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Children of Skeptics

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Readers of *The Beginning of Wisdom* know that it contains rich materials for reflection on a number of matters of contemporary relevance: the meaning of marriage and parenthood, the tensions between technology and piety, and the complex interplay between human dignity and human shame—to say nothing of our relationship to the divine. Yet as its author himself remarks, *The Beginning of Wisdom* occupies an odd place in the contemporary landscape.[1] Devoted to a wisdom-seeking, anthropological inquiry into the book of Genesis, the book might well seem—in this era of culture war—to be a book without an audience: avowed rationalists might find the whole project either foolish or dangerous; believers who come to the book through one religious tradition of interpretation or another might see no need for it. It is a large question—albeit one more about our contemporary scene than about the book—as to whether there is a constituency for a respectful yet genuinely open-minded reading of Genesis. Would it be too pessimistic to say that our national conversation has gotten to the point where believers and nonbelievers confront each as armed camps between which no conversation is possible? The possibility of conversation, one might guess, is not a given fact naturally occurring in the world; it can only be performed, it must be accomplished by us, here and now. One cannot begin the conversation if one knows from the outset that there can be no response. Let us begin then with the opposite hypothesis—that some sense can be made of this world—not as a thing known in advance but as a promissory note whose proof is, as we say, in the pudding.

In fact *The Beginning of Wisdom* is conceived in just such a spirit. Kass addresses himself in the opening pages of the book to those he calls "the thoughtful children of skeptics."[2] The children of skeptics are the inheritors of the Enlightenment, brought up within a world shaped by modern science and technology. Yet they are aware, as only those with an inside view can be, of the moral-spiritual weakness of

1. Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 13-15.
2. *The Beginning of Wisdom*, 1, 8.

that world. The modern scientific project combines great power with ambiguity or confusion about what would constitute a worthy way to exercise that power. The children of skeptics—many of whom Kass encountered in his classes at the University of Chicago—recognize that modern science can hardly be wished away. But they also recognize that it leaves us unsatisfied, in search of something more. The children of skeptics are embroiled in the ambiguities of inheritance, which seems always to enable and restrict at the same time. Needless to say, one does not come to terms with an inheritance, even an ambiguous one, by rejecting it wholesale: one must attempt to think it through, to take it seriously in all of its parts. One way to do that is to investigate it rigorously in the light of a serious alternative: the Bible is one such alternative.

Kass's book, which begins a consideration of the Biblical alternative, takes as primary interlocutors just these children of skeptics. It is plausible to say that the book offers something of a dialogue with them. Any reading of it that attends to what is done as well as what is said will have to keep an eye on how it might appear to those silent (and often, as the many footnotes that engage with Kass's students reveal, not so silent) interlocutors. At least at first glance, Kass asks us to engage in an activity rather than giving us a set of answers. He asks us to suspend our disbelief provisionally with a view to seeing what sense can be made out of the world. The suspension of disbelief is not the end of the activity of trying to reason things through but rather the condition of its possibility.[3] Yet one does not and cannot know in advance where such an inquiry might lead us. It would therefore not be surprising if the book inspires different, perhaps contrary, views of the fundamental issues in different readers. It is not skepticism, it is merely honesty, to acknowledge that there is no readily available answer sheet, no secret knowledge potentially available in advance of inquiry, against which our reading of Genesis may be checked, though there surely are better and worse readings. We shall simply have to look and see what sense can be made of the book, and of the world, for ourselves. How and whether the book succeeds in that endeavor is a question for a different time. Here I offer some observations about a text that illuminates the situation of "children of skeptics" and touches on some Kassian themes. Leo Strauss's "Preface" to his *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* is the closest thing we have to an intellectual autobiography from one of the twentieth century's great thinkers.[4] Written in 1962 for the English translation of Strauss's book on Spinoza (originally published in German in 1930), the Preface provides a tour of the intellectual landscape of a young German Jew coming of age in the Weimar

3. For discussion, see *The Beginning of Wisdom*, 16-17.

4. Page numbers in the text refer to Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).

Republic of the 1920s. It traces Strauss's path from the political problems facing Jews in Germany between the World Wars (problems whose end we know all too well) toward a reopening of the great theological and philosophical questions that underlie our modern situation. Strauss shows himself struggling to come to terms with prominent Jewish and non-Jewish thinkers and actors from Spinoza to Herzl and Pinsker, to Cohen, Rosenzweig, and Heidegger. It describes how Strauss came to write his book on Spinoza, and why his historical studies became pressing and even necessary in light of the situation of German Jews. Yet the text is undoubtedly of interest to audiences beyond Jews and scholars of German thought. While Strauss's reflections are oriented toward Jewish problems, he shows how they raise fundamental questions of general interest: questions about the character and viability of the Enlightenment and of reason more generally; the challenge to rationalism posed by orthodoxies of various kinds; and the roots of modern Enlightenment in spiritedness or will.

My concern here is with the matrix—intellectual, social, political—out of which the questions orienting *The Beginning of Wisdom* become genuine questions. Strauss's essay helps to delineate the fundamental situation of the "children of skeptics"—that is, of anyone grappling with the ambiguous legacy of the Enlightenment. And although the foreground of Strauss's essay is understandably occupied with Jewish thinkers and themes, the questions he raises go well beyond Judaism to the heart of our Enlightenment. This essay attempts to sketch what Strauss has to teach us about that fundamental situation, and to tease out some lessons for our own, somewhat different, historical situation.

