"Exile" as a Theologico-Political Principle in Leo Strauss's Jewish Thought

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Abstract

I consider the recent attempt by Professor Eugene Sheppard to follow the development of Strauss's thought within the parameters of Strauss's biographical circumstance as a German-Jewish "exile." I begin by mentioning two key points in Strauss's critique of historicism. I then sketch Sheppard's approach to Strauss in a preliminary way so as to bring out something of its historicist character. After that, I test the soundness of Sheppard's approach by looking at a statement of Strauss's on "exile" which is found in his most autobiographical writing. Since this statement is only a small part of Strauss's larger argument in that writing, I comment on it in terms of its place in his argument as a whole. My purpose in doing so is to discover whether Strauss's statement when understood in its own terms warrants being placed within Sheppard's historicist parameters.

Keywords: exile; historicism; political philosophy; Spinoza; Zionism

Introduction

A few intellectual historians have recently tried their hand at reversing the tables on the twentieth-century political philosopher and Jewish thinker Leo Strauss (1899–1973). What draws their attention and provokes their opposition is, among other things, Strauss's elaborate critique of historicism (e.g., Strauss 1953, 9–34; 1959, 25–27, 56–77).[1] Instead of facing Strauss's critique directly, however, the historians try to merge it with the overall drift of his thought as they understand it – that is to say, in an avowedly historicist manner (Myers 2003, 106–129; Sheppard 2007, 5, 121; Aschheim 2007, 102). Unfortunately, they thereby end up making misleading or downright counterfactual statements about Strauss.

To illustrate the foregoing and perhaps offer a corrective, I plan to consider the recent attempt by Professor Eugene Sheppard to follow the development of Strauss's thought within the parameters of Strauss's biographical circumstance as a German-Jewish "exile" (Sheppard 2007). I begin by mentioning two key points in Strauss's critique of historicism. I then sketch Sheppard's approach to Strauss in a preliminary way so as to bring out

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1   There is also the contemporary American "neoconservatism" that Strauss is said to have inspired; see, e.g., Sheppard 2007, 1–2. For fuller (and more articulate) treatments of Strauss on political philosophy and American constitutional democracy, see Pangle 2006, Smith 2006, 156–201, and Zuckert 2008.

something of its historicist character.[2] After that, I test the soundness of Sheppard's approach by looking at a statement of Strauss's on "exile" (*galut* in Hebrew), which is found in his most autobiographical writing (Strauss 1965, 6). Since this statement is only a small part of Strauss's larger argument in that writing, I comment on it in terms of its place in his argument as a whole. My purpose in doing so is to discover whether Strauss's statement when understood in its own terms warrants being placed within Sheppard's historicist parameters. I find that it does not. I therefore conclude by pointing out how Strauss, having anticipated in principle the difficulty to which Sheppard's approach is exposed, also anticipates how to correct it.

Strauss's Critique of Historicism

Historicism – or historical relativism – amounts to the view that, historically speaking, any "philosophy" is to be understood, not in terms of the "trans-historical, trans-social, trans-moral, and trans-religious" insights a particular thinker understands himself to be aiming at (Strauss 1953, 89), but rather in terms of the passing political and cultural setting in which his thought occurs. Strauss has at least two criticisms of this view.

First, historicism is inherently self-contradictory (Strauss 1953, 24–25).[3] The historicist claims for himself a trans-historical insight – namely, the very impossibility of trans-historical insights. In that way, however, he rules out in advance, that is, unhistorically, the possibility that any of the historical figures he investigates may, as a matter of historical fact, have arrived at trans-historical insights that warrant consideration in their own, trans-historical terms. Admittedly, Strauss goes on to find this criticism inadequate, since historicism in its most radical version (namely, Martin Heidegger's)[4] holds that, owing to the impossibility of seeing beyond the horizon of one's own time, the basic philosophical riddles remain forever insoluble (Strauss 1953, 29, 35). The radical historicist, then, avoids gross self-contradiction by claiming that what discloses that insolubility is not philosophy so much as history itself, or more exactly the history of the historicist's own time. This disclosure, being essentially unpredictable and for all we know unrepeatable, is a unique and mysterious gift of unfathomable fate. In short, the historicist draws from the historical experience and/or intellectual trends of his own time the standards for interpreting the philosophers of the past. Strauss's criticism that historicism is self-contradictory thus gives way to the more basic criticism that it is inherently parochial or idiosyncratic.

Second, historicism has a dubious historical pedigree (Strauss 1953, 11–19, 26–31). According to Strauss, historicism originated as a scholarly overreaction to the social and political upheaval caused by the French Revolution. It differs, then, from the mere conventionalism, or moral relativism, of the ancient sophists (who, unlike modern historicists, did not deny the possibility of philosophy). Historicism's immediate historical back-

2 Sheppard acknowledges scholarly debts to both Myers and Aschheim (Sheppard 2007, ix, 84, 139n8, 144n74, 144n80, 164n14, 174n48; cf. Myers 2003, 213n43).
3 This paragraph and the next have been adapted from Yaffe 2008, 115–17.
4 Strauss limits himself here to analyzing Heidegger's argument without so much as mentioning Heidegger's name. If we consider this striking rhetorical fact together with the further fact that Strauss does not provide a once-and-for-all refutation of radical historicism, but limits himself to investigating its principles at some length, we may say that his intent is rather to awaken a presumption in favor of (non-historicist) philosophy – by showing ad oculos that it is possible to separate the principles of an argument from its historical setting, at least in the case of Heidegger.

