

Book Reviews

Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, trans. Marcus Brainard. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. xxi + 183 pp. ISBN 0-521-85647-7 (hbk).

Leo Strauss has become the recipient of numerous begrudging acknowledgments in high-brow media outlets, where he is often spotted lurking behind discussions about American foreign policy and blamed for providing the intellectual foundations of neo-conservatism. This is ironic, because, although he almost single-handedly restored political philosophy to the centre of modern intellectual debates, he was not a politically active scholar. Indeed, to read him is to breathe some of the fresh air of ancient Greece, when ideas were alive and words were weighty with meaning. Nonetheless, many liberal academicians think they can blithely ignore Strauss simply due to his association with neo-conservatism. A further irony is that Strauss, by arguing that the persecution of philosophers leads them to hide their truest thought, can be blamed for planting the seed for the kind of conspiratorial reading that has marginalized his own work. Heinrich Meier is one of the most thoughtful and insightful readers of Strauss, so he can hardly be accused of trying to limit Strauss's influence by attributing to him a secret political agenda. Yet this is the net affect of the interpretive strategy Meier uses in his newest book.

Meier, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Munich and the editor of Strauss's *Gesammelte Schriften*, first came to the attention of American scholars with a brilliant book on what he called "the hidden dialogue" between Strauss and Carl Schmitt, the controversial German political theorist who inaugurated the modern debate over the status of "political theology." Meier then proceeded to divide this dialogue into its two parts, with a book on Schmitt and now a book on Strauss. Strauss was not as interested in Schmitt as Meier is interested in drawing Strauss and Schmitt closer together. Schmitt's political agenda was as clear as Strauss's (if he had one) is obscure. For Schmitt, the friend-enemy distinction is the unmovable foundation of political order. Strauss had a political understanding of philosophy only because he knew that independent inquiry required cunning political defence. Part of Strauss's cunning, according to Meier, was his public treatment of religion. In Meier's interpretation, Strauss thought religion was the enemy of philosophy. Thus, Meier can be thought of as developing a Schmittian reading of Strauss. Does this make Meier a friend or an enemy of Strauss? And if Meier is a friend, does Strauss need his many enemies?

Meier also could be thought of as developing a Straussian reading of Strauss, because Strauss is as well known for his own pivotal distinction as Schmitt is for his. Rather than the friend-enemy construct, Strauss emphasized the distinction between exoteric and esoteric philosophical writing. This has sometimes been interpreted to mean that the greatest philosophers divided their thought into two

sets of ideas, one amenable to the wider public and the other set aside for the elite few. Strauss is not so clumsy. In his superbly elegant manner, he connects this distinction to literary style rather than the manipulation of ideas. Esotericism is an inherent aspect of philosophy because, according to Strauss, true philosophy has a necessarily unstable relationship to political and social order. How far Strauss wanted to push this distinction is not always clear, since it has the potential to undermine the stable meaning of philosophical texts.

Meier, however, is clear in wanting to push the exoteric–esoteric distinction as far as he can. His Straussian reading of Strauss does not simply draw a straight line from the master to his neo-conservative disciples, but it comes pretty close. Meier first connects Strauss to the political agenda of battling religion. He then connects him to the political act of founding a philosophical school. Let me take these points one at a time, while raising the question of whether Strauss was as esoteric (and political) as Meier thinks.

Meier argues that Strauss was able to revive political philosophy only by setting out to do battle against every kind of religiously inspired political myth. Strauss, says Meier, wanted to live philosophically, not just think like a philosopher, and he believed that the justification of the philosophical life necessarily put it into conflict with (every) religion. If Strauss sometimes seems to be paying religion a complement by taking it so seriously, Meier observes, it is because he was all too aware of the danger posed by the philosophical act to any set of beliefs grounded in an ultimately unquestionable source of authority. Strauss not only wrote about esotericism, he lived it, in the sense of being very guarded in the way he formulated the debate between reason and revelation.

Much of Meier's analysis of Strauss rings true, even if he portrays Strauss as more combative toward religion than he actually was. But of course, once the hermeneutical leverage of esotericism is employed, Meier can argue that any apparent sympathy for religion was merely a rhetorical strategy made necessary by Strauss's political situation. To his credit, Meier does not make that argument explicit, though it lurks just beneath the surface of his text. (By making Meier's esoteric argument explicit, of course, I can be accused of developing a Straussian interpretation of Meier.)

