The Review of Politics 86 (2024), 176–196.
© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of University of Notre Dame
doi:10.1017/S0034670523000700

Nietzsche, the Muslim *Falāsifa*, and Leo Strauss's Avicennan Turn

Malik Mufti

Abstract: Impressed by Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of liberalism but alarmed by its consequences, Leo Strauss turned in the 1930s to the medieval Islamic philosophers (*falāsifa*). A review of a key cleavage in their political philosophy—reflected in the contrasting positions of Ibn Rushd and Ibn Sina—identifies the fundamental alternatives Strauss found available to him on the role of religion in politics, and on the necessity and efficacy of political activism more generally. It thus illuminates the trajectory of Strauss's thoughts on the relationship between reason and revelation: from an initial appreciation for the "golden mean" between Nietzsche and liberalism he believed he had found in the writings of al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd, to a more apolitical "Avicennan" stance after his arrival in America. This last, it is suggested, was a contingent stance requiring reconsideration in light of new circumstances in American politics today.

Leo Strauss (1899–1973) came to America in 1937 seeking to understand how a noble instinct among the more idealistic elements of Germany's youth, the instinct to reach beyond oneself and do great deeds, had been perverted into the destructive impulses giving rise to fascism. That Strauss's investigations revolved around his reading of Friedrich Nietzsche—of whom he said that he "so dominated and bewitched me between my 22nd and 30th years, that I literally believed everything that I understood of him"[1]—is well attested. That in his thirties Strauss gained an appreciation of the medieval Islamic political philosophers (the *falāsifa*)—including, specifically, of their focus on the relationship between the individual and the city, as well as of the related imperative of esoteric writing—so profound that it has been described

Malik Mufti is professor of political science in the Department of Political Science at Tufts University, Packard Hall, Medford, MA 02155, USA (malik.mufti@tufts.edu).

I thank Ruth Abbey, the anonymous reviewers, Rob Devigne, and Vickie Sullivan for their helpful comments.

[1]From his letter to Karl Löwith of June 23, 1935, trans. George Elliott Tucker, *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 5/6 (1988): 183. Cited in Laurence Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670523000700 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as a "Farabian turn" in his thinking, is also recognized.[2] What has gone virtually unremarked is the connection Strauss drew in 1936 between the two sets of influences when he credited the *falāsifa* with having uncovered a "golden mean" between the "destructive instincts . . . of the master" and ignoble "slave morality."[3] The few brief references to this "golden mean" in the Strauss scholarship either do not connect it to his reevaluation of Nietzsche or do not see it as indicative of his considered views on political engagement.[4] Yet this connection provides a novel perspective on the tension, extending throughout Strauss's career, between sympathetic attention to the noble aspirations of youth and anxious regard for the moderating effects of liberalism; a tension all the more noteworthy because Strauss's dramatic change in orientation on the question—he would call it a "shipwreck"[5]—upon arriving in the United States is gaining deeper resonance in light of unfolding political dynamics in America today.

The prevailing view among his followers, encouraged by Strauss himself, is that he left whatever radical Nietzsche-inspired inclinations he may have had in his youth behind, to become an "unhesitating" friend of America's liberal regime.[6] Beyond occasionally pointing out liberalism's excesses, moreover, this friendship is understood to entail a generally apolitical stance designed to attract the best minds to lives of private contemplation.[7] This prevailing view obscures consequential continuities in Strauss's thought, the salience

[2]Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Christopher Nadon (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 53, 68, 79–98; Rémi Brague, "Athens, Jerusalem, Mecca: Leo Strauss's 'Muslim' Understanding of Greek Philosophy," *Poetics Today* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 235–59.

[3]Leo Strauss, "Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi" (1936), trans. Robert Bartlett, *Interpretation* 18, no. 1 (Fall 1990): 6.

[4]John Ranieri, "Leo Strauss on Jerusalem and Athens: A Girardian Analysis," *Shofar* 22, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 101; Leora Batnitzky, "Leo Strauss and the 'Theologico-Political Predicament,'" in *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, ed. Steven B. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 51; Catherine H. Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Strauss, Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 111–12.

[5]Leo Strauss, letter to Karl Löwith, August 15, 1946, cited in Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, trans. Marcus Brainard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 29.

[6]Leo Strauss, "Liberal Education and Responsibility" (1962), in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 24. See Allan Bloom, "Leo Strauss: September 20, 1899 – October 18, 1973," *Political Theory* 2, no. 4 (November 1974): 374; Thomas L. Pangle, *Leo Strauss: An Introduction to His Thought and Intellectual Legacy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 75, 82; Susan Shell, "'To Spare the Vanquished and Crush the Arrogant': Leo Strauss's Lecture on 'German Nihilism,'" in *Cambridge Companion to Strauss*, 191.

[7]Bloom, "Leo Strauss," 389; Pangle, *Leo Strauss*, 46–56; Steven J. Lenzner, "Strauss's Fârâbî, Scholarly Prejudice, and Philosophic Politics," *Perspectives on Political Science* 28, no. 4 (Fall 1999): 194–202.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670523000700 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the "golden mean" between Nietzsche and liberalism he believed he had found in the writings of the medieval Muslim *falāsifa*, and thus the contingent character of his later apolitical stance.

In order to better track the trajectory of Strauss's thinking on political engagement it is necessary first to identify what he took from Nietzsche in this regard: a concern with "greatness" understood politically as being in conflict with liberalism, and a conviction that the preferred political framework must be expressed under a distinct religious rubric, to which Nietzsche gave the shorthand designation "Islam." A review (in the second section of this article) of a key cleavage in medieval Islamic political philosophy identifies the fundamental alternatives Strauss found available to him on the question of reason and revelation in the 1930s, and illuminates (in the third section) his fateful yet hitherto inadequately explained reconsideration after arriving in America. A brief conclusion assesses Strauss's reconsideration in light of current circumstances.

Nietzsche's "Islam"

The ending of Strauss's youthful enchantment with Nietzsche around 1929–1930 coincided with the beginning of his interest in the Muslim *falāsifa*. Beyond a speculation in passing by Rémi Brague that this new interest may have been inspired by Nietzsche's comparison of Plato's political agenda to that of the Prophet Muhammad,[8] it would appear an odd transition, given Nietzsche's reputation for hostility to revealed religion and lack of familiarity with Islam's medieval political philosophers. As outlined by Peter Groff, Nietzsche "never mentions any of them, no works by or about them can be found in his personal library or list of readings, and there's little reason to think that he might even have encountered their ideas indirectly."[9] According to a widespread view, Nietzsche's assault on the metaphysical tradition in religion and philosophy cleared the way for Strauss to view Maimonides in a new rationalistic and nonreligious light, then to be led to his own like-minded Muslim teachers, and then to a rediscovery of true Socratic political philosophy.[10] Such a narrative, while compelling in itself,

[8]Brague, "Athens, Jerusalem, Mecca," 239.