drop is the historiography of those 19th historians who, as conservatives, sought to re-dress the damage done from the promulgation of abstract and universal principles con-cerning natural right which underwrote the Revolution, by emphasizing instead the uni-queness of the various epochs of human history and the irreducibility of human life to such principles. Strauss suggests that those historians were hoping that history itself, or what would come to be called the "experience of history," could generate alternative norms for understanding human life; but this did not happen, and, conservatives though they were (or that they were), they ended up sharing the same assumptions as their revo-lutionary predecessors and bequeathing them to subsequent historicists. Strauss spells out those assumptions as follows:

"It seems to us that what is called the "experience of history" is a bird's-eye view of the history of thought, as that history came to be seen under the combined influence of the belief in necessary progress (or in the impossibility of returning to the thought of the past) and of the belief in the supreme value of diversity or uniqueness (or of the equal right of all epochs or civilizations)." (Strauss 1953, 22; Kennington 1991, 233–34)

In other words, the aforementioned school of historians, like the revolutionaries who preceded and the historicists who followed, assumed uncritically the (dubious) abstract and universal principles supplied by the philosophical founders of modern Enlightenment – men like Descartes, Hobbes and Locke (Strauss 1937, lxiii-lxiv; 1953, 165–251) – con-cerning the irreversibility of historical progress and the unassailability of human indivi-duality. Stated most succinctly: historicism according to Strauss accepts dogmatically the premises of modern individualism bestowed by the Enlightenment.

As we shall see in passing, Sheppard's approach to Strauss is unfortunately exposed to both these criticisms.

Sheppard's Historicist Methodology

Sheppard's aim is, in the words of the subtitle to his book, to trace "the making of [Strauss as] a political philosopher." He divides Strauss's intellectual development into four stages (Sheppard 2007, 7): Strauss's youthful Zionist and other Jewish writings dur-ing his Weimar Republic years (1921–1932); the philosophical reorientation during his years of as a political refugee in France and England (1932–1937); the studies of "perse-cution and the art of writing" (in his eventual book by that name; Strauss 1952) and re-lated topics during his immigrant years in New York (1938–1948); and "his mature spec-ulations and reassessments of his intellectual journey and on the Jewish question in par-ticular" during his Chicago years (from 1948 on). At each of these stages, Sheppard discerns a "sense of unease or not-being-at-home" in Strauss's writings. On the premise that this sense is expressed in an increasingly complex way during the course of Strauss's development, Sheppard infers that the notion of "exile" is at the heart of Strauss's "intel-lectual personality" (Sheppard 2007, 4, 7).

Now it is enough for me to have outlined Sheppard's approach to Strauss in the most general way in order to bring out the following methodological point. To give direction to his four-stage intellectual biography, Sheppard appeals to a number of pre-set notions concerning Strauss's mature thought. Thus in the Introduction to his book, during a brief assessment of Heinrich Meier's Strauss scholarship, he speaks of "the dogmatism of Strauss's mature work," with its "overdeveloped binary oppositions ... such as Jerusalem

and Athens, Reason and Revelation, Ancients and Moderns" (Sheppard 2007, 3–4).[5] In a subsequent statement concerning the theme of his book, he describes Strauss's work as having "developed into an enigmatic orthodoxy" – by which he means "all of the pieces that define the intellectual movement known as Straussianism" (Sheppard 2007, 4).[6] And when summarizing what he takes to be the overall tendency of Strauss's thought, he asserts that "Strauss regarded exile as the natural condition of all political societies" and that "exile" was "the subject with which Strauss held the deepest and most sustained engagement of his career" (2007, 7–8). Since each of these claims occurs in Sheppard's Introduction, it is perhaps not surprising that none of them is actually documented or explained there. Nor, however, do I find adequate documentation or explanation for them elsewhere in his book. But I must leave it to the rest of my argument to indicate that none of those claims is warranted on the basis of what Strauss himself actually says. My point here is that, in his method as historian, Sheppard starts out with and holds to a (dubious) set of prior notions concerning Strauss – or, more exactly, "Straussianism" – which is, strictly speaking, independent of the immediate evidence to which he then looks to mirror those notions. In this way, Sheppard's approach to his subject illustrates what I have said Strauss says about the parochial or idiosyncratic character of historicism.

Strauss's Quasi-Autobiographical Statement on "Exile"

In a Preface to the English translation of his Spinoza's Critique of Religion (Strauss 1930; 1965, 1–31), Strauss says the following about "exile" (galut) as understood by modern Zionism:

"The establishment of the state of Israel is the most profound modification of the Galut which has occurred, but it is not the end of the Galut. Finite, relative problems can be solved; infinite, absolute problems cannot be solved. In other words, human beings will never create a society, which is free from contradictions. From every point of view it looks as if the Jewish people were the chosen people, at least in the sense that the Jewish problem is the most manifest symbol of the human problem [insofar] as [it is] a social or political problem." (Strauss 1965, 6)[7]

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5 For a more informative account of these "oppositions" etc., see my remarks on Meier 2006 (Yaffe 2007, 659–66).

6 Nathan Tarcov points out how Strauss himself differentiates his own thought from so-called "Straussianism," understood (as Sheppard also appears to understand it) as "the error and danger of applying classical political philosophy as the solution to modern political problems" (Tarcov 1991, 9). Tarcov quotes inter alia Strauss 1964, 11: "We cannot reasonably expect that a fresh understanding of classical political philosophy will supply us with recipes for today's use. For the relative success of modern political philosophy has brought into being a kind of society wholly unknown to the classics, a kind of society to which the classical principles as stated and elaborated by the classics are not immediately applicable. Only we living today can possibly find a solution to the problems of today. But an adequate understanding of the principles as elaborated by the classics may be the indispensable starting point for an adequate analysis, to be achieved by us, of present-day society in its peculiar character, and for the wise application, to be achieved by us, of these principles to our tasks."