Since Strauss's "Preface" is lengthy and dense, it may help to provide an overview at the outset. Strauss published his first book, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, in 1930. Strauss's "Preface," written from the vantage point of 1962, provides an account of how he came to write that book. It is first and foremost an intellectual autobiography, rooted in a particular place and time and extending only up to about 1928, when Strauss completed work on the Spinoza book. Strauss presents three main stages in his intellectual development. In the first stage, Strauss roots his narrative firmly in the political situation confronting German Jews in the Weimar Republic in the 1920s, who faced a choice between assimilation to German culture, on the one hand, and various forms of Zionism on the other. Strauss chose Zionism; yet however necessary that choice might have been on practical grounds, the intellectual underpinnings of Zionism appeared to him insufficient and unsatisfactory. In the second stage of Strauss's trajectory, the question thus arose whether the political project of Zionism needed a deeper and more substantive grounding in Jewish thought. The possibility of such a "return" to Judaism was explored by thinkers like

Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber, thinkers who were themselves influenced by the critiques of modern philosophy offered by Nietzsche and Heidegger. Strauss found, however, that none of these thinkers achieved their stated goals, because they remained, wittingly or unwittingly, under the spell of modern presuppositions. The main obstacle to such projects of return was a genuine intellectual challenge: the thought of Spinoza and the Enlightenment, which claimed to have refuted or superseded orthodoxy. To come to terms with that challenge, Strauss needed (in the third stage of his narrative) to re-examine the most authoritative recent case against Spinoza, the case made—in the name of the Jewish tradition—by the great Neo-Kantian and Jewish thinker, Hermann Cohen. Yet Cohen, for all the passion of his case against Spinoza, turned out to rely on certain key assumptions shared inherited from and shared with Spinoza: he had still not penetrated to the fundamental question underlying the dispute, the question as to whether Spinoza or orthodoxy had been right. It was this question that occupied Strauss in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. In re-opening the dispute between Spinoza and orthodoxy, Strauss had to raise some questions that remain fundamentally important today: Did the Enlightenment and the modern scientific project have good grounds for rejecting religion? Or was that rejection motivated by political or passionate impulses that precluded an impartial consideration of the case? Did the Enlightenment's commitment to rationality and science rest on a disinterested concern for truth or a desire for predictability and control?

Strauss's narrative is not simply autobiography for the sake of autobiography. It has an internal logic, and it illustrates how a particular political problem—the uneasy situation of German Jews in the 1920s—points to, and may finally be unintelligible except in the light of, fundamental philosophical and theological questions. In what follows, I offer some, admittedly preliminary, comments on Strauss's trajectory toward those questions.

THE JEWISH PROBLEM AND THE HUMAN PROBLEM

Strauss's point of departure is emphatically political: the situation of a Jew in Germany in the early twentieth century. That political situation was defined by the aspirations, and the weakness, of liberal democracy in Germany. Liberal democracy claimed to have superseded religion: no longer would citizens be defined by this or that religious affiliation. Human beings qua human beings linked by a universal secular morality would live together in peace. Yet the fact was that liberal democracy never fully took hold in Germany. German culture fell under the influence of the powerful critique of modernity, including liberal

democracy, given by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Seen in this light, liberal democracy appeared as a thin rational veneer over darker, more profound, and more dangerous passions. In the light of German romanticism and longing for the lost spiritual unity of the Middle Ages—and German resentment at being defeated in World War I—the rationalism of liberal democracy appeared shallow. It is no surprise then that the German liberal democrats were politically weak and eventually swept away by more illiberal forces.

For a modern, enlightened Jew, this situation was deeply unsettling. Raised to believe that a universal tolerant human society was within reach, and that German society would accept him with open arms, the German Jew found himself betwixt and between. The political reality was that the majority in Germany was suspicious of Jews, whether they attempted to assimilate into German society or remained orthodox. Even the most cosmopolitan of Germans, such as Goethe, harbored objections to the full assimilation of the Jews—to say nothing of less savory thinkers or of the darker impulses that came to light later. Yet the premise of Enlightenment was that traditional Judaism had to be relinquished. For the young Jews of Strauss's generation, the path backward was intellectually blocked by acceptance of the Enlightenment. But the political reality of German society made it impossible for them or her to stop being identified with their fellow Jews as a practical matter.

For Strauss, the primary lesson of the Weimar republic was one of realpolitik: in all societies the majority will, in one way or another, determine who belongs and who does not. At the heart of political society is an act of ruling. That act may be more or less humane; it may be wise; but it remains an expression of power, in which the majority asserts its will over the minority. In the moment of decision, there is no third party to appeal to; and in the controversy between German Jews and the rest of Germany, that decision would necessarily be made by the non-Jewish Germans. Jewish citizens, whether they were believers or not, were thus confronted with a fundamentally untenable situation. To simply appeal to the good sense of the German or to rely on the Enlightenment promise of toleration would be to put oneself and one's community at the mercy of powers beyond one's control. Basic self-preservation, as well as responsibility for one's family and community, compelled Jews to look for another strategy.

Political life proper is born from the recognition of the necessity to act or to assist others who act. For some Jews of Strauss's generation, Zionism—in its original, political form—was the vehicle of that recognition.[5] These Jews saw

5. Strauss himself was a Zionist in the 1920s and an active participant in the debates over the future of Judaism. His Zionist writings have now been translated in *Leo Strauss: The Early Writ-*

that they would have to do for themselves what no one else could or would do for them. The Zionism of Pinsker and Herzl took a hard-headed look at the realities of European politics and recognized that mere moral appeals to the powerful of the world would not be efficacious. In standing up for themselves, in taking on the responsibility for their common fate, the political Zionists took a large step toward vindicating Jewish dignity, honor, and pride. Instead of assimilating as individuals to a promised but elusive post-religious Enlightenment society, the Jews would take their rightful place among the independent nations of the world: political Zionism was a Jewish declaration of independence.

