Leo Strauss and Arab Philosophy

Medieval versus Modern Enlightenment

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Critique of the modern Enlightenment is at the heart of Leo Strauss's thought. Motivated by the obligation to seek ways of escaping from the crisis of modern times, this critique rejects the break with the past and the excessive trust placed in human beings. That is how nihilism, which is seen as the greatest feature of the modern Enlightenment and against which Strauss fought constantly, may be combated only by returning to ancient philosophy, an inaugural moment that witnessed the foundation of a discourse on humanity, its nature and how living together can be thought. However this emphasis on the ancients (Socrates, Plato) has to be seen through reading medieval authors, for instance Fârâbî (870–950) and Maimonides (1138–1204). This essential detour comes from the fact that the medieval thinkers are emblematic of the 'good' reception given to Plato's teachings and an excellent application of ancient philosophy to a different context, societies dominated by the monotheistic religions. This is the purpose of this turn in the overall economy of Strauss's thought: it does not stem from nostalgia for lost eras or from a backward-looking reaction to the confusion caused by modernity's mistakes; he is looking for a stable founding discourse that takes account of the permanence transcending time. Strauss's aim is to remind us that humans have not changed and that they are still full of the same questioning. So awareness of this fact invites us to grasp the essence of this questioning when it was initially formulated. In its turn the detour through the medieval thinkers shows us the success of a thought that avoids the catastrophes to which the founders of political modernity would lead, notably Spinoza, Machiavelli and Hobbes. Behind these three figures, who conceptualized the main changes affecting modern times, stretch out the various crises that led to nihilism and the intellectual strategies that supported it, such as historicism and relativism. If Machiavelli is the author who undermined any link between morality and politics, thus opening the way to a divorce between the notions of 'good' and 'politics', it was Hobbes who fin-

ished off his predecessor's work by reducing humanity to the order of the passions and levelling down. As for Spinoza, he is blamed for the break in the relationship between faith and reason, religion and philosophy. Considering that the critique of modernity by some moderns (Rousseau, Nietzsche, Heidegger) does not help us to find a path to salvation or a radical change from what was introduced from the sixteenth century onwards, Strauss therefore goes to the medieval thinkers for a satisfactory answer and a way out of the crisis. That is the point of studying medieval philosophy and two authors in particular, Fârâbî and Maimonides, from whose writing Strauss obtains the tools for his radical critique of the modern Enlightenment. By contrasting it with the medieval Enlightenment, he redefines the bond between philosophy and religion, around which he deploys all the elements of his thinking about religious law, rationalism and the art of writing. The aim of this paper will be to focus on the central role that Arab philosophy has played in the development of Strauss's thought and to discuss the validity of the uses he makes of it. As Daniel Tanguay remarks in his intellectual biography of Strauss (2005: 11), his thought has 'that peculiar virtue of both fascinating and irritating'. If the fascination stems from the openings in interpretation he creates and the intuitions he offers, the irritation often emanates from the settled views he adopts and the radical stances he defends. And so my intention is to emphasize the interest of Strauss's analyses as regards Arab philosophy while drawing attention to the tensions they create – the objective being less to 'correct' or 'rectify' his views than to show the nature of the problems posed by his readings.[1]

Arab Philosophers and the Law

In Strauss's work the notion of a medieval Enlightenment covers a relationship between religion and philosophy that is diametrically opposed to the one formulated by Spinoza and the moderns. They created a gulf between faith and reason, philosophical truth and the truth of revelation. Their biting critique of miracles and prophecies created a disproportionate confidence in reason, which led humanity to the catastrophes of the twentieth century and left it at the mercy of the demons of nihilism. For them religion is now simply a matter of individual morality; it is seen neither as a tradition to be respected nor as a Law taking in the ethical, social and political. In contrast to this attitude, the medieval philosophers, both Arab and Jewish, saw the Law as a founding reference point, a tradition that provides the work of philosophy with a basis able to preserve it from the pride and insolence of reason. So the Law seen as identified with tradition can be considered as a solid wall that can be quite confidently leant against. It ensures the durability of a stable social framework as well as maintaining the transcendence of norms, both of them aspects lacking in liberal democracy. In general this respect for religion is perfectly expressed by most Arab philosophers, as is observed by Averroes (1126–1198) in a passage from *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* which is not quoted by Strauss but illustrates perfectly the spirit of the argument he seeks to defend. In it Averroes (2000: 202) says the following: 'The opinion of all wise men [about revealed laws is] that we should practise imitation of the prophets and those who instituted the principles of action

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and the traditional ways of behaving (سنن) which act as law (مشروعة) in each community (ملَّة).' This passage clearly shows that the philosopher's attitude to the Law and social and religious tradition should be based on imitation, that is, respecting religious laws. The same viewpoint is defended by Ibn 'Adiyy (893–974), a Christian philosopher and student of Fârâbî's who composed a treatise entitled *Letter showing that the science of wisdom is one of the things that most encourage us to follow religious laws*, in which he defends the same viewpoint as Averroes on the relationship between philosophy and religion (Ibn 'Adiyy, 1988: 46). These two examples display a commonality of opinions between an eastern Christian Arab and a western Muslim Arab. Maimonides definitely shared the same view, even though he did not write anything specific on the matter. So philosophers do not need to upset the social order or instigate a political revolution. However this does not mean they have to accept widespread opinions out of conservatism or disturb their fellow citizens' mental peace. On the contrary, their work may be critical and even subversive, but should nonetheless be based first and foremost on respect for commonly-held opinions and the wish not to offend people's sensitivities. This issue of respect for the Law illustrates one of the basic points that is a focus for the contrast between medieval and modern Enlightenment. For in Strauss's view the origin of the eighteenth century Enlightenment must be sought in the rebellion against religion and revelation led by Spinoza. His intention was to free human beings from obstacles to the progress of history and attack on the positive mind through a critique of miraculous beliefs and submission to the authority of sacred texts. And so turning to Maimonides and his Muslim masters is a strategy used by Strauss to take the opposite stance to the project of Spinoza and the modern Enlightenment.