7 These sentences are also found in Strauss's republished version of the Preface (Strauss 1968, 230), which contains some minor editorial changes (only), including the addition of the words I have put in square brackets, as well as a splitting up of several paragraphs of the earlier version such that the republished version has 54 paragraphs instead of the original forty-two. Sheppard misdescribes the republished ver-

This statement occurs at an important juncture in Strauss's Preface. As Strauss says in a private letter, his Preface aims "to bridge the gap between 1930 Germany [the publication date of the German original of his Spinoza book] and 1962 U.S.A." (to Alexandre Kojève, May 29, 1962; Strauss 1991, 309). The Preface is thus a deep-backgrounder on the theological and political issues animating Strauss's Jugendschrift and, at the same time, an author's retrospective designed to bring out what Strauss now sees as the philosophical shortcoming of its overall argument.

Broadly speaking, Strauss's Preface covers three topics, with an added conclusion. Approximately the first quarter of the Preface recalls the precarious situation of the Jews in Weimar Germany and considers the theologico-political options readily available to them then and there – including "individual assimilation, political liberalism, communism, fascism, political Zionism, cultural Zionism, religious Zionism, and the personal return to Orthodoxy" (Sheppard 2007, 119; Strauss 1965, 1–7). The rest of the first half or so of the Preface considers, as a further option, the Jewish neo-orthodoxy underwritten by the "new thinking" of Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber, which Strauss also compares with Heidegger's atheist version of the "new thinking" (Strauss 1965, 7–15).[8] The Preface's second half then revisits the option of the personal return to traditional Jewish orthodoxy, by asking whether this option would be "compatible with sheer consistency or intellectual probity," given the attack on orthodoxy by Spinoza – "the greatest man of Jewish origin who had openly denied the truth of Judaism and had ceased to belong to the Jewish people without becoming a Christian" – along with the counterattack on Spinoza by Hermann Cohen – "a Jew of rare dedication, the faithful guide, defender and warner of German Jewry, and at the same time, to say the least, the one who by far surpassed in spiritual power all the other German professors of philosophy of his generation" (Strauss 1965, 15, with 15−29). Finally, the Preface's last three paragraphs connect what Strauss now sees as the philosophical shortcoming of his Spinoza book with (his own) "intellectual probity" (Strauss 1965, 28−31). This notion runs through the Preface like a scarlet thread (Strauss 1965, 7, 12, 15, 30). At any rate, the statement about "exile" which I have quoted above is found toward the end of the first quarter of the Preface and is the pivot of Strauss's critiques of political and cultural Zionism. These critiques are what lead him to consider, in contrast, the option of the personal return to orthodoxy, an option that Strauss keeps open throughout the remainder of the Preface.[9]

Strauss's critiques of political and cultural Zionism are as follows (Strauss 1965, 4–7).[10] The young Strauss, like a considerable minority of German-Jewish university students who were his contemporaries, first turned to political Zionism out of dissatisfac-

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sion as a "shortened ... posthumous edition" (Sheppard 2007, 176n4). In any case, I follow Sheppard in citing the earlier version.

8   Among other things, Strauss criticizes Buber for attributing what amounts to Heidegger's atheistic view of divine providence to the biblical prophets, and Rosenzweig for his deliberately idiosyncratic, "wholly individual" approach to reading the Torah (Strauss 1965, 10–13, 14–15; cf. Yaffe 1991, 35–38; 2007, 661–63; 2008, 119–22).

9   Strauss's Preface as a whole may therefore be described from a strictly philosophical point of view as an ongoing confrontation between Jewish orthodoxy and intellectual probity. The philosophical shortcoming that the mature Strauss sees in his earlier book has to do with its inadequate attention to intellectual probity, that is, its merely taking for granted that intellectual probity ought to be the basis for judging the merits and/or drawbacks of Jewish orthodoxy. More generally stated: Strauss's Preface is his philosophical confrontation with the intellectual probity of his youth. In the language of Plato's Socrates, it is Strauss's "second sailing" (Plato, Phaedo 99d).

10 The following four paragraphs have been adapted from Yaffe 1991, 33–35.

tion with the situation of the Jew in the modern German state. Most German Jews before Hitler, the mature Strauss recalls, assumed that the state was or ought to be liberal, that is to say, "neutral to the difference between non-Jews and Jews" (Strauss 1965, 4). In speaking of the "Jewish problem," they meant that the sufferings of the Jews owing to their millennial exile and persecutions could in principle be overcome by purely human means, namely, by religious tolerance as spelled out in the teachings of modern political liberalism. Yet the founders of political Zionism, Leon Pinsker in his Autoemancipation of 1892 and Theodor Herzl in his The Jews' State of 1896, saw otherwise. They pointed out that the non-Jewish German majority did not share the assumption that German Jews were their social, not just legal, equals: "Who belongs and who does not belong," Strauss quotes Herzl as saying, "is decided by the majority; it is a question of power" (ibid.). Pinsker, Herzl et al. did not abandon liberalism's understanding of the Jewish problem as a purely human problem, however. Instead, according to Strauss, they radicalized it. If Jews as Jews were denied more than bare legal equality with non-Jews in the modern liberal state, Jews as a nation could still win equality with all other nations by establishing their own state, one that would be equally modern, liberal and secular. Political Zionism thus concentrated its efforts on raising Jewish political consciousness in order to recover Jews' long lost political pride. The eventual result, the establishment of the modern state of Israel – which Strauss in retrospect calls "a blessing for all Jews everywhere regardless of whether they admit it or not" (Strauss 1965, 5) – he nevertheless found inadequately understood in political Zionism's own terms.

