Leo Strauss and Islam

by

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Dissertation Style Guide

When I have added text of my own to a quotation for elaboration or clarification, I have used square brackets and prefaced my remark with “sc.” When italics have been added to in-text quotes, I have noted “[Italics added]” at the end of the block quotation.

When referring to chapters, or sections of chapters, of the present thesis, I have capitalised the words “chapter” and “section.” This is to help distinguish references to the thesis from references to other texts.

When translating Arabic, I have used modern standard transliteration. Where Arabic or German texts are used, I also note any English translation that I have drawn from. Full text details are included in the thesis’ bibliography.

I have preferred the terms “medieval Islamic philosophy” and “Islamic philosopher” over “medieval Arabic philosophy” and “Arabic philosopher.” I have favoured the term “Islamic philosophy” to “Arabic philosophy” as I believe this accentuates the importance the rise of Islam had in the preservation, and development, of philosophy. When identifying key dates, I use the Gregorian calendar, as it is the most widely used.

I have endeavoured to ensure that the thesis follows U.K. English although, at times, I may have periodically used American English.

I have endeavoured to write a thesis with no spelling, punctuation, or grammatical errors. I have attempted to ensure that quoted passages are entirely accurate.

D. Townsend
Melbourne, June 2014
For M & O
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Politicized Hermeneutics:
Leo Strauss and Islamic philosophy

I am by no means a Nietzsche specialist; I can only say that Nietzsche so dominated and bewitched me between my twenty-second and thirtieth years, that I literally believed everything that I understood of him.
Leo Strauss to Karl Löwith, June 23, 1935.

Even we knowers of today, we godless anti-metaphysicians, still take our fire, too, from the flame lit by the thousand-year old faith, the Christian faith which was also Plato’s faith, that God is truth; that truth is divine…But what if this were to become more and more difficult to believe, if nothing more were to turn out to be divine except error, blindness, the lie — if God himself were to turn out to be our longest lie?

[Strauss] introduces an early statement by Nietzsche on an issue which characterized his investigations from beginning to end, the problem of deadly truth as posed in Nietzsche’s Second Meditation Out of Season. Strauss is the writer who showed that this very issue of deadly truth had in fact been basic to the whole tradition of Platonic political philosophy, an esoteric tradition whose esotericism flowed, in part, from the recognition that some truths are likely to do harm and that philosophy’s social responsibility dictated that philosophy shelter society from the harmful truths.
Laurence Lampert, Leo Strauss and Nietzsche, 38.

There is no evidence that the medieval philosophers held Strauss’s idiosyncratic notions of philosophy, religion, and their incompatibility. On the contrary, they never tire to assert that philosophy and religion, correctly understood, are in agreement. To make them endorse esoterically the opposite of what they say, Strauss introduces inflated notions of persecution and the moral fragility of “the vulgar.”
Carlos Fraenkel, Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza, 34.

Leo Strauss (d. 1973) remains a controversial thinker. Criticism of Strauss – a German-Jewish political scientist who emigrated to America in 1937 – began in the mid-1960s, as scholars began noticing the divisive effects Strauss was having in North American Political Science and

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1 For a detailed account of Strauss’s early life and career, see Sheppard, Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile; Zank, Leo Strauss: The Early Writings.
Philosophy departments. Strauss’s earliest critics argued that he used philosophy for political ends; specifically, in his texts, Strauss subtly advocated for the establishment of “closed” societies. Strauss was, these critics asserted, counter-Enlightenment and anti-liberal. Debate over Strauss’s work grew in the 1980s with the publication of Myles Burnyeat’s scathing “Sphinx without a Secret” (1985) and Shadia Drury’s broadside *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (1988). These texts suggested Strauss was, essentially, a right-wing ideologue and masterful manipulator. In 2003-4, the controversy surrounding the German-Jewish émigré became more public. Strauss was accused – not entirely inaccurately – of being one of the intellectual godfathers of the “Neoconservative” political movement. As a consequence of the connection between Strauss and contemporary politics, Strauss’s works, legacy, students, and political views, became subject

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2 For early examples of censure, see, for example, Rothman’s “The Revival of Classical Political Philosophy: A Critique” (1962) or McShea’s “Leo Strauss on Machiavelli” (1963). At Rothman, 352: “Despite his concern with identifying the “true nature of man,” Strauss's definition of the human, his longing for the “closed society” of Plato’s ideal, is rather less than human.” Similarly from McShea, 796: “The solution [i.e. for Strauss] is a closed, static, and aristocratic society with a state religion.” McShea charges Strauss as being counter-Enlightenment (ibid., 797): “The Straussian outlook, consisting as it does of an unsystematic collection of intuitions and *ipse dixit*, cryptically expressed, is not coherent. The tendency of that outlook, however, is rather clear; we would do well to prefer the degree of light we have thus far achieved to this most recent variety of the Kingdom of Darkness.” That other academics largely ridiculed or ignored Strauss during his lifetime has been well-documented by his students; see Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics*, 107, 113; Bloom, “Leo Strauss: September 20, 1899-October 18, 1973,” 386; C. & M. Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss*, 1-2.


4 See Kristol, *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*, 6-7. Following the American pragmatist Sidney Hook, the “two thinkers who had the greatest subsequent impact on my thinking were Lionel Trilling in the 1940s and Leo Strauss in the 1950s.” Strauss was “a powerful Germanic, supersubtle political philosopher.” Kristol writes:

> His [i.e. Strauss’s] students – those happy few who sat at his feet – became “Straussians,” though they preferred to be known as “political theorists.” (One such student was my dear friend, the late Martin Diamond, who helped me understand what Strauss was up to.) These students of Leo Strauss, in turn, have produced another generation of political theorists, many of whom relocated to Washington, D.C., since the academic world of positivist “political science” has become ever more hostile to Strauss and “Straussians” – even while his mode of thought has filtered down to an ever more numerous “happy few.”

Kristol (ibid., 9) claims that Strauss was not, however, a “right-wing ideologue, as some of his critics have claimed” and denies that Strauss easily comports with “contemporary conservative discourse.”
matter for the American Congress, the U.S. and European print media, a three-part television documentary, a Broadway production, a host of academic texts, and numerous journal articles. At the time of writing, Strauss remains the focus of an entire philosophical-political dispute: the “Strauss wars.” At its most basic level, the focus of the “Strauss wars” is the extent of Strauss’s connection to Neoconservatism.

Although a topic of significant interest, the present thesis does not concentrate on detailing Strauss’s relationship to Neoconservatism. Suffice it to say, contrary to denials found in some recent scholarship, there is a connection between Strauss and strands of

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6 A list of the media sources in which Strauss appeared comes in the Zuckert’s The Truth About Leo Strauss. See the notes to their introduction, 269-73.

7 The documentary series was entitled “The Power of Nightmares.” It was created by British documentary maker Adam Curtis and originally screened in the U.K. on the BBC in October 2004.

8 The play was written by actor and activist Tim Robbins. For a media review of Embedded see Brantley, “Prowling for Laughs From Today’s Foreign Policy”:

That cabal [sc. the political elite in Washington] is the satanic power center in “Embedded,” a coven of policy makers called the Office of Special Plans. Its members have resonant names like Dick, Rum Rum, Gondola, Woof and Pearly White. They wear sinister half-masks and offer Black Sabbath-style hymns of praise to Leo Strauss, the neo-conservative philosopher. And though they plot their military strategy with icy detachment, they become sexually aroused at the mere prospect of more power. [Italics added]

For criticisms of Robbins’s play see the Zuckert’s, The Truth About Leo Strauss, 115; Smith, Reading Leo Strauss, 185; Pangle, Leo Strauss, 131n2.

9 To inventory, on the supportive side there has been the Zuckert’s The Truth about Leo Strauss (2006); Smith, Reading Leo Strauss (2006); Pangle, Leo Strauss (2006); Batnitzky, Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas (2006); Minowitz, Straussophobia (2009); Gottfried, Leo Strauss and the Conservative Movement in America (2012). There are also supportive comments on Strauss in Fukuyama’s America at the Crossroads (2006). On the opposing side, and highly critical of Strauss are, for example, Drury, The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss (updated edition: 2005); Wolin, Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism (2008); Xenos, Cloaked in Virtue (2009); Altman, The German Stranger: Leo Strauss and National Socialism (2010). See also note 31 below.

10 See, for example, Xenos, “Leo Strauss and the Rhetoric of the War on Terror,” Drury “Leo Strauss and the American Imperial Project” and “Reply to Smith”; Smith “Drury’s Strauss and Mine.” Lilla also published supportive articles on Strauss in the 21 October 2004 and 4 November 2004 editions of the New York Review of Books.

11 For use of this term, see Altman, “The Hindenburg Line of the Strauss Wars.”

12 See note 13 below.
American conservatism that cannot be dismissed entirely. This connection is made particularly apparent in the writings of Neoconservatism’s better-known “godfather,” Irving Kristol. One might therefore claim that Strauss’s writings on Islam and Islamic philosophy are worthy of serious study as the “clash of civilisations” – Islam versus the West – and “war on terror” were defining features of the Neoconservative G.W. Bush administrations. The problem with such an approach, however, would be that it would risk distorting Strauss’s thought; it would mean viewing Strauss’s philosophy through the lens of modern politics. Such a practice might not be entirely fair to Strauss.

Strauss’s political influence is not, in any case, the only, or even the most important, reason for engaging with his works. Strauss offers a series of critical readings on ancient, medieval, and modern philosophy. He gives us much to think about. At the heart of Strauss’s contribution to modern philosophy and the history of ideas are his challenging and fascinating hermeneutic claims. Strauss argues that some works of philosophy, particularly those written during ages in which persecution was a distinct possibility, contain an outer, *esoteric*, doctrine that serves to hide an inner, *exoteric*, teaching. Strauss’s absorbing hermeneutic claims are particularly prominent in his interpretation of the Muslim philosophers, the *falasifa*, and it is noteworthy that Strauss’s career-defining work on exoteric writing came at a time when he was immersed in the study of medieval Islamic and Jewish texts. Given Strauss’s fascinating hermeneutic claims, any critical engagement with medieval philosophy might well be complemented by having Strauss’s works ready-at-hand.

Subjecting Strauss’s works on medieval Islamic philosophy to critical examination is the aim of the present thesis. By carefully exploring Strauss’s frequently overlooked texts on

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13 Strauss’s defenders generally deny any such connection, although, as mentioned above, Kristol is clear regarding Strauss’s influence on his thought. Fukuyama (*America at the Crossroads*, 22) writes: “Strauss did not produce doctrine in the sense that Marx and Lenin did, and it is extraordinarily hard to extract from his writings anything that looks like public policy analysis.” Batnitzky offers a similar denial (*Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas*, xvi; 210-2) as does Smith (*Reading Leo Strauss*, 201). Compare, though, with what Drury asserts in *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* and *Leo Strauss and the American Right*. See also Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire*.

14 See note 4 above.

15 The problem of believing in a hegemonic, homogenous, Islam is noted by Ahmed at *Postmodernism and Islam*, 200: “I wish, once again, to dispel the notion that there ever was – or is – one unified and monolithic Muslim society.” One might say the same about a “monolithic” West.

16 This is the essential claim of Strauss’s *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952), a book based on several articles Strauss had published earlier in his career. Concerning *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, see the discussion in Chapter 3 of the present thesis.
medieval, or “classical,” Islamic philosophy,17 the thesis raises several questions about Strauss’s project; Strauss’s work on medieval philosophy surely has much to offer those interested in penetrating the depths of his thought. After all, Strauss took his engagement with medieval philosophy with the utmost seriousness, a point encapsulated in a letter written to Eric Voegelin in the 1940s: “you are interested in Arabic political philosophy,” writes Strauss, “that was once my speciality.”18

Despite the important place medieval philosophy occupies in the Straussian corpus, there are few studies centred on this aspect of his work.19 One speculates that this neglect is due to the fact that Strauss remains a controversial and disliked thinker. Furthermore, medieval Islamic philosophy might be considered by some today, as Strauss might say, a merely “antiquarian” interest.20 Yet these are surely, from the perspective of a neutral scholar, trivial reasons for avoiding Strauss. Strauss’s work on medieval Islamic philosophy deserves attention given, firstly, the magnitude of Strauss’s claims and, secondly, given Strauss’s widespread academic influence.21 Concerning the magnitude of Strauss’s claims, I document several reasons in this Chapter as to why Strauss’s texts remain controversial; suffice it to say that Strauss’s most divisive statements (at least “academically” speaking) relate to exoteric writing. With regard to Strauss’s widespread academic influence, this can easily be highlighted though noting that a number of his students, including Muhsin Mahdi, Charles Butterworth, and Ralph Lerner,

17 For Leaman, “classical Islamic philosophy” refers to the period roughly between the 3rd century AH/9th century CE to the 6th century AH/12th century CE, i.e., the time when Greek philosophy significantly influenced Islamic scholarship, from al-Kindi (d. 873 CE) to Averroes (d. 1198 CE). See Leaman, An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy. It must be noted that Strauss’s comments on Islamic “political philosophy” have been criticised by other scholars (see the sources cited at note 24 below).

18 Strauss to Voegelin, 13 February 1943 [italics added], printed in Faith and Political Philosophy, 11-2. The context of the remark is Strauss’s article “Persecution and the Art of Writing.”

19 The notable exception is George Tamer’s compelling and thorough study of Strauss: Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne: Das Verhältnis von Leo Strauss zu Alfarabi, Avicenna und Averroes (2001). As I argue in Chapter 2, there are subtle yet important differences between my approach to Strauss and Tamer’s. I must also note that my study of Strauss is aimed at the Anglo-sphere of Strauss scholarship.

20 CM, 1: “It is not self-forgetting and pain-loving antiquarianism nor self-forgetting and intoxicating romanticism which induces us to turn with passionate interest, with unqualified willingness to learn, toward the political thought of classical antiquity.”

21 That said, even if Strauss had not been as influential in the academic and political realms, he would still be, I believe, a thinker worth studying.
became prominent translators of, and commentators on, medieval philosophy. Furthermore, there are several scholars connected to Strauss either through friendship or by pedagogic legacy, or who are simply serious readers of his work. One could mention in this regard Paul Kraus, Shlomo Pines, Joel Kraemer, Rémi Brague, Laurence Lampert, Joshua Parens, Thomas Pangle, Christopher Colmo, Catherine Zuckert, and Daniel Tanguay. All of these scholars write, or comment, on medieval Islamic philosophy, and Strauss’s influence on some of these authors is palpable. In terms of Strauss’s academic influence, one could also refer to the scholars of medieval Islamic philosophy who have published critical works and reviews. Strauss’s critics include Dimitri Gutas, Oliver Leaman, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Julius Guttmann, Herbert Davidson, Georges Tamer, and Carlos Fraenkel. Further still, one could mention medievalists cognisant of Strauss’s works and the potential implications of his hermeneutics; for example, Sarah Stroumsa and Peter Heath. Strauss’s influence does not stop there. The effects of Strauss’s work are also seen in contemporary research on medieval Jewish philosophy, particularly research on Maimonides. At the bare minimum, the above list of scholars points to the fact that Leo Strauss has played a key role in how medieval philosophy has been studied (in the “West” at least) since the mid-20th century.

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22 Mahdi, Butterworth, and Lerner, have all published works on Islam and/or Islamic philosophy. Many of the medieval texts Strauss cites in his own works are now widely available in English due to the translation efforts of his students. For example, *Medieval Political Philosophy* (1963), a sourcebook edited and published by Strauss’s students, contains excerpts from medieval Islamic, Jewish, and Christian philosophers.

23 Concerning the overall extent of Strauss’s influence, see Murley, *Leo Strauss and His Legacy: A Bibliography*. Strauss offers scholars an unconventional reading of the history of philosophy. Strauss also offers scholars a series of hermeneutic tools that might be applied to ancient and medieval texts.


26 Davidson, an eminent scholar of Maimonides and medieval philosophy, describes Strauss as having “brought about so great a sea change in the study of the book [i.e. the Guide of the Perplexed] that no one can hope to appreciate the way in which the Guide is read today without taking account of him, his method, and his watchword. The watchword is esotericism.” Davidson, *Moses Maimonides*, 393.
While Strauss has been a significant influence on the study of medieval Islamic philosophy, the more important point is, as previously mentioned, that few works have attempted a detailed, dispassionate, and critical, exploration of Strauss’s central arguments. Generally speaking, Strauss’s supporters readily accept his interpretations of medieval Islamic philosophers as accurate. Particularly illustrative of this are works by Strauss’s students (or his students’ students) on the Muslim philosopher Farabi (d. 950) in which the major hermeneutic premises are sourced directly from Strauss’s works. In this regard, one might mention texts by Mahdi, Parens, Colmo, Butterworth and Pangle. It might not be unfair to claim that exposure to Strauss (or his students) has had a large degree of influence on these scholars. On the other hand, the most hostile of Strauss’s critics remain unconvinced of the accuracy, or sincerity, of Strauss’s ideas concerning medieval Islamic philosophy, and therefore summarily dismiss the arguments and readings Strauss presents. A large part of this criticism of Strauss comes, no doubt, for academic reasons – there are scholars who simply do not consider Strauss’s theses meritorious. That said, we must also be cognisant of the fact that seemingly academic criticisms of Strauss (as well as outright dismissals of his works) might be politically motivated. Strauss’s association with widely disliked political movements has undoubtedly influenced how his works have been received and it bears noting that Strauss has a long list of “liberal” critics. As such,

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27 The exception is Tamer’s critical study of Strauss. See note 19 above.

28 For example, Mahdi, Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy; Parens, An Islamic Philosophy of Virtuous Religions; Parens, Metaphysics as Rhetoric; Colmo, Breaking With Athens; Butterworth & Pangle, “Foreword” in Alfarabi: Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. Illustrative of the deep divisions that Strauss, and Strauss-influenced scholarship, creates among scholars is Gutas’s scathing review of Mahdi’s Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy. Gutas describes Mahdi’s book as “an antiquated curio, of interest only to historians of American intellectual currents in the middle of the 20th century.” Gutas has stated elsewhere that “the prevalence of the Straussian interpretation of al-Farabi has had a chilling effect on mainstream studies of this very significant philosopher.” See Gutas, “The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century,” 24.