[9]Peter S. Groff, "Nietzsche and the *Falāsifa*," in *European/Supra-European: Cultural Encounters in Nietzsche's Philosophy*, ed. Marco Brusotti et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 340. For an argument that unremitting hostility to "religious delusion" (169) characterized both Nietzsche's thought and Strauss's reading of the *falāsifa*, see Joel L. Kraemer, "The Medieval Arabic Enlightenment," in *Cambridge Companion to Strauss*, 137–70.

[10]Timothy W. Burns, "Strauss on the Religious and Intellectual Situation of the Present," in *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s*, ed. Martin D. Yaffe and Richard S. Ruderman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 79–113.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670523000700 Published online by Cambridge University Press

needs to be supplemented by an element of continuity between Strauss's attraction to Nietzsche and his attraction to the *falāsifa*.

Nietzsche's antireligious animus was tempered by his distinction between religions that are "life-promoting, life-preserving, species-preserving, perhaps even species-cultivating" and those that are not.[11] The former, exemplified by ancient Greek and Roman polytheisms, are "nobler ways of creating divine figments" indispensable to a legislating philosopher in "his project of cultivation and education."[12] The latter, exemplified by Christianity and Buddhism, are "religions for *sufferers*" and have produced in Europe "a smaller, almost ridiculous type . . . sickly and mediocre."[13] The virtue of a religion rests on its capacity to sustain "species-cultivating" military and legislative action. The fatal effect of Christian hegemony is that the capacity for virtuous political action is lost: "'resist not evil'—the most profound word of the Gospels."[14] It is in this context that, particularly in his last writings, he invoked Islam as what Ian Almond calls a "constructed anti-Christianity" which serves as "a pool of signs and motifs to dip into and make use of for his own philosophical aims."[15] Nietzsche's "Islam" illustrated the kind of religious rubric under which a vigorous and creative politics can be practiced.

Thus, "Islam is a thousand times right in despising Christianity: Islam presupposes *men*."[16] Whereas Nietzsche praised the Prophet Muhammad's saying, "Paradise is under the shadow of swords," as "a symbol and motto by which souls of noble and warlike origin betray themselves and divine each other,"[17] he depicted Christianity, devitalized by the "poison of the

[11]Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), §4.

[12]Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), 2.23; *Beyond Good and Evil*, §61. For an analysis tracing the importance of religion for political reform in both Farabi and Nietzsche back to Plato, see Peter S. Groff, "Wisdom and Violence: The Legacy of Platonic Political Philosophy in Al-Farabi and Nietzsche," in *Comparative Philosophy in Times of Terror*, ed. Douglas Allen (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 72.

[13]Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §62. Whenever Nietzsche is quoted, all emphases are in the translated originals.

[14]Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), §29. The few English-language studies of contemporary liberal Islamic responses to Nietzsche tend to neglect those aspects of religion he found so appealing. See, e.g., Roy Jackson, *Nietzsche and Islam* (London: Routledge, 2007).

[15]Ian Almond, "Nietzsche's Peace with Islam: My Enemy's Enemy Is My Friend," *German Life and Letters* 56, no. 1 (Jan. 2003): 51, 55.

[16]Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, §59.

[17]Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), §952.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670523000700 Published online by Cambridge University Press

doctrine of 'equal rights for all,'"[18] as seeking to subdue the proud and the powerful, to "become master over *beasts of prey*: its method is to make them *sick*; enfeeblement is the Christian recipe for *taming*, for 'civilizing.'"[19] And whereas he lauded Muhammad for "becoming the lawgiver of new customs"[20] that gave rise to the "wonderful world of the Moorish culture of Spain"[21] life-affirmingly grounded in the affairs and gratifications of this world, he decried Christianity driving human beings to abandon the arena of collective praxis for private, unwholesome preoccupations: "Public acts are precluded, the hiding-place, the darkened room, is Christian."[22]

In a now notorious 1933 letter to Karl Löwith—some years after the ostensible end of his Nietzschean phase—Strauss made it clear that he still shared Nietzsche's revulsion at political liberalism:

> only from the principles of the right, that is from fascist, authoritarian and imperial principles, is it possible with seemliness, that is, without resort to the ludicrous and despicable appeal to the *droits imprescriptibles de l'homme* to protest against the shabby abomination. I am reading Caesar's *Commentaries* with deep understanding, and I think of Virgil's *Tu regere imperio . . . parcere subjectis et debellare superbos* [you rule by empire . . . to spare the subjects and subdue the proud]. There is no reason to crawl to the cross, neither to the cross of liberalism, as long as somewhere in the world there is a glimmer of the spark of the Roman thought. And even then: rather than any cross, I'll take the ghetto.[23]

Later still, Strauss indicated his ongoing esteem for Nietzsche's insistence on the distinction between noble and base in politics in a 1941 lecture describing how "quite a few very intelligent and very decent, if very young, Germans" after World War I recoiled from the leveling egalitarianism of modern ideology—liberal and socialist alike—which introduced the "prospect of a pacified planet, without rulers and ruled, of a planetary society devoted to production and consumption only. . . a world in which no great heart could beat and no great soul could breathe, a world without real, unmetaphoric sacrifice."[24] Nietzsche presented the consummate expression of this

[18]Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, §43.

[19]Ibid., §22.

[20]Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), §496.

[21]Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, §60.

[22]Ibid., §21.

[23]Leo Strauss to Karl Löwith, May 19, 1933, trans. Scott Horton, https://balkin.blogspot.com/2006/07/letter_16.html. The "shabby abomination" seems to refer to Nazism.

[24]Leo Strauss, "German Nihilism," ed. David Janssens and Daniel Tanguay, *Interpretation* 26, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 360. This was a lecture delivered in New York on February 26, 1941.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670523000700 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"passionate protest . . . in the name of noble virtue"[25] against liberalism's "debasement of morality" —a protest which redounded to "the lasting honour of Germany."[26] As late as 1959, even while now excoriating Nietzsche publicly for preaching "the sacred right of 'merciless extinction' of large masses of men,"[27] Strauss was still telling his students: "Nietzsche appeals to those who are concerned with human greatness."[28]

As equivocal as Strauss was on his agreement with Nietzsche about the aspiration to greatness in politics being in tension with liberalism, he was still more so on the role of religion in politics. In a late and particularly abstruse essay, his sole publication dedicated to Nietzsche and one concerned chiefly with religion, he wrote: "There is an important ingredient, not to say the nerve, of Nietzsche's 'theology' of which I have not spoken and shall not speak since I have no access to it."[29] Though Strauss's focus here is more on the philosophical application of religious discourse than its mundane political utilities, he nevertheless presented a Nietzsche for whom the political imperative is always subsumed under religion: "for Nietzsche, as distinguished from the classics, politics belongs from the outset to a lower plane than either philosophy or religion."[30]

Are there any indications, then, beyond the Nietzschean allusion to the "cross of liberalism" in his 1933 letter to Löwith, or the centrality of religion in this short 1973 essay, of the extent to which Strauss agreed with Nietzsche on the role of religion in politics? Discussing the medieval Jewish thinker Yehuda Halevi in 1943, Strauss wrote that to "deny that religion is essential to society, is difficult for a man of Halevi's piety," and continued—as if to emphasize his agreement—"and, we venture to add, for anyone who puts any trust in the accumulated experience of the human race."[31] Then a few pages later, even more emphatically: "The philosophers would not have devised governmental religions in addition to the governmental

[25]Ibid., 359.

