Surveying Leo Strauss’s writings as a whole, one receives the impression that in view of the great diversity of his intellectual production – writings which mainly consist of commentaries on authors as different as Xenophon and Edmund Burke, Thucydides and Alfarabi, Maimonides and John Locke, Judah Halevi and Machiavelli – Strauss was an author with a surprising variety of interests and intellectual projects. His writings are so diverse that they seem to resist any kind of categorization under a single heading. Strauss, however, once famously spoke about the internal unity of his writings and intellectual project as a whole: in the 1964 preface to the German edition of *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes*, he claims that throughout the years “the theologico-political problem has ... remained the central theme” of his whole intellectual odyssey, the problem which most clearly gives unity to the plurality of his writings.¹ Yet it would be a mistake to believe that this statement of Strauss clarifies the basic aspects of his thought to the common reader. In fact, the common reader and the more initiated are in the same boat in this regard. There are no straightforward answers regarding what the theologico-political problem actually is, in what sense it is the main axis of Strauss’s writings, and even what Strauss’s position is on this problem.

Let us for the moment concentrate on what the theologico-political problem is. Strauss also refers to “theologico-political” as a general term in a footnote of his 1935 book *Philosophy and Law*, a statement which

might provide us with clarifying information on the meaning of this term. In this footnote, rather than referring to the “theologico-political problem,” Strauss speaks first of the “theologico-political treatise” (in scare quotes) and then clarifies the meaning of these scare quotes by speaking of “the theologico-political treatises of the seventeenth century, especially those of Hobbes and Spinoza.” In this way, Strauss draws our attention to a rather obvious point: the term “theologico-political” is borrowed from the title of Spinoza’s famous book and is employed for characterizing a series of similar writings – the most impressive examples being those of Spinoza and Hobbes. In other words, for Strauss, the “theologico-political treatise” is a specific genre of writings appearing in the early modern period. It seems that the main theme of such treatises, as Strauss understands them, is explained by the subtitle of Spinoza’s treatise, the subtitle which claims that through his book the author intends to show that the “freedom of philosophizing” is compatible with and even contributes to “piety” and the “peace of the republic.”

From Spinoza’s statement one can therefore conclude that the theologico-political problem is about the problematic relationship between the element of philosophy and two other elements, namely religion and politics. This preliminary hypothesis points to two other common issues at the center of Strauss’s thought: (a) The irreducible conflict or eternal tug-of-war between Reason and Revelation or “Jerusalem and Athens,” and (b) the clash of politics and philosophy, or more concretely, the conflict between the city and the philosopher. The theologico-political problem seems to be the synthetic formulation of these two problems: it synthesizes the conflict of Reason and Revelation with the clash of philosophy and politics.

The theologico-political problem has several levels of meaning, consisting of outer and deeper ones. At its most basic level, it points to the fact that religion and politics, in their relationship with philosophy, are two sides of the same coin. For Strauss, philosophy and philosophers are above all concerned with one fundamental question: How should one live? This amounts to asking the question of the best way of life. As man is a political animal living with other human beings in a political

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1 Strauss, Philosophy and Law, 138n2 (GS II:31n2).
2 The full title is as follows: “Theological-Political Treatise Containing several discourses which demonstrate that freedom to philosophize may not only be allowed without danger to piety and the stability of the republic but cannot be refused without destroying the peace of the republic and piety itself”: Benedict de Spinoza, Theological-Political Treatise, trans. Jonathan Israel and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
community, and because this question is addressed and answered by the authoritative traditions of political societies, the theologico-political problem is essentially a political question. But it is also a theological question in that, in all premodern societies, the most authoritative tradition that answers this question is the religious tradition of those societies. In other words, political society is essentially a theologico-political institution. Because for Strauss free thought and critiques of common authoritative answers are the most distinctive characteristics of philosophy, and because he did not believe in the possibility of a synthesis of Reason and Revelation, he therefore argued for the strict separation of religion from philosophy and claimed that there is always a fundamental tension between the two. Philosophy not only calls any authoritative answer into question, but also provides its own answers to the question of the best way of life; therefore, according to Strauss, philosophy necessarily enters into conflict with the sacred tradition of the community and with the theologico-political front as a whole. In other words, the conflict of philosophy and politics is a subsidiary aspect of the conflict of Reason and Revelation, but at the same time, religion and politics somehow form a common front. The perfect manifestation of this synthesis of religion and politics is the concept of law, or more precisely the divine law (theios nomos); hence the title of Strauss’s book, Philosophy and Law, is the theologico-political problem expressed in other terms. Judaism and Islam, the religions of law (torah and sharīʻa) rather than Christianity, the religion of faith, are the manifestation of this close connection between religion and politics. Furthermore, it is in Judaism and Islam that philosophy is entirely in its element, where the theologico-political problem exists in its purest form.


5 Modern society differs from premodern society in this respect because its authoritative tradition is not religious. Strauss saw the recovery of the premodern perspective, which is the world of “the natural understanding, the natural world, or the world of common sense,” as distinguished from our philosophic and scientific world, as the proper starting point of inquiry. The element of the natural world of the city is religion. Strauss, Natural Right and History, 77–81, 83ff.

6 Strauss, Natural Right and History, 74–75; Strauss, “Jerusalem and Athens,” 149–50; Strauss, “Progress or Return?,“ 246; Strauss and Voegelin, Faith and Political Philosophy, 78 (Letter to Eric Voegelin on February 25, 1951).

7 Meier, Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem, 7.

Concern with the theologico-political problem, especially from the point of view of the conflict of philosophy and religion, is not a novel issue in the intellectual history of the West. This issue, viewed from the perspective of Islamic philosophy, immediately reminds one of the Averroistic controversy, a European phenomenon occupying the minds of many authors for several centuries. The Averroistic controversy and Strauss’s engagement with the theologico-political problem seem rather close; they belong to each other. But considering these obvious affinities, a question comes to mind: If the theologico-political problem is the axis of Strauss’s oeuvre, and considering the special place of Islam and Islamic philosophy in Strauss’s thought and writing, why did Strauss never write anything substantial on Averroes or Averroism? It is true that Strauss was preoccupied with Averroes in several of his writings, found his works essential for understanding the classical conception of natural right, and looked at the Averroism of the Renaissance as one of the central elements of modern political philosophy, inaugurated by Machiavelli. However, apart from short discussions, Strauss did not publish an independent study on Averroes’s ideas. What can explain this absence in Strauss’s writings?

AVERROES AND THE THEOLOGICO-POLITICAL PROBLEM

Averroes occupies a unique place in the history of Western philosophy. Although the writings of many Islamic medieval philosophers were mostly unexplored in the West until the beginning of the twentieth century, Averroes has been a major figure in Europe since the Middle Ages, and the phenomenon of Averroism has been a part of the common European intellectual heritage for centuries. During this time, one of the most enduring and widely held views of Averroes has been that he was a fierce enemy of every religion. As Strauss indicates, this view was partially rejected by the classic nineteenth-century study by Ernest Renan, in which Renan questioned what he called “la légende d’Averroès.” Renan tended to depict Averroes’s rationalism and Islamic beliefs as two independent elements that do not directly conflict. Founding his view

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10 Strauss, Philosophy and Law, 81–89 (GS II:69–75).
of Averroism on this strategy of separation, Strauss observes, Renan succeeded in transforming Averroes into “a loyal, and even a believing, Muslim.” Renan shared, however, the basic presuppositions of historicism, and therefore saw in each system of thought the reflection of the prejudices and common beliefs of a historical period – the perspective which made his claim about Averroes’s independence from the religious presuppositions of his time untenable. In the generation after Renan, Léon Gauthier, although a critic of Renan, followed essentially the same path. Gauthier’s main claim was based on the idea that Islam is a religion without substantial doctrinal content. In Gauthier’s eyes, this characteristic of Islam gave Averroes considerable latitude in avoiding a direct clash between philosophical ideas and Islamic beliefs. Gauthier saw therefore Averroes’s philosophy as “un rationalisme sans réserve” which was wholly compatible with traditional Islamic beliefs. Other scholars avoided Gauthier’s unsatisfactory half-measures and fully embraced historicism by claiming that Islamic philosophy is a manifestation of Islamic ideas in the language of Greek philosophy. From this perspective, there cannot be a conflict between the philosophy of Falâsîfa in general – or with Averroes’s philosophy in particular – on the one hand, and Islamic beliefs on the other.

13 Léon Gauthier, La Théorie d’Ibn Rochd (Averroès) sur les Rapports de la Religion et de la Philosophie (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1909), 177ff. This did not escape the attention of Strauss: Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing, 1952, 2716; Strauss, Philosophy and Law, 14319 (GS II:19).
Averroes and the Theologico-Political Problem

It is not an exaggeration to say that the problem of the conflict between Islamic philosophy and Islamic tenets today is a rather outmoded subject of study and is not as much addressed in the literature as it was in the past. This lack of interest in the study of the conflictual relationship between philosophy and religion is not limited to scholars of Islamic philosophy. Speaking about the lack of interest in the strict distinction between philosophy and religion in Western thought, and the predominant tendency to harmonize and to reconcile them, Strauss observed that “we do not like the suggestion that we have to make an irrevocable choice between two things which for all we know are both of supreme goodness or beauty.” According to Strauss’s diagnosis, scholars feel that a strict separation between Reason and Revelation would lead to the “suggestion that all our actions or thoughts may ultimately be based on a blind choice, on a leap into the dark.” Strauss sees here a kind of psychological urge at work which tries to save us from the unpleasant feeling of “humiliation,” of the sharp distinction which “offends human nature.” This psychological urge has led to efforts of harmonization and synthesis, which “allow us to believe that we are the masters of the situation.” The lack of interest in this subject today may be also traced to the recent transformation of religion into a vehicle of self-expression and cultural identification, which is essentially different from a highly intellectual understanding of religion as a system of orthodox doctrines and beliefs which can be fruitfully compared with a specific system of philosophical doctrines. As we shall see, Strauss saw no difficulty in making such radical but fruitful comparisons between philosophical doctrines and religious beliefs.