29 See notes 24 and 28 regarding criticism of Strauss from scholars of medieval philosophy. See also note 89 concerning Drury’s and Levine’s claims about Strauss.

30 This is not to say, of course, that scholars of medieval philosophy have been unable to approach Strauss’s works dispassionately and objectively. Davidson’s comments on Strauss in Moses Maimonides are an example of a scholar approaching Strauss’s works with tact and then disagreeing on academic grounds. The same could be said about Guttmann’s remarks on Strauss in Philosophies of Judaism. Davidson’s commentary on Strauss’s reading of Maimonides is, however, only a few pages in length; Guttmann’s remarks are limited to a lengthy footnote. Tamer offers (in German) a detailed and nuanced study of Strauss’s works on medieval Islamic philosophy (see note 19 above), although it must be emphasised that there are important differences between my reading of Strauss and Tamer’s. The conclusion of my study is also wholly different to Tamer’s.
there is justification for a thesis, aimed at the Anglo-sphere of Strauss scholarship, that critically explores Strauss’s principal ideas on medieval Islamic philosophy, a thesis guided by the question of why Strauss has remained such a controversial and divisive thinker. As I argue throughout the present thesis, perhaps the most notable reason why Strauss remains so controversial relates to his proximity, intellectually speaking, to the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), a philosopher who influenced the 20th century, via intellectuals and political leaders, like few others.

This Chapter introduces the major themes of the thesis. In Section 1.1, we examine the issue that has made Leo Strauss a notorious (even “hated”32) figure within the fields of philosophy and political theory. Section 1.1 provides a basic overview of Strauss’s thesis concerning “exoteric writing” or “exotericism.” I argue that Strauss views exoteric writing as useful for several reasons. Most importantly, Strauss believes exotericism – a form of writing he “became familiar with” through reading medieval philosophy – represents the best way of disguising the “deadly truths” identified by Nietzsche in his Second Meditation. As noted in Sections 1.1 to 1.3, Strauss appears concerned with philosophers openly publicizing their skeptical assessments of morality and, by doing so, publicizing or advancing moral and political nihilism.33 In Section 1.2, we explore the

31 See, for example, Holmes, Anatomy of Antiliberalism; Levine, Nietzsche and the Modern Crisis of the Humanities; Drury, The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss; Leo Strauss and the American Right; Xenos, Cloaked in Virtue; Wolin, Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism; Blackburn, Plato’s Republic; Singer, The President of Good and Evil: The Ethics of George W. Bush, 260-4. That Strauss was understood by his followers as opposed to liberalism (or, at the very least, as critical of liberalism), is made evident by Kristol at Neconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea, 380.


33 Strauss’s proximity to Nietzsche has been documented (see the sources cited below), however no one has yet considered, in-detail, how Strauss’s Nietzscheanism influenced his work on medieval Islamic philosophy. Strauss uses the term “deadly truth” when discussing Nietzsche (RCPR, 25; SPPP, 177). For Nietzsche’s definition of the “deadly truth,” see Untimely Meditations (ed. Breazale), 112-3: “If, on the other hand, the doctrines of sovereign becoming, of the fluidity of all concepts, types and species, of the lack of any cardinal distinction between man and animal – doctrines which I consider true but deadly – are thrust upon the people for another generation with the rage for instruction that has by now become normal, no one should be surprised if the people perishes of petty egoism, ossification and greed, falls apart and ceases to be a people; in its place systems of individualist egoism, brotherhoods for the rapacious exploitation of the non-brothers, and similar creations of utilitarian vulgarity may perhaps appear in the arena of the future.” Regarding Nietzsche’s “deadly” truths, or “nihilism,” as theoretically valid for Strauss, see his very suggestive remarks at NRH, 26; SPPP, 30, 176-7; RCPR, 28. For Strauss’s definition of nihilism, see RCPR, 9:
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evidence that supports the idea that premodern philosophers used exoteric writing and consider Strauss’s own endorsement of exotericism. Then, with the basic aspects of Strauss’s thesis on exotericism in mind, we investigate, in Section 1.3, the influence medieval Islamic philosophy had on Strauss’s philosophical and political thought. Finally, Section 1.4 provides an overview of Chapters 2-7.

“Let us properly define nihilism as the inability to take a stand for civilization against cannibalism.” This is similar to Nietzsche’s definition in *The Will to Power*, 8 [italics in original]: “What does nihilism mean? That the highest values devaluate themselves. The aim is lacking; ‘why?’ finds no answer.” Note Strauss’s assertion at *P.A.W.*, 36 [italics added]: exoteric books lead potential philosophers “from popular views which are indispensable for all practical and political purposes to the truth which is merely and purely theoretical…”

Strauss’s students and defenders, Catherine and Michael Zuckert (*The Truth About Leo Strauss*, 141), write that Lampert and Rosen represent the “most serious” and “most persuasive” “efforts to read Strauss esoterically.” For Lampert, the difference between Strauss and Nietzsche is that although Strauss recognizes the same fundamental “truths” as Nietzsche (the sovereignty of becoming, fluidity of concepts, the lack of difference between man and animal), Strauss believes that these truths ought to be concealed by religion. At *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche*, 171-2 [Lampert’s italics]: “[T]here can be little doubt that Strauss held that the human species was mortal and the whole natural order subject to perpetual change – that he agreed with Nietzsche on these ultimate matters. For where in Strauss is there an argument on behalf of the contrary view, an *argument* as opposed to the occasional expression of alignment with traditional beliefs in the contrary view?” However, according to Lampert (*ibid.*, 172), Strauss “could not follow Nietzsche in his radical, open, and intransigent endorsement of the advancement of science, his exposure of the truth about nature.” This leads Lampert (*ibid.*, 173) to complain that: “Strauss could not show his followers any way toward political responsibility except perpetuating a supposedly noble lying on behalf of views rendered both incredible and unpalatable by modern experience.” At Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics*, 125: “Strauss is himself almost a Nietzschean, but not quite: he comes closer to Kant in the roots of his thought.” Yet, at *ibid.*, 126: “From this standpoint, Nietzsche is himself a Kantian, namely, in the general but crucial sense that nature understood as the Greek *physis* is not accessible to us and hence that there is no independent standard for scientific “theories.” All theory, including the theory of nature, is a construction: the value or sense of the theoretical entities comes from the will.” See also *ibid.*, 180: “According to Leo Strauss, classical philosophy, no less than modern, is an act of the will.” Several other scholars consider Strauss to recognize the same “deadly” truths as Nietzsche, and a number of scholars read Strauss as a Nietzschean. See, for example, Altman, *The German Stranger*; Drury, *The Truth about Leo Strauss*; Holmes, *Anatomy of Antiliberalism*; Levine, *Nietzsche and the Modern Crisis of the Humanities*.

Regarding Strauss learning of exotericism in medieval philosophy, see *P.A.W.*, preface, 8 [Italics added]: “These essays are here collected into one volume primarily with the view to the fact that they all deal with one problem: the problem of the relation between philosophy and politics…As I state in the Introduction, I became familiar with the problem mentioned while studying the Jewish and the Islamic philosophy of the Middle Ages.” Note that Strauss writes that he “became familiar” with exoteric writing when reading medieval philosophy. Strauss does not claim that he learnt, or discovered, exotericism from reviewing those texts. Altman (*The German Stranger*, 29-62) demonstrates that there are good reasons for believing Strauss learnt of exotericism from Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (d. 1819), the philosopher Strauss wrote his doctorate on. Jacobi is credited for first using the term “nihilism.” Concerning “the problem of the relation between philosophy and politics,” note Strauss’s apparent admiration of Farabi (“Farabi’s Plato,” 37): Farabi did not “preach” the philosophic truth “from the house-tops.” The Zuckert’s (*The Truth about Leo Strauss*, 134) write: “[T]he hidden truths that Strauss finds in Plato or Farabi sound familiar [w. to modern philosophers] – later writers have blared them from the rooftops.”
1.1 Exoteric and esoteric doctrines: writing “between the lines” to hide the “deadly” truth

In this Section, I argue that Strauss appears to accept Nietzsche’s claim that the philosophic truth is “deadly” and that Strauss believes many past philosophers disguised the “deadly” truth by utilising exoteric writing. I contend that Strauss endorses a return to exotericism.

Let us start with the basics. Strauss is arguably best known for his contention that premodern (i.e., ancient and medieval) philosophic texts may conceal hidden, or esoteric, doctrines. A passage from Strauss’s seminal work on exoteric writing, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, helps introduce the pertinent concept. “An exoteric book,” Strauss writes, contains:

[T]wo teachings: a popular teaching of an edifying character, which is in the foreground [sc. the exoteric teaching]; and a philosophic teaching [sc. the esoteric doctrine] concerning the most important subject, which is indicated only between the lines. [Italics added]

Strauss writes that an “exoteric book” is not addressed to the “unphilosophic majority.” The “unphilosophic majority” will simply find such books to contain an “edifying,” exoteric, teaching. Yet neither is an exoteric book directed at the “perfect philosopher.” Rather, Strauss writes that exoteric books are aimed at “young men who might become philosophers.” These “young men,” as “potential philosophers,” are:

[T]o be led step by step from the popular views which are indispensable for all practical and political purposes [sc. the exoteric teaching] to the truth which is merely and purely theoretical, guided by certain obtrusively enigmatic features in the presentation of the popular teaching – obscurity of the plan, contradictions, pseudonyms, inexact repetitions of earlier statements, strange expressions, etc.

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34 For Strauss’s definition of “premodern,” see L-AM, 240. Regarding texts as containing multiple layers of meaning, see P-AI’, 18, 36; “On a Forgotten Kind of Writing,” WPP, 222.

35 P-AI’, 36.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.
Strauss’s statement raises the important question of what “truths” are to be guarded and not disclosed to the masses. For this reason, it is immediately noticeable that the exoteric/esoteric distinction carries with it overt political implications. Strauss suggests that exotericism is premised on the view that many people (the “unphilosophic majority”) are incapable of becoming philosophers and are therefore to be safeguarded from a certain “truth.” Exoteric writing rests, then, on a particular view of human beings and human nature, on a dichotomization between those who, based on claimed natural attributes, are entitled to the “truth” and those who, based on a perceived absence of certain natural attributes, are precluded from “truth.” Strauss emphasises this division unambiguously. The “enigmatic features” of an exoteric book:

[Do not disturb the slumber of those whose cannot see the wood for the trees, but act as awakening stumbling blocks for those who can. All books of that kind owe their existence to the love of the mature philosopher for the puppies of his race, by whom he wants to be loved in turn: all exoteric books are “written speeches caused by love.”]

According to Strauss’s account, exoteric writing is predicated on the perceived intellectual differences between human beings. At the top of the natural hierarchy Strauss describes is the “mature philosopher” who possesses “truth” and “love.” At the mid-point of this intellectual hierarchy are the “potential philosophers” who might be led to the “truth.” At the lowest level are those who are precluded, apparently by nature, from philosophy and philosophizing. Strauss suggests that those who are capable of understanding an exoteric book’s true teaching will discover this teaching; those who are incapable of such serious study will simply find an edifying message that reinforces prevalent dogma and prejudice. As Strauss writes, some readers will only find the “popular views which are indispensable for all practical and political purposes.”

With respect to the connection between exoteric writing and belief in a hierarchy of human types, it is notable that Strauss describes exoteric writing as a standard philosophic practice prior to the 17-18th century European Enlightenment. According to Strauss, before the modern Enlightenment, a number of philosophers accepted that the element of the city, or civilisation, was opinion. As Strauss writes:

\[^{40}\text{Ibid.}\]

\[^{41}\text{Ibid.}\]

\[^{42}\text{Ibid.}, 33-4.\]

\[^{43}\text{PAW, 33-4; see also WPP, 221-2; “A Giving of Accounts” in JCMM, 463; NRH, 26.}\]
Politicized hermeneutics

Philosophy or science, the highest activity of man, is the attempt to replace opinion about “all things” by knowledge of “all things”; but opinion is the element of society; philosophy or science is therefore the attempt to dissolve the element in which society breathes, and thus it endangers society. [Italics added]

In Strauss’s view, due to the importance of opinion in everyday social and political life, pre-modern philosophers (i.e., pre-Enlightenment philosophers) understood philosophy as “subversive” for the reason that philosophy involved questioning, and potentially undermining, prevalent attitudes and beliefs. For these reasons, pre-Enlightenment thinkers did not believe philosophy was necessarily conducive to the common good. Strauss argues that these philosophers therefore moderated their public speech and writing. Pre-Enlightenment thinkers believed in restricting some forms of knowledge from the majority. This raises, once again, the question of what Strauss believes constituted the philosophic “truth” for pre-modern philosophers, and why access to this “truth” needed to be restricted.

With the above points in mind, we may summarise Strauss’s claims by noting that exotericism is based, firstly, on the philosopher’s benevolence or “love”: recognising the limitations of the majority of people, but loving them nonetheless, the philosopher chooses to moderate what he or she will publish. On this reading, the philosopher does not wish to harm the nonphilosophic majority who may hold beliefs that are practically useful, but impossible to verify. The second reason for exotericism according to Strauss again relates to harm: the potential threat of harm against the philosopher by the nonphilosophers. Strauss considers these two reasons – the philosopher’s desire not to harm others and the philosopher’s fear of being harmed by others – as equally valid reasons for exoteric writing. Strauss ties both reasons together in Persecution and the Art of Writing.

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44 Consider P-41F, 18.

45 WP, 221-2. Holmes mocks Strauss’s claim about the dangers of philosophy (Anatomy of Antiliberalism, 78): “Another aspect of Strauss’s rhetorical posture is the suggestion that he and those who follow him are walking time-bombs. Their ideas, far from being bland and boring, are horrifyingly dangerous. What they know could destroy the world.”

46 On this theme, see Strauss’s letter to Löwith, January 10, 1946, printed in Sheppard Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile, 104. Strauss accepts that all people cannot become philosophers, and this underlies Strauss’s theoretical endorsement of the closed society. As Sheppard notes, Strauss is skeptical of the possibility of a “united humankind.” On this theme, see P-41F, 3: “What attitude people adopt toward freedom of public discussion, depends decisively on what they think about popular education and its limits.” A pressing question here is, even if we recognise that all people cannot become philosophers, or have no interest in becoming philosophers, do we abandon the Enlightenment’s ideals of mass education and greater equality? Strauss would argue against mass education. See LAM, 9-10; WP, 38.
Exoteric literature presupposes that there are basic truths which would not be pronounced in public by any decent man, because they would do harm to many people who, having been hurt, would naturally be included to hurt him who pronounces the unpleasant truths. It presupposes, in other words, that freedom of inquiry, and of publication of all results of inquiry, is not guaranteed as a basic right. This literature is then essentially related to a society which is not liberal.47 [Italics added]

The point here is that a “decent man” – a person who, presumably, respects others – does not want to cause harm. The same person also wishes to avoid being harmed. This returns us to the pressing question of the nature of the philosophic “truth.” The philosophic “truth” is clearly understood, as he writes, to be “unpleasant.” This is in contrast to the opinions of society which are “necessary” and, presumably, far more pleasant in certain relevant, but often unstated, ways.48 What can be said, then, is that exotericism is premised on the philosophic “truth” being dangerous, and therefore necessarily having to be restricted. As Strauss contends in “A Forgotten Kind of Writing”:

[Philosophy or science must remain the preserve of a small minority, and philosophers or scientists must49 respect the opinions on which society rests. To respect opinions is something entirely different from accepting them as true. Philosophers or scientists who hold this view about the relation of philosophy or science and society are driven to employ a peculiar manner of writing which would enable them to reveal what they regard as the truth to the few, without endangering the unqualified commitment of the many to the opinions on which society rests. They will distinguish between the true teaching as the esoteric teaching; whereas the exoteric teaching is meant to be easily accessible to every reader, the esoteric teaching discloses itself only to very careful and well-trained readers after long and concentrated study.50 [Italics added]

47 P-AIF, 36.

48 See note 33 above. As Strauss writes at IFPP, 221-2 (quoted in-text above), society “rests” on opinions. At NRH, 26, Strauss contends that “comprehensive views” provide the “protecting atmosphere within which life or culture or action is alone possible.” The “theoretical analysis of life is noncommittal and fatal to commitment, but life means commitment” (NRH, 26). Given Strauss’s endorsement of exoteric writing, the truth of philosophy clearly stands to undermine social and political stability.

49 We are not told what the source of this moral imperative is. By claiming that philosophy is destructive, dangerous, or subversive, Strauss indicates that he believes the truth of philosophy is not life giving. As argued below and throughout the present thesis, Strauss continually implies that the “theoretical truth” is “deadly” (see note 33 above). If this is the case, then why does an absolute moral standard exist for the philosopher? Curiously enough, this moral imperative is presented by Strauss as a “hypothetically valid” Natural Law. See P-AIF, 139.

50 IFPP, 221-2.
Philosophy is the attempt to replace opinion by knowledge, but opinion is the element of the city, hence philosophy is subversive, hence the philosopher must write in such a way that he will improve rather than subvert the city. In other words, the virtue of the philosopher’s thought is a certain kind of *mania* [i.e., passion or inspired frenzy], while the virtue of the philosopher’s public speech is *sophrosyne* [i.e., moderation or self-control]. Philosophy is as such transpolitical, transreligious, and transmoral, but the city is and ought to be moral and religious.\(^{51}\) [Italics added]

If the “truth” of philosophy, or science, is as dangerous as Strauss suggests in these passages, then this “truth” is clearly not edifying, life giving, or necessary. There are not many interpretive options available to us here: Strauss’s statements concerning the limitations of philosophy suggest that Strauss believes, as has been mentioned, that the philosophic truth is “unpleasant” because it is “deadly.” He believes that the truths of philosophy will destabilise society and the political realm generally. However, he also believes that philosophers will, despite accepting that the philosophic truth is “deadly,” adhere to a definite moral code on the grounds of “decency”; philosophers will seek to disguise the “deadly” truth from non-philosophers.\(^{52}\) This brings us to a difficulty noted in later Chapters of the present thesis: Strauss recognises that the philosophic

\(^{51}\) *JPCM*, 463.