[26]Ibid., 371.

[27]Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 54–55.

[28]Richard L. Velkley, ed., *Leo Strauss on Nietzsche's "Thus Spoke Zarathustra"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 68. Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche*, 7–10, criticized Strauss's published excoriation as an "irresponsible" (9) attack masking a more sympathetic understanding of Nietzsche.

[29]Leo Strauss, "Note on the Plan of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*" (1973), in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, with introduction by Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 181.

[30]Ibid., 176. On Nietzsche's need for "the language of religious mythology" for his own philosophical project, as Strauss read it, see Robert B. Pippin, "Leo Strauss's Nietzsche," in *Interanimations: Receiving Modern German Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 208.

[31]Leo Strauss, "The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*" (1943), in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 130.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670523000700 Published online by Cambridge University Press

laws, if they had not admitted the social necessity of religion."[32] For a clearer picture of Strauss's views on this question, it is necessary to turn to his reading of the medieval *falāsifa*.

Ibn Rushd's Harmonization and Firewall

Strauss's students agree that his "Farabian turn" to Platonic political philosophy entailed a recognition of the philosopher's need to accommodate to some degree the opinions and beliefs of the community. They disagree vehemently on the extent of the accommodation envisaged: is it only to gain a disinterested understanding of political phenomena while fending off accusations of impiety and attracting the best young minds to a life of philosophic contemplation, or does it more proactively seek to effect religious and political reform for the benefit of the community as a whole? At one extreme, Allan Bloom found no evidence of "enlightened, nonillusionary love of the common good"[33] in the philosophical tradition Strauss upheld: "Socrates does care for other men, but only to the extent that they, too, are capable of philosophy, which only a few are."[34] Thomas Pangle argued that "classical political philosophy is not concerned to rule, but . . . to understand political society,"[35] adding: "it has been claimed by some that Strauss . . . having effected a synthesis of Plato and Nietzsche (!), hoped and worked for the indirect rule of philosophers. . . . Such talk of Strauss's synthesis of Nietzsche and Plato is oxymoronic, and reveals a profound ignorance of all three thinkers."[36] An intermediate position is staked by Laurence Lampert, who insisted that Strauss read his predecessors as more actively political: "Alfarabi credits Plato with establishing this view of the philosopher as a commander and legislator who creates values or who rules the multitude through religion. It is identical to the view that Strauss, student of Alfarabi, finds in Nietzsche as well as in Plato."[37] But he concluded that Strauss shied away from this Farabian and Nietzschean political stance.[38] Muhsin Mahdi, a protégé on whose expertise in Islamic political philosophy Strauss often relied, articulated the other pole of this Straussian dispute:

> There have always been philosophers who think that they can pursue wisdom as private men regardless of the quality of public life; that they should tend exclusively to their own private gardens. . . . Even today there are respectable thinkers among us who cannot understand what

[32]Ibid., 135.

[33]Allan Bloom, "Reply to Hall," *Political Theory* 5, no. 3 (August 1977): 319.

[34]Ibid., 329.

[35]Pangle, *Leo Strauss*, 51.

[36]Ibid., 47. See also Pangle, introduction to *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, 8–9, 17–18.

[37]Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche*, 59.

[38]Ibid., 136–40.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670523000700 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> the expression "political philosophy" means and therefore cannot write it down without placing it in quotation marks, as if to say that these are meaningless words or that the expression represents the frivolous pursuit of men who have not yet discovered true philosophy.[39]

This section proceeds from the premise that Nietzsche's politically infused idea of a functional religion—one that simultaneously offers "the strong and independent" a "means for . . . the ability to rule," serves those who prefer a life of contemplation as "a means for obtaining peace," and provides the mass of "ordinary human beings . . . inestimable contentment with their situation and type"—is precisely what the *falāsifa* understood to be the correct interpretation of Islam.[40] A critical debate between two of Farabi's followers highlighting a central tension in this interpretation allows us to better track the twists and turns of Strauss's trajectory in his understanding of the proper alignment of reason and revelation.

Strauss laid great emphasis on the fact that what distinguishes philosophy in an Islamic or Jewish as opposed to a Christian context is that the quest for the Good—a transcendent standard of high and low—is carried out before the bar of revealed religion, under a legal-political framework absent in Christianity. In a much more fundamental manner than their Christian counterparts, Muslim and Jewish philosophers confronted the problem of justifying their vocation to a legal authority which claimed already to possess the full truth. The Andalusian philosopher Ibn Rushd (known in the West as Averroes, 1126–1198) presents two characteristic responses to the problem of how to relate reason and revelation. The first he identifies with his predecessor Ibn Sina (known in the West as Avicenna, 980–1037).

Ibn Sina, like all the *falāsifa*, viewed intellect as the distinguishing characteristic of human beings in general, and therefore sought above all to safeguard the freedom to pursue rational inquiry. At the same time, and again like all the *falāsifa*, he recognized the differing capacities of individual human beings in this regard, and consequently the need to convey teachings conducive to virtue in a manner comprehensible to all—in the form of religious imagery. Wise legislators, among whom the highest type is the prophet, accordingly let the commonalty (*al-ʿāmma*) "know of God's majesty and greatness through symbols and similitudes," affirm the conviction that evil will be punished and good recompensed, and establish regimes that promote general virtue while simultaneously exhibiting other "symbols and signs that might call forth those naturally disposed toward theoretical reflection to pursue philosophic investigations."[41]

[39]Muhsin Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 62.

[40]Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §61.

[41]Ibn Sina, *The Metaphysics of "The Healing": A Parallel English-Arabic Text*, trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 366.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670523000700 Published online by Cambridge University Press

As I have argued elsewhere, the problem for Ibn Rushd is that in his view Ibn Sina made two fundamental errors in his effort to reconcile reason and revelation—conceding too much in terms of metaphysics, and neglecting too much in terms of political philosophy.[42] In terms of metaphysics, Ibn Sina's Neoplatonic postulate of a hierarchy of celestial entities emanating from a divine One and culminating in an Active Intellect from which in turn issues the multiplicity of the sublunar world entails, according to Ibn Rushd, a faulty blend of philosophical and religious concepts with disastrous results. Empowering an external Active Intellect to generate and apprehend the sublunar world's manifold sensory particulars undermines natural causality and thereby natural philosophy or science as a whole.[43] Positing the Active Intellect as an external repository of intelligibles which are emanated to passive human minds through "conjunction" negates the human capacity for the abstraction and understanding of intelligibles—activities Ibn Rushd insists should be understood as products of "our will."[44] In both physics and psychology, then, the overall thrust of Ibn Rushd's refutation of Ibn Sina's metaphysics is to restore natural and intellectual agency back to the sublunar realm.

