

*Leo Strauss lettore di Hermann Cohen* (Leo Strauss Reads Hermann Cohen)

by Chiara Adorasio. Florence: Giuntina, 2007, 260 pgs.

Chiara Adorasio's recent *Leo Strauss lettore di Hermann Cohen* (*Leo Strauss Reads Hermann Cohen*) is principally concerned with Strauss' and Cohen's interpretations of Spinoza and Maimonides, emphasizing the importance of Cohen's work for Strauss' political thought and philosophy. The relationship between the Jewish tradition and rational philosophical inquiry is an underlying and persistent theme throughout. Adorasio depicts Strauss as having built on Cohen's philosophy, which he transformed into a project that would recover and elaborate the ancient Greek notion of *polis*—as well as medieval Jewish and Islamic ideas of law—for the benefit of contemporary philosophy. Strauss, for Adorasio, adheres to the Socratic ideal of philosophy as based on language and dialogue.

The first chapter focuses on Spinoza and other fundamental influences on Leo Strauss' philosophical thought as it developed during the period of the Weimar Republic. Providing a detailed account of Strauss' early writings on Spinoza, the chapter shows that, like the compelling German Jewish thinkers of his generation, Strauss admired but also disagreed with the philosophy of Hermann Cohen. Cohen, a founder of Neo-Kantianism, was one of the major authorities for German Jewry until his death in 1918. The Jews of Cohen's time lived in a social setting where assimilated Jews experienced major historical changes. Adorasio's analysis of texts by Strauss and Cohen obliges the reader to confront one of Cohen's central questions: does the accentuation of theology and politics lead to the elimination of philosophy, or is it, rather, the concrete fulfillment of philosophical reflection, writing, and action? In a stimulating presentation of Cohen's *Spinoza über Staat und Religion, Judentum und Christentum* and early texts by Strauss, such as *Cohens Analyse der Bibelwissenschaft* and *Zur Bibelwissenschaft Spinozas und seiner Vorläufer*, Adorasio invites us to reconsider major issues of Spinoza's philosophy. These include the relationship between holy Scripture and philosophical reason, Spinoza's critique of Calvin, and the esoteric and exoteric meanings of writing, all of which are shown to lie at the heart of Leo Strauss' 1930 *Die Religionskritik Spinozas auf der Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft* and of his 1935 masterpiece, *Philosophie und Gesetz*. The latter was a groundbreaking work in which Strauss called into question one of Cohen's major assumptions: that there is an obvious and undeniable philosophical relationship between

“Athens and Jerusalem,” philosophy and law, Enlightenment and Jewish tradition. All these are ultimately translated by Strauss into an antagonism between atheism and orthodoxy, leading the Weimar thinker to philosophical reflection on tradition and the causes of its loss. *Philosophie und Gesetz*, admired by Gershom Scholem and by Walter Benjamin, is a reflection on the problems of traditional and philosophical reason, relating them to two hundred years of nihilism, its confrontation and containment. *Philosophie und Gesetz* is not only a philosophical counterpart to Julius Guttmann’s vision of a “*Wissenschaft des Judentums*,” nor is it simply an investigation of medieval Jewish philosophy. It is, even more ambitiously, an attempt to resolve problems with which Goethe, Nietzsche, and Kafka had all grappled. This is perhaps the only aspect of Strauss’ reading of Cohen underappreciated by Adorisio.