Strauss certainly strove to reestablish the stringency of Socratic questioning, and he recognized that this vocation committed him to a rigorous way of life. For that reason, he came to dwell on the conditions that make such thinking possible. Those conditions, for Strauss, were not limited to the realm of epistemology. In fact, it was his recognition that the conditions of thought demand the interrogation of the realm of politics that led him to the ancients and thereafter left him with a deep distaste for the post-Kantian penchant for all things subjective. Contrary to Meier, I would suggest that Strauss sought to combat modern liberalism more than ancient faiths. Thinking, which is the task of philosophy, is an intrinsically good activity, argued Strauss, and thus it requires freedom and cultivates virtue. Modern liberal democracies promise freedom but do little to promote virtue. The philosopher, therefore, is only a reluctant friend of democracy. This line of analysis renders Strauss a paradox to the modern mind: his task of asking the

eternal questions led him to recover the fundamentals of political philosophy—but he did so without giving much value to political practices as such.

For all of his suspicion of politics, some of Strauss's best students went on to careers in government. Meier makes the case that Strauss's influence might someday be felt more in the area of religion than politics. Strauss's understanding of the singularity of the philosophical task gave him a bracingly realistic view of politics, but for Meier, his contribution to a renewed vigour in defence of political realism should not obscure the more fundamental conflict that his recovery of political philosophy unearthed. He was a man of ideas, and his pursuit of the truth led him to a lifelong meditation on the relationship between reason and revelation. To what extent the political justification of rational inquiry precludes the role of religious myth in legitimating social order is the central question of Strauss's legacy. More than any other contemporary scholar, Heinrich Meier has kept this question of the relationship between reason and revelation in the foreground of research on Strauss.

Meier brings a sense of drama to his reading of Strauss by depicting his battle with religion as a dispute so fundamental that it rises to the level of Schmitt's distinction between friends and enemies. That is, Meier thinks that for Strauss, the outcome of this dispute is determinative of the fate of philosophy. Is there any evidence of this interpretation of Strauss? To answer that challenge, Meier makes available for the first time two lectures by Strauss. The first, "The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy," which dates from April 1940, offers perhaps the fullest exposition by Strauss of the concept of political theology. The second, "Reason and Revelation," was originally given at Hartford Theological Seminary in 1948. This lecture is in the form of notes; it sketches and hints at arguments the reader is left to expand to a final form. It would be immensely rewarding to know more about the context of this lecture—who these theologians were and how they responded to Strauss—if Meier's esoteric interpretation of Strauss's thought on religion is to be taken seriously. Was Strauss hiding something from the good theologians of Hartford? These two appendixes are certainly valuable, but it is questionable whether they are significant enough to rejuvenate a renewed discussion of Strauss's relationship to religion. If Strauss had thought these documents were so important, he surely would have incorporated them into his many published writings.

Like all fundamental questions, Strauss sets up a productive if wobbly circle that keeps rolling along, even as it makes no real progress toward a resolution. Meier points out that Strauss expends an equal amount of energy arguing for the necessity of refuting revelation while at the same time refusing to clarify how such an attempt should be made. According to Meier's esoteric interpretation of Strauss, that hesitancy was based on a strategic decision. After all, why should Strauss try to demolish religion when people of faith were among his greatest allies in his battle with modern liberalism? According to the plain meaning of Strauss's work, however, that hesitancy was a byproduct of Strauss's humility in the face of revelation. Philosophers, Strauss often insisted, could never explain away the power of religion.

Meier demurs. He thinks that “The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy” is the missing piece in Strauss’s critique of religion. In this lecture, Strauss efficiently presents the story of the Enlightenment’s prejudice against prejudice and posits the ancient Greeks as providing an avenue of escape from modern thought’s wavering between a theological commitment to certainty and a nihilistic abandonment to relativism. Along the way he briefly discusses Karl Barth as an example of the return to authority that does not free itself from the Enlightenment distrust of religion. Strauss’s argument against religion, such as it is, amounts to a consideration of the failure of the greatest twentieth-century theologian to save revelation from the ravages of history. This is a negative argument at best, of course.

In “Reason and Revelation” Strauss gives historicism sufficient credit to admit that philosophical truths cannot be directly known today. Historicism argues that we can think about how philosophers thought in the past, but we are forced by our historical consciousness to contextualize every thought, including every thought philosophers in the past have already thought. We cannot, therefore, think just for its own sake in the way that the Greeks did. Strauss accepts historicism as a predicament but not as a permanent state to which modern thinkers should simply surrender. For Strauss, historicism digs a cave beneath Plato’s cave, and thereafter it is caves all the way down. That is, once the meaning of philosophy is located in historical context, then every attempt to dig out of the cave of ignorance leaves nothing but a deeper hole. Historicists think the truth can be found by digging to the bottom of things, when they should be looking up at the clear (Greek) light of conceptual reasoning instead.