Ibn Rushd thus holds Ibn Sina responsible for the corruption of philosophy in the Muslim world constituted by the turn away from Aristotelian rationalism and toward metaphysical mysticism—a mysticism reflected in the secretive "Eastern" or "Oriental" philosophy that Ibn Sina formulated at one point believing it would prove less objectionable to orthodox theologians, and that served as the wellspring of the "Illuminationist" theosophy which has dominated Islamic thought ever since. According to Ibn Sina's own followers, Ibn Rushd repeatedly points out, their master's mystical teaching is a mere smokescreen designed to placate the gullible multitude and the guardians of orthodoxy, and the real secret in his writings is adherence not to some theosophical mysticism but to an atheistic materialism that rejects separate transcendental realities altogether, so that "the Gods are the celestial bodies, as he [Ibn Sina] had come to believe."[45]

[42]See Malik Mufti, *The Art of Jihad: Realism in Islamic Political Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 62–87, which also reviews the scholarship on Ibn Rushd's critique of Ibn Sina. For the Arabic-language scholarship, see Malik Mufti, "Ibn Rushd's Political Philosophy in Contemporary Arab Scholarship: A Transient Revival?," *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies* 2, no. 1 (May 2017): 17–35.

[43]Ibn Rushd, *Averroes on Aristotle's "Metaphysics": An Annotated Translation of the So-Called "Epitome,"* ed. Rüdiger Arnzen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 172.

[44]Ibn Rushd, *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's "De Anima,"* trans. Alfred L. Ivry (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 116; Ibn Rushd, *Long Commentary on the "De Anima" of Aristotle*, trans. Richard C. Taylor (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 351–52.

[45]Ibn Rushd, *Averroes' Tahafut al-Tahafut*, trans. Simon Van Den Bergh (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 1987), discussion 10, section 421 (254). See also Ibn Rushd, *Averroes' De Substantia Orbis*, trans. Arthur Hyman (Cambridge: Medieval Academy

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670523000700 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In terms of politics, accordingly, Ibn Sina's fundamental error for Ibn Rushd was that his theologized philosophy—consisting as it did of "senseless statements and assertions, weaker than those of the theologians, extraneous to philosophy"—served only to draw the ire of theologians and expose philosophy as a whole to charges of heresy.[46] Ibn Sina's disdaining to secure a firewall between reason and revelation that preserved the integrity of each brought about a situation where religion is left to dogmatists and mystics, politics is neglected, and philosophy devolves into amoral and sterile self-indulgence: "Perhaps this is one of the reasons why we see that the customs and habits of most of those devoting themselves to philosophy in this time are corrupt."[47]

So understood, Ibn Sina's apolitical stance exemplifies what Ibn Rushd's predecessor Abu Nasr al-Farabi (870–950) denounced as "defective" philosophy: the failure to "exploit" the "theoretical sciences . . . for the benefit of others."[48] Ibn Rushd's concern for the benefit of others, by contrast, mandates a politically engaged stance which, in the first place, entails submission to the principles of religion because philosophers understand that "religious laws are necessary political arts" indispensable for the moral and social well-being of the learned and ignorant alike.[49] Conversely, Ibn Rushd famously explains, because the ultimate ends to which true religion and sound philosophy point must converge, it is "evident that reflection upon" the political and philosophical writings of "the Ancients" is not only legitimate but "obligatory according to the Law, for their aim and intention in their books is the very intention to which the Law urges us."[50]

In the second place, Ibn Rushd's own political turn—the alternative characteristic response he identifies to the tension between philosopher and polity—implies the desirability and feasibility of meaningful reform aimed at establishing a more virtuous political community. In his *Middle Commentary on the Rhetoric*, for example, Ibn Rushd identifies a "regime of good dominion" characterized by philosophy and religious law working in tandem which,

Books, 1986), 131; Carlos Steel and Guy Guldentops, "An Unknown Treatise of Averroes against the Avicennians on the First Cause," *Recherches de théologie et philosophie médiévales* 64, no. 1 (1997): 99; Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 118–19; Mufti, *Art of Jihad*, 70–72.

[46]Ibn Rushd, *Tahafut* 3.246 (146).

[47]Ibn Rushd, *Long Commentary on the "De Anima,"* 346. On Ibn Rushd's view of Ibn Sina's political shortcomings, see Mufti, *Art of Jihad*, 73–74.

[48]Farabi, *The Attainment of Happiness*, §54, in *Alfarabi's Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, trans. Muhsin Mahdi (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1962), 43.

[49]Ibn Rushd, *Tahafut* 4.581–82 (359–60).

[50]Ibn Rushd, *Decisive Treatise and Epistle Dedicatory*, trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2001), 6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670523000700 Published online by Cambridge University Press

according to Farabi, actually "existed among the ancient Persians."[51] In this regime, philosophy informs governance while its religious counterpart ensures that the actions of the nonphilosophical multitude remain "in accordance with what the theoretical sciences prescribe."[52] Elsewhere, Ibn Rushd suggests that philosophers can reform meaningfully even nonvirtuous regimes when he discusses the democratic city, noting the variety of character types it accommodates and affirming that it may produce virtue: "Hence all the arts and dispositions emerge in this city, and it is so disposed that from it may emerge the virtuous city and every one of the other cities."[53] The problem is that democracy's focus on the autonomy of the self and the private sphere tends to undermine social cohesion to such an extent that, unless philosophers "attend" to the democratic city by reforming its laws and governance as needed, it "perishes rapidly."[54] For Ibn Rushd as opposed to Ibn Sina, in short, the pursuit of political virtue is a realistic objective.

Such being the case, the centrality of law becomes evident, for it is the imperative of applying the law correctly that constitutes the basis for alliance between rulers and philosophers in a virtuous regime. While the law must address its subjects as a whole, however, capacities for comprehension vary and so the appropriate methods of instruction vary as well—ranging from demonstrative for a few to rhetorical for the many. Ibn Rushd cites the Prophet Muhammad himself to this effect: "We, the prophets, have been ordered to put people in their places, and to address them according to their rational capacities."[55] What happens when an apparent contradiction arises between the rational and rhetorical articulations of the law? "Whenever demonstration leads to something differing from the apparent sense of the Law, that apparent sense admits of interpretation."[56] The correct interpretation, moreover, can be provided neither by the unlearned multitude, nor by dogmatic theologians whose often conflicting interpretations produce confusion and strife.[57] Only those with the requisite philosophical training can recognize the underlying intent of the law, and only they can

[51]Ibn Rushd, *Talkhis al-Khataba*, ed. Muhammad Salim Salem (Cairo: Dar al-Tahrir li-l-Tabʿ wa-l-Nashr, 1967), 137–38. Passages translated by Charles E. Butterworth, "The Political Teaching of Averroes," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 2 (1992): 189–90.