Strauss always held the achievements of political Zionism in high regard. His participation in the Zionist movement was perhaps the most important direct political engagement of his life. Yet ultimately he found the Zionism of Herzl and Pinsker insufficient, even on realpolitik grounds. The political Zionists were simply not numerous enough to found a state without an alliance with other Jews. A more fundamental defect was that the movement's roots were not deep: it had not found an answer to the question: for what do we stand, as opposed to, against what are we reacting? Strauss remarks that the Zionists remembered Rabbi Hillel's saying, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" but forgot its companion, "If I am only for myself, what am I?" Without an answer to that question, Zionism, or any political movement, could make a case for itself as a matter of calculation and self-interest but not as a cause worth fighting and dying for in itself. It could not engage the heart as well as the head. Having stood for itself *against* the contempt or indifference of others, political Zionism could not say positively what it stood *for*. Yet politics, however hard-headed and realistic, can never escape the deeper question, what justifies—what sanctifies—political action?

Political calculation in the narrow sense is necessary but not sufficient to form a political community that engages the whole human being. Politics requires a supplement to make sense of itself.[6] Yet once we raise the question of justification, the real trouble begins. For some Jews in the 1920s, the answer lay

ings (1921-1932), ed. Michael Zank (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2002). See also the very helpful volume of collected essays by Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1997).

6. In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville provides an American parallel. He famously suggests that one democratic vice is a resignation to what is taken to be the tides of history. Upon examination, Tocqueville's account of the psychology of the democratic belief in history turns out to have the same structure as the logic of the tyranny of the majority in the political realm. Tocqueville seems to think that history in the democratic sense is the cosmological version of the tyranny of the majority. Even democrats, who pride themselves on being pragmatic, anti-theoretical, and anti-theological, seem unable to refrain from interpreting being or the cosmos in light of their fundamental political opinions.

in seeing Judaism as one high culture among others. Culture refers primarily to the habits, mores, and traditions of a people. It appeals to a reverence deeper than the hard-headed calculations of politiques. But the source of culture, in the modern understanding, is merely a people. Culture is the unintended consequence of the aggregate activities of many individuals over a long period of time. One may recognize the importance and value of traditional practices and beliefs and still question the underlying authority of ancestral inheritance. This or that custom may prove useful, but why in principle should we look up to the activity of certain particular human beings, who have no obvious claim to be superior to us?

The appeal to culture *qua* culture is even less appropriate in the case of Judaism, which always staked its claim on its dedication to a universal truth and to justice in a transpolitical and transcultural sense. When cultural Zionism takes itself seriously, Strauss remarks, it turns into religious Zionism: it must take seriously the claim of orthodoxy as orthodoxy. Yet from the point of view of Jewish faith, the attempt by political Zionism to solve the "Jewish problem" through human and political means proves to be misguided and finally blasphemous. Politics needs a supplement, but culture alone cannot offer an ultimately satisfying alternative, while religion requires a reorientation away from politics, in the light of which politics and political action must be subordinated to concerns for justice and purity. Mere political success no longer appears sufficient. Zionism is thus a paradox: even or especially in Israel, a new version of the "Jewish problem" reappears.

Strauss goes so far as to claim that this problem is not unique to the Jews but is paradigmatic for political life as such. In this respect, "the Jewish problem" reflects the continuing absence of a satisfactory resolution to the problems of human life. Strauss comes close to suggesting that the experience of exile, of the Galut, is in fact the human experience as such. The founding of the state of Israel is not the coming of the Messiah, and human beings must still attempt to see their way clearly, and make their way as best they can, in a world of insuperable tensions:

> The establishment of the state of Israel is the most profound modification of the Galut which has occurred, but it is not the end of the Galut: in the religious sense, and perhaps not only in the religious sense, the state of Israel is a part of the Galut. Finite, relative problems can be solved; infinite, absolute problems cannot be solved. In other words, human beings will never create a society which is free of contradictions. From every point of view, it looks as if the Jewish people were the chosen people in the sense, at least, that the Jewish problem is the most manifest symbol of the human problem as a social and political problem.

It is not immediately clear what Strauss means by "the human problem as a social and political problem," or indeed what the contradictions are. Presumably he refers to the tension between the political Zionists and the religious Zionists, between the demands of politics and the demands of religion. It may be the case, for example, that every political society must find a way to negotiate between the circumstantial political realities at any given moment and the higher things to which it looks up and which it reveres. The "Jewish problem" may be paradigmatic because it provides one particularly sharp expression of that question.

Be that as it may, the defects of liberalism must appear in a different light once Zionism has shown itself to be paradoxical. Strauss's original dissatisfaction with liberalism stemmed from its inability or unwillingness to genuinely welcome enlightened Jews: beneath the universalistic pretensions of liberalism lurked the old antipathies. But if *no* society is free of contradictions, the judgment on liberalism is not so simple. At its best, liberalism tries to enforce a distinction between public and private: it attempts to govern the body without intruding on the soul. It therefore cannot eradicate prejudice and discrimination in the private sphere without ceasing to be liberalism. But a polity that respects the private sphere also makes room for political and religious liberty, for Jews as well as others. Another liberalism, one that took itself and its principles seriously, might well be far more defensible and successful than the liberalism of the Weimar Republic. To be sure, such liberty comes at the price of being a primarily political community, one in which the highest things are not shared. The question arises whether the Enlightenment hope for a universal human community, one that combined liberty and a deep community of the heart, was not a false hope born from an unwillingness to see the world as it is.

RELIGIOSITY WITHOUT RELIGION?