Remember Strauss’s insistence in “The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy” that the ancient Greeks are the only clear alternative to the Enlightenment. In “Reason and Revelation” he admits that our historical consciousness bans us from entering fully into their milieu. It is this predicament that makes the relationship between reason and revelation so important to Strauss. Philosophy needs revelation as its most worthwhile opponent. Without this opposition, philosophers can never apprehend the depths of the questioning to which they are called. Yet here again Strauss posits an impasse. In order to recover true philosophy, philosophers must refute revelation, but that task is beyond their reach! The life of questioning is only reasonable if theologians are wrong, because theologians, for Strauss, think they hear a final and comprehensive answer that brings questioning to a premature end. At the sketchy end of the “Reason and Revelation” lecture notes, Strauss raises the connection between the moral law and the “absolute superiority of the ancestors” (166), which seems to present a projection theory of religion, but how far he went in this Feuerbachian direction in order to account for the origins of faith is lost in the halls of Hartford Seminary. I cannot imagine that Strauss would have seriously considered Feuerbach the key to understanding faith, which might be why these lectures were never polished into a publishable form.

Correlated to Strauss’s challenge to philosophers is a provocation to theologians. Theologians should not try to pretend that they are philosophers. That

is, theologians should answer to their founding myth, rather than pursue a life of questioning, since questioning, Strauss thinks, will dissolve their confidence in their myth. Strauss in effect argues that philosophers know what theologians should do better than theologians themselves, because philosophers know that myth is impossible to reconcile with reason. But he can corral theology only if he can demonstrate that revelation is not the source and goal of all questioning, in which case theology is the answer to the inherent limitations of philosophy.

So what was Strauss to do in his dual (but doomed) battle against historicism and revelation? This is where Meier, in a circumspect and guarded manner, makes an argument in the guise of a throw-away comment that actually gets at the basis of his interpretation of Strauss. Meier makes this intriguing comment in his preface. He writes that “the sole political act of consequence that Strauss brought himself to launch was to found a school, which the offer of a professorship in political philosophy at the University of Chicago in 1949 provided him the opportunity to do” (xvii–xviii). This wry comment is deeply problematic because it suggests that Strauss thought his brand of pure thinking could not flourish, or even survive, without some kind of institutional support, and that this support would not stain the purity of his thought. Meier speculates that Strauss knew the risk he was running by entering into the political fray. The risk Meier takes is in portraying Strauss as representing his enemies’ worst suspicions. That is, Meier thinks that Strauss really was an esoteric thinker who passed along to his disciples an oral tradition that required a fundamental agreement on a common agenda. Schools, after all, are political organizations of a peculiar sort. Members of a school will necessarily need to think that they have access to a master’s thought that bypasses the accounts that are generally accessible to the public. Their exclusivity leads any school to take the straight path of dogma through the impenetrable thicket of endless questioning.

Strauss, in my interpretation, thought that philosophical hands had to be politically clean. He would never have held up an intellectual school as a kind of counter-polis to the power of the state. Nevertheless, it could be that the political authorities will always interpret philosophical schools as a social threat. Of course, all of this is wishful thinking; the dynamics of capitalism and the levelling effects of democracy render philosophy safe for the masses. Where Strauss’s school is a threat is not in the arena of politics. The apprehensive rush in some quarters of the academy to tar Strauss’s “school” with the brush of reactionary politics is evidence that philosophical schools always pose a threat to the liberal status quo, which historicizes the classics while postponing fundamental moral problems through the means of procedural debate.

The only politics that Strauss practised, in my view, was the act of demarcating the boundaries of political philosophy. Meier gives a Schmittian spin to this question by framing it in terms of philosophy and enmity. Philosophy, Meier argues, is not politically innocent. Today, philosophers have a false sense of security, because they operate as employees of universities and therefore are bound to (and protected by) its ethos. True philosophy can never be so simply domesticated. “As a way of life,” Meier writes, echoing Strauss, “philosophy is in itself an

answer to the question of what is right. It knows friendship and enmity. It is therefore—whether it accounts to itself for such or not—fundamentally in need of political defense” (98). The will to probity, as Meier puts it, conflicts with the will to security, but for the sake of the latter, the philosopher will be wise to act very cautiously in defending the former. Nonetheless, caution does not mean retreat. Philosophy must be firm in taking on the task of influencing the society in which the philosopher lives. Consequently, philosophy’s rational self-justification will necessarily be a political act. Here is where, perhaps, Strauss was most influenced by Carl Schmitt: philosophy begins with a decision that cannot itself be justified by the rational procedures this decision calls forth. For Strauss, the attempt to ground philosophy in arguments about epistemological certainty merely mirrors the manoeuvring of religion, and what works for religion cannot possibly work for philosophy.