For one thing, as the young Strauss saw, political Zionism could not be effective all alone. It had to join with traditional Jewish hopes for a divinely authorized end to the Exile and a return to the land of Israel, which would come with the long-awaited arrival of a Messianic age. That political Zionism was too much bound up with the given emergency and had neglected to reconcile itself with Jews' traditional self-understanding as a nation, Strauss learned from the writings of Ahad Ha'am, the founder of political Zionism's rival movement, cultural Zionism (Herzberg 1959, 249–77). Cultural Zionism aimed to add historical perspective to what would otherwise be an empty exercise in power politics. It traced the so-called Jewish national mind or "culture" from its roots in the Jewish heritage. Yet here Strauss saw a further difficulty. Did not the Jewish heritage in its most authoritative layer understand itself to be a divine gift, based on revelation, rather than a "culture" or product of the autonomous human mind? If so, then in light of that heritage must not the claim of modern Zionism to have solved the "Jewish problem" appear not only blasphemous, but grossly overstated? Strauss remained receptive to cultural Zionism's argument that the state of Israel was the most important event in Jewish history since the completion of the Talmud, but drew the line at equating it with the arrival of the Messianic age. Rather – as he says in the passage I have quoted above – given that only finite or relative problems are humanly soluble whereas infinite or absolute problems remain insoluble, it follows that human beings, Jews included, will never create for themselves a contradiction-free society. To Strauss, the insolubility of the Jewish problem thus implies the humanly understandable truth of the traditional doctrine of the chosenness of the Jewish people – at least in the sense that the Jewish people is "the most manifest symbol of the human problem [insofar] as [it is] a social or political problem" (Strauss 1965, 6).

In addition, the insolubility of the Jewish problem taught Strauss something about the limitations as well as the virtues of liberalism. Liberalism, Strauss says, "stands or falls by the distinction between state and society," that is to say, between a public sphere that must be regulated by law and a private sphere that must not be regulated but only pro-

tected by law (ibid.). Still, liberalism's placing Judaism or any other religion within the private sphere does not wholly solve the problem at issue. To protect the private sphere from the intrusion of the law is not only to allow the private exercise of a given religion, Judaism included, but by the same token to allow private discrimination against that religion – and so in fact to foster private discrimination! No liberal state could try to solve the Jewish problem by making laws to protect against anti-Jewish discrimination, moreover, without destroying itself in the process by abolishing the distinction between public and private. Nor would abolishing that distinction solve the Jewish problem anyway, as Strauss observes in the case of the Soviet Union, whose anti-Jewish policies he finds dictated by the unprincipled expediency, which the Communist state both permits and encourages.

At any rate, for all its limitations, Strauss finds the liberal state to be preferable to the available alternatives, since it allows Jews to solve one aspect of the Jewish problem that is amenable to a purely human solution, namely, teshuvah, or return to the Jewish faith and the Jewish way of life. Here Strauss seems to have in mind the contemporary Jewish (or ex-Jewish) intellectual, whom he describes as "the Western individual who or whose parents severed the connection with the Jewish community in the expectation that he would thus become a normal member of a purely liberal or of a universal human society, and who is naturally perplexed when he finds no such society" (Strauss 1965, 7). Yet Strauss is forced to consider a philosophical objection that is likely be raised by such an individual, even if he admitted from a practical point of view that returning to Judaism would solve his "deepest problem" and satisfy "the most vital need:" Is not the return to the Jewish way of life impossible on the grounds that the Jewish faith has been refuted? In Strauss's expression: Is not such a return forbidden by "intellectual probity"? Strauss's immediate reply – a provisional reply, to be sure – is that a "vital need" may well induce someone "to probe [sic] whether what seems to be an impossibility is not in fact only a very great difficulty." In order to see whether the argument from intellectual probity is correct in claiming that the return to Judaism is impossible rather than just very difficult, then, Strauss goes on to examine (in the second quarter of his Preface) Rosenzweig's "new thinking" and (in the second half of his Preface) Spinoza's claim to have refuted the Jewish faith.

Now having said this much about the immediate context of Strauss's statement on "exile," let us look at what Sheppard says about it, so as to be able to consider afterwards whether Strauss's statement warrants what Sheppard says.

Sheppard on Strauss's Statement

According to Sheppard, Strauss's statement has a purely political point. It is to "promot[e] acceptance of the contradictions inherent in the liberal state" (Sheppard 2007, 127). Certainly Sheppard's claim here is consistent with his initial premise that everything Strauss says adds up to "the intellectual movement called Straussianism" (Sheppard 2007, 4). That is to say, here as there Sheppard identifies political philosophy as Strauss understands it with political ideology. But how does Sheppard then arrive at the particular ideological content of the Straussian statement in question? Here too, as in his Introduction, Sheppard spells out his premise in advance. Noting that Strauss's critiques of unsatisfactory solutions to the Jewish problem "appear" to culminate in a call for a return to Jewish orthodoxy (Sheppard 2007, 119), he nevertheless denies that Strauss's words should be taken at face value. Strauss's call for an unqualified return to orthodoxy, he

says, is not meant for "intellectuals."[11] It is only for "the many." For "the select few", Strauss instead "points toward the continuation of the political project initiated by the prophets in the Hebrew Bible ... of creating or sustaining a community in which a moral code of conduct is obeyed by all its members." To Sheppard this means that Strauss identifies the role of a latter-day prophet with a "philosophical elite who can properly respond to the challenge of knowing that providence does not guide the unfolding of history." However all this may be, Sheppard's premise here is that the plain meaning of Strauss's statement on "exile" (as I have outlined it in the previous section) is to be trumped by how Strauss "uses" that statement for the purpose of the political project just outlined (Sheppard 2007, 127).