For the young Jew of the 1920s who asked whether a return to or reaffirmation of Judaism was possible, several intellectual-moral alternatives presented themselves. Hermann Cohen, one of the greatest German Jewish thinkers before the World Wars, had argued that Judaism was the paradigmatic "religion of reason." So far from being dependent on a law that could only be known through some greater-than-human revelation, Judaism was, on this view, emphatically rational. Its moral teachings could be verified by reason acting alone, and any alleged miracles and revelations could be seen as merely longstanding self-misunderstandings. Yet it is not clear why such a religion would need a transcendent god like the one spoken about in the Bible or even whether such a God is really compatible with it. In the absence of such a transcendent God, it was unclear what the ultimate basis of the rational morality was. By discarding all the super-rational elements of the Jewish tradition, Cohen came close to reducing Judaism to a mere moral ideal or hope with no grounding in nature or the divine. For many of Cohen's readers, God seemed to be on the verge of evaporating.[7]

Not surprisingly, many thinkers found this profoundly unsatisfying. A deeper and more vibrant attempt at a genuine return to Judaism was made by Franz Rosenzweig and others. According to Rosenzweig, all human beings had or could have an experience of the divine command or "call," as a matter of direct experience, a call that is especially manifest in our awareness of our obligation to our fellows. We can in fact recognize our experience of that call in the Bible. For Rosenzweig, that recognition thus prepared the way for a return, albeit partial, to Judaism. Our awareness of the ethical command, however, is available to human beings as human beings and rests on our experience of a call from the divine, from something absolute and beyond the human. Yet that experience tended to be obscured by the various forms of rationalism from ancient Greek philosophy to Hegel. Rationalism in all its forms, for Rosenzweig, was superficial. It could see the world only through the lens of subjects and objects, as mere things or as pure minds, necessarily abstracted from the living human experience of the absolute. Coming to terms with the call or the absolute experience therefore required the critique of philosophy as hitherto known, what Rosenzweig calls the "old thinking."

Rosenzweig was not the only thinker who called for the replacement of the "old thinking" of Western philosophy with a "new thinking." Martin Heidegger also called for a thoroughgoing critique of traditional philosophy, and he also began with the premise of something like an absolute experience or call, prior to philosophic reason. But Heidegger denied that the Jewish interpretation, or any other interpretation of the fundamental experience, could be known to be the true interpretation. For Heidegger the most important virtue is a kind of probity (*Redlichkeit*), or the resolute willingness to look the ugly reality in the face and not cover it up with mere wishful thinking. He demanded that the fundamental experience be seen as it is in itself, stripped of all merely conventional or believed interpretations. Heidegger argued that all such interpretations had

7. Consider the story Strauss tells elsewhere of Cohen being asked by an orthodox Jew about what has happened to the creator of the world in Cohen's philosophy: "Cohen had no other answer than—to weep, and thus to confess that the gap between his belief and the belief of the tradition is unbridgeable." Leo Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, trans. Eve Adler (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 50.

the effect of hiding from us the reality of death and our fundamental loneliness in the cosmos. Rosenzweig's "Jewish" interpretation of the experience, the Presence or the Call, could be nothing but an attempt to make that experience bearable; for Heidegger it stems in the last analysis from the human hope to escape mortality into something eternal, a hope that is, according to him, indistinguishable from a spirit of revenge.

Yet Heidegger's objection can be turned back on him, for is it so clear that the atheistic interpretation of the fundamental experience is the correct one? Does not Heidegger's attachment to that interpretation stem from his preference for a world in which human beings must demonstrate courage and fortitude in the face of a hostile cosmos? As Strauss put it, "[J]ust as an assertion does not become true because it is shown to be comforting, so it does not become true because it is shown to be terrifying" (11). Heidegger's view presupposes that what is morally serious in life is to face up to the ugly truth about the world. But one might also say the reverse: Heidegger needed the truth to be ugly so that human beings might be morally serious. In fact, Strauss charges, the source of the thought of Heidegger (and in some measure of Nietzsche as well) about *Redlichkeit* and other matters is an essentially Biblical moral impulse. "Being toward death," "conscience," and "guilt,"—the concepts Heidegger uses to explicate the human in *Being and Time*—are all much more closely tied to the Biblical understanding of human beings than to the Greek.

Rosenzweig's version of the "new thinking" appeared to be a more viable alternative. Yet Rosenzweig did not return to orthodoxy completely. He did not claim to believe all the miracles of the Bible, for example. His standard was not submission to a mysteriously revealed law, but the experience of God's call, which, to be sure, could find echoes of itself in the law. This means, however, that Rosenzweig uses the personal experience of the call to judge the law and not the other way around: in the crucial respect, Rosenzweig remained an individualist. As Strauss put it, "The sacred law, as it were the public temple, which was a reality, thus becomes a potential, a quarry or a storehouse out of which each individual takes the materials for building up his private shelter" (14). Rosenzweig differed from his orthodox contemporaries on two points especially. He wished to replace the orthodox understanding of law as prohibition and denial with one of law as granting and liberation. And he did not, and felt that he could not, believe all the Biblical miracles. Yet, as Strauss points out, there is reason to think that the orthodox might have more insight than Rosenzweig regarding both of these disagreements. For does not the understanding of law as prohibition rest on a "deeper understanding of the power of evil in man" than that possessed by Rosenzweig? And would it not be more consistent—if we find traces of God's call in the Bible—to treat our doubts about miracles as moral failings on our part as the orthodox might do than to judge miracles by our individual ability or inability to believe or not believe?

Rosenzweig's position was thus internally unstable. On his premises, the question inevitably arises: is not a genuine return to orthodoxy both possible and necessary? Does not intellectual consistency require that this possibility be explored? Rosenzweig's inconsistency thus awakened in Strauss a renewed and intensified focus on the question of orthodoxy. Such questioning cannot fail to turn us back to the major obstacle to such a return, viz., the belief that the Enlightenment and modern science had decisively refuted or made obsolete all religious belief. For Jews—and not just for Jews—that belief was entangled with their ambivalent views of Spinoza, the Jew who became one of the founders of the Enlightenment and whose excommunication from the Jewish community in 1656 was a defining moment in the origins of the modern age. Strauss remarks that a return to orthodoxy was possible "only if Spinoza was wrong in every respect" (15).