16 Leo Strauss, “Jerusalem and Athens (1946)” (The New School for Social Research, November 1946), 2. I am familiar with this unpublished typescript thanks to Heinrich Meier who shared it with the participants of his course entitled “Jerusalem and Athens” given at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich in 2018 and at the University of Chicago in 2020. Strauss’s lecture was presented on November 13, 1946, when he spoke in the General Seminar at the New School for Social Research in New York. See Meier, Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem, xvi.
More specifically among contemporary scholars of Islamic philosophy, the lack of interest in the question of the conflict between philosophy and religion has also a supplementary cause: the awareness and critique of some problematic aspects of Western scholarship on Islam. Many feel that preoccupation with the problem of Reason and Revelation comes too close to the biased views sometimes expressed in the writings of the older generation of scholars, who claimed that there is something fundamentally antirationalist in the Muslim mind which cannot separate itself from religious beliefs. There is much truth to this critique of so-called Orientalism: it is unfortunately not difficult to find examples of such views in the writings of some of the luminaries of the study of Islamic philosophy in the West. Studies documenting a conflict between Islamic philosophy and Islam seem like a close relative of such biased views, and one might believe that they provide raw material for claiming that there is something particularly irrational in Islamic civilization. Although one is justified in being wary of drawing wrong conclusions from the study of the conflict of Islamic philosophy and religion, however, Strauss’s lack of interest in this problem in the writings of Averroes is not related to this critique. But if the absence of a substantial discussion of Averroism in Strauss’s writings cannot be explained by fear of decisionism, new perspective on religion as a source of identity, or the problem of orientalism, how can one explain it? One should consider two points.

First, the question of the conflict between Averroes’s philosophical views and traditional Muslim doctrines in particular, as well as to religious ideas common to the so-called Abrahamic religions in general, is mainly studied by scholars through the lens of some metaphysical views

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18 As I explained in the Introduction, Strauss’s writings, as far as I can see, show no sign of bigotry or bias toward Muslim thinkers. Everywhere one can observe a deep appreciation for the philosophical talents of Muslim philosophers in his writings. In fact, Strauss has a much higher regard for Islamic philosophy than Christian philosophy, and for him even Jewish philosophy is in a sense highly dependent on Islamic philosophy. See Strauss, “Eine vermißte Schrift Farābīs”; Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing, 1952, 11, 21, 95–97; Clark A. Merrill, “Leo Strauss’s Indictment of Christian Philosophy,” The Review of Politics 62, no. 1 (2000): 77–105. As we saw, this has not prevented several scholars from accusing Strauss of having orientalist biases. See also Mohammad Azadpur, “Is ‘Islamic Philosophy’ Islamic?,” in Voices of Change, ed. Vincent Cornell and Omid Safi, vol. 5 (Westport: Praeger, 2007), 23–41.
attributed to Averroes. Examples include the idea of the unicity of the intellect for all human beings and the eternity of the world. In the Muslim world, the adherence of Greek philosophers to the idea of the eternity of the world was seen as incompatible with the Muslim belief that the world was created; the Greek understanding of the divine as mostly a passive being which plays very little part in the world differed from the active conception of the Islamic god who punished and rewarded believers for their actions and was fully aware of the smallest things happening in the world. Similarly, the mainly intellectual Greek understanding of the afterlife did not correspond to the Islamic conception of the bodily rewards and punishments in the afterlife. These and similar issues were prominently emphasized in the writings of those who had important objections to Muslim Aristotelians, most famously in the writings of al-Ghazali. Now, Strauss avoided this field of speculative philosophy throughout his intellectual career and instead concentrated on practical or, more precisely, political philosophy. One explanation for this is to view Strauss’s approach as a result of some personal choice or division of academic labor: his field was simply not speculative philosophy, and therefore he avoided the discussion of Averroism, which was mainly studied from the perspective of speculative philosophy. It is unclear, however, whether Strauss’s practical orientation does not have some philosophical justification. For instance, Strauss sometimes claims that political philosophy is more fundamental than speculative philosophy, hence his bewildering claim that political philosophy is properly speaking the first philosophy par excellence. In other words, Strauss’s outward lack of interest in speculative philosophy seems to have deep theoretical roots and cannot be explained as a simple division of academic labor. What might better explain Strauss’s lack of interest in the traditional debate on Averroism is the fact that Strauss tended toward an understanding of philosophy which is at its core fundamentally skeptical, a zetetic enterprise free of definite theoretical positions and doctrines. His preoccupation with the conflict between philosophy and religion was therefore bound to be less about doctrines and differed from the usual treatment of the Averroistic controversy as a mainly speculative debate about the adherence of philosophers to specific metaphysical doctrines and their compatibility with religious beliefs.

Second, the practical orientation of Strauss’s perspective should be considered alongside Strauss’s view of Islam as a religion of law. Strauss saw the primacy of law as the most distinctive characteristic of Islam (and Judaism). In the case of Islam, he looked at shari’ā or Islamic Law, a law regulating men’s private and public lives alike, as the most prominent aspect of Islam which must be taken into account while discussing the theologico-political problem. Islam, being a religion of law, has a decisively political character, and this means that, although adherence to a set of doctrines or beliefs has some importance, the law and its political character are decidedly more prominent. The theoretical effects of this distinctive characteristic of Islam can be seen in the apologetics of the Muslim philosophers against the traditional accusations of heresy and apostasy. Reading these apologetical writings, one often receives the impression that the debate between the philosophical and anti-philosophical parties is a mainly hair-splitting affair without clear lines of demarcation between the two camps. Philosophers always found some subtle interpretation of the philosophic ideas that sounded compatible with some interpretation of Islamic orthodoxy. What particularly contributed to and helped the apologetic enterprise of the philosophical party was the fact that the Islamic belief system itself is rather ambiguous on major abstract, theoretical questions at the heart of the controversy, leaving considerable room for harmonizing philosophy with some understanding of Islam. From the point of view of purely theoretical questions, the rather limited and ambiguous character of Islamic dogma made the conflict between Islamic beliefs and Greek philosophy less pronounced than, for instance, the conflict between Greek philosophy and Christianity. On the contrary, the conflict became more pronounced when the questions became more practical and touched on the precepts of the Islamic Law. It is one thing to claim that some subtle interpretation of the eternity of the world is compatible with some understanding of the Qur’ān, but quite another to, following Plato, advise that women should wrestle naked alongside men in the best regime!  

21 This seems to be Averroes’s suggestion: Averroes, On Plato’s “Republic,” 59 (Rosenthal 54.17). For another example see Averroes’s discussion of the practical effects of the belief in the bodily character of the afterlife. Averroes, Tahafut Al-Tahafut, 359–62 (Bouygues 581–84). Significantly, it is here, when a theoretical question has practical effects, that one encounters difficulties in justifying Averroes’s supposedly orthodox religious beliefs. See Leaman, Averroes and His Philosophy, 94–96. Tamer has also observed this relationship between Averroes and Strauss: Tamer, Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne, 47–48.
The prominence of law or the practical aspect of Islam would have a further consequence: if law is much more prominent in Islam than its dogmas, and if the conflict between philosophy and Islam is more pronounced in practical philosophy than in metaphysics or psychology, it makes more sense to address the theologico-political problem through a study of Islamic political philosophy. In other words, this perspective justifies more intensive engagement with Islamic political philosophy and what Falāṣīfa said and thought about politics. This path of inquiry is precisely the one followed by Strauss in his studies on Islamic philosophy, in which he concentrated exclusively on Islamic political philosophy rather than on more speculative aspects of the writings of Muslim thinkers. In the case of Averroes also, the precedence of practical philosophy should lead to an increase in importance of Averroes’s political writings, more specifically his most comprehensive statement on political philosophy, namely his commentary on Plato’s *Republic* (hereafter, *Commentary*). That this perspective is also shared by Strauss is confirmed not only by his lack of interest in participating in the Averroistic controversy but also from a recently discovered transcript which shows his interest in the political philosophy of Averroes: it seems that Strauss actually planned to write a study on Averroes’s *Commentary*, but for some reason, partly discussed in the Introduction of this volume, did not.

Interestingly, this writing of Averroes is particularly suitable for the study of the theologico-political problem in Islamic philosophy from the point of view of practical philosophy, because Plato’s *Republic* at least *seems* to be a radical political project. Averroes’s *Commentary* is the meeting place of a law-oriented revelation and a highly radical politico-philosophic project in the shape of a utopia. The presence of conflict between these two is nowhere more likely than here, because the *Republic* is itself Plato’s most radical political work: unlike the other substantial political statement of Plato, namely the *Laws*, which mainly appears like a conservative political project with subtle philosophic undertones, the *Republic* is, or at least seems to be, consciously and conspicuously a radical project, so radical that even the literary participants of the dialogue themselves occasionally attest to the bewildering nature of Socrates’s suggestions: when Socrates argues that women, whose Greek traditional

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22 Strauss claimed that Plato’s *Republic* is not actually a practical proposal but rather a complex work which intends to raise doubts about the desirability as well as practicability of a best regime. The *Republic* is meant to convey “the broadest and deepest analysis of political idealism ever made.” Strauss, *The City and Man*, 127.
virtue was to not be even heard, should begin exercising and ruling alongside men and wrestle naked the interlocutors express their unease. The view of women in Islamic Law was not much different from that of the Greeks, and one can therefore imagine similar reactions from the Muslim readers of the dialogue. In other words, commenting on Plato’s dialogue, Averroes was not confronted with abstract ideas about the heavenly bodies or the faculties of the human soul, but with concrete considerations dealing with the practices of daily life under an Islamic regime, which from the orthodox perspective touch and clash with many well-known precepts of Islamic Law. Surely there are also more abstract ideas in the Republic and in Averroes’s commentary on it – for example, the religiously correct conception of the invisible beings and the moral status of divine commands – which can be discussed from the point of view of Islamic orthodoxy. But because of the legalistic character of Islam and the ambiguous character of many of these issues in Islamic theology and scripture, the most crucial aspects of Averroes’s Commentary prove to be those which touch on different aspects of Islamic Law, and this seems to be one of the reasons why Strauss decided to comment on this particular writing of Averroes.