Now Sheppard's account of the political project he attributes to Strauss depends on his reading of what Strauss says about prophets and philosophers in *Philosophy and Law*, the Maimonides book Strauss published during his refugee years (Strauss 1935; 1995; Sheppard 2007, 69–73). According to Sheppard, Strauss "came to see the thought of Maimonides as a promising alternative to the liberal configuration of Judaism:" "Strauss's Maimonides," he explains, "contemplated Jewish exilic existence and ultimately arrived at a compelling, sophisticated, and prudent understanding of the relationship between the ideal political regime and existing ones" (Sheppard 2007, 69). That is to say, as Sheppard recognizes, Strauss in *Philosophy and Law* attempts to recover the political-philosophical component of Maimonides' thought as a live option in modern times. The key insight on Strauss's part is that Maimonides followed his Islamic philosophical predecessors in assimilating lawgiving prophets like Moses or Mohammed to Plato's philosopher-lawgiver. Maimonides is thus said to view the Torah – which Jewish orthodoxy takes to be a legal code revealed through a prophet by a perfectly just Lawgiver – as the religious counterpart to Plato's perfectly just society founded by a philosopher-ruler. The only difference here is that whereas Plato's perfectly just society is "hypothetical" (Sheppard 2007, 72), the society mandated by the Torah according to Jewish orthodoxy has actually existed in the past and its restoration is to be hoped for in the future. The Torah, then, is (as we might say) a utopia – a utopia that was, but even so a utopia. Sheppard therefore summarizes the significance of the argument of *Philosophy and Law* for the eventual development of "Straussianism" as follows:

"... Plato's political doctrine became a philosophic foundation of the revealed law, offering a solution [*sic*] to the ancient question about the ideal state and its possibility of becoming a reality." (Sheppard 2007, 72)

The "solution" to the question of the ideal society, which Sheppard attributes to Strauss is, again, a political one. Given that the Torah's utopia is, like Plato's, "hypothetical," it is also, like Plato's, unlikely to be realized ever, not in full anyway. The practical lesson, then, is for "the select few" who understand this unlikelihood to keep their expec-

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11 Sheppard treats "intellectuals" as coterminous with "philosophers." Consider, however, Strauss's calling attention to their difference in the following remark about Maimonides' Treatise on the Art of Logic (Strauss 1959, 158f.): "We are tempted to say that the Logic is the only philosophic book which Maimonides ever wrote. One would not commit a grievous error if he understood by 'we' [in Maimonides' statement on political science in that book] 'we men of theory', which term is more inclusive than 'we philosophers' and almost approaches in comprehensiveness the present-day term 'we intellectuals.'"

tations low – that is, to doubt the future restoration of the Torah's utopia even as they meanwhile acknowledge its desirability. Yet there is a further difficulty. The notion of the realizability of the Torah's utopia shows up in traditional Jewish piety, indeed is inseparable from it, as faith in a divine providence leading to a Messianic age. For the sake of preserving Jewish piety and its morally desirable teachings, then, "the select few" will defer outwardly, or in "appearance," to that piety. At the same time, as a practical matter they will reserve judgment inwardly concerning what political proposals are both consistent with the Torah's utopian moral standards and humanly realizable here and now. Such, at any rate, is the putatively Straussian view that Sheppard finds reflected in Strauss's statement on "exile" in the Spinoza Preface.

More exactly, what attracts Sheppard's attention in the statement in the Spinoza Preface is Strauss's remark that "*human beings will never create a society which is free of contradictions*" (2007, 126–27, quoting Strauss 1965, 6; Sheppard's italics). Sheppard infers the meaning of Strauss's remark as follows:

"... if the Jewish people come to this recognition and see that humans are unable to accomplish the task of creating a perfectly free and just society, they may be identified as "the chosen people in the sense, at least, that the Jewish people is the most manifest symbol of the Jewish problem as a social or political problem."

Now Sheppard's inference differs from what Strauss actually says in two important details. Whereas Strauss's statement identifies the chosenness of the Jewish people with their symbolizing – by virtue of the insolubility of the Jewish problem – the human problem as a social or political problem, Sheppard instead makes chosenness for Strauss contingent on the Jewish people's recognizing that insolubility as their historical task.[12] Also, by imputing to Strauss himself the view that the Jewish people must recognize that humans are unable to "creat[e] a perfectly free and just society," Sheppard overlooks the competing view that Strauss has introduced a few sentences earlier when saying, in his critique of cultural Zionism, that "the foundation, the authoritative layer, of the Jewish heritage presents itself, not as a product of the human mind, but as a divine gift, as divine revelation"; that is to say, Sheppard neglects Strauss's possible openness to the orthodox view that "a perfectly free and just society" may be brought about with divine help. To be sure, as I have already pointed out, Sheppard has alerted his reader in advance that the meaning he finds in what Strauss says is not necessarily its plain meaning. The question I am raising at the moment, however, is simply whether or how Sheppard is warranted in amplifying or reducing the plain meaning of Strauss's statement to fit his historicist parameters. In what follows, I divide this question into three sub-questions: whether Strauss's statement when understood in its own terms *invites* being placed within those

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12 Sheppard's formulation of Strauss's view of the chosenness of the Jewish people is an inadvertent mirror-image of Hermann Cohen's messianism. Cf. Strauss 1965, 21–22, with Pelluchon 2005, 222f.: "Cohen is a man of the modern Enlightenment because he has confidence in man and in reason and believes in progress, the progress of history, as is obvious in his interpretation of messianism. … Cohen understands messianism as socialism: it suggests the moral progress that we shall make in the future. Cohen, who has not experienced the shocks of Communism and Nazism, is a man of the nineteenth century, says Strauss, because he believes that man is good and that history is the history of the progress of wisdom." The quasi-parallel with Cohen in Sheppard's formulation recalls Strauss's critique of historicism to the effect that it assumes uncritically the premises bequeathed by the (modern) Enlightenment.