Meier demonstrates that in his quest to understand the nature of thinking, Strauss was involved in a dialogue with Heidegger that was more fundamental and fascinating than is usually thought. For Strauss, the philosophical act is groundless, which resonates with Heidegger’s own attempt to recover the Greeks as well as his phenomenology of temporality. Meier even suggests that Strauss may have been sympathetic with Heidegger’s substitution of death for God (as the horizon of an atheistic philosophy), although this goes against the grain of Strauss’s most trenchant criticisms of Heidegger. Strauss always thought that Heidegger confused philosophy with theology by framing philosophy with an existential rhetoric that barely conceals its genealogy in secularized Protestant theology. If Meier is right, however, then Strauss’s own attempt to return to the Greeks is hardly free of theological baggage. Indeed, Strauss’s decisionism (just like Schmitt’s) carries with it something of a theological voluntarism, just as his esotericism reflects something of Gnosticism. There is a real question, then, whether Strauss’s political philosophy ever escapes the logic of a political theology. This question is fundamentally important because if Strauss is a political theologian in the last analysis, then not only should Strauss be read from a Schmittian perspective, but Strauss’s goal of separating philosophy from theology lies in ruins.

For better or worse, ancient philosophy has become entangled with the history of Christian theology. For Strauss, the claim that truth has been revealed puts an absolute limit on the ambition of the unaided intellect. Strauss was somewhat indifferent to the content of revelation; it is the declaration that revelation has occurred that philosophy must reject. Strauss sometimes speaks as if the conflict between reason and faith is a pragmatic one, because philosophy simply needs this alternative to give itself a clear identity. Philosophy, the epitome of intellectual freedom, needs to bind itself to a fictitious enemy of its own creation in order to distil its inner essence! At other times, Strauss seems to posit an endless dialectic between philosophy and theology. He also connects this conflict with the origins of historicism, in that the triumph of Christianity forced philosophers to recover their original task by drudging through the muddle of history. What Strauss does not—indeed, could not—consider is that theological arguments about God sanctify, preserve and enrich the infinite search for truth that was inaugurated on Greek soil.

Strauss challenges philosophers to take seriously revelation and politics as well as the connection between them with regard to philosophy's own stake in defining itself. Theologians should try to meet Strauss's provocation by demonstrating how theology is the true philosophy and salvation is the culmination of contemplation. The shape of this argument would be fairly simple. Who today can seriously say that philosophy is a way of life (and not an academic career)? To Strauss's credit, he insists that true philosophy is more than a job. This suggests to me that the return to Socrates is not possible except as an imitation of the Christianity that humbled philosophy by bringing it to its knees before God. If philosophy does not acknowledge its opponent, then it will lose its strength and vigor and, as a result, become little more than an instrumentalized or politicized account of reason. If it does acknowledge the religious way of life, then it will never achieve the pure thought it seeks, because it will always compare unfavourably with the greater resources for promoting nobility and sacrifice to be found in religious devotion. Perhaps this is why the path of wisdom for Strauss was, in the end, essentially private, or at least constrained within a very small group of friends. Any school of philosophy is bound to become something like a church, but when that happens, philosophy becomes the very thing it most needs to question.

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James Calvin Davis, *The Moral Theology of Roger Williams: Christian Conviction and Public Ethics*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004. 175 pp. \$24.95. ISBN 0664227708 (hbk).

James Calvin Davis's recent book is an outstanding and much-needed contribution to the scholarly corpus dedicated to Roger Williams. As I read it, Davis's book has three major aims. First, he seeks to recover Williams as a Puritan theologian. Davis emphasizes that Williams's well-known positions regarding freedom of conscience and separation of church and state were, in fact, the product of his theological commitments. He notes how Williams has often been misinterpreted as a thinker whose political contributions have been developed independently of his theology. Williams has been identified as a proto-Jeffersonian democrat and a religious agnostic/relativist by American historians. One historian has gone so far to refer to Williams as the "Tom Paine of the seventeenth century" (138). Davis notes that these descriptions have led to the unfortunate neglect of Williams's importance as an early American moral theologian. However, as Davis demonstrates, Williams was very much at home in the Puritan tradition, using the resources of the tradition to cast innovative arguments for freedom of conscience. Williams's distinctive reworking of his Puritan heritage revealed his theological ingenuity and enabled him to debate effectively his Puritan adversaries on their own turf.