The case of Spinoza's excommunication had in fact been reconsidered by Hermann Cohen. Whatever the defects of the "religion of reason," Strauss concluded that Cohen had given the most sober and impressive consideration of Spinoza's case up until that time. Cohen had affirmed the excommunication, although on somewhat different grounds from the original judgment. Strauss's extended examination of Cohen's case against Spinoza is the last stage before his turn to a direct consideration of Spinoza. This is not the place to give that reconsideration all the attention it deserves; three summary points will have to suffice. First, Strauss confirms and even provides deeper grounds for Cohen's judgment, and thus affirms the original excommunication, albeit on the basis of a somewhat different interpretation of Spinoza. Second, Strauss judged that Cohen failed to recognize some harsh political realities that both Spinoza and the Jewish tradition saw clearly. This led Cohen to misunderstand the character of Spinoza's rhetoric, especially Spinoza's need to appeal to the premises of his Christian audience, premises that Spinoza did not share. Cohen's blindness with regard to politics also led to an excessive utopianism. In this connection Strauss cites the saying of the Jewish sage Rabbi Hanina: "But for the fear of the government, men would eat each other alive." Third, despite Cohen's anger against Spinoza—perhaps because of that anger—he failed to acknowledge his acceptance of some of Spinoza's most important legacies: the historical-critical method of reading the Bible, the critique of miracles, and so on. Cohen suffered from "defective subjectivity": in some key instances he lacked self-knowledge. In particular he failed to reflect upon the fact that he essentially took Spinoza's side in the dispute with orthodoxy:

"Cohen took for granted that Spinoza had refuted orthodoxy." But if the "old thinking"—philosophy as known to the Western tradition hitherto, including Cohen's own philosophy—had collapsed, then Cohen's critique of Spinoza was insufficient. It failed to penetrate to the fundamental question. Thus was the stage set for the question animating Strauss's Spinoza book.

The theme connecting Strauss's readings of the alternative attempts to think through a return to Judaism is thus something like "unclear premises." Rosenzweig appeals to the call or the presence of divinity, but turns out to still be under the spell of modern individualism. Heidegger calls for a resolute atheism but has borrowed essential elements of his thought from Biblical religion. Hermann Cohen reaffirms the justice of the Jewish excommunication of Spinoza but has failed to reflect upon his tacit acceptance of Spinoza's most basic premises. In each case what seems to be an inconsistent melange of positions is made possible by a lack of self-knowledge on the part of the thinker in question. In each case Strauss is enabled to expose that lack of self-knowledge by using the challenge of orthodoxy to probe the premises of post-Enlightenment thinking.

Enlightenment vs. Orthodoxy

Strauss came to think that the various harmonizations of Cohen, Rosenzweig, and others obscured more than they revealed, that it would be more honest to confront directly the original conflict between Enlightenment and orthodoxy. What can reasonably be said in the dispute between believers and the partisans of science? *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* represents his first (though not his last) attempt to take the measure of this question lurking behind the Enlightenment. As the question comes to light in the Spinoza book, the fundamental situation is an impasse. Orthodoxy cannot claim to have established the truth of its characteristic claims demonstratively, but only to believe them. But Enlightenment cannot claim to have refuted the central claims of orthodoxy: that there is a mysterious God who is omnipotent, and that He chooses when and where to reveal Himself. Accordingly, the central moment in the Spinoza book is the confrontation between Spinoza, the archetypical modern rationalist, and Calvin, the Protestant theologian. (Interestingly, Strauss chooses no Jewish thinker for the position of orthodoxy.) In that confrontation Calvin has the better of Spinoza. Neither an appeal to the principle of noncontradiction nor an appeal to experience can suffice to rule out the possibility of an omnipotent God. Science depends on the *assumption* that the world is intelligible; it does not and cannot establish that assumption.

It is one of Strauss's distinctive claims that the great thinkers who originated "modernity" were aware of this weakness, however little they wished to speak of it in public. In the absence of a more satisfying refutation on the merits, their published attacks on orthodoxy instead took the form of mockery. Mockery—still a dominant mode of critique of religion among today's avowed atheists—insinuates that religious belief is mere prejudice, mere unthinking habit that has been shed by all forward thinking persons, who cannot help but have contempt or condescending pity for those stick-in-the-mud believers. In turn, those believers cannot help but resent the evident contempt of the intellectuals. Enlightenment thus understood is necessarily divisive: even to this day in all Western democracies, believers and unbelievers confront each other with the haughtiness of contempt on the one side and an understandable resentment on the other.

Despite the passion with which some nonbelievers reject religion, however, we cannot ignore the essential weakness of the Enlightenment's substantive grounds for rejecting religion. Yet Strauss remarks that the awareness of this failure did not deter the Enlighteners from their practical project, the construction of a new world. On the contrary, precisely that awareness compelled them to forge ahead, to attack religion by another route. If orthodoxy could not be refuted on philosophical terms, then perhaps it could be circumvented or outlived. One could, for example, try to show that a clear, distinct, and adequate account of the world can be given by science; and one could try to show that the longing for religion was merely a sublimated desire for material things. Both attempts require the dedicated pursuit of the project of mastering and possessing nature or the conquering of chance in the name of rational control. Alternatively, if one could produce material plenty by means of modern technology, unsatisfied longings that had been expressed through religion and religious conflict might turn out to be satisfied by consumer goods and the like. The religious passions as religious passions might simply dry up. And that could be considered a kind of proof that those passions were never really genuinely concerned with the noble or divine in the first place. Strauss elsewhere calls this a "truly Napoleonic strategy" of forgoing a frontal attack on the enemy's fortress while conquering the country around it.[8]