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parameters, whether it *fits smoothly* when placed there, and whether it *gains in clarity* by being placed there.

Does Strauss's Statement Invite Sheppard's Historicist Parameters?

In order to illuminate what I have already pointed out about the general difficulty of seeing how one gets from what Strauss actually says to what Sheppard says he says, let me introduce the following example of something that Strauss says about "exile" in another writing (Strauss 1959), to see whether or how it may be said to invite being placed in Sheppard's historicist parameters:

"... we would seem to be compelled to understand Maimonides' statement [to the effect that the books of the philosophers on politics are useless for 'us' 'in these times'] as follows: not the Jews as such, but the Jews in exile, the Jews who lack a political existence, do not need the books of the philosophers. The Torah is not sufficient for the guidance of the political community. This would imply that the political books of the philosophers will again be needed after the coming of the Messiah, as they were needed prior to the exile." (Strauss 1959, 158, with 156f.)

Certainly the reader will notice Strauss's preoccupation with the question of "exile" here and, like Sheppard, may be attracted by the possibility of relating it to Strauss's intellectual development. Admittedly, there are some difficulties in reconciling what Strauss says in this example with Sheppard's particular version of that development. The obvious difficulty is that Strauss here seems to be saying that the Jews in exile, lacking a political existence, do not need the books of the philosophers, whereas Sheppard, as we have already seen, imputes to Strauss in his Spinoza Preface the opposite view. But perhaps this difficulty can be removed by appealing to the distinction between what Strauss appears to be saying and what he actually means as Sheppard understands it – such that Strauss in this example may be said to be keeping up the "appearance" (for "the many") that the Torah is a sufficient guide for the Jews in exile, even if it is not a sufficient guide for the "elite" Sheppard understands him to have in mind.

Then again, I must apologize for having introduced this example in the way that I have, since it involves a certain ruse. Namely, in the original context in which the statement I have just quoted is found, Strauss's point is that the hypothesis he is putting forward (*sc.*, that Maimonides holds that the books of the philosophers are not needed for the Jews in exile) is – as he goes on to show – untenable.[13] But to make that point effectively, and to be able to qualify it further as needed, Strauss first had to spell out the untenable view in its own terms and without necessarily prejudging it, for his own and his reader's consideration. My own poor excuse for having done likewise by quoting that statement is similar. It is this: How, I wonder, can the reader who is attracted to the biographical possibilities to be found in Strauss's statements tell whether a statement on, say, "exile" is something Strauss himself believes, or perhaps something Strauss believes with some qualification (as Sheppard is in effect saying about Strauss's statement in the Spi-

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13 An important part of Strauss's argument are the sentences I have quoted in note 11, above.

noza Preface), or, finally, something Strauss is merely considering for a moment or more (as I am suggesting here)? My point is that the same words of Strauss's, by themselves, might well point in any of these three directions. What is needed in order to determine Strauss's true meaning, then, is not only adequate corroboration from further first-hand evidence in Strauss's writings (a principle that Sheppard too acknowledges), but also or especially an openness to the third of the three possibilities I have just outlined – namely, that sometimes (and maybe more often than not) Strauss is spelling out a point, say, about "exile," for the purpose of considering it philosophically. The difficulty I am calling attention to in Sheppard's argument, however, is that it does not seem to leave room for this last possibility.[14]

Does Strauss's Statement Fit Smoothly Within Sheppard's Historicist Parameters?

I have already said enough to indicate my doubts about whether Sheppard's interpretation of Strauss's statement on "exile" in the Spinoza Preface fits smoothly with its immediate context there. Yet Sheppard's reply, as I have also indicated, might well be that his interpretation fits smoothly with the argument of *Philosophy and Law*, as Sheppard understands that argument anyway. But what if Strauss turns out to have changed his mind in important respects between writing *Philosophy and Law* and the Spinoza Preface? This likelihood is not taken into account in Sheppard's argument. To show the reason for my misgiving here, I need only cite two other intellectual biographers of Strauss, whom Sheppard happens to mention with approval (2007, 2–4).

According to Daniel Tanguay,[15] Strauss in *Philosophy and Law* combines the features of the philosopher and the prophet in Maimonides' thought in such a way as to "hesitate" over how to separate the two, since the philosopher depends on the insights of the prophet to guide both his political praxis and his philosophical theorizing. This view, if it were Strauss's own final view, might lend support to Sheppard's way of formulating the mature Strauss's putative political project as that of raising up a "philosophical elite" for the sake of "the continuation of the political project initiated by the prophets in the Hebrew

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14 A small case in point is Sheppard's hasty (as it seems to me) consideration of the opening sentences to the Spinoza Preface (Strauss 1965, 1; Sheppard 2007, 118–19): "This study of Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise was written during the years 1925–28 in Germany. The author was a young Jew born and raised in Germany who found himself in the grip of the theologico-political predicament." Sheppard takes these sentences to mean that Strauss "found himself," practically speaking, in a perplexing historical situation. He overlooks the further possibility that Strauss "found himself" – that is to say, came to important discoveries about who or what he was – while following out philosophical questions prompted by that situation.