The relationship between philosophy and the Law is not limited to this aspect. Starting from a searching interpretation of Averroes's *Decisive treatise* Strauss begins to think through the complex, subtle connexions between them.[2] His interpretation, which still targets Spinoza's thought, goes beyond respect for the Law to argue in favour of subordinating philosophy to religion. Philosophers can philosophize only because their activity is authorized and prescribed by the Law: this is the idea that Strauss gets from the *Decisive treatise*, in which the act of philosophizing is examined from a legal viewpoint and according to categories relevant to the science of Muslim law (مشروعة). Averroes's objective is to discover the Law's opinion on philosophy by starting from the very categories used in the legal literature. Thus he asks whether the practice is permitted, forbidden or prescribed. Even though he states, at the end of this legal enquiry into philosophy, that it is considered as a duty or religious commandment, philosophy is nevertheless obliged to justify itself in the court of the Law, and is, both de facto and de jure, subject to its criteria for approval or rejection, legality or illegality. Indeed Strauss (1988: 55) takes advantage of Averroes's work to show how 'medieval philosophy (both Islamic and Jewish) is distinct from ancient philosophy, just as it is from modern philosophy, because of this characteristic which means that, since it understands itself to be bound by Revelation and entrusted by it with a mission, it sees its prime and most pressing concern as basing philosophy in a *foundation of philosophy starting from the Law*'. Though Strauss's analysis is valid for Averroes, his generalization to all Arab philosophers such as Kindî (790–874), Fârâbî (870–950), Avicenna (980–1037), Avempace (1077?–1111) or Ibn Tufayl (1110–1185, to

mention only the best known, cannot be accepted without raising certain problems. Dealing with the context in which Averroes's view is developed reveals that he raises the question only following the crisis initiated by Ghazâlî (1058–1111) who, in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, accuses philosophers of impiety based on the scrutiny of three questions: eternity or the creation of the world, the knowledge by God of the individual and the nature of the life to come. It is true that the accusation of impiety against philosophers existed well before that date, whether in the culture of Islam, in Christianity or in ancient Greece. But before the crisis brought about by al-Ghazâlî the issue of the legality or illegality of the act of philosophizing was not raised by philosophers or jurists or theologians (المتكلّمون), who were nevertheless fierce opponents of philosophers. If it is clear that before al-Ghazâlî the practice of philosophy, like other theological, legal and religious practice, was likely to expose individuals to accusations of impiety or heresy, I think we must relate this to the ideologies current then and to the contexts in which they developed. More often than not these accusations arose from conflicts between disciplines similar to the ones that set grammarians against logicians or theologians against philosophers. They even appear within theological movements, as is shown by the conflict between mu'talilism and traditionalism under the caliph al-Ma'mûn in Baghdad in the early ninth century. Despite these facts we can see that philosophy did not have to account to the Law, as Strauss attempts to persuade us was the case. This observation may be supported by looking at the moment when philosophy first came to Islamic territory with Kindî and the various translators of Greek and Syriac texts, such as Qustâ ibn Lûqâ (d. 912) or Hunayn ibn Ishâq (808–873).[3] It was then that the issue of the appearance of philosophy before the Law should have been raised and examined, especially as from the eighth century onwards the science of law was being systematized and codified, a process which had turned it into a perfectly formed and epistemologically established discipline. But history shows that Kindî and the various philosophers who followed in his wake from the ninth century were not required to raise this issue, which proves that philosophy was evolving as naturally as the other scientific, literary or religious areas of scholarship.

To understand the nature of Averroes's work and its context we should remember that the two Andalusian philosophers who preceded him (Avempace and Ibn Tufayl), and who were also affected by al-Ghazâlî's attack, did not react to the accusation of impiety – probably because it was commonplace in the intellectual milieu, or else because they had not realized the effect of such an accusation, which turned out to be fatal for the continuation of philosophy in Islamic lands. But being both jurist and philosopher Averroes was particularly affected by Ghazâlî's accusations and outraged by this failure to understand the essence of philosophy, which was being proscribed in the name of orthodoxy. And it was in order to ensure opportunities for the continuing practice of philosophy on Islamic territory that Averroes began to study the position of the Law with regard to the use of reason. This rapid contextualization of the conditions in which Averroes's legal thinking on the act of philosophizing took shape shows that before him that act did not require any justification before the court of the Law.

In another context and for other reasons a twelfth century Andalusian philosopher, a contemporary of Maimonides and Averroes, began to criticize religious law openly.

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Though he was aware of the danger lying in wait for philosophers and the hardening attitude of the Law to practitioners of philosophy, Ibn Tufayl did not shrink, in his philosophical tale *Hayy ibn Yaqzân* (حيّ بن يقظان), from criticizing what in Strauss's view marks out the Jewish and Muslim religions, that is their character as Law, a series of commandments given as a whole and aiming to govern and regulate society. And so, alleging impoverishment of the spiritual dimension of religion, he deplores the fact that it focuses on ritual duties and a jurisprudential activity whose purpose is earthly goods. Arriving on an island governed by religious law after living according to natural law and attaining knowledge of God simply by using reason, Hayy, the story's hero, discovers the correspondence between the religious description of humanity's supreme purpose and what he was able to discover through rational speculation about beings. However the correspondence on the matter of humanity's supreme purpose hides a divergence which he immediately identifies: the invalidity of religious law for humans' spiritual development.

> 'Two things' – goes the narrative – 'were astonishing to him: he did not understand the wisdom of them. First, why did that messenger[4] use allegories most often to describe the divine world when talking to the people? Why did he refrain from presenting the naked truth? which makes people fall into the serious error of giving God a body, attributing to the essence of the True things of which it is totally free; similarly where rewards, punishments, the life to come are concerned. Secondly, why did he insist on those precepts and ritual prescriptions, why did he allow people to acquire wealth and leave such latitude as regards food, so that people took up vain activities and turned away from the Truth? For he himself thought we should take only the food that was needed to sustain life; and as for wealth, in his view there was no reason for it to exist. He saw the law's various provisions as regards wealth, for example legal alms and its subdivisions, sale and purchase, usury, the penalties prescribed by the law or left to judge's discretion, and all that seemed to him strange and superfluous; he said [to himself] that if people understood the true [value] of things, they would certainly turn away from these futilities, they would move towards the true Being, and they would do without all that: no one would own private property that would subject to legal alms, whose furtive theft means [for the culprit] having their hands cut off, and whose open theft means losing their life.' (Ibn Tufayl, 1936: 107–108)

This passage is crucial insofar as it allows us to pin down the fact that the relationship with the Law is not always the same in Arab philosophers' writings. Though Averroes views seriously its moral utility (training good citizens, educating them in virtue) and political usefulness (in law-making), Ibn Tufayl sees these legislative aspects as a brake on the spiritual development of human beings. The civil goods the law claims to govern and regulate are vain, futile things, and in the latter thinker's work this leads, contrary to Strauss, to a depoliticization rather than a politicization of the Law. An antinomy between the legislative aspect of religion and the philosophical way of life is pinpointed by Ibn Tufayl. The Law does not lead to happiness; quite the reverse, happiness means ditching its legislative aspects and preserving its supreme purpose which links with rational speculation on God.