Strauss goes out of his way to emphasize the negative, reactive character of this characteristically modern atheism. For this atheism does not start from a neutral point, from which it reaches a disinterested judgment on religion. Rather, its crusading, revolutionary spirit makes sense only in terms of its zealous desire to refute its opponent once and for all: "it would not rest content with dismissing the tenets of orthodoxy as not known but merely believed; having been

8. *Philosophy and Law*, 32.

impressed by the claim of these tenets, it wanted to refute them."[9] Modern science binds itself to the disinterested pursuit of truth by means of method; but the motives that lead it to do so are highly interested, indeed are generated by consciousness of inadequacy and failure. So Strauss argued at greater length in his second book, *Philosophy and Law*. "Was not the 'unique' 'world construction' of modern natural science, according to which miracles are of course unknowable, devised expressly for the very purpose that miracles be unknowable, and that thus man be defended against the grip of the omnipotent God?"[10] Strauss thereby articulates one version of what Hans Blumenberg has called the "secularization thesis," the view that modernity is dependent in an important way on the Christianity it both mimics and displaces.[11] By basing philosophy and science on the felt need to disprove the omnipotent God, the Enlightenment revealed that in the crucial respect it still *believed*; believed to the extent that it felt a moral imperative to disprove its opponent. Modern science thus conceived is not, at the deepest level, the product of the disinterested pursuit of knowledge but is motivated by a crusading spirit and a desire to disprove the claims of religion. It bears a relationship to belief in the omnipotent God rather like that of a negative to a photograph. Even at its most atheistic, Enlightenment proves to be haunted by the idea of omnipotence. Beneath the polemical attack, the Enlightenment proves to be a kind of amalgamation of philosophy and religion.

Whether this critique of the Enlightenment is successful is a very large question. Even were Strauss's account of the antitheological motives of the architects of the Enlightenment simply accurate, that mere fact would certainly not allow us to dismiss their findings. For one thing, even if their premises were faulty, their conclusions might still be true. One would have to turn away from Strauss's critique of the motives of the Enlightenment and consider the modern scientific account of nature on its merits before we could conclude that its foundations are faulty.[12] Moreover, the desire to reject religion is not the only motive of Enlightenment; it also builds on the human desires to avoid suffering and to improve one's condition, impulses that cannot be reduced to ressentiment. It is also unclear whether this judgment expresses Strauss's final

9. Ibid., 31.

10. Ibid., 32. Cf. "Preface," 12-13, 30.

11. For some prominent attempts to read early modernity along these lines, see Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1985), and Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

12. Political philosophy, it seems, succeeds but cannot dispense with natural philosophy. See Leon R. Kass, *Toward a More Natural Science: Biology and Human Affairs* (New York: Free Press, 1985).

judgment on these thinkers.[13] Suffice it to say that the modern project—in both its liberal democratic politics and its commitment to science—has proved to be remarkably durable, and its endurance is prima facie evidence that it builds on something real. To be sure, that endurance is based far more on its pragmatic successes in ameliorating undisputed human ills than on any success at providing a clear and distinct account of the whole. Nor has the attempt to dry up religious longings succeeded. Chance has not been eliminated, and the human longing for the divine has not disappeared, not even where conditions of material plenty have been achieved. Rather, the very meaning of progress has become questionable, even or especially among the beneficiaries of the real technological progress produced by modern science.

There is thus one more layer of the crisis of modernity, the crisis in the self-confidence of modernity. The Enlightenment promised material progress on the basis of human effort; the premise of that effort was the basic inhospitability of the cosmos to human beings. Since human efforts to construct a predictable world have not been wholly successful, the question arises whether facing up to the underlying truth of our bleak natural condition is not truer and more serious than taking comfort in the illusions of progress. The final wave of modernity, that of Nietzsche and Heidegger, turns this insight into the basis of its philosophy. The atheism of the original Enlighteners had made the evils and terrors of religion—most especially the fanaticism of the early modern Wars of Religion—the primary grounds for rejecting religion; the later atheists believed that we must reject religion precisely because it would be a consolation if it were true. Aware of the basic inability of the Enlightenment to refute an omnipotent God, these atheists found belief in God to be a sin against their consciences. For these thinkers, a truly morally serious life required that we look the ugly truth in the face and refuse any pleasing illusions. This new virtue, at once intellectual and moral, is a combination of fortitude and probity. It is an atheism out of conscience and on principle. Like the atheism of modern science, the new atheism is still embroiled in a complex mixture of rejection of and indebtedness to Biblical religion: "Thus it becomes clear that this atheism, compared not only with the original

13. Did Strauss change his mind about this interpretation of the reactive motives of modernity? Put differently, could he have come to think that (at least some) moderns were moved by a genuine desire to know, rather than by ressentiment against religion? The question is not easy to decide on the basis of the 1962 "Preface" because Strauss's mature views are hard to disentangle from the views he presents himself as having held in the 1920s and 30s. It is clear that Strauss in 1962 regarded the interpretation of Spinoza to be found in the Spinoza book as defective. He applies to his interpretation the same judgment he makes of Hermann Cohen: "I understood Spinoza too literally because I did not read him literally enough." Strauss uses this judgment to suggest that Cohen underestimated Spinoza's esotericism: does Strauss imply that the difference between his earlier and later interpretation of Spinoza turns on a deeper understanding of esotericism?

Epicureanism but also with the generally 'radical' atheism of the age of Enlightenment, is a descendant of the tradition grounded in the Bible: it accepts the thesis, the negation of the Enlightenment, on the basis of a way of thinking which became possible only through the Bible. . . . [I]t is itself the latest, most radical, most unassailable harmonization of these opposed positions." Late modern atheism is an indelibly post-Christian phenomenon; and while its dedication to consistency may well lead it to uncover many illusions, it cannot—according to Strauss—avoid the fact that a philosophy based on the moral imperative to conscientiousness is self-contradictory; its most fundamental premise is belief and not knowledge; and "being based on belief is fatal to any philosophy."