15 "... the prophet is to be considered the founder of a new theologico-political order. He is the philosopher-king of Plato's city. While in Philosophy and Law Strauss seeks to interpret Maimonides within this Platonic horizon, ... he hesitates to do so altogether. The reason for this hesitation is that Maimonides' concern with revelation is based, according to Strauss, on the following thesis: "... the philosopher needs the teaching of the prophet in order to guide his life and to know certain truths that he cannot discover due to the insufficiency of his understanding." After Philosophy and Law, Strauss abandoned this way of conceiving the relation between the philosopher and the prophet in Maimonides. Henceforth he insists on the commonality of the views held by Maimonides and the Islamic Aristotelians, especially Farabi. ... Through Farabi, Strauss came into contact with the tradition of genuine Platonism that constitutes his fundamental philosophical position." (Tanguay 2006, 52–53)

Bible" – that is to say, as a synthesis of philosophy with biblical prophecy where philosophy is a means to a quasi-prophetic goal. But Tanguay goes on to say that Strauss after *Philosophy and Law* came to a deeper appreciation of Maimonides' receptiveness to the "genuine Platonism" of Farabi and other Islamic philosophers. Tanguay thus speaks of Strauss's "Farabian turn," by which he means that after 1935 (the publication date of *Philosophy and Law*), Strauss like Farabi et al. "resolutely followed the path of genuine Platonism," rather than continuing to combine Platonic philosophy with biblical prophecy in the way that Sheppard suggests.

Similarly, according to Kenneth Hart Green,[16] there is a post-*Philosophy and Law* development whereby Strauss subsequently gives more weight to Maimonides' receptiveness to the genuine Platonism of the Islamic philosophers than he did in *Philosophy and Law*. Green differs from Tanguay mainly in raising the further question of "whether there remains any unique teaching or position which Strauss discovers in Maimonides" (Green 1993, 128). He answers that there does, in that Maimonides according to the mature Strauss departed from his Islamic predecessors somewhat in finding grounds for remaining open to the claims of Jewish orthodoxy.[17] Still, whatever the final differences between Green and Tanguay, both hold that the Maimonideanism of the mature Strauss differs markedly from that of *Philosophy and Law*.

Now if there is a defense of Sheppard's having taken a position to the contrary here despite his high regard for Tanguay and Green, it would have to be that his own view – namely, that Strauss's Maimonideanism in *Philosophy and Law* is consistent with the Maimonideanism of the Spinoza Preface – nevertheless fits with what he takes "Straussianism" to be in his book's Introduction. That is, Sheppard's overall argument has a perhaps valid claim to what Strauss in his Spinoza Preface calls "sheer consistency or intellectual probity" (Strauss 1965, 15). I will say more about this feature of Sheppard's argument in what follows.

Does Strauss's Statement Gain in Clarity Within Sheppard's Historicist Parameters?

To see in general what gain in clarity might be found in Sheppard's argument – and at what cost – consider, by way of analogy, Strauss's critique of Spinoza's *Ethics* in the Spinoza Preface:

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16 "... Strauss seems virtually to retract the position on Maimonides' resolution [between philosophy and prophecy] which had been propounded in Philosophy and Law. ... [H]e seems to presuppose in this final stage that Maimonides is primarily a philosopher rather than a theologian. In Strauss's final estimation of Maimonides, Maimonides appears in the guise of a Jewish theologian because, besides his genuine love for things Jewish which he loves because they are his own things, he is also fully alert to what Strauss represents as 'the precarious status of philosophy in Judaism,' and hence he needs to vindicate his life as a philosopher who is also a Jew. What 'was done . . . in and for Judaism by Maimonides' had already been done in and for their respective cities and communities by the likes of Plato, Cicero, and Alfarabi." (Green 1993, 122, 127f., quoting Strauss 1952, 21, and 1991, 205–206)

17 Strauss, Green argues, "understood what was at stake" for Maimonides in not ruling out a philosophical openness to the biblical view in its own terms – namely, "a sharpened alertness which has been formed by the biblical world view to the cognitive conditions necessary for the survival in any society of the absolute morality made possible by the Bible, together with an awareness of the vital centrality of morality in human life, and an attentiveness to philosophy's frailty in the face of the biblical God" (Green 1993, 132).

"The *Ethics* starts from explicit premises by the granting of which one has already implicitly granted the absurdity of orthodoxy and even of Judaism as understood by Cohen or Rosenzweig; at first glance these premises seem to be arbitrary and hence to beg the whole question. They are not evident in themselves but they are thought to become evident through their alleged result: they and only they are held to make possible the clear and distinct account of everything; in the light of the clear and distinct account, the Biblical account appears to be confused. The *Ethics* thus begs the decisive question, the question as to whether the clear and distinct account is as such true and not merely a plausible hypothesis." (Strauss 1965, 28)

According to Strauss, Spinoza vindicates the (dubious) premises he spells out at the start of the *Ethics*, by deriving clear and distinct consequences from them in a logically consistent way. But he ends up accounting only for things that fit that argument, and meanwhile simply disregards competing accounts, especially the Bible's, as "confused." Spinoza's argument thus begs the crucial question of whether the confused accounts may, in their way, be truer than the clear and distinct account. His argument suffers from what we might call tunnel vision. By contrast, in the *Theologico-Political Treatise* he "starts from premises that are granted to him by the believers in revelation; he attempts to refute them on the bases of Scripture, of theologoumena formulated by traditional authorities, and of what one may call common sense" (Strauss 1965, 28). In other words, Spinoza in the *Treatise* engages the competing, albeit putatively confused accounts with a view to leading their devotees to consider the truth of the *Ethics*' clear and distinct account. My point here is that Sheppard's argument resembles that of the *Ethics* rather than the *Treatise*. For all its "sheer consistency or intellectual probity" – in this case, its clarity and distinctness in tracing what it takes to be Strauss's Maimonideanism on the basis of its proffered notions concerning "Straussianism" – it pays the price of excessive narrowness of focus, or tunnel vision, vis-à-vis its subject-matter.