If we return to the way Strauss characterizes the relationship between philosophy and religion – that the former should initially bow to the latter so that then philosophy may escape from the clutches of the Law because of the privilege of being

able to interpret it – we see that the method of first dealing with this issue in Arab philosophy was the opposite of Strauss's idea. In the *Book of Letters* Fârâbî asserts that philosophy precedes religion both historically and normatively. It is the source of religious knowledge and should therefore be seen as the origin of any basis for norms. 'It is clear,' he writes, 'that the art of dialectic theology and jurisprudence comes later than religious law, that the latter comes later than philosophy, that the dialectic and sophistic faculty comes before philosophy and that dialectic and sophistic philosophy come before demonstrative philosophy. In general philosophy precedes religious law in the same way as over time the person using tools comes before the tools' (al-Fârâbî, 2004: 132). This idea is developed by Fârâbî all through chapter 2 of the *Book of Letters*. It shows that the perfection or imperfection of religious law depends on the nature of the philosophy preceding it. If religious law emerges from a philosophy that has not attained perfection in its demonstrative methods, 'it will be full of many erroneous opinions' (al-Fârâbî, 2004: 154). Fârâbî's initial conceptualization of this connexion shows it is religion that has been brought down to philosophy. It was divided into two aspects, practical and theoretical, and the disciplines representing it brought down to the parts of philosophy. Thus dialectic theology (الكلام) is brought down to metaphysics, while the jurist (الفقيه) is identified with the prudent person (the φρόνιμος). But though religious law teaches theoretical things relating to God, the soul and heavenly joy or misfortune using allegories, demonstrative philosophy on the other hand approaches them through the strict regime of truth. So metaphysics is superior to theology in the degree of conviction they can reach. Similarly there is a difference between the jurist and the prudent person. They both infer good opinions about practical matters, but the former establishes these inferences from laws fixed by the religion's founder, whereas the latter relies on knowledge gained from experience and long study of human affairs (al-Fârâbî, 2004: 132–133). In the *Book of Religion* the same assimilation and subordination of religious knowledge to philosophy is repeated and extended to other aspects, such as examination of the respective roles of the prophet who founds a virtuous religious community and the philosopher-king who founds the perfect city.

So Fârâbî goes further than Strauss's ideas. He does not look for the philosophical basis of revelation but brings everything down to philosophy, which has total primacy. Fârâbî's attitude is thus not occasioned by an irreducible conflict between philosophy and religion, it is dictated by a vision that relates human origins to the emergence of philosophy, which is therefore the source and basis for religious law. And this reverses Strauss's perspective, where philosophy is subject to religion. The founding formulation of the relationship between philosophy and religion in Islam requires an inversion of Strauss's theory in which that relationship was described.

The Theologico-political Problem

The existence in Arab culture of such diverse attitudes to the relationship between religion and philosophy thus shows that it is impossible to retain the theory defined by Averroes in the twelfth century. The use Strauss makes of Averroes, from which he generalizes to all the medieval philosophers, requires us to take account of the

contextual details and individual nuances I have supplied above. As we shall have occasion to see in this paper, Strauss more often than not uses a particular case, an example taken from a single author, to support an overall thesis. He does not hold back from a radical reading of the case in question to the extent of giving readers to believe they are faced with an alternative where both terms are unavoidable. In spite of all that, Strauss's analysis of the relationship between philosophy and religion in Averroes allows us to sketch in the initial features of that medieval Enlightenment. The central role in it of Arab philosophy is confirmed when the young Strauss discovers a text by Avicenna which leads him to go deeper into the relationship between philosophy and Law in both Jewish and Muslim traditions. Strauss notes that in the *Letter on the parts of the intellectual sciences* Avicenna states that 'the aim of prophecy is political' and 'the prophet's most excellent practical function is not mantics but political guidance' (Strauss, 1988: 129, in which he translates the title of the text as *On the parts of science*). In the conception of political science Avicenna proposes, it is thus reduced to teaching religious law: it is the prophet, Strauss concludes (Strauss, 1988: 132), who '*is the founder of the ideal state*', since he is able to lead people towards both perceptible perfection and intelligible perfection. Strauss thinks that in this doctrine of prophetology the mantic and thaumaturgical dimensions are replaced by political and legislative aspects. This gives him a strong argument for keeping the issue of revelation at the heart of philosophical endeavour. Avicenna shows him how this problem, which the moderns tried to dismiss with their contempt for revelation, was perfectly dealt with by one of the representatives of the medieval Enlightenment. Avicenna's solution suits the young Strauss to perfection; thanks to the discovery of this text around 1929–30, he grasped the essence of political Platonism in the work of the *falâsifa* and immediately understood why they suggested a psychological and metaphysical interpretation of prophecy rather than a traditional reading based on the defence of miracles. Starting with this idea supported by Avicenna, Strauss constructs an argument that aims to show on one hand assimilation of civil politics to prophecy and on the other the genuine Platonism of the *falâsifa.*

This promotion of the prophet's political role and his assimilation to the founder of the perfect city is indeed present in Avicenna. But is it supported by *all* the Arab philosophers? In Averroes, who wrote a commentary on Plato's *Republic*, we do not find this assimilation of the prophet to the head of the virtuous city. He thinks it is not *necessary*, but simply *preferable* for the leader to have prophetic qualities (Averroes, 1974: 72). Thus Averroes retains an autonomy for politics in relation to religion. It could even be said that Avicenna's reduction of politics to prophecy – a reduction from which Strauss draws as many arguments as possible in favour of divergence between medieval and modern Enlightenments – is the sign of the particular way Avicenna has of tackling political issues. Strauss does not question the fact that, by identifying prophecy with political science, the latter is also reduced to religion, and no longer has the status of a science which would mean it could replace simple, commonly-held opinions with demonstrable arguments. But the particular nature of political philosophy, as Strauss often repeats in *What is Political Philosophy?*, is to replace commonly-held opinions about politics with demonstrable arguments that are the framework of a science. It is also to be distinct from political theology, that is, political teaching based on divine revelation (Strauss, 1988). Reducing to prophetic

teachings the Arab political philosophy treated in this case by Avicenna means, in other words, that there was in fact no political philosophy in the medieval authors' work.