In Strauss's telling, all of this seems to be a working out of the willful character of modern philosophy. Spinoza and others, it seems from the vantage point of the Spinoza book, chose as an act of will to live in a world defined by the impossibility of an omnipotent God. But as an act of will, the basis of the claim is not self-evident: the modern project is a choice and not a necessity. The sneaking suspicion of an inability to refute the omnipotent God seems to be the source of motion behind the development from early modern Enlightenment to late modern existentialism. From this point of view, the unfolding of modernity might well be seen as the relentless uncovering of the moral motive behind the modern way of philosophizing, which we might call the spiritedness at the root of modernity. Let us not be afraid to acknowledge the humanly impressive, not to say terrifying, character of these late modern thinkers who both expose and exemplify the spirited roots of modernity. But an atheism based on conscience or probity is just as irrefutable and indemonstrable as is the hypothesis of the omnipotent God. Enlightenment and religion thus conceived can only confront each other as incomprehensible and uncomprehending adversaries. If, as Strauss suggests, the antagonism between Enlightenment and orthodoxy is "not theoretical but moral," it would seem to be because the antagonism is at bottom political: no further rational conversation seems possible, only the the verbal thrusts and diplomatic démarches of warring polities. The politicization of philosophy ends in the loss of the possibility of theory.

CONCLUSION

Strauss's "Preface" provides indispensable help in getting hold of the situation of Enlightenment—our situation. Yet the ultimate result of Strauss's inquiries remains unclear. By the end of it, all sides are compromised; every position discussed seems to be insufficient or to borrow surreptitiously from its opponents. Neither the defenders of Judaism like Rosenzweig and Cohen nor the partisans of modern Enlightenment in its various guises seem to have viable arguments. Meanwhile Strauss refrains from discussing two positions of great interest to his readers. First, orthodoxy remains an almost silent interlocutor throughout the essay. Despite the fact that orthodoxy appears at every significant turning point as the path not taken, as an ever-present alternative in whose light the defects and self-contradictions of other positions appear, Strauss never engages with it directly: no representative of orthodoxy is allowed to speak in his own name in the essay. Whatever may have been Strauss's final position on orthodoxy, he quite clearly uses it here (and elsewhere) to probe the assumptions underlying various rationalisms, to expose their unarticulated faiths and their undefended presuppositions. As such, orthodoxy is a most potent tool of the Socratic investigation of opinions. Second, the Preface is also silent in regard to Strauss's own considered judgment as of 1962; as an intellectual autobiography the essay is visibly lacking. Strauss covers the period of his life through the publication of the Spinoza book with great depth, yet merely mentions his "change of orientation" which occurred sometime in the 1930s. The mature phase of Strauss's thought, the rediscovery of classical political rationalism, appears on the horizon, but just barely. Yet these lacunae in the Preface need not mean that Strauss's treatment is of merely historical interest or only concerned with positions superseded by later events. In a dialectical fashion, we may first need to work through various inadequate positions in order to clear the way for something else. Strauss's essay is on this view a propaedeutic to further investigations, investigations for which Strauss only whets our appetite.

The initial impression that all positive positions have been discredited by the end of Strauss's essay is thus not the whole story: we readers remain "on the way" at the end of the essay, and Strauss provides rich materials for reflection on our situation. By way of conclusion, I mention three positive lessons we may learn from the essay. First, regarding *the character of politics*: Political reflection begins from the recognition of the need to act, primarily for the sake of our own self-interest, but not solely. Political responsibility requires that we be clear-sighted and hard-headed. Because we must be concerned with the long-term flourishing of ourselves and our communities, we cannot retreat into utopian moralizing. Strauss's quiet but unmistakable judgment on both Rosenzweig and Cohen is that they underestimated the power of human evil: "but for the fear of the government, men would swallow each other alive." In light of what happened in Germany between the thirties and the sixties, the significance of the point can hardly be overstated. Nevertheless, it is also true that political reflection on its own is insufficient to engage the whole human being. Politics needs a supplement; it willy-nilly looks up to something, some

account of nature or the divine. Since political life is shaped, whether we intend it or not, by thoughts about what is highest, we would do well to try to see those thoughts for what they are. Better to articulate them than to allow ourselves to be unwittingly shaped by them.

Second, *the perils of religiosity*: Many of us want to have our cake and eat it too: we want the material benefits of modern science and the moral seriousness of religion. On Strauss's telling, Cohen and Rosenzweig attempted to have it both ways—not very successfully, as it turns out. Yet at least at the outset, whether or in what sense science and religion can be harmonized is very much an open question. Our attempts to put those things together often do more honor to our hopes or wishes that all good things go together than to our clear-sightedness. But as Strauss remarks elsewhere, our need or desire for a resolution to these questions does not prove that such a resolution is available.[14] That said, we must also admit that many modern atheists can be accused of an opposite confusion: being motivated by anti-Christian or anti-theological animus, they cannot see their opponents or themselves clearly. At least some of these atheists are parasitic on Christianity. In an analogous context G. K. Chesterton made the illuminating remark that such critics are largely reactive. They can neither be Christians nor leave off being anti-Christians. It would be better, as he says, to be really inside Christianity or really outside it: "It is well with a boy when he lives on his father's land; and well with him when he is far enough from it to look back on it and see it as a whole. But these people [the critics of religion] have got into an intermediate state, have fallen into an intervening valley from which they can see neither the heights beyond them nor the heights behind. . . . Now the best relation to our spiritual home is to be near enough to love it. But the next best is to be far enough away not to hate it."[15] Such a sentiment, it seems to me, is not far from Strauss's, even if made from a different point of view.