With these considerations in mind, let us turn toward Strauss’s interpretation of Averroes’s Commentary. This interpretation is found in a transcript of a collection of notes; until now no attempt has been made to present its content. In what follows, Strauss’s notes will be interpreted in an effort to reconstruct his understanding of Averroes’s Commentary. It is fortunate that this unique transcript has survived, as its content is

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24 These notes are found in Leo Strauss Papers, box 18, folder 17, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library. References to Strauss’s transcript are here identified by SNA, followed by the page and paragraph numbers of the transcript. I have greatly benefited from Ralph Lerner’s excellent translation of Commentary. References to Commentary are identified by A, followed by Rosenthal’s page numbers, also indicated in the margins of Lerner’s translation. Strauss’s transcript cannot be precisely dated, but as it refers to the page numbers of Rosenthal’s 1956 edition, it must have been written sometime after 1956. A passage also (SNA 6.14) seems to refer to Muhsin Mahdi’s book on Ibn Khaldūn, published in 1957. Strauss might have even composed these notes close to his death – we know that shortly before his death he read the transcript of Lerner’s translation of Averroes. See Averroes, On Plato’s “Republic,” ix; Muhsin Mahdi, Ibn Khaldūn’s Philosophy of History: A Study in the Philosophic Foundation of the Science of Culture (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1957). Ralph Lerner generously showed me Strauss’s annotations on the manuscript of his translation.
of interest not only for understanding the evolution of Strauss’s engagement with the theologico-political problem, but also for understanding Averroes’s political philosophy. Scholars have paid very little attention to this writing of Averroes, although a reliable edition has been available for more than fifty years: since the publications of the 1956 Hebrew-English edition of E. I. J Rosenthal and the 1974 excellent English translation by Ralph Lerner, very few in-depth scholarly studies have been written on any aspect of this unique writing. Therefore, to borrow an expression of Averroes, “there is room for inquiry here”: Strauss’s transcript may help us become aware of many aspects of Averroes’s treatise which are ignored in the literature. One must bear in mind, however, that the interpretation of these notes is bound to be tentative, as well as selective. It is tentative because our source for Strauss’s interpretation of Averroes’s Commentary is a series of brief notes clearly produced for Strauss’s own use: in most cases the notes are ambiguous and many of them are highly obscure. What I present as Strauss’s meaning is based on my understanding of Strauss’s larger project as well as these ambiguous remarks. This interpretation will be selective as well, because Strauss mentions many points in his notes, and they cannot all be discussed and interpreted in this chapter. I will therefore concentrate primarily on a few particularly prominent themes on which Strauss’s perspective seems easier to establish.

APPROACHING ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY

Before turning to Averroes’s Commentary Strauss begins his notes by discussing the correct approach to the study of Islamic medieval philosophy. As these preparatory remarks form a major part of Strauss’s unique approach to the study of Islamic medieval philosophy, this is where we should begin before turning to Strauss’s notes on the Commentary proper. Strauss’s question is: “How to approach Islamic (political) philosophy?” This question shows the overriding importance of methodological considerations of the interpretative work for Strauss. It is in a certain way ‘easy’ to answer a question like this, and as Strauss explains elsewhere, this question is often answered by some general observations about the importance of scholarly thoroughness, exactness, attention to detail, and so on. Although these are very sound suggestions as far as they go, one must say that they are not enough; one needs more constructive suggestions to study medieval philosophy. Strauss therefore answers this question by invoking two points. The first is that we should not approach Islamic philosophy “from a modern point of view” (SNA 1.1). What Strauss is driving at is that the scholar of Islamic political philosophy should not look down on his subject matter, and should avoid following the common presumption of modern philosophical progressivism, which treats the views of the past primarily as cultural artifacts and takes for granted that modern insights are superior to the insights of the past thinkers. In other words, the student of medieval Islamic philosophy must have a keen historical sense. A modern scholar is always tempted to study the works of the past as containing knowledge inferior to the knowledge available to us. However, if he or she remains faithful to sound historical scholarship, he should not have any prejudice in favor of contemporary thought. For instance, in the progressive perspective, the knowledge of a twelfth-century philosopher ultimately relies on ideas about nature and politics which are wholly inadequate and false. This old philosopher is believed to have been stuck in obsolete Aristotelian science and adheres to a nonegalitarian political order incompatible with modern scientific and democratic beliefs. However true these observations might be, to acquire a truly historical knowledge of past thinkers one must abstract from one’s modern presuppositions and try to understand that thinker on his own terms. To acquire a genuine historical understanding requires us to avoid trying to understand a philosopher better than he understood himself and instead to try to understand an earlier

philosopher exactly as he understood himself. Any other approach would significantly distort our vision and would thwart a genuine understanding of the thinker. In other words, Strauss invites us to approach the works of Islamic philosophers philosophically and avoid treating them as the relics of some refuted system of thought, works only of purely historical interest. This methodological point is particularly crucial for scholars of Islamic philosophy because, as Strauss explains, scholars of Christian medieval philosophy already tend to believe in the philosophic relevance of their subject, while scholars of Islamic (and Jewish) philosophy show a particular tendency to treat medieval works as only of antiquarian interest.27

The second point Strauss mentions is that one should not interpret Islamic political philosophy through the lens of Christian medieval thought: one should not approach it “from the point of view of Christian scholasticism,” for example, “assuming that Averroes is [an] Islamic Thomas Aquinas” (SNA 1.1). Islamic philosophy has its own distinctive characteristics. To understand the major distinguishing characteristics of Islamic philosophy, one must first address what Strauss considers a very common misconception: Islamic philosophy, still to a majority of scholars, “seems to be a combination of Aristotle and Neo-Platonism” (SNA 1.1). In other words, historians of Islamic philosophy often argue that there is an undeniable affinity between Neo-Platonism and Islamic thought. However, this understanding of Islamic philosophy as a form of Neo-Platonism is not as obviously true as one might believe. Let us take the example of Alfarabi, often called the founder of Islamic Neo-Platonism, who, supposedly more than any other thinker, is responsible for injecting Neo-Platonic ideas into Islamic philosophy.28 It is true that some of Alfarabi’s writings contain doctrines which can be called Neo-Platonic, and in fact he explicitly refers to perhaps the most important source of Neo-Platonic ideas in Islamic thought, namely the apocryphal *Theology of Aristotle*, which he introduces as a genuine work of Aristotle.29 However, in his authoritative exposition of Aristotle’s

philosophy, Alfarabi does not even mention this Neo-Platonic work. Furthermore, Alfarabi’s “Philosophy of Plato shows no trace of Neo-Platonism” (SNA 1.1). It is on this basis that Strauss, and some others, have questioned the idea that Alfarabi believed in the authenticity of *Theology* and subscribed to a Neo-Platonist reading of Plato. But why does Alfarabi present this apocryphal work, which he supposedly knew to be inauthentic, as a genuine work of Aristotle? To answer this question, one must bear in mind that Alfarabi refers to this work to refute what he describes as the “base and reprehensible presumption about Aristotle” according to which “Aristotle is of the opinion that the world is eternal.” Alfarabi reports that according to his adversaries, Aristotle, unlike Plato, does not believe that “the world is generated and has a maker.” In response to this accusation, Alfarabi claims that whoever consults Aristotle’s *Theology* will no longer doubt the compatibility of Aristotle’s philosophy with traditional Islamic beliefs. Other instances in which obvious Neo-Platonic themes and ideas are presented are found in those political writings of Alfarabi that enumerate ‘the opinions’ which the citizens of the virtuous regime must have. In other words, in Alfarabi’s writings, classic Neo-Platonic ideas are to be found not in philosophic writings proper, but rather in those works which can be described as exoteric defenses of philosophy, or in political works describing the beliefs expected of the multitude of the virtuous city.

But if, according to Strauss, Neo-Platonism is not the major characteristic of Islamic philosophy, what is? Strauss here draws our attention to the fact that Alfarabi “is much closer to Cicero than to Plotinus” because he tends to present his philosophy in a radically political framework. In other words, contrary to metaphysical Neo-Platonism, Alfarabi’s philosophy is highly political. Strauss is here taking a position very much against the scholarly consensus: to look at the politics of Falâsîfa as an appendage of speculative philosophy was and remains a rather common


31 Alfarabi, “The Harmonization of the Two Opinions of the Two Sages,” 153, 155 (Fauzi f15b, 16a–b).


33 See also Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*, 56.
view among the scholars of Islamic political thought.-connected to the political character of Islamic philosophy, according to Strauss, is “the great importance of political philosophy” in its Platonic rather than Aristotelian version, for Muslim philosophers. For Strauss this is an “obvious difference from Christian scholasticism,” because when Christian thinkers paid attention to political philosophy, they tended to follow Aristotle rather than Plato, and while Plato’s radically political works (Republic and Laws) occupied a prominent place in the thought of Islamic (and Jewish) philosophers, Aristotle’s Politics occupied that position for Christian thinkers. This interest in Platonic political philosophy is, according to Strauss, due and “connected with [the] difference between Islam and Christianity.” Islam, like Judaism, is a religion of law, while Christianity is the religion of belief or dogma. Islam reveals itself to its followers mainly as law, as a political phenomenon. This law or shari’a is given by God to men through a prophet, and this is why Islamic philosophers look at Plato’s political science as “the clue to the understanding of sharia” and also interpret “the prophet as philosopher-king.” This kind of political philosophy is wholly alien to and “radically different from Aristotle’s Politics,” which speaks more about regimes than about laws. This is also why in Alfarabi’s enumeration of sciences, the Islamic science of jurisprudence (fiqh) and dialectical theology (kalām) are presented “as appendages to political science.” They are seen as prominently political in character.


37 Strauss mentions (SNA 1.1) that Avicenna’s remark on Plato’s Republic and Laws points toward this aspect of Islamic philosophy. For a detailed discussion of Avicenna’s statement see the Introduction of this book.

