Spring 2006

111   Mark J. Lutz   Wrath and Justice in Homer’s Achilles

133   Roslyn Weiss   The Strategic Use of Myth in the Protagoras and Meno

153   Jianhong Chen   What Is Carl Schmitt’s Political Theology?

177   Harry V. Jaffa   Thomas Aquinas Meets Thomas Jefferson

185   Corine Pelluchon   Strauss and Christianity

205   Maureen Feder-Marcus   From Kant and Royce to Heidegger and Are We IN Time? by Charles Sherover

213   Alex Harvey   A Different Universe: Reinventing Physics from the Bottom Down by Robert B. Laughlin

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ISSN 0020-9635
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In Plato’s *Republic* (606e), Socrates reports that Homer’s admirers consider him the “educator of the Greeks.” Socrates himself emphasizes how greatly Homer shaped the Greek understanding of what constitutes human virtue as well as their understanding of the gods (*Republic* 377d, 386–94, 514b, 599d2–3; also Herodotus, *Histories* 2.53). If Homer understood himself to be a teacher, it is not obvious what he meant to teach with some of his most powerful images and characters. Among the most problematic figures in Homeric poetry is Achilles, who is called by his companions the “best of the Achaians” and who was taken as a model of excellence by men such as Alexander the Great but who often appears to modern readers as a model of self-absorption, vindictiveness, and brutality. According to a number of contemporary scholars, Achilles is chiefly distinguished by his terrible wrath, which bursts forth unreflectively and inflicts unjustified suffering and death on his friends and fellow countrymen. In the grip of his measureless, selfish anger, Achilles so isolates himself from his companions that he sinks to the level of a harsh, solitary animal. Only at the end of the *Iliad* does he seem to be redeemed, when he shakes off his wrath and, feeling compassion for Priam, comes to recognize another human being as a human being. By sympathizing with Priam, Achilles gains his own humanity and becomes capable of living in a genuine community (King 1987, 19–49; Mueller 1986, 35, 73–74; Schein 1985, 99, 116, 160–63).

While granting that Achilles becomes markedly civilized by the end of the poem, one wonders whether modern readers do justice to the Achilles of the first twenty-three books of the *Iliad*. In order to defend himself
against the charge that it is shameful to risk death by continuing to philosophize, Socrates likens himself to Achilles when he determined to die in order to avenge Patroklos. Socrates says that Achilles knew he would die if he avenged Patroklos but chose to do so because he did not want to live as a bad man. Achilles wanted to punish the man who did injustice in order to make sure that he did not prove ridiculous and useless (Plato, *Apology of Socrates* 28b–d). According to Socrates, at least, Achilles is to be admired for his desire to be good and just and honorable even when he is filled with grief and wrath. Indeed, the opening lines of the poem suggest that the wrath of Achilles should not be dismissed as a merely blind, destructive rage by noting that this wrath accomplished the “will of Zeus” (1.5). Moreover, the word usually translated as “wrath” (*themis*) is never ascribed to brutes or even human beings but is ordinarily associated only with divinities. It has been suggested that the wrath of Achilles is a reflection or manifestation of a great divine force that asserts itself when gods or human beings overstep the “conventional limits of behavior” in order to restore the boundaries that constitute the life of “the group.” Even though many innocents may suffer when this “cosmic sanction” lashes out at the guilty, one is to accept the indiscriminate destruction because that sanction preserves an order which is far preferable to chaos (Muellner 1996, 7–8; also Schein 1985, 91). While there is much to be said for this argument, it not only suggests that both Achilles and Zeus are willing to accept great injustices so that order can be restored but also presents Achilles as an unknowing participant in the “cosmic sanction” whose final purpose is to restore the integrity of the community, as when he angrily prays to Zeus that all the Greeks who fight alongside Agamemnon should die in the battle (15.97–100). If we were to leave our analysis of Achilles at this, it would remain difficult to understand why Socrates and other Greeks regard him as a man who is to be admired for the depth of his concern for being good and just and worthy of honor. To be sure, in the *Republic*, Plato’s Socrates is critical of Homer and of Homer’s Achilles. Socrates complains that Homer makes Achilles overly afraid of death, excessively stricken by grief at the death of Patroklos, disgracefully concerned with “things,” as he was when he demanded that he be paid a ransom before he would return the corpse of Hector to Priam, and that he disobeys a god (*Republic* 390e–91a). The purpose of this study will be to consider what Socrates, and other students of Homer, might have nonetheless found admirable and illuminating about Achilles (*Republic* 383a), not only at the end of the *Iliad* but throughout.
Achilles seems unjust not because he gets angry but because of the depth of his anger. While we understand that Achilles believes that his honor has been taken from him when Agamemnon takes back the girl whom Achilles won as prize of war, Achilles’ reaction, his bitter contempt for Agamemnon and his vindictive desire to see all the Greeks suffer miserably, seems disproportionate to the offence. In order to understand why Achilles believes that their injustice is so grave, we must examine the place of both community and honor in his life and recover what he thinks justice means. The community against which he turns is not, of course, a polis or nation ruled by a traditional monarch but an ad hoc community, formed from many clans or tribes. While the various warriors remain loyal to their own people and to its leader, each is also bound to the community as a whole by an oath that they will remain until they sack Troy (2.284–88, 339–43). This community is led by Agamemnon, who commands in part because he is from a royal line that was established by Zeus himself and in part because he has contributed the most men and ships. But Agamemnon’s rule is limited. Unlike in Priam’s Troy, in the Greek camp important decisions are made in common, in assemblies, either among the kings or among the entire community. The principal object of these assemblies, and, indeed, of the community itself is to vanquish Troy. But it is also the responsibility of “the people” as a whole to reward those who exhibit martial virtue with goods and honors (1.123, 126, 163–64). To be sure, the individual hero bears some responsibility for the well-being of the community. In giving back a girl whom the people gave him as a prize, Agamemnon grudgingly acknowledges that the individual owes it to the community to give up his goods and honors when the community’s survival is at stake (1.116–17). But, in Achilles’ eyes, the warrior does not owe it to the community to relinquish his well-deserved prizes in order to gratify someone who does not deserve them. Providing goods and honors to those who deserve them is not the sole aim of the community; but when the community is not pressed by the necessity of preserving itself, it has a great responsibility to distribute goods and honors that are commensurate with the excellence or virtue displayed by each individual. In fact, one could say that Achilles’ initial understanding of justice is that it consists in distributing goods according to the excellence or virtue of each individual (cf. Aristotle, Ethics 1131a24–32a1, Politics 1282b23–27). Thus, Achilles is indignant at his comrades’ failure to honor the “best of the Achaians” because this failure seems to betray the community’s own just principles (1.231, 244, 412; also 16.271, 274).
In order to understand why this injustice matters so much to Achilles, it is useful to consider the place of honor in his life. It is generally understood that Achilles, like other heroes, seeks honor because it gives him standing in his community and might provide him with a lasting reputation that would console him for the brevity of his life (e.g. Zanker 1994, 11–12). Beyond this, however, Achilles regards honor not merely as a source of status and posthumous fame but as a necessary part of the life of virtue. Achilles has heeded his father’s exhortation always to be “best in battle and pre-eminent beyond all others” (11.782–83). But his devotion to the heroic virtue necessarily shortens his life (9.410–16). In order to find consolation for his early death, in order to make the heroic life bearable, Achilles looks to honor (1.352–54; contrast 12.322–28). Honor provides solace in part because it reflects one’s excellence and will do so long after one has perished. But it is important to note that Achilles does not regard honor as an entirely human good. According to him and the other heroes in the Iliad, to triumph in battle or hold political authority is to be “loved by a god” or “honored by a god” (1.74, 279; 2.98, 628; 5.225; 8.216; 10.49; 11.300, 418, 610, 647, 652; 13.674; 15.596; 16.169; 24.472, 635). To be honored signifies that the gods know the heroes, care for them, and provide them with the goods that they deserve. Achilles is not surprised that Athena witnesses Agamemnon’s outrage and assumes that his mother, the goddess Thetis, already knows what befell him even before he meets her (1.201–5; also 1.365). Furthermore, he expects that when Zeus is reminded of the time when he suffered unjustly and needed Thetis’s help, Zeus will see to it that Achilles recovers the honors that he deserves for having chosen to lead a magnificent but short heroic life (1.396–412). Thus, Agamemnon’s injustice, his failure to give Achilles honor that is commensurate with his virtue, is significant because it both undercuts the life of virtue and sunders an important tie between Achilles and the gods.

When we next see Achilles, in book 9, he is approached by the embassy that consists of Odysseus, Phoenix, and Ajax. But instead of seething in anger or gloating at his comrades’ desperation, Achilles is now “pleasing his heart” with song and welcomes them. After an initial exchange of greetings and feasting, Odysseus tells Achilles that the Greeks are faltering and may lose unless Achilles quickly returns to the fighting. Odysseus claims that he once heard Achilles’ father urge him to help his friends. In addition, he recounts the many gifts that Agamemnon offers him to return. But fearing that Achilles will be offended by such offers, he adds that Achilles should pity his friends who will honor him as a god if he comes back and should remember that he will win great glory by killing Hector. Having come to Achilles in this manner, the
Greeks seem to give Achilles all that he wants. But Achilles does not return to the fighting. After repeating his earlier complaint that no one has been grateful for his labors, he adds to it that it does not matter whether one is a strong and aggressive fighter or a weak coward since everyone is “held in a single honor.” Because all honor is the same, it does not matter “whether we do much or little for everyone dies just the same.” Achilles announces that he has two fates: he can lead either a long, comfortable, anonymous life or a short but glorious one. Because lasting fame means nothing, because it does not reflect the insight and care of a truly just god, he will choose the former destiny and return home the next day.

Achilles does not complain that honor is worthless for Greeks who must live under Agamemnon; rather, he speaks universally, saying that honor is always empty and that the heroic life is never worth its cost (Saxonhouse 1988, 34). The problems with both honor and the heroic life seem to stem from his reflections about Zeus's failure to make certain that honor is bestowed justly. Because Zeus cannot be counted on to monitor who is honored even in the most important cases, honor is “single” in that it cannot be counted on to measure or reflect one’s worth. Great honor does not differ from little honor. Honor that is deserved does not differ from honor undeserved. Having always sought honor to support the heavy burdens of the heroic life, he now finds honor insubstantial and the burdens of heroism beyond the limits of endurance.

Disappointed by his new insight into the character of honor, Achilles comes to see his comrades and their community in a new light. He can now overlook Agamemnon’s slight because what Agamemnon took from him has no significance (9.336–37). Beyond this, he sees that neither Agamemnon nor any of his companions has ever cared deeply about anything noble. Agamemnon has never cared about defending Menelaos’s right to keep the woman he loves but has always sought only personal gain (9.332–35). Achilles, on the other hand, was like a mother bird who tirelessly gathers food for her young without taking a bite for herself (9.323–25). But now that he has begun to pay attention to how others care solely about their own well-being, he will no longer be deceived (9.344). Like them, he, too, sees that he must look to his own good. It has been suggested that Achilles acts unjustly in refusing to accept the sort of compensation for his injuries that is customarily offered to victims of injustice (Lloyd-Jones 1971, 26). But having come to doubt the worth of honor, Achilles does not believe that the community of warriors at Troy possesses anything that could compensate him for the cost of his life.
Despite Achilles’ powerful rejection of the heroic life, he does not sail away. His reply to Phoenix reflects the confusion that he says he feels (9.612; Burns 1996, 293). After all he has said about the worthlessness of honor, he still acknowledges that Zeus honors him as he sits out the war (9.608) and once again expresses anger at Agamemnon (9.646; also 9.369–76). Achilles finds himself confronted with two alternatives. He can either accede to his doubts about honor, abandon the heroic life, and go home or else dismiss such doubts and return to the fighting. Unprepared to do either, he now sits in his camp, reflecting on the question before him. He has too much respect for the heroic life and for what honor and Zeus ought to be for him to abandon them completely. He still cares enough about honor to harbor anger at Agamemnon and the Greeks who failed to side with him against Agamemnon. But he is also too serious about what is at stake in these things to ignore his doubts. Consequently, he waits and reflects on his situation.

II. Wrath and Friendship

Even as Achilles expresses his doubts about the heroic life and honor, he shows signs that he will not continue to contemplate the fundamental question before him. After Ajax, whom Achilles respects above the other heroes, criticizes him for not accepting anything to compensate him for his loss, Achilles promises not to sail but to rejoin the war if the Trojans set fire to the ships. But what brings Achilles fully back into the war is his friendship with Patroklos. Even though Achilles was willing to soften his position to the extent that he promised Ajax that he would return to the fighting, Achilles now seems angry again at his comrades. He reproaches Patroklos for his weakness and questions his loyalty since he cares for the Greeks who are dying “because of their own arrogance” (16.18). Patroklos, however, replies that the best of the Greeks are now injured and questions Achilles’ refusal to help them. Aware of the sharp difference between Achilles and himself, he says that he hopes that he never experiences the anger that Achilles feels and even curses his friend’s “dreadful virtue.” He complains that no one will be able to benefit from Achilles if he does not save the Greeks from shameful destruction and asserts that Achilles is so heartless that he must be the offspring of rocky cliffs and of the grey sea. If, he says, Achilles stays back because of something he has heard from the gods, he should at least lend him his armor and let him and the Myrmidons relieve the Greeks (16.20–45). Achilles replies that he has been given no such sign but that he remains offended that a king would use his power to rob him. But even as he recounts what Agamemnon did, he declares
that it is not in his heart to be angry forever. He reminds Patroklos that because of his promise to Ajax he cannot return to the fighting until his ships burn; he will, however, allow the Myrmidons to rescue the Argives and will lend Patroklos the armor. He asks Patroklos not to become so caught up in the fighting that he diminish the honors that belong to Achilles. Achilles asks Patroklos not to win any honors that would take away from the honor that is rightfully his. Achilles’ admonition indicates that he has not forgiven the Greeks for depriving him of worthless honor but has instead regained his respect and desire for honor. Moreover, it also points to a possible tension between the hero’s single-minded pursuit of excellence and his obligation to his friend (Burns 1996, 294–95). It is, of course, thinkable that one could pursue heroic virtue in ways that undercut friendship just as one could defer to friends in ways that stand in the way of one’s own heroic actions. But heroism may be so difficult that one needs friendship to make it bearable; and thus each must make concessions for the sake of the other so that together they can pursue heroic virtue. Accordingly, Achilles follows his stipulation that Patroklos hold back with prudent advice not to fight his way to the gates of Troy lest a god should kill him. Achilles would allow Patroklos to help the Greeks and even divide his honors with him—but he does so out of friendship for Patroklos rather than out of sympathy for the Greeks. He prays to Zeus, Athena, and Apollo that all the Greeks perish and that he and Patroklos should sack Troy by themselves (16.97–100).

This prayer is not, of course, answered. Patroklos is caught up in the fury of the battle and killed by Hector with the help of Apollo. Devastated by news of his friend’s death, Achilles is so anguished that it is feared he will kill himself (18.32–34). Homer’s depiction of Achilles’ grief at the death of a beloved friend helps to explain Zeus’s earlier remark that man is the most wretched of living things (17.442).

When approached by his loving mother, Achilles quickly and fully accepts her observation that everything that has taken place was the result of his request to Zeus (15.74–77; 18.74–79). Rather than call Zeus negligent or unjust, Achilles sees that in order for him to win the greatest honor, he must defeat a man of his own rank in battle. To provide such an opponent, Zeus had to elevate Hector far beyond his native ability and had to allow him to triumph over Patroklos, who comes closest to Achilles in heroic virtue. There is, however, more to Achilles’ acceptance of Patroklos’s death than acknowledging that it follows from the request he made to Zeus for honor. Achilles takes full responsibility for neglecting his friend.
As the importance of friendship sinks in, Achilles’ disappointment with himself is accompanied by a fuller understanding of the role of obligation in friendship and of obligation itself. When sitting apart from the army, he reflected on his anger and saw that he has always believed that it is right for the virtuous man to expect goods that compensate him for the sacrifices he makes in the course of exercising his virtue. In addition, he has come to doubt that honor is sufficient compensation for fighting along with his comrades at Troy. But as he is confronted with the loss of Patroklos, he is struck most forcefully by the thought that as a friend he has a profound obligation to help his friend. In fact, Achilles becomes aware of a deeper, more powerful aspect of justice than he discerned when he was indignant at Agamemnon. He now comes to believe that justice demands and means, more than anything else, helping one’s friends and harming one’s enemies (16.31; cf. Plato, Republic 332a). And Achilles knows that he has neglected this obligation. When Hector killed Patroklos and his other comrades, he did nothing but sit by, a “useless burden on the land” (18.104). His new vision of justice includes a strong desire to avenge Patroklos that must not be confused with a desire to sacrifice himself to atone for his guilt. He says that he does not want to go on living unless he is able to kill Hector to avenge Patroklos (18.91–92). He accepts death as necessary consequence of what he ought to do. As this new aspect of justice comes to sight, it does not simply efface Achilles’ earlier understanding of justice as giving the greatest goods to those who are best. He is able to put aside his indignation at Agamemnon only because his obligation to avenge his friend is stronger. He experiences this obligation to his friend as a force which compels a resisting indignation to yield (18.112–13). Homer himself comments in book 15, just before Patroklos is about to die, that Thetis’s request to Zeus on behalf of Achilles was “excessive” (15.598). While it went beyond its proper limits, it was not simply unjust.

Achilles’ deepened understanding of right sheds new light on his relation to the divine. Reflecting on what he now owes to the friends that he has neglected, he remarks that he will accept whatever the gods determine (18.115–16). One can understand why he accepts his own responsibility for Patroklos’ death but it is less clear why he does not blame Zeus for granting the wish and for allowing such a terrible injustice to befall his friend. Instead of complaining, he goes on to say that Zeus sends “delusions” and that he “somehow” wanted all this to take place (18.270–75). Thus, we are left wondering why Achilles accepts that Zeus’s purposes are mysterious rather than arbitrary or malevolent. This difficulty may be resolved by considering Achilles’ lingering belief that Agamemnon was at fault in their initial quarrel.
as well as his observation that even though others excel him in counsel he is, after all, still the best at war.

As has been noted, even though Achilles is convinced that his obligation to his friend is his greatest duty and that Patroklos did not deserve to die, he still believes that he had some aspect or part of justice on his side when he asked Zeus to grant him the greatest honor for being best. Because Zeus supports justice, he can be counted on to punish those who act unjustly and to assist those who deserve assistance. He will punish Agamemnon for failing to honor Achilles in a way that is commensurate with his virtue and will bring the greatest honors to the best of the Achaians. But Zeus cannot give Achilles sufficient honors unless he elevates Hector. And he cannot elevate Hector unless he demotes Patroklos. Thus, Zeus cannot be just to everyone in the same way and at the same time. He cannot give both Achilles and Patroklos what they deserve (Burns 1996, 299). Nor can he support justice, understood as rewarding the best with the greatest goods, and at the same time support justice understood as friendship. Because Zeus follows principles of justice that sometimes conflict, it will be impossible always to predict what he wills in any particular circumstance. Perhaps Zeus had to be asked to punish the injustice committed by Agamemnon because Zeus knew that innocents were likely to suffer and that the consequences of his actions would not be perfectly just. It is precisely because Zeus is both just and well disposed toward men (20.21) that he hesitates to act and that his actions are difficult to foresee.

III. Wrath and Death

Before Achilles can enter the fighting and slay Hector, he must first replace the armor that was taken from Patroklos. When Thetis brings her son new armor from Hephaestus, what most impresses and frightens the Greeks is the shield. Achilles alone looks at it and at first is delighted by its bright shine but as he looks at the handiwork he grows angry (19.18–20). The images on the shield are placed within five concentric circles. The first circle described contains the earth, sea, sun, moon, and stars. In the next circle is a city at peace, in which there is both a wedding and a legal dispute. In the latter, two parties appeal to an arbiter to settle the blood price to be paid for a murder. In the same circle is another city that is besieged by one army but is sending out its own to conduct an ambush. The latter army, led by Ares and Athena, engages in a great battle. In the third circle, men and women plough and harvest through the seasons of the year. In the fourth, there are scenes of
pastoral life: cattle and sheep and predatory animals being harassed by dogs. Human beings also dance and sing. In the fifth, outer circle is Ocean, which encompasses everything. Although the word “nature” does not appear in the poem, nature, or nature as it is seen and worked by human beings, is the overarching theme of the handiwork. On the shield, the earth, its fruits, its animals, are processed and tamed in order to make the world an abode for man. There are, of course, warriors and gods. But only the gods are identifiable, for every human being reflects an aspect or potential of human nature. While there are classes of men there is no place for the particular individual Achilles or for the particular individual Patroklos in the otherwise charmingly beautiful order of the world. Since Achilles re-enters the fighting in order to honor Patroklos and win some honor for himself, he could grow angry at the thought that he and Patroklos are, in one sense, by nature mortal and, in another, by nature nameless. Reflections such as these may lead him to become angry at the thought that he is limited by any nature at all.

As we see for the first time how Achilles fights, we come to see more of what he finds attractive or compelling about the heroic life. For in battle Achilles seems to cast off the limits of human nature. Throughout the poem, Homer has described both Hector and Achilles as “going loose” when they fight, meaning that in their ferocity all the ordinary constraints of life fell away (9.238–39; 13.53; 15.605–9; 21.542; Redfield 1975, 201–2). Achilles not only disregards the concern for safety that ordinarily limits human beings but also seems to move from nature to nature. He is like a lion who turns to fight a band of hunters that he had disdained. A few lines later, he is like an “inhuman fire” that sweeps through the dry wood of a mountain and into a valley (20.163–67, 420, 490); and in the next lines, he is said to crush men like a team of oxen crushes grain on the threshing floor (20.495–502). As he is transfigured, he takes on new forms, new ways of thinking and acting, that are unplanned but nonetheless intelligible, purposive, and powerful. This capacity may not establish a place for him as a distinct individual. But it seems to free him from the human nature he saw on the shield, a nature that would obscure his individuality. Despite the appearance of freedom in fighting, Achilles’ purpose remains fixed. At times, he will speak to his adversaries as if they were mere animals, refusing to spare them for ransom and promising to feed them to the fish. But he treats them like animals only to punish them. In his eyes, they owe an immeasurable debt for killing Patroklos and his other comrades. Because they must pay as much as possible, Achilles inflicts the most dishonorable deaths on them that he can. When Achilles rebuffs Lykaon’s plea for mercy, he explains that the Trojan should accept his death because Achilles, who is far
greater than he is, must also die soon. One might accept an evil on the grounds that an even more deserving man also must also accept that evil (21.122–35); Achilles seemed to do this earlier when he reminded himself that Heracles, too, had to die (17.117–21). But this would not address the difficulty faced by the more deserving man who faces this same evil.

Achilles’ wrath against the Trojans does not seem to be accompanied by great piety, for in the course of his killings he fights the river-god Skamandros. Skamandros objects to being choked with the corpses of Achilles’ victims and tells Achilles that he is the greatest man and yet the most outrageous. Achilles agrees to stop fighting in the river; yet when he hears the river-god call on Apollo to help the Trojans, he jumps back in the water. In response, the river-god overwhelms him. His shield is no use against the force of the waves. His swift feet give way as the river moves the earth out from under them. In desperation, Achilles prays to Zeus to save him from drowning. “Father Zeus, no god could bear to save me from the river, I who am so pitiful. What will become of me? This is wretched death: trapped in a big river like a boy who is caring for swine” (21.273). Prior to this ordeal, Achilles had been angered not only at those who killed his comrades and at himself for permitting it, but also at the thought of a natural order in which the individual has no lasting place. Now, nearly dying in the river, he finds himself overwhelmed by the utter lack of order, by the swirling chaos in which he cannot survive. Far from being able to die on his own terms, Achilles recognizes that even he cannot make sure that he can die nobly. Longing to fulfil his obligations and to die an honorable death, he discovers that only a Zeus can save him. He prays to Zeus because he is a just god, a god who might care about our obligations to our friends and about the dignity of those who strive to fulfil them. Zeus, of course, hears the prayer and sends Poseidon and Athena to help him.