\(^{52}\) This is a recurring theme of the present thesis. As mentioned, it is a tension in Strauss’s thought. *Prima facie* evidence that Strauss believes that the truth is “deadly” comes in “Notes on Lucretius.” In addition to Strauss’s claim that philosophy is “subversive,” note Strauss’s (LAM, 83) summary of the “function” of Lucretius’s poetry, specifically book I 926-950 and book IV 1-25 of *De Rerum Natura*:

> The movement from the untruth to the truth is not simply a movement from unrelieved darkness and terror to pure light and joy. On the contrary, the truth appears at first to be repulsive and depressing. A special effort is needed to counteract the first appearance of the truth. This special effort is beyond the power of philosophy; it is the proper work of poetry. [Italics added]

At LAM, 85:

> Man has to choose between peace of mind deriving from a pleasing delusion and peace of mind deriving from the unpleasing truth. Philosophy which, anticipating the collapse of the walls of the world, breaks though the walls of the world, abandons the attachment to the world; this abandonment is most painful. Poetry on the other hand is, like religion, rooted in that attachment, but unlike religion, it can be put into the service of detachment. [Italics added]

For Strauss, philosophy is “subversive” insofar as it can destroy the noble lies necessary for human life (see note 48 above). For comments on this theme see, for example, *Leo Strauss on Plato’s Symposium*, 59; *NRH*, 26. Additional comments on this theme come in Chapter 2 of the present thesis.
truth is “deadly,” and therefore implies that “ethics is impossible.” Yet, on the other hand, Strauss suggests it is necessary for philosophers to exercise social and political responsibility.

Given that Strauss suggests exoteric writing rests on a philosopher’s benevolence, “love,” or “decency,” the title of Strauss’s key text on exotericism, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, is somewhat problematic. As is also noted in Chapter 4 of the present thesis, the title of Strauss’s work suggests that *persecution* alone leads to exoteric writing, or, at the least, that persecution is the primary reason for exoteric writing. Yet as we have already seen, this is clearly not the case. While Strauss writes that an analysis of the history of philosophy – including, in particular, the fate of some philosophers within ancient Greece or within the medieval Islamic civilisation – indicates that there was a palpable tension between philosophy and the opinions of the general population, Strauss describes persecution as only the “most obvious and the crudest reason” for exotericism. A deeper understanding of Strauss’s thesis is that many premodern authors believed in self-imposed censorship as they accepted that the “truths” of philosophy could potentially destabilise their society. Although Strauss attributes this treatment of philosophic “truths” to premodern writers, Strauss never argues against their practice. He thereby implies, I believe, that he also adheres to the practice and principles of exoteric writing. It also bears noting that Strauss’s thesis on exotericism comes with an important safeguard: even if the threat of persecution had not existed for premodern philosophers, according to Strauss’s argument, certain philosophers would have refrained from widely publicising philosophic “truths” given their views about the differences between human types and given their sense of “decency.”

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53 Strauss writes in the context of Heidegger (*RCPR*, 28 [Italics in original]): “Heidegger did face the problem. He declared that ethics is impossible, and his whole being was permeated by the awareness that this fact opens up an abyss.” In the context of politics, Strauss allows “latitude” for statesmen, see *NRH*, 157-64; *TOM*, 157: “Paganism left human prudence free to choose the wisest course of action.” This suggests those operating in the political realm are to remain aware that there are no absolute moral or political standards.

54 *PAF*, preface, 18, 21, 33. Strauss’s assertion that scholars and thinkers living in medieval Islamic societies were at risk of persecution for *philosophizing* is a highly contentious claim. See the discussion in Chapter 4 of the present thesis.

55 *PAF*, 17.

56 Note Strauss’s apparent rebuke of Nietzsche at *WPP*, 54-5. Does Strauss agree with Nietzsche on a “theoretical” level, yet disagree with publicizing this truth? See note 33 above and 134 below.

57 See *PAF*, 32. Strauss does not suggest *all* premodern texts will contain hidden doctrines. Strauss proposes both a “positive” and “negative” criterion for assessing texts. The required “positive” criterion is that the writer in question *indicates* awareness of “the orthodox view and all its ramifications.” If a writer who is aware of such an “orthodox view” (consider, for example, the Platonic Socrates’s awareness of the views of ordinary Athenians, or Averroes’s awareness of the tenets of Islam, or Spinoza’s awareness of then prevalent Jewish or Christian beliefs) “surreptitiously” indicates in their text that they *do* not agree with such “orthodox” doctrines, “we must,” Strauss writes, “study his
implication of Strauss’s claim concerning the philosopher’s “decency” is that philosophers living in liberal regimes – regimes where persecution for philosophising would be highly unlikely – might still practice exotericism depending on what they understand the philosophic “truth” to be.

Strauss’s thesis on exoteric writing points to, or presupposes, an irreconcilable, ahistorical tension between philosophy and society. Notably, Strauss never asserts that this tension can be eradicated. Strauss appears dedicated to presenting philosophy as an elitist pursuit, and presenting the few true philosophers as misunderstood individuals at odds (at least intellectually) with their respective communities. Importantly, for Strauss, the tension between the philosopher and their community may exist on the theoretical plane only; due to exoteric writing, the philosopher’s true views might never be publicly expressed. Exoteric writing can therefore be understood as a device used by some philosophers to live peacefully in their communities. Strauss mentions in this regard the practices of the “ancients” Plato and Aristotle and the “medievals” Farabi, Averroes, and Maimonides. These thinkers were, in Strauss’s view, reticent to state their opinions with the openness of authors such as Voltaire, Dostoyevsky, or Nietzsche.

whole book all over again, with much greater care and much less naïveté than ever before.” The necessary “negative” criterion for believing a text may contain an esoteric teaching is that the “book in question must have been composed in an era of persecution, that is, at a time when some political or other orthodoxy was enforced through law or custom.” As mentioned in-text, the problem is that even if we find no evidence of persecution having existed at a certain point in history, Strauss could still insist that given the premodern philosopher’s knowledge of “the orthodox view” and its absolute necessity for social and political life, the philosopher would not undermine this view. The “positive criterion” (the premodern philosopher’s awareness of, and support for, “orthodoxy” or politically useful beliefs) appears to render the “negative criterion” (the threat of persecution) superfluous. I return to this theme in Chapter 4.

58 Note, for example, Strauss criticisms of the Enlightenment at PL, 21-39; WPP, 46; TOM, 173.

59 See L-AM, 7. Strauss elevates philosophy, and restricts the use of the term “philosopher.” He states that members of modern philosophy departments are not truly “philosophers.” Similarly at RCPR, 29: “I know that I am only a scholar. But I know also that most people who call themselves philosophers are mostly, at best, scholars.”

60 Strauss’s most explicit account of this view comes at OT, 205-6. As discussed in Chapter 5, Strauss attributes to Farabi (interpreted by Strauss as an exoteric writer) a long-range political project; exoteric writing is necessary to “gradually” replace the “accepted opinions” (PAW, 17).

61 This is an essential thesis of Persecution and the Art of Writing (see, for example, Strauss’s statements at 34-7). See also Strauss’s comments in On Tyranny (185) on the difference between Jane Austen’s and Dostoyevsky’s manner of writing. Strauss’s criticisms of Nietzsche’s unrestrained speech come at WPP, 54-5 (compare with “Three Waves of Modernity,” IPP, 98). Strauss’s remarks about Voltaire come at Philosophy and Law, 89 (note Strauss’s censure of the modern Enlightenment generally at ibid., 62-3). See also PL, 102-3; “Farabi’s Plato,” 37. Unlike the “moderns” (i.e., the philosophers of the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment), Strauss claims premodern philosophers believed their true views should only be expressed to “sensible friends.” See CM, 54; PAW, 23 (“reasonable friends”).
Given that he documents several advantages of exoteric writing, we must consider why, in Strauss’s view, philosophers abandoned its practice. According to Strauss:

After about the middle of the seventeenth century an ever increasing number of heterodox [sc. Western European] philosophers who had suffered from persecution published their books not only to communicate their thoughts but also because they desired to contribute to the abolition of persecution as such. They [sc. the “heterodox philosophers” of the Enlightenment] believed that suppression of free inquiry, and of publication of the results of free inquiry, was accidental, an outcome of the faulty construction of the body politic, and that the kingdom of general darkness could be replaced by the republic of universal light. They looked forward to a time when, as a result of the progress of popular education, practically complete freedom of speech would be possible, or – to exaggerate for purposes of clarification – to a time when no one would suffer any harm from hearing any truth.62 [Italics added]

Unlike the premoderns Strauss describes, the philosophers of the Enlightenment did not accept (or at least questioned) a hierarchical view of human nature. They did not believe that philosophical questioning needed to be severely moderated. What changed, then, was the view of human beings that philosophers held: it was believed that the “progress of popular education” could create a new type of society. Strauss draws attention to this point particularly:

The attitude of an earlier type of writers [sc. the “premoderns” compared to the philosophers of the Enlightenment] was fundamentally different. They believed that the gulf separating “the wise” and “the vulgar” was a basic fact of human nature which could not be influenced by any progress of popular education: philosophy, or science, was essentially a privilege of “the few.” They were convinced that philosophy as such was suspect to, and hated by, the majority of men.63 [Italics added]

It is curious that when commenting on the differences between “premodern” and Enlightenment philosophers that Strauss uses the phrase “kingdom of general darkness.” A similar expression is used by Hobbes in the *Leviathan*. As Strauss criticizes Hobbes as an early-, or proto-, liberal, one is tempted to ask whether Strauss believes that both liberalism (understood as the doctrine of maximising individual freedom) and the notion of progressive education (or “free inquiry”) are equally problematic outcomes of the Enlightenment.64 As Strauss notes, exoteric writing either presupposes, or is related to, a “society which is not liberal.” Liberalism and mass education rest

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62 PAIIP, 33-4.

63 Ibid.

64 Strauss’s criticism of Hobbes relates to Hobbes’s position as “creator of political hedonism” (*NRH*, 169) and, depending on our definition, perhaps the “founder of liberalism” (*ibid.*, 181-2).
on an egalitarian view of human beings; it is certainly noteworthy that Strauss defines Enlightenment (albeit in an “exaggerated” form) as aiming at a time when “no one” will “suffer any harm from hearing any truth.” On Strauss’s reading, for the Enlightenment to have occurred, philosophers had to stop communicating the “truth” only to “sensible friends.”

Given his statements on exotericism, including the tension between philosophy and opinion, the divide between philosophers and non-philosophers, and the philosophical causes of the Enlightenment, it is clearly defensible to claim that Strauss believes philosophy possesses the power to change civilisations. Contrary to Hegel’s position in the Philosophy of Right, for example, Strauss does not understand philosophy as that which, so to speak, “arrives on the scene too late” and simply reports how the world is, “painting its grey on grey.” Rather, Strauss continually draws attention to the clear social and political consequences philosophy can have, mentioning the effects of modern philosophers such as Rousseau, Marx, and Nietzsche. Strauss underscores that philosophy is dangerous and, accordingly, is suited only for the few that “nature,” as Strauss understands or evokes the concept, chooses. As noted in Section 1.3, Strauss is critical of the moral uncertainty he believes has resulted from the European Enlightenment and from the abandonment of exoteric writing. Prior to examining those themes, however, some further elaboration of Strauss’s hermeneutic theory is required.

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65 Note that Strauss writes of the “attitude” and “belief” of “earlier authors.” The Enlightenment seems to rest, for Strauss, on a prejudice; it rests on a belief that human beings are equal. Strauss would likely claim that, insofar as this is only a prejudice, it is disputable. The difference between “ancients” and “moderns” therefore appears to revolve around what is believed.


67 Although a caveat must be noted. Strauss considers that: “…it is as absurd to expect members of philosophy departments to be philosophers as it is to expect members of art departments to be artists” (L-AM, 7). Strauss’s view is that there are only a few true philosophers alive at any one time; few thinkers have the capability to cause great social and political change. Perhaps tellingly, Strauss labels Heidegger the only “great thinker” alive in his (Strauss’s) lifetime (RCPR, 29). Strauss identifies himself as a “scholar” (see note 59 above) rather than a philosopher. For Strauss’s comments on the consequences of Rousseau’s, Marx’s, and Nietzsche’s philosophy see WPP, 54-5; “The Three Waves of Modernity,” IPP, 98.
1.2 Evidence in support of exoteric writing and criticisms made of Strauss’s hermeneutics

In this Section, some of the difficulties with Strauss’s hermeneutic method are introduced. I argue that the magnitude of Strauss’s claims about exotericism, and the complaints made against Strauss’s works on medieval Islamic philosophy, indicate that a critical study is required. I also discuss in greater detail the fact that Strauss provides both a descriptive and a prescriptive claim concerning exoteric writing. When documenting the historical existence of exotericism, Strauss appears to be implying that politically responsible contemporary philosophers ought to use the same practice.

As indicated in Section 1.1, Strauss accentuates that a foundational tenet of the European Enlightenment was the notion that human beings were fundamentally equal and that greater education would achieve a harmonious, peaceful society. (Strauss’s views on these topics are discussed further in Chapters 2 and 3.) With regard to hermeneutics, we can understand Strauss as arguing that contemporary, Enlightenment-derived, prejudices lead modern scholars to overlook the hierarchical view of human beings, societies, and cultures, that many premodern philosophers accepted; such hierarchical views of nature might have influenced how premodern philosophers composed their works. Strauss also draws attention to the threat of persecution that may have existed for some premodern philosophers. Strauss’s works suggest that many contemporary scholars commit fundamental errors when interpreting ancient and medieval texts.

There is evidence that supports elements of Strauss’s thesis on exotericism, evidence that suggests Strauss is raising, to some degree, a valid criticism of modern scholarship. Support for the view that some philosophers may have written “between the lines” can be found in ancient, medieval, and even some modern, philosophical texts. To begin with ancient Greek philosophy, a foundation for classical Islamic philosophy, Strauss notes that in the Phaedrus, Plato asserts that there is a fundamental defect to writing: writing, unlike direct speech, remains static as if a work of art. While direct speech allows the philosopher to cater their message to their audience, the words in a book remain the same despite what questions are asked of the text and despite who is asking the questions (Phaedrus, 275a-279c). Given what is written in the Phaedrus, and given that Plato indicates belief in separating humans into classes or castes (e.g.: Republic 415a, 434a-435a; cf. Timaeus, 17c-19a), Strauss believes we have evidence pointing to the possibility of an esoteric doctrine in Plato’s works. Strauss also notes that the Platonic Socrates’s discussions are framed

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68 Holmes, for example, is willing to accept Strauss’s point about the historical existence of exotericism. Holmes’s censure of Strauss is based partly on Strauss’s own use of exoteric writing. See Anatomy of Antiliberalism, 85-6.

69 Plato’s classification of human beings might be compared with Farabi, The Political Writings (ed. Butterworth), 37 (aph. 57); Fuṣūl al-madani (ed. Dunlop) (aph. 53). See also Averroes, Avernoes on Plato’s Republic, 36-7.
by the interlocutor’s “nature.””\(^7\) As the Platonic Socrates’s style of communicating with others is based on their suitability for philosophy, we must ask whether Plato moderated, or censored, his texts given that he did not know who his future readers would be (cf. *Seventh Letter*, 341d-342a; cf. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1124b30). Further still, there are the epistemological and hermeneutic questions posed by Plato’s comments on the need to create “medicinal” lies or “lie nobly” (*Republic*, 389b, 414-415). And, curiously enough, in the *Second Letter* (314c), Plato describes his Socrates as having become “fair and young” or “embellished and modernised.”\(^7\) The pertinent question is whether we believe, in light of these facts, that reading Plato’s works literally is justified or whether we are to believe that Plato veiled his true thoughts behind a salutary facade. That said, in drawing attention to these points concerning Plato’s philosophy, Strauss appears willing to accept some sections of Plato’s works as intended literally (i.e., the problems of writing, the division of humans into classes, Socrates’s methods of conversing,\(^7\) and so on) while dismissing other sections of Plato’s texts as metaphorical or allegorical.\(^7\) Strauss’s reading of Plato is discussed further in Chapters 3 – 5.

Still, it would be remiss to overlook or deny the considerable amount of evidence that supports the *possibility* of exotericism. Similar to Plato’s works, and once again hinting at exoteric writing, are passages found in Aristotle’s corpus. Aristotle also accentuates the differences between human beings: there are the “divine” and contemplative, the political class, and the vulgar (*Nicomachean Ethics*, I.5; 1177b26-30; cf. *Politics*, 1324a25-35). Akin to Plato’s awareness of the corrupting influence of poetry (*Republic*, 607; cf. *Laws*, 817a-d), Aristotle notes the problems associated with, and therefore the undesirability of, absolute freedom of speech or allowing any view to be publicly expressed (*Politics*, 1336b3-25; cf. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1127b34-1128a4; cf. *Topics* 105a2-7).

Proceeding to medieval philosophy – philosophy that was, as Farabi writes, partly derived from ancient Greek sources\(^7\) – Strauss points to two medieval Aristotelians particularly

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\(^7\) *CM*, 53-5.

\(^7\) “Fair and young” is R.G. Bury’s translation.

\(^7\) Yet, as noted in Chapter 5 of the present thesis, Strauss does not consider Socrates to have been Plato’s key spokesperson. The practices of the Platonic Socrates help justify, according to Strauss, an exoteric/esoteric reading of Plato despite the fact that, on Strauss’s reading, Socrates does not entirely indicate Plato’s true views.