[52]Ibn Rushd, *Talkhis al-Khataba*, 138. For my explication of Ibn Rushd's regime of good dominion, see Mufti, *Art of Jihad*, 78–81.

[53]Ibn Rushd, *Averroes on Plato's "Republic,"* trans. Ralph Lerner (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 127.

[54]Ibid., 127–28. See Mufti, *Art of Jihad*, 81–82.

[55]Ibn Rushd, *Faith and Reason in Islam: Averroes' Exposition of Religious Arguments* (*Al-Kashf ʿan Manahij al-Adilla fi ʿAqa'id al-Milla*), trans. Ibrahim Najjar (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), 77.

[56]Ibn Rushd, *Decisive Treatise and Epistle Dedicatory*, 9.

[57]Ibn Rushd, *Kashf*, 59, 66. On the inadequacies of dogmatic theologians as interpreters of the Law according to Ibn Rushd, see Mufti, *Art of Jihad*, 75–77.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670523000700 Published online by Cambridge University Press

suggest rectification to the law that accords with its original intent when changing circumstances require it. Thus, even a clear legal imperative such as jihad needs to be considered in light of prevailing circumstances: just as there are indeed times when "fighting is prescribed for you, though it is hateful to you" (Qur'an 2:216), so too "there are times in which peace is more to be preferred than war."[58] Here, incidentally, Ibn Rushd like many of the *falāsifa* departs from the isolated, territorially limited, and pacific city-states envisioned by Plato's Socrates and Athenian Stranger—a universalist departure reflected in the Prophetic saying Ibn Rushd cites that "I have been sent to the Red and the Black [i.e., all mankind]."[59]

It remains to reiterate the distinction between Ibn Rushd's attempt to harmonize philosophy and religion, and his insistence on maintaining a firewall between them. The firewall prohibits the application of each realm's discourse and methods to the other; a prohibition grounded ultimately in the *falāsifa*'s recognition of the variety of human types. Harmonization reflects their conviction that reason and revelation seek the same end—attaining the maximum happiness of which each individual is capable—a conviction that secures not only the legitimacy but indeed the legal imperative of philosophizing (for those with the requisite qualifications), and at the same time mandates a political engagement that in turn provides a standard for virtuous as opposed to defective philosophy. The failure of Christian thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas to maintain the distinct integrity of philosophy, by contrast, provoked defensive reactions such as those of the inaptly named "Averroists" in Europe who found no recourse but to undermine religion altogether.

Strauss saw clearly the difference between Ibn Rushd's understanding of the political utility of certain kinds of religion—an understanding that led Ibn Rushd to the pole of the *falāsifa*'s central tension opposite Ibn Sina's more apolitical stance; an understanding Nietzsche came to share at one point—and "Averroistic" intransigence against all religion. He made this evident as early as 1930 when he questioned the tradition tracing such intransigence back to Ibn Rushd: "In Christian Europe knowledge of the true Averroës is more and more replaced by the legend of Averroës."[60] Having outlined the range of political stances mapped out by the *falāsifa*, I can now consider more precisely the evolution of where Strauss positioned himself

[58]Translation of a passage in Ibn Rushd's *Commentary on the "Nicomachean Ethics"* by Lawrence V. Berman, review of *Averroes' Commentary on Plato's "Republic"* by E. I. J. Rosenthal, *Oriens*, no. 1 (1969): 439.

[59]Ibn Rushd, *Averroes on Plato's "Republic,"* 45–46. On Ibn Rushd's differences with Plato, see Mufti, *Art of Jihad*, 85–86.

[60]Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, trans. E. M. Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 47–48. For a discussion of the differences Strauss saw between Western "Averroism" and the real Ibn Rushd, see Charles E. Butterworth, "What Is Political Averroism?," in *Averroismus in Mittelalter und in der Renaissance*, ed. Friedrich Niewöhner and Loris Sturlese (Zurich: Spur Verlag, 1994), 239–50, esp. 247.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670523000700 Published online by Cambridge University Press

along their central debate about the philosopher's reformist role, and how this evolution shaped his adherence to Nietzsche's concern with an elevated politics for modern times.

Strauss's Avicennan Turn

We have seen that Strauss maintained his alignment with Nietzsche's championing of spirited "noble virtue" in his 1941 lecture by praising the latter's passionate protest against the "debasing" egalitarianism of liberal ideology. His main objective here, however, was to understand how the aspiration of German youth for a world where great hearts could beat and great souls breathe ended up in the nihilism of the Nazis. The key problem Strauss identified in 1941, the real reason Nietzsche "of *all* philosophers" was most "responsible for the emergence of German nihilism," is that his radical dismantling of the Platonic and Christian wellsprings of modern civilization was not accompanied by "any clear positive conception" to take their place.[61] Nietzsche's desire to safeguard the autonomy and fearless character of philosophic inquiry led him to reject a Christianity that had hegemonic ambitions but enervating consequences. His attempt to substitute for it a more life-affirming doctrine based on a hierarchy of human types and values failed because he could not demonstrate any natural basis for such distinctions. Without such grounding, Germany's spirited antiliberal youth were left no recourse but "irrational decision."[62] What "they rather needed," Strauss submitted, was "such old-fashioned teachers . . . as would be undogmatic enough to understand the aspirations of their pupils."[63] He indicated who he had in mind in his letter to Löwith nine years earlier, where instead of pointing to Socrates and his ancient Greek followers, Strauss identified himself with another group of old-fashioned teachers more relevant to his and Nietzsche's monotheistic context: "we, 'men of science' . . . as our predecessors in the Arab Middle Ages called themselves."[64]

Strauss's own engagement with the Muslim *falāsifa* went back, by his account, to 1929 or 1930—around the time his youthful enchantment with Nietzsche is said to come to a close—when he ran across Ibn Sina's treatise *On the Divisions of the Rational Sciences* in the Berlin National Library, and was struck by the assertion that "the standard work on prophecy and revelation is Plato's *Laws*."[65] Ibn Sina's comment led Strauss by the mid-1930s to a clear understanding of the core political insight of the *falāsifa*—whom he

[61]Strauss, "German Nihilism," 372 ("of *all* philosophers . . . nihilism," Strauss's emphasis), 357 ("clear positive conception").

[62]Ibid., 360.

[63]Ibid., 361.

[64]Strauss to Löwith, May 19, 1933.