One last basic characteristic of Islamic philosophy is the absence of a tradition of natural law, which has played a central role in Christian tradition. The question of the relationship between Islamic political philosophy and the idea of natural law is one of the most subtle aspects of Strauss’s thought, which we cannot fully explore here. We should, however, bear in mind that in his complex article on Judah Halevi, Strauss distinguished two camps: those who believe in the existence of natural law or related concepts like “rational commandments,” “moral law,” and “the law of reason” on the one hand, and those who do not subscribe to this view and only accept the existence of endoxa or “generally accepted opinions” (masbāḥat) on the other. In the former group Strauss identifies Thomas Aquinas in Christianity, Mu’tazili theologians in Islam, and Halevi in Judaism, while Marsilius of Padua, the Falāsifa, and Maimonides belong to the second group. Now, what is significant is that according to Strauss, there is a direct link between subscribing to the doctrine of natural law and being a believer. When Strauss adds the short remark that in Islamic philosophy there was “no Roman law and Cicero” he is referring to the idea developed elsewhere that the “Stoic natural law teaching is the basic stratum of the natural law,” the tradition which “affected Roman law” and “became an ingredient of the Christian doctrine.” According to Strauss, the Stoic doctrine of natural law and its Thomistic heir are alien to the perspective of the Falāsifa because they presuppose acceptance of divine providence.39 In other words, the Falāsifa do not belong to the camp of believers in revelation. This therefore explains what Strauss considers the distinctive character of Islamic philosophy and separates it from Christian Scholasticism and Thomas Aquinas in particular, to whom Strauss refers explicitly. According to Strauss, the Falāsifa did not pursue a project of harmonization or synthesis of Reason and Revelation, which he considered impossible and only a recipe for the subordination of philosophy

to religion. In this regard, among others, Strauss is a firm believer in the “philosophic intransigence of the falāsifa” which made them immune to the temptation of falling victim to “the absurd intermixing of a νομο- tradition with a philosophical tradition.”

APPROACHING AVERROES’S COMMENTARY

Strauss now turns to Averroes’s Commentary. How should one read it? The first point that is often raised concerns Averroes’s access to the text of Plato’s Republic itself. This question is raised because in his commentary, discussing different aspects of Plato’s dialogue, Averroes makes additions which are not entirely faithful to Plato’s text, omits some of the ideas present in the Republic, or through his editorial comments deviates from his Platonic source. In other words, Averroes’s Commentary is not exactly a simple summary or commentary on a Platonic work, but rather a complex construction containing Averroes’s own ideas as well as those borrowed from different sources, including Plato, Aristotle, and Alfarabi. The most notable aspect of the deviations from Plato’s text is the fact that Averroes transforms Plato’s work into a treatise by abstracting from the poetic setting of the dialogue and its several participants. Facing this characteristic of Averroes’s work, scholars have raised questions about the sources available to Averroes, including his access or lack thereof to an Arabic translation of the Republic. Examining the discrepancies

41 Averroes himself refers to this aspect of his work. See A 21.4 and 105.13ff.
42 Franz Rosenthal, who is among those who Strauss probably has in mind here, explicitly denies that there ever existed anything close to a faithful Arabic translation of any Platonic work: Franz Rosenthal, “On the Knowledge of Plato’s Philosophy in the Islamic World,” Islamic Culture 14 (1940): 393; Franz Rosenthal, “Addenda,” Islamic Culture 15 (1941): 396–98. See also Erwin I. J. Rosenthal, “Introduction,” in Averroes’ Commentary on Plato’s “Republic” (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Oriental Publication, 1956), 12–13. For a good summary of the discussion on the existence of Plato’s Republic in Arabic see David Reisman, “Plato’s Republic in Arabic: A Newly Discovered Passage,” Arabic Sciences and Philosophy 4 (2004): 263–300. Although Reisman provides a remarkable passage from Plato in Arabic which not only preserves the dialogic form but also includes the names of Glaucion and Adeimantus, Reisman is skeptical that a complete translation was ever made (p. 269). I am grateful to Alexander Orwin who drew my attention to this article. See also Alexander Orwin, Redefining the Muslim Community: Ethnicity, Religion, and Politics in the Thought of Alfarabi (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 15–18. For some additional evidence for the
between Averroes’s Commentary and Plato’s Republic, Strauss addresses two hypotheses: (a) the Arabic translation of the Republic available to Averroes was faulty; (b) the more radical claim that Averroes did not have access to the text of the Republic at all, but rather to a summary of or a commentary on the dialogue. Although the second hypothesis (b) is more commonly accepted among scholars, Strauss brings forward a much more convincing counterargument to refute it: Strauss draws our attention to the fact that “Averroes says that he summarized the Republic because he didn’t have access to the Politics; this implies that he did have access to the Republic” (SNA 1.3, A 22.4–5). In other words, those who deny Averroes’s access to the text of Republic go against the express testimony of Averroes himself, whom we have no reason to disbelieve. The first claim (a) is more difficult to address: We don’t have Averroes’s translation of Republic, but according to Strauss, “we have no right to assume that it was bad or unintelligible” (SNA 1.3). But Strauss moves further than this and makes a more radical and perhaps more substantive claim: One reason, or perhaps the reason, why modern scholars often assume the inferior quality of the Greek sources available to Muslim philosophers, is that these scholars find some aspects of Muslim commentaries existence of an Arabic translation of Plato’s Republic see Galen, Galeni Compendium Timaei Platonis aliorumque dialogorum synopsis, quae extant fragmenta, ed. Paul Kraus and Richard Walzer (London: Warburg Institute, 1951), 35ff. For more on Plato’s writings in general and the Laws in particular, see Chapter 4 of this study.

43 As we shall see in Chapter 3 of this study, this is an argument used originally by Paul Kraus for Alfarabi’s access to Plato’s Laws. See Paul Kraus’s letter to Leo Strauss on May 28, 1936 quoted in Mahdi, “The Editio Princeps of Fârâbî’s Compendium Legum Platonis,” 6n23. As we shall see, like Rosenthal in the case of Averroes’s Commentary, Dimitri Gutas has also argued that Alfarabi’s commentary on Plato’s Laws was not based on Plato’s text, to which Alfarabi did not have access, but was rather based on Galen’s summary of Laws. This is despite Alfarabi’s explicit assertion that he had access to at least the first nine books of the Laws. Gutas, “Fârâbî’s Knowledge of Plato’s ‘Laws,’” 408; Alfarabi, “Summary of Plato’s Laws,” in The Political Writings, Volume II: Political Regime and Summary of Plato’s Laws, trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2015), 173 (Druart 152). See also Mahdi, “The Editio Princeps of Fârâbî’s Compendium Legum Platonis,” 4–6 and a view similar to Gutas in Shlomo Pines, “Aristotle’s Politics in Arabic Philosophy,” Israel Oriental Studies 5 (1975): 150–60.

44 It is true that, unfortunately, not even a single Arabic translation of a Platonic dialogue has survived in its entirety; however, a study of Arabic translations of the Greek works which have survived often show the remarkable fidelity of the translators even to the nuances of the original Greek. For instance, the Arabic translation of Nicomachean Ethics is described by its modern editors as “a remarkable performance, showing nearly everywhere a firm grasp of the intricacies of the thought of Aristotle.” Aristotle, The Arabic Version of the Nicomachean Ethics, 2.
incompatible with what these scholars believe they know about Greek philosophy. In case of Averroes, they judge what the latter says with “a view to our understanding of the Republic.” Given our own understanding of the Republic, we are tempted to read some comments of Averroes and ‘digressions’ from the text of the Republic as results of misreading or faulty translation. However, Strauss claims, we should first ask ourselves whether “we understand the Republic.” It is entirely possible that our own understanding of Plato’s Republic is inferior to that of this Muslim thinker from many centuries ago. One here sees the importance of Strauss’s remark about the importance of fostering a genuine historical sense in the study of Islamic philosophy. Many such problems can be avoided by forgoing the common modern lack of appreciation for thinkers of the past.

Strauss claims that if, after examining all other possibilities, we finally arrive at the conclusion that what Averroes attributes to Plato is entirely different from what Plato actually says in the Republic, and if we do not find a way to explain the discrepancy by attributing it to Averroes’s potential superior understanding of Plato, “this need not be due to incomprehension on his part or on the part of the translator of the Republic” (SNA 2.4). It is possible that Averroes’s departures from Plato are by design; that is, he might be intentionally presenting an erroneous picture of Plato. This possibility points toward one of the most controversial aspects of Strauss’s thought, namely the question of esotericism. Strauss elsewhere claims that one of the most useful techniques available to a writer who wishes to hide his heterodox thoughts is to put them in the mouth of someone else. According to Strauss, this technique can take several forms: sometimes the esoteric writer employs this technique by composing literary works in which some disreputable fictional character acts as the mouthpiece of the author. There are other instances in which the author conveys his own thoughts through pseudo-historical works or

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even, like Machiavelli, voices many of his own views by using historical figures and the characters of Livy’s History. One of the most interesting examples of this technique is the use of form of commentary itself. While the most common medium of transmitting one’s philosophical thoughts is the treatise, commentary can provide the esoteric writer with a defensive shield behind which he can hide, while conveying his own thoughts by using another author as his mouthpiece. In such pseudo-commentaries and “in the guise of a historical account” the esoteric writer “avails himself … of the specific immunity of the commentator, or of the historian, in order to speak his mind concerning grave matters.” Now, Strauss is suggesting that Averroes might have used a commentary on Plato’s Republic as an instrument of conveying his own unorthodox thoughts safely to the reader. It is therefore not surprising that elsewhere and alluding precisely to Averroes’s Commentary, Strauss describes Averroes as the “commentator who after all was more than a mere commentator.” In these notes, Strauss does not refer explicitly to esotericism, but as we shall see, he certainly believed that Averroes writes esoterically and must be read ‘between the lines.’ In Strauss’s interpretation of Commentary, the question of esotericism and the theologico-political problem meet and form the perspective through which he interprets this work. He approaches Commentary as a work intended to be read between the lines, containing heterodox ideas incompatible with, and critical of, the reigning beliefs of the time. In this perspective, Averroes’s diversions from the teachings of the Republic might be due to Averroes’s practice of esoteric writing, through which he tries to hide his deepest, most unorthodox insights from most readers, while also revealing them to some others who know how to discern them. Averroes may ‘in the guise of a historical account’ pretend to be ‘a mere epitomist of a Greek text’ and yet transmit his own thoughts about different subjects by putting those thoughts in the mouth of Plato. To put it differently, Strauss writes that Averroes may “use Plato, he may hide behind Plato, for presenting unorthodox views of the sharia” (SNA 2.4).