\(^7\) Strauss’s claim is that the Islamic Aristotelians believed Plato’s Ideas (or Forms) and Plato’s notion of an immortal soul were exoteric doctrines. This matter is discussed in Chapters 3 – 6.

aware of exoteric writing. The Jewish Aristotelian Maimonides’s *Guide of the Perplexed* opens with a very prominent discussion about the “secrets” of “divine science” and how these “secrets” cannot be taught openly; parables, hints, and riddles are used to communicate the secret teaching to only a few.\(^{75}\) Akin to other scholars of that age, Maimonides greatly esteemed the Islamic philosopher Farabi, a thinker whose works acknowledge the existence of exotericism.\(^{76}\) For example, Farabi writes of a debate between Plato and Aristotle concerning the necessity of exoteric writing.\(^{77}\) There can, then, be no disputing the fact that philosophers such as Farabi and Maimonides were aware of the practice of exoteric writing, and understood the practice was a literary possibility for philosophers. However, as argued in Chapter 4, exotericism cannot be understood purely as a philosophic, or “Platonic,” practice, as Strauss appears to suggest in texts such as *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. Farabi, and perhaps other Islamic philosophers, may well have known of passages in the Quran that imply its verses have both “inner” and “outer” meanings; Averroes is certainly aware of this fact.\(^{78}\) To claim that the possible use of exotericism by medieval Islamic philosophers was due to their engagement with Plato or Aristotle therefore fails to account for the possibility that these philosophers first became aware of exotericism through their religious tradition, that they considered exotericism a practice of both religious prophets and philosophers. On this theme, I ask in Chapters 3 and 4 whether the rigid distinction Strauss suggests medieval Islamic philosophers made between philosophy (understood as atheistic and secular) and religion is tenable.\(^{79}\)

\(^{75}\) Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, [Introduction to the First Part].


\(^{77}\) See note 76 above.

\(^{78}\) For example, Quran 3:7, 24:35, 57:3. Concerning Averroes’s views, see Chapter 4, Section 3 of the present thesis. The Islamic Aristotelians understand religion as communicating philosophic truths in symbolic form. On this topic, see the commentary in Chapters 3 and 4.

\(^{79}\) As discussed in Chapter 4, this is a controversial claim from Strauss. See Gutas, “The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century,” 20: “And this brings us back to the origin of Strauss’s hermeneutics, the orientalist notion that all of Arabic philosophy is about the conflict between religion and philosophy; for how else could one hold Strauss’s view and claim that philosophers never say what they mean when they write about logic, all subjects of physics (other than the eternity of the world), etc. which are patently not threatening to the presumed orthodoxy of the religious authorities?” As discussed in Chapters 3 – 5, Strauss appears to equate what he considers Plato’s exoteric doctrines (the immortal soul, the Ideas, the possibility of a philosopher-legislator or prophet-legislator communicating with the divine
As there is historical evidence that supports, to some degree, the claim that ancient and medieval philosophers wrote multi-layered texts, we must consider how Strauss understands exoteric writing to function. As Smith writes, Strauss asks scholars of ancient and medieval philosophy not to read texts with a “flat-footed literalism,” particularly if a text is believed to contain an esoteric teaching. So how are we, according to Strauss, to extract the esoteric teachings that might be concealed in premodern philosophic texts?

This is what makes Strauss’s readings so debatable: Strauss does not suggest a set hermeneutic formula be applied to ancient and medieval texts. As discussed in Chapters 2 – 6, Strauss points to a variety of literary devices premodern authors might have used to disguise their true thoughts. Strauss’s readings are therefore vulnerable to the criticism that the conclusions he draws are arbitrary, that they depend entirely on what literary devices he believes an author is using.

After all, according to Strauss, the literary devices exoteric writers use are highly diverse. They include intentional contradiction; repeating a theme or idea throughout a text; placing important ideas in the centre of a text (a location where superficial readers might not read closely, or by which time have forgotten the author’s earlier arguments); making noticeable blunders such as incorrectly citing another author’s work or making a glaring spelling mistake; using a disreputable character as a spokesperson; providing “hints” through the title or chapter headings of their books; and, utilising numbers to emphasise a concept or idea. It is worth noting that one scholar has attempted to distinguish Strauss’s hermeneutics from Derridean deconstruction,

or transcendent) with similar Islamic beliefs, thereby suggesting that a rejection of exoteric Platonism also means disbelief in Islam. This view is suggested in Strauss’s commentaries on Farabi and the Islamic Aristotelians (see Chapter 3, Section 4; Chapter 5, Section 2). Perhaps in Nietzsche’s footsteps (see Will to Power, aph. 972; PL, 141n25/PG, 62n1), Strauss seems to insinuate that Islam is a by-product of Platonic philosophy.

80 Smith, Reading Leo Strauss, 8.

81 Note, for example, Strauss’s statements on interpreting Maimonides’s Guide of the Perplexed at PAW, 60 [italics added]: “What are, then, the general rules and the most important special rules according to which this book is to be read?” See also Joseph Cropsey’s comments on Strauss’s hermeneutics in The International Encyclopedia for the Social Sciences, 750: “He [i.e. Strauss] employed and taught what came to be called ‘careful reading,’ but he did not use or impart a ‘method,’ for by the nature of the case there cannot be one…” Strauss outlines many exoteric writing/reading techniques in PAW, chapter 2.

82 Compare Machiavelli, Il Principe, XIII with I Samuel 17:38-50. When Machiavelli writes about the story of David and Goliath, David is provided with a knife. On the possible reasons for this addition, see Mansfield, Machiavelli’s Virtue, 188.

83 See TOM, 52; SPPP, 224; WPP, 166; OT, 275.
as some parallels might be drawn. The important consideration is that, contrary to Derridean deconstruction, Strauss believes (albeit esoteric) authorial intentions are ultimately accessible due to the precision with which exoteric writers compose their texts. As Strauss writes in the context of Machiavelli:

> The perfect book or speech obeys in every respect the pure and merciless laws of what has been called logographic necessity. The perfect speech contains nothing slipshod; in it there are no loose threads; it contains no word that has been picked up at random; it is not marred by errors due to faulty memory or to any other kind of carelessness.

This is, of course, a rather lofty claim on behalf of the great philosophical authors. Despite Strauss asserting that an author’s esoteric teaching can be categorically identified due to “logographic necessity,” one of the primary criticisms of Strauss’s hermeneutics remains why one ought to believe, or accept, what Strauss claims is the esoteric teaching. Due to his contention that authors may not have meant what is explicitly written on the pages of their books — and given that Strauss’s hermeneutics cannot claim mathematical precision — critics argue that Strauss does little more than offer arbitrary readings of prior philosophers. Some critics remain highly skeptical of Strauss’s claim to have uncovered the esoteric teachings of premodern authors; they allege that Strauss uses the concept of exoteric writing as a means to distort the history of philosophy in any way he pleases. As I argue, particularly in Chapters 2 and 7, there are solid reasons for being receptive to this criticism of Strauss. Strauss makes several noticeable errors

84 Derrida argues against the “myth of presence” or “logocentricity” — i.e., against the notion that words, and therefore texts, can possess definite meanings. Strauss believes exoteric texts can impart the author’s true views and teaching. On this theme, see Cantor, “Leo Strauss and Contemporary Hermeneutics” in Leo Strauss’s Thought: Toward a Critical Engagement.

85 TOM, 121. Note also Strauss’s remarks at CM, 53; WPP, 31; LAM, 54; AAPL, 167.

86 Strauss was certainly aware of the criticisms made against his thesis. See his comments on George Sabine’s review of Persecution and the Art of Writing, WPP, 223. Drury has argued that Strauss uses Machiavelli as a “mouthpiece.” See The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss, 26, 114-32. See also note 89 below.

87 On this point, see Bloom, “Leo Strauss: September 20, 1899-October 18, 1973,” 386. Bloom notes that works composed after Strauss discovered exoteric writing were “considered perverse and caused anger.”

88 Some compare Strauss with Derrida. See note 84 above.

with medieval Islamic philosophy yet never returns, in subsequent works, to correct his mistakes. We must take criticisms of Strauss’s works on medieval Islamic philosophy particularly seriously as, very often, these negative remarks come from prominent scholars working in that field. To note just a few examples, Gutas considers Strauss responsible for creating widespread “hermeneutical libertarianism” in the field of medieval Islamic philosophy, and is especially critical of Strauss’s contention that medieval Muslim philosophers wrote “political” (or “exoteric”) philosophy. Gutas argues that Strauss’s approach revolves around an incorrect assumption: Strauss’s view of medieval Islamic philosophy is “an offshoot of the older orientalist conception of Arabic philosophy as being invariably about the conflict between religion and philosophy.” Tamer and Fraenkel also maintain that such a conflict did not exist for the medieval philosophers Strauss writes on. Similar to Gutas’s remarks, Leaman and Nasr dismiss Strauss’s hermeneutics as merely a form of “Orientalism.” Perhaps even more critically, philologist Rosenthal is said to have commented concerning Strauss’s works: “I can only read what I see.” Rosenthal did not, in other words, consider Strauss’s idea of a secret, or encoded, message written “between the lines” to be a subject for serious scholarly analysis, a sentiment one sees frequently expressed towards Strauss’s works. As one author puts it, what critics believe is that Strauss’s exoteric/esoteric analyses place Strauss’s “interpretation[s] outside the realm of debate and falsification.” These serious complaints against Strauss’s works deserve attention.

Although Strauss’s works have frequently been criticised, it must be noted that exotericism is not a peripheral topic in contemporary non-Straussian scholarship on medieval thought; despite the censure, Strauss’s theses remain a subject of significant scholarly interest. Recent “Companion” texts to Medieval Arabic Philosophy, Medieval Jewish Philosophy, and


91 Ibid., 20-1.

92 See Tamer’s remarks on Farabi’s and Avicenna’s views, and Strauss’s misreading of those thinkers, at Islamsche Philosophie und die Kriege der Moderne: Das Verhältnis von Leo Strauss zu Alfarabi, Avicenna und Averroes, 331-3. Note also Fraenkel’s criticisms of Strauss at Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza: Reason, Religion, and Autonomy, 34.

93 Nasr & Leaman, History of Islamic Philosophy, 1145-6.

94 Franz Rosenthal quoted in Joel Kraemer, “The Medieval Arabic Enlightenment,” CCLS, 161n81. That said, Strauss did not think highly of philology, considering the discipline to be reductionist (“…the philologists are indescribable idiots!”). On this topic, see Kraemer’s remarks in “The Medieval Arabic Enlightenment,” CCLS, 160-1. See also Lampert’s comments at “Strauss’s Recovery of Esotericism,” CCLS, 72.

95 Smith, Reading Leo Strauss, 88. Smith’s comments relate to the criticisms made of Strauss’s interpretation of Plato.
Plato, all note the influence of Strauss’s works and hermeneutics. Acknowledging the fact that premodern philosophers may have written exoteric texts is crucial. As Strauss’s student Stanley Rosen has stated, those who completely deny the phenomenon of exoteric writing for “historical” or “philological” reasons “merely reveal their own obtuseness and incompetence.” That is to say that those who repudiate exoteric writing completely might as well concede that they have either not read, or have failed to think laterally about, the perplexing statements found in the works of Plato, Aristotle, Maimonides, Farabi, Ibn Tufayl, and Averroes (and even, for that matter, in more modern authors such as Nietzsche) that suggest texts might possess multiple layers of meaning. There is also, as Strauss emphasises, the matter of persecution: did some philosophers, fearing persecution, compose their works to disguise their true thoughts from superficial readers?

Strauss’s key assertions, if accepted, have a range of consequences for how a modern scholar studies premodern philosophy. If Strauss’s own works are taken to exemplify what exoteric/esoteric analyses can lead to, then Strauss’s hermeneutics can clearly result in interpretations of philosophers entirely at odds with conventional readings. While it is true – as the weighty criticism against him proves – that Strauss’s readings of prior philosophers are often highly debatable, what appears to be so controversial about Strauss is not the historical, or descriptive, claim he offers about exotericism but the moral, or prescriptive, claim he appears to make. As I argue, Strauss’s claim is, as mentioned, that all “responsible” philosophers will write multi-layered texts and will conceal, to some extent, their true views. Importantly, Strauss does not argue against the practice of exoteric writing. Rather, as is discussed in Chapter 3, one finds in Strauss’s works a romanticisation of the Middle Ages. One finds criticisms of the European Enlightenment. One finds Strauss attacking modern Enlightenment thinkers for openly and honestly (in Strauss’s view, recklessly) publishing their true philosophical and political views. Furthermore, as is discussed in Chapters 3 – 6, it is noticeable that Strauss does not oppose a


98 Several of these statements are discussed throughout the present thesis.

99 As Strauss contends (*PAW*, 32), the full dimensions of premodern philosophical works may not: [B]e noticed, let alone understood, so long as we confine ourselves to the view of persecution and the attitude toward freedom of speech and candor which have become prevalent during the last three hundred years.
view he attributes to premodern philosophers: disingenuously supporting religion on the grounds that religion insulates non-philosophers from the “deadly” truth and can serve as a bulwark of social and political order. If Strauss is understood as advocating the practice of exoteric writing, and if Strauss is himself an exoteric writer, then the question arises as to whether his position carries obvious counter-Enlightenment, anti-egalitarian, and anti-liberal, overtones. And, if Strauss is an exoteric writer, perhaps his interpretations of prior thinkers are not only commentaries, but also texts that carry Strauss’s own teaching. This is, then, what makes Strauss so controversial: Strauss’s hermeneutics, and therefore potentially a number of Strauss’s texts, are politically loaded.

1.3 The influence of medieval Islamic philosophy on Strauss’s political theory

So far we have examined several of Strauss’s claims about exoteric writing, and reviewed some of the reasons why Strauss’s thesis has been roundly criticised. We are now in a position to explore the influence medieval Islamic philosophy may have had on Strauss’s thought and career, and further investigate why Strauss believes exoteric writing is necessary. To do so, some historical details are required.

While in Berlin in the early 1930s, Strauss assisted Paul Kraus, a respected philologist and scholar of Islamic philosophy, in translating Farabi’s *Summary of Plato’s Laws* (*Talkhīṣ Nawāmīs Aflāṭun*), an original manuscript of medieval Islamic philosophy. The importance of the *Summary* lay in the fact that it asserted Plato had veiled his true philosophy behind riddles, allegories, and parables. According to Farabi, Plato had believed that if philosophy reached the

100 Throughout his career, Strauss remained hostile to the Enlightenment’s ideals, liberalism especially. For commentary, see Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*, 41-4; Altman, *The German Stranger*, 77-8. It bears noting here that two interpretive options seem to emerge: one can interpret Strauss as offering broad and largely unsubstantiated claims about ancient and medieval philosophy that are nothing more than, perhaps, the result of Strauss unwittingly projecting his own Nietzschean sympathies on to premodern philosophers. Alternatively, one can interpret Strauss as deliberately providing falsified accounts of ancient and medieval philosophers in order to impart a political teaching. It is certainly strange that Strauss always seems to position premodern philosophers (though he does not do this explicitly) as covert-Nietzschians.


102 Regarding the importance of the manuscript, see Mahdi, “The Editio Princeps of Farabi’s Compendium Legum Platonis,” 1-2.
wrong hands it would be used “improperly.” Farabi stated his intention in the *Summary* was to extract what Plato had alluded to “in order that the present book [i.e. Farabi’s *Summary*] become[s] an aid to whoever wants to know that book [i.e. Plato’s *Laws*].” Viewed in the broader context of the history of ideas, the rediscovery of Farabi’s “Muslim” Plato, a Plato who seemingly practiced exotericism, came at an opportune moment. Around four decades earlier, in the late 1880s, Nietzsche had attacked – if not tried to terminate – both the “Christian” interpretation of Plato that had been prevalent in Western philosophy for several centuries and its accompanying metaphysical tradition.

As noted in Chapters 3 and 5 especially, Strauss’s exploration of Farabi’s works, among other medieval philosophic texts, in the early 1930s can be understood as having influenced the philosophical and political themes Strauss would later write on. Furthermore, Strauss’s discovery of exotericism can be viewed as having had a significant consequence for Strauss’s own writing style.

Acknowledging that Strauss begins to utilise exoteric writing at a certain point in his career (a point several scholars agree on) allows us to divide the Straussian corpus roughly as follows. Works written before 1940 – including, notably, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* (1930), *Philosophy and Law* (1935), *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (1936), and “Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi” (1936) – were composed prior to Strauss attaining his deepest understanding of exotericism. In the words of Strauss’s student Allan Bloom, these early works “conform with the canons of modern scholarship” and indicate Strauss is aware of exoteric writing although he is not yet practicing it himself. Ancient and medieval esoteric

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104 Ibid.

105 Nietzsche characterises himself and his followers as “godless anti-metaphysicians” at *The Gay Science* (ed. Williams), aph. 334. Note that Nietzsche explicitly connects Platonism and Christianity; in the preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*, first published in 1886, Nietzsche characterises Christianity as “Platonism for ‘the people’.” Compare with Nietzsche’s assertion about Socrates being Plato’s creation at *Beyond Good and Evil*, aph. 190. Zuckert notes (*Postmodern Platos*, 10) that Nietzsche suspected the Platonic Ideas and the doctrine of the immortal soul were Plato’s public teachings. That Plato’s principal doctrines are exoteric is a claim made far more overtly by Strauss.

106 The claim that medieval philosophy first exposed Strauss to the idea of exoteric/esoteric texts is debateable. Strauss might have known of exoteric writing (i.e., the exotericism that exists in “philosophic” rather than “religious” traditions) due to his early work on Jacobi. See note 33 above.

107 See note 112 below and the discussion in Chapters 2 and 3 of the present thesis.

doctrines, and exoteric writing techniques more generally, are not a primary focus of these early works. Strauss has not yet drawn any firm conclusions as to the esoteric doctrines of the Islamic Aristotelians, the *falasifa*, or their Jewish successors. Strauss interprets the *falasifa* and Maimonides conventionally, so to speak, as wholehearted believers in their respective religions. (This theme is explored further in Chapter 3.) Accordingly, these works are considered, at least by some scholars, to be “transitional” as they were written prior to the *Kehre* Strauss underwent around the late 1930s and early 1940s, a period that corresponds with Strauss’s assertion, made in private correspondence, that he has uncovered Maimonides’s esoteric teaching.

Following Strauss’s analyses of Maimonides’s and Farabi’s works around the late 1930s to early 1940s, Strauss’s later texts increasingly – or, in some cases, exclusively – focus on the theme of exoteric writing. In this respect, one author has pointed to Strauss’s 1941 article on Maimonides, “The Literary Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*,” as the first work in which Strauss centres his attention on uncovering esoteric doctrines and begins to utilise exoteric writing techniques himself. Strauss’s works on medieval Islamic philosophy written after 1941 include “Farabi’s *Plato*” (1945), *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952), and “How Farabi read

109 In the thesis, I refer to the “*falasifa*” (Islamic Aristotelians) at times rather than writing “Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes” (or similar) on each occasion. Strauss’s commentary in *Philosophy and Law*, “Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi,” “Farabi’s *Plato*,” and *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, indicates he considers these thinkers ultimately guided by Platonic “political philosophy” (see *PAW*, 9-10). Strauss’s statements about a “sociology of philosophy” and “class” of philosophers (*PAW*, 7-8) demonstrate that he understands all true philosophers, or “true Platonists” (see Chapter 5 of the present thesis), as united in terms of their philosophical and political views.