If the first chapter lays the foundations for understanding Strauss’ separation between religion and philosophical reason, the second introduces us to the functions he attributes to medieval Jewish and Islamic notions of law. The focus is on Maimonides and the interactions between prophecy, philosophy, and religious law in his thought. Cohen had a broad understanding of Jewish prophecy, which he combined with his interpretations of Kant and Plato into a modern synthesis of ancient Greek and ancient Jewish thought. Strauss, on the other hand, is shown to have been more interested in the two premodern elements of this synthesis, stressing a less ideal and more specific function. For Strauss, the value of law and prophecy derives from their capacity to provide precise political coordinates and concrete social frameworks. The highest expression of prophecy is therefore to be found in the figure of Moses, who, in these terms, was primarily concerned with the law. In a comprehensive reconstruction of Strauss’ and Cohen’s readings of Avicenna and Maimonides, Adorisio explains how and why Strauss treats religious law mainly as a political issue. She shows that Strauss questions the identity of revelation and reason in Maimonides and explains how Islamic and Jewish philosophers, inspired by Plato’s writings on the city-state, treated religious laws largely as a matter of politics. Adorisio reconstructs why the ancient Greek idea of the philosopher-king is transformed into reflections upon the prophetic legislator. Given the fact that Jewish and Islamic medieval philosophers are already embedded in a specific law, there was no need for Strauss to seek out an idealized “messianic” state as proposed by Cohen’s concept of *unendliche Aufgabe*, but Strauss did try, with a new hermeneutic approach, to analyze the concrete political and theological environments in which Spinoza, Maimonides, and Avicenna lived. This approach drew attention to Strauss’ own historical context, the Weimar Republic, and to his position in contemporary debates among German

Jews on Zionism. For Strauss, medieval Jewish philosophy presents law not as something to be sought, idealized, or summarized but rather, as something delivered in full by a specific legislating prophecy. This synthesis of prophecy and law is not grounded in Neo-Kantianism, in German Idealism, or in a synthesis of Greek and Jewish thought; nor can it be found in reflections on European Jewish culture and its potential. If any such synthesis is possible, according to Strauss, it must be rooted in the notion of *nomos*, or law, conceived as a set of rules for social and political action. Adorasio explains that the salvaging of medieval Jewish rationalism is possible for Strauss only by a reinterpretation of the logic of this rationalism in a political context. This salvaging and its reinterpreted rationalism require the assistance of Plato's writings in Arabic translation. The advantages and disadvantages of uniting prophetic and legislative leadership are clearly demonstrated, and Adorasio discusses the benefits as well as the problems inherent in reading religious traditions in political terms as she compares Strauss' approach to Cohen's.

This second chapter also includes an overview of Strauss' standpoint on the philosophy of Julius Guttman and Franz Rosenzweig. According to Strauss, both thinkers unsuccessfully attempted to establish a philosophical connection to Jewish tradition from a modern, humanist, enlightenment standpoint. For Strauss, religious tradition is more fruitfully approached from the perspective of a secularized political thought that rereads religious traditions in order to disclose their premodern conditions. In short, it might be said that Strauss tries to maintain the shell of religious and moral authority and to fill it with predominantly secular political thought. But the question of whether the authority and wisdom of tradition may be transmitted and preserved in such a way remained unresolved throughout Strauss' writings, just as it had been in his early *Philosophie und Gesetz*. Nonetheless, Strauss remains one of the most influential philosophers of law who reflected conceptually on halacha and its role in medieval and premodern thought. Benjamin, who believed in a relationship between modern literature and Jewish *agada*, said in a March 1929 letter to Gershom Scholem that he saw Leo Strauss for the last time when giving him a copy of the bibliography of fairy tales collected for his *Arcade-Project* and his writings on Kafka and Goethe. There has been little research on this "agadic relationship" between Benjamin and Strauss. Why was a philosopher of ancient, medieval, and contemporary law and politics taking European fairy tales with him on his departure from Europe? Perhaps this is something Adorasio will investigate in one of her forthcoming publications.