Furthermore this idea of identity between political science and prophecy was extremely widespread among Islamic jurist-theologians, who constantly tried to defend the religious Law and the political traditions instigated by the Prophet and his successors as the norm to be followed in organizing the City. In this respect Avicenna follows a viewpoint present in these traditions. The tendency can be detected in this short part of the *Book of Healing*, his philosophical encyclopedia devoted to practical philosophy. Like the jurists of Islam he stresses the ways open to the individual to have access to the caliphate and the legal skills he must have. The fact that he deals with the topics of the ban on opposing central power and the political and theological condemnation of dissidents (people accused of impiety whose physical elimination is demanded) shows the influence of classical political law on Avicenna's thinking (1985: book x, chap. 5). To the extent that he does not deal with the issue of human excellences or with that of unjust cities or with the status of the philosopher-king which is at the heart of political philosophy he follows the views of Islamic jurists in subordinating practical knowledge to religious traditions. This appears quite explicitly in another text, the *Book of Science*, in which Avicenna (1955: 89) states that 'knowledge of the nature of religions' is the principle that gives access to the nature of political science. The latter thus emerges from this religious principle (Avicenna, 1955: 90). In another text, the *Logic of the Eastern People*, Avicenna goes even further. He thinks the prophet's legal knowledge comes into play not only in the city's administration, but is also involved in the other two branches of practical science, ethics (governing the self) and economics (governing the domestic sphere). 'It is preferable,' he writes, 'given what needs to be done in the private or individual sphere, in the area of the little community [the household] and the big community [the city], for the legislator to be a single person possessing a single art, and this person is the prophet.' The science of law emerging from prophetic teaching is thus presented as an architectonics that play a part in the organization of the three branches of practical science (Avicenna, 1955: 8–9).

This way of thinking the relationship between political science and religious law is peculiar to Avicenna and it would be hard to find an equivalent among other philosophers. In his *Commentary on Plato's Republic* Averroes proceeds in a completely contrary manner. Like Aristotle he links political science with ethics and stresses that it finds its principles in the will and choice, willed actions being its particular object (Averroes, 1974: 3). In the *Commentary*'s opening pages he introduces a comparison between political and medical science which does not exist in Plato's text. This comparison aims to show that the bipartite division of political science into theory and practice applies to the art of medicine as well. Thus ethics is compared to the part of medicine that studies sickness and health, while political science is to do with maintaining health (حفظ الصحّة) and warding off sickness (إزالة المرض). In Averroes's work this point prepares the idea of an epistemological base common to politics and medicine, which means that in both can be found the principles and basis essential to their practice. This parallel, which continues through the *Commentary*, makes it possible to put political science together with other sciences which share the same

epistemological status rather than with religious Law. Though this approach is very different from Avicenna's, it does not exclude the idea that the philosopher should respect his city's laws, or the idea that, within the city and under certain conditions, the Law has a positive function in citizens' education. But as a science politics possesses an autonomy with respect to its object, principles and purposes, which enables it to use the Law according to what it establishes as *science*.

The same attitude appears regarding the human soul. Averroes asks himself about the possibility – or impossibility – of a separation of the soul after the person's death. He does not give a pat answer taken from religious texts, nor does he bring them into understanding and dealing with the problem. Right to the end of the investigation the issue must remain faithful to its initial principles and retain an internal cohesion, thus making the discourse satisfactory from the viewpoint of the criteria set by the scientific search for truth. The religious texts that have a certain latitude and a semantic extension capable of allowing several interpretations will adapt where necessary to the demonstrating discourse – or it is for the philosopher to find an understanding of the sacred text in accordance with the results of his research. But in either case religious Law does not have a role in justifying the work of philosophy.

We find the same strategy in Avempace's work. He develops his political philosophy without making reference to any similarity to religious discourse. Ethico-political issues are dealt with independently of the ethico-political framework defined by the religious Law: this is the case with the topic of human excellences, to which Avempace devotes the *Valedictory Letter*, and also with the status of the philosopher in imperfect societies covered in the *Hermit's Guide*. This indifference to the Law and absence of questioning as to the meaning of prophetic teaching do not stem from a disdain for religion or a concealed opposition to its commandments.[5] For Avempace the principles of political science should be taken from people who have reflected on this field of human activity, just the same as with other scientific disciplines such as noetics, physics or astronomy.

According to Strauss the Platonism of the *falâsifa* is also based on this political interpretation of prophetology, of which the perfect example is provided by Avicenna and Fârâbî, but which he generalizes to Maimonides from 1936 onwards (Strauss, 1988: 143–182). The argument taking revelation as a human phenomenon, and thinking the medieval philosophers did not believe in the supernatural character of prophecy, allowed him to show that politics was not the philosophers' fundamental preoccupation in the medieval period, because what counted for them was devoting themselves to the theoretical life. Thus the medieval Enlightenment could be said to connect with the Platonist intuition according to which the philosopher needs a law, a framework he respects but is not bound to. Though he recognizes Aristotle's importance for the Arab philosophers, Strauss still sees them as Platonists. This may be explained in the relationship Plato develops with the Law, whose letter and spirit the *falâsifa* will respect and which he says is not found in Aristotle. Though Plato and Aristotle both deal with certain topics and agree on many important points, such as the fact 'that humanity's happiness and true perfection lie in the pure activity of contemplating and understanding', a fundamental difference between the two men is the way they '*behave* regarding contemplation and humanity's highest perfection. Aristotle frees it completely; or rather he allows it its natural freedom. But Plato

does not let philosophers' continually contemplate truth. 'He "*forces*" them to be concerned about others and watch over them so that the state may in fact be a true state' (Strauss, 1988: 141). In Strauss's view retaining this twofold demand of the theoretical life and the life of the city is typical of Plato. Though he is aware of the superiority of the contemplative life over active life, the Platonist philosopher feels bound to the city. He is, 'even as a philosopher, [. . .] subject to the city, he has to answer to it, he is not absolutely sovereign' (Strauss, 1988: 142). So we find once more the theme of the subordination of philosophy to the Law which compels the Arab philosophers to accept revelation as a political law that legitimately claims to control human affairs. They can philosophize freely in an Aristotelian, that is, purely contemplative, way only when they have been authorized to do so by the Law. In other words they can be Aristotelian only after being fundamentally Platonist or adopting a Platonist attitude to politics.