110 SCR, 151.


113 Bloom (“Leo Strauss: September 20, 1899-October 18, 1973,” 383-7) contends that Strauss’s works can be classified into three phases. Note also Rosen’s remarks (*Hermeneutics as Politics*, 117) about the changes in Strauss’s writing style.


115 As Strauss points out (*PAW*, “Preface,” 5), the book is a collection of published articles. All the articles were written around the time of, or post-*Kehre*. Note that the book’s introduction (7-21) is based on “Farabi’s *Plato*.” Strauss omits much of the original commentary from “Farabi’s *Plato*” presumably because that article reveals, I believe, Strauss’s own views quite clearly. See Chapters 5 & 6 of the present thesis.
Plato’s *Laws*” (1957). As noted in Chapter 5 particularly, Strauss’s own use of exotericism – for example, disclosing important details in the centre of texts, or posing as a commentator – is arguably apparent in some of these works.

Strauss’s engagement with medieval philosophy appears to have influenced his American-era writings on classical Greek philosophy. As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, the effects of medieval Islamic philosophy – most notably the works of Farabi – seems evident in Strauss’s chapters on Plato in the *History of Political Philosophy* (1963) and *The City and Man* (1964). Strauss contends, controversially, that Farabi’s esoteric doctrine was disbelief in the possibility of metaphysical knowledge and disbelief in an afterlife. When writing on Plato, Strauss treats the same Platonic doctrines as peripheral; Strauss’s interpretation of Farabi therefore looks to have influenced his reading of Plato. (Although, as I argue in Chapters 4 – 6, Strauss’s understanding of Farabi, and therefore Plato, is highly questionable.)

In terms of the effect medieval Islamic philosophy had on Strauss, there is also the matter of Strauss’s repeated references to Avicenna’s *Divisions of the Rational Sciences*. As is emphasised in Chapters 2 and 3, Strauss considers an ambiguous Avicennian passage (“[t]hat which is connected with prophecy and the *sharī‘ah* is included in two books, both about the laws”) to support the claim that Plato’s *Laws* was of the utmost importance to many medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers. Notably, Strauss uses the same Avicennian quote as the epigraph for his last significant text on Plato, *The Argument and Action of Plato’s Laws* (completed in 1971, and published in 1975).

Additionally, in both “Farabi’s *Plato*” and *Socrates and Aristophanes* (1966), works written over twenty years apart, Strauss refers to the importance of the medieval philosopher Razi’s account of Socrates, specifically Razi’s discussion of how Socrates experienced a major change during his (Socrates’s) life. Strauss infers that Razi’s identification of a “young” and “mature” Socrates helps explain Aristophanes’ and Plato’s diverging accounts of the same philosopher.

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116 There is also the posthumously published “How to Begin to Study Medieval Philosophy” which is based on a lecture Strauss delivered in 1944 (see Pangle, “Introduction,” *RCPR*, xxxiv). Strauss (“How to Begin to Study Medieval Philosophy,” *RCPR*, 224-6) draws attention to the alleged use of exoteric writing by medieval philosophers.

117 As noted in-text, Strauss uses a passage from Avicenna’s *Divisions of the Rational Sciences* as the epigraph for one of his final works, *The Argument and Action of Plato’s Laws* (1975). Strauss refers to the same Avicennian passage at “Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi,” 5; *P:AW*, 10; “A Giving of Accounts,” *JPCM*, 463. Strauss’s use of Avicenna’s comment is, however, highly problematic, as Tamer (*Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne: Das Verhältnis von Leo Strauss zu Alfarabi, Avicenna und Averroes*, 77-86, 324-5, 329-32) points out. For commentary on Strauss’s use of Avicenna’s *Divisions of the Rational Sciences*, see Chapter 2, Section 3 of the present thesis.

118 “Farabi’s *Plato*,” 28n70; *SA*, 314.
Medieval philosophy can, then, be understood as having influenced Strauss insofar as he is a thinker highly concerned with exotericism, and insofar as a link between Strauss’s commentaries on medieval philosophy and his texts on Plato can be discerned.

Strauss’s works on medieval philosophy and his writings on modernity are also potentially connected by exotericism. *Prima facie*, the “theme” of Strauss’s philosophical investigations is the source, and integrity, of “values” in modernity. As a German-Jew born in 1899, Strauss experienced the world-changing events that occurred in Europe in the first half of the 20th century. Strauss participated in the First World War, and witnessed the end of liberal democracy in Weimar Germany. He saw the effects of Russian pogroms, and the consequences of Communism and Fascism. Emigration to America in 1937 meant Strauss could meaningfully compare European and American politics. What appears to tie Strauss’s work on Islamic philosophy with his American-era political writings relates to exoteric writing: it is, in my view, accurate to claim that Strauss found in medieval philosophy a political teaching that he believed could rectify what he considered the problematic outcomes of the European Enlightenment, particularly secularism and value relativism. To outline this point, a brief synopsis of Strauss’s political thought is necessary.

In many of his works, Strauss draws attention to the problems attached to value relativism. Strauss contemplates the long-term consequences of losing what he suggests are the two pillars of Western civilisation: the rationalism of ancient Greek philosophy and the moral absolutes of Biblical religion. Strauss refers to these pillars figuratively as “Athens and Jerusalem.” Strauss’s American-era works often focus on doctrines he believes deleterious to moderate politics (positivism, value relativism, and historicism). These doctrines point to what is, perhaps, the greatest philosophical and political problem for Strauss: nihilism. As mentioned in

119 See *LAM*, 220-3; *JPCM*, 453.

120 For the influence these events may have had on Strauss, see Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile*.

121 See *JPCM*, 312.

122 On secularism, see *LAM*, 270; Batnitzky, “Leo Strauss’s Disenchantment with Secular Society.”

123 For Strauss’s use of these terms, see “Jerusalem and Athens,” *JPCM*, chapter 9. Note Strauss’s remark (*LAM*, 8) that we have “lost all simply authoritative traditions.” See also *NRH*, 74:

Man cannot live without light, guidance, knowledge; only through knowledge of the good can he find the good that he needs. The fundamental question, therefore, is whether men can acquire that knowledge of the good without which they cannot guide their lives individually or collectively by the unaided efforts of their natural powers, or whether they are dependent for that knowledge on Divine Revelation. No alternative is more fundamental that this: human guidance or divine guidance.
Section 1.1, there are several reasons for believing that Strauss accepts nihilism as the theoretical “truth.” He often, if not always, suggests the truth is “deadly” or “unpleasing,” thereby directly indicating he agrees with what is, arguably, the core tenet of Nietzsche’s philosophy. However, as Strauss’s comments on exoteric writing reveal (also noted in Section 1.1), Strauss appears to be teaching – perhaps inconsistency – that the “deadly” truth ought to be concealed for social and political reasons. At least on the surface, so to speak, of his texts, Strauss is a thinker concerned with the problem diagnosed by Nietzsche at the end of the 19th century: a morality based on Biblical commands or Biblical teachings cannot be maintained without corresponding belief in the Biblical God (it is noteworthy in this regard that many interpret Strauss as a spokesperson for “conservative” politics). As Nietzschean philosophy holds, without God, metaphysical absolutes, or belief in divine intervention, all views, opinions, and doctrines, are merely human perspectives or human interpretations. Strauss appears to accept this sweeping assessment as valid. A vital theme in Strauss’s American-era works is, then, that the spread of Nietzsche’s “deadly” truths, the spread of nihilism, will inevitably erode (or indeed, that nihilism may have already eroded) the foundations of liberal democracy. Apparently drawing on his experience as a German-Jew, he suggests, furthermore, that global politics has become – and may remain – an arena in which those with the greatest daring, “strongest will,” and “ruthlessness,” can harness the powers of modern technology and pursue any goal. Strauss is particularly candid on this theme when discussing the 20th century German philosopher and heir of Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger:

124 Strauss labels the truth “unpleasing” in the context of Lucretius (L-AM, 85). Regarding Strauss’s recognition of the same “truths” as Nietzsche, see notes 33, 52, and 136.

125 Concerning Strauss’s claims about morality and religion, see IPP, 265; “1962 preface,” SCR, 12-3. Rosen (Hermeneutics as Politics, 107) describes how Strauss was viewed as a thinker who “spoke for the detested “conservatives.”” Regarding Strauss as a conservative, see Gottfried, Leo Strauss and the Conservative Movement in America.

126 See “The Three Waves of Modernity,” IPP, 98. Note also Strauss’s remarks at RCPR, 168. This is one of the essential themes of Bloom’s The Closing of the American Mind.

127 SCR, “1962 preface,” 1:

The weakness of the Weimar Republic made certain its speedy destruction. It did not make certain the victory of National Socialism. The victory of National Socialism became necessary in Germany for the same reason that the victory of Communism had become necessary in Russia: the man with the strongest will or single-mindedness, the greatest ruthlessness, daring, and power over his following…was the leader of the revolution [Italics added].

Regarding Strauss’s views on technology and modern tyranny, see OT, 23, 211; On Plato’s Symposium, 2; “Progress and Return,” IPP, 310.
All rational liberal philosophic positions have lost their significance and power. One may deplore this, but I for one cannot bring myself to clinging to philosophic positions which have been shown to be inadequate. I am afraid that we shall have to make a very great effort in order to find a solid basis for rational liberalism. Only a great thinker could help us in our intellectual plight. But here is the great trouble: the only great thinker in our time is Heidegger.128 [Italics added]

Strauss’s claim that Heidegger is the “only great thinker” who might be consulted is certainly contestable (at the very least, analytical philosophers would surely dispute such a remark). Nonetheless, it is clear that Strauss intimately connects philosophy and politics. On Strauss’s account, Nietzsche and, curiously, the “great thinker” Heidegger129 are directly associated with National Socialism. The philosophical doctrines both thinkers helped to disseminate allow for any type of conduct (political or otherwise) on the basis that metaphysical nihilism provides, at least by implication, political carte blanche.130 While Strauss does not assert that one of the major problems (or the major problem) faced in contemporary European philosophy (nihilism) will necessarily result in more political movement like National Socialism, Strauss does view moral uncertainty, or “fanatical obscurantism,” as growing in the West, and he wonder what the consequences will be.131 This is, perhaps, Strauss’s – and some of his students’ – deepest criticism

128 RCPP, 29. Note also Strauss’s claim at RCPP, 168: “These lectures [ie “The Problem of Socrates”] take place under the shadow of the contemporary collapse of rationalism. This collapse induces us to consider the whole issue of rationalism…”

129 Lampert makes several important points at Leo Strauss and Nietzsche, 89. Lampert asserts that members of Strauss’s school often intimately associate Nietzsche and Heidegger, although Strauss might not have done so. Is Nietzsche, like Heidegger, ultimately a “radical historian” in Strauss’s view? See NRH, 26, 26n9; RCPP, 31. Is Strauss a radical historicist? Pangle (Leo Strauss, 67) suggests Strauss might have accepted radical historicism as theoretically sound; see the discussion in Chapter 2 of the present thesis. Concerning Strauss’s view of Heidegger, see Altman, The German Stranger, chapter 3 and note 130 below.

130 Strauss suggests that according to the premises of modern philosophy, a “rational liberal” position is merely one option that can be chosen. Strauss’s view of Heidegger is worth considering in this regard. Strauss notes (RCPR, 30-1) that Heidegger never withdrew his statements about National Socialism’s “greatness and dignity.” The implicit claim from Strauss appears to be that: (i) as merely one political option, liberalism needs intellectual support (ii) only the “great thinker” Heidegger could provide this (iii) Heidegger supports National Socialism, not liberalism. Is Strauss’s point that liberalism has no hope? Regarding Nietzsche’s connection to National Socialism, see Strauss’s remarks at WPP, 54-5; IPP, 98.

131 “Preface to the American Edition,” PPH, 1:
of modern secular, liberal, democratic regimes: definitive claims can no longer be made regarding right or wrong actions. Residents of the Western world choose between competing, yet ultimately arbitrary, “lifestyles.” As the West no longer has, for Strauss, a clear moral vision or unifying purpose, he raises the question of whether we ought to “despair” about the future. As he writes in his remarkable introduction to The City and Man:

The crisis of the West consists in the West’s having become uncertain of its purpose. The West was once certain of its purpose – of a purpose in which all men could be united, and hence it had a clear vision of its future as the future of mankind. We do no longer have that certainty and that clarity. Some among us even despair of the future, and this despair explains many forms of contemporary Western degradation.

Strauss’s comments on Nietzsche, Heidegger, the “crisis of the West,” and nihilism often appear to suggest that Strauss’s goal amounts to combating, or even refuting, nihilism. When Strauss claims, for example, that the West once had a “clear vision of its future,” or that “a society which was accustomed to understand itself in terms of a universal purpose, cannot lose faith in that

I had seen that the modern mind had lost its self-confidence or its certainty of having made decisive progress beyond pre-modern thought; and I saw that it was turning into nihilism, or what is in practice the same thing, fanatical obscurantism.

See also Strauss’s remarks at “The Three Waves of Modernity,” IPP, 98:

[The critique of modern rationalism or of the modern belief in reason by Nietzsche cannot be dismissed or forgotten. This is the deepest reason for the crisis of liberal democracy. The theoretical crisis does not necessarily lead to a practical crisis, for the superiority of liberal democracy to communism, Stalinist or post-Stalinist, is obvious enough.

132 See Strauss’s remarks on “universal philistinism and creeping conformism” at RCPR, 31. The passage of Nietzsche’s that Strauss refers to comes from The Will to Power, Book 1, aph. 67. As far as I am aware, Strauss does not use the word “lifestyle.” However, note the similarity between Strauss’s negative comments about the “democratic man” as “prodigal playboy” and “Lotus-eater” (CM, 132-3) and Bloom’s remarks on democracy and “life-styles” (Closing of the American Mind, 144, 235). The Zuckerts (The Truth about Leo Strauss, 36) note the Nietzschean element of Strauss’s and Bloom’s criticisms of western modernity.

133 CM, 3.

134 This is not to imply that Strauss viewed Nietzsche and Heidegger as his philosophical opponents (although Strauss is sometimes interpreted in this way). Strauss’s comments on Heidegger are generally very positive, and Strauss’s final article on Nietzsche in Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy indicates that Strauss considers Nietzsche a true philosopher. See notes 33 and 129 above.
purpose without becoming completely bewildered,” 135 he seems to be asserting that moral and political ideals are wholly desirable and, more to the point, that the West can once again have a unifying goal. Yet, as is argued in the present thesis (and further to what has already been noted in Section 1.1), when Strauss is read closely, we find that he agrees with Nietzsche’s fundamental claim that the philosophic truth is “deadly” and “unpleasant.” This means that Strauss’s concern is not with the truth, so to speak, of nihilism; rather, Strauss’s concern is that some philosophers openly publicize their skeptical assessments of morality. To return to one of Strauss’s points in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*:

Exoteric literature presupposes that there are basic truths which would not be pronounced in public by any decent man, because they would do harm to many people who, having been hurt, would naturally be included to hurt him who pronounces the unpleasant truths.136 [Italics added]

This matter leads us to two interrelated themes that will be raised in subsequent Chapters: Strauss’s endorsement of exoteric writing and his treatment of religion.

As will be discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 particularly, Strauss’s claim is that many influential and well-known premodern philosophers disingenuously supported religion. Strauss asserts that the medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers he writes on (chiefly Farabi, Avicenna, Averroes, and Maimonides) did not undermine revealed religion despite the fact that, according to Strauss’s reading, they did not truly believe in God, an afterlife, or the possibility of prophetic or metaphysical knowledge. According to Strauss, unlike many of the thinkers of the modern Enlightenment, medieval philosophers considered religious beliefs socially and politically useful.

Properly understood, Strauss’s contention is that the difference between premodern and modern philosophers does not relate to actual belief in God, gods, revelation, or metaphysics; as I argue, Strauss continually gives the impression, at least in the vast majority of his American-era works, that all true philosophers – premodern or modern – are atheists.138 As we will see, on

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135 CM, 3. Strauss writes that he does not believe that the “theoretical crisis” in contemporary philosophy will, by necessity, lead to a “practical crisis.” However, as his literary output reveals, Strauss considers a close examination of the history of philosophy, and the origins of modernity, necessary. See note 131 above.

136 PAW, 36. The Zuckert’s comment on this topic at *The Truth about Leo Strauss*, 134-5. Regarding nihilism as “theoretically” true for Strauss, consider his remarks at PAW, 36. See also notes 33, 52, and 124 above.

137 “Prophecy” refers in this context to the idea of communicating with the divine. Strauss’s understanding of the falarjia’s Platonism is discussed in Chapter 3.

138 This seems to be precisely Strauss’s point at OT, 205-6.
Strauss’s account, the difference between the premoderns and the moderns is that each group has a different perspective of, or belief about, human nature. Generally speaking, the moderns publicise the “deadly” truth; the premoderns use exoteric writing to disguise it. The moderns are liberal and egalitarian; the premoderns do not believe in the equal dissemination of knowledge. In Chapters 3 – 6, we will investigate Strauss’s contention that the practices of the premoderns relate to what they learnt from Plato’s texts, from Plato’s “political philosophy.” Strauss submits that Plato’s “political philosophy” helped teach medieval philosophers the importance of having widespread belief in divine laws. There is, then, for Strauss, a connecting thread between ancient and medieval thought, a thread that was severed by the thinkers of the Enlightenment. And let us not fail to heed the political overtones of Strauss’s thesis: the question subtly presented to us is whether modern philosophers should, no matter their own personal convictions, endeavour to revitalise certain belief systems. Are we to revivify what Strauss claims is a teaching passed down from antiquity?