As one might expect, this marks an important point in Achilles’ thinking about Zeus. After Achilles kills Hector, he swears by Zeus that he will not wash until he gives Patroklos a proper funeral:

Before Zeus, who is the greatest of gods and the highest, there is no justice in letting water come near my head until I have laid Patroklos on the burning pyre and heaped the mound over him. (23.43–45)

Again, Achilles expects that Zeus will back up this oath because Zeus is just and will punish those who fail their friends. At the same time, he dedicates a lock of his hair to Patroklos’s pyre, a lock that he had
promised to give to a river god in his homeland. He seems to excuse this on the ground that his obligation to his friend is more important and more sacred than the promise he made to the river god. Furthermore, after his brush with death in the river, Achilles no longer speaks as if nothing remains of us after we die but instead claims that it is possible for the dead to know whether or not their living friends honor them. He promises Patroklos that even though “the dead forget the dead in the house of Hades, even there I will still remember my beloved companion” (22.387–90; also 23.12–23).

At the start of book 23, after Achilles has gone to sleep, the “soul” of Patroklos appears to him and complains that because Achilles has not yet buried him he cannot enter into the house of Hades. The soul also laments that they he and Achilles can never sit and consult together again. After the soul of Patroklos asks Achilles to make sure that they are buried together, Achilles replies to Patroklos’s complaint by saying that he is doing everything and says to himself that in death there is a soul and an image but there is no “mind” or “heart” (phrenes; 23.104). While it is not clear exactly what Achilles has in mind as he says this, the whole incident affirms that the dead have some sort of continuing existence and even know whether or not they are honored by their living friends. In light of this conviction, friendship seems to provide a good man such as Patroklos with the honor and lasting memorials that heroes sought from heroic virtue alone. In other words, the burdens of the heroic life seem bearable when they are borne for the sake of a friend who will remember and respect the heroic friend after he has died.

IV. THE VIRTUE OF ENDURANCE

While acting as judge for the funeral games that honor Patroklos, Achilles seems a changed man. Rather than simply reward the winner of each contest, he is quite politic in honoring different kinds of excellence and authority. But soon after the games end, Achilles once again defiles the body of Hector. Apollo asserts that Achilles’ abuse of Hector is shameless, proud, brutal, and an outrage against the gods. He does say that a man loses his brother or son. He mourns and it is over, for the Destinies put endurance in the heart of mortal man. But Achilles abuses Hector, and nothing is gained thereby for his nobility or betterment. (24.47–54)

While there would seem to be no direct link between abusing a corpse and lacking respect for the gods, there may be some connection
between being able to accept the death of a loved one and feeling reverent toward the gods. In order for Achilles to be fully reconciled to Zeus, he needs to accept the death of Patroklos. And the end of the Iliad recounts how that came about.

Zeus answers Apollo by saying that Hector, too, is loved by gods. He was best of the Trojans, always sacrificed, and thus must be respected by Achilles (24.75). Zeus tells Thetis that Achilles must return Hector and that Priam must bring him gifts. Talking with Thetis, Zeus says nothing about why Hector is loved but merely instructs her to tell Achilles that all the gods are unhappy and that he, most of all, is most angry with the way that Hector is being abused. Zeus does not present this message as a matter of justice nor even as the product of Zeus’s will in particular but as a threat from a multitude of angry gods. “Maybe,” says Zeus, “he will fear what I say” (24.113–16). When Thetis relays the command to Achilles, he replies, “So be it.” Achilles, who obeyed Athena grudgingly at the start of the poem and complained of Zeus’s inaction, now accepts this command without hesitating.

Achilles comes into his full “humanity” or becomes a civilized man not when he obeys Zeus but in his response to Priam, who makes his way into Achilles’ tent and begs him to return Hector for burial. As Achilles wonders at the old king, Priam asks him to remember his own father’s troubles and the joy it would bring his father if he were to return home. But Priam says that he has no such hope now that the best of his sons is dead. After offering Achilles gifts beyond count, Priam asks Achilles to honor the gods and take pity on him “remembering your father, yet I am still more pitiful. I have gone through what no other mortal has gone through; I kissed the hands of the man who killed my children” (24.486–502).

Homer tells us that this speech brings great changes over Achilles’ heart. It stirs in Achilles a desire to be with his own father and with Patroklos. After weeping along with Priam, Achilles takes “full satisfaction” in his sorrow as his desire for his lost loved ones leaves his mind and body. Following this, he remarks about Priam’s strength of soul and encourages him to lessen his grief, and offers him not only Hector but also food and a place to sleep. Achilles’ pity for Priam seems to begin as he sees the old man as a father. But Achilles is stirred not only to feelings of familial love but also to admiration for this old man’s character. Impressed by the old man’s willingness and capacity to suffer on behalf of his loved one, Achilles remarks that Priam has a “heart of iron.” As with Achilles, it seems that Priam’s great virtue permits him to suffer all the more. Empathizing with the great king, Achilles sees that his
enemy is a man like himself and genuinely pities him. He not only offers the old king the comforts of food and sleep but returns the body of Hector willingly. This appears to mark Achilles’ civilization: he seems to recognize the needs and “rights” of others and is willing to limit his own claims so that he can find a place in a broader community (e.g. Benardete 2000, 332; Nagy 1997; Zanker 1994).

There is, of course, much to this understanding of Achilles. But it does not explain why Achilles’ sympathy for Priam is able to overcome his powerful conviction that he is obliged to keep honoring Patroklos and thus to keep defiling Hector. Why is it that he now can cry and find “full satisfaction in grief” and advise Priam that they should let their grief rest (24.521–24)? He could, after all, admire Priam’s devotion and continue to abuse Hector. Nor is it clear why he is now willing to sympathize when he seemed to recoil against the decorations on the shield that underscore what human beings or kinds of human beings have in common. Achilles sheds some light on his thinking as he tells Priam that he should not lament so much because “there is no gain from it.” The gods, he says, have “spun this thread for wretched mortals, that we should live in pain while the gods live without sorrow” (24.525–26). Zeus, he explains, has two jars from which he dispenses either a mixture of good and evil or else nothing but evil. He reminds Priam how Achilles’ own father and Priam himself enjoyed great goods before they suffered great evils. But now, he says, “You must endure it all, without constantly weeping in your heart. There is nothing to be gained by grieving for your son. You will not bring him to life again, not before you’ll have to suffer yet another evil” (24.517–51). The core of the argument seems to be that any father who has known the joys that Priam has known must now expect to suffer evils. Moreover, no amount of mourning could ever restore those lost joys. Achilles urges Priam to lessen his grief because it does not seem right to him that a man like Priam, a man who devotes himself to his loved one, should ruin himself in a sorrow that may never end or even diminish. He is able to sympathize fully with Priam because he sees him as a good friend to Hector, that is, as a man who feels both love and the obligations that accompany that love. And from the point of view of justice, it seems to Achilles that it is not right for Priam to allow himself to be destroyed trying to carry out the limitless demands that grief can make. Achilles’ principle of justice seems to be that a good friend is obliged to do everything he can to help his friend; and yet a good friend is not thus obliged when his help both ruins him and does no distinct, discernable good to anyone (cf. Plato, Republic 331c–d). Moreover, Achilles is able to apply this reasoning to himself. He is willing to give back the body because his grief is becoming too
much for him. In accepting a limit to what he owes Patroklos, he is confident that he is acting within the limits of justice. He speaks to Patroklos and apologizes for agreeing to give Hector back to Priam; but he assures Patroklos that they are being well compensated and that Patroklos will have his share of the gifts (24.592–95). It is not the case that Achilles returns Hector because he has come to see that he has been disloyal to his friends or because he believes that he has defied the “general principle that a man should not remain obdurate” (Lloyd-Jones 1971, 26). While explaining to Priam why the good friend does not owe it to his lost loved one to grieve infinitely, Achilles does not blame himself for failing to do what is right but instead gives reasons why Priam and he are in the right to ease their exertions. Nor is it the case that Achilles now adopts the “moralism” of Nestor and Phoenix who advised him to be “flexible” because in book 24 he puts personal considerations aside and sees Priam “aesthetically” and thus in universal terms (Redfield 1975, 217–19). When Nestor, Priam, and numerous others urge Achilles to accept compensation for the injuries done first to him and later to Patroklos, they seem to be asking him to put his indigination aside because it is too harsh on those who have been unjust. Achilles, however, is willing to accept compensation for his injuries only when he recognizes that his indignation is too harsh on those who are just; or, to put it another way, he does not put aside or temper his convictions about justice but instead follows those convictions in accepting compensation. Justice is not the unqualified obligation to help friends; it is an obligation to help friends within the limits of possibility, with an eye to the discernable good that comes from being just. Moreover, Achilles does not see Priam “aesthetically” but “morally,” that is, as a noble-hearted man who does not deserve ruin and who should be treated with kindness. Again, it is not so much that justice “fails” here (Saxonhouse 1988, 41) as that justice itself recognizes that it must be limited by concerns other than unconditional obligation to the friend.

Because Achilles sees that he does not owe it to Patroklos to be angry without limit at Hector and the Trojans, he is able to be gentler toward both himself and even toward his adversaries. When friendship is “limited” in this way, it is not simply diminished but rather made more humane both to the good friend himself and to a broader range of people, like Priam, who can now be seen as good and as pitiable, as if by nature. To be sure, Achilles would still die to avenge Patroklos. But he now sees that even the deepest friendship has something by which to measure it, some limit. Thus, it is not sympathy alone that makes Achilles a man who is capable of justice and civic life. Rather, it is Achilles’ concern for and insight into justice that allows him to feel sympathy for Priam. Achilles now understands the meaning of “endurance” as Apollo
did. It does not mean the capacity to absorb infinite sorrows but the strength to mourn without being consumed by mourning. Endurance is the capacity to bring together one’s obligations as a friend or comrade with one’s own needs. It is the capacity to see that the sometimes excruciating and yet beautiful demands made on us by justice are not boundless. Despite the appearance that gods and human beings have different standards of justice (Lefkowitz 2003, 167), all agree that justice cannot ask human beings to suffer endlessly and lose everything on its behalf. Thus, along with some clarity about the obligations of friendship, Achilles also achieves a kind of satisfaction or at least calmness in the belief that he has done his duty and can now attend to himself, if only for a short time. As Achilles reminds Priam, even Niobe, whose twelve children were killed by the gods, eventually remembered to eat (24.601–20).

Achilles’ actions seem to follow from seeing Priam. In fact, Achilles indicates to Priam that he does not demand the gifts that Priam offers him in exchange for Hector because he already has it in his mind to return Hector to him (24.560–61). But if meeting with Priam is sufficient to make Achilles return the corpse, why does Zeus issue Achilles a blunt command to do so? And why does Zeus make his command so blunt? Achilles’ sorrow, sympathy, and insights into the character of justice together provide him with a richer humanity than he has ever known. But Achilles is worried that he and Priam will become angry with each other and risk offending the gods (24.560–70). Before long, we know, he will once again rage against the Trojans in battle. His love of his own friends and his indignation on their behalf is too strong to allow him to maintain the insight and reconciliation that he has achieved with Priam. While many in the Iliad urge Achilles to temper his anger and accept compensation for injuries done to him and his friends, men like Achilles love their friends with such devotion that they cannot be expected to temper their anger for long unless they are compelled to do so by a god or by a law with the authority of a god. Zeus issues commands that are consistent with Achilles’ just thoughts because such commands are usually needed to force men like Achilles to act in a temperate or humane or civilized manner. But the indignant Achilles might not have harkened to the god’s commands so readily had he not learned, from his encounter with death in the river, of his vulnerability and dependence on Zeus.
CONCLUSION

Achilles’ wrath is quick and fierce and the source of many evils but it is not unrelated to justice or right. For as we observe him, we find that his indignation is based on intelligible principles of right and wrong. Without the wrath, it may have been difficult for Achilles to discern how much these principles inform and have always informed his dedication to the heroic life and his friendship for Patroklos. In one respect, Achilles struggles because he often has only a partial view of what is just. When infuriated at Agamemnon and the other Greeks, he sees how much he expects to be rewarded by his friends for the virtues he manifests on their behalf. But he will not permit himself to ignore the powerful claims that can be made on behalf of honor and on behalf of his obligations to his friends. Confronted by a conflict between acting nobly by helping his friends and attending to his own needs, Achilles sits in his camp and reflects about what appears to him as a fundamental human problem. Later, as he is overcome with wrath at the Trojans on behalf of his lost comrades, the depth of his obligation to his friends puts aside the question that stopped him in book 9. But the plight of iron-hearted Priam suggests to him that the obligations to one’s friends must have some limit. At both times, Achilles discerns a tension between the good that he will do for others and his own needs (9.323–25, 344–45; 16.31–32; 24.524, 549). In the end, Achilles may not know all that justice is or all that it entails but he can see that whatever it might ask of us, it will not ask that we try to accomplish what is impossible. Because he cares deeply about what is right, he does not allow either Priam or himself to sink into despair but permits himself to endure believing that it is just.

In the course of thinking about his wrath and about what is just, Achilles questions whether Zeus is just and thus whether honor is meaningful and whether heroic virtue is worth its costs. But in accepting his own responsibility for Patroklos’s death, Achilles puts aside his doubts about justice; he sees that the justice that he sought from Zeus was the source of the evil that befell his friend. He seems to conclude that Zeus will be just when called upon but what is just in one respect is not necessarily just or good for everyone. Yet Zeus is not to be blamed for allowing unjust things to take place because it is impossible for just things to happen to everyone, always. Achilles continues to believe that Zeus can be called upon to punish those who do injustice (23.43–45) but he accepts that Zeus will not send us goods unmixed with evils. At the same time, Zeus is not simply “the random dispenser of good and evil” because Zeus will follow the principles of justice—although those
principles may sometimes be at odds (Mueller 1984, 147). Nonetheless, in limiting himself to the strictures of what is just, Zeus will not command good human beings to do what is beyond their capacity but will issue commands intended to relieve them from their hardships so that they may endure.

This is not to say that Achilles achieves total clarity about the resolution he achieves at the end of the poem. Prior to book 9, he does not seem to have been fully aware that he has expected some compensation for the sacrifices he has made as a hero. While these expectations seem to have been put aside in the face of his obligations to Patroklos, it is not clear that they have or should have been forgotten entirely. In book 24, Achilles indicates to Priam that even the best of friends cannot be expected to lose every advantage in order to give endless honors to a departed loved one. Having granted this limit to the evils a friend should be expected to suffer, Achilles might go on to consider whether such a friend should also expect some form of compensation for the terrible hardships that can attend the deepest friendships. In fact, Achilles’ references to the honors that he will someday garner as a result of his heroism suggests that he expects such a consolation (18.121; 22.393–94). But it is not obvious who will be able to pay Achilles the sort of tribute that he pays to the fallen Patroklos. Moreover, even if he is greatly honored in death and is able to learn about it in the afterlife, it is not clear that he will find even this compensation adequate. Indeed, in the Odyssey, Odysseus claims that when he visited Hades and met Achilles, the great hero told him that he regretted having died a young man and that he would prefer to be alive and without honor (Odyssey 11.498–91).

However incomplete Achilles’ thinking may be at the end of the Iliad, it is important to note that his reflections about what is right have informed him about what it is and about what it demands of him. In book 9, as he reasons about his obligations to others and about the just claims that he can make on others, what he learns moves him to reconsider his way of life and to incline to change it. In book 24, what he learns about his obligations and about the just claims that friends can make on their own behalf provides him with no little relief and permits him to treat Priam with genuine sympathy and generosity. Moreover, Achilles’ thinking about Zeus affects his attitude toward the god. What he learns about the limitations of justice reveals Zeus to be a more trustworthy god than he had originally supposed. He comes to believe that the will of Zeus, the will of the highest and greatest god, is not fundamentally obscure or malevolent or arbitrary. Homer might respond to Socrates’ criticisms in the Republic that his goal was not to portray a man of perfect
virtue but to show how even a man who is given to extremes of indignation can learn from thinking through what he believes to be right. He lays out the defects in Achilles to which Socrates refers not in order to glorify them but to show how they require and sometimes limit his reflection. Homer wants to show that Achilles’ deficiencies do not obscure his determination to speak the truth, especially to himself, and his determination to do what is right, to the extent that he is able to discern what it may be. When, in the Apology, Socrates compares himself to Achilles, he amends Homer’s text by having Achilles make explicit references to his concern with justice and to his wish to avoid being disgraceful (cf. Iliad 18.98–104 with Plato, Apology 28b–d). Rather than attribute this either to Plato’s carelessness (Burnet 1924, 118–19) or to Socrates’ desire to supply new reasons for Achilles’ actions (West and West 1984, 79n50), this reading suggests that Socrates of the Apology intends to underscore some of the central themes of Achilles’ life.

By presenting his audience with such a hero, Homer enables them to see how even such passions as indignation, friendship, and grief are accompanied by beliefs about what is right and what is wrong and that these beliefs are based on principles that are intelligible to us. These principles may conflict with one another, but some, at least, can be weighed against others. And even though these principles call on friends to make great sacrifices, they would not compel friends to ruin themselves in fruitless efforts. By reflecting on the wrath of Achilles and on the principles that accompany it, we ultimately find that the demands of justice are neither arbitrary nor absolute but point us toward some good result. Most importantly, Homer shows us a Zeus who limits his actions and his commands to doing what is just. Unlike those Trojans who assure themselves that there are gods who support both sides in the war and thus who are indifferent to whether or not one is in the right (3.440), or who trust that their prayers and sacrifices can win over the gods regardless of the justice of their cause (4.44–49), Achilles has come to see a Zeus who takes his bearings by principles of justice that are intelligible to human beings. The highest and greatest god will not make demands on us that are simply contrary to what we ourselves can discern about what is right and what is wrong. Believing this to be true, human beings can deliberate about what is right and wrong with the confidence that Zeus will neither take actions nor make commands which defy what our own reason informs us about justice.

In addition, by presenting the reader with this understanding of justice and with Zeus’s adherence to it, Homer has helped to legitimate and invigorate not only political deliberation but also philosophy. As presented by
Plato, the philosopher relies on reason to guide his life (Apology 38a2–8). In the Republic, Socrates claims that philosophic reason is so reliable and capable a guide that if and only if philosophy came to rule civic life could the evils that beset human beings come to an end (Plato, Republic 472d–e). In claiming that philosophy can alleviate all the evils that afflict us, Socrates implies that these evils will always be intelligible to the philosopher and that nothing can so alter the world as to make either the evils irremediable or philosophy superfluous. In particular, he implies that the gods will not send evils that we cannot overcome or make demands on us that we cannot fulfil. Now, Homer’s Olympian gods seem ready both to harm human beings in ways that cannot be overcome by philosophy and also to rescue human beings without the help of philosophy. But Homer’s presentation of the highest, greatest, and most powerful god shows him to have a will that is not arbitrary or malicious. By thinking through what Zeus demands of human beings, we see that he remains within the limits of justice and does not demand of us that we do things that would destroy us. A similar understanding of the divine serves as a foundation for the conversation and thinking in the Republic. The dialogue begins by affirming that the gods want us to be just and that justice would not require that we do things that would grievously harm our friends and ourselves (Republic 330d4–331d1, 332a9–10). In the theology of book 2, Socrates goes so far as to say that the gods cannot be the source of any evil and would bring about only good things (Republic 379a5–c1). While Homer’s presentation of the divine may differ from Plato’s in many ways, Homer’s reflections on the meaning of obligation or justice and on its importance to Zeus helps to establish an understanding of the divine that invites the Platonic philosopher to turn his attention to the examination of justice and divinity. In this as in other respects, Homer may be said to have contributed to the education of “the Greeks.”
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There is a striking but nevertheless largely neglected parallel between the Protagoras and Meno. Only in these two dialogues—and nowhere else in the Platonic corpus—does one protagonist challenge the very life’s work of the other and the latter respond with a myth. In the Protagoras, Socrates challenges Protagoras to defend his claim to teach the political art, and Protagoras responds with the myth of Zeus’s distribution to all men of a sense of shame (aidôs) and a sense of right and wrong (dikê); in the Meno, Meno challenges Socrates to defend the worth of his relentless questioning in light of the fact that it seems to lead nowhere, and Socrates responds with the myth of recollection. Insofar as these challenges strike at the very core and ground of, respectively, sophistic instruction and Socratic inquiry, it is not surprising that Protagoras and Socrates would spare no effort in their attempts to meet them.

In both instances, too, the myth is immediately followed and bolstered by a nonmythical presentation: in the Protagoras, by a reasoned account (logos), in the Meno, by a demonstration (apodeixis). In both cases, the implication is that the myth cannot stand on its own. Yet whereas in the Protagoras Protagoras offers a reasoned account on his own initiative, in the Meno Socrates produces his demonstration at Meno’s request. One might argue that Protagoras never intended his myth to convince; indeed, he introduced it as a “pleasant” forerunner of the reasoned account to come (320c6–7). Socrates, by contrast, is portrayed as regarding his mission as having been completed once the myth and its message are fully explicated; the geometry demonstration that cements his case comes only in response to Meno’s prompting. We shall consider the significance of this difference in our discussion of the Meno.

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I shall argue that the parallels between the *Protagoras* and *Meno* are not accidental but suggest a deeper one: that Protagoras and Socrates share the same motivation in answering their respective challenges with a myth. We shall look first at the *Protagoras* where the motivation is somewhat more obvious. We shall see that Protagoras is put by Socrates in a position where he cannot afford to speak the plain truth and therefore has recourse to myth. We shall then turn to the *Meno* and explore the possibility that this predicament is the very one in which Socrates finds himself courtesy of Meno’s paradox. It will become clear that the use of myth in both cases is an attempt to dodge the challenge and to distract the questioner, since neither Protagoras in the one case, nor Socrates in the other, has an answer that can satisfy his challenger.

Let us begin, then, by considering Protagoras’s use of myth in the *Protagoras*. Protagoras’s speech is occasioned by his having been asked by Socrates to explain what benefit the young Hippocrates will derive from associating with him. Hippocrates, eager to become Protagoras’s pupil, had come to Socrates for an introduction to the great sophist, but Socrates turns the meeting between them into an opportunity to expose Protagoras and his profession for what they truly are. Regardless of the superficial respectfulness with which Socrates approaches Protagoras, he has little respect for Protagoras’s profession. (What is said about Protagoras and Socrates in what follows is meant to apply specifically to the *Protagoras* and Socrates in the *Protagoras*. How closely Plato’s character Protagoras resembles the historical Protagoras, whether Socrates’ censure of him in the *Protagoras* is therefore fair or not, and whether that censure even reflects Plato’s own actual estimation of the great sophist are not matters considered in this essay.)

The warnings about sophistic education begin in the earliest stage of the dialogue. Here we learn from Socrates’ conversation with Hippocrates that what the sophist is known for is being a clever speaker himself (310e6–7) and making others clever speakers (312d5–7); one supposes, therefore, that clever speaking is the skill that Hippocrates hopes to acquire by studying with Protagoras. We discover that there is some shame attached to being a sophist (312a; note, too, the contempt for sophists that Callias’s doorman expresses – 314d); it is no doubt for that reason that Hippocrates wishes to learn from Protagoras only for personal edification (*epi paideiâ*) and certainly not for professional mastery (*epi technê*) (312b2–4), as befits a layman (*hôs ton idiotên . . . prepei – 312b4) and not in order to become an expert craftsman (*hôs démiourgos esomenos – 312b3*). We see, too, that
Protagoras has no readily specifiable area of expertise, no technical knowledge of any kind (312e5–6). And we are warned, finally, that the sophist is not to be trusted, that there is danger in putting one’s soul in his hands (313a1–3): like a salesman, the sophist is likely to praise his wares regardless of their worth (313d5–7)—if he even knows their worth (313d7–e1); moreover, he is prone to deception (313c8–9). (At 323a, immediately after he finishes the story about Zeus and Hermes, Protagoras rather defensively says: “And lest you think you’ve been deceived” [hina de mé oiêi apatasthai – 5]).