This argument marks a radicalization of Strauss's stance. It leads to the idea that the Arab philosophers no longer needed to search for the basis of the perfect city because what Plato had thought in his discourse they assimilated to the prophetic mission and the basis for the Muslim city. Let us remind ourselves of the terms of the question. The Platonism of the *falâsifa* is said to come from their acceptance of the theory, formulated by Plato in the *Laws*, which presents the legislator as the founder of the perfect city. However, since for Muslim philosophers the legislator was the Prophet, the foundation matter was resolved and they could unproblematically 'Aristotelize', which for Strauss means devote themselves to theoretical activity and the question of Being, which would have been impossible without resolving the political issue as a philosophical one (Strauss, 1988: 142). Besides the fact that it poses the problem of the utility and function of certain philosophers' research into the conditions for the emergence of the perfect government or into the relationship between the theoretical model of the perfect government and its practical realization (these two aspects are at the heart of Fârâbî's and Averroes's work), and over and above the fact that this reading assimilates the Muslim city, in its totality and independently of any kind of historicity, to a perfect government, this argument about the Platonism of the *falâsifa* raises grave problems as far as the history of Arab philosophy is concerned.[6] An argument invoked by Strauss observes that Arab philosophers were interested in Plato's *Republic* and his *Laws* but not in Aristotle's *Politics*. A historical lacuna (that text did not come down to the Arabs among the Aristotle corpus) is raised to the level of a significant argument in order to prove the political Platonism of all the *falâsifa*. Strauss does not wonder about Averroes's stated wish to Aristotelize the *Republic* and bring Plato's teachings back to the starting point of political science defined by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics.* Indeed Averroes changes Plato's text considerably. His *Commentary* on the *Republic* is perhaps the most unfaithful of the works he was interested in. We should note first that the dialogue literary form is abandoned in favour of a treatise composed not of ten books but of three parts.[7] The first of these attempts to define the principles of political science and describes the characteristics of the perfect city. The second covers the status of the philosopher-king and in general the nature and status of knowledge in planning such a city. The final part asks about the opposites to the perfect city and, unlike Fârâbî's work, contains important historical remarks taken from the history of Al-Andalus and Islam

in general. A betrayal of Plato and Platonism lies at the origin of this transformation: by abandoning the mythical narratives (the myth of Er), which Averroes finds have no philosophical interest, by subordinating the *Republic* to the *Nicomachean Ethics* and by altering the structure of Plato's work considerably, Averroes reveals the concern deeply affecting him, that is, to bring out the universal principles of political science and above all to use them to understand the historical issues Andalusian cities faced at the time. Far from claiming that the perfect city had already come about, he puts his finger on a series of problems related to political injustice, division of the state and issues of education in Muslim cities. How should we think that the basis of the perfect government was no longer a philosophical problem for him?

This question leads us to another aspect of Strauss's approach. He uses the medieval model to show the need to safeguard the link between theological and political. In his view it was because religion was the valued ally of politics that the medieval philosophers were able to continue and develop Platonist teaching in a monotheistic context. According to this reading of the 'theologico-political problem' which has remained 'the theme of all his research', Strauss's aim (1984: Foreword) is to attack the very process with which modern politics is identified: secularization. Stemming from this desire we can discern a twofold division: on the level of religion, between Jews and Muslims on the one hand and Christians on the other; on the philosophical level, between Plato and Socrates on the one hand and Aristotle on the other. Following this division the former continued to respect religious tradition and welcome forms of rationality appropriate to it, whereas the latter worked methodically to distinguish and separate the political and religious spheres. The medieval Enlightenment preserved the teaching of the prophets while the modern Enlightenment destroyed that balance, systematically criticized religion and spread atheism.

Nevertheless the issue in this context is whether it is possible to involve all Arab philosophy in defending a theological purpose which would of necessity be the constraint to any political conceptualization. The concept of 'political theology' as Strauss uses it and applies it to that philosophy can be defined according to criteria he does not use but which bring out other aspects of the medieval Enlightenment. Like Carl Schmitt and many other critics of modernity and secularization, Strauss emphasizes this concept in order to define the ideal of a government that would be linked to a transcendent origin determined by a purpose or supreme requirement surpassing the immanence of the political. But whereas Schmitt sees acceptance of the will of a leader supported by the infallibility of divine decrees as the sole means to guarantee transcendence of the political act, for Strauss the durable presence of the Law with its commandments and morality represents symbolically the guardian of the state and the guarantor of the correct working of society. Strauss thinks that Platonist philosophy, revisited by the Jews and Arabs in the Middle Ages, is the paradigm of successful politics, since it tells the state to define excellence and take responsibility for perfecting human beings based on philosophical teaching (for the elite) and religious teaching (for the masses). This way of seeing the political is peculiar to classical natural law, which Strauss attempts to rehabilitate in opposition to modern natural law. The Arab philosophers' approach is completely consistent with that conception inherited from the Greeks: we need to work towards perfecting human beings, and the government should take charge of leading citizens towards earthly happiness