[65]Leo Strauss, "A Giving of Accounts," *The College* 22, no. 1 (April 1970): 3. See Heinrich Meier, "How Strauss Became Strauss," trans. Marcus Brainard, in

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670523000700 Published online by Cambridge University Press

singled out as "*the* 'philosophers,' that is, the Islamic Aristotelians from Alfarabi to Averroes"—that prophecy and philosophy share an "identical" end: to reform imperfect polities so as to sustain the distinction between high and low (and thus among other things to sustain the grounding for philosophy).[66]

Strauss indicated the magnitude of the impact on him by the *falāsifa*'s reading of Plato when he described Farabi as "astounding, ὁ ἀρχηγὸς τῆς τοιαύτης φιλοσοφίας [the founder of this school of philosophy]" and added: "It seems to me that the principal deficiencies of the traditional interpretation of Plato . . . can be attributed to a large extent to the Christian tradition, thus making Islam a better point of departure from the start."[67] By failing to maintain the firewall between reason and revelation insisted upon by Ibn Rushd, by striving to incorporate the former into the latter, Christian Scholasticism had ended up corrupting both in the West. Philosophy became defective as it set out to undermine religion in self-defense, while religion lost its political efficacy altogether as a result.[68]

At the same time, Strauss also recognized by the mid-1930s that the intensified urgency of the political imperative under Abrahamic monotheism induced the Muslim *falāsifa* to go further than their Greek predecessors. Their simultaneous solicitude for the felicity of the philosopher and for the well-being of the community now elicited a much sharper censure of "defective philosophy" by Farabi and Ibn Rushd, and a far higher value attributed to factors such as courage and rhetoric needed to sustain a spirited polity congenial to "great souls." In a "modification" that for Strauss implied "a *critique* of Plato," the *falāsifa* demanded that "the ruler-philosopher must be *more* than a philosopher"—combining political, philosophical, and religious functions in accordance with the needs of a virtuous regime that can no longer be an isolated city-state but a diverse and expansive imperial civilization.[69]

Enlightening Revolutions: Essays in Honor of Ralph Lerner, ed. Svetozar Minkov (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 367.

[66]Leo Strauss, *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors*, trans. Eve Adler (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995 [1935]), 69 ("*the* philosophers," Strauss's emphasis), 84 ("identical" end).

[67]Leo Strauss, draft of unsent letter to Gerhard Krüger (December 25, 1935), trans. Jerome Veith, Anna Schmidt, and Susan M. Shell, in *The Strauss-Krüger Correspondence: Returning to Plato through Kant*, ed. Susan Meld Shell (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 78–79.

[68]That Strauss turned to the Muslim *falāsifa* owing to his dissatisfaction with Christian Scholasticism is a central theme of Joshua Parens, *Leo Strauss and the Recovery of Medieval Political Philosophy* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2016). See also Christopher Nadon, "Philosophic Politics and Theology: Strauss's 'Restatement,'" in *Leo Strauss's Defense of the Philosophic Life: Reading "What Is Political Philosophy?,"* ed. Rafael Major (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 87.

[69]Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 128, Strauss's emphases.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670523000700 Published online by Cambridge University Press

They were accordingly "guided by the idea of a civilization realizable only through civilizing wars: this idea is absent from the thought of Plato."[70]

To what extent did Strauss agree with the *falāsifa*'s "modification"? Judging by his 1936 essay on Maimonides and Farabi, he believed it offered a solution to the core political problem of his era as he saw it—to uphold the distinction between high and low without giving way to irrational cruelty: "Farabi had rediscovered in the politics of Plato the golden mean equally removed from a naturalism which aims only at sanctioning the savage and destructive instincts of 'natural' man, the instincts of the master and the conqueror; and from a supernaturalism which tends to become the basis of slave morality."[71] This is the aspect of Strauss's famous "Farabian turn"—relating back as we can now see to Nietzsche's views on the political utility of the right kind of religion—that has not received sufficient attention: that in addition to clearing a new approach to theoretical inquiry it entailed for Strauss a potentially *practical* remedy to the post-Nietzschean political pathologies of the time.

Such a golden mean can be arrived at, Strauss's Farabi understood Plato to say, only through political or legislative reform, which is why his central aim in the *Laws* was "to show a way of changing the laws . . . in a coherent, well thought-out manner."[72] And this requires combining the "intransigent" way of Socrates—heedless of the accepted opinions of his city—with the politically attuned "way of Thrasymachus." Effective political reform, according to Strauss's Farabi's Plato, thus complements free rational inquiry with "judicious conformity with the accepted opinions."[73] But this in *its* turn further entails the distinction which Ibn Rushd would elaborate between modes of discourse—demonstrative, dialectical, rhetorical—appropriate for different types of audiences.

Strauss's appreciation of the *falāsifa*'s golden mean, and initial inclination toward the Rushdian pole of their internal debate, is indicated by the fact that after 1935 he "put aside Avicenna's interpretation of prophetology as too mystical and metaphysical," downgrading his estimate of Ibn Sina in favor of Farabi and Ibn Rushd.[74] In his 1943 essay on Yehuda Halevi's

[70]Strauss, "Some Remarks," 27n15. For a parallel contrast between the *falāsifa* and Plato in their emphasis on rhetoric, see also 29n20.

[71]Ibid., 6. For Strauss's consideration of Nietzsche on cruelty, see "Note on the Plan of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*," esp. 185.

[72]Leo Strauss, "Course Transcript: Plato's *Laws* (St. John's College, 1970–1971)," ed. Lorraine Pangle, session 4, 86; available at the website of the Leo Strauss Center, University of Chicago, https://wslamp70.s3.amazonaws.com/leostrauss/s3fs-public/Laws%201971-72.pdf. Plato in this reading thus "*compels*" (Strauss's emphasis) philosophers to return to the cave and care for others: Leo Strauss, "Cohen and Maimonides" (1931), trans. Martin D. Yaffe and Ian Alexander Moore, in *Leo Strauss on Maimonides: The Complete Writings*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 218–19.

[73]Leo Strauss, "How Fārābī Read Plato's *Laws*" (1957), in *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 153. See also Brague, "Athens, Jerusalem, Mecca."