Even before the speech begins, we are witness to Protagoras’s self-aggrandizement, self-protectiveness, and evasiveness. While disparaging the crafts that the great educators of the past were experts in—poetry, religious rites, prophecy, physical training, music, and literature (316d–e)—Protagoras nevertheless insinuates himself into their distinguished company. His forthright admission to being a sophist is, as he says, a precaution—one among others he has taken. (The myth, as Protagoras presents and subsequently develops it, is, I argue, itself one such precaution.) Protagoras’s evasiveness is manifest in (1) his rather vague promise to make Hippocrates a better man with each passing day, (2) the somewhat broad and unspecific description he gives of his subject, when pressed: “good counsel (euboulia) in domestic matters—how best to manage one’s household—and, concerning public matters, how to be at one’s best in both deed and word” (318e5–319a2), and (3) his willing embrace of Socrates’ characterization of his subject as the political craft (hê politikê technê) and making men good citizens (319a4–5).

Although Protagoras has, then, before the myth, classified himself with prominent men of the past into whose ranks he arguably would not be welcomed, and although he has been cautious, evasive, and inexplicit about what he teaches, nevertheless he has at least been candid enough to affirm that what he offers the best young men is the opportunity to advance themselves (hôs beltious esomenous – 316c9) and to learn subjects other than those they do not wish to learn (318d–e). He assures Hippocrates that if he becomes his pupil he will make him a powerful presence (dunatótatos – 319a1) on the public stage. Prior to the myth, then, Protagoras provides a plausible account of why a young man like Hippocrates, who wishes, as Socrates explains to Protagoras, to make a name for himself in the city (ellogimos genesthai en têi polei – 316c1), would have reason or incentive to abandon his former associates and pay for the privilege of associating with Protagoras instead. It is true that Protagoras studiously avoids the potentially damaging admission that what he teaches is skill at speaking. But he does make a modest concession to truth
through his unspecified guarantee that what his students will learn from him will be unlike what they might learn or have already learned elsewhere. This modest nod in the direction of truth, however, does not survive the thoroughgoing fraudulence of the myth. It is in the myth, fashioned ostensibly to counter Socrates’ reasons for suspecting that virtue is not teachable, that outright deception sets in.

Because Socrates ends the lengthy challenge he poses with the question, “Can virtue be taught?,” it is easy to lose sight of the more pressing question that underlies it: “Do you, Protagoras, teach it?” Interestingly, this is not a question that Protagoras himself quite loses sight of, although he does not address it directly until the end of his narrative. Indeed, it is not a question that the moneymaker in him can afford to ignore. After all, seated before him, as he is well aware, is a prospective client, the wealthy and well-born Hippocrates. In order to win Hippocrates over, he must not only defeat Socrates’ arguments but must establish himself as virtue’s finest teacher. What Socrates forces Protagoras to do, however, is defend his unique effectiveness as a teacher of virtue while not offending Athenian democratic sensibilities. As Frede (1992, xii–xiii) explains: “Democracy rests on the assumption that the affairs of a city are not the subject of some special expertise, but that every citizen is competent to judge them. To claim that a special expertise or art is needed for these matters comes dangerously close to claiming that the people are not fit to rule, for they do not have this expertise.” The task Socrates sets Protagoras cannot be fulfilled both successfully and honestly. Protagoras opts for success. Thus is the myth born.

Scholars have debated vigorously and vehemently about the origins of the Protagorean speech (is it Protagoras’s or a Platonic invention?); about its merits (is it brilliant or hopelessly confused?); about Plato’s take on it (would Plato not agree with, for example, much of what Protagoras says about punishment?); about how effectively it answers Socrates’ arguments concerning Athenian political practice and their approach to the transmission of personal virtue (does it assimilate political expertise to personal virtue; does it mistake a merely necessary condition for political participation for a sufficient condition for political proficiency?); and about how seriously Protagoras himself takes the myth and what follows from it (surely he does not take it literally, but does he not perhaps subscribe to it on some other level?). In all these scholarly debates, however, the most critical question is neglected: does Protagoras say in his entire speech anything true about what he actually does?
It is a measure of the strategic success of Protagoras’s speech that this question is rarely raised. (Bartlett 2004, 71–75, is a possible exception.) The myth with which it begins obscures the weakness of Protagoras’s case. It seduces the imagination with an engaging story. It is the myth that enables Protagoras in effect to substitute a single question of his own for the two questions Socrates poses. Socrates had asked (1) if political skill is teachable, or, what amounts for Socrates to the same thing, if there is a political craft; and (2) if personal virtue is transferable from good men to others. The question with which Protagoras replaces these is whether everyone in a civilized society is an accomplished craftsman (demiourgos) in justice. It is the myth that makes possible the seemingly seamless transition from the idea that everyone must share in a sense of shame (aidôs) and a sense of right and wrong (dikê) if there are to be civilized communities at all to the notion that a sense of shame and of right and wrong are a technical skill allotted to all. By insisting upon the technical nature of basic civic virtue, the myth preserves the reasonableness of the occupation of teaching virtue—even, perhaps, for a fee. Yet, we must ask, is it really a sense of shame and right and wrong, is it really justice (dikaiosunê) and moderation (sôphrosunê), that Protagoras teaches? Is it really in order to become more just and moderate that young men abandon their friends and associates and lavish upon Protagoras all the money they can lay their hands on?

The myth tells us that although people at first, thanks to Prometheus, acquired the skills necessary for existence in small groups, they did not, until Zeus dispatched Hermes, possess the skills necessary for living politically, in communities composed of members not all related by blood (this is Taylor’s interpretation [1991, 81, 84–85]). The “skills” of the sense of shame and of right and wrong enabled human beings to combat beasts without combating each other. These skills, the myth maintains, were not, however, distributed as the others were: these were distributed to all insofar as they are necessary (and presumably also sufficient) conditions for participation in political life.

What does it mean, in the context of Protagoras’s speech, that a sense of shame and of right and wrong (322c4) or justice and moderation (323a1–2) were distributed to all? Is the implication of their universal distribution that they do not constitute a genuine craft because crafts are necessarily or by definition distributed more sparingly? As the speech continues into its reasoned component it becomes clear that, from its perspective at any rate, political craft or virtue is just one craft among others. All crafts require natural
talent and instruction if they are to be fully mastered; the only difference between the political craft and others is how widely they are taught. The de mysticized sense of universal distribution is universal instruction: because people appreciate the critical importance to society of justice and moderation, everyone teaches these things to everyone. And as is the case in every craft, those who have natural talent in virtue turn out “better” than those who do not. But, since all are taught virtue, and taught it constantly, all learn virtue, and all are, therefore, in comparison with those raised in lawless societies, veritable craftsmen in justice. The other crafts, being less important to society and not needing to be possessed universally in order for the society to survive, are taught by some to some, and are hence acquired only by some. Here, too, it is those with natural talent who will be more skilled than those without.

Political skill, then, is assimilated by Protagoras in the myth to the cooperative excellences, justice and moderation, that are required for common living. Everyone teaches everyone—not in order to make some stand out over others but, on the contrary, because “we benefit … from one another’s justice and moderation” (lusitelei gar oimai hêmin hê allêlôn dikaiosunê kai aretê – 327b1–2). As it turns out, then, virtue is, according to Protagoras’s speech, someone else’s good: it benefits in the first instance not oneself but one’s associates; and it is, in turn, one’s associates’ virtue that is of benefit to oneself. If Protagoras, as he claims, indeed teaches what everyone else does—though somewhat better—then, on his own account he neither teaches his students what they wish to learn (since he does nothing to help them to distinguish themselves in the public arena) nor has grounds for persuading them “to abandon their association with others, relatives and foreigners, young and old alike, and to associate, instead, with him” (316c7–9).

One telling irony of the speech is that it assures a young man who has no desire to be a technician of sophistry (312b3), someone who wishes to learn from Protagoras only for his own edification (epi paideiâ – 312b3–4), as a layman would (hôs ton idiôtên . . . prepei – 312b4), that he is already, by virtue of the ongoing ubiquitous instruction in virtue to which he is subject daily, a craftsman in the very virtue that Protagoras teaches (327c7). For Protagoras, anyone who is instructed all the time is ipso facto a craftsman; a layman, he thinks, is someone who knows nothing at all. As he says, in a society in which everyone teaches everyone flute-playing, all would be capable (hikanoi) at flute-playing when compared with laymen, tous idiôtas, who know nothing of it at all (327c2).
Protagoras’s answer to Socrates, then, is that the Athenians rightly listen to everyone on political matters, not because, as Socrates thinks, political virtue is not a craft so that there are in it no experts to consult and all are laymen, but rather because in the case of political virtue there are no laymen: everyone is a craftsman by virtue of having been raised in a civilized society.

We see, then, that Protagoras actually ends up confirming rather than refuting both of Socrates’ points: there is no one who teaches the political technê and there is no one who reliably transfers personal virtue. The children are indeed left to do exactly what Socrates says they are left to do in the absence of real teachers of virtue, namely, browse around like sacred cattle on the chance they will pick up virtue spontaneously (320a). As Gomperz (1920, 2:312) notes, Protagoras has children picking up virtue like they pick up Greek and like children of artisans pick up their fathers’ crafts. The Meno (92e) makes the same point, even putting it in the same way, and casts it as a challenge to Anytus, the Athenian democratic gentleman (kalos kagathos) who supposes that virtue may be learned from any Athenian gentleman one happens upon. Nussbaum thinks that what Protagoras means is that he is like the expert instructor of Greek. “Even if all adults are competent native speakers and teach the language to their children, there is still room for an expert who can take people ‘a little further along the road’—presumably by making the speaker more explicitly and reflectively aware of the structures of his practice and the interconnections of its different elements. Even so, an expert ethical teacher can make the already well-trained young person more aware of the nature and interrelationships of his ethical commitments” (1986, 104). Let us note, however, first, that Protagoras makes no claim to expertise of this kind with respect to virtue; second, that he thinks (or, at any rate, says) that street-instruction actually makes one an expert (démourgos) at justice; third, that Protagoras is deliberately vague about what he does; and that that is because, fourth, he does not do what he says he does, namely, teach what others teach only somewhat better. What Protagoras does teach has nothing whatever to do with enhancing the cooperative virtues young men otherwise acquire by a kind of effortless osmosis.

Since what Protagoras in fact transmits is the wherewithal for some people to excel, to stand out, and to outstrip others, it seems clear that, were he unafraid to speak the truth about himself and his profession, he would have said that the Athenians are foolish to consult everyone on political matters: not all men are expert craftsmen in the political craft; the political craft is something at which only a few are skilled and at which most are
laymen—that is, they know nothing at all. Political skill, he would have said, consists primarily in the ability to speak well; and speaking well is what Protagoras is both proficient at himself and able to teach others. Lacking the courage, however, to speak the truth, and having been forced by Socrates into a position where it would require courage to speak the truth, Protagoras takes refuge in myth: he tells a story that removes the distinction between individual political success, on the one hand, and civic-mindedness, on the other, making political skill the province of the many—indeed of all—rather than of the few.

Taylor thinks that Protagoras actually believes what he says, namely, that the Athenians are right to believe that all should be consulted on matters of public policy (1991, 183). He thinks this view of Protagoras’s is a logical consequence of Protagorean subjectivism. But the truth of the matter is that Protagoras, like Meletus in the Apology, is forced by Socrates into a position where he cannot say what he thinks for fear of giving offense. As we learn from the Gorgias, flattery is at the core of democracy: the many must be pandered to. Socrates’ cornering of Protagoras so that he must say that everyone has the political craft/virtue is reminiscent of his forcing Gorgias into a position where he must say that he teaches justice to anyone who comes to him without already knowing it (460a). Frede recognizes that Protagoras does not, and is unwilling to, attack democratic procedure: “He rhetorically supports the ideology on which these procedures rest. The result is a certain confusion in his own position: he supports the value of special expertise, but also the democratic ethos that is fundamentally at odds with it” (1992, xiii). The point might be better put a bit more strongly: Protagoras supports the democratic ethos only rhetorically and only because he must—not because that is where his sympathies lie. As Frede says a little later on: Protagoras “hesitates to speak his mind and to develop his view in a direction which inevitably would bring him into conflict, not only with the people of Athens, but also with traditionalists among the upper class. Instead . . . he compromises his position, and this compromise leads to the reversal [from the initial insight that virtue is a matter of wisdom or expert knowledge to the democratic view that it is something all possess] and to Protagoras’s downfall” (xix).

Let us turn now to the Meno. Might it be that Socrates in the Meno, like Protagoras in the Protagoras, finds himself in a position where he cannot speak the truth plainly and openly, and that it is for that reason that he, too, has recourse to myth? The position that Meno puts Socrates in is one in which he must either (1) show that inquiry of the kind he conducts, namely, inquiry in which one nonknower asks questions of another nonknower, can
yield knowledge, or (2) admit that his inquiry is useless. Has Meno trapped Socrates as Socrates trapped Protagoras? Although Socrates surely does not believe that the inquiry he conducts is useless, can he honestly say that it yields or might yield knowledge? Or is it possible that, just as Protagoras recognizes that he does not teach the cooperative virtues of justice and moderation but dares not say so in public, so Socrates is aware of the incapacity of his own method to yield knowledge but dares not say so—at least not to Meno? Meno’s challenge to Socrates leaves no doubt that he has no interest in engaging in inquiry whose end result is not knowledge. His frustration mounts because no final answer is reached—not because no progress has been made. For Socrates has in fact brought Meno quite a distance. By the time Meno rebels, Socrates has gotten him to acknowledge, if not quite to see, that virtue is a matter of how one does whatever one does—that is, is it being done justly and temperately—rather than, as Meno had initially thought, a matter of what one does or acquires. Indeed, Meno concedes (78e) that when gold and silver can be attained only unjustly, their acquisition is not virtue at all but rather their nonacquisition is. Despite this progress, however, indeed, after going several rounds with Meno on the question of what virtue is, Socrates still wants to begin anew, wants to pose again the very same question, “what is virtue?” (79c3–4, 79c7–8, 79e1–2). Can Socrates sincerely assure Meno that further consideration of the same question will eventually produce knowledge?

There are several indications within the Meno itself, and still more outside the Meno, that Socrates does not believe his method of question-and-answer, a method in which he mostly tests the opinions of his interlocutors for coherence and consistency, yields knowledge. If Socrates indeed does not believe that his elenctic method yields knowledge—any more than Protagoras believes that his instruction makes his students (or is even intended to make his students) just, moderate, and pious—would we not have good reason to suppose that Socrates, when put in the same position by his interlocutor as Protagoras is put in by his, reacts in the same way for the same reason?

Let us turn first to the support provided by dialogues other than the Meno. Socrates presumably practices his elenchus for a good part of his long life. Yet, he declares in the Apology (22d–e) that his wisdom is merely human wisdom, and consists in the recognition that, with respect to the most important things (ta megista), that is, with respect to questions of virtue and how a human being should live, he lacks wisdom (Ap. 21b4–5, 21d2–6, 22c9–d1; also, Gorg. 506a3–5, 509a4–6; Meno 71b3; Charm. 165b–c; Euthyphro 16d).
Moreover, insofar as he thinks that any man who, like him, recognizes that he lacks wisdom is similarly wisest, he clearly regards positive wisdom about virtue as beyond the reach of all (ordinary) human beings (Ap. 23a–b). The “negative” wisdom of which ordinary human beings are capable is indeed “worth little or nothing” in comparison with the positive wisdom that is divine (Ap. 23a). Socrates no doubt thinks his own opinions are well-supported—in the Gorgias he says of his views that they are bound by “arguments of adamant and iron” (Gorg. 509a1–2). He might well even think they are right: he calls the truth “my property” at Gorg. 472b6; and, at Rep. 1.337a–c, when Thrasymachus will not allow Socrates to offer certain answers, Socrates likens the answer he would have given “if that were my opinion upon consideration” to the answer 2 times 6, or 3 times 4, or 6 times 2, or 4 times 3, to the question how much is twelve! Nevertheless, he seems to regard all opinions, including his own, as corrigible: his greatest benefactor, Socrates says, would be the man who shows him he is wrong (Gorg. 458a–b, 506c); also Gorg. 509b: “And if these things are so….” Moreover, no matter how strong his argument, Socrates disclaims knowledge: “For my speech is always the same: I do not know how these things are” (Gorg. 509a5); also: “For I, at any rate, do not say what I say with knowledge, but am seeking together with you” (Gorg. 506a). Indeed, if Socrates is the sort of man who obeys what “seems best to me upon reasoning” (Crito 46b), then he is not a man who has certainty about what is best. If Socrates may be presumed to have wielded his elenchus for many, many years, and if elenchus were able to yield wisdom, why would Socrates die an ignorant man, always seeking truth but never quite knowing it?

The best life for a human being, the only life worthwhile for a human being, Socrates contends, is the life of examination—of testing our beliefs against each other to see which hold up best (Ap. 40e–41c). Such a life is surely not one of knowledge and wisdom but rather one of inquiry and searching. As Socrates restates Meno’s paradox at Meno 80e: “For he would not search for what he knows for he knows it; and for such a thing it is not necessary to search.” Indeed, as Socrates depicts his own life after death in the Apology, he continues to do in death what he did in life—question people to see who is wise and who is not (Ap. 41b). It is this he calls “inconceivable happiness” (améchanon eudaimonias – Ap. 41c3–4). Moral inquiry is, then, a way of life (and perhaps even of death); it does not culminate in positive, once-for-all wisdom, but is ongoing.

It is perhaps in the Republic that we find the clearest and least ambiguous statement of the limitations of the Socratic method of inquiry
(although the passage does not explicitly name Socratic method as its target): “When the beginning is what one does not know, and the end and what comes in between are woven out of what is not known, what contrivance is there for ever turning such an agreement into knowledge?” (533c3–5 [trans. Bloom 1968, very slightly modified]). When one starts with opinion—that is, with something that is less than knowledge—and one builds on that opinion with other opinions, any agreement reached, Socrates contends, will necessarily fall short of knowledge.

Let us see now how the *Meno*, too, reveals a Socrates skeptical of the ability of his own method to give rise to knowledge. First, the Socrates we encounter in the *Meno* declares that he lacks wisdom with respect to the question of the nature of virtue: he says, quite emphatically and more than once, that he knows “not at all” (*to parapan*) what virtue is (71b3 and b5; echoed by Meno at 80d6). Nor does Socrates think anyone else knows (71c3–4). It would seem, then, that, with respect to virtue, Socrates in the *Meno*, no less than in the *Apology*, believes that he and all other men lack knowledge—and this despite a lifetime spent testing not only opinions held by others but those he himself holds as well. We note that he shows no similar diffidence with respect to his ability to define shape.

Second, in his reformulation of Meno’s paradox at 80e2–6 Socrates omits the part of it that says: “or even if you do happen upon it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know?” (*ê ei kai hoti malista entuchois autôi, pôs eisê hoti touto estin ho su ouk êidêstå;* [80d7–8]). Why does Socrates leave this part of the paradox out when arguably it is precisely this part of it that the myth and the geometry demonstration that follows it address? Might it be that Socrates himself believes that even if one happens upon the moral truth, one will nevertheless still not know it?

Third, Socrates in the *Meno* emphasizes the difference between knowledge and true opinion. Indeed, Socrates rather insistently declares that if there is any thing he knows—and there are not many such things—it is that there is a difference between these two modes of cognition (98b3–5). If Socrates believes he has true opinions about virtue, true opinions arrived at or confirmed by the repeated exercise of his method, his placing emphasis on the difference between true opinion and knowledge might well indicate his recognition that what he does not have—what his method cannot yield—is knowledge.
Fourth, although Socrates does try to make the case that recollection will yield knowledge, the case he makes is not unambiguous. (We shall assume that Socrates intends recollection to be just another name for elenchus. Although recollection as initially described is not just like elenchus, it is made to mimic elenchus when it is illustrated in the geometry demonstration: Socrates elicits the slave’s opinions, shows him that his opinions are inconsistent, and then triumphantly points out to Meno that the slave, who used to think he could lecture before large audiences on the matter of doubling the square, has now been shown his ignorance and is thus clearly far better off than he was at first.) Close attention to both the introduction and conclusion of the first part of the recollection section suggests that Socrates is not all that sanguine about recollection’s yielding knowledge. In the introduction he merely “trusts in its truth” (81e2), and in the conclusion he refuses to swear by anything more than the value of believing that moral inquiry is not futile or unnecessary (86c2–3). He rather conspicuously fails to be willing to fight for, “in both word and deed,” the reliability of recollection as a producer of knowledge. In Bartlett’s words (2004, 146): “It is a rhetorical argument intended to persuade, one that Socrates himself admits he would be unwilling to fight very hard for (86b6–c2).”

Fifth, whereas it surely appears that upon the conclusion of the geometry demonstration Socrates affirms that knowledge can be had through recollection, here, too, matters are far more murky than they appear. We note, first, that Socrates says of the slave that if he is asked the same thing many times in many ways he will know “no less accurately than anyone” (85c9–11). To ask the same question over and over again is, of course, Socrates’ procedure. Indeed, as we noted above, what provokes Meno’s paradox is Socrates’ plan to raise the same “what is virtue” question anew. But is there any reason to believe that this repetition can ever result in knowledge? Whereas it may well be true that the slave can learn elementary geometrical truths and end up with accurate knowledge of them, is it equally likely that this can happen in the matter of virtue? To say with respect to the matter of virtue, where no one has knowledge, that someone will come to know “no less accurately than anyone” is to say that he will in the end still fail to know. Moreover, Socrates does not consistently maintain in his concluding remarks that what the soul has within that is accessed via recollection is knowledge. The slave is said to have had knowledge in him only at 85d4 and d6. But at 85c4 and c10 he is said to have had only opinions. Indeed, at 85c10, d7, and 86a6–8 the claim is made that the slave’s opinions will eventually become knowledge. In a dialogue in which the difference between knowledge and opinion is so forcefully insisted
upon, Socrates’ awkward shifts between the two betray the discomfort he feels concerning his initial assertion that it is knowledge that will be recollected. For, is it really accurate to say, particularly with respect to virtue, that what we currently have in our souls is knowledge rather than beliefs? Furthermore, if an additional process is needed to convert opinions into knowledge—“asking him these same things many times and in many ways” (85c10–11)—then, first, recollection itself does not yield knowledge and, second, the likelihood is that nothing will: are we really to believe that continued and repeated posing of the same questions will turn opinions into knowledge? Socrates, we note, provides no support for this dubious claim.

Sixth, Socrates does not allow his conclusion at 89c that virtue is knowledge and therefore teachable to stand. Despite the extraordinary lengths to which he goes in order to tie all good things—virtue among them—to knowledge and, in turn, to teachability, he proceeds to undermine his conclusion by pointing to the absence of teachers of virtue. If there are no teachers, he argues, then virtue is not teachable and is not knowledge. Yet, if in Socrates’ view it takes a teacher to certify a subject-matter as a branch of knowledge, does not the fact that Socrates repeatedly denies being a teacher of virtue attest to his belief that he has no craft with which to teach virtue, no craft that will produce knowledge of virtue?

Finally, in distinguishing between knowledge and true opinion in connection with the Road to Larisa example (98a), Socrates requires that true opinions be tethered by “calculating the cause” if they are to be converted into knowledge. Is such tethering a feature of the elenctic process? Is it a feature of recollection? To be sure, Socrates says it is: “This, my friend Meno, is recollection, as we agreed in what we said before” (98a5). But there was no previous mention of such a procedure; it is a notably new process that goes beyond the others in that its goal is to get at “the cause.”

If, indeed, Socrates does not think his method of question-and-answer leads to knowledge, if he does not think that one nonknower can induce knowledge in another nonknower simply by eliciting and testing the latter’s opinions, how can he respond effectively to Meno’s challenge? Socrates’ strategy is to present a myth. What the myth does is assimilate inquiry into virtue to all inquiry, propose that all knowledge comes via recollection, and thereby make the case that knowledge of virtue comes by way of recollection. Let us note how different Socrates’ tack here is from the one he took in the _Protagoras_. In the _Protagoras_ Socrates made the case that political deliberation is not technical and does not require expertise, and that personal virtue is
not transmittable. He thus sought to isolate virtue—political and personal—from the realm of craft, to set it apart as something that is neither taught nor learned. In the absence of bona fide teachers of virtue, he argued, youngsters are allowed to “browse about like cattle” on the chance that they might pick up virtue from those around them. In the Meno, however, in order to salvage his elenctic investigation with Meno into the nature of virtue, Socrates makes virtue one craft among many, all of which are somewhat perversely said to be recollected.