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and heavenly salvation, seen as humanity's supreme purpose. Whether in Fârâbî, Avempace or Averroes, politics is subordinate to theology from this perspective. But though those thinkers place government in a context that goes beyond the immanent ends of the political, this is because, starting with ethics and noetics, science requires that subordination. In this case the theological does not emanate from sacred texts and revealed religion. The latter has an auxiliary part to play, it assists in pursuing a purpose determined by science. So it is possible, and even a duty, to criticize other forms of political theology: for instance imposing a religious doctrine, a dogma or an exclusive interpretation of the Law. This dimension of the theologico-political, which Strauss does not refer to, should be mentioned as one of the prominent features of the medieval Enlightenment which makes it possible to compare those thinkers with the modern Enlightenment. If we look at Averroes and his critique of dialectic theology, we can see that the separation he makes between the practical purposes of religion and its theoretical side foreshadows a modern approach to relations between philosophy and religion. Indeed Averroes thinks religion has a practical use (training the virtuous citizen) which may become a political danger when the city turns into the place where theological problems and abstruse issues are debated that can only lead to tearing apart the civil body (Abbes, 2009: 238–255). In other words Averroes tries to neutralize politically dogmatic faith and expresses the wish to free the sphere of action from the domination of religious knowledge, which, in his view, should remain open to a plurality of forms of representation of invisible things (be they demonstrative, dialectic, rhetorical or poetic). Thus there is a separation between faith and exact knowledge related to invisible things, the second being, according to him, the preserve of philosophy which alone provides the scientific tools that make it possible to conduct precise research into those things.

These ideas were continued into the modern Enlightenment through Lessing, Kant, Mendelssohn, Leibniz and many others. If Strauss passes over this connection it is mainly because those representatives of the moderate Enlightenment were not able to resist the radical thinking expressed in Spinoza's critique of religion. But, even if they are moderate, these authors cannot be pressed into service to solve the crisis of modernity for which they are blamed: 'It is not possible to transcend modernity by modern means', he says in a letter to Karl Löwith of 15 August 1946 (Strauss, 1997: 662; Pelluchon, 2009: 200). And so it is Maimonides and his Arab teachers who must provide a solution to the crisis, since they, in their idea of rationality, retained the sense of heteronomy, of that tension between two wisdoms, that of Athens and that of Jerusalem (Brague, 1989). Though Strauss's interpretation of prophetology saves philosophy and restores the philosopher to his role contemplating the mysterious, majestic All, it binds together forever the political and the theological, which thus become the preserve of a mass unable to rise to the level of the human. Paradoxically it is through this assimilation of politics to prophecy that the break is consummated, since the esoteric art of writing, which sees the Law as a noble lie intended for the masses and without any intrinsic value as truth, enters the heart of the work of philosophy. Strauss's approach to the medieval Enlightenment therefore becomes more complicated and dense when it starts to conceptualize the art of writing peculiar to the philosophers.

Strauss's Art of Writing Tested on Fârâbî's Texts

It was in the late 1930s, in the text on Abravanel, a sixteenth century Jewish author, that Strauss departed from the theory of the medieval philosophers' genuine belief in revelation and asserted that Maimonides and his Arab predecessors practised a dual writing susceptible to both a moderate and a radical reading.[8] It is interesting to see that Strauss's method of reading does not hesitate to use the philosophers' opponents and their attacks on philosophy as a tool for understanding the texts of the authors he is commenting on. So, just as he uses the opinion of Abravanel, a traditionalist author who had criticized Maimonides's doctrine of providence, Strauss exploits to the maximum Ghazâli's critique of philosophy, leaving out of account the responses of the philosophers themselves. 'The Islamic philosophers,' he states, 'did not believe in Revelation strictly speaking. They were philosophers in the classical sense of the word: men who followed reason and reason alone. Consequently they were forced to account for Revelation, which they had to accept, and did accept, in terms of human reason' (Strauss, 1998: 559–560). The fact of having read Plato's works encouraged those philosophers to distinguish the purely philosophical exercise (contemplation leading to true knowledge) from social and political necessities (the royal art). This method of presenting the conception which ancient and medieval thinkers had of philosophy leads Strauss to assert that for them the true philosopher is concerned with the city only in that he has to live in it and meet other citizens. Theoretical activity alone makes it possible to achieve happiness: therefore Fârâbî's interest in politics, for instance, is only a stratagem peculiar to his art of writing and aims to awake the reader's awareness of the distinction between philosophy and politics rather than their identity. As true Platonists these philosophers would have found in the art of writing a way to guarantee the philosopher's independence and superiority as compared to the masses, without that involving a contempt for religion or questioning the meaning of life and politics for people in general. On the contrary, they would have been convinced of the political utility of religion, which they identified with the royal art. It was constantly maintaining that perspective that brought their work notable success: the philosophers' political action in the name of philosophy, Strauss (2000) reveals to Alexandre Kojève, was completely successful: sometimes one even wonders whether that success was not too great.

If the medieval philosophers end up demoting religion to the rank of a pious fib, a noble rhetoric for the masses, in what way then are they different from the moderns? Why should we criticize the moderns for criticizing religion and praise the medieval thinkers for looking down on it and thinking of it simply as a lie that should be dismissed thanks to an art of writing reserved for the elite? Strauss's answer to these questions lies in the fact that, though both groups of philosophers defend the freedom to philosophize, they are opposed to one another on how far philosophy should be disseminated. The moderns sought to spread truth and not keep it wrapped carefully in cotton-wool, whereas the medieval thinkers knew that this impulse did not lead to the happiness of all and even that it was dangerous for philosophy. This is where their Platonism comes in.

Strauss (1989: 66–70) supports this reading with the fact that the medieval philosophers took from Plato the idea of the need to lie to the masses. A passage in the

Commentary on the *Republic* shows Averroes (1974: 23–24) in the process of accepting this idea of the possibility, even the need, for states to use 'noble lies'. However Strauss's understanding of this issue of the lie is a matter for caution. In fact, in the word 'lie' Averroes refers to the idea that certain discourses whose logical status is faulty are used by politicians for educational ends in the perfect city. This lying status of discourse is perfectly described in the *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's* Rhetoric using examples the informed interpreter can have no doubt about. Averroes gives as an example the fables of *Kalîla and Dimna*, whose falseness cannot logically be denied yet which are extremely useful ethically and politically.[9] In the *Commentary on the* Republic Averroes also interprets myths and allegories as discourses that are not literally true but are useful for citizens' education or the moral and political stability of government. Strauss's reading passes over this aspect and invites the reader to understand the word 'lie' in a sense that departs from the one it is given by medieval philosophers such as Averroes.