47 Strauss, Thoughts on Machiavelli, 42.
49 Strauss gives here an example of this kind of esoteric writing found in Alfarabi’s remarks on the seventh book of Plato’s Laws. In Alfarabi’s summary, we observe that the seventh chapter is supposed to explain the content of the seventh book of Plato’s Laws. However, one will not find anything resembling the content of this chapter in Plato’s Laws. This chapter contains a startling discussion about the successors of a supposedly divine legislator, which brings the Islamic idea of Muhammad as the ‘Seal of the
Approaching Averroes’s Commentary

Strauss’s perspective on Commentary here is above all opposed to Rosenthal’s: While Rosenthal claims that “Averroes was a convinced Muslim for whom the absolute authority and superiority of the Shari‘a as prophetic revealed Law was an article of faith which shaped his thought and determined the mode of his expression,” Strauss thought the issue is in fact more complex.⁵⁰ One should first begin by asking why a twelfth-century Muslim imam, judge, and scholar might decide to write a commentary on Plato’s Republic, the work of a pagan philosopher, in the first place. To put it differently, we may rightly ask here about the status of Greek pagan philosophy in Muslim thought. This is the first question which any study of Averroes’s Commentary must address and constantly keep in sight. To begin with, Strauss reminds us that Plato’s regime presents itself as the best city, “the perfect community” (SNA 2.6). But the major characteristics of this city are communism, equality of the sexes, and the rule of philosophers, none of which are Islamic or even entirely compatible with the well-known precepts of Islamic Law, the shari‘a. Furthermore, if Plato’s regime is the perfect community for Averroes, the radically different Islamic umma cannot be perfect (SNA 2.6). One can even go further: Strauss claims elsewhere that on the basis of faith in revelation, one must conclude that shari‘a and divine law render political science entirely superfluous. God through his Law has already shown men the way to organize their political life in the most perfect manner and to found the most perfect community. There is therefore no need to seek recourse to reason and science to discover the perfect community.⁵¹

To summarize, Strauss draws our attention to the fact that Averroes’s interest in Plato’s Republic should not be taken lightly, and that we should not assume his ignorance of the theologico-political problem. However, Strauss also remains open to the idea that “perhaps Averroes does not identify himself with Plato” (SNA 2.6). Averroes might have

Prophets’ to mind. For Strauss, this discrepancy seems to be not due to Alfarabi’s access to inferior manuscripts of Plato’s Laws, but rather to Alfarabi’s awareness of the differences between Islam and Plato’s philosophy and his decision to rewrite Plato’s dialogue to fit the new context brought about by a new revealed religion. Alfarabi may have tried to protect himself by ascribing his own heterodox ideas to the dead Plato, as a way to respond to “the problem of Islam” (SNA 2.4). If this can be the case for Alfarabi, it can also be the case for Averroes. Strauss, “How Farabi Read Plato’s Laws,” 1959, 143–44. For a more detailed discussion see Chapter 4 in this book.

even used the occasion of writing a commentary on Plato to philosophize on his own. These remarks lead Strauss to conclude that the most important issues regarding Commentary, including Averroes’s access to manuscripts, his knowledge of Plato’s Republic, and above all his intention in this work, cannot be decided before we arrive at an adequate understanding of Commentary by itself (SNA 1.5). It is therefore necessary to turn to Commentary. It is important here to be conscious of the transformation at work in Strauss’s interpretation: what he accomplishes by his critical remarks on the common perspective on Averroes’s work is to overcome the historical preconceptions which stand in the way of a truly philosophical treatment of Averroes’s Commentary. In other words, scholarly obsession with historical questions like Averroes’s access to translations and summaries must be superseded to make a truly philosophical approach to the work possible.52

THE PROBLEM OF THE UNIVERSAL SOCIETY

Averroes commences his summary proper of the Republic by observing that Plato begins his discussion of how virtues are brought about with the virtue of courage. But right away Averroes distances himself from Plato and speaks in his own name (“We say” [A 25.10]). As Strauss remarks, it seems that Averroes intends to announce his independence from Plato by showing that “he will speak first in his own name before permitting Plato to speak” (SNA 3.10): Commentary is as much a work of Averroes as it is a presentation of Plato’s ideas. Averroes says in his own name that there are two ways in which the knowledge of first principles, the final cause, and the virtues in general are brought about in the human soul. First, through rhetorical and poetical arguments, the way which is above all appropriate for the multitude, i.e., the ordinary citizens of the virtuous city who have been educated in the exercise of virtues since their childhood. This method is neither appropriate for the education of the few elect individuals capable of attaining knowledge through demonstrative speeches, nor for those who are not citizens of the virtuous city.

52 This is Strauss’s favorite approach in his other commentaries too: see the discussion of the authenticity of Plato’s dialogues in Strauss, The City and Man, 55; Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing, 1952, 31; Strauss, Socrates and Aristophanes, 3; Leo Strauss, On Plato’s Symposium, ed. Seth Benardete (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 11. Similar points are made regarding the authenticity of Xenophon’s Athenian Constitution in Leo Strauss, 1963 Winter Course on Xenophon Offered at the University of Chicago, ed. Christopher Nadon (Chicago: Leo Strauss Center, 2016), 160 (Session 7).
The second method by which knowledge is brought about in the soul of human beings is coercion. The first method is not used in the case of enemies, foes, or other nations who are not good and human. In its relation to foreign nations, the virtuous regime exclusively uses the second method: coercion, chastisement, or more precisely, war (A 26.3–5). Fostering the virtue of courage is a preparation for the art of war.

The question of courage is especially important for Averroes’s understanding of the relationship between Islam and philosophy, because courage above all concerns war, and war touches one of the most important aspects of Islamic Law, namely the holy war (jihād). As Strauss puts it, “one of the great issues between philosophy and law is religious war, and this is connected with the problematic character of a universal society” (SNA 9.20). “That Averroes makes these remarks as a Moslem” or more precisely that he sees this question relevant to his particular Islamic theologico-political situation, is shown by the fact that Averroes finds it relevant in this context to mention “our divine Law,” i.e. the shari’ā. He seems to divide the shari’ā into two parts: the part that is like what is also found in human laws, and the part which is different from human laws. The part that proceeds like human laws leads human beings toward God in two ways: “speeches” and compulsion (A 26.16–19). According to Strauss, by mentioning “speeches” in general, Averroes “leaves it open” whether Islam leads the elite to the speculative truth by means of demonstration. It is possible that “speeches” include only poetical and rhetorical speeches; then demonstration is excluded. Averroes explains that the multitude is incapable of attaining knowledge through demonstrative speeches, and therefore what they are taught through poetical and rhetorical speeches is not properly speaking knowledge but rather beliefs: “knowledge of the speculative truth by rhetorical and poetical argument is in fact ignorance of the speculative truth. It certainly is not knowledge but belief which is affected by rhetorical and poetical arguments” (SNA 5.13).

Before concluding his own remarks on courage, and just when he wants to turn to Plato’s discussion of this issue, Averroes adds that,

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53 In 1936, Strauss develops this point by remarking that “falasifa attribute greater value to courage than did Plato and Aristotle.” According to Strauss, this orientation of the Falasifa is partly due to “the missionary tendency which is inherent in a universal religion,” i.e., Islam, which commanded a holy war of civilization, an idea absent from the thought of Plato and Aristotle. Strauss, “Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi,” 295n59 (GS II:156–57). In this regards, see also the letter to Paul Kraus on May 17, 1936 quoted in Strauss, *Hobbes’s Critique of Religion and Related Writings*, 13n41 (GS III:XXIII1n41).
according to some writing of Alfarabi, this account of courage, the one which puts courage in the service of the holy war, is also what *Aristotle* asserts about the wars of the virtuous city. It therefore seems that this ‘Aristotelian’ account of courage, which incidentally is in harmony with the Islamic view, is different from Plato’s account. But what is Plato’s view? Averroes explains that for Plato, courage is *not* intended for the war of civilization. For Plato, it is only on account of some necessity that the art of war and courage are practiced. In other words, according to Strauss’s understanding of Averroes, “Plato implicitly or explicitly rejects the war of civilization and the holy war” (SNA 6.14). Plato’s un-Islamic view should therefore be distinguished from that of Aristotle, or rather that view which Averroes, relying on some unknown writing of Alfarabi, attributes to Aristotle. Averroes ascribes Plato’s view to the idea that only a part of humanity – for Plato, the Greeks – is disposed to perfection, above all to theoretical perfection. If Plato was right, this amounts to saying that civilizational warfare, which intends to spread perfection to other nations through war and compulsion, must be rejected as a misguided enterprise. But Averroes takes issue with Plato’s view of the capacities of the barbarians. While the Greeks are most disposed by nature to wisdom, Averroes claims that some men in Andalus, Syria, Iraq, and Egypt are gifted too – though he is conspicuously silent about the Arabs of Arabia proper.\(^5\) Moreover, Averroes argues that even if the Greeks are particularly gifted in wisdom and intellectual virtues, other nations *might perhaps* be said to be gifted in nonintellectual virtues, and since it is fitting that everyone obtains as much human perfection as is compatible with what is in his nature, these nations may be subjected by conquest to discipline in those virtues. However, Averroes seems to take back with one hand what he gives with the other by adding that perhaps the existence and establishment of other virtues are also dependent on the development of wisdom, and perhaps if wisdom is absent in some nations, other virtues also tend to be absent. In other words, Strauss thinks that Averroes draws our attention to the question of “whether the highest development of the other virtues does not depend on the corresponding development of wisdom” (SNA 6.14).