Third, *the need for anthropology or human wisdom*: Strauss's essay forces us to confront some hard questions about the nature and character of divinity and perhaps even about the nature of nature. But one need not wade into those deep waters to raise questions about the completeness of modern accounts of the human. Modern science and early modern thought more generally have proved remarkably effective in a variety of arenas; yet many later modern thinkers, from Rousseau down to our own time, bear witness to the resurgence of the human desire or need for the noble and the divine. The fact that on the political level those desires have born fruit in the variety of modern

14. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 6.

15. G. K. Chesterton, *Everlasting Man* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2007), 4-5.

tyrannies and fanaticisms is all the more argument for trying to see them as they are rather than dismissing them as atavisms.[16] Prior to questions about the character of the divine or about nature, there are questions about whether we have correctly understood what has been called "the human experience of the human." Does being human involve a directedness toward the transcendent, however understood? Can an adequate account of the human be given, starting solely from the necessities of self-preservation and the like? Have we ourselves articulated and clarified our own desire or need for the noble or divine? Did certain premodern authors not possess an understanding of these questions superior to our own—superior not as a matter of metaphysics or science but of simple human self-knowledge?[17]

Strauss's essay shows why there might be a serious audience for a genuine reconsideration of the Bible in its own voice and on its own terms—the kind of inquiry to which Leon Kass's *The Beginning of Wisdom* invites us. Precisely because the giants of the Enlightenment defined themselves over and against the Bible, we inheritors of their efforts ought to try to hear and understand the Bible in its own voice, free of the polemical context of our culture wars, and uninfluenced by the dogmatic prejudice toward atheism bequeathed to us by modern science. Even more importantly, our experience of modernity, both in its undoubted successes and its great failures, compels us—as children of skeptics know all too well—to raise anew the question of how we should live. *The Beginning of Wisdom* provides an invitation to think again about that question as a real question, and to ponder the Bible's way of answering it.

But whatever substantive wisdom we may gain from that inquiry, *The Beginning of Wisdom* gives us a lesson, just as important and easily overlooked, about the way a genuinely wisdom-seeking inquiry might proceed. Such an inquiry starts neither from some orthodox presuppositions nor from a dogmatic attachment to rationalism. For us the larger danger comes from dogmatic rationalism, and its confident assertion that we know there are no miracles. But that claim is more than we know and is likely merely the expression of our desire not to be surprised, to be in control. The atheists prominent in today's culture wars often seem to be moved more by outrage at the possibility that

16. Consider Francois Furet's comment on the democratic need for utopia at *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 502. As Furet remarks, the fall of the Soviet Union should by no means be taken as evidence of the end of the human desire for a more perfect life, even in liberal democracies.

17. In speaking of Hitler's Germany and Soviet Russia, Strauss remarked: "Catastrophes and horrors of a magnitude hitherto unknown, which we have seen, and through which we have lived, were better provided for, or made intelligible, by both Plato and the prophets than by the modern belief in progress." ("Jerusalem and Athens," in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, 399.)

the world might not be fully transparent and predictable than by a thoughtful consideration of the merits of the case. A genuine openness to the world would seem to require of us both a willingness to suspend disbelief—to try things out, to hear and consider before judging—and a tenacious desire to reason things through. Reading the book of Genesis in this spirit cultivates the virtues necessary for a reader, those disciplines of the heart and head that tell us what to care about and give us the wit to recognize it when we see it. And it may well give us indispensable practice for that larger task of developing a genuine openness to the world beyond the book, or beyond any book.

The difference between that spirit and the spirit of many a modern philosopher is perhaps best illustrated by a remark of Strauss's from *Philosophy and Law*. Intellectual probity of the sort recommended by Nietzsche and Heidegger, among others, he suggests, is associated with the attempt to make atheism into a "positive, dogmatic premise." Yet if atheism is not demonstrable, the attempt to build a system on it will necessarily entail shutting off other possibilities and silencing our consciousness of our own ignorance. Strauss illustrates the difference between that intellectual probity and the love of wisdom by quoting a French scholar of ancient Greek philosophy: "This conception of probity recalls the definition of criticism: 'la critique . . . a pour essence la negation du surnaturel.' To this it was objected: 'l'essence du critique, c'est l'attention.'"[18]

18. *Philosophy and Law*, 137 n. 17.

14

THE GOD-SEEKING ANIMAL

ERIC COHEN

At the very least, they can be persuaded that the bodily position makes no difference to their prayers; for they constantly forget, what you must always remember, that they are animals and that whatever their bodies do affects their souls.

–C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

On the cover of *Being Human*, the anthology of writings collected by the President's Council on Bioethics under Leon Kass's stewardship in 2003, there is a picture of a ballerina. She is leaping into the air, body extended, gazing and reaching and soaring toward the heavens, looking at once so perfectly natural and so unnaturally perfect. Why this image on a book that aims to illuminate the problems and possibilities of the human condition? There are, after all, so many other possible images of being human: from the *ordinary activities of human life*, like walking or sleeping; to images of *being human together*, like conversing or embracing; from images of *human neediness and care-giving*, like the patient and the nurse, in bed and at the bedside, or the mother and child, holding and being held.

Kass would surely see rich themes to explore in these many images of the human form, and the Council's collection of readings grapples with the many faces, postures, and possibilities of the human animal. But Kass deliberately chose the ballerina to represent us—an image that celebrates our embodiment and not our rationality alone; our yearning for the beautiful and not our ordinariness alone. The ballerina embodies the graceful human animal at its best—one of us, to be sure, yet also separated from us by the heights to which she can reach, by the elevated posture she can assume, by the pleasure that she brings to those who behold her. And while we fellow humans may watch her in awe, this perfection-seeking performance seems more like her own offering to the divine, which her body seeks at the very peak of her movement.