Adorasio's third chapter seeks to determine whether there is a possible union or an inevitable separation between "Jerusalem and Athens,"

or between Orthodox Jewish tradition and philosophy. Philosophy and Orthodox law remain two different codices, for the main question of tradition is not primarily theoretical or epistemological, but authoritative; not a matter of what one can *know*, but a matter of what one should *do*. The latter is described by Strauss, following Spinoza in his *Theologico-Political Treatise*, as functioning within a system based on fear (of God) and superstition. The former pertains more to self-confident human action and theory. Adorasio shows how Strauss' position separates more than it unifies philosophy and religion; yet Strauss' intellectual honesty in his attempt to salvage some common ground, points of contact, and reciprocal respect is also demonstrated. Strauss regarded religious law, like politics, as transcendent human facts, and philosophy for him remains bound to a concept of intellectual and historical honesty.

Adorasio correctly shows how this philosophical attitude toward religious belief and changing political frameworks derives from Strauss' reflections on medieval Jewish and Arabic ideas on the esoteric and exoteric meanings of texts and the relationship between the philosopher and his audience. In his introduction to Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*, Strauss argued that the major issue of Spinoza's concept of truth is to be found in his *Ethics*, where hierarchies of human knowledge and different degrees of human consciousness were established. Adorasio shows that this assumption, which points to a major difference between Strauss and Cohen, can also be found in Strauss' later critiques of contemporary thought, where he asserts that philosophy was transformed and politicized over the course of history and that it became a weapon and was no longer humanist research. In his notion of natural law, according to Adorasio, Strauss demonstrates that no teleological natural law today could establish common aims in human action. Contemporary society is confronted by the arbitrary interests and preferences of individuals, coalescing, if possible, into a "natural" equilibrium or self-regulation of their passions and needs, a dynamic and ever-changing framework of written and unwritten social rules and laws. Adorasio points out how in works such as *Natural Right and History* and *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Strauss remains concerned about the vulnerability of social-political systems and philosophical weaknesses in contemporary thought.

The fourth and final chapter is dedicated to the relationship between religious traditions and rational philosophical critique, and it analyzes Strauss' interpretation of Hermann Cohen's later work *Die Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums*. It is devoted to Cohen's conception of the "correlation" between man and God, which depends, in effect, on human relations and especially on attitudes toward "the poor" and "the stranger." Adorasio reminds us that for Cohen the biblical idea

of the one and only God is not based on ontology but is conceived as the origin of religious and rational love between human beings. Cohen's concept of "the Other" is not derived from a representation of other people as "just another example of myself." It is in the biblical idea of God as One, where his transcendence plays a fundamental role in a philosophical experience of the "You" and therefore of the "Self." Adorasio argues that this epistemic idea of "the Other" remains present in Strauss even when he adapts the philosophy of Cohen to serve his own political thought. Even if Strauss is more pessimistic than Cohen about social justice and "messianic" ideals, the search for an ideal legal framework and the idea of a legal constitution of philosophy remain indispensable for human society for both philosophers. Some of Cohen's teachings are shown to linger in Strauss' reflections in *The City and Man* and in his confidence in the efficiency of legal and social frameworks. For Strauss, the philosopher has to learn the lesson that there are great differences in how human beings—philosophers and nonphilosophers, religious and nonreligious people—conceive of happiness and how to live a good life. Strauss thus remains Hermann Cohen's student to some degree. If Strauss proposes the "Just City" as a symbol and as an ideal for actual political governments, there can be no doubt that he refers to Cohen's idea of a "religion of reason." Just as Cohen defines Jewish religious law as a philosophical symbol of the "correlation" between human beings and their God, so Strauss' discussions of politics have to do with their symbolic as well as their explicit, practical worth. Adorasio shows us that the "sources of Judaism" remain relevant for Strauss and Cohen even though Strauss, unlike Cohen, denies the identification of reason and revelation in Maimonides' thought and adopts different hermeneutic tools in his approach to medieval Jewish thought. The greatest merit of Adorasio's book is its rejection of stereotypes and commonplaces when discussing Strauss' philosophy. It is a work that concentrates on philosophical facts and arguments and is a valuable introduction to the interactions between Strauss and Cohen in matters of medieval and contemporary Jewish thought.

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