Because of this interpretation of the doctrine of prophetology in the work of the *falâsifa* Strauss relegates religion to a kind of poetic, imaginative version of philosophical truth. It is here that the question of the art of writing comes in and that Arab philosophy plays a more than central part in shaping Strauss's thinking. Like Avicenna, who gave Strauss the conceptual tools to deal with the link between prophecy and politics, Fârâbî provides him with the overall scheme that is the basis for theorizing the art of writing. Nicknamed 'the second master' among the Arab philosophers and held in high esteem by Maimonides,[10] Fârâbî is both the key to Strauss's interpretation of Maimonides and, as Tanguay stresses (2005: 151), 'one of the keys to the interpretation of the thought of Strauss' himself. Strauss finds in Fârâbî a form of 'radical intellectual eudemonism' (Tanguay, 2005: 153) to which he remains forever faithful. This identity of views between the two philosophers stems from their attachment to a particular attitude of mind that consists of being inclined to the desire for contemplation but without philosophy being confused with a fully formed system of knowledge, even if that knowledge were true and perfectly developed. Based on this interpretation Strauss attributes to Fârâbî an implicit distinction between the royal art and philosophy, as well as an identification of the royal art with religion, which makes it possible to deny the latter any kind of access to true knowledge. According to Strauss (1945) this work could be carried out in the context of the tenth century Islamic city thanks to a strategy of taking advantage of the commentator's or historian's specific immunity to say what he thinks on serious questions in his 'historical' works rather than in those that set out what he presents as his own doctrine.

Without getting into the discussion about the art of writing as a strategy making it possible to evade persecution and deliver an esoteric teaching contradicting or getting round established dogma (Jaffro *et al.*, 2001), I wish to call attention to a point relating to the reading of a text that inspired Strauss profoundly, *The Philosophy of Plato*. According to Strauss Fârâbî uses Plato as a screen that lets him disseminate his heretical opinions, as in the case of the rejection of the belief in the soul's immortality or the assertion of theoretical philosophy's primacy over politics. In other writings such as the *Principles of the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City*, the *Political Governments* or the *Virtuous Religious Community*, the opinions put forward are purely exoteric and do not reflect their author's convictions. To define Fârâbî's

art of writing as a condition for understanding Maimonides Strauss first states, in agreement with Maimonides, that the fundamental text is the *Principles of Beings*, also called *Political Governments*, which is supposed to contain Fârâbî's esoteric opinions: because – he writes – this book's teaching is to some extent to reject silently some principles defended in the other two books, viz. the *Principles of the Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City* and the *Virtuous Religious Community* (Strauss, 1945). But while he explains that he cannot spend too much time on the content of the book, Strauss attacks *The Philosophy of Plato* and reverses the status of the texts: he states that *Political Governments* contains orthodox, therefore exoteric opinions, just like the *Book of Religion* (Strauss, 1945). Later the text Maimonides considered central in Fârâbî's work is relegated to a secondary rank: it goes without saying that, Strauss argues, in the case of conflict between the teaching of the *Plato* and that of the *Tahsîl* [the *Achievement of Happiness*], the *Political Governments*, the *Enumeration of Sciences* and other similar works, the balance will lean to the teaching of the *Plato*. Compared with the *Plato* all those other writings are exoteric (Strauss, 1945). Although Strauss himself questioned this move,[11] it suggests that the medieval philosophers' power lay in their ability to uphold, because of political and philanthropic demands, teachings that they refuted or mocked in their esoteric work. The philosophical portrait of Fârâbî painted by Strauss is strange at the very least: while he saw him, together with other *falâsifa*, as Maimonides's master and the incarnation of the medieval Enlightenment, he places him in the materialist line and the critique of religion peculiar to the modern philosophers. Fârâbî differs from Spinoza only insofar as he sought to integrate religious knowledge into his work intended for the masses. Furthermore Strauss reads Fârâbî's work according to the same criterion used for Spinoza when he stated that the *Theologico-political Treatise* should be taken as the starting point for understanding the other texts (Tanguay, 2005: 49).

And so the medieval Enlightenment offers another facet, the political need to uphold the lie, since access to truth is just a privilege reserved for the philosophical elite. For Strauss, insofar as it is impossible to resolve the theological issue, reason itself demands the safeguarding of religion, otherwise the social edifice would crumble. This interpretation of the medieval Enlightenment shows that the ideal of the good philosopher is confused in Strauss's work with the figure of the Averroist, as he himself says of Maimonides. In a letter addressed to his friend Klein (dated 16 February 1938) he says he is holding 'a bomb set to explode and upset the huge majority of naïve people who believe Maimonides is something other than an Averroist' (Pelluchon, 2009: 184, n. 13; Strauss, 1998: 561–563). In the end would the man who embodies the medieval Enlightenment for Strauss not be the Averroist, that dual being about whom the myth was created in the Middle Ages based on the figure of Averroes? Because it really is that type of philosopher, with a kind of fundamental duplicity according to legend, who is able to keep people in religion and philosophy, faith and reason, protected from the crises that shook modernity (nihilism, tradition's loss of authority). When all is said and done this reading would mean a considerable reduction in the difference between the medieval and modern Enlightenments, the father of the latter being no other than Machiavelli, whom Strauss thought of as an Averroist (1994: 340). In the end the difference may lie in the fact that the medieval philosophers made more concessions to revealed religion and they accepted the con-

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tinuation of the 'noble rhetoric'. Unlike the moderns they understood that criticizing religion does not solve the theologico-political problem any more than it results in a refutation of orthodoxy. According to Strauss the balance the philosopher has to strike is as follows: if we are unlikely to become completely disenchanted and since, in the eventuality that we did, we would be faced with the catastrophe of nihilism, we might as well preserve that tension between Athens and Jerusalem with the 'medieval Enlightenment' model as a backdrop.

Conclusion

Strauss gets involved at once in the quarrel between Ancients and Moderns in order to show, contrary to the dominant interpretation supported by Julius Gutmann, that medieval philosophy cannot be reduced simply to the effort to reconcile philosophy and religion (Strauss, 1988: 34-77). His philosophical questioning caused him to read the texts by Arab and Jewish authors, stressing on the one hand their link with Platonism and on the other their understanding of prophetology. Thus through his subtle, penetrating analyses he threw light on the main features of that philosophy: the theoretical life's superiority over practical life, the importance of distinguishing between elite and masses as regards access to knowledge, continuation of the ideal of ancient natural law which sees humans as beings able to improve and achieve virtue rather than beings motivated by evil passions. The ideas of some Arab philosophers cropped up throughout Strauss's philosophical development and determined his interpretation of Maimonides and Plato as well as his stance in opposition to the moderns. Sometimes the commentaries on texts such as Avicenna's *Letter on the parts of the intellectual sciences* and Fârâbî's *Philosophy of Plato* were the source of genuine philosophical revelations and gave him the inspiration for lasting interpretative choices.