As noted earlier, Socrates supplements the myth and its explication with a demonstration only at Meno’s behest. Unlike Protagoras who begins with a myth because it is “pleasanter” (chariesteron – 320c6–7), though he evidently neither believes his story literally himself nor expects his audience to do so, Socrates presents his myth as if he believes it to be (literally) “true and fine” (81a8), expecting or hoping that Meno will simply accept it. He is not portrayed as recognizing on his own, as Protagoras does, a need to strengthen it. Indeed, why should he? After all, Meno is quite eager to hear Socrates’ report of what men and women wise in divine matters (81a5–6) have to say: he breaks in at 81a7, asking, “Saying what thing?” (Tina logon legonta;); and then again at 81a9: “What is this, and who are the ones who say it?” (Tina touton, kai tines hoi logontes;). Having been questioned by Socrates ad naus eam, it stands to reason that he would relish a definitive pronouncement by those who are wise. Moreover, Meno is accustomed to Gorgias who, unlike Socrates, answers “fearlessly and magnificently” whenever anyone asks him a question (70b6–7). The priests and priestesses, who, along with the divinely inspired Pindar and others, are Socrates’ sources, similarly speak authoritatively. Socrates has solid grounds for expecting Meno to respond warmly to their declamations.

What the priests and priestesses say with such assurance is that the soul is immortal and never perishes but is repeatedly reborn. The moral of the story for them is that one must live one’s life piously in order to ensure a promising next round (81b6–7). The moral that Socrates draws, however, is that we must try to recover—since if we try we may well succeed—all that our souls knew (including virtue) prior to this earthly life. By way of the expression, “both concerning virtue and concerning other things” (kai peri aretês kai peri allôn – 81c8), Socrates seeks to blur the distinction between virtue and other things, casting all learning as recollection.

The myth is delivered quickly and without due care. Socrates runs through its numerous claims so swiftly that one is at first swept up in the
current of their superficial plausibility. When one goes back to review them slowly, however, one is struck by the many puzzles and unresolved questions they contain. (1) How do we know that every soul has undergone a sufficient number of births such that we can say with confidence that every soul has seen all things? (2) Has the soul literally “seen,” ἐόρακυία, all things or is this “seeing” metaphorical? (3) If all souls have seen only the things that are here and in Hades, might there be other things, higher things, Forms, perhaps, that not all souls have seen? (4) What is the relationship between the soul’s having seen, having learned (memathēken), and having recollected? (5) Surely the soul cannot “recollect” all the way down; it must learn something initially in some other way (by seeing?) if it is to have something to “recollect”; how, then, can all learning be recollecting? (This point is put crisply by Ryle [1976, 4]: “…retrieval cannot, in logic, be the origin of knowledge—any more than Proudhon’s ‘Property is theft’ can, in logic, cover all ownerships.” Thomas [1980, 143] and Davis [1988, 125] similarly note this problem.) (6) What is the force of the qualification, “those things, at any rate, that it, indeed, knew before” (ha ge kai proteron épistato – 81c9), if there is, in fact, nothing the soul has not seen or learned? (7) Why should the kinship of all of nature ensure that the discovery of one thing will lead to the discovery of all others? (8) Will courage and perseverance really suffice for the discovery of all things once one thing has been recollected? (If all it takes to attain knowledge is courage, perseverance, and the discovery of a single truth, is it not a wonder that Socrates is still in the dark? Has anyone been more dogged than he?)

Why does Socrates present a myth that raises at least as many questions as it answers? Might he be indicating thereby that no fully satisfactory justification can be given for moral inquiry of the Socratic kind if what is demanded of such inquiry is that it ensue in certain and unassailable knowledge? As was suggested above, Socrates’ disclaimer in his summary of the geometry demonstration to the effect that he is not prepared to swear to all he said but only to fight in word and deed for the value to people of embracing the belief that we should search for what we do not know (86b6–c3) strongly suggests that he is less than wholeheartedly committed to the story he serves up in response to Meno’s paradox. If Socrates does not believe that his asking questions of Meno—or of anyone else, for that matter—on the nature of virtue or its parts or on their interrelations will ever yield knowledge, then he has no answer that will satisfy Meno. Elenchus is, as Socrates recognizes, a method that tests some opinions against others; it offers no escape from the realm of opinion. All the recollection myth can do, then, is create the illusion that virtue can be known by recollection just as other things can. In reality, however,
recollection cannot provide a common ground for virtue and all other subjects. For, first, recollection is not the way knowledge of virtue is acquired; second, recollection is not the way knowledge of other subjects is acquired; and third, other subjects are known and taught but virtue is not. Let us look more closely at each of these points.

1. **Recollection is not the way knowledge of virtue is acquired.** Socrates gives us scant reason to think that the soul can acquire *knowledge* of virtue by recollecting formerly known truths. For how can a soul confined to here and Hades—we note that no higher realm is mentioned—a soul that endlessly repeats the migration from the one to the other, recollect knowledge of virtue, something it never had and never could have had in these two places? (The Hades in the *Meno* really is the Underworld, unlike the “Hades” in the *Phaedo*, which is the realm of the “unseen,” in the sense of being beyond sense perception [through a pun on *Haidēs*, “Hades,” and *aides*, “unseen”]. In the *Phaedo* Socrates is careful to say “Hades in the true sense” [80d6–7], to distinguish this metaphorical Hades from the literal Underworld.) Indeed, Socrates hints within his very presentation of the myth that virtue may not be recollectable precisely because it was never known. He qualifies his observation that “there is nothing that it [the soul] has not learned” (*ouk estin hoti ou memathēken* – 81c7) by remarking that it is therefore not surprising that it is able to recollect concerning virtue and other things “that which, at any rate, it knew previously” (*ha ge kai proteron ēpistato* – 81c9). This qualification, especially coming as it does on the heels of the unqualified declaration that there is nothing the soul has not learned, suggests that the soul may indeed not previously have had knowledge concerning virtue. The *Meno*, let us note, begins with Socrates’ assertion that neither he nor anyone he has ever met knows anything at all about virtue (71b–c).

2. **Recollection is not the way knowledge of other subjects is acquired.** Even with respect to the various arts and sciences, Socrates reveals his doubts about their being learned by way of recollection. In his summary of the results of the geometry demonstration—the whole point of which was to show that there is no teaching but only recollection—he hints that geometry is in fact *taught*, as are all other subjects. At 85d–e, in ascertaining that the slave did not acquire in his present life the knowledge he now has of how to double a square, Socrates asks Meno: “Or has anyone *taught* him geometry?” And in making the point that he will learn “all other subjects too” as he has learned this one, Socrates asks: “Is there then anyone who has *taught* this slave all things? You, it seems, should know, especially since he was born and raised in your
household.” If geometry, then, as it appears, might indeed have been taught to Meno’s slave, and so, too, all other subjects, the inescapable inference to be drawn is that geometry and all other subjects are the kinds of things that are taught. And if Meno is in a position to know if all of these subjects were taught to his slave, it is only because he would have seen the teachers in his home. Assuming, then, that the slave was not taught previously how to double the square, how is it that he is able to do so now? There is only one possibility: he is able to do so now because he is taught—now. Indeed, it is Socrates who teaches him, who quite literally “draws him a diagram.” As Bartlett (2004, 146) notes: “In fact, Socrates himself leads the slave to the correct answers eventually, answers arrived at by performing simple acts of calculation, of putting two and two together (82d4)…. These passages…do not prove that all learning is recollection….” But if Socrates does teach the boy this piece of geometry, how is it that he is able to do so? He can teach it because he knows it: he, too, was presumably taught by a teacher. Far from showing, then, how one nonknower can help another reach knowledge merely by asking questions, the geometry demonstration shows how someone who knows can teach someone who does not.

3. Other subjects are known and taught but virtue is not. Socrates cannot teach what he does not know—indeed, what no ordinary human being can know: virtue. There is no diagram he can draw; no final and conclusive tests he can perform; no teachers to whom he can point. (Lists of criteria such as these for certifying that one has knowledge can be found at Laches 185, Gorg. 465a, 500b–501a, 514a–c.) Yet in other subjects it is indeed possible to know. One can point to teachers, experts, from whom one has learned; and one can put new findings and discoveries to the test: products will either work well or not; mathematical hypotheses will either be proved or not. (We note the effectiveness in geometry of hypothetical method in the example at 86d–87b.) It is clear, too, when one has failed. One fails when one’s solution or product or answer is defective or deficient or wrong all by itself. The slave’s answer “4 feet” to the question what is the length of the sides of a square that is twice the size of a square the length of whose sides is two feet, for example, is not wrong because it fails to cohere with other beliefs he holds; it is wrong because 4 times 4 is 16—not 8. So, too, for his answer “3 feet”: it is wrong because 3 times 3 is 9. In the matter of virtue, by contrast, at most, and at best, one can test some of one’s opinions against others; the measure of success or failure is whether or not one’s opinions are consistent.

It is with respect to virtue, then, and not with respect to all things, that elenchus is Socrates’ only recourse. And it is with respect to virtue
and not with respect to all things that knowledge is so elusive. Virtue is not a craft like all others. Indeed, the question that occupies the remainder of the dialogue, the question of whether virtue can be taught, of whether there are teachers and pupils of it—a question that is raised not only here in the *Meno* but in the *Protagoras* and *Gorgias* as well—is not a question that Socrates could have or would have asked about any other subject.

Since, on the one hand, virtue is not like other subjects where knowledge is possible and expected, but, on the other, Meno will not be satisfied with anything less than knowledge, Socrates must design the myth in the *Meno* to hide the fact that his method of questioning will not yield knowledge. He must pretend that virtue is a branch of knowledge like all others, and that it, like all others, is learned by recollection of prenatally known truths. Thus Socrates, like Protagoras, defends in his myth a practice that is actually alien to what he does: Protagoras does not teach people conventional virtue but rather how to speak well and distinguish themselves; Socrates does not help people recover prenatal knowledge but rather tests their beliefs for consistency and on occasion suggests alternative ones. The fact is that neither Protagoras nor Socrates is willing to describe openly, accurately, and frankly what it is that he does. Their respective myths contain, then, not what they regard as “likely truth” (Brisson 1998, 9–10), but rather something they know to be untrue. Honesty might cost Protagoras his flourishing enterprise, his reputation, and possibly, his life. For Socrates, the consequences of honesty are the likelihood that his inquiry with Meno into the nature of virtue will end prematurely. Protagoras has no wish to defend in Athens a practice and profession that is anathema to Athenian democracy; we note how frequently Protagoras speaks of the need to be careful and take precautions (*Prot.* 316c, 317b–c, 351d). Furthermore, in spite of his clearly low opinion of the many (317a–b, 331c1–2, 352e3–4, 353a7–8, 359c6–7), he addresses at considerable length and with ostensible seriousness Socrates’ first question concerning the many’s practice of permitting all citizens to speak on political matters. Nor does Socrates wish to defend before Meno a procedure that has no chance of satisfying his demand to know.

Interestingly, in the case of both Protagoras and Socrates, the defense they offer works against them, so that in both cases the conclusion they draw is a jarring nonsequitur—in Protagoras’s case: so study with me; in Socrates’ case: so inquire with me. If virtue were learned the way their respective myths suggest, neither Protagoras’s nor Socrates’ services would be needed. If, as Protagoras maintains, the political craft is indeed just civic
virtue and, as such, a skill mastered by all by virtue of everyone’s teaching it to everyone, then what has he to offer? That Protagoras emerges from his speech with almost nothing to say for himself is the hefty price he pays for his disingenuousness. In the Meno, it is Socrates’ disingenuousness that has its price. For if, as Socrates contends, the likeness of all nature and the soul’s having learned all things make it fully possible for the soul that has recollected one thing to discover all other things if only “one is courageous and does not tire of the search” (81d4), what role has he to play in another man’s search for virtue? Instead of submitting once more to Socratic questioning, Meno would do best to go off by himself, try to recollect one thing, and then courageously apply himself to connecting one thing to another until he knows everything. There is no good reason for Meno to accept Socrates’ invitation to renew their joint inquiry. Socrates may be “willing to search with you for what virtue is” (81e2–3); but why should Meno wish to continue?

In the end, neither Protagoras nor Socrates succeeds. In the Protagoras, Socrates immediately turns the discussion to the “one small matter” (328e4) that remains unclear to him: what the relationship is between virtue and the individual virtues; the Great Speech with its reckless claims about the nature of sophistic instruction are all but abandoned. In the Meno, Meno simply returns in the aftermath of the geometry demonstration to his original question, “is virtue taught or does it come to men by nature or in some other way?” (86d1–2), nullifying in effect all of Socrates’ efforts to establish that virtue comes by recollection. Indeed, recognizing the utter failure of the recollection thesis to sway Meno, Socrates can only resignedly say: “…is it teachable or not—or, as we said just now, recollectable—but let it make no difference to us which term we use” (87b8–c1). The distinction that just a moment ago made all the difference in the world is now simply relinquished. Protagoras is unable to satisfy Socrates with his myth; Socrates fares no better with Meno.
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What Is Carl Schmitt’s Political Theology?

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Editor’s note: A response to this article by Anna Schmidt, defending Heinrich Meier’s interpretation of Schmitt, will appear in a forthcoming issue.

Carl Schmitt became famous and infamous through his definition of the political as the distinction between friend and enemy. The recognition of the enemy actually preponderates in the definition. Moreover, the distinction is existentially concrete. It amounts to a plain truth in politics that there is neither constant enemy nor perpetual friend. With the change of concrete situations, the grouping of friends and enemies changes accordingly. This changing character leads some scholars to apply it to Schmitt’s own political theory. Just as Georg Lucács finds in Schmitt’s thinking the “existential foundations” (Lucács 1980, 658, 839), Karl Löwith sees Schmitt as a political occasionalist, who changed his political discourse in response to the changes of concrete political occasions. Political decision in the Schmittian sense is thus regarded as “merely formal” without content and goal. Therefore, the essence of Schmitt’s political theory is ultimately reduced to nihilism (Löwith 1995).

In recent scholarship, there is a trend of recognizing the core of Schmitt’s thought as political theology. It is argued that Schmitt’s political doctrine is fundamentally based on divine revelation, on his Christian faith. The chief spokesman for the theological reading of Schmitt is Heinrich Meier, the author of two increasingly influential books on Schmitt and several monographs on Strauss (Meier 1995, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2003). In the theological reading, Schmitt’s political doctrine in general and Schmitt’s concepts of the political and of enmity are placed on the theological ground.

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The theological reading of Schmitt has consequently divided Schmitt scholars into two camps, one group in one way or another agreeing with the theologization of Schmitt, the other group opposing it. A number of scholars are rather convinced by the theological reading. For instance, Böckenförde testifies that “in light of many personal conversations with Schmitt, there are good reasons to adopt” Meier’s interpretation (Böckenförde 1996, 86). In addition, some scholars take similar lines of reading Schmitt as a political theologian, not necessarily being in full accordance with Meier’s interpretation (Waker 1994; Palaver 1992). On the other hand, there are scholars flatly rejecting the theological reading of Schmitt. For them, Meier’s interpretation wrongly enjoins theological dogma on Schmitt’s political and legal doctrine; it is rejected as “misleading” for its “attempt to demonize Schmitt by religious means” (Ulmen 1996, 93). Regarding the concept of political theology, while one camp insists upon understanding it strictly as Schmitt explains it, the other camp attempts to conjure up a deep and real meaning, i.e. the theological meaning that Schmitt supposedly covers with the statements on the surface. For Meier, whoever sticks to the surface meaning of political theology is in a certain sense fooled by Schmitt’s art of writing, and as a result remains unable to understand “Schmitt’s ‘arcanum’” (Meier 1998, xvi n9). The crux of the sharp disagreement between the two camps lies in their differing understandings of political theology, a term or a concept that was, as Erik Peterson points out, “introduced into the literature” by Schmitt (Peterson 1994, 81n168). In order to have a clear grasp of Schmitt’s concept of political theology, this essay will explore 1) what Schmitt means by political theology; 2) how Heinrich Meier interprets Schmitt in light of the thought of Leo Strauss; 3) how to understand the issue of Jerusalem and Athens in the thought of Strauss; and 4) how Strauss would understand Schmitt’s political theology.

1. Political Theology as Meant in Schmitt

Schmitt’s introduction of the concept of political theology into the theoretical discourse has earned him a title among many others: “the twentieth-century godfather of political theology” (Hollerich 2004, 107). Yet, it is more important to properly grasp what Schmitt means by political theology. In order to do so, it is indispensable to analyze how Schmitt uses the term, especially in the book entitled Political Theology, a book Schmitt published in 1922. Throughout the text the term political theology is mentioned three times, all in the third chapter, the heading of which is the same as the book title. The first and the third mention of political theology refer to the time of the French
Restoration. The context tells that Schmitt uses “political theology of the Restoration time” to mean the belief in the close connection between changes of spirit and mentality on the one hand and changes of society and politics on the other (Schmitt 1934, 47–48/42–43, 53/50). (References to Politische Theologie [Political Theology] are both to the German original and to the English translation. Numerals before the slash refer to the German original, and figures following the slash to the English translation.)

The second mention of the term political theology occurs in the context of the discussion about what happened at the conceptual level when the people won the seat of the sovereign in the political realm. Similarly, political theology means in this context the phenomenon of the correspondence between political and theological concepts, as illustrated by the analogy of the people in democracy and God in theology (53/49). It is noticeable that political theology is here accompanied by the word metaphysics. The term political metaphysics itself was just mentioned earlier in the text. One would wonder if there is a difference between political theology and political metaphysics. It is likely that Schmitt has their sameness or similarity in mind when mentioning political theology and metaphysics.

The similarity in meaning of political theology and political metaphysics can also be inferred from Schmitt’s general use of the terms “theology” and “metaphysics” throughout the text. “Theology” is used in combination with “metaphysics” several other times in the third chapter of Political Theology. If I am not mistaken, the phrase “theology and metaphysics” and its derivative forms occur seven times. More concretely, “theology and metaphysics” occurs thrice (43/36, 53/49), its adjective form “theological and metaphysical” or “the metaphysical and the theological” thrice (45/39, 50/46), and “theology or metaphysics” once (45/39). It is evident that theology and metaphysics belong together, though strictly speaking they are perhaps not identical. This belonging together explains a general characteristic of Schmitt’s concept of political theology. As G. L. Ulmen states, what Schmitt means by political theology is that “there is always an idea or metaphysical certainty, be it the Christian god or whatever, behind every system of law, every order of existence” (Ulmen 1992, 79).

Schmitt is of course cautious about speaking of metaphysics behind a system of law. Schmitt consciously distances himself from the materialistic philosophy of history, which sees theological and metaphysical doctrines as mere reflections of the economic basis, as well as from the spiritualistic philosophy of history, which attributes political changes to the corresponding
metaphysical construction. To avoid such misunderstandings, Schmitt speaks of the structural “correspondence,” “analogy,” or “identity” between theological and legal concepts. This is precisely what Schmitt means by “sociology of the concept of sovereignty,” which is part and parcel of “sociology of the concepts.” Schmitt defines sociology of the concept of sovereignty as the ascertainment of the identity between “the metaphysical image that a definite age makes of the world” and “a form of its political organization” (Schmitt 1934, 50–51/46).

In brief, political theology and metaphysics can be pinned down to a structural identity between the political-juristic concepts and the theological-metaphysical concepts of a certain age.

For Schmitt, the structural identity of theological and juristic concepts of a certain age reflects the metaphysical nature of the age. From this it follows that the content of that formal structure may vary from age to age. One may wonder how Schmitt would consider the kind of change in content. Schmitt does provide a historical analysis of the changes of content from age to age. He detects significant changes of the central sphere in the most recent five centuries of European intellectual development. The central sphere is said to have undergone a successive change from theology in the sixteenth century, to metaphysics in the seventeenth century, to the humanitarian morality of the eighteenth century, to economics in the nineteenth century, and lastly to technology in the twentieth century. The shift from theology to metaphysics is regarded as the “strongest and most consequential” change of the central sphere in European intellectual history, because it decisively “determined the direction of all further development” (Schmitt 1993, 137). This leads us to consider Schmitt’s talk about secularization.

Schmitt’s most famous statement on secularization is no doubt the opening sentence of the third chapter of Political Theology. There Schmitt declares that “[a]ll significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.” Apart from mentioning the structural relation between the two series of concepts, Schmitt instantiates his assertion by seeing omnipotent legislators as the secularized all-mighty God, the state of exception in jurisprudence as the secularized form of miracle (Schmitt 1934, 43/36). What is concerned here is no longer merely a structural identity of theological and political concepts of a certain age, but the transformation of traditional theological concepts into modern political concepts. The structural identity of theological and political concepts of a certain age is thus complemented with the discussion over the transformation of traditional theological concepts into modern political concepts. Furthermore, it is not
only a conceptual transference, but also a relation of derivation. Modern political concepts are derived from traditional theological concepts. On the other hand, the substitution of the derivative political concepts for the original theological concepts implies that theological concepts are inevitably driven into oblivion in the process of secularization.

If one follows Schmitt’s distinction between the age of theology and the age of metaphysics, one could say that political metaphysics strictly understood has both a positive and a negative meaning. Positively, however secular it may be, political metaphysics still has in view the correspondence between metaphysics and politics. Negatively, the process of secularization, which started from the age of metaphysics, inevitably leads to the attempt to rid the secularized world of the residues of theology. A completely secularized world would conceive of itself as a self-functional automaton, which renders its maker insignificant and superfluous. As a result, the significance of a transcendent God to theology and that of the state sovereign to politics are gradually marginalized. The marginalization of the question of sovereignty results in the fact that contemporary legal theory becomes incapable of apprehending its significance. Schmitt’s discussion about political theology is therefore also an attempt to challenge contemporary legal theory by reaffirming the question of sovereignty and its significance.

The subtitle of *Political Theology* clearly indicates that the book is devoted to a discussion about “the doctrine of sovereignty.” Schmitt asserts at the start of *Political Theology* that “Sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception [Ausnahmezustand]” (Schmitt 1934, 13/5). The sovereign is described as “a highest, legally independent, indivisible power” (26/17). Taking his cue from Bodin, Schmitt attempts to incorporate the concept of decision into the concept of sovereignty (15/8). The question of sovereignty is thus understood by Schmitt, as well as by the seventeenth-century writers of natural law, as “the question about the decision in the exceptional case” (16/9). It is hence a double question, a question about decision and the exception. As to decision, Schmitt holds that “the juridical order [Rechtsordnung], like every order, is based on decision and not on the norm” (16/10). What Schmitt is chiefly concerned with is not the question of how to decide, but the decision itself, and particularly the question of who decides on the state of exception in the actuality of the juridical life (Rechtsleben) (13/7, 17/10, 40/34). According to Schmitt, the law and the norm only regulate how to decide, but they do not know who decides.
The sovereign decision is the decision on the state of exception. Therefore, the theory of sovereignty presupposes a theory of the state of exception. As Giorgio Agamben stresses, Schmitt established in *Political Theology* “the essential contiguity between the state of exception and sovereignty” and made “the most rigorous attempt to construct a theory of the state of exception” (Agamben 2005, 1, 32). The state of exception is in Schmitt contrasted to the normal state. Schmitt does not employ it, however, to fight against the normal state, but rather attempts to ground the normal state on the state of exception. With the concept of the state of exception, Schmitt launches into a fierce polemic against legal normativism, which denies the significance of the state of exception to a legal theory.