1.4 Central Arguments and Overview of Thesis Chapters

The principal arguments in the present thesis are as follows:

1) Strauss’s work on medieval Islamic philosophy is vulnerable to a series of criticisms, criticisms severe enough to undermine Strauss’s views about a medieval “Platonic political philosophy.” I argue against Strauss’s assertion (noted above) that medieval philosophers were atheists yet, in accordance with Plato’s “political philosophy,” did not attack revealed religion on the grounds that it was viewed as socially and politically useful. Strauss supports his claims by utilising what I contend are questionable hermeneutics.

2) I contend that we must remain receptive to the possibility that Strauss deliberately misreads ancient and medieval texts. That is, Strauss appears to intentionally align ancient and medieval philosophers with an anti-metaphysical, anti-theological position similar to Friedrich Nietzsche’s. Importantly, by asserting that the

\[139\text{ See note 109 above.}\]

\[140\text{ PL, 73-6; PG, 61-4. For commentary on Strauss, the } fa\text{d}a\text{fija, and the idea of divine laws, see Chapters 2 and 3. Strauss writes that the medieval view of prophecy – as, apparently, a political necessity – was indicated to him by a work of Avicenna’s, the aforementioned } Divisions \text{ of the Rational Sciences. See note 117 above.}\]
fundamental metaphysical and theological beliefs expressed by philosophers such as Plato and Farabi were exoteric, i.e., by allying these thinkers with Nietzsche, Strauss removes the basis of these philosophers' political systems. Strauss’s reading of ancient and medieval philosophy requires believing that premodern thinkers did not view themselves as involved in a quest for truth, or as expressing ultimate truth or reality; rather, on Strauss’s reading, premodern thinkers must have considered philosophy a form of poetry. The epistemological difficulties of Strauss’s own metaphysically sceptical position are also emphasised. Strauss makes a series of assertions concerning the “best” regime, the “highest” forms of human existence, the “crisis” of modernity, the need to return to the wisdom of the ancients, and how philosophical and political moderation is necessary. However, Strauss’s claims are not defensible as his philosophy, properly understood, clearly precludes the possibility of an objective summum bonum that will theoretically ground his enterprise. Like Strauss’s premoderns, Strauss’s own philosophy lacks a metaphysical foundation.

3) Strauss is not, I contend, a thinker merely diagnosing modernity; rather, Strauss offers, on the esoteric level of his texts, a distinct political claim. Against those generous or unsuspecting readers who consider Strauss a misguided interpreter of ancient and medieval philosophy, I suggest that there are good reasons for believing that Strauss has a political project that relates, at base, to the revivification of religion. On my reading, Strauss distorts ancient and medieval philosophy to comport with this project. This possibility leads to considering an inconsistency in Strauss’s philosophy. If Strauss accepts, on the esoteric level, that the truth is “deadly” – that we face, in modernity, the “truth” that life is meaningless, and that the foundations of all moral and political principles are questionable – then Strauss’s political project must be understood as poetry or a “noble lie.”

The Chapters of the thesis are as follows:

Chapter 2: “A Nietzschean Approach to Medieval Islamic Philosophy?”

In Chapter 2, I argue that a sceptical approach to Strauss’s works is called for, particularly given that Strauss, a scholar of considerable academic talents, makes several noticeable errors when writing on medieval Islamic philosophy. The Chapter differentiates my work from Georges Tamer’s insightful and critical study of Strauss: Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne: Das Verhältnis von Leo Strauss zu Alfarabi,
Arivenna und Averroes (2001). Contrary to Tamer’s reading, I argue that Strauss did not simply misunderstand aspects of medieval Islamic philosophy; rather, Strauss appears to have deliberately misread prior thinkers as part of a philosophical-political project, a project with Nietzschean foundations.

Chapter 3: “From Modern to Medieval Enlightenment: Islamic Philosophy in Philosophy and Law & Persecution and the Art of Writing”

This Chapter examines Strauss’s criticisms of the modern Enlightenment and how Strauss considers medieval philosophy to supply a superior paradigm of “enlightenment.” In this regard, we explore Strauss’s contention that Averroes and Maimonides justified the practice of philosophy by appealing to the laws of their respective religions. We also survey the reasons why Strauss criticises his fellow medievalist, Julius Guttmann. Several themes from Persecution and the Art of Writing are reviewed, and we examine how Strauss’s understanding of the falasifa alters between the 1930s and 1940s. A key theme in this Chapter is the influence Strauss believes Plato had on several medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers.

Chapter 4: “Strauss’s hermeneutics: persecution, metaphysics, and esotericism in medieval Islamic philosophy”

Having discussed several aspects of Strauss’s reading of the falasifa in Chapter 3, Chapter 4 further analyses Strauss’s main contentions about the falasifa. The theme of the Chapter is whether medieval philosophers, commonly understood as adhering to Aristotelian and Neoplatonic doctrines, were Platonists in the sense Strauss describes. We consider Strauss’s claim that medieval Islamic societies were hostile to independent thought or heterodoxy and that philosophers were, as a result, forced to write “political philosophy.” This view is, I argue, problematic for a variety of historical and philosophical reasons. We also explore Strauss’s suggestion that the metaphysical doctrines of the Islamic Aristotelians were exoteric. I contend that Strauss’s reading is unconvincing: Strauss is asserting that the falasifa knew that their ontology, epistemology, and politics, were, in truth, based on fiction. We then scrutinize one of Strauss’s key claims regarding the origins of exoteric writing: the view that the falasifa learnt of exoteric writing from Plato. As the idea of exotericism/esotericism exists within the Islamic tradition, it is problematic to assert, as Strauss does, that the falasifa’s hermeneutics were the direct result of adhering to an atheistic, anti-metaphysical, “Platonic political philosophy.”
Chapter 5: “Strauss’s Esoteric Farabi”

Chapter 5 serves the exegetical purpose of describing the nexus between Strauss’s interpretation of Plato and Strauss’s account of Farabi. In order to outline the connection between these two readings, the Chapter documents some of the key aspects of Strauss’s interpretation of Plato. We then inspect a work written by Strauss on Farabi, a work that, importantly, predates Strauss’s American-era writings on Plato. The Chapter concludes by questioning the interpretation of Farabi that Strauss provides. I argue that Strauss is not justified in asserting that Farabi’s esoteric doctrine can be found within a single text, and that Strauss’s misreading of Farabi casts doubt on Strauss’s claims about a medieval “Platonic political philosophy.”

Chapter 6: “Farabi’s Metaphysics”

In Chapter 6, we explore several questions raised by Strauss’s account of Farabi, including whether Farabi disbelieved in an afterlife, whether Farabi’s Neoplatonic metaphysics were exoteric, and whether Farabi believed that Thrasymachus – a character who endorses questionable opinions in Plato’s Republic, including the view that “might makes right” – was truly one of Plato’s mouthpieces. The central argument in Chapter 6 is that while it is, as Strauss suggests, possible that Farabi disbelieved in Islamic and Platonic notions of an afterlife, it seems unlikely, given the evidence we have, that Farabi disbelieved – for the entirety of his career – in the possibility of a union with the divine. Similarly, I argue against Strauss’s claim that Farabi disbelieved in the possibility of metaphysical knowledge.

Chapter 7: “Conclusion”

The thesis concludes with a controversial claim: given the censure Strauss’s reading of medieval Islamic philosophy has received, scholars must be receptive to the possibility that Strauss “wilfully” misrepresents other thinkers. I argue that, if Strauss’s philosophy is fundamentally Nietzschean in its orientation – if Strauss does believe that the “truth” is deadly, and that God and the possibility of metaphysics must be rejected – then any political program we find in Strauss’s works must be understood as a form of poetry. We conclude, then, by considering the possibility that Strauss’s philosophical and political enterprise is itself a “noble lie.”
As noted in Chapter 1, there is, in the Anglo-sphere, very little scholarship dedicated to exploring Strauss’s work on medieval Islamic philosophy.1 However, in the German-sphere of Strauss scholarship there is one in-depth study: Georges Tamer’s *Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne: Das Verhältnis von Leo Strauss zu Alfarabi, Avicenna und Averroes* (2001).2 Tamer’s work brings important interpretive issues concerning Strauss’s reading of medieval Islamic philosophy to the fore. The principal aim of this Chapter is to examine and critically engage with the essential features of Tamer’s reading, including his criticisms of Strauss. Several of the themes raised will be explored in greater detail in Chapters 3-7.

As a preliminary point, it must be emphasized that Strauss’s main claims regarding medieval Islamic philosophy were offered in the 1930s and 1940s, particularly with the publication of *Philosophie und Gesetz: Beiträge zum Verständnis Maimunis und seiner Vorläufer* (1935) and “Farabi’s *Plato*” (1945). Between the release of these publications and Strauss’s death in 1973, Strauss had around three decades to revisit and revise his main theses about medieval Islamic philosophy. Yet, to a large extent, Strauss never did.3 In Tamer’s study, what he locates as the

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1 Concerning Strauss and medieval Islamic philosophy, see Joel Kraemer, “The Medieval Arabic Enlightenment” in *CCLS*, 137-70; Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*. See also the sources cited in the Introduction to Chapter 1 of the present thesis. Note that the majority of these works treat the theme of Islamic philosophy in Strauss’s work only in passing. Furthermore, the problem with the majority of scholarship on Strauss is that it is often characterised by deference or hostility.

2 Trans. *Leo Strauss and the Crisis of Modernity: The Relationship of Leo Strauss to Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes*. Tamer’s text is referenced below as *LSCM*. As mentioned, Tamer’s work is in German and has not yet been made available to the Anglo-sphere of Strauss scholarship. This means that many of the themes Tamer raises have not been comprehensively discussed in the Anglo-sphere.

3 Regarding Strauss’s “early” and “mature” reading of medieval Islamic philosophy, see the detailed discussion in Chapter 3 of the present thesis. Strauss did, to some extent, “revise” his work. Around the late 1930s to early 1940s – around the time Strauss discovered what he believed was Maimonides’s esoteric doctrine – Strauss stopped interpreting medieval philosophers (including Farabi and Maimonides) as genuine believers in religious or Platonic metaphysical doctrines. Concerning this topic, see Lampert “Strauss’s Recovery of Esotericism” in *CCLS*, 63-92; Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, 69. The criticisms Tamer makes of Strauss relates to theses Strauss could have easily revisited yet never did. As argued in the present thesis, Strauss continued to reiterate claims regarding medieval Islamic philosophy that, as Tamer notes, are problematic, if not erroneous.
shortcomings, or problematic aspects, of Strauss’s works on medieval Islamic philosophy are interpreted as genuine errors. On Tamer’s reading, Strauss failed to realize that several of his claims about medieval Islamic philosophy were weak, and he therefore never corrected those inaccuracies. Tamer’s approach is certainly a valid way of understanding why there are so many controversial aspects of Strauss’s reading of medieval Islamic philosophy (these controversial aspects will be explored below and in Chapter 3-7). Perhaps Strauss’s most disputable claims about medieval philosophy were the result of him genuinely misreading texts due to his exoteric/esoteric distinction; perhaps Strauss was led, due to his hermeneutics, to read texts in ways medieval authors never intended. As mentioned, one might interpret Strauss in this way. However, in contrast to Tamer’s approach, I believe that the controversial aspects of Strauss’s reading of medieval philosophy point to a troubling question. After all, Strauss is not a typical author. Our question is this: would a scholar of Strauss’s caliber make simple interpretive mistakes, and completely fail to recognize the improbable nature of some of the claims he offers? Is it possible that the influence Nietzsche had on Strauss needs to be considered? In this Chapter, I will argue that if the controversial aspects of Strauss’s reading of medieval philosophy are considered in the context of Strauss’s Nietzschean sympathies then we have a reason to ask whether Strauss’s most disputable claims represent either a (i) deliberate attempt to align medieval philosophers with Nietzsche or (ii) an unwitting, accidental, discovery of Nietzschean views in medieval philosophy. Position (ii) requires believing that Strauss’s hermeneutics, combined with his Nietzschean sympathies, led him to unknowingly impose his Nietzschean views on to medieval philosophy. On this reading, Strauss found, due to his hermeneutics, support for his own Nietzschean position in premodern texts. I believe that when we take into account Strauss’s Nietzschean opposition to modernity (documented below in Section 2.1), we must be more receptive to position (i).

The issue here relates, then, to being cognizant of Strauss’s political project when reading his works. If we are to truly grapple with Strauss’s thought and project we must keep in mind, from the very beginning, Strauss’s contentious and well-known claim that seemingly minor mistakes by

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4 I agree here with Tamer that there are several difficulties with Strauss’s reading of medieval Islamic philosophy; these issues are documented in the present Chapter and Chapters 3-6. Strauss’s students acknowledge that aspects of Strauss’s works are problematic insofar as his readings often diverge widely from standard interpretations of philosophers. See, for example, Bloom’s description (“Leo Strauss: September 20, 1899-October 18, 1973,” 386) that works composed after Strauss discovered esotericism were “considered perverse and caused anger.” The Zuckert’s (The Truth about Leo Strauss, 2) similarly note that Strauss “was often dismissed by fellow scholars as an eccentric or, worse, as a willful and distortive interpreter of the philosophic tradition.” The hermeneutic methods Strauss utilises when interpreting Avicenna are discussed below (Section 2.3). Strauss’s treatment of Farabi, and the falasifa generally, is dealt with in Chapters 3-6. Concerning the influence of Nietzsche on Strauss, see his letter to Karl Löwith, June 23, 1935 (cited in Chapter 1 and below in Section 2.1). See also the sources mentioned in Chapter 1, note 33, and the discussion in Chapter 7 of the present thesis.
exoteric writers are significant, and often serve to reflect their larger intentions; that is, mistakes can reveal an author's true political project. Questions about Strauss’s writing style – particularly whether he purposely distorts medieval philosophy – are rendered all the more important when we consider one of Tamer’s crucial observations: Leo Strauss has a political project that involves the “instrumentalization” of religion. In concluding his study of Strauss, Tamer contends that “Strauss’s purpose certainly is not rule by religion, but rather the instrumentalization of religion for the purpose of establishing the best political order.” Strauss’s “conception of religion was intended,” Tamer notes, “to keep it acceptable to philosophers” on the basis that religion (understood primarily as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) is allegedly necessary for social and political reasons. Tamer seems right to attribute such an ambitious plan to Strauss; as noted in Chapter 1,

5 As noted in Chapter 1, Strauss describes the phenomenon of intentional spelling “mistakes” as a method of communicating an esoteric teaching; spelling “mistakes” are made deliberately in order to indicate a point of fundamental importance. See PAW, 30: “If a master of the art of writing commits such blunders as would shame an intelligent high school boy, it is reasonable to assume that they are intentional, especially if the author discusses, however incidentally, the possibility of intentional blunders in writing.” Strauss pays attention to what he considers Machiavelli’s “blunders” (see TOM, 35-7), Maimonides’s “deliberate contradictions” (“How to Study Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise,” PAW, 181), and Farabi’s deliberate silences (see “How Farahi read Plato’s Laws,” WPP, 138-9, 147-8, 150). As mentioned in Chapter 1 of the present thesis (note 100) and in the commentary above, there are two ways Strauss might be interpreted. We might read Strauss as making genuine errors with ancient and medieval philosophy, i.e., as offering broad, unsubstantiated claims that perhaps reflect Strauss unwittingly projecting his own Nietzschean sympathies. Alternatively, and far more critically, we can read Strauss as deliberately providing falsified accounts of ancient and medieval philosophies in order to help validate a Nietzschean philosophical-political teaching.

6 Tamer, LYCM, 329.

7 Ibid., 327.

8 I note the Abrahamic faiths as those are Strauss’s primary concern at PAW, chapter 1; the context is the falsaifa and “Platonic political philosophy.” Strauss’s comments at JPCM, 112 do not suggest in-depth knowledge of Hinduism, and I have found few references to Buddhism in Strauss’s texts.

9 Tamer, LYCM, 324: “Strauss’s analysis of Spinoza’s critique of religion brings to light Averroistic elements that apparently influenced Spinoza as much as they did the young Strauss. Spinoza agrees with Averroes on the political function of religion, that it is a necessary tool to control the masses who are dominated not by reason but by affect. Since religion operates with sanctions, it guarantees social stability and thus becomes important politically. As a constitutive factor of social order, religion to Strauss is a postulate of reason.” At ibid., 329: “Strauss’s political interpretation of religion shows structural similarities to the interpretation of fundamentalists who hold religion and state politics to be inseparable, and who deal with the problems of modernity through idealizing the past and emphasizing the role of religion in the life of man and society. Islamic fundamentalists aim to establish a state on the basis of šari‘ah. Strauss’s purpose certainly is not rule by religion, but rather the instrumentalization of religion for the purpose of establishing the best political order, with its theoretical principles drafted by political philosophy. Nevertheless, his evaluation of religion as a political instrument has a functional similarity to the fundamentalist position and risks being usurped by it.” See note 120 below for the difference between Strauss and “fundamentalists.”
Strauss’s works appear to point towards the possibility of religion being revivified in modernity. As I argue in Section 2.1 below, Strauss appears to be an atheist endorsing religion for political reasons. Importantly, as we will see in Chapters 4 - 6 of the present thesis, Strauss discards the essential connection between metaphysics and theology that many ancient and medieval philosophers believed in: Strauss appears to overlook the metaphysics and theology of the premoderns entirely. If it is possible that this atheistic endorsement of religion is indeed Strauss’s plan, then we must ask whether the problematic aspects of Strauss’s reading of medieval Islamic philosophy – what we might perceive as Strauss’s “mistakes” – are not simple errors, but a means of endorsing a political teaching concerning religion and philosophy “between the lines” by appealing to the authority of several prominent medieval philosophers. As argued below and in subsequent Chapters, I consider the controversial aspects of Strauss’s reading of medieval philosophy – the aspects that Tamer’s work lucidly emphasizes – to reflect an attempt by Strauss to ally medieval philosophers with the Nietzschean prejudices and ideas Strauss appears entirely sympathetic towards.