However Strauss's idea of the 'medieval Enlightenment' remains fundamentally ambiguous. Is that Enlightenment supposed to be an argument for the preservation of faith alongside reason or does it rather express a kind of atheism or disguised materialism? We find the same ambiguity in Strauss's personal opinions; he is sometimes the fervent defender of religious orthodoxy and tradition, sometimes a determined atheist, agnostic or even, despite many contradictions, a follower of Maimonides (Kriegel, 2004: 176). A text as fundamental as the introduction to *Philosophy and Law* 'was thus able to act as an argument for either orthodoxy or atheism' (Kriegel, 2004:170). If I have recalled this relativist feature of Strauss's personal convictions it is because the practice of philosophical commentary is inseparable in his writing from that quest for the hidden opinions of the authors studied and for their most personal beliefs. But insofar as Strauss wished to express himself in the same way as he read his authors and in the same way as they had written – since, as he himself maintains, people write as they read – interpretation of his thought becomes a difficult and dangerous exercise.

The notion of 'medieval Enlightenment' illustrates this well because it is caught in the web of three options adopted by Strauss. First an option for enlightened Judaism which makes Maimonides a model to be followed as far as the link between

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philosophy and Judaism is concerned. Then, the antinomy of the two wisdoms, of Athens and Jerusalem, changes its character when it is approached from a philosophical viewpoint and leads to an idea, strongly coloured with elitism, of philosophy's superiority over both politics and religion. Finally, the area of the medieval Enlightenment widens to embrace the destiny of the west and the definition of modernity, Enlightenment and secularization: like Nietzsche or Heidegger Strauss then attempts to give an answer for the crisis of modern times. Certain themes from Arab philosophy – like Avicenna's statements on prophecy as a part of political science, Averroes's problematization of the link between philosophy and the Law, or Fârâbî's art of writing – were mobilized in defence of these options each time and according to situations. But in this strategy Strauss's scientific rigour did not avoid the pitfall of generalizing a particular viewpoint and applying it to the *falâsifa*: as if the relationship between philosophy and revelation, the interpretation of sacred texts, the doctrine of prophecy or the opposition between esoteric and exoteric had the same meaning for those authors.

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Notes

1. In his writing Strauss speaks of 'Jewish philosophers' and 'Arab philosophers'. Even though I often follow Strauss in this usage for the convenience of the argument, this distinction confuses a religious criterion (Jewish/Muslim) with a linguistic one (Arabic). Though influenced by the twentieth century context, it can be rejected when related to the medieval period, which witnessed the rise of philosophers from different confessions (Jewish, Christian, Mazdean, Sabean, etc.) who nevertheless all wrote in Arabic. Thus Maimonides's philosophical and scientific writings are in Arabic, as are, for example, those of Yahiyâ ibn 'Adiyy (893–974), a Christian philosopher and student of Fârâbî's (870–950). Maimonides is in the same situation as several intellectuals from the Muslim world who were completely arabized and used other languages (Hebrew, Persian, Syriac), whether to write on topics that affected them as religious minorities (the case of Hebrew and Syriac), or to spread scientific knowledge among peoples who did not have a perfect command of Arabic: this is the case, among others, of Ghazalî and Avicenna, the authors of works of synthesis in Persian such as *Dânishnamè* or *Book of Science* (in which Avicenna gives a summary of his scientific encyclopedia *Book of Healing* (written in Arabic) or *Alchemy of Happiness* in which Ghazalî provides the quintessence of his spiritual philosophy found in his Arabic writing.
2. Entitled in Arabic فصل المقال, this book was first translated by Léon Gauthier with the title *Traité décisif* (Averroès, 1988), then by Marc Geoffroy with the title *Discours décisif* (Averroès, 1996).
3. On the cultural and political conditions that enabled philosophy to establish itself on Islamic territory, see Gutas (1998).
4. This is the prophet who founded the city.
5. A reading of Avempace inspired by Strauss's method (Leaman, 1980) detected in this lack of reference to the religious Law a kind of heterodoxy on Avempace's part. I consider that an error of interpretation given the fact that Avempace did not attempt to deal directly or indirectly with the relationship between religion and philosophy, his main aim being scientific research which he saw as human beings' supreme purpose (Abbes, 2005).
6. For a critique of the argument regarding Fârâbî's Platonism see Vallat (2004: 85–102).
7. This remark should be treated with caution given that we do not know exactly the text Averroes had access to, which could also be a summary of the *Republic* by Galen.

8. For details on this development in Strauss's thinking see Tanguay (2005), Kriegel (2004: 170–174). For an overall view of the development of Strauss's thought, with a study of Maimonides's place in it, see Brague (1986).
9. For more details see Maroun Aouad's introduction in Averroes (2002: 1, 84–85).
10. Strauss (1945) says about this admiration for Fârâbî that in his letter to Samuel Ibn Tibbon, Maimonides lets it be very clearly understood that he considered not Avicenna or Averroes, but Fârâbî as the highest authority in philosophy, apart from Aristotle himself.
11. Strauss (1989: Introduction) returns to the heart of the argument developed in Fârâbî's *Plato* while asserting that in Fârâbî's view politics makes it possible to achieve happiness and is an essential complement to philosophy. He even goes further in saying Fârâbî lays 'the foundations of the age-old alliance between philosophers and princes favourable to philosophy' and that he 'begins a tradition whose most famous representatives in the west are Marsilius of Padua and Machiavelli' (Strauss, 1989: 44). This new interpretation makes Fârâbî the initiator of the tradition of the Mirrors and the alliance between kings and philosophers, which overturns Strauss's previous reading and contradicts Fârâbî's teaching, which remains markedly different from that of the authors of the Mirrors for Arab princes. See Abbes (2009: 193–197) where I analyse the divergences between these two approaches to the political.

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