabian Nights* (the Calcutta II recension) as an esoteric composition of a single author (94). It seems to prove that Strauss, if he applies himself, can demonstrate the coherence and unity of purpose of just any text. Namazi lays out the evidence against the single authorship of the recension as adduced by Muhsin Mahdi. Rather conveniently, however, he "leaves the critical evaluation of Strauss's interpretation . . . aside" (95, 116). The trend is ubiquitous: throughout the book Namazi raises problems in the face of Strauss's interpretations but leaves their implications for Strauss's method unpondered.

⁶Al-Ghazālī, "Al-Munqidh min Aḍ-Ḍalāl," *Majmū'at Rasā'il Al-Imām Al-Ghazālī*, Taḥqīq Aḥmad Shamseddīn (Beirut: Dār Al-Kutub Al-'Ilmiyya, 1988), 59.

For instance, Namazi points out that “Alfarabi does not actually use the term [‘the other life’]” (185), central for Strauss’s involved interpretation of the *Summary* as “a specific kind of *kalām*.” But instead of questioning Strauss’s choices, Namazi tries to absolve him: “Strauss’s ambiguous terminology seems to point to Alfarabi’s ambiguous terminology.” Likewise, Strauss’s “inventing a quotation which cannot be found in Alfarabi’s *Summary*” (197) is seen as an “ambiguous” reference to the problem of Plato’s explanation of the origins of the laws, especially in an Islamic context, as if ambiguity is a plausible justification. Such tactics render anything Strauss says immune to falsification. Namazi lives up to his name in faithfully carrying Strauss’s message⁷ but he lets down his reader who does not expect the sharp critic of Gutas (23ff.) to turn timid when assessing Strauss’s work.

⁷The Arabic word “*rasūl*” means “messenger.”