This marks, then, a substantial difference between Tamer’s approach to Strauss and my own: Tamer views the controversial features of Strauss’s reading of medieval Islamic philosophy as genuine errors on Strauss’s behalf, genuine hermeneutic flights of fancy. I am proposing that Strauss’s most controversial claims may well be related to his political intentions. As noted below, I believe Strauss’s own comments on interpreting exoteric philosophical works provide us with clear reasons to be sceptical when we find what appear to be problematic claims in his texts. And, as mentioned, I believe it is also vital to keep in mind the influence Nietzsche’s philosophy had on Strauss, and consider Strauss’s works on medieval Islamic philosophy in the context of his Nietzschean sympathies.

A particularly Nietzschean element of Strauss’s thought is his assessment of modernity. Accordingly, prior to examining some of Tamer’s main contentions, and in order to contextualize the principal arguments of this Chapter and the rest of the thesis, some words are necessary regarding Strauss’s criticisms of modernity.

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Tamer describes Drury’s and Burnyeat’s readings of Strauss, readings that note Strauss’s respect for Nietzsche, as “sceptical” interpretations (LSCM, 323). At ibid., 327-8, Tamer notes a difference between Strauss and Nietzsche. Tamer does not seem to explicitly interpret Strauss as an exoteric writer, although, as noted below, he suggests Strauss writes in this fashion.
2.1 Strauss's agreement with the Nietzschean critique of modernity

In this Section, I outline Strauss’s fundamental agreement with Nietzsche’s evaluation of modernity. I argue that understanding the Nietzschean elements of Strauss’s thought helps prevent us from interpreting Strauss – in my view, entirely incorrectly – as a Platonic dualist, conservative advocate of natural right, or as a “Jewish” philosopher.

Strauss’s Nietzschean sympathies are directly witnessed in On Tyranny. In that text, Strauss clearly objects to a culturally homogenous, open, world-state, believing that this would mark, as Nietzsche had argued, the advent of the “last men,” understood as lazy and self-satisfied human beings who all want, and who all are, the same. Strauss’s hostility to such a world-state is seen as he debates the Hegelian-Marxist Alexandre Kojève. Strauss writes:

To borrow an expression which someone used recently in the House of Lords on a similar occasion, the citizens of the final state are only so-called workers, workers by courtesy. “There is no longer fight nor work. History has come to its end. There is nothing more to do” (pp. 385, 114). This end of History would be most exhilarating but for the fact that, according to Kojève, it is the participation in bloody political struggles as well as in real work or, generally expressed, the negating action, which raises man above the brutes (pp. 490-492, 560, 378n.). The state through which man is said to become reasonably satisfied is, then, the state in which the basis of man’s humanity withers away, or in which man loses his humanity. It is the state of Nietzsche’s “last man.”

Strauss’s point is that the utopian society described by Kojève requires that no critical differences between human beings exist. For this “universal and homogenous” world-state to be actualized, differences between humans must be neutralized, if not expunged. In such a homogenous, egalitarian, state, there would be, accordingly, nothing to fight for. As Strauss notes, there would be no need for “bloody political struggles” or “negating action.” In Kojève’s words, in the

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11 OT, 208; Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, 9-10.

12 Strauss is quoting here from Kojève’s Introduction à la lecture de Hegel.

13 OT, 208. Yet if Strauss accepts Nietzsche’s “deadly” truths (see Chapter 1, note 33), then there is no “cardinal distinction between man and animal.” Whatever human beings do cannot change this “deadly” truth.

14 Although Strauss believes that, even if the end-state were to come into existence, some would oppose it. See OT, 207-8.
homogenous world-state, “wars and revolutions are henceforth impossible.” Kojève draws on Marx and Engels’s vision of an egalitarian state in which no human being has “an exclusive sphere of activity but can become accomplished in any branch he wishes.” In this egalitarian state, according to Marx and Engels, one can “hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, [and] criticize after dinner.”

Concerning the homogenous world-state, Straus clearly aligns himself with Nietzsche. As mentioned above, Nietzsche characterizes the inhabitant of a state of radical freedom and equality a “last man,” a resident in a state in which life has no meaning. Nietzsche compares the “last men” to dull and lazy “flea-beetles.” In accordance with Nietzsche’s critique, Strauss views the Marxist-Kojèvian world-state as characterized by total meaninglessness. As Strauss contends in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*:

Regardless of whether or not Nietzsche knew of Marx’s writings, he questioned the communist vision more radically than anyone else. He identified the man of the communist world society as the last man, as man in his utmost degradation: without “specialization,” without the harshness of limitation, human nobility and greatness are impossible.

Strauss appears to share Nietzsche’s view that the homogenous world-state necessarily means the end of human greatness and nobility. He certainly never censures Nietzsche, or Kojève, for these strong and contentious claims. Importantly, Strauss also agrees with Kojève that the world-state

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15 Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, quoted at OT, 208. In the English translation, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (ed. Bloom), Kojève’s statement appears at 158-9n6 [Kojève’s italics]: “What disappears is Man properly so-called – that is, Action negating the given, and Error, or in general, the Subject opposed to the Object. In point of fact, the end of human Time or History – that is, the definitive annihilation of Man properly so-called or of the free and historical Individual – means quite simply the cessation of Action in the full sense of the term. Practically, this means: the disappearance of wars and bloody revolutions. And also the disappearance of Philosophy; for since Man himself no longer changes essentially, there is no longer any reason to change the (true) principles which are at the basis of his understanding of the World and of himself. But all the rest can be preserved indefinitely; art, love, play, etc., etc., in short, everything that makes Man happy.” See note 69 below concerning Schmitt’s and Strauss’s disparagement of a world of “entertainment.”


19 *SPPP*, 32.
means “the end of philosophy on earth”\footnote{OT, 211 [italics added]: “It seems reasonable to assume that only a few, if any, citizens of the universal and homogenous state will be wise. But neither the wise men nor the philosophers will desire to rule. For this reason alone, to say nothing of others, the Chief of the universal and homogenous state, or the Universal and Final Tyrant will be an unwise man as Kojève seems to take for granted. \textit{To retain his power, he will be forced to suppress every activity that might lead people into doubt of the essential soundness of the universal and homogenous state: he must suppress philosophy as an attempt to corrupt the young.}” Compare with \textit{LAM}, 19-20: “Modern philosophy comes into being when the end of philosophy is identified with the end which is capable of being actually pursued by all men. More precisely, philosophy is now asserted to be essentially subservient to the end which is capable of being actually pursued by all men. We have suggested that the ultimate justification for the distinction between gentlemen and nongentlemen is the distinction between philosophers and nonphilosophers. If this is true, it follows that by causing the purpose of the philosophers, or more generally the purpose which essentially transcends society, to collapse into the purpose of the nonphilosophers, one causes the purpose of the gentlemen to collapse into the purpose of the nongentlemen. In this respect, the modern conception of philosophy is fundamentally democratic. The end of philosophy is now no longer what one may call disinterested contemplation of the eternal, but the relief of man’s estate.” I believe that, in Strauss’s view, the end-state represents ultimate “relief” – \textit{i.e.}, protection from nature and from limitations – insofar as the citizens of the end-state are free to do as they please. See notes 15 and 69.} for the reason that there is nothing left to think critically about or to dispute.\footnote{While Strauss remains critical of Marxism for these reasons, Strauss, like Heidegger, views communism and modern democracy as opposing sides of the same coin: both will result in cultural homogenization as both political models are fundamentally egalitarian, fundamentally atheistic, and fundamentally geared towards satisfying the majority. See \textit{IPP}, 98. At \textit{WPP}, 38: “Beings who look down on us from a star might find that the difference between democracy and communism is not quite as great as it appears to be when one considers exclusively the doubtless very important question of civil and political liberties, although only people of exceptional levity or irresponsibility say that the difference between communism and democracy is negligible in the last analysis.” Note Heidegger’s claims at \textit{Introduction to Metaphysics}, 40: “This Europe, in its unholy blindness always on the point of cutting its own throat, lies today in the great pincers between Russia on the one side and America on the other. Russia and America, seen metaphysically, are both the same: the same hopeless frenzy of unchained technology and the rootless organization of the average man.” See also Strauss’s comments on Heidegger at \textit{RCPR}, 41-2.} There can be no doubt that the effects of Nietzsche’s influence on Strauss are witnessed in \textit{On Tyranny}, and validate a statement Strauss makes in private correspondence to Karl Löwith. “Nietzsche so dominated and bewitched me between my 22nd and 30th years,” Strauss writes, “that I literally believed everything that I understood of him.”\footnote{Letter from Strauss to Löwith, 23 June, 1935, printed in \textit{JPCM}, 63; \textit{Gesammelte Schriften} 3, 648. \textit{On Tyranny} was first published in 1948 when Strauss was in his late 40s, and there can be no doubt that Strauss continued to respect Nietzsche, particularly considering Strauss’s complementary “Note on the Plan of Nietzsche’s \textit{Beyond Good and Evil}.” Although he notes Nietzsche’s “enduring influence” on Strauss (\textit{The German Stranger}, 168), Altman (\textit{ibid.}, 161) argues that it was around the age of thirty that Strauss was inspired by the philosopher Strauss would label “the only great thinker in our time”: the “radical historicist” (\textit{RCPR}, 29) Martin Heidegger. Altman raises a noteworthy point at \textit{The German Stranger}, 153: Strauss considers Heidegger’s philosophic connection to Nazism clear yet deems Heidegger “the only great thinker in our time” (see \textit{RCPR}, 30). Burneyat makes the same point; see note 36 below. Strauss writes to Löwith that he “believed” in Nietzsche until his 30th year. As Altman notes, Strauss’s 30th year was 1929, the year of the Cassirer-Heidegger encounter at Davos. Strauss is believed to have attended the Davos Hochschule (he mentions it...}
Several scholars, including Rosen, Meier, Lampert, C. & M. Zuckert, and Drury, all note the importance Nietzsche’s criticism of modernity has for Strauss. Strauss’s acceptance of Nietzsche’s radically reactionary aristocratic position aligns with the implicit elitism Strauss’s endorsement of exoteric writing carries (as documented in Chapter 1) and with Strauss’s criticisms of the European Enlightenment more generally. Strauss’s agreement with Nietzsche’s critique of modernity appears relatively clear (there is little evidence that Strauss agrees with the ideas of secularism, egalitarianism, liberalism, and the morality of “the large majority”) and this fact raises an important question. As outlined in the present thesis, Strauss attributes to medieval philosophers a disingenuous endorsement of religion. Yet is this (the need for philosophers to disingenuously endorse religion) in-fact Strauss’s own view, a view deliberately, but falsely, attributed to other, earlier thinkers? There are clear reasons why a political theorist living in a liberal democracy – a political theorist sympathetic to Nietzsche’s assessment of modernity – would wish to make such claims discreetly. Some readers, if not the majority, would be deeply offended by the idea that religious beliefs, though regarded as untrue, are to be used for political and social purposes. (As noted in Chapter 1, the counter-Enlightenment tone of Strauss’s works was what initiated the first major criticisms against him.) There are solid reasons why Strauss would support the preservation of religion, even on atheistic grounds. Strauss writes in private correspondence to Kojève, concerning Kojève’s Introduction à la lecture de Hegel, that:

[T]he end state owes its privilege to wisdom, to the rule of wisdom, to the popularization of wisdom (414a., 385, 387), and not to its universality and homogeneity as such. But if wisdom

23 Rosen, Hermeneutics as Politics, 137; Meier, Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss, 47; Lampert, Leo Strauss and Nietzsche, 73-4; C. & M. Zuckert, The Truth about Leo Strauss, 36; Drury, The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss, 176-7; Drury, Leo Strauss and the American Right, 17, 66-7, 69-72, 75-6.

24 For Nietzsche’s criticism of the Enlightenment, see Will to Power, aph. 943. Describing “what is noble,” Nietzsche writes: “Disgust with the demagogic, for the “enlightenment,” for “being cozy,” for plebeian familiarity.” See also Nietzsche’s criticisms of the French revolution at Beyond Good and Evil, aph. 38, 46. Note Nietzsche’s endorsement of exoteric writing at ibid., aph. 30, 40.

25 I.e., Strauss rejects, like Nietzsche, the idea of a universal morality, or judging human beings by the same standards: the philosophers are different. See SPPP, 183 and Lampert’s commentary at Leo Strauss and Nietzsche, 73-4.

26 See Chapter 1, note 2. Refer also to Burnyeat’s criticism of Strauss at note 36 below.

27 References to Kojève’s Introduction à la lecture de Hegel.
does not become common property, the mass remains in the thrall of religion, that is to say of an essentially particular and particularizing power (Christianity, Islam, Judaism…), which means that the decline and fall of the universal-homogenous state is unavoidable.  

Strauss asserts that the universal and homogenous world-state cannot be actualized if “wisdom does not become common property” and if the “mass remains in the thrall of religion.” Strauss suggests that “wisdom” involves moving away from the “particular and particularizing power” of religion. Strauss implies, then, a connection between “wisdom” and atheism; that, by virtue of their wisdom, philosophers will necessarily be atheists. In the same letter to Kojève, Strauss reiterates his Nietzschean criticism of the homogenous state:

If I had more time than I have, I could state more fully, and presumably more clearly, why I am not convinced that the End State as you [i.e. Kojève] describe it, can be either the rational or the merely-factual satisfaction of human beings. For the sake of simplicity I refer today to Nietzsche’s “last men.”

In a later letter, Kojève asks Strauss why, when giving a lecture on modern political philosophy, Strauss omitted references to, and was thereby silent on, Hegel and Marx. “But what about a certain Hegel,” asks Kojève, “who spoke of the end-state and absolute knowledge, and the people called Marx, etc., who actualize it?” Strauss’s response concerning his omission is emphatic:

My general reaction to your statements is that we are poles apart. The root of my question is I suppose the same as it always was, that you are convinced of the truth of Hegel (Marx) and I am not. You have never given me an answer to my questions: a) was Nietzsche not right in describing the Hegelian-Marxian end as “the last man”? and b) what would you put into the place of Hegel’s philosophy of nature?

28 Strauss to Kojève, 22 August 1948, printed in OT, 238.

29 OT, 239.

30 Kojève to Strauss, 1 July, 1957, printed in OT, 290. The lecture Kojève refers to is “What is Political Philosophy,” delivered by Strauss in 1954-55 at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. See OT, 323n34.

31 OT, 290 [underline in original].

32 OT, 291. For Strauss’s criticism of Hegel, see ibid., 192: “Hegel’s teaching is much more sophisticated than Hobbes’, but it is as much a construction as the latter. Both doctrines construct human society by starting from the untrue assumption that man as man is thinkable as a being that lacks awareness of sacred restraints or as a being that is guided by nothing but a desire for recognition.”
This much can be said with relative certainty. Strauss’s comments in *On Tyranny, Studies in Platonist Political Philosophy*, and his private letters, all draw attention to his opposition to the idea of a homogenous, egalitarian, world-state. If Strauss believes religion has the power to preserve differences between human beings, and that such preservation is necessary in order for philosophy and human greatness to remain possible, then Strauss has obvious reasons to endorse the idea that philosophers should, albeit from an atheistic platform, support religion. If this view of Strauss is accepted, we can characterize Strauss’s position as follows. First, Strauss considers religion necessary as it serves as a basis for public morality and therefore social and political order. As documented in Chapters 3-6, this is the position that Strauss constantly attributes to medieval philosophers and one that he does not criticize or dispute. Second, religion preserves differences between human beings (it has, as Strauss writes to Kojève, an “essentially particular and particularizing power”), thus guarding against the conditions that will make the homogeneous world-state possible. The important point here is that, for Strauss, *the survival of philosophy depends upon the survival of religion*: philosophy requires that there are meaningful differences between human beings, and therefore meaningful questions about the right way of life, the best political order, and so on. The homogenous world-state means the death of philosophy insofar as it means, as Strauss writes, “the rule of wisdom,” that is, that we collectively believe that “wisdom” has been attained. The world-state presupposes that all fundamental questions have been answered. Relatedly, *human greatness depends, for Strauss, on the possibility of differences being recognized and valued*: if human beings are all considered the same – as would be the case in an egalitarian and homogenous state – there could not be “great” human beings insofar as “greatness” means standing apart from the mass. “Greatness” requires a hierarchy of human types or, in Nietzschean terms, the possibility of rank-ordering.

For Strauss to make these arguments openly and directly in a secular, egalitarian, liberal, society would, as mentioned, be strategically questionable, particularly given Nietzsche’s reputation directly after the Second World War. A better way to make these arguments would be, surely, to attribute them to a series of earlier “Platonists”33 or to a “wise man.”34 We must, therefore, keep in mind one of the interpretative options available to us, as outlined above. As Strauss is committed to the Nietzschean critique of modernity, does he utilize the idea of exoteric/esoteric writing to deliberately *fabricate* an “esoteric” doctrine, a doctrine falsely attributed to medieval philosophers? This fabricated doctrine suggests religion will always be

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33 Note Strauss’s claim at “Farabi’s Plato,” 21: Farabi is a “true Platonist.” Note also the connection Strauss suggests between the *falasifa* and Plato at *PAW*, chapter 1. This connection is discussed in Chapter 3 of the present thesis.

34 Strauss often uses this term. It is regularly used in the context of philosophers he contends are exoteric writers. See, e.g., *OT*, 86; *CM*, 109; *NRH*, 142; *RCPR*, 198-9; *TOM*, 30; *SPPP*, 200.
necessary for the masses, the non-philosophers, as the truth is “deadly.” According to this potentially Nietzschean reading of the history of philosophy, the best philosophers always recognised these truths about political life: Nietzsche was simply the one who, for whatever reason, declared these truths more openly.

As noted, Tamer’s contention is that the debatable aspects found in Strauss’s reading of medieval Islamic philosophy, including what might be considered Strauss’s erroneous assumptions, reflect an oversight – a genuinely accidental misinterpretation – on Strauss’s behalf. Tamer also argues that reading Strauss as an “esoteric writer whose teachings hide atheism and destructive political ideas” is just one approach to Strauss that “could be characterized as reductionist and unsatisfactory.”35 Tamer identifies Drury’s and Burnyeat’s works as paradigmatic of this “sceptical” interpretation. These are readings that strongly emphasise Strauss’s proximity to Nietzsche (Drury) or note Strauss’s “deep respect” and “particularly magnanimous” regard for Nietzsche and Heidegger (Burnyeat).36

In Section 2.2, I will argue that although Tamer mentions three separate “currents” in Strauss scholarship – Strauss as (a) “Jewish” philosopher, (b) “Platonist,” and (c) “esoteric writer” – these currents align on several fundamental issues. As detailed below, a number of Strauss’s readers note his atheism and exoteric writing style. Furthermore, several readers note

35 Tamer, LSCM, 323. Tamer continues that the reason for his claim is: “insofar as they [ie. the three currents of interpretation he identifies, outlined below] tend to marginalize, or rather exclude, the palpable influence of the medieval Islamic philosophers – Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes – on Leo Strauss’s thought.”