Averroes backs away from these dangerous waters and claims that indeed many nations are disposed to receive training in nonintellectual virtues. In any case, the issue remains: excellence in these virtues requires

\(^5\) Strauss here refers to Ibn Khaldūn (SNA 6.14). For a probable source of this remark (or vice versa) see Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldūn’s Philosophy of History*, 19915.
extensive education from childhood. Therefore, only little children who have not been corrupted by the nonvirtuous regimes and by the faulty education of their cities are apt to be trained in the virtues. But perhaps one can say that even the older generation is not beyond hope: those who have been brought up in regimes close to the virtuous regime can acquire the virtues to some extent. All these qualifications prepare the ground for Averroes’s final claim: If in a given case education in virtues proves impossible, “the people concerned must be killed or else enslaved, i.e. treated like irrational animals” (SNA 7.14, A 27.21–24). This brings the problematic character of Averroes’s treatment of war to the fore: apart from wars of necessity, which are mainly defensive, the only kind of war of which Averroes seems to approve is a war of civilization, which is ultimately dependent on the natural conditions of the enemies. While the holy war must be waged against all mankind (according to the Prophet, against the reds and the blacks [A 46.19–20]), the war of civilization is only legitimate where the natural conditions of the defeated permit their education in excellence. In other words, Strauss claims, “Averroes argues on the premise that the purpose of the war of civilization is to spread wisdom” (SNA 7.16). Averroes’s many qualifications lead to the conclusion that in many or perhaps most cases, a war of civilization is unwarranted, and in practice wars are mainly for the sake of necessity, “not conversion to the true religion but treating the conquered like irrational animals” (SNA 7.15).

The problems of the holy war and the universal society appear again when Averroes begins discussion of the size of Plato’s best city (A 46.1ff). Plato considered one thousand warriors sufficient for his virtuous city. But Averroes claims that the size and number of citizens of the best city must vary according to the time, the place, and the neighboring nations. The number of warriors that Plato believed to be sufficient was in accord with his time, and Averroes claims that Plato did not make the number to be unalterable. Plato would have admitted as we do, Averroes claims, that this number is not sufficient for a city that intends to wage a universal holy war with all the inhabitants of the earth. The incompatibility of Plato’s small city with the requirements of the universal holy war leads Averroes to suggest another possibility: a virtuous community consisting of many smaller communities, each having a limited size. This view, Averroes reminds us, is not that of Plato but rather of Aristotle, and Averroes believes that it is undoubtedly the true opinion (A 46.22). In other words, following the Islamic perspective, “Averroes demands a universal society,” consequently, he demands a society which is capable
of waging war against the whole of mankind. This leads to a retraction of Averroes’s previous agreement with Plato and, Strauss writes, “brings the conflict between Plato and Islam into the open” (SNA 7.19). What prevents this conflict from becoming an unqualified conflict between Islam and philosophy is that Averroes claims to have found a view compatible with sharī‘a in Aristotle. The problem is that one does not know where to find this supposedly Aristotelian view in the writings of Aristotle. In other words, a doubtful reference to Aristotle is all that stands between philosophy as an un-Islamic science and philosophy as an Islamic science.55

Before leaving the question of holy war, it is also worth noting another relevant passage to which Strauss draws our attention: Averroes reports that according to Plato, the guardians must punish those guardians who do not obey the shari‘a (A 41, 6–7). Now, while it is in itself remarkable to see here that for Averroes even Plato’s virtuous city has a shari‘a (see also A 44.23), it is also interesting that Averroes’s Plato did not believe that wisdom could be brought about by compulsion, while he thought adherence to the shari‘a could. If it is so, Strauss claims, “this means that for Plato wisdom is radically different from the sharia.” It is therefore no wonder that Plato does not approve of the war of civilization or holy war, and it is tempting to conclude with Strauss that here we see a difference between Plato and Averroes, for whom the holy war for the sake of spreading wisdom is a legitimate enterprise (SNA 7.18). However, we tried to show the qualified nature of Averroes’s view of the holy war, the account which must keep us cautious in passing this judgment. After all, Strauss thought that Averroes sometimes uses Plato as a mouthpiece: for Strauss, at times Averroes “says in a disguised way in his own name what he makes Plato say explicitly” (SNA 10–11.23).

55 By asking: “To what Aristotelian work does he refer? A genuine work of Aristotle?” (SNA 8.19) Strauss seems to be reminding us of Alfarabi’s reference to the pseudo-Aristotelian Theology. What is particularly interesting in Averroes’s claim is that there are passages in Aristotle which come close to some of the things Averroes is attributing to him. But these passages are found in Aristotle’s Politics (see 1256b24–26, 1325a10–15, 1327b30–33), the work which Averroes claims he has not had access to, and which, according to a wide scholarly consensus, was never translated into Arabic! See Pines, “Aristotle’s Politics in Arabic Philosophy”; Rémi Brague, “Note sur la traduction arabe de la Politique d’Aristote. Derechef, qu’elle n’existe pas,” in Aristote politique: Études sur la Politique d’Aristote, ed. Pierre Aubenque (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993), 423–33. Mahdi seems skeptical of this consensus and Strauss had his own doubts: Mahdi, Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy, 34–35.
Pervasiveness of the Theologico-Political

To show that the conflict of philosophy and shari'a is not a limited issue in Commentary, Strauss follows his meticulous study of the text by keeping this question at the center of his interpretation. The theologico-political problem raises its head again in Averroes’s discussion of the limits of warfare. Averroes reports that according to Plato, men engaged in war should not enslave those who are of their kind and speak a common language; they should not even call these enemies unbelievers, but rather those who have gone astray. This opinion of Plato, Averroes reminds us, is at variance with what many bringers of shari'a assert (A 60.3–4). This example is especially important because, unlike in previous cases, Averroes here only observes the contradiction between shari'a and the teaching of Plato and does not refer to any opinion of Aristotle compatible with shari'a. In other words, Strauss explains, Averroes does not pass any judgment on Plato’s opinion that “racial and linguistic unity [should] override religious diversity.” Averroes “merely notes the disagreement between Plato and many prophets” without taking a side and at the same time avoids the cover provided by a recourse to some pseudo-Aristotle (SNA 8.20, 9.20).

This issue introduces us to one of the major aspects of Strauss’s notes: he observes that Averroes follows a peculiar method for pointing to the conflict between Platonic philosophy and shari'a. Apart from cases in which he introduces a fictitious Aristotelian alternative to Plato’s un-Islamic views, Averroes sometimes glosses over the presence of a conflict; he presents Plato’s clearly un-Islamic opinions but “does not polemicize against Plato” or does not even point out the conflict (SNA 9.21). In other words, Averroes uses different methods for pointing to the confrontation of Greek philosophy and Islamic Law: he may directly tell the reader about such a conflict, but he may also merely plant the question in the reader’s mind. It is true that Averroes calls the perspective of the shari’a “the indubitable truth” (A 46.22) but in view of the difficulties presented, one must confess perplexity about Averroes’s final position in this conflict. What is Averroes’s position on the theologico-political problem? Strauss believes that Averroes sheds some light on this question when he discusses the education of the guardians by music (A 29.13ff). Strauss explains that the question of education by music “concerns the use of untruth, of untrue fables” (SNA 9.21). According to Averroes, the citizens owe their knowledge about speculative and practical things to arguments. These arguments are of two major kinds: demonstrative on the one hand, and dialectical, rhetorical, and poetical on the other.
Education by music is education by the second kind of speeches, mostly by poetic and rhetorical speeches, i.e., speeches which are lower in rank and less scientific than demonstrative speeches. In other words, the education of the young is through unscientific speeches, which only *imitate* the truth. However, not every imitation is equal to another: some are closer to the original and some are remote from it. Averroes claims that the education of the best city must be based on imitations which are most close to the original (A 30.6). Still, one wonders whether this kind of education brings the many closer to the truth because, as Strauss remarks, “the vulgar cannot help taking the representations as the truth and hence the vulgar is in fact led toward the untruth” (SNA 9.21).

We can say that Averroes, reporting Plato’s view, does not approve of using what he describes as untrue and base stories; yet this does not mean that he disapproves of the untrue but noble stories, or rather “noble lies”; as such, untrue stories are necessary for educating the many, who are not capable of learning the truth (SNA 9.22). Next, we receive more information about the types of stories which are conducive to courage and those which give birth to fear. Averroes claims that according to Plato fear should not be ascribed to *prophets* and chiefs, but Averroes reports that according to Plato much laughter should not be ascribed to the *righteous* and the chiefs. One must conclude with Strauss that “there is no danger that prophets be presented as given to laughter as distinguished from fear, to say nothing of weeping” (SNA 10.23). Furthermore, the guardians must be exhorted to always tell the truth. However, the chiefs can and should lie to the citizens, because untrue stories are necessary for the education of the vulgar, who are incapable of knowing the truth itself. In fact, we learn that “[n]o bringer of a nomos is to be found who does not make use of invented stories, for this is something necessary for the multitude to reach their happiness” (A 32.22–24, SNA 11.24).