Schmitt’s affirmation of the concept of sovereignty is an affirmation of the state of exception, for the question of sovereignty is a question about the decision on the state of exception. The sovereign decides, Schmitt stresses, “whether there exists the extremely emergent case, as well as what to do in order to eliminate it.” More importantly, the sovereign “stands outside the normally valid juridical order and yet belongs to it, because he is responsible for the decision on whether the constitution can be suspended in toto” (Schmitt 1934, 14/7). It is precisely this standing-outside and yet belonging, as Giorgio Agamben notes, that constitutes “the topological structure of the state of exception” (Agamben 2005, 35). On the one hand, as the suspension of the entire exiting juridical order, the state of exception “confounds the unity and order of the rationalist scheme (Schmitt 1934, 20/14). On the other hand, it is “something always different from anarchy and chaos, and in the juristic sense an order still exists, even if it is not a juridical order” (18/12). Seen from this topological structure, the juridical order is temporally suspended on the state of exception with a view to the creation of the situation in which the norm can become applicable again. The state of exception as the suspension of the juridical order thus always retains an essential relation to the juridical order. Both the exception and the norm belong to a juridical framework. The exception belongs to it through its exclusion from it, whereas the norm belongs to it through its inclusion in it. Moreover, the state of exception is for Schmitt “more important” and “more interesting” than the normal case, because “the norm proves nothing, and the exception proves everything; not only does it ratify the rule, but also the rule in general lives only on the exception” (21/15). Therefore, the exception is for Schmitt the living force, the ultimate ground, and the originary source, of the norm. It makes the application of the norm possible.
To summarize, by political theology Schmitt means above all a methodological observation of a phenomenon in the history of concepts, that is, the structural analogy or identity or correspondence between theological and legal concepts. Horizontally, the correspondence means a structural identity of theological-metaphysical and juridical-political concepts of a certain age. Vertically, it means a transformation of traditional theological concepts into modern political concepts. On the other hand, Schmitt’s political theology is an affirmation on the urgency of a theory of sovereignty and its presupposition, i.e. a theory of the state of exception. One can say that the theory of sovereignty is the subject matter of Schmitt’s political theology.

One may object that a proper understanding of Schmitt’s political theology should not be confined to a discussion about Political Theology only. Yet, when we look beyond Political Theology, we do not find in Schmitt substantial changes regarding the meaning of political theology. For instance, in the 1930 essay “Ethic of State and Pluralistic State” Schmitt clearly describes political theology as the “intellectual and historical array of phenomena” illustrated in the “correspondence of theological and metaphysical world-pictures with the picture of the state” (Schmitt 1999, 197). In the preface to the second edition of Political Theology (1934), Schmitt emphasizes that the concept of secularization is the key to understanding “recent centuries of our history” (7/2). In the sequel to Political Theology, Schmitt reiterates that the treatise Political Theology does not concern “any theological dogma, but a scientific-theoretical and history-of-idea problem: the structural identity of the concepts in theological and juristic argumentations and recognitions” (1970, 18–19).

In brief, Schmitt’s political theology can be understood from two perspectives. From the methodological perspective, it means a structural correspondence between theological and juristic concepts, and a structural transformation of traditional theological concepts into modern political concepts. From the viewpoint of the subject matter, it concerns the doctrine of political sovereignty, which is, as Moltmann describes it, “the political theology of power, authority, and sovereignty” (1999, 38–39).

2. Political Theology as Based on Divine Revelation

Heinrich Meier’s theological reading of Schmitt has made a “theological twist” in the Schmitt historiography. In this reading, Schmitt’s
explicit statement on political theology as a historical-intellectual phenomenon is regarded as one of many legends about the meaning of political theology, a legend allegedly promulgated by others and Schmitt himself. On the other hand, Schmitt’s doctrine of sovereignty, the subject matter of Schmitt’s political theology, is anchored in his commitment to the Christian faith. Whereas Schmitt talks about the secularization of traditional theological concepts in the modern theory of the state, Meier conversely anchors Schmitt’s own political theory in his Christian faith. In so doing, Meier situates Schmitt’s political theology in the tradition of Christian political theology. Schmitt’s attacks on Judaism are accordingly explained by virtue of their religious grounds. In Meier’s reading, not only is Schmitt’s political doctrine grounded on the Christian faith, but also the political burden on the name of Schmitt is shaken off.

According to Meier, what Schmitt really means by political theology is that the political has its deepest roots in the theological. Schmitt’s own political theory too is rooted in the belief in divine revelation. This is Meier’s particular claim. The first expression of this particular thesis can be found in Meier’s first book on Schmitt, *Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss und “Der Begriff des Politischen”: Zu einem Dialog unter Abwesenden* (Meier 1988, 1995). In this groundbreaking work Meier undertakes a detailed, forceful, and provocative analysis of the three editions of Schmitt’s *Concept of the Political* (1927, 1932, 1933), especially of the last two editions, together with Leo Strauss’s 1932 review essay on *The Concept of the Political*. In this study, Meier takes pains to demonstrate that divine revelation is the “hidden” ground of Schmitt’s political doctrine. The significance of Leo Strauss lies, as Meier sees it, in the fact that in facing the challenge of Leo Strauss from the standpoint of political philosophy Schmitt was enticed to explicate, especially in the third edition of *The Concept of the Political*, his well-covered standpoint of political theology. Meier’s interpretation of Schmitt’s political theology finds its most condensed formulation in the article “What Is Political Theology?” originally published as a prefatory essay (Meier 1992, 2002b).

Meier turns his particular interpretation of the “hidden” dialogue between Schmitt and Strauss into a broad issue by laying stress upon the conflict or tension between political theology, the standpoint as represented by Carl Schmitt, and political philosophy, the standpoint as represented by Leo Strauss. One could say that the general aim of Meier’s inquiry into the then unexplored “hidden” dialogue between Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss is to argue for the incompatible conflict between political theology
and political philosophy. The twofold aim was further developed and reiterated in Meier’s second book on Schmitt, *Die Lehre Carl Schmitts: Vier Kapitel zur Unterscheidung Politischer Theologie und Politischer Philosophie* (Meier 1994, 1998). This book focuses on four aspects (morality, politics, revelation, and history) that are considered decisive to understanding Schmitt’s political theology on the one hand, and the distinction between political theology and political philosophy on the other.

Schmitt employs the term political theology, above all, to analyze an important phenomenon in the history of thought. In Meier’s interpretation, it is turned into characterizing Schmitt’s own theoretical position. Political theology, understood as a political theory or doctrine that “claims to be founded on faith in divine revelation, now becomes for the first time a concept of self-identification and self-characterization” (Meier 2002b, 82–83). It is believed to be “the core of Schmitt’s theoretical enterprise” and “the apt and sole appropriate characterization of Schmitt’s doctrine” (Meier, 2002b, 79, 83). Schmitt’s theoretical position therefore holds to the truth of faith, and puts itself in service of the obedience to God. Furthermore, political theology is also believed to be “a weapon” or “the instrument” used by Schmitt to force his adversary to join the battle between the “two irreconcilable armies,” “one under the banner of Satan, the other under the sign of God.” With this weapon, Schmitt detected and uncovered political theologies even in “theologians of the antitheological,” who repudiate, negate, and deny theology, the political, and political theology. Therefore, Schmitt is said to have successfully forced his adversaries to fight on Schmitt’s own battleground, i.e. on the plane of political theology where only faith meets faith (Meier 2002b, 81, 84).

In addition to reading Schmitt as a political theologian, i.e. a political thinker whose teaching is based on divine revelation, what is decisive to Meier’s framework of interpretation is the general claim that only against Strauss’s political philosophy can Schmitt’s political theology be properly understood, and vice versa. Though Meier’s particular claim has attracted far more attention than his general claim, the general one is actually even more decisive than the particular one. One cannot properly understand or refute Meier’s interpretation of Schmitt as a political theologian without paying sufficient attention to his general claim regarding the conflict between political theology and political philosophy. Moreover, Meier’s aim is not merely to reconstruct the hidden dialogue between Schmitt and Strauss, but also to associate it with a broader issue, i.e. the incompatible tension between political theology and political philosophy, between the life of obedience and the life of
free insight. Following Leo Strauss, Meier sees the vitality of the West in that irreconcilable tension.

The framework of Meier’s interpretation is dependent on and derived from Strauss’s view on the political tension between Jerusalem and Athens. In Meier’s interpretation, Strauss is regarded as a political philosopher independent of any religious influence, Judaism included. He is opposed to Schmitt, a political theologian who holds fast to the Christian faith. What Meier says about the opposition between Schmitt and Strauss, between political theology and political philosophy, can be seen as an application of Strauss’s view of the tension between Jerusalem and Athens.

In Meier’s reading, Schmitt as a political theologian is opposed to Strauss as a political philosopher. The opposition between the two thinkers is interpreted as an excellent illustration of the tension between Jerusalem and Athens, between the life of obedience to the divine command and the life of free insight into the truth. Yet, Meier has to modify Strauss’s discussion about the tension in order to fill Schmitt into one side of that tension. Whereas the side of Jerusalem in Strauss’s discussion represents the position of traditional Judaism, the side of Jerusalem in Meier’s interpretation as represented by Schmitt is anti-Semitic. This is a crucial modification. The Jew is the enemy or at least the embodiment of the enemy in the eyes of Schmitt. Meier does not shun the question but traces Schmitt’s anti-Semitism to the religious root, namely, to his faith that Jesus is the Christ. Schmitt’s attacks on Judaism are therefore described as understandable for a Christian political theologian, in view of the millennial conflict between Christianity and Judaism. Meier links Schmitt’s political theology with “the most important representatives of political theology in the history of Christianity,” i.e. with the signposts of the tradition of Christian theology, Paul, Tertullian, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, etc. (Meier 2002b, 86). Making the mention of Paul, Meier refers to the lectures of Jacob Taubes on the political theology of Paul. He does not mention, however, the Jewish point of view in Taubes’ reading. For Taubes, the political theology of Paul as the initiator of the Christian tradition is not anti-Semitic at all, but pro-Jewish and in service of the salvation of the Jews. Nor does Meier mention that in describing the political theology of Paul as “a political declaration of war on the Caesar” Taubes opposes it to Schmitt’s “totalitarian” concept. In Taubes’ understanding Schmitt was neither a philosopher nor a theologian but a jurist who “has to legitimate the world as it is” because it is “a part and parcel of the whole education, the whole idea of the office of the jurist” (Taubes 2004, 16, 103).
In filling Schmitt into the Straussian formulation of the tension between Jerusalem and Athens, Meier has to oppose political theology (represented by Schmitt) to political philosophy (represented by Strauss) and to Judaism at the same time. In other words, political theology is both opposed to political philosophy as its enemy at the theoretical level and to Judaism as the enemy in the political realm. Even if we grant that Meier’s reading is convincing, one is still left in perplexity as to whether there is a kinship between political philosophy and Judaism and what is common to both as the enemies of Schmitt’s supposed political theology. Meier’s analysis itself suggests the question but fails to proffer an answer. As long as that question remains unanswered, Meier’s interpretation itself remains in question.

3. The Issue of Jerusalem and Athens in Strauss

The identification of Jerusalem with Judaism in Strauss’s discussion about the tension between Jerusalem and Athens, between revelation and reason, is testified both by Strauss’s own words and by the critiques of the Straussian emphasis on the tension. One of the most telling evidences that can be adduced from Strauss’s writings is what he says in the Introduction to Persecution and the Art of Writing. There Strauss unambiguously states that “[t]he issue of traditional Judaism versus philosophy is identical with the issue of Jerusalem and Athens” (Strauss 1952, 20). This identification is clearly expressed in most of Strauss’s early writings. When mentioned in combination with Athens, Jerusalem refers primarily to Judaism, more concretely, to Jewish orthodoxy. After Strauss moved to the United States, he did not so explicitly identify Jerusalem with Judaism, but used more ambiguous words such as the Bible, revelation, and the like, that seem to include both Judaism and Christianity. But what Strauss actually refers to or Strauss’s preference of traditional Judaism to Christianity is not ambiguous to those who read him with care. As Fortin acutely observes, there is an “absence of any thematic treatment of Christianity anywhere in Strauss’s writings or of any extended commentary by Strauss on the works of an unmistakably Christian author” (1996, 287). This absence does not merely indicate a fact, but an attitude of preference. Strauss’s preference is well discerned by his Christian critics too. F. D. Wilhelmsen, for example, complains that for Strauss and his followers, “Jewish religion is superior to Christian religion and Greek philosophy is superior to Christian philosophy.” It follows that for them “Christians lose both ways” (Wilhelmsen 1978, 216). It is thus evident that
Christianity is secondary in meaning for Strauss’s discussion on the tension between Jerusalem and Athens.

Meier does not hesitate to apply the Straussian template to Schmitt’s political doctrine by filling Schmitt, interpreted as a Christian political theologian, in the side of Jerusalem of that tension. Of course, it is justifiable to interpret Jerusalem in general as referring to both Judaism and Christianity. But in this particular case, if one takes Strauss’s emphasis on the tension between Jerusalem and Athens as the point of departure, one has to bear in mind Strauss’s preference of Judaism over Christianity. Meier remains silent, however, about the fact that in Strauss’s formulation Jerusalem means primarily Judaism.

The question may arise as to why we need to take into account the distinction between Judaism and Christianity in Strauss. Is this distinction really significant? Would it not be possible that as a Jew Strauss just considers it expedient to formulate the tension as the one between traditional Judaism and philosophy? Is not Christianity a revealed religion? Of course, it would be absurd to deny Christianity to be a revealed religion. It is certainly a common sense to Strauss as to anyone else. Still, we have to pay attention to the question why Strauss particularly identifies “Jerusalem” with traditional Judaism. Is it just an expedient way of talking about the issue?

Strauss once commented on the talk about the “Judaeo-Christian tradition” by saying that this way of talking “means to blur and to conceal the grave differences” (Strauss 1995, 307). We need to ask then what these “grave differences” are. In the Introduction to Persecution and the Art of Writing, Strauss acknowledges that his discovery of esotericism/exotericism resulted from his study of the Jewish and Islamic philosophy of the Middle Ages. Then he proceeds to discuss the obvious and essential difference between Judaism and Islam on the one hand and Christianity on the other. What is essential is that revelation understood in Judaism and Islam has “the character of law,” whereas revelation understood in Christianity has the character of faith (Strauss 1952, 8–9). Accordingly, there is a difference concerning the status of philosophy. Whereas in Judaism and Islam the status of philosophy is precarious before the law, in Christianity philosophy is incorporated into the theological dogma. What Strauss intimates here is that philosophy as a way of life, as the life of free inquiry into the truth, was better understood and preserved in Judaism and Islam than in Christianity. Put conversely, incorporated into the theological system, philosophy as a way of life becomes blurred and subservient to theology.
As early as 1936, Strauss obviously aligns Christian thought with modernity. After pointing out “a profound agreement” between Jewish and Muslim thought of the Middle Ages and ancient thought, Strauss asserts that “it is not the [Jewish] Bible and the Koran, but perhaps the New Testament, and certainly the Reformation and modern philosophy, which brought about the break with ancient thought” (Strauss 1990, 4–5). The word “perhaps” seems to suggest a sense of uncertainty, but perhaps it is just a prudent way of stating the “grave differences.” Yet, one may wonder if this alignment of Christianity with modernity would be contrary to Strauss’s view that the moderns started their project with a radical critique of religion in general and Christianity in particular. It would be a mistake to simply attribute the seeming contradiction to the inconsistency of Strauss. The question remains, however, as to how to reconcile the Christian origin of modernity with the antitheological nature of modernity in the thought of Strauss.

Strauss ascribes the origin of modernity to Christianity in virtue of the fact that the modern attempt to establish a rational world state by means of the universal Enlightenment has its root in the Christian concept of universal salvation. For Strauss, Judaism and Greek philosophy do not understand salvation as universal. The Jews understood it according to the conviction that they are the chosen people. The Greeks understood it based on the conviction that there is an insurmountable gulf between philosophers and nonphilosophers, between the select few and the many. For Strauss the status of the Jews as a people among peoples is analogous to the status of Socrates as a man among human individuals. It is in this perspective that Strauss identifies the issue of Jerusalem and Athens with the issue of traditional Judaism versus philosophy. The distinctiveness of the Jews lies in their obedience to God’s calling them as a chosen people. It is in this character that Strauss sees the worth and distinctness of the Jewish people. Strauss considers the Jewish people and their fate as “the living witness of the absence of redemption,” because Strauss understands the meaning of the chosen people as being “chosen to prove the absence of redemption” (Strauss 1997, 327). In contrast, the mission of Socrates starts from his questioning the saying of the god that there is no one wiser than Socrates (Apology 21a). The mission of Socrates does not start from obedience, but from questioning. Yet Socrates’ attempt to refute the god by examining those reputed to be wise led him to realize that men of wisdom are actually ignorant of the most important human things. Socrates’ attempt failed in a sense, but it does not fail in any sense. Socrates is in a sense chosen to witness the absence of knowledge. For Strauss, the longing of the Jews for the righteous city in deed is comparable and at the same time opposed
to Socrates’ construction of the best city in speech. What Strauss says about the disagreement between Jerusalem and Athens can be properly understood when one is mindful of Strauss’s identification of Jerusalem with Judaism.

Both Judaism and Greek philosophy are timid with respect to the question of the possibility of universal salvation or Enlightenment. It is with Christianity that the love of God is equally and graciously applied to all human beings. From this perspective, Strauss understands modernity as the secularized form of Christianity. Yet, the modern project has a bolder vision of the order of human things. It attempts to abolish religion and persecution as such with a view to the establishment of a world state, of a republic of universal light, in which religion is rendered superfluous by way of the universal or popular Enlightenment (Strauss 1952, 33–34). Therefore, Strauss understands the modern project both as having originated in Christianity and as an antitheological attempt to establish an irreligious world.

For Strauss, the break with the ancients is of Christian origin. Therefore, one can say that in Strauss “Greek, Arabic and Jewish thinkers belong to the Ancients, whereas the Moderns are Christian, even if they fight against the Christian church” (Pelluchon 2005, 226). One may disagree and dispute with Strauss, but one cannot say that the distinction in question is insignificant to Strauss. As a matter of fact, it was significant to Strauss from the outset. In this regard, Christian critics, Wilhelmsen for instance, have good reasons to complain about the inferiority of Christianity in the thought of Strauss.

4. Political Theology in the Straussian Perspective

Meier argues that Strauss rightly detects the political theology of Schmitt, just as Schmitt rightly reads Strauss as a political philosopher, that both read each other with the awareness of the tension between political theology and political philosophy. Meier’s reading of Schmitt depends on Strauss’s formulation of the tension between Jerusalem and Athens. Meier’s definition of political theology draws upon Strauss too. Strauss seldom uses the term political theology, but he does use it several times. What is most relevant and most important to the present discussion is a distinction made between political theology and political philosophy when Strauss defines what political philosophy is. Strauss distinguishes political philosophy from various concepts, i.e. political thought, political theory, political theology, social philosophy, and political science in the scientific sense. Contrasting political
philosophy with political theology, Strauss writes,

We are compelled to distinguish political philosophy from political theology. By political theology we understand political teachings which are based on divine revelation. Political philosophy is limited to what is accessible to the unassisted human mind. (Strauss 1959, 13)

It is precisely by this distinction that Meier reads Schmitt and Strauss and defines the core of Schmitt’s political teaching and that of Strauss’s.

Meier employs Strauss’s distinction between political theology and political philosophy to construct an unlikely “hidden” dialogue between Schmitt and Strauss. The crux of the problem is whether Strauss understands Schmitt, as Meier believes he does, as a political theologian in the sense of political theology as Strauss explains it, and whether Schmitt understands the tension between theology and philosophy so strictly as does Strauss. Meier identifies Schmitt’s political theology with Strauss’s definition of the term. More correctly, Meier surreptitiously replaces Schmitt’s own explanation of political theology by Strauss’s definition, and assumes that Strauss’s understanding precisely explains how Schmitt understands himself and how Strauss understands Schmitt. Yet, Schmitt hardly talks about philosophy, theology, and their tension so strictly as does Strauss. Were Schmitt to use the terms philosophy and theology strictly in the Straussian sense, Schmitt’s portrayal of the Catholic counter-revolutionary thinkers as Catholic philosophers would be in conflict with that sense. On the other hand, Strauss does not refer to Schmitt when he defines political theology as political teachings based on divine revelation.

While Schmitt scholars pay more attention to Meier’s particular claim, i.e. that Schmitt is a political theologian, I would consider an ignored but important point presupposed in Meier’s general claim, i.e. that Strauss understands Schmitt as a political theologian. In what follows I will argue that Strauss actually does not read Schmitt that way. As analyzed above, Schmitt’s elaboration on political theology consists of two aspects, one regarding a methodological observation, the other regarding the subject matter. What is to be examined is how Strauss may understand Schmitt with respect to those two aspects.

Methodologically speaking, Schmitt defines political theology as sociology of the concept of sovereignty, which forms a part, if not the most important part, of sociology of concepts in general. If we do not ideologically understand ideology as the superstructure in relation to the economic basis,
that sociology can be characterized as a particular form of ideology of a
certain age, in view of the correspondence of theological-metaphysical and
juristic-political concepts. It may not be accidental that Karl Mannheim
considers Schmitt relevant to the studies of ideology, though Schmitt’s related
discussions are for Mannheim still confined “to historical references or to the
most general considerations” (Mannheim 1972, 53n1). Mannheim is generally
acknowledged to be one of the founders of sociology of knowledge.
Mannheim’s references to Schmitt indicate that sociology of concepts may
be understood as equivalent to sociology of knowledge. Sociology of the
concept of sovereignty may accordingly be understood as part of sociology
of knowledge. If this connection we make is correct, it will be clear how
Strauss may understand Schmitt’s political theology when we examine how
he understands sociology of knowledge in general.

In the Introduction to *Persecution and the Art of Writing*,
Strauss contrasts sociology of philosophy with sociology of knowledge.
Sociology of knowledge, Strauss writes, “emerged in a society which took
for granted the essential harmony between thought and society or between
intellectual progress and social progress.” Concerned with “the relation of the
different types of thought to different types of society,” sociology of knowledge
“tended to see in the different philosophies, exponents of different societies
or classes or ethnic spirits” (Strauss 1952, 7). This description can be applied
to the sociology of concepts that Schmitt advocated, namely, the structural
correspondence between theological and juristic concepts, between the
metaphysical images of the world and the forms of the political organization.
Strauss elaborates what he calls “sociology of philosophy” in contradistinction
to sociology of knowledge. While sociology of knowledge in general is con-
cerned with the harmony between thought and society, between types
of thought and types of society, sociology of philosophy is concerned with
“the fundamental relation of thought as such to society as such.” It seriously
considers a possibility that sociology of knowledge fails to consider, i.e. the
possibility that “all philosophers form a class by themselves, or that what unites
all genuine philosophers is more important than what unites a given
philosopher with a particular group of non-philosophers” (Strauss 1952, 7–8).
Sociology of philosophy, or the political aspect of philosophy, denies the
harmony between thought and society, between philosophy and politics. It
believes that the legitimacy of philosophy is not recognized in society, and
philosophers are “very far from the exponents of society or of parties.”
Therefore, sociology of philosophy tends to emphasize the tension between
thought as such and society as such, whereas sociology of knowledge stresses
the harmony or correspondence between them. In the perspective of sociology of philosophy, the status of philosophy and philosophers in society is precarious and in danger. Strauss regards the understanding of that danger and of its various forms as “the foremost task” and “the sole task” of the sociology of philosophy. It is for Strauss identical in meaning with political philosophy or the exoteric teaching of philosophy. The contrast between sociology of philosophy and sociology of knowledge reveals the possible attitude of Strauss toward Schmitt’s elaboration of sociology of concepts. From this perspective, Strauss does not understand Schmitt as a political theologian in the Straussian sense, but sees Schmitt’s political theology as belonging in spirit to sociology of knowledge in general.

Related to the methodological aspect of Schmitt’s political theology is the theme of secularization. The Schmittian thesis of secularization maintains that all significant concepts in the modern theory of the state are secularized forms of theological concepts. As Strauss formulates it, “modernity is secularized biblical faith; the other-worldly biblical faith has become radically this-worldly.” The positive aspect of the notion of secularization is for Strauss “to establish heaven on earth by purely human means.” Its negative aspect is the “loss or atrophy of biblical faith,” notwithstanding the preservation of thoughts, feelings, or habits of biblical origin in a secularized form after that loss (Strauss 1989, 82–83). Though Strauss does not refer to Schmitt when formulating the meaning of secularization, his critique of secularization corresponds to Schmitt’s stricture on modernity, especially on the positive aspect of secularization.