[74]Tanguay, *Leo Strauss*, 81.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670523000700 Published online by Cambridge University Press

defense of religion, for example, Strauss seemed to endorse Ibn Rushd's charges against Ibn Sina. After repeating the claim by Maimonides that the author of a Sabean book of magic deliberately "presented his ridiculous nonsense in order to cast doubt on the Biblical miracles," Strauss suggested: "It is perhaps not absurd to wonder whether [such] books . . . were written, not by simple-minded adherents of superstitious creeds and practices, but by adherents of the philosophers." Then, observing that "the basic tenet of the Sabeans is identical with what adherents of Avicenna declared to be the basic tenet of Avicenna's esoteric teaching, viz., the identification of God with the heavenly bodies," Strauss added: "The same would be true *mutatis mutandis* of the rational *nomoi* composed by the philosophers in so far as they served the purpose of undermining the belief in Divine legislation proper."[75] Ibn Sina's theologized metaphysics thus pandered to orthodoxy even as it subverted the religious convictions of select attentive readers qualified for true philosophy. By citing Ibn Rushd's criticisms of Ibn Sina, however, Strauss appeared to endorse the concerns raised by the former about the "enormously dangerous" amoral and apolitical implications of Ibn Sina's all too transparent denigration of religion.[76] Hence his acknowledgment of the "necessity" for philosophers to devise "governmental religions."[77]

In order to effect a universally realizable "golden mean" between brutality and enervation, such religions must, it bears reiterating, recognize the rank order of human characters, utilize the way of Thrasymachus, and maintain a firewall ensuring the harmonious coexistence of reason and revelation. In the Islam of the *falāsifa*, then—and only in that religion—Strauss seems to have found all the ingredients necessary to address the crisis of modernity. As Leora Batnitzky puts it: "it is important to underscore the irony that Strauss was devoted to revitalizing Islamic philosophy, in direct opposition to Christian thought, for the very sake of the future of western civilization."[78] Lampert has a more negative take: a "return to the conditions that made the Medieval enlightenment possible implies the reestablishment . . . of the conditions of the earlier Islamic empire. . . . Did Strauss believe that a return to that world was possible or desirable for modern Europe?"[79] Lampert further questions the *falāsifa*'s strategy by quoting Strauss on its failure to prevent the "collapse of philosophic inquiry" in the Muslim world within a few centuries.[80]

[75]Strauss, "Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*," 125–26.

[76]Ibid., 126n98, 140. See Mufti, *Art of Jihad*, 72–73.

[77]Strauss, "Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*," 135.

[78]Leora Batnitzky, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy and the Politics of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 211.

[79]Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche*, 140.

[80]Ibid., 175n8, quoting Strauss's introduction to *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (19). While criticizing Strauss's failure to be more outspoken about "the idiocies of revealed religion" (184), Lampert added that "Nietzsche did not oppose religion, a universal and necessary phenomenon; he opposed *our* religion both sacred and secular" (182, emphasis in original).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670523000700 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Not long after coming to America and encountering the potency of liberal politics and Protestant religion, however, Strauss began to draw away from the *falāsifa*'s line. Already in his 1943 essay on the *Kuzari* it is possible to detect an ambivalence. Discussing the "Law of Reason"—the "rules for conduct which the philosopher has to observe in order to become capable, and to be capable, of contemplation"—Strauss first wrote that in a society "hostile to philosophy, the Law of Reason advises the philosopher either to leave that society and to search for another society, or else to try to lead his fellows gradually toward a more reasonable attitude."[81] But then, two sentences later: "As a matter of principle, contemplation requires withdrawal from society. Therefore, the Law of Reason is primarily the sum of rules of conduct of the philosophizing hermit, the *regimen solitarii*."[82] Philosophers are "men with no inner attachment to society, men who are not—citizens."[83] Such apolitical inclinations intensified in "Farabi's *Plato*," published two years after his piece on the *Kuzari*. Strauss again acknowledged that Farabi's Plato advocated a reformist albeit "conservative" agenda entailing "the gradual replacement of the accepted opinions by the truth or an approximation of the truth"—but now only to the extent that such action either secures the philosopher from persecution, or serves "to guide the potential philosophers toward the truth."[84] The evocation of political action—the "royal art" and the way of Thrasymachus—is no longer driven by communal responsibility; it is merely "a pedagogic device for leading the reader toward the view that theoretical philosophy by itself, and nothing else, produces true happiness in this life."[85] Farabi is no longer a denouncer of defective philosophy: "Philosophy and the perfection of philosophy and hence happiness do not require—this is Fârâbî's last word on the subject—the establishment of the perfect political community: they are possible, not only in this world, but even in these cities, the imperfect cities."[86]

But an obvious question arises: If the philosophic life is possible in these imperfect cities, why did Farabi (and his Plato) advocate a program of political or ethical reform—no matter how conservative and gradual—that can only be an unnecessary distraction from the theoretical contemplation which alone provides the philosopher's true happiness? The difficulty of answering this question has fractured Strauss's students. The so-called West Coast Straussians deny any opposition at all—between reason and revelation, between contemplation and action—in his thought. Another school

[81]Strauss, "Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*," 136–37.

[82]Ibid., 137.

[83]Ibid., 139.

[84]Leo Strauss, "Farabi's *Plato*," in *Louis Ginzberg: Jubilee Volume*, ed. Saul Lieberman et al. (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1945), 383–84.

[85]Ibid., 370.

[86]Ibid., 381. See also Strauss's 1952 introduction to *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 15–16.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670523000700 Published online by Cambridge University Press

acknowledges the tensions but views them as somehow creative—in Strauss's own words, an "unresolved conflict [that] is the secret of the vitality of Western civilization"[87]—and perhaps also as reflecting Strauss's unwillingness to break altogether with Judaism (specifically) by denying it "an intrinsic cognitive value."[88] A third approach distinguishes between the "idealism" of Farabi's call for political action in order to effect "the most perfect union of man's theoretical and practical capacities," and the "realism" of Ibn Sina's acceptance of "the tension between philosophy and politics" and his consequent denigration of politics.[89] Strauss can then be understood as being closer after all to Ibn Sina's position than to Farabi's: "By failing to cite Alfarabi in his own study of Plato's *Laws*, Strauss indicated his disagreement with Alfarabi's major conclusion" that philosophers should try to effect "political reform through the gradual alteration of public opinion."[90]

The "shipwreck" Strauss reported in his August 15, 1946, letter to Löwith described his latest reassessment of the need for philosophers to devise "governmental religions" or, more generally, to engage in political action. This reassessment is summarized in a lecture (and associated notes) delivered to the Hartford Theological Seminary in January 1948, where Strauss now affirmed a decisive break, indeed total war, between reason and revelation that "cannot be evaded by any harmonization or 'synthesis.'"[91] Far from submitting to the authority of religious law and justifying itself on that basis, philosophy "must prove the impossibility of revelation. For if revelation is possible, it is possible that the philosophic enterprise is fundamentally wrong."[92]

After noting that religion always "comes after" philosophy, because religion aims to instruct the multitude in ways it can understand about matters that have already been inferred by philosophy, Farabi in his *Book of Letters* distinguished between two cases.[93] If the religion issues from an originally sound philosophy, the later resistance to philosophy by that religion's

[87]Leo Strauss, "Progress or Return?" (1952), in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 270.

[88]Tanguay, *Leo Strauss*, 208. See also Batnitzky, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas*, 135.

[89]Miriam Galston, "Realism and Idealism in Avicenna's Political Philosophy," *Review of Politics* 41, no. 4 (October 1979): 576–77.

[90]Michael P. Zuckert and Catherine H. Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 136, 142. Indeed, although he cited neither Farabi nor Ibn Rushd in this, his final monograph, Strauss opened it with an epigraph from Ibn Sina: Leo Strauss, *The Argument and the Action of Plato's "Laws"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 1.