The question of laughing and weeping, or rather comedy and tragedy, and their relationship with philosophy, is one of Strauss’s most complex observations which seems to have Nietzschean origins but is also attributed to the Socratic school. What here seems to be Strauss’s meaning is to draw our attention to the close relationship between morality, seriousness, and tragedy on the one hand, and philosophy, playfulness, and comedy on the other. See Strauss, *The City and Man*, 61; Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes*, 140, 312; Leo Strauss, *Xenophon’s Socrates* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 170; Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften. Band 3*, 743 (Letter to Gershom Scholem on November 22, 1960); Strauss and Voegelin, *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 90 (Letter to Eric Voegelin on June 4, 1951); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil. Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 42 (aphor. 30); Plato, *Laws* 803b.
same vein, Averroes claims that happiness should not be represented to the many as a reward for virtuous actions, nor suffering as punishment for vicious actions. Happiness should rather be represented as the health of the soul, its survival and eternal life. Averroes does not explain if suffering should also be represented as the privation of the last two.57

According to Averroes’s report, Plato says that the guardians should not be frightened by the horrifying stories about the afterlife, “i.e. there must not be presentations of hell as little as of demons and of the devil” (SNA 10.23). Here Averroes makes the cryptic remark “in his own name” that “women’s songs” should be kept from the guardians, those songs which depict death as an evil (A 32.2).58 This point touches one of the most interesting aspects of Averroes’s Commentary, which Strauss has clearly in mind. In one of his early writings, Strauss attributes the importance of courage for Falâṣīfa to two things. The first, which was mentioned before, is the universalistic character of Islam. Strauss also attributes the importance of courage to “the polemic against ‘superstitious’ menaces which are inherent in a universal religion that is thereby popular.”59 Furthermore, in a later writing of his, Strauss refers to Averroes as “the commentator who after all was more than a mere commentator” and who “directly attacks the teaching of the Republic concerning the life after death.”60 These passages together make it clear that the main superstition which Strauss has in mind is the belief in the afterlife. Although in the notes under discussion, Strauss does not refer to or discuss the specific passages of Averroes’s

57 As we shall see in the Chapter 3 of this volume, Strauss draws our attention to the “heretical” view found in Alfarabi’s Political Regime according to which the souls of the wicked dissolve into nothing, and only those of the virtuous are immortal. Strauss, “Fârâbî’s Plato,” 372; Alfarabi, “Political Regime,” in The Political Writings, Volume II: Political Regime and Summary of Plato’s Laws, trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2015), 72 (Najjar 83); Ibn Tufayl, Hayy Ibn Yaṣẓān: A Philosophical Tale, trans. Lenn Evan Goodman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 100 (Gauthier 13–14).

58 For the significance of the “women’s songs” see Alfarabi’s remark about “senseless ravings and old wives’ tales” quoted in Ibn Tufayl, Hayy Ibn Yaṣẓān, 100 (Gauthier 14); Shlomo Pines, “Limitations of Human Knowledge According to Al-Fârâbî, Ibn Bājja, and Maimonides,” in Collected Works of Shlomo Pines, ed. Moshe Idel and W. Z. Harvey, vol. 5 (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1997), 404. As we shall see in the Chapter 3, Strauss refers to this famous passage elsewhere. See Strauss, “Fârâbî’s Plato,” 372; Strauss, Thoughts on Machiavelli, 175; Meier, Political Philosophy and the Challenge of Revealed Religion, 66n80.


60 See Strauss, “Fârâbî’s Plato,” 376n43. See also Strauss, “On Natural Law,” 142: “certain Islamic Aristotelians [asserted] that the only divine punishment is the loss of eternal felicity.”
Commentary to which he refers in his two other writings, it is worth mentioning them. In the first passage (A 62.11–13) Averroes summarizes the qualities of the philosopher as described in the Republic. When Socrates reaches the virtue of courage, he claims that a true philosopher “believes that death is not something terrible” (Republic 486b1–2). Averroes gives a different justification of the philosopher’s courage by claiming that for “one who has no courage will be unable to despise the nondemonstrative arguments on which he has grown up, and especially if he has grown up in these cities.” What Strauss believes Averroes is driving at becomes clearer by the second passage in Averroes’s Commentary to which Strauss refers. This second passage (A 105.14–25) is where Averroes explains why he has not summarized the content of the tenth book of the Republic, where Plato’s theory of the immortality of the soul, “the argument by which he explains that the soul does not die,” is presented. Plato’s story which depicts “the bliss and delight that await the souls of the happy and the just, and what awaits the souls of the tormented,” Averroes claims, is “of no account, for the virtues that come about from them are not true virtues.” Averroes does not believe that such untrue stories are even necessary to a man’s becoming virtuous, because we see many people who “albeit devoid of these stories, are not less well off than those possessing [these] stories.” I believe the most important statement connecting Averroes’s two passages in Strauss’s mind comes next, when Averroes mentions that these stories about the fate of the virtuous and the nonvirtuous in the afterlife are “stories that over which the ancients had already disputed; and Plato was troubled thereby.” In other words, according to Strauss, Averroes accuses Plato of lacking the necessary courage which has led him to fall victim to “the nondemonstrative arguments on which he has grown up.”

There are other cases in which Averroes insensibly moves from reporting Plato’s views to discussing claims which can be described as his own. For instance, Averroes, reporting Plato’s criticism of physicians and judges, says that the virtuous city does not need the art of judges. Strauss believes that these comments are Averroes’s own, because in this context Averroes also refers to the cities of his own time and questions the beneficial character of the art of adjudication, i.e., fiqh or Islamic jurisprudence. Perhaps to diminish the radical character of his remark, Averroes only allusively refers to “our time and the past” and gives us the impression of

speaking only about the corruption of the contemporary cities (A 37.15–20, SNA 12.26). Strauss finds the same criticism of \textit{fiqh} and shari‘a in the discussion of inferior and corrupted regimes: Averroes explains that if the true philosopher-king is not available, an \textit{inferior} regime can be founded on the basis of the laws legislated by the true king; these laws must be applied by a successor who is expert in jurisprudence, i.e., \textit{fiqh}. Averroes also imagines the possibility of a dual system of rule, in which an imperfect king rules in conjunction with an expert in jurisprudence, and claims that this kind of inferior regime actually exists in contemporary Muslim cities (A 81.1–8). That shari‘a and \textit{fiqh} are inferior instruments of rule is also implied when Averroes mentions many legislators who have erred by legislating highly particularized or detailed laws, in contradistinction to more general laws (A 47.8–19, SNA 12.26).

There are other instances in which, according to Strauss, Averroes’s view is rather ambiguous; in these cases, Averroes limits the purpose of his commentary to simply planting questions in the mind of the reader. For example, Averroes reports, at some length, Plato’s view about the elimination of people born with incurable defects. According to Plato, Averroes claims, people who are unfit to benefit the city because of incurable defects should be killed, or they may commit suicide. Averroes remarks on the controversial character of Plato’s suggestion by introducing two groups of people: those who argue against this proposal, and those who agree with it. However, he refrains from deciding the matter explicitly, or as Strauss has put it, “his decision is obscure” (A 38.16–17, SNA 12.29). A similar ambiguity exists in the case of the actualization of the best regime: Averroes explains that the best city requires the existence of philosophers, and philosophers in their turn must have been brought up in a virtuous city. It therefore seems that the actualization of the best city is in fact impossible. However, Averroes claims that philosophers can appear in current cities, and if they rule for what he calls \textit{an infinite time}, the best regime would emerge (A 63.3–5). Regardless of what Averroes’s claim means for understanding his view of the eternity \textit{a parte post}, it seems that for him “[the] best regime [is] not in existence now nor was it ever in existence under Islam,” including even in the early Islamic period. In fact, it seems that for Averroes “our time” in contradistinction to \textit{Plato’s time} is that of decay and corruption (SNA 14.42, 11.25; A 35.11–12, 35.19–20).

A more sensitive issue that receives the same ambiguous treatment is the question of prophecy: at the beginning of his book Averroes divided the Muslim shari‘a into two parts: human and divine (A 26.17–19).
gives us the impression that only the human part of the sharī‘a is common to all laws. This points to a larger issue that Averroes calls attention to and at the same time expertly avoids addressing: the relationship between prophecy and philosophy (A 61.17–19). It seems that for Averroes, the qualifications of the perfect legislator are exactly the same as the qualifications of the philosopher (A 60.21ff); even “Lawgiver” (i.e., bringer of sharī‘a) is equated with the philosopher (A 61.14–16). But what can the gift of prophecy add to the already excellent qualities of the philosopher-king? It seems that for Averroes, only a prophet can prescribe the divine aspect of the sharī‘a, i.e., the laws concerning religious matters, namely temples, prayers, sacrifices, and offerings. However, later on, he claims that the divine aspect of nomos – the laws concerning temples, prayers, sacrifices, and offerings, or more generally those laws which regulate men’s relationship with God – as Strauss puts it – is also common to “all nomoi and sharai” (SNA 12.27, A 47.23–28). In other words, one can speak of many ‘divine’ laws (see also A 41.6–7 and 44.23). As these religious laws and regulations are common to all the laws and are presumably found in every city, Strauss concludes that for Averroes there is “no excess of sharīa beyond reason and nature” (SNA 13.37).

Strauss also observes that Averroes is not consistently reserved about the contradiction between Plato’s philosophy and the traditional order of Muslim communities in his time: sometimes he is surprisingly outspoken and does not avoid taking controversial positions without any recourse to convenient silences or fictitious references. The most remarkable example of these cases is the discussion of equality of the sexes in the Republic. Averroes writes that in Plato’s city, women engage in the same activities as men; they practice the art of war, take part in government, and might acquire wisdom. Averroes knows this is not what happens in the cities of his time. In these cities, women are merely confined to procreation and are put in the service of their husbands. Averroes believes contemporaries and the sharī‘a regarding women are in error, and considers it as “self-evident” that because women are not trained in human virtues in these cities, they come to resemble plants, are a burden upon men, and are the cause of poverty in contemporary cities (A 54.9ff). Averroes observes also the difference between the laws of Plato and the sharī‘a of his time regarding the community of women (A 55.11–15), consanguineous intercourse (A 56.11–13), nakedness of women (A 54.17) and private property (A 42.9), and does not refrain from approving of these measures. One must add that the remarkable radicalism of Averroes’s speech is also attested to by the fact that in this context he accepts (Strauss: “without any polemics”)
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that the virtuous city must remain fixed in size forever (SNA 13.35; cf. A 56.23 with A 46.22–23; see also A 57.6, 79.24–25).