Yet, for Strauss Schmitt’s critique of modern liberalism remains trapped in the framework of liberalism. In his comments on Schmitt’s Concept of the Political, Strauss emphasizes that Schmitt’s critique of liberalism still falls within the consistent “systematics of liberal thought.” According to Strauss, Schmitt’s critique can be completed “only if one succeeds in gaining a horizon beyond liberalism. In such a horizon Hobbes completed the foundation of liberalism” (Strauss 1996, 93, 106–7). It amounts to saying that Schmitt’s critique of liberalism falls prey to Hobbes’s foundation of liberalism.

Strauss sees Schmitt’s affirmation of the political as an affirmation of Hobbes’s state of nature in the opposite direction. Whereas Hobbes’s project is to negate the state of nature, Schmitt “restores the Hobbesian state of nature to a place of honor” (Strauss 1996, 90, 103). Giorgio Agamben understands the Hobbesian state of nature in the light of the Schmittian state of exception. In this perspective, the Hobbesian state of nature
is restored in Schmitt to a place of honor in the person of the sovereign who decides on the state of exception. The Schmittian-Hobbesian understanding of the state of exception attempts to inscribe the state of exception within the juridical context, taking it as the measure and the source of the normal state (Agamben 1995, 35, 105). In this connection, Strauss would find much resonance in Agamben. He criticizes the Schmittian-Hobbesian political theory for taking its bearings on the notion of the state of exception. Strauss makes the distinction between the ancients and the moderns by what they take as their bearings: while “the classics take their bearings by the normal case as distinguished from the exception,” Machiavelli and the moderns take their bearings by the exception, by extreme case, believing that “the extreme case is more revealing of the roots of civil society and therefore of its true character than is the normal case” (Strauss 1959, 47; 1953, 179). As one of the founders of the modern project, Hobbes too “built his whole moral and political doctrine on observations regarding the extreme case” (Strauss 1953, 196). Seen in this perspective, Schmitt is in line with Hobbes in taking his bearings by the exception, by the extreme case. By contrast, Strauss appears to endorse Maimonides’ view that “the Law does not pay attention to the exceptional, and legislation is not made with a view to things that are rare” (Lerner and Mahdi 1963, 224).

In addition, Schmitt agrees with Hobbes on the supremacy of authority. For the classics, the sovereign is sovereign by virtue of his wisdom, and the simply best regime is the absolute rule of the wise and virtuous; for the moderns, the sovereign is made sovereign because of the fundamental compact. The question of the best regime is hence replaced by the question of the legitimate government. From this it follows that “command or will is the core of sovereignty or that laws are laws by virtue of authority alone.” Hence in Hobbes’s doctrine of sovereignty there is a “denial of the possibility of distinguishing good and bad regimes (Strauss 1953, 186, 191–92). This denial results from the assumption of the supremacy of authority. Strauss’s criticism of Hobbes in this regard can be equally applied to Schmitt’s doctrine of sovereignty. One can easily recognize the supremacy of authority in Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty. Schmitt holds that the political entity or the state is by its very nature decisive and sovereign, “regardless of the sources from which it derives its last psychic motives. It exists or does not exist. If it exists, it is the supreme, that is, in the decisive case, the authoritative entity” (Schmitt 1996, 43–44). Therefore, we can conclude by saying that for Strauss Schmitt follows Hobbes at least at two decisive points, i.e. taking his bearings by the exception and assuming the supremacy of authority. Seen in this perspective, Strauss’s
critique of Hobbes’s political doctrine can be read, *mutatis mutandis*, as a critique of Schmitt’s political doctrine. For Strauss, Schmitt’s critique of liberalm does not go beyond the horizon in which Hobbes founded liberalism. Schmitt does not explain his concept of political theology as rooted in divine revelation. Nor does Strauss understand Schmitt’s political teaching as based on divine revelation, but as reluctantly dependent on the foundation of liberal thought.

**Conclusion**

Schmitt coined the term *political theology* and elucidated it from the viewpoint of the history of ideas and of the theory of sovereignty. Strauss borrows the term and defines it differently as political teachings based on divine revelation. This does not necessarily suggest that Strauss reads Schmitt in the light of the political theology thus understood. Moltmann and Taubes borrowed the term from Schmitt too. Both parted from Schmitt’s political theology understood as a theory of the sovereign power by seeking another understanding of political theology (Moltmann 1999; Taubes 2004). The same holds true with Strauss. Strauss does not conflate his criticism of Schmitt and the issue of Jerusalem and Athens. Seeing that Schmitt’s critique of liberalism depends in the decisive respects on Hobbes’s foundation of liberalism, Strauss undertakes his criticism of Schmitt with a view to the quarrel between moderns and ancients. He elaborates the issue of Jerusalem and Athens on the basis of his study of the Jewish and Islamic philosophy of the Middle Ages. It may be overstating to assert that there is no connection at all between the two issues in the thought of Leo Strauss. It would be misleading, however, to conflate Strauss’s critical reading of Schmitt and his elaboration of the issue of Jerusalem and Athens.

In the theological reading of Schmitt, the political is for Schmitt rooted in the theological. In Strauss’s understanding of Schmitt, whereas the central sphere occupied by theology was in recent centuries of Europe successively replaced by metaphysics, morality, economics, and most recently by technology, the political constantly remains destiny (Strauss 1996, 102). For Schmitt the political stands as the inescapable destiny of human existence. Of course, Strauss’s view of Schmitt as presented above may have missed the esoteric and hence real meaning conveyed both in Schmitt’s own text and in Strauss's critique of Schmitt. Yet, the enthusiasm about exploring the secret meaning of Schmitt’s political theology is contrary to Schmitt’s
explicit statement and to Strauss’s critique of Schmitt. Moreover, inspired by Strauss’s elaboration of the esoteric/exoteric art of writing, that enthusiasm seems to ignore one of the hermeneutic principles that Strauss admonishes, namely, the oft-cited statement that “[t]he problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things” (Strauss 1958, 13).

References

I am indebted to Prof. William Desmond, an anonymous reader of the journal, Prof. LIU Xiaofeng, Dr. CHENG Guanmin, and XU Jian for their valuable comments and suggestions on earlier drafts. I am also grateful to Prof. Heinrich Meier for reading an earlier draft and for sparing the time for an impressive discussion, in late January 2006 in Munich, about Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss, and the intention of his own interpretation. Last but not least, I wish to thank Thomas Schneider and Erik Dempsey for their superb editorial help.


The conventional, the more or less received view, of the relationship of Aquinas’s thought to Jefferson’s, is that the former represents the gloomy ages of monkish superstition, and the latter the skeptical and scientific Age of Enlightenment. In due time, it is said, the progress of History replaced the former with the latter. Of course, the same progress has in our time replaced the Age of Enlightenment with the Age of Nihilism, also known as Post-Modernism. A meeting of the two Thomases today—assuming such a thing were possible—would then be a meeting of two minds, each locked within the confines of its own age, unable to understand each other, and both made obsolete by Progress. Thomas, as a quasi-official philosopher of the church, may still be of interest to some pious Roman Catholics, and to some marginal non-Catholics, who have not yet discovered that they are also prisoners within their own time and place.

Leo Strauss, in blissful defiance of what everyone else knew (or thought they knew) used to say that Socrates had more in common with any intelligent American than with any stupid Athenian. For Strauss, the difference between intelligence and stupidity was more important than any difference between an ancient Athenian and a modern American. According to Strauss, there was something called the “human condition” which was common to all human beings, apart from their time and place. What was common to all human beings made possible a common understanding which, however difficult to achieve, was nonetheless in principle accessible to all human beings. That principle was once called “philosophy.” (This was before a doctorate in philosophy—Ph.D.—might be in any subject other than philosophy.) The understanding of what was important to all human beings as human beings was once regarded as a measure of one’s distance from barbarism. Notwithstanding their great differences within this common
understanding, the Great Books of the Western tradition constituted the basis of what we call Western Civilization. Today, something called “cultural relativism,” a feature of what is called “political correctness” holds that what is unique to particular times and places has within itself a greater truth than what is common. At the same time, they deny the possibility of intelligent communication between different times and places. Strangely, the proposition that all vital human communication is sealed within its own time and place, is a generalization about all times and places which exempts itself from its own edict. The essence of post-modernism was captured in the ancient world by the Cretan who declared that all Cretans were liars.

“Deconstructionism” is the literary wing of post-modernism fashionable on our campuses today. It abandons any quest for objective meaning in literature but studies instead the subjective reaction of the reader. Among the historians, documents are studied for what they mean to us, not what intrinsic meaning they might have, or what meaning they once had to those whose lives were directly affected by them. Ken Burns, at the end of his long Civil War documentary, observed that the promise of equality in the Gettysburg Address had not been fulfilled, since there was still discrimination against sodomites (Burns however used the false neologism “gay”). It is difficult to imagine anything in 1863 further from the mind of Abraham Lincoln or the defenders of the Union than the association of the cause of freedom with that of sodomy. Lincoln did say however that Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence had embodied an “abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times.” The idea of such a truth, trans-historical and trans-cultural, would have been as familiar to Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln, as it would have been strange to Ken Burns, and to most present-day academic historians.

The most famous sentence in the political literature of the world, embodying the abstract truth that commended itself to Lincoln, and the one most pregnant with consequences for all mankind, is as follows.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Lincoln at Gettysburg said that the nation, at its birth, had been “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” We see however that in its original form, that proposition was the first in a series of propositions, all of which are regarded as self-evident. The evidence for the latter is however
contained within the former. That is to say, the sense in which all men are said to be equal implies *a priori* the rights which they are said unalienably to possess.

There is only one respect however in which “all men” (meaning all human beings) are held to be equal. That is in what John Locke calls “dominion.” By nature, no man is the ruler of another. There is no natural difference between one human being and another, such as there is between the queen bee and the workers or drones. Nor is there any such difference between one human being and another, as there is between any man, and any dog or horse or chimpanzee, by reason of which the one is the ruler and the other is the ruled. Jonathan Swift to the contrary notwithstanding, men ride horses by self-evident natural right. The “enslavement” of the horse by his rider is not against nature, and is therefore not unjust. But the enslavement of one human being by another violates that same order of nature which justifies the rider of the horse. There is here no intention to say that human beings are equal, among themselves, with respect to intelligence, strength, size, beauty, or virtue. Nor are they thought to be equal in any of those qualities which are generally regarded as desirable in those who fill the offices of government. George Washington was the first president of the United States. It is doubtful that there was then another human being in the world with the experience, the wisdom, the self-control, the justice, and the confidence of his countrymen, who could fill that office, and launch the new Constitution upon its path of glory. But Washington did not choose himself, nor did his virtues, of themselves, entitle him to office. He was indeed chosen because of his virtues, but he was chosen in a constitutional process, decided upon by the American people, embodying the consent of the governed. Let us follow the logical process whereby the proposition that all men are created equal might result in the superior virtues of George Washington being placed at the service of the American people.

It was an oft-repeated saying of James Madison, that “compact is the essence of free government.” What Madison meant is neither more nor less than what is meant by “all men are created equal.” That human beings are by nature equal in “dominion” means that human beings are not by nature under government. While human beings remain equal in dominion, with none having authority over another, they are in what is called the state of nature. The transition, by which human beings become citizens or subjects of government, is accomplished by something called the social contract (or “compact”). This is an agreement of each with all, and of all with each, that they form a government whose object shall be the better security of the equal
and unalienable rights with which each has been endowed by his Creator. For someone to be a party to such a contract, he must, first of all, recognize that each one of his partners to the contract possesses the same unalienable rights, and that each therefore has the same claim to the security of those rights. No one can, a priori, lay claim to greater protection of his rights, than can be afforded anyone else. Not George Washington, or anyone with George Washington’s virtues, can lay claim to such protection. Nor can anyone claim any exemption from an equal share of the burdens which must be borne if the government is to be able to furnish the protection for which it is founded.

No one can claim as a right exemption from taxation or military service. The most urgent reason for the formation of the political community is protection from all violence, both foreign and domestic. Prior to government—in the state of nature—each individual had to furnish his own protection. In such a state he would remain extremely vulnerable. Now his fellow citizens will join together to help protect him. But it would be irrational to demand protection for himself, and be unwilling to join in protecting the others. No one can claim advantages not equally shared with others, or exemptions from the burdens equally shared by others. Anyone who tries to exempt himself from the common burdens, which are the price to be paid for the common benefits, cannot be accepted as a fellow citizen. He will remain in a state of nature. What, you may ask, about the Quakers, who set the pattern of conscientious exemption from military service that has remained part of the American political tradition? That exemption has not been a right, but rather a privilege granted, out of consideration for those whose mode of worshiping God requires that they abstain from violence, even in self-defense. It is an act of prudent generosity towards otherwise good citizens, a privilege that can only be granted to a few, for otherwise the political community would be disabled from performing its most urgent reason for existence.

The formation of the community, by the social contract, is by unanimous consent. This consent is based upon the mutual recognition of the common humanity of the contracting members. In the ancient city—the city of Plato and Aristotle and Moses and of Fustel de Coulanges—human beings commonly recognized each other as members of the same family, or clan, or tribe, or city, or nation. To ask them to recognize each other first and foremost as members of the human race is to reverse the order of priority of what hitherto had been the ordinary experience of mankind. Hitherto that experience had been linked to the self-understanding of the ancient city as the creation of the gods (or God) of that city. The Old Testament in this respect—in the self-
understanding of the Mosaic polity as the creation of the God of Israel—is typical of all ancient cities. The God of Israel gave Israel its laws, but did not give laws to Athens or Rome or Sparta. In the post-classical world of the Christian West however the God of Israel became the God of all mankind. In so becoming, He ceased being the lawgiver that was the God of Moses. Municipal law, the law of particular regimes, is no longer the law of a particular god, since the particular gods are all dead! The task of connecting the universal God with a particular regime would have to await the realization that mankind had been endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. From the perspective of the American Founding, the governments of the West had, from the fall of the Roman Empire (in the words of the Federalist) depended for their political constitutions “on accident and force” rather than on “reflection and choice.” Lincoln grouped all of the former together as based upon “the divine right of kings,” which he considered in principle the same as slavery. Slavery represented the quintessence of force without right, but any form of government without a foundation in the consent of the governed was a form of slavery. The precise point in the long human story at which accident and force was replaced by reflection and choice was the point at which human equality determined the form of the unanimous consent by which the state of nature was transformed into civil society.

For more than a millennium and a half the Christian West had been afflicted by the hiatus between the authority of God and the authority of the law. By unanimous consent the authority of God became once more the authority for law, but this authority now emanated from the people, not from autocratic kings or aristocracies of wealth or birth. This was by reason of the fact that each human individual participating in the creation of a free civil society had been equally endowed by his Creator with the rights which entitled him to enter into the social contract. It was understood moreover that the exercise of these rights (among them “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”) was confined to the purposes for the sake of which they had been endowed by their Creator. When the Signers of the Declaration appealed to the “supreme judge of the world” for the “rectitude of [their] intentions” they acknowledged the divine government of the world as the framework within which their rights might be exercised. The Declaration was moreover issued in the name of “the good people of these colonies.” In a letter to Spenser Roane, many years later, Jefferson said that the ultimate repository of the principles of the Constitution was “the people en masse.” They, he said, are independent of everything “but moral law.” The people however does not make the moral law, the moral law makes the people. Without the moral law, a human
assemblage, even one formed by consent, may be nothing more than a gang of robbers. Consent is then more than an act of will, it is an act of will informed by understanding of the moral law, which is also God’s will. We see here how closely Jefferson is attuned to the natural law doctrine of Thomas Aquinas.

The community formed by unanimous consent will act by the will of the majority. The will of the majority is however restrained a priori by the limits intrinsic to unanimous consent. According to James Madison, in his great essay on Sovereignty, the majority may do anything that can be done rightfully by unanimous consent. But free governments cannot govern by unanimous consent. Majority rule is a substitute for unanimity, authorized by the social contract. The purpose of majority rule is to find the means to serve the ends of government already embodied in the unanimous consent. The ends served by majority rule are not themselves decided by majority rule.

It is amazing how little of this most basic of the elements of political right is understood today even in the highest places. Mr. Justice Scalia, in his famous Rome interview (Origins, vol. 26, no. 6 [June 27, 1996]), declared that “The whole theory of democracy…is that the majority rules; that is the whole theory of it. You protect minorities only because the majority determines that there are certain minority positions that deserve protection.” And again: “You either agree with democratic theory or you do not. But you cannot have democratic theory and then say, but what about the minority? The minority loses, except to the extent that the majority, in its document of government, has agreed to accord the minority rights.”

Justice Scalia, like all legal positivists, denies to the Declaration of Independence any constitutional status whatever. But one would think the most elementary reasoning—the natural law in its pristine form—would instruct him that there can be no legitimacy to majority rule without minority rights. What rightful authority can be attributed to an election in which there is no freedom of speech, or of the press, or of the right of the people peaceably to assemble? The plebiscite has been a favorite instrument of tyrants since Napoleon. In the last election conducted by Saddam Hussein he received 99% of the vote, doing better even than Hitler and Stalin. One of the main concerns of the authors of the Federalist was to prevent the tyranny of the majority.

The idea that the majority “accords” rights to the minority is the ultimate absurdity. The purpose of majority rule is to secure the rights possessed equally by every citizen. Strictly speaking, there are no minority
rights, there are only individual rights. The Bill of Rights of the Constitution is not an act of condescension by the majority; it is a recognition of rights with which we have been “endowed by [our] Creator.” Only because majority and minority have the same rights, and therefore a common interest, is majority rule a legitimate means of governing.

We said earlier that George Washington had been elected first president because of his great virtues. Once a political community has been formed, the people rightly seek those they think best qualified to find the means to secure their rights. Democracy, understood from the principles of the Declaration of Independence, is not only consistent with aristocracy, it is aristocracy. Consider the following passage from one of Jefferson’s letters to John Adams.

For I agree with you that there is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents … The natural aristocracy I consider as the most precious gift of nature for the instruction, the trusts, and government of society. And indeed it would have been inconsistent in creation to have formed man for the social state, and not to have provided virtue and wisdom enough to manage the concerns of the society. May we not even say that that form of government is the best which provides the most effectually for a pure selection of these natural aristoi into the offices of government.

The last sentence in the above was quoted by Leo Strauss, in his essay “On Classical Political Philosophy,” to express the very essence of the idea of the best regime in Plato and Aristotle, the very heart of classical political philosophy. The theme of nature’s fitting man for the social state, and providing virtue and talents for government, could hardly be more Aristotelian had it been written by Thomas Aquinas. We might call the American Founding as a whole, taking into account both the Declaration and the Constitution, as prudently classical, recalling Aristotle’s dictum, that of natural right, all is changeable. The equal rights of the Creator were necessary to replace the law-giving gods of the ancient city. This replacement required a democratization of the ancient idea of aristocracy. But the change in form was less a change in substance than it might at first seem to be. Consider the following from Washington’s inaugural address as president.

[T]he foundations of our national policy will be laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality … I dwell on this prospect with every satisfaction … since there is no truth more thoroughly established than that there exists in the economy and course of
nature an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness...since we ought to be no less persuaded that the propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right which Heaven itself has ordained...

What Washington says about the “indissoluble union between virtue and happiness” is as succinct a précis of the *Nicomachean Ethics* as can be imagined. Clearly, the “pursuit of happiness” and the pursuit of virtue—“the pure and immutable principles of private morality”—are one and the same. There is no patronage here of the notion, popular today, that the pursuit of happiness means “doing your own thing,” no matter what that “thing” is. Finally, we see Washington asserting that the boundaries of national policy, the actions of citizens and statesmen, whether private or public, must conform to “the eternal rules of order and right.”

Wherein does this differ from Thomas Aquinas’s concept of the natural law, as the rational creature’s participation in the eternal law? This, freed from the obscurantism of historicism, relativism, and nihilism, is our true inheritance.
According to Leo Strauss, how responsible is Christianity for the foundation of modern natural right? This question is related to the Straussian diagnosis of the origin and meaning of modern nihilism. In his own critique of modernity, Strauss confronts Nietzsche, as we see in his letters to Karl Löwith. This important correspondence began in 1932 when Strauss was in Paris. It continued during the years he spent in New York and Chicago and lasted until 1971, shortly before his death. It will be the main source of my reflections, as it sheds important light on the differences between Nietzsche’s and Strauss’s critiques of Christianity.

Both Nietzsche and Strauss consider Christianity importantly responsible for nihilism, but they do not offer the same diagnosis or critique. Nietzsche denounced the denaturalization of man due to the influence of Christian morality and a loss of manliness due to the resentment of a type of individual he loathed and endlessly critiqued. For him Socrates and Christianity represent “the beginning of a long mistake” which led to human rights, the French Revolution, and ultimately to European nihilism, the denial of any stars in the ascetic universe, of any rank order among human beings. Moreover, according to Nietzsche, there is no essential break between Judaism and Christianity. Strauss did not share this view.

Strauss argues that we have to reopen the quarrel between the Moderns and the Ancients. To do so, though, we have to exclude a Christian component partly responsible for the second cave built by the Moderns (Strauss 1932). But this exclusion is not so easy, since in Strauss’s judgment, “modern philosophy shares something essential with Christian medieval philosophy” (Strauss 1946). On one hand, there are the ancient Greeks and the Jewish and Islamic medieval philosophers and, on the other, there are the Christians and the Moderns. But what is the core of Strauss’s critique of
Christianity? Does Strauss fight against the Christian faith? In my view the answer is no. But we still need to understand why Strauss believes that there is a link between Christianity and the modern understanding of politics, centering around natural human rights.

According to Strauss, the Moderns share with Christians a humanistic scheme that helps explain the characteristics of the modern version of natural right: both exalt the freedom of individuals. Such a view of the genesis of human rights is well-known, since we are accustomed to read that the philosophy of human rights is a secularization of the morality that we find in the Gospel. But the way Strauss analyzes the responsibility of Christianity for nihilism is not a repetition of this cliché. Now, there is a path that travels from the replacement of Law by Christian faith, and hence to a notion of the importance of human freedom or subjectivity that leads to, or opens space for, a modern notion of natural right which is emphatically apolitical and universal. Grotius and Pufendorf, for example, claimed that right or justice is related to people as such: the definition of justice is no longer *cuius cuique tribuere* (to give each person his due) as in Aristotle. In Hobbes’s version of natural right, justice is the power of a being preoccupied by his own conservation. Such a definition is even more individualistic. And connected with his prototypical version of modern natural right is his nominalism.

But the most accredited Christian thinkers were not nominalists. And there is a world of difference between the Gospel notion of justice or righteousness and the aforementioned philosophies of natural right or rights. In fact, the latter are today often criticized by Christians, when human rights are articulated in a way that makes individuals forget their duties as citizens and as creatures: human rights become the mere means of asserting selfish interests. Nonetheless, Strauss is convinced that there is in modern political thought something deeply wrong that derives from Christianity.

To examine Strauss’s thought on Christianity means focusing on two things: First, Strauss stresses the continuity between the Christians and the Moderns and draws theological-political conclusions from that continuity. To be sure, he believed that the Moderns, Hobbes in particular, fought against theological politics and wanted to eradicate it, because it was responsible for religious wars and debilitating superstition. But he adds that these rebels are still dependent upon certain Christian assumptions. These assumptions, of course, are not due to shared religious beliefs, but to a way of understanding the relationship between religion and politics: Christians claim to separate religion and politics. They interpret the message of the Prophets and of Christ as
fundamentally spiritual or moral, so that redemption is not finally a question of politics. Even the “city of God” and the Church as *respublica perfecta* is different from the true or best city in Greek philosophy, as we will see later in this article, when considering the difference between Thomas Aquinas’s natural law and the Law as a political and religious whole in Maimonides. Moreover, Christians reduce politics to policy, to an art of governing or mastering the people. But Strauss’s main critical point hinges on the status of subjectivity drawn from Christianity considered as a *way of thinking*. In this connection, he stresses the structural linkedness between Judaism, Islam, and the ancient Greek city.