Coincidentally, Strauss in the concluding paragraphs of his Spinoza Preface ascribes a similar shortcoming to his original argument in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. He also indicates how he corrected it. Let me conclude by briefly describing how.

Strauss's Self-Correction

In his original book, Strauss showed how the *Treatise*'s critique of religious orthodoxy can be countered by denying its tacit presupposition. Spinoza's argument, Strauss pointed out, presupposes that orthodoxy claims to *know* that its teachings are true. These include the teachings that the Bible was divinely revealed and divinely inspired, that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, that the biblical miracles really happened – and, we may add here, that divine providence will eventually end the exile of the Jews in a Messianic age. But what if orthodoxy only *believes* those teachings? Would not belief in them be consistent, at least, with the "irrefutable premise that the omnipotent God whose will is unfathomable, whose ways are not our ways, who has decided to dwell in the thick darkness, may [*sic*] exist"? (Strauss 1965, 28) If so, then the only way to "refute" orthodoxy would be to show that its teachings are unnecessary – by "proof that the world and human life are perfectly intelligible without the assumption of the mysterious God," by "success of the philosophic system" whereby "man would show himself theoretically and practically as the master of the world and the master of his life," hence by replacing the "merely given" world with "the world created by man theoretically and practically" (1965, 29). All this

Spinoza's "system" claims to do. Strauss, however, showed that it does not succeed, if only since, for the reasons we have just seen, its "clear and distinct account" remains "fundamentally hypothetical." Philosophically speaking, then, Spinoza and orthodoxy remain at a stand-off. From this point of view, the choice "between Spinoza and Judaism, between unbelief and belief" is therefore "ultimately not theoretical but moral."

In retrospect, however, Strauss could not leave things at that. It is not that he found the argument of his Spinoza book to be unclear or inconsistent, that is, lacking in "probity" (1965, 30). It is that he became aware of the inadequacy in principle of arguments from probity. Among other things, even though Strauss's own argument from probity ended up vindicating orthodoxy to a considerable extent against Spinoza's attack, it nevertheless did so at the cost of "the self-destruction of rational philosophy" (*ibid*.). Nor, Strauss adds, did it quite vindicate Jewish orthodoxy anyway, since "Jewish orthodoxy based its claim to superiority to other religions from the beginning on its superior rationality (Deut. 4:6)." I must leave a fuller discussion of Strauss's critique of probity in his Spinoza Preface for another occasion (cf. Green 1993, 26, 42, 166n119, 178n57, 189n29; Meier 2006, 45–51; Yaffe 2007, 661–63). I limit myself to calling attention to how his turning to Maimonides et al. is, among other things, a corrective to the argument from probity. "The present study," he says of his Spinoza book, "was based on the premise, sanctioned by powerful prejudice, that a return to pre-modern philosophy is impossible" (Strauss 1965, 31). An argument from probity, an argument whose chief merit is its "sheer consistency," is not designed to deal with "premises" or "powerful prejudices" – that is to say, with authoritative theological and/or political opinions – as such or in their own terms. For that, one needs the sustained philosophical consideration of authoritative opinions (including the various opinions about "exile") of the sort found in Strauss's Spinoza Preface itself.

A Final Word

Strauss's statements on exile in his mature writings are few and far between.[18] All the same, his statement in the Spinoza Preface, when looked at in its "logographic" context (Plato, *Phaedrus* 264b), may well invite the inference that his personal experience of exile provided him with a lifelong inducement to philosophize in the way that he does, even if it did not end up supplying the rubric for his philosophizing. Certainly Strauss's statement invites us to consider the same theologico-political options he himself considered as a young man – assimilation, political and cultural Zionism, religious orthodoxy, etc. – and to review their merits and shortcomings philosophically, both with him and for ourselves. I doubt, however, whether we are helped in that task by starting with the "Straussianism" that is alleged to underlie the surface meaning of Strauss's words. I have instead been guided by Strauss's own indications of how he wished to be read, before

18 Besides the two statements about "exile" quoted and commented on earlier, there is his penetrating description of the addressee of Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed (Strauss 1952, 49; Sheppard 2006, 109–10). There is also his empathetic description of Moses Mendelssohn's psychological reaction to F.H. Jacobi's ruthless literary attack during the so-called Pantheismusstreit in pre-Emancipation Germany (Strauss 1937, liii–liv). Then too, there is his unpublished lecture of 1962 to the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation at University of Chicago on "Why We Remain Jews" (Strauss 1997, 311–56; Sheppard 2006, 119–20, 128–29).

going on to arrive at any interpretation or explanation of what he is saying (cf. Strauss 1952, 142–44). As the mature Strauss says elsewhere: "The problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things." (Strauss 1958, 13; Yaffe 2007, 652f.)

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