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Strauss’s notes on Averroes’s *Commentary* are a perfect example of how fruitful his meticulous observations are; it is difficult to deny that Strauss’s reading of Averroes’s work through the lens of the theologico-political problem helps us acquire a better perspective on Averroes’s work. Regardless of how much we are persuaded by Strauss’s more general thesis about the conflict of Reason and Revelation or the esoteric art of writing, any serious reader of Averroes’s *Commentary* is bound to read this work differently after encountering Strauss’s observations. In other words, there is an un-Straussian case to be made for reading Averroes as Strauss reads him: the points of conflict between what Averroes says in his commentary and Islamic orthodoxy, as they become manifest through Strauss’s observations, are so prominent that only a prior uncritical attachment to the idea that Averroes was and must have been a simple orthodox Muslim can persuade us to ignore many curious aspects of Averroes’s *Commentary* as they concern Islamic Law. But Strauss’s notes are also interesting for those readers who are more curious about the presence of particularly ‘Straussian ideas’ in these notes. Among these specifically Straussian themes, the most prominent in these notes is the question of the conflict between Reason and Revelation. Consequently, I will mention three points which are of interest regarding Strauss’s thesis about the conflict of Reason and Revelation.

The first point concerns Averroes’s discussion of Plato’s theology. In his commentary, Averroes refers to Plato’s criticism of untrue and base tales, but replaces Plato’s examples of such stories with the tales common in his own time. One example which Averroes brings up is that God should not be said to be the cause of good and evil (A 30.26). God is wholly good, and evil ought to be attributed only to other causes, for example to demons or Iblis. However, this also creates certain problems: a guardian believing in the existence of such supernatural beings will be soft-hearted and timorous. It is therefore advisable to trace evil to matter, darkness or privation – Strauss believes that this means, for Averroes, teaching “omnipotence” is not a part of the education of the best city (SNA 10.22). This point is of particular importance because according to Strauss, faith in revelation stands or falls with the belief in divine omnipotence and it is because of the incompatibility of belief in
divine omnipotence and philosophy that Strauss denies the possibility of philosophers believing in revelation. “There cannot be faith in God that is not faith in our being absolutely in the hands of God, and this means that is not faith in God’s omnipotence, and therefore in the possibility of miracles.” In fact, Strauss goes so far as to say that “all philosophers deny divine omnipotence.” In this regard, it seems that Strauss has found what he considered to be the major point of contention between philosophers and believers in Averroes’s Commentary, and in his view, Averroes has positioned himself squarely in the camp of philosophers.

The second point appears in Strauss’s comments on Averroes’s discussion of the Platonic doctrine of the noble lie. Averroes says in his own name that the multitude must be taught by imitation of the truth, but an imitation which is close to the truth; yet he makes Plato say more directly and in a less orthodox manner that the shari‘a teaches by fictitious stories, because “if the sharia represents true happiness by imaginary happiness and the first principles by political principles, the bringer of the sharia must use fictitious stories” (SNA 10–11.23). What is true of the shari‘a is also true of human rulers and especially philosopher-kings. Averroes tells us that lying does not befit God’s rulership (A 32.13–14), but he also adds that human rulers must lie to their subjects, because the multitude are incapable of knowing the truth. In other words, these untrue stories are designed to fill the gap between the knowledge of the philosopher-king and the vulgar. But if God is a ruler, Strauss observes, “the distance between God and the most intelligent human beings is infinitely greater than the distance between the most intelligent human rulers and their human subjects.” Therefore, the divine ruler is as much in need of fictitious stories as the human ruler and shari‘a must contain untrue stories appropriate for the vulgar. As Strauss puts it, “if God is a ruler, he must lie—or if he does not lie he is not a ruler” (SNA 11.24). These ambiguous remarks seem to refer to one of the most important aspects of Strauss’s thought: the argument of natural theology. This argument

occupies a decisive place in Strauss’s engagement with the claims of revelation. At its most basic level, the argument of natural theology aims to refute the claims of revelation through demonstrating the impossibility of revelation. In order to do so, Strauss begins with the concept of a god as the most perfect being. This most perfect being, as it is known from experience, proves to be the wise man, the philosopher. According to Strauss, this view of man gives us an indirect access to the most perfect being simply. In other words, one begins by the most perfect human being and develops an analogy which acts as the instrument of evaluating the claims of revealed religion. For instance, if the most perfect human being is characterized by his self-sufficiency, a god must also be a self-sufficient being who consequently would not be dependent on or concerned with men’s worshipping him, in the same way that the wise man would not care for the praise and approval of others. In these notes also, it seems that Strauss is referring to such an analogy at work in Averroes’s Commentary. Although he does not develop the idea in detail, it seems that according to Strauss, Averroes draws our attention to the fact that the complete truthfulness of God is incompatible with the wisdom expected from a perfect being as it is reflected in the recourse of the philosopher to the noble lie in his dealing with vulgar.


Cf. “So in other words, love is based on need. Yes, that is the axiom underlying both Plato and Aristotle. Love is based on need. Therefore a being which has no need cannot love. That is the great difference between Plato and Aristotle on the one hand, and the Bible, that the Bible recognizes a kind of love which comes from abundance and not from need.” Strauss, 1959 Course on Plato’s Laws, 295 (Session 11, February 19, 1959).

See also the following remark: “The first principle and the second principles (i.e., God and the angels) must be represented by their analogues in the political principles [i.e., as rulers issuing commands]” (SNA 9.21; square brackets are in the original).
While the first and second points, as they appear in Strauss’s notes, seem to point in the direction of a rejection of the claims of revelation by Averroes, the third point seems to point in the opposite direction. Before turning to Plato’s *Republic*, Averroes prefaces his work with an introduction in which the subject of the book is discussed. According to Averroes, the practical science the *Commentary* deals with is divided into two parts: scientific and practical. The first part is found in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, while the second half is discussed in Aristotle’s *Politics* as well as in Plato’s *Republic*. Averroes claims that because Aristotle’s *Politics* is not yet available to him, he intends to dedicate his summary only to the second part of the practical science as far as it is presented in Plato’s *Republic*. But to prepare the reader for his discussion of the second part of the practical science, Averroes also intends to give a summary of the first part of it, on which the second part is founded. However, in the survey of the first part, which we expect to be wholly based on Aristotle’s *Ethics*, Strauss writes, Averroes “uses, and even explicitly refers to Plato’s *Republic*”; in fact, in this summary of the first part Aristotle is not even mentioned (A 22.27, 23.31; SNA 3.9). Strauss claims that, contrary to the impression Averroes gives at first, for Averroes “the *Republic* contains the two parts of practical science.” This is particularly important because in this part of the book, Averroes does not even pretend to be only a commentator of some Greek book, but rather a transmitter of what he believes to be the truth about practical science. Consequently, he identifies himself with the teaching of the *Republic* as whole. This must be taken into account when later on Averroes gives us the impression of being a ‘mere epitomist’ because, Strauss writes, a complete adherence to the teaching of the *Republic* “would imply a complete break with Islam” (SNA 3.9). One is here forced to ask: in view of the many un-Islamic points that Strauss observes in *Commentary*, does Strauss think that Averroes has broken with Islam? The first and the second points seem to confirm this claim. However, there is a third point in Strauss’s notes whose significance is not easy to establish. Commenting on a passage in which Averroes divides the Islamic sharī‘a into divine and human parts (A 26.16–19), Strauss writes that according to Averroes, the truly divine part of the sharī‘a is not found in Plato: “only the lower part of the divine law is covered by the *Republic*. “ In this passage, Averroes implies that the truly divine part of the sharī‘a, unlike the part which resembles the human laws, does not lead men toward truth by speeches or compulsion, but rather by other methods. Strauss suspects that “the specifically divine ways leading men to God are not speech and war but silence and peaceful
action.” Strauss continues his comments by observing that “practical science (i.e., philosophy) is perhaps not able to understand those parts of the divine law which have no analogy in human law” (SNA 5.12). Strauss’s meaning here is not entirely clear: When referring to “silence” is he pointing toward mysticism and the supra-rational? Does he mean that Averroes believed in the possibility of the supra-rational and that he asserted philosophy per se is incapable of addressing the supernatural? If this is Strauss’s meaning, he seems to be pointing to the reason-revelation impasse by saying that for Averroes, the truly divine part of the sharī‘a is outside the reach of Plato or even philosophy. But it is also possible that Strauss means that only theoretical philosophy is the appropriate branch of philosophy for addressing the nonpractical questions. In other words, Strauss attributes to Averroes the idea that only theoretical philosophy, in contradistinction to practical philosophy, is capable of dealing with (and perhaps refuting) the fundamental claims of revealed religions (see SNA 2.7) – but why then does Strauss equate “practical science” with the whole of philosophy in his notes? Unfortunately, based on Strauss’s remarks, it is not possible to conclude what his last word is, but it is nonetheless important to keep these points in mind while reading his notes on Averroes’s view of revelation and reason.

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66 See also: “Aristotle himself admits that there is something higher than reason or logos or ratio and he calls that nous, intellectus, the understanding, as distinguished from reason. Now, could there not be an intellect, a mental perception, without logos, without reason, a mental perception which, as it were, shatters all logos and all nomos or law? Then, from this point of view, the perfection of man would not consist in any activity, in any work, as Aristotle puts it, but in a certain suffering, in a certain way of being affected: pathos as distinguished from [praxis?], in an experience of the principle, of the [inaudible]. So from this point of view the highest to which man can raise cannot be achieved by an ascent, by a methodic ascent from the primary seeing to the principles but, as it were, a sudden interruption, a sudden appearance of – a sudden presence or a sudden call: nous without logos. Now this – what I try to describe – is generally known by the name of mysticism, but in a wide sense where it also would include the Biblical revelations, something which transcends the work of the logos.” “One can say this—that is, I believe true of Plato and Aristotle in the same way as a whole—no nous, intelligence, without logos and no logos without nous. These go together .... Nous without logos is mysticism.” Leo Strauss, 1963 Spring Course on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics Offered at the University of Chicago (Chicago, 1963), Session 3, April 9, 1963 and Session 15, June 6, 1963. See also Strauss, Gesammelte Schriften. Band 3, 701 (Letter to Gershom Scholem on August 2, 1933). See also this curious statement: “[m]ysticism is one form in which philosophy can appear” in Strauss, On Tyranny, 275 (Letter to Alexander Kojève on April 22, 1957) and also Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing, 1952, 111n46. Can one speak of a specific Straussian doubt about the religious character of Islamic mysticism?