As suggested in *Philosophie und Gesetz*, Strauss shows that Christianity has made faith the core of our relationship to God, whereas the other two revealed religions, Judaism and Islam, are characterized by a special understanding of the theological-political problem: Law (*Torah, Sharia*) is understood as a Whole (Strauss 1935c). For Jews and Muslims, religion is a matter of authoritative tradition. These religions dictate social duties and affirm a conception of man as necessarily involved in political community: the children or nation of Israel, the *umma* of the Prophet. Subjectivity cannot be the standard of truth, reason cannot be the—sole—criterion of the good. According to Strauss, Christianity is responsible for nihilism in this sense: it replaced Law by ethics, as he says at the end of his lecture entitled “Cohen und Maimuni” (Strauss 1931). The first error, therefore, does not lie with Socrates, as Nietzsche suggested, but with the disappearance of the ancient understanding of authoritative Tradition and Law, which Maimonides still considered the starting point for politics. Moderns in contrast inherited from Christianity the notion of the subject which becomes the principle of principles. This is true in politics, with Hobbes’s and Locke’s grounding of the modern State in the individual and his consent; it is also true in religion, where private beliefs have replaced opinions true and plausible and knowledge. Thus while Strauss is less polemical than Nietzsche, he may be more radical in his critique of modernity. He certainly affirms that “We cannot overcome modernity with modern means,” as he wrote to Löwith (1946). For him, that means putting into question the whole Christian heritage and its notion of subjectivity. We have to return to premodern thought and to Socrates. But the return to the Greeks is not as straightforward as one might think. It needs to encounter Maimonides’ understanding of the relationship between Law and politics. This, at least, is Strauss’s claim at the beginning of his career, before his arrival in the United States, in 1938.
There remains in Strauss’s work a “silent argument” with Nietzsche about Christianity. This “silent argument” also concerns Heidegger who used this expression to define his own path from *Sein und Zeit* to his book on Nietzsche and his interpretation of Anaximander (Heidegger 1936–37). Heidegger and Strauss agree that Christianity blocks the way to an authentic return to the Greeks. There are differences, though. One is that the Greeks to whom Strauss wants to return are different from the Greeks Nietzsche and Heidegger spoke about. It is also that “we have lost the natural understanding” and we have lost it because we are no longer “natural beings” (Strauss 1946).

Given this, one has to ask whether it is possible to escape such denaturalization, which implies freeing oneself from the thinking that the Moderns have inherited from Christianity. According to Strauss who, in this, concurred with Löwith, Nietzsche failed to do so. He repeated the Ancients “at the peak of the modernity,” said Strauss who borrowed from Löwith this expression: “die Wiederholung der Antike auf der Spitze der Modernität” (Strauss 1935a). Since we have seen that Strauss sometimes included Christianity in the concept of the Moderns, we must ask whether Nietzsche was dependent on a Christian scheme. Is it that scheme which prevented him from overcoming modernity and being able to return to a Greek conception of nature and of the human being? Strauss says that Nietzsche remained trapped in his anti-Christian polemics, which stood in the way of his return to the Greeks. So, was he at once too Christian and too anti-Christian?

In any event, we have to pursue the question further: why, according to Strauss, are we obliged to reopen the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns by resolutely excluding the Christians? Why does Strauss refer to the Islamic and Jewish medieval philosophers and not to Christian thinkers? And more precisely: Is the return to Maimonides a necessary propaedeutics for contemporary philosophy, a necessary stage for those who want to understand the ancient notion of nature which is no longer available to us?

A second set of questions concerns the way Strauss understands Christianity. Does he understand what Christianity is? Or, does his critique highlight something essential in the Christian concern for human dignity? These questions will lead me to speak about Kierkegaard, to whom Strauss refers in three letters to Löwith (Strauss 1933, 1950, 1951). I then will reopen the question of the Straussian critique of modern humanism which is considered, even by some Christian thinkers, as responsible for contemporary nihilism. Does the reference to Kierkegaard help us understand the gap between the Straussian return to political philosophy and the other responses
to nihilism, be they atheist like Heidegger’s existentialism or related to the Christian heritage?

**The Failure of Nietzsche**

According to Strauss, Nietzsche “looks for the natural man in the prechristian man” (Strauss 1933). However, his return to the Greek understanding of nature is suspect, because he claims a truth which was recognized without any pathos by the Ancients. His “pathos” is proof that he was trapped in his polemics against Christian morality which he accused of driving man into losing his manliness, his force, his innocence, or in one word, his nature. Strauss suggests that Nietzsche is motivated by his anger toward Christianity and this motivation undermines the very truth he is praising, the Presocratic truth. Such a truth, which is linked to a certain sense of the tragic of life, must be accepted calmly rather than out of a spirit of rebellion against revealed religion. Otherwise, it is not accepted in the spirit in which the Presocratics did; it is not the same nonmoral truth.

This first argument, which we find in several letters to Löwith (Strauss 1933, 1935a, 1935b), is connected with the critique of the Eternal Return: Nietzsche wants to overcome Christianity and its values, the values of sacrifice and charity. He also, paradoxically, is indignant before a Christendom that has betrayed the desire for sincerity of the Christ. God is dead because of Christianity and Christians have departed from what Jesus taught and embodied. Christendom is a blending of beliefs and moral values that are all the more despicable as they betray the resentment of men who are not able to claim the strength of life. For Nietzsche who opposes Dionysos to the Crucified, Christianity has aggravated something that already existed in Judaism. This interpretation is quite different from that of Strauss, who emphasizes the differences between the Christian and the Jewish interpretations of politics, even if both are already far away from the Greek notion of nature. Nietzsche wants to restore the tragic—nonmoral—sense of life which has been destroyed by Jews, Christians and by Socrates whose teaching he understood as a moral one.

For Nietzsche, the return to the Presocratic notion of nature is a way to criticize the moral interpretation of human life or destiny. He says that we find such interpretation in Socrates and in revealed religion. Both Judaism and Christianity are responsible for the loss of man’s nature, that is to say for the loss of man’s innocence. Christianity however stands for a worse
form of denaturalization, because the Crucifixion and the value of compassion have weakened us: men no longer dare to express their strength. The censorship is inside, which is worse than obeying the Law. Christianity has made the return to the Presocratic notion of nature more and more impossible. According to Nietzsche, Christianity is a ruse. This ruse allowed the weakest to chain up the strongest. But there is no essential rupture between Judaism and Christianity. On the contrary, according to the Straussian scheme, it is impossible to speak of a Judeo-Christian heritage (Pelluchon 2005, 232–39).

For Strauss, there is a structural difference between Judaism and Christianity, even if as revealed religions they both are opposed to the ancient cosmology. But in the Jewish heritage there is something that can help us understand the ancient notion of nature which is not Presocratic, but that of Plato or Aristotle. It is linked to the end of the human being and to his perfection. It does not refer to moral values, to compassion or to the refusal of sin, but it hinges on the perfection of the intellect: the person who has true opinions and who considers the place of the human being in the universe is not the servant of his passions. The true perfection is that of knowledge, which implies virtue as a condition and a consequence, as shown in Strauss’s study of The Guide of the Perplexed (Strauss 1935, 96–97). Such perfection requires a true education and a true city and this is the reason why the political message of Maimonides, which is a Socratic message, lies in his prophetology. For Strauss, the return to Jewish and Islamic medieval rationalism, to Maimonides in particular, is a way to return to the Socratic teaching (Pelluchon 2005, 264–69). Such opposition between the Christian and the Jewish inheritances is considered in the lecture “Cohen und Maimuni” and in many of Strauss’s early writings. It also helps us understand the connections, as well as the differences, between his thought on Christianity and Nietzsche’s.

Strauss interprets the theory of the Eternal Return as an answer to this loss of nature due to morality. It expresses Nietzsche’s “super-human effort” to free himself from the Providentia particularis, which has nothing to do with the ancient cosmology (Strauss 1935b). The individual has to learn to love the past as it was and to return to a reality which is completely indifferent to him. However, this theory and the will to eternity—which gives to the world a value that Christianity refused to give it—may be close to a religious atheism (Strauss 1973). Moreover, the claim that some values and some ways of life are more true than others suggests that Nietzsche is not able to get rid of the belief of a Providentia particularis. The complete indifference to man which should sustain the theory of the Eternal Return is in contradiction
with “the pathos of Nietzsche.” Strauss reckons that Nietzsche, who criticizes the Christian and Socratic identification of nature and morality, remains in a moral scheme: he proposes another kind of life, another morality, which will be the acceptance of the Eternal Return. But this is not the true conception of nature: the Platonic-Aristotelian understanding of nature, which is linked to the end of the human being and to his intellectual perfection, is not available to Nietzsche. This is the reason why the return to the Greeks is, according to Strauss, a return to Aristotle’s conception of nature.

The return to the ancient conception of nature is almost impossible for people who have grown up in a world where the freedom of each person and the subject are the limits of the State and the starting point of any theory. Moreover, the importance of morality and of the question of values are the symptoms of our prejudices: we are trapped in the modern understanding of human nature which comes from Christianity. Strauss, in his early writings, uses Maimonides’ conception of Law as a political, religious and moral whole in order to help us go out of the second cave built by the Christians and the Moderns. The crisis of our time is due to the fact that the question of the human end has been excluded from politics. The crisis of liberal democracy is characterized by the separation and hence tensions between ethics, politics and religion, which are considered as different fields of culture. If we want to overcome this crisis, which leads to relativism, we have to return to Aristotle and to Plato. But this return is not direct and the reference to Maimonides enables us to question the main principles of modern thought and what Heidegger calls humanism. The subject cannot be the source of truth and justice. We have to put into question the modern content of freedom and the modern foundation of natural right, which means we have to correct the philosophy of human rights by understanding what is true in the Socratic teaching, which is not essentially moral, but political. We have to learn to think beyond or beneath the questions of values in order to recognize what is still true in classical political philosophy: what do we learn from the Ancients and can they enlighten us? They can teach us what natural beings are and help us reach the natural understanding of nature, as Strauss wrote to Löwith in 1946. Nietzsche did not reach this level.

The Straussian critique of Christianity is another opportunity for the Jewish thinker to confront Heidegger who shares with Strauss the same rejection of the notion of values. And his answer to the Heideggerian philosophy of Ereignis is Maimonides and Socrates. Maimonides’s conception of Law in the Guide of the Perplexed is a propaedeutics for political philosophy, because it
prevents us from forgetting the question of human excellence which must not be excluded from politics. The return to the Islamic and Jewish medieval thinkers who understood well the political message of Plato’s and Aristotle’s philosophy is a necessary step if we want to go out of the cave built by modern prejudices. In Strauss’s work, the study of the medieval conception of Law and of politics is connected with his effort to overcome modernity without being trapped in modern assumptions. His critique of the modern Enlightenment and his way to reopen the theological-political problem do not lead to any religious answer to the political problem, to any theocracy, but they help him reconsider the principles of the liberal State: the conception of the individual as a being preoccupied by his own conservation and the fact that the social link is a matter of interests and contracts, instead of being dependent on common ideas or traditions. Strauss’s archeology of nihilism is a way to criticize modern principles which led to liberal democracy but also explain its current tendencies and defects. Strauss however does not reject the institutions of liberal democracy, such as the defense of human rights and the separation between politics and religion. The study of Maimonides and Farabi stands for a guide to the perplexities of liberal democracy. It is the first chapter of a philosophical revolution whose aim is to urge contemporary men to change their conception of freedom by correcting it in the light of classical political philosophy (Pelluchon 2005, 264–75).

It is hard to know whether there is a tension between Jerusalem and Athens—which means that those two kinds of wisdom could enlighten us—or if Strauss only belongs to Athens, as if he had stopped thinking that there was in Maimonides a special contribution to premodern political philosophy. In his correspondence with Jacob Klein (Strauss 1938), we notice that Strauss no longer takes for granted the importance of the Maimonidian conception of the Law. Maimonides is no longer the last word of Strauss’s political thought. I do not mean that he stopped being interested in Maimonides after 1938. It looks as if there was a tension between the Jewish sources of his philosophy—where the critique of modern rationalism hinges on motives that Strauss shares with other Jewish thinkers of his time—and the ancient notion of nature, which we still find in the Guide of the Perplexed, where Maimonides tends to replace belief in the creation of the world with the notion of its eternity. Be that as it may, the study of the Islamic and Jewish medieval thinkers is a necessary stage towards Plato and Aristotle, because they grasped the teaching of Socrates which is often hidden by his successors. Strauss’s final answer to Heidegger’s existentialism is the return to Socrates. Strauss refers to the Socratic understanding of the place of the city in human
education and to the natural understanding which we have lost, because
history has blinded us and Christianity changed the meaning of nature.

By replacing the ancient cosmology with the idea of creation,
Christianity has destroyed the conditions of ancient wisdom. The latter was
a matter of understanding the natural order of the universe and the natural
hierarchy of beings. Such knowledge implied a kind of behavior, which cannot
be called moral in the modern sense of the word and was embodied by the
philosopher, whose intellectual perfection required virtue. The understanding
of the natural order, which was also a divine order, was the standard for the
conception of the social, political and moral conditions of a good life. A city
and a human being were healthy when they were close to this ideal perfection.
To be sure, social mores were often used as customs to help ordinary people be
better. But what we call morality today, by referring to individual choices which
can eventually lead us to obey traditions, is not on the same ground as the
ancient wisdom. The Straussian critique of modern political thought and
his charge against Christianity are due to his will to return to an ancient
conception of wisdom. And he finds in the Jewish and Islamic medieval
philosophy a mirror of the ancient wisdom, centered around the natural order
which indicates the human end or excellence.

At first glance, we can oppose the Maimonidian conception
of Law to the ancient notion of nature because the revealed God has changed
it, and, as Strauss says to Löwith, there is no biblical word for the Aristotle’s
notion of nature. But if we pay attention to the relationship between physics
and metaphysics in the Guide of the Perplexed, we understand what
Maimonides says when he speaks of the perfection of the Law, whose aim is the
perfection of knowledge (Guide, introduction and book 3). The Maimonidian
conception of Law appears to be an actualization of the ancient wisdom in
a world characterized by the revealed religion. In this connection, Strauss
considers Maimonides as a guide for contemporary men who are trapped in
the prejudices of modern political thought. In order to go out of the second
cave built by the Moderns, we have to reach a prechristian level. Such an
ambition implies overcoming Nietzsche and Heidegger on their own ground.
Strauss’s strategy was to use Maimonides as a mean to escape from the
Christian way of thinking and to be able to return to the natural premodern
man, Socrates.

The question is now to understand why Strauss considers that
the Christian heritage is not able to overcome nihilism. There are some
Christian thinkers who criticize modernity by referring to the Gospel and to
the Christian philosophical tradition. Why does Strauss consider the Christian critiques of modernity as irrelevant? In answering these questions—which are not expressly addressed by Strauss himself—we will have to indicate something on our own critical attitude toward Strauss’s critique of Christianity.

**The Critique of Strauss’s Critique of Christianity**

Does Strauss understand Christianity and what else does he reject in Christianity? I do not allude to the content of the Christian faith, but the relationship between individual and community which characterizes Christianity, as said by Strauss in a letter to Löwith, where they both write about Kierkegaard (Strauss 1933).

Strauss disagrees with Löwith who reckons that Kierkegaard’s answer to the political problem is “a reactionary one.” Löwith focuses on the starting point of Kierkegaard, because it highlights the problem of Christianity. Kierkegaard starts with the “Auflösung der menschlichen Wesen,” and this “dissolution of the human being” leads to his radical Veröffentlichung, with the loss of his human substance. The starting point of Kierkegaard and the climax of his thought is the person in his or her singularity, in an absolute relationship with the Absolute: Kierkegaard strips the human being off from his political involvement. He does not understand that the city is the place where men become aware of themselves. Strauss suggests that Kierkegaard is a great thinker, because he has seen that something was wrong with the modern and human answer to the human problem: neither economics nor ethics can help us know how to organize ourselves and how to live. So Kierkegaard has better understood than Marx or Rousseau that the Christian difficulty to give an absolute answer to the political problem could not be overcome by an atheist way of thinking (Strauss 1933). As we know, Kierkegaard does not consider the moral perfection as the true perfection of the person and asserts that only faith can cure us from despair. For him, faith is not only a passion, but also a way to refer to oneself by referring to God. It is a conversion in the sense of Augustine, a way to transform oneself.

Strauss disagrees with this religious answer: revealed religion is not a standard for politics and existentialism is a dead end. An exceptional being, whether he is the Enkelte of Kierkegaard or the philosopher whom Strauss and Farabi refer to, is separated from the others and he usually is not a founder of any concrete city. Existentialism is to be replaced by political
Two ideas support such a return to political philosophy: opinions about Good and Evil determine affections and social or moral attitudes and true wisdom is the result of a philosophical knowledge about nature and human nature. Strauss does not mention Socrates in this letter, but his critique of Kierkegaard can be applied to any thought which starts with the subject and whose consequences are the death of political philosophy and the misunderstanding of nature—and of human nature as well. Kierkegaard’s starting point is the contrary of the Socratic teaching, because Socrates starts with the fact that human beings live in a city. The latter is the matrix of all ideas, even if philosophers criticize the opinions of the city and transcend politics (Strauss 1964).

Kierkegaard’s conception of the human being betrays a misunderstanding of his political nature. On the contrary, the way Maimonides interprets the Torah by beginning with the texts of the tradition, presupposes another conception of the relationship between person and community. There is also another understanding of the order that binds our souls: nature or a set of natural ends which take precedence over our desires, including our desire of God. For Christians, our relationship with God is an affective one. Faith is a passion, Kierkegaard writes. It is also the ontological grounding of the self defined as a relation which relates itself to its own self and to which constitutes the whole relation. Faith affects the one who is becoming himself. It shapes his own definition of himself. On the contrary, for Strauss, who differs from most Jewish thinkers of his time and follows Maimonides, reason—neither experience nor existence—is the locus of any transcendence. Our relationship to God is linked to knowledge, as shown in the Maimonidian conception of divine Providence. The Jewish medieval sources of Strauss’s thought not only help Strauss overcome modernity without modern means, but they are also connected with the rationalism he wants to promote. A special link between tradition and reason is expressed in such rationalism, which is part of what Strauss called “Enlightened Judaism.” But if Kierkegaard is one of the strongest examples of the existentialist truth which belongs to Christianity and if Strauss says it is not politically relevant, can we say that it is impossible to overcome nihilism with the Christian tradition? Aren’t the primary texts, the Bible and the tradition of great Christian theology and literature, a treasure which could be used in order to found a decent politics on Christian religious principles? Does Strauss’s silence on this question mean that he was skeptical of the relevance of the notion of human dignity which we find in Christianity? Or is it just that Christians have been intellectually and morally lazy about learning from their own foundations and applying this knowledge to political life?
This point stresses the originality of Strauss’s work and perhaps its limits. In fact, it is possible to criticize the modern foundation of natural right and the humanism of human rights by returning to the Christian tradition, as Jacques Maritain and Michel Villey show. Both denounce the perversion of human rights and the exaltation of the ego which cuts freedom from any content and drives to subjectivism and also to contradictions: human rights can be used for inhuman aims or at least for the defense of individualistic aspirations, as seen with some current medical practices. Maritain refers to the Thomist notion of the natural law which corrects the false humanism of human rights and restores the conception of human dignity. Villey tries to think about justice in the light of Aristotle in order to prevent human rights from being the mere means of selfish desires. So true Christianity is not responsible for nihilism, according to Maritain and Villey. Why does Strauss refer to the Jewish and Islamic medieval thinkers, and not to Thomas Aquinas?

This question is very important, because there is a deep difference between Strauss’s critique of modernity and the Christian ones. And this is connected with what we said about Kierkegaard: the city, for Strauss, is the *topos* for human education, whereas Christians belong to two cities and two laws, as Ernest Fortin (1963) explained well in his article on Thomas Aquinas in the *History of Political Philosophy*, edited by Strauss. Moreover, Christians tend to refer to Aristotle, whereas the Islamic and Jewish medieval philosophers follow the Socratic heritage. Fortin says that this different source explains why Islamic and Jewish thinkers pay attention to the political message of Plato, instead of developing a metaphysics inspired by the theory of the Ideas. But the main point is that the Christian medieval writers find in Aristotle’s philosophy something which fits with their *transpolitical* thought. Strauss believes that the Christians interpreted classical political philosophy in the light of their own preoccupations, whereas the Islamic thinkers, who were separated from Plato and Aristotle by “the fact of Revelation,” by monotheism, were more faithful to the Ancients and were able to focus on their true message.

Thomas Aquinas, who has read the Islamic medieval philosophers, does not consider the true city as the condition for human excellence. The human city has to prepare the conditions of happiness and peace, but it is not the right place for the self-accomplishment of the person who conversely participates in the natural law of God. Human beings are the members of a universal society which is governed by divine Providence and this spiritual authority is a standard which is much higher than any human city. Christian society is governed by two different laws and two cities, whose aims are
different: one is connected with our life on earth and the other with our supernatural end. So the separation between politics and spirituality fits much better with Aristotle’s contemplation than with the Socratic teaching, which compels the philosopher to confront other men by asking them to examine their lives. But instead of being moral, as Nietzsche thought, such teaching, which takes place in the city, is a way to ask what it is to live like a human being. Socrates’ teaching assumes that we know the place of the human being in the universe. It therefore implies a knowledge of the limits of human knowledge. The medieval conception of Law as a political, religious and social whole and as a starting point for philosophical discussions—since the philosopher has to think in front of the tribunal of the Law—is closer to Socratic political philosophy than the Christian and modern way of understanding the link between the intellectual and the practical fields. According to Strauss’s view, this Christian scheme has driven the Moderns into isolating politics from metaphysics, religion and ethics (Pelluchon 2005, 251–55).

For those who think in the light of Strauss’s heritage, the importance of ethics in contemporary philosophy and the fact that ethics is considered as a means which could counterbalance the individualistic drift of the defense of one’s rights and private interests are symptoms of the crisis of our time. The latter is due to the disappearance of the political philosophy which links politics to the question of human nature, of the human end. Ethics is no longer a separate field when the question of the common Good and of human excellence is the standard for a politics whose foundation is neither the atomistic conception of the individual nor the negative definition of freedom. But if it is true that the Moderns, in their fight against the Christian Church, have inherited from Christianity such an interpretation of politics as an isolated field, can we say that ethics is the last word of this tradition? Does Strauss understand well what Christianity is?

If we focus on the originality of the Christian answer to modernity, instead of exposing the Straussian critique of Christianity, we see that Christians learn what the Good is by referring to Jesus Christ, who is a model. Those who criticize modernity by referring to the Christian tradition, whether they are believers like Maritain or convinced that philosophers are to be atheists or silent concerning their faith like Jean Nabert, are preoccupied by ethics in the deep sense of the word. Ethics is a way to help a person to reach salvation and true happiness. It may be a stage toward something that overcomes ethics, as Kierkegaard and Lévinas show. How faithful can we stay to the values which have been conveyed by our western civilization but whose
strength no longer transforms our lives? How can we reach the moral level that is required by our tradition? This tradition is Greek, Jewish and Christian. Strauss is alien to such a thought which supposes that one trusts human beings. For him, wisdom is neither a moral nor a holy attitude, but a question of true opinions and it presupposes the true city or, at least, the possibility of philosophy.

Moreover, Strauss asserts that the solution to the crisis of our time supposes that we return to a prechristian way of thinking which is opposed to most institutions linked to liberal democracy. This turn of mind is paradoxical: liberal democracy cannot be saved from itself without the actualization of classical political philosophy, Strauss says in “Three Waves of Modernity.” Unlike Bergson who depicts in Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion some moral or religious genius who may help us transform our heart and make our respect for the other men a love for humanity, Strauss does not really believe that a society can be saved by some exceptional individuals. He however thinks that liberal democracy is in danger because the kind of individual who characterized the modern world since the first wave of modernity has false conceptions about Good and Evil. So ethics is not the core of philosophy, as he said about The Guide of the Perplexed, and politics is no longer an isolated field, but something substantial that comes first and whose horizon is the human excellence in the sense of Aristotle or of Maimonides.