[91]Leo Strauss, "Reason and Revelation" (1948), in Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 149.

[92]Ibid., 150.

[93]Farabi, *Kitab al-Huruf*, ed. Muhsin Mahdi (Beirut: Dar al-Mashreq, 1970), part 2, 131.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670523000700 Published online by Cambridge University Press

orthodox defenders can be overcome by practitioners of philosophy who point out that their differing modes of discourse aim at the same original end. If on the other hand the religion issues from a "corrupt" or unperfected philosophy, then the subsequent practitioners of true philosophy and the defenders of orthodox religion will be absolutely opposed and will try to "abolish" each other.[94] In the notes to his 1948 lecture, Strauss wrote that in order for religion to exclude any possibility of being refuted by philosophy "there is only one way: that faith has no basis whatever in human knowledge of actual things. This view of faith"—that it not rely on human reason or understanding in any way—"is not the Jewish and the Catholic one. It was prepared by the Reformers."[95] Unlike Judaism or Catholicism—to say nothing of Islam—Protestantism, especially in its Americanized articulation, is, in Strauss's severe judgment, divorced from sound philosophy. Because it is the hegemonic religion of America and one that transforms other faiths as well into its own image, a Farabian or Rushdian accommodation with religion, necessitating political engagement by philosophers, is ruled out.

It is not surprising that a Jewish survivor of Europe's wreckage washed up on America's shores should pull back from proselytizing for the *falāsifa*'s revolutionary agenda. Strauss surely appreciated the danger involved: the possibility, not to say likelihood, that undermining American conventions without assurance of a feasible alternative will lead to the kind of nihilism that consumed Germany. The Avicennan strategy of retreating into contemplative seclusion and leaving the public arena to its prevailing verities—above all, a liberalism completing its deconstruction of a religion he in any case considered dysfunctional—must have seemed the more prudent course. Strauss spelled out the price he was willing to pay for his newfound conformity to liberalism in a 1962 speech to fellow Jews highlighting the inherent tension between its twin principles of freedom and equality: "liberal society necessarily makes possible, permits, and even fosters what is called by many people 'discrimination' . . . [because the] prohibition against every 'discrimination' would mean the abolition of the private sphere, the denial of the difference between the state and society—in a word, the destruction of liberal society—and therefore it is not a sensible objective or policy."[96] Strauss saw no alternative to the "uneasy solution": so valuable is the principle of public freedom for philosophers and nonphilosophers alike that it is necessary to put up with private discriminations of religion and race.[97]

[94]Ibid., 155–56.

[95]Strauss, "Reason and Revelation," 177. See also Strauss, "Some Remarks," 4–5; Brague, "Athens, Jerusalem, Mecca," 252.

[96]Leo Strauss, "Why We Remain Jews: Can Jewish Faith and History Still Speak to Us?" (1962), in *Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker*, ed. Kenneth L. Deutsch and Walter Nicgorski (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 46–47.

[97]Ibid., 49.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670523000700 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Additional factors may have reinforced Strauss's defection from the political *falāsifa*'s ranks and submission to the "cross of liberalism," such as an innate cautiousness that seems to have further inclined him away from radical reformism, and the apparently decreased urgency of the need for such reformism in any case given the unexpected fortitude and vigor displayed by the liberal order in the face of its enemies during and after World War II.[98] His last publication dedicated to the *falāsifa* is a 1957 article confirming his new apolitical reading—"We do not see that Farabi's Plato describes here unambiguously a man who is concerned with things other than his own felicity"[99]—and after that they fade into the background of his work. Given Strauss's circumstances, it may seem understandable that he abandoned their golden mean and opted not to tamper seriously with the underpinnings of the American regime. Nonetheless, predicated as it was on particular conditions necessarily subject to the vagaries of time, his calculation was bound to require reconsideration at some point.

Conclusion: Current Circumstances

The "line of demarcation between timidity and responsibility," Strauss wrote in his essay on the *Kuzari*, "is drawn differently in different ages."[100] The extent to which he merely understood rather than shared the aspiration of spirited youth for greatness, for upholding the distinction between noble and base—the extent to which he utilized that aspiration in order to draw them toward a life of purely theoretical contemplation—may be debated, but in either case it is now a different age indeed from the one prevailing during his time in America.[101] The liberal order seems less robust; its once functional internal tensions out of whack; its enemies more formidable. Externally, far from succumbing to a liberalizing wave, vicious regimes such as China's and Russia's are acting more aggressively than they have in decades. Internally, a series of economic downturns since the 1970s have

[98]On Strauss's cautiousness, see George Anastaplo, "Leo Strauss at the University of Chicago," in *Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American Regime*, ed. Kenneth L. Deutsch and John A. Murley (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 10, 25n10; Seth Benardete's comments in *Encounters and Reflections: Conversations with Seth Benardete*, ed. Ronna Burger (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 36.

[99]Strauss, "How Fārābī Read Plato's *Laws*," 146.

[100]Strauss, "Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*," 110.

[101]For a range of views relating to this debate see Pangle, introduction to *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, 11–12; Harry V. Jaffa, "The Legacy of Leo Strauss," *Claremont Review of Books* 3, no. 3 (Fall 1984): 14–21; Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 107–40; Robert C. Bartlett, *The Idea of Enlightenment: A Postmortem Study* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 54–63; Robert Devigne, "Strauss and 'Straussianism': From the Ancients to the Moderns?," *Political Studies* 57, no. 3 (October 2009): 592–616.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670523000700 Published online by Cambridge University Press

combined with identity politics, social anomie, and ideological polarization to generate an illiberal radicalism reflected in the proliferation of armed militia movements and demonstrated in the assault on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021. One study traced the decline in the percentage of Americans polled who consider it important to live in a democracy from 57 (1950s) to 51 (1960s) to 44 (1970s) to 29 (1980s).[102] Whereas "only one in sixteen believed that army rule is a good system of government" in 1995, "today [2018], one in six do."[103] At a deeper level, the relentless development of marketing algorithms in social media appears to be corroding psychological well-being in fundamental and unprecedented ways.

Ibn Rushd points out that democracy needs attending to if it is not to devolve into anarchy or tyranny. As more of America's intelligent and spirited youth on both sides of the political spectrum lose faith in liberalism, they require a teaching that not only affirms their aspiration for a serious life looking beyond the lowly and vulgar, but also encourages their political pursuit of that aspiration. Such a teaching must be grounded enough in a universalist ethic to avoid its twin characteristic pitfalls—irrational prejudice and cruelty—and undogmatic enough to recognize the distinction between noble and base without a morbidly obsessive insistence on demonstrative proof. Sometime during the 1930s, Strauss came to believe that Farabi and Ibn Rushd offered such a teaching.

[102] Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 105.

[103] Ibid., 5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670523000700 Published online by Cambridge University Press