The core of Strauss’s critique of Christianity is to show that there is a structural difference between the theological-political whole linked to the Jewish and Islamic Law and the separation between politics and religion which was drawn from Christianity. But can’t we say that the Church is a topos for human education? Doesn’t it help the human being understand his political and social responsibilities? Can’t the Pope be a spiritual and political leader, as seen with John Paul II? Is the spiritual message of the Gospel essentially moral or are the Moderns responsible for such a moral interpretation of Christianity? If this is the case, there is a denaturalization of Christianity due to Moderns and to the philosophy of human rights. Such denaturalization explains the misunderstanding of the spiritual message of Christianity and the difficulty to found a politics on this tradition. Strauss may have misunderstood the very truth of Christianity, because he was dependent on a modern scheme. Was he too modern—or insufficiently interested in Christianity? Be that as it may, he has not understood Christianity by referring to the Christian texts themselves. But those who follow Strauss are not obliged to imitate him in this matter.
CONCLUSION

The Straussian critique of modernity is radical. His critique of Christianity takes place in his fight against modernity. Strauss puts into question most modern principles which come from Christianity and expects us to deconstruct them and consider them as mere prejudices. The Straussian critique of Christianity is one chapter of his archeology of nihilism whose aim is to help us get out of the second cave. We must acquire a natural understanding. We usually are even more blind than the prisoners described by Plato, since modern philosophy is an obstacle to the return to the natural understanding and to Platonic-Aristotelian political philosophy. One of the most important assumptions of modern and contemporary thought is related to the philosophy of the subject. It comes from Christianity, even if the development of this Christian heritage proves to be very distant from its first intention, as shown by the perversion of the subject, which becomes an individual merely preoccupied by the defense of his selfish desires. Strauss wants to put into question the philosophy of human rights and the destructive replacement of laws by rights. So he criticizes the point where modernity began. Therefore, he rejects the Christian way of thinking. Moreover, he was convinced that something was wrong with modern rationalism and with modern politics by the tragic events he experienced, Nazism and Communism. His skepticism concerning the ideals of the modern Enlightenment may have something to do with his Jewish origin and with the Jewish tradition, which does not share the Christian and modern belief in progress or in history.

Like Nietzsche, he thinks that Christianity has changed the meaning of nature. However, he does not interpret the loss of our natural understanding and of our natural being in the same way as Nietzsche and Heidegger. He does not fight against Christian morality itself, but he reckons that Christianity is not the relevant level to reopen the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns. Christianity is an obstacle to the actualization of classical political philosophy, because it has changed our conception of nature and because its starting point as well as its climax is the dignity of the person, to whom God promised salvation. This is the reason why Strauss was fascinated by Nietzsche and Heidegger who said that it was necessary to return to the Greeks and to argue with Christianity.

For Strauss, the Christian starting point, the “dissolution of man,” betrays a misunderstanding of his political nature. It condemns modern politics and Christian thinkers to a dead end: it leads to the crisis of liberal democracy. The symptoms of such a crisis are the eclipse of politics, which has
excluded the question of the human end. The importance of the notion of values and the misunderstanding of the social link are the consequences of this death of political philosophy. Moreover, such a starting point and such transpolitical thought condemn to weakness those who criticize modernity by referring to the Christian heritage.

Strauss does not consider the Christian answer to the destructive forces of nihilism as relevant. Is the Christian conception of human dignity able to face the problems we encounter in politics, be they connected with the destruction of the social link, with the perversion of individual rights or with the use of genetics which gives men the possibility to change human nature? Can ethics and the call for human dignity prevent us from entering in some version of the Brave New World depicted by Aldous Huxley?

The Christian way to reach the Good by referring to a holy or a moral standard did not prove to be strong enough to stop Nazism and it does not appear either to be able to counteract the current forms of relativism. According to Strauss, Christianity is politically weak. Its power is moral and individual. This question of the weakness of Christianity was raised by Machiavelli. It is also suggested by the replacement of existentialism by classical political philosophy. The question is: how can we understand the common Good in a democracy? The rejection of Kierkegaard’s starting point which condemns him to give a religious answer to the political problem suggests that it is impossible to draw any religious politics from Strauss’s work. And the reference to Socratic teaching and to Maimonidian rationalism could be a ballast to irrationalism. The allies of politics are the philosophers who are enlightened by the ancient conception of human nature and excellence. The consideration of the human end could be a standard for wise political decisions, whether they concern war, social care or bioethics. But couldn’t we draw a true image of the human being from Christianity?

Whether a spiritual message may exist that could be translated into a philosophical language and then inspire another foundation for human rights and another politics is still an open question. Strauss may have neglected these original forces which belong to Christianity, but which have been obfuscated by the negative conception of freedom which underpins the modern and contemporary reference to human rights. “Secularization” may have made the true message of Christianity unavailable and Moderns may have misunderstood the ontological message of Christianity. When they borrowed from the Gospel the understanding of the place of faith and love in the relation to God and drew from it an individualistic conception of the
person, did they succeed in translating into a rational and philosophical language the spiritual message of the Christ and his experience? Would it be possible to translate the experiences of the sacredness of life which are in the Gospel in such a way that they would enrich the notion of human dignity?

Those who restrict Christianity to a humanitarian message do not see the truth of the Christian tradition. This truth goes beyond humanism. Strauss did not see this point. He “argued with Christianity” because he argued with Heidegger and borrowed from the latter some of his schemes. Strauss’s interpretation is helpful to establish the demarcation-line between the Ancients and the Moderns and understand the originality of Jewish and Islamic medieval thought, which is a model for actualization of the classical political philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. Those who believe that Strauss helps us think through the crisis of our time can still consider the Straussian critique of Christianity—and the return to Maimonides—as a means to understand the ancient political philosophy which is no longer available to us. But if they want to pursue the task of Strauss, whose critique of the modern Enlightenment has opened up a way toward a new Enlightenment, they have to ask the questions that he did not raise: if it is true that tradition can enlighten us and help us solve some contemporary problems, if liberal democracy could only be saved by a premodern way of thinking, can we highlight the special contribution of each revealed religion?

If the Gospel is not to be reduced to a moral message, to a set of values, we can ask whether there are in Christian texts some experiences of the sacredness of life which are not yet translated into a rational language and which would make us understand the link between politics and ontology. Christianity separates politics and religion as far as institutions are concerned, but it does not mean that it is a transpolitical thought. The spiritual message of Christianity may enrich the ontological notions which underpin our politics and contribute to another foundation for human rights. If we pay attention to the Christian texts which consider human responsibilities toward the other species, we are invited to derive human rights from mankind as a species—and not as a moral agent. Such rights encounter some limits when they threaten the survival of subsequent human generations and that of other species. This foundation of human rights does not presuppose the Christian faith. It is however enriched and inspired by the interpretation of a Christian heritage which has often been neglected. To consider in medical ethics the giftedness of life which is strongly expressed in the Gospel and in many texts of Christian theology does not mean to refer to any God. We however take into account the
biological conditions of freedom which come before and apart from our will and efforts. Such consideration implies that we examine the metaphysics and the drive to mastery which characterize sex selection, genetic engineering and enhancement. If there is in the Christian tradition some resources which help us confront nihilism and put into question most of the political assumptions derived from the modern Enlightenment, Strauss’s heirs may have to reconsider his judgment concerning Christianity in order to pursue his critique of modernity.

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**Time Matters**

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These two collections of essays give us access to the range of thought of a distinguished American philosopher. Charles Sherover’s work represents a rich and important counterpoint to some dominant trends in contemporary American philosophy. While social and political questions have been a central focus of much recent work, the approach tends to be piecemeal. We have the sense of careful housekeeping but also of work that is limited in scope and value. The essays collected here are very different. The volume *From Kant and Royce to Heidegger* contextualizes contemporary questions of polity, community, and the common good within a reading of the history of modern philosophy that takes the question of time as foundational. *Are We IN Time?* articulates an experiential metaphysics that, again, takes time and temporality as grounding notions. Together these volumes argue for first principles for political judgment and moral action and provide a historical framework for continued thought.

Gregory Johnson, the editor of both books, has chosen and organized the essays with great intelligence and care. The first volume appears as part of the series *Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy* ©2006 Interpretation, Inc.
(volume 38) under the general editorship of Jude P. Dougherty; the second collection is part of Northwestern University’s *Topics in Historical Philosophy*. Each collection reflects a coherent, distinct and distinctive aspect of Sherover’s work and each is richly rewarding on its own. Together they complement and reinforce the creative appropriation of thinkers and themes that marks Sherover’s thinking. All the essays are lucid, elegantly crafted and insightful. The two volumes together contain 23 essays, so this review will attend to the larger themes and claims put forth in the volumes with specific essays mentioned in those contexts.

Sherover’s goal in the volume of historical essays is a creative appropriation of the history of modern thought through the reading of its development. His eye is on the culmination of this development in Heidegger as the philosopher who harvests the tradition’s insight that time is the form of all human experience. In his preface, Sherover tells us that although these essays “appeared independently over a course of years, … they work together to present a coherent interpretation which yields questions not generally asked and perhaps some new insights worth pursuing” (ix). The collection succeeds on both counts. For example, Sherover’s essay “Kant’s Debt to Leibniz” is a rethinking of the roots of German Idealism and is indeed a model of the kind of creative rereading of the history of philosophy in which Sherover engages throughout the volume.

The essay, he tells us, “seeks to demonstrate the continuity of development from Leibniz to Kant and, to overstate the point, to suggest the transformation of Leibniz’s monadological idealism into Kant’s ‘transcendental idealism’” (xi). By situating Kant in “the household of the Leibnizian way” some interesting themes arise that provide a richer and more developmentally coherent understanding of both Kant and Heidegger. In particular the nature of time and space and the perspectival claims arising from their relational nature, and the continuities between Leibnizian themes and sections of Kant’s first Critique, are explored to great advantage. His discussion of the rootedness of Kant’s categories of cognitive judgments, analogies of human experience, and the “highest principle of synthetic judgment” in Leibniz, throws new light on Heidegger’s project in *Being and Time*. We see, from another vantage point, the very deep roots of Heidegger’s claim that Being is the context for the projective experience of Dasein or, to use explicitly Kantian terms, that the deeper investigation of the human perspective leads to and not away from the larger noumenal context in which that perspective occurs. Another important appropriation is made possible through Sherover’s
discussion of the harmony between the cognitive and practical in Leibniz. The fruits of this exploration make possible Sherover’s rethinking of Kant, in particular his argument that the freedom of human reason is the enabling ground of both cognition and morality within the Kantian framework. This understanding is, of course, foundational for both the pragmatic and phenomenological traditions and it is useful to be reminded of how deeply rooted it is within German Idealism.

“Royce’s Pragmatic Idealism and Existential Phenomenology” is another high point in Sherover’s creative rereading of modern philosophical history. A sustained analysis of Royce’s idealism as well as his grounding pragmatism allows Sherover to derive “familial” links that strengthen the common foundations of idealism, pragmatism, and phenomenology. This is preparatory for the next section of the book where Sherover will use Heidegger as the basis for developing an existential ethics. In particular he draws our attention to three Roycean themes, intentionality, sociality, and temporality, that will both complement and supplement the Heideggerean perspectives developed in his own later essays. Perhaps most importantly, he reminds us that Royce repudiates any notion of existential alienation and works from the primordiality of the social in our experience of nature as well as ourselves. Hence Royce can call upon philosophy “to take up its responsibility of moral educator” and ground “the pluralistic community of the whole of being in which we participate” (Sherover, 93, 107). This, of course, echoes and reinvigorates Leibniz’s notion of “cosmic citizenship in the cosmic republic.” Sherover’s overall point here will be developed more fully in the essays comprising the second volume. There he will address the issue that neither pragmatism nor phenomenology is self-grounding. A metaphysical, speculative thrust that takes seriously the notion that our forms of experience, being, and purposive ideas do tell us something about the world of which we are part and to which we belong will be necessary. Grounding this, Sherover will demonstrate, will be time and the enabling condition it generates, freedom.

The last two sections of this first volume, “Building a ‘Metaphysics of Morals’” and “Grounding Political Consequents,” draw together the import of the earlier explorations for both moral and political thinking. Sherover’s argument here is that Heidegger, in Being and Time, gives us a propaedeutic for ethics and this in turn will ground some key political concepts and principles. These political consequents turn out to be sage and important with Sherover dwelling on issues of heritage, Rousseau’s civil religion and the need for citizens to commit themselves to the grounding political principle of freedom and the institutions and ideational complex that
supports it. A concluding essay “The Conditions of Freedom: A New World Order” lays out a number of conditions for universalizing that political freedom and provides a blueprint that should be taken very seriously. Laid out under the rubric, “Eight Principles of Statecraft” (212), these principles include some classic elements of civic republicanism, among them, protection of contest, the fragmentation of political power, the call for a pragmatic politics, and the loyalty to freedom as the prime moral precept. While these principles may not, in themselves, be novel, the fact that they are systematically articulated and situated in this overall philosophical context adds clarity and cohesion to a view that is usually assented to only intuitively.

The problem here, however, is the part Heidegger’s categories are assigned to play in this reconstruction. For Sherover, the ontological categories of Dasein, in particular, anticipatory resoluteness projected out of Care, suggest a reconstruction of moral philosophy that grounds it in temporality and freedom. This analysis does give us a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of the role of temporality in our moral experience and what its implications are for the responsible exercise of freedom. Sherover also suggests that an existential ethic would include the notion of stewardship as the “moral counterpart of Heidegger’s root ontological concept of Care” (153). With this move the abstract notion of freedom is instantiated within a concrete framework of social relations, evaluative frameworks and lived heritage.

His claims here are descriptively enriching but there is at least a twofold difficulty. To begin with, Sherover himself recognizes that not all resoluteness is to be welcomed and not all norms are equivalent. Thus evaluative judgments and decisions must constantly be made. Yet the gap between Sherover’s ontological analysis and the principles of actual evaluative judgments is never satisfactorily bridged. There are no mediating categories for how these ontological structures, even at the level of heritage, issue in concrete ethical decisions. Sherover’s own answer (176) does not seem sufficient. “Freedom is, then, not ‘merely’ a grounding ontological fact; freedom is primordial. Ontological loyalty then demands that freedom itself becomes a (if not the) prime evaluative norm.” We can certainly assent but, still, what are we to do?

Moreover the larger issue here is whether we should be turning to Heidegger for this grounding. Is Sherover’s claim compelling that Heidegger provides some hitherto missing ontological foundation for ethics? Is the ontological foundation so provided true to our experience? Does the use of Heidegger yield an ethics consonant with the experiential fidelity Sherover
takes so seriously and rightly so? When Sherover elucidates the nature of ethical experience phenomenologically, he finds projective temporality and its enabling consequent, freedom, to be the defining structures. Ethics takes place within the temporal horizon; an ethical decision is a responsible appropriation of the ideational and evaluative structures that make up our social world. It speaks to those possibilities that are real for me and through which I create an authentic future. But there is certainly another aspect to ethics that is experientially even more fundamental and that is not reducible to temporality understood as an ontological category. Most of ethics, to state the obvious, revolves around how we treat others, our effects on them and the mutuality or lack of it that is created. How we treat others, this affective and relational core of ethical experience, is not reducible to the existential structure of projective temporality. And when we speak about this core, this very concrete and particular web of lived duties and obligations, desires and demands, we are in a domain other than transcendental structures or possibility. It is the very reality of the Other that is irreducible. It is simply not convincing that grounding ethics in a Heideggerean framework takes us further in articulating the nature of lived ethical experience or in deriving useful principles for choice and action. (For a fuller and quite elegant elaboration of this critique of Heidegger, readers may want turn to William Barrett’s discussion, the chapter entitled “The Moral Will,” in his work The Illusion of Technique.)

In fact when Sherover writes about the political consequents of this Heideggerean grounding in the last section of the volume, he turns to a tradition that does not seem much in need of it; namely he asks for a reinvigoration of the tradition of civic republicanism. This is a tradition in which ‘freedom’ is already doing its work both theoretically and practically. Thus the use of a Heidggerean ontology here seems more like a “grafting on” than a grounding; its use seems awkward and philosophically questionable. Are we, in fact, making political freedom more ontologically secure by going this route as opposed to, for example, a Kantian one? Does this grounding add anything substantive to the tradition of political thought Sherover draws upon? To use the pragmatic criterion—what difference does Heidegger really make here? Sherover does seem to have something more substantive in mind when he mentions the notion of an anthropological translation of Heidegger’s existential ontology: “...And in these terms, one may say that an anthropological translation of Heidegger’s existential ontology yields something akin to what Kant had anticipated as a politics ‘which is based on empirical principles of human nature’” (189). Certainly there remains a question of the success of such a translation. (Indeed these points are taken up, albeit from a different
perspective, by Dana Villa in his *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* and chapter three of his *Politics, Philosophy, Terror* where he examines Arendt’s criticism of Heidegger, in particular, his lack of a normative conception of human nature in contrast to Kant.) It would be important for Sherover’s overall argument to see this translation worked out in greater detail in order to assess the meaningfulness of this Heideggerean importation for political thought.

Turning to the second volume, *Are We IN Time?*, Sherover lays out an experiential metaphysics that is both speculative in reach yet Kantian in its critical parameters. In Part 2, “A Kantian Rethinking of Some Kant,” and Part 3, “Metaphysics—As If Time Matters,” Sherover calls us back to the task of metaphysics as if it matters. And it does if we are to generate first principles and a coherent valuational framework for judgment and action. A number of points developed in this section are important and well worth pursuing. As the editor points out, the essay “The Question of Noumenal Time” offers “an ingenious critique of a central incoherence of Kant’s thought” (x) arguing that Kant must presuppose some kind of time beyond the realm of possible human experience to accommodate decision as an action of free will. Further explorations of time and cognition, time and God, and the temporality of human consciousness, as well as temporally grounded arguments for a metaphysics of internal relations, individuation and free will are all provocative and fruitful. Sherover also pulls these pieces together by giving us a programmatic overview of an experiential metaphysics that is grounded in a radical temporalism. This volume also ends with a section that examines the consequences of this metaphysics for our political life. It is a compelling vision and a refreshing experience to see philosophy done with this reach and seriousness.

Sherover’s final essays in this volume, however, do raise issues that need further clarification. Drawing upon a central claim common to idealism, pragmatism, and phenomenology, the ontological primacy of the social over the individual, Sherover rejects an atomistic liberalism that cannot generate a notion of a common good. Indeed he shows that the notion of the common good is both logically and ontologically implied by the hermeneutic structures of time and freedom. But the nature of this common good remains sketchy and vague. At certain points it is connected to Rousseau’s general will as in the opening essay of the first volume reviewed, “Forming the Mind of Modernity.” In another essay in this volume, “The Temporality of the Common Good,” Sherover raises the question of how our common good is to be defined and yet still allow for our pursuits of individual goods. This question is raised
explicitly but no explicit answer is given. And finally the notion of a common good seems to veer off in the direction of the complex ideational/valuational matrix which is our cultural and political heritage. These various senses need to be sorted out more fully. For on the basis of these essays, we can’t identify the common good with much more than a loyalty to the enabling conditions of freedom that underlie a meaningful human life. And if this is the case, do we really get something so different when we instantiate Sherover’s own political matrix as opposed to the ideational and value complex of atomistic liberalism? It is certainly not clear on the basis of this volume. Readers will need to go to Sherover’s more fully worked out political treatise, Time, Freedom and the Common Good for an extended treatment of these issues. Again the question of a worked out philosophical anthropology, one that issues in a normative conception of human nature, seems central here.

A final point should be mentioned as well. Sherover’s ontology of human freedom leads him to view a free society as one that maximizes the free use of its citizens’ time. Hence he argues for the superiority of representative over participatory democracy. But, clearly, representative democracy has its own very serious problems. If Aristotle and the pragmatists are right about the role of habit and practice in developing virtue, we seem to be back to one of the fundamental questions of classical political thought. What happens when citizens use their free time to make choices that don’t lead to virtue and moral development, that don’t even acknowledge valuational differences among choices or are willfully “subversive” of those differences? Can institutions do their work effectively when the surrounding culture is, well, like ours? How does a consensual republic provide enough of a sane cultural fabric so that its citizens don’t find themselves “unhinged”? Sherover writes about the centrality of heritage for both individual and social life and takes Burke as axiomatic for notions of political and social change. He also calls attention to the religious quality of civic commitment in Rousseau. Clearly our common heritage must be lived and loved if it is to continue to function. The connection to that heritage is deeply affective or it is just not real. How to foster that in the current climate is a serious challenge. It would be most welcome to have some current reflections from a philosopher of Sherover’s stature to help point the way. In the meantime these two volumes are deeply rewarding. They remind us of what philosophy can accomplish when a gifted thinker seriously engages with the past in order to give us creative appropriations for the future.
REFERENCES


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The book deals with an ongoing controversy concerning the structure of physics: *reductionism* vs. *emergence*. Professor Laughlin shared the Nobel Prize in 1998 for his theoretical work on the fractional Hall effect and is more than well qualified to engage in the debate. Reductionism in physics has had and continues to have great success. Working ever inward, physicists have justified a reductionist approach by their experimental discoveries from the molecules to atoms to quarks and gluons. Supporters of emergence (of which Professor Laughlin is a stalwart) have equally strong arguments. The two views are well exemplified, respectively, by Abraham Pais, *Inward Bound: Of Forces and Matter in the Physical World* (Clarendon Press, 1988), and Philip W. Andersen, “More is Different” (*Science*, vol. 177 [1972], 394–96). Emergence in physics may be understood to mean the existence of macroscopic systems such as crystals, the behavior of which cannot be deduced from microscopic principles; that is, there are macroscopic systems that are subject to autonomous laws. This idea certainly has been long entertained with respect to living systems.

Professor Laughlin is an extremely fluent writer. Very few physicists have comparable ability. However, he is inclined to be self-indulgent. The text is liberally larded with anecdotal material that, though pleasant to read, is distinctly alien to the thesis at issue. Additionally, he needlessly denigrates research areas such as nanotechnology, quantum computing, string theory, and other fields he finds annoying. The book might well be two-thirds its present size were the extraneous material deleted.
The technical level of the book is deceptive. The absence of even a single equation and the presence of all the anecdotal material imply the volume to be intended for a lay audience, yet much of the material is very heavy going. It is so even for persons with technical background. More troubling is the sloppy treatment of the scientific material. Some at the level of a misdemeanor, some felonious: Kepler was not an observational astronomer; his discussion of Schrödinger’s cat is flawed; the entire chapter “The Fabric of Space-Time,” dealing with special and general relativity, is shot through with misunderstandings. Professor Laughlin must have learned about special and general relativity as an undergraduate from an instructor who did not understand the material very well and never realized it. For instance, his discussion of the principle of equivalence does not resemble Einstein’s and nowhere did Einstein ever discuss the vacuum as a medium. Einstein was once asked (apocryphal tale) what the vacuum consisted of and he sagely responded that it was the sum of its properties. Moreover, to refer to the theory of general relativity as “still controversial and beyond the reach of experiment” indicates that Professor Laughlin has no idea of what is going on in the field. Should you read the book, definitely skip this chapter.

No reductionist in physics would have the temerity to claim that ultimately every non-microscopic physical structure would admit an explanation from first principles. Likewise, Professor Laughlin’s claim that every physical concept in physics is emergent, awaits stronger arguments than he presents. Will any part of this controversy have any effect on the practice of physics? Of course not!

The best part of the book is that which has nothing to do with ‘emergence in physics.’ Professor Laughlin is a brilliant writer and delightful spinner of yarns. Had he relegated the physics to an ancillary role and expanded the anecdotal and spleen-ventning material into a proper collection of autobiographical sketches and essays detailing his animadversions, the book would have been a winner. However, then it would have little to do with emergence. In horse racing, there are ‘win,’ ‘place,’ and ‘show.’ The book, as is, ‘places.’
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