36 Drury does not contend that Strauss is a nihilist on the grounds that Strauss “is not indifferent to all ends” and “he regards a certain end or a certain way of life as by nature superior to others” (The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss, 167). Yet Drury does (ibid) admit, seemingly contradictorily, that there are no “inviolable moral principles for Strauss,” thereby suggesting that Strauss’s view does align with textbook definitions of nihilism, i.e., a rejection of religious/moral principles and viewing life as ultimately meaningless. As Lampert asserts (see Chapter 1, note 33), Strauss offers no counter-argument to this position. Importantly, Drury claims that Strauss views the philosopher as Nietzsche did: as an “interpreter” of life, or of the “non-existent” text. Strauss “owes more to Nietzsche than to any other philosopher.” Ibid., 176. Burnyeat (“Sphinx Without a Secret,” 34-5) notes the tension between philosophy and religion for Strauss, but believes Strauss truly considered Nietzsche “Respected Enemy Number One” as Nietzsche is, for Strauss, the source of “radical historicism.” While I disagree with this aspect of Burnyeat’s reading, Burnyeat is justified in his criticisms of Strauss’s epistemology. Burnyeat notes that, given Strauss reads Plato without the Forms, Strauss’s Plato lacks an objective basis for teaching the “gentlemen” (ibid., 32); this claim is considered in Chapter 5, Section 1. Note also Burnyeat’s final claim: “The real issue is Strauss’s ruthless determination to use these old books to “moderate” that idealistic longing for justice, at home and abroad, which grew in the puppies of America during the years when Strauss was teaching and writing” (ibid., 36). Burnyeat also mentions Strauss’s “particularly magnanimous” respect for Heidegger (ibid., 34) and is suspicious of Strauss praising a thinker who, as Strauss informs us, was connected intimately with Nazism. Concerning Strauss’s atheism and treatment of religion, see ibid., 34: “For he [ie. Strauss] agreed with what he supposed to be Maimonides’ unobvious meaning, that no philosopher can believe in religion but it is most necessary that nonphilosophers do so.”
Strauss’s proximity to Nietzsche. My contention, distilled to its essence, is that by viewing Strauss as close to Nietzsche, particularly in terms of accepting that the philosophic truth is “deadly”37 and that Nietzsche’s aristocratic critique of modernity is fundamentally sound, we can understand why Strauss endorses the social and political use of religion and why he has reasons to attribute this view to medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers. That is, as Strauss’s political program is counter-Enlightenment and anti-liberal, Strauss has solid reasons for utilising medieval Islamic philosophers as vehicles, or “mouthpieces,” for his project.38 As argued below, the problem with viewing what appear as erroneous assumptions from Strauss as genuine oversights (or mistakes), as Tamer does, is that it seems contrary to Strauss’s hermeneutics. As Strauss writes in the context of an author he considers an expert in exoteric writing:

By committing a manifest blunder when speaking of such manifest blunders as conceal fraud, he [i.e. Machiavelli] gives us to understand that there is deception beneath his own manifest blunders, or that his manifest blunders are intentional: they indicate his intention.39

Strauss makes similar remarks, concerning an author’s silences, mistakes, or enigmatic comments, when writing on Farabi, Maimonides, and Nietzsche.40 Does Strauss’s hermeneutic advice apply to reading Strauss himself? In contrast to Tamer’s reading, I will argue that it does.

2.2 Currents in contemporary Strauss scholarship as identified by Tamer

Tamer describes “three main currents” in interpretations of Strauss.41 These are, first, Strauss as Jewish thinker, a position represented by Ken Hart Green.42 This interpretation presents Strauss

37 See Chapter 1, notes 33, 49, 52.

38 On “mouthpieces,” see P.AW, 36; TOM, 42, 137, 139; OT, 30; CM, 133. My claim here aligns with Drury, who writes that “the ancients to whom Strauss appeals have been transfigured by Nietzsche” (The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss, 170). Furthermore: “Those who consider Strauss’s exposition of the esoteric style of writing to be a hermeneutic for the study of ancient texts, not surprisingly, complain about the arbitrariness of this hermeneutic. Strauss’s penchant for arriving at conclusions based on Machiavelli’s silences lead his critics to maintain that Strauss asserts whatever he pleases” (ibid., 114). On the importance of Strauss’s silences, see note 109 below.

39 TOM, 35-6.

40 See note 5 above. Concerning Nietzsche, Strauss notes Nietzsche’s “graceful subtlety” “as regards the art of silence” at SPPP, 175, and Nietzsche’s deliberately “enigmatic” comments in Beyond Good and Evil (ibid., 177). Strauss also notes (IPP, 98) that Nietzsche’s comments on political action are “much more indefinite and vague than what Marx says.”
as a “Jewish philosopher dealing mainly with Jewish themes.” The second current is Strauss as a “Platonic political philosopher,” a thinker “concerned with the universal political problem of justice, eager to renew the discussion of the best political order.” This position is, Tamer writes, represented by Thomas Pangle and Heinrich Meier. Strauss’s critics, Shadia Drury and Myles Burnyeat, epitomize the third current Tamer identifies. These scholars “interpret Strauss sceptically,” and assert Strauss is an “esoteric writer” who, as mentioned above, uses exoteric/esoteric writing to “hide atheism and destructive political ideas.” Tamer believes all of these positions “could be characterized as reductionist and unsatisfactory” as they do not adequately emphasize how medieval Islamic philosophy influenced Strauss.

Tamer’s text might be read as implying that some of the major interpretations of Strauss – as Jewish thinker, as Platonist, and as esoteric writer – are notably different. This would, however, be a questionable view to take. As discussed below, all the scholars that Tamer refers to – Green, Pangle, Meier, Drury, and Burnyeat – interpret Strauss as an atheist (or at least suggest this reading), as having a political project, and as intellectually close to, or influenced by, Nietzsche. By highlighting, and understanding, the similarities we find in critical readings of Strauss, we can begin to understand the full dimensions of Strauss’s thought and project.

According to Tamer, the first current of Strauss scholarship, represented by Green, emphasises Strauss’s Judaism. While Green situates Strauss in the context of his Jewish heritage (thus presenting Strauss as a “Jewish thinker”), Green does not read Strauss as a believing Jew. Rather, in order to categorize Strauss, Green applies the term “cognitive theist.” In a footnote, Green explains what he means:

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41 Tamer, LSCM, 323.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 When, for example, Green names his text on Strauss Jew and Philosopher, but argues that Strauss is an atheist, Green must mean that Strauss is an ethnic, not a religious, Jew. Refer to note 121 below for Arendt’s assessment of Strauss as an “orthodox atheist.” For Strauss’s early endorsement of political Zionism, see Zank, Leo Strauss: The Early Writings and Sheppard, Leo Strauss and the Politics of Eshei.
48 Green, Jew and Philosopher, 27.
The term is adapted from E. D. Hirsch, Jr., who applied it, in reverse to Heidegger, whom he calls a “cognitive atheist.”

*Prima facie,* Green might be understood as suggesting that the principal difference between Strauss and Heidegger is that Heidegger is a philosopher who, based on perception (or, more generally, based on mental action of some sort), believes there is no God. Conversely, Strauss—based on what he perceives—is a philosopher who believes there is a God. Yet this is not what Green means. As he continues in the same footnote:

Strauss’s concern with “the whole” is itself already an expression of his “cognitive theism,” since the philosophic intuition represented by “a vision of the articulated whole,” whether “adequate” or not, is not the only or the necessary way in which the human or natural basis of philosophy has been postulated. Consider also that while “the ideas” may be a transitional pedagogical teaching to true and pure philosophizing, coloured by the theological teaching which they are meant to supersedes, and hence this teaching is not meant to be taken literally, nevertheless it is meant very seriously. For Strauss, as we also know, only the theological teachings give us our first access to “the articulated [or intelligible] whole” which philosophy is striving to know. Inasmuch as we do not achieve that complete knowledge of “the whole,” we are stranded in the transitional realm, which augments its value to us as the only unchanging reminder we possess of what we are striving for.50 [Green’s italics]

Three points might be extracted from Green’s analysis. The first is that, for Strauss, the philosophic quest, a concern with understanding “the whole,” is what comes initially. Green’s second point is that “philosophic intuition” leads the philosopher to question theological claims concerning “the whole” (presumably, for example, the biblical account of creation or humankind’s purpose). For Strauss, it is “theological teachings” that provide “first access” to the notion of “the whole,” even though the philosopher wants to understand “the whole” for his or her-self. This means that the philosopher either questions, or does not accept, theological teachings. The third point is that the Platonic Ideas (as metaphysical postulates) are not taken seriously; they are “not meant to be taken literally.” Strauss is not, on Green’s reading, a Platonic dualist; Strauss does not believe in Plato’s metaphysical Ideas or descriptions of the afterlife. The Platonic Ideas therefore constitute only a, so to speak, pedagogic middle ground. Based on Green’s analysis, the Platonic Ideas only seem to serve, for Strauss, the pedagogic function of allowing a philosopher to consider whether absolutes (such as “Goodness” and “Justice”) can

49 Ibid., 167n127.
50 Ibid.
exist independently of a creator God, or can exist, as with Plato’s philosophy, in a separate world or reality (we return to this theme in Chapter 5). Yet, just as the philosophic quest begins by contemplating the validity of theological teachings, the philosopher also comes to doubt the veracity of the doctrine of Ideas: the doctrine of Ideas is not, Green writes, accepted “literally.” Crucially, this leaves the philosopher with very little except for the “philosophic intuition” they began their quest with. As Green’s analysis suggests, and as discussed in Chapters 3-6, Strauss’s Platonism is entirely secular or “anti-metaphysical” insofar as Plato’s otherworldly doctrines – the Ideas and doctrine of immortal soul – are dismissed.

Tamer associates Green with a “Jewish” current of Strauss scholarship. However, if, as Green implies, Strauss understands the philosophic quest as essentially atheistic, how exactly is Strauss to be considered a “cognizing” theist or a particularly “Jewish” thinker? Given how Green describes Strauss’s account of philosophy, what precisely is “theistic” about Strauss’s outlook? Green acknowledges this problem:

Thus, the question may legitimately be asked: what remains of “theism” in Strauss’s notion? Is there any element of divine will or of personality possible in “the ideas” which we cognize? How then is God (“theism”) present? The soundest answer which we are bound to reach, if our original suggestion is correct is: God is “the whole” or “nature” – which we cannot fully comprehend – hence his Being is beyond our comprehension, although this is not necessarily willed. He is the merely intuited unity of “the whole” (whose “character” is “elusive” or “mysterious”), which is expressed imaginatively but truly by “theistic” religion, and especially by “monotheism.” [Green’s italics]

51 On this point, see *CM*, 118-9. Strauss complains that the doctrine of the Platonic Ideas or Forms, as “self-subsisting beings which subsist always,” is “very hard to understand” and “utterly incredible, not to say that it appears to be fantastic.” According to Strauss, “[n]o one has ever succeeded in giving a satisfactory or clear account of this doctrine of ideas.” Note the implicit criticism of Plato himself.

52 For a similar reading of Strauss, see Altman, *The German Stranger*. Altman also refers to Strauss’s Platonism as “secular” (*ibid.*, 152-3). Note Nietzsche’s characterization of his position at *The Gay Science*, 201: “we godless anti-metaphysicians.”

53 Following Rosen’s analysis, Green acknowledges that Strauss understands that we cannot access (or at least cannot “fully comprehend”) *physis* or “nature.” This is deeply problematic for a variety of reasons. Suffice it to say here that if this is the case, then Strauss’s frequent appeals to “nature” have to be rhetorical, as Rosen suggests. For Rosen’s views, see Chapter 1, note 33.

54 Green, *Jew and Philosopher*, 167-8n27.
It might be inferred that the point Green is making is that, in Strauss’s view, the existence of God is a possibility insofar as we cannot claim to adequately know whether or not there is a God (“we cannot fully comprehend” God, “the whole,” or “nature”). Based on what Green asserts, Strauss might be interpreted as a mystic (God is “intuited” but not “comprehended”), an agnostic (God’s “Being is beyond our comprehension”), a Spinozist (“God is “the whole” or “nature”), or perhaps an atheist.

In one of the final footnotes of his text, Green writes that he does not consider Strauss to be a theist, mystic, or agnostic: Strauss is, Green asserts, an atheist. According to Green, Strauss endorses religion simply on the grounds that it is “philosophically necessary”:

As previously argued, I believe Strauss’s position as a philosopher and Jew may be characterized as “cognitive theism.” This means that on the crucial issue of God, which preoccupied Strauss’s thought from his youth, Strauss may be called a “theologizing philosopher,” to employ a Maimonidean term. (Guide I, 68) I make this point emphatically only in order to differentiate him decisively from his dear friend Kojève. It is uncontroversial that Kojève announced his atheism, not just as deaf and blind rebellion, but as philosophically necessary. It is in this specific sense that I call Strauss a “theologizing philosopher,” precisely because he would in no way accept Kojève’s position on these matters as philosophically necessary.

Green claims that he refers to Strauss as a “cognitive theist” in order to differentiate Strauss from Kojève, an overt atheist. The difference between Strauss and Kojève amounts, then, to the lone fact that Strauss does not believe that announcing one’s atheism is “philosophically necessary.” “Cognitive theism” thus seems to imply that “theism” rests on existential commitment and that

55 Green, Jew and Philosopher, 237n1.

56 I would venture that for some non-religious readers, Green’s point will strike them as ridiculous. Green’s treatment of Strauss suggests that, having discovered Strauss’s atheism, one must go to extraordinary lengths not to reveal it. At Leo Strauss and Nietzsche, 143n18, Lampert writes that Green begins Jew and Philosopher by offering the view that Strauss “like his master Maimonides, held to the dual primacy of philosophy and Judaism.” Yet Lampert notes that later in Green’s study, Green reveals that he does, in-fact, consider Strauss an atheist, albeit one who did not believe in announcing his atheism. This leads Lampert to assert that “[e]vidently, one of the problems Strauss bequeathed to his followers was a problem of candor: how far should they go in helping Strauss preserve his cover once they concluded that he had labored to provide himself with one. Does loyalty require it? Does philosophy require it?”

57 Strauss makes several comments lauding existentialism. See, for example, “Relativism” and “Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism” in RCP, 13-46. At ibid., 24: “Existentialism, like many other movements, has a flabby periphery and a hard center. That hard core, or that thought to which alone existentialism owes its intellectual dignity, is the thought of Heidegger.”
advocating “theism,” or at least not harming “theism,” is “philosophically necessary.” This would support the thesis, noted above, that Strauss believes religion is necessary for moral, political, and social, reasons, and that philosophy itself is only possible if competing points of view, and competing truth claims, are offered by various cultures and religions. Indirectly, the points Green makes can be understood as confirming Strauss’s opposition to a homogenous world-state or, at the very least, as confirming that Strauss, despite being an atheist, believes religion is necessary as a moral-political framework.

Overall, what can be extracted from Green’s analysis is that the Jewish “current” of Strauss scholarship that Tamer refers to does not interpret Strauss as a believing Jew but, rather, suggests Strauss is an atheist. Strauss is an atheist who believes religion (or “theism”) is “philosophically necessary.” “Philosophically necessary” appears to mean that religion is viewed as politically necessary and, therefore, that a philosopher must exoterically defend established religion. As argued throughout the present thesis, the view that atheist philosophers rarely disclose their true beliefs is a view Strauss claims is supported in medieval Islamic philosophy. Given that Green suggests that Strauss himself does not believe that announcing one’s atheism is “philosophically necessary,” one is forced to ask whether Strauss attributes his own personal preference, or conviction, to the philosophers he writes on. It is crucial to emphasize that both the “Jewish” and the “sceptical” currents that Tamer refers to clearly overlap on the themes of Strauss’s atheism and Strauss’s view that religion has significant political utility. The “sceptics” Drury and Burnyeat – another “current” of Strauss interpretation that Tamer refers to – make precisely these points, and have been strongly censured by Strauss’s defenders for doing so. Furthermore, although Green does not read Strauss as a Nietzschean, Green does acknowledge that the matter of Nietzsche’s influence on Strauss is an interpretative grey area.

58 Is Strauss claiming that, as a member of a society, the philosopher is obligated, based on self-interest, to help stabilise society for his or her own safety and well-being? If this is so, then Strauss’s criticisms of Locke, liberalism, and the “acquisitive society” – as predicated on the desire for “comfortable self-preservation” (see JPPP, 212; NRH, 251) – seem to be inconsistent. Of course, one could assert that Strauss believes liberalism is only suitable for the few; the many are not, in Strauss’s view, capable of (or suited to) handling the freedom that liberalism provides.

59 Note Lampert’s claim at “Nietzsche’s Challenge to Philosophy in the Thought of Leo Strauss,” 589: “The true doctrine that God is dead was true for Strauss himself early in his career. Thanks to Heinrich Meier’s assiduous work as an editor we now have a clearer picture of Strauss as a young author: he was a public, crusading atheist.” In Strauss’s later works, he chooses to disguise his atheism for “philosophical” reasons, as Green suggests.

60 See Drury, The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss, 20-2. Concerning Burnyeat’s views, see note 36 above. For an example of a “Straussian” response to Drury’s and Burnyeat’s criticisms, see C. & M. Zuckert, The Truth about Leo Strauss.

61 Green (Jew and Philosopher, 184n14) notes the “tremendous influence that Nietzsche exercised on Strauss at a certain formative stage in his philosophical development. But the fundamental premises of Strauss and Nietzsche (on both the possibility of philosophy and on its possible rootedness in truth) are at odds with one another.” That said, Green later
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The extent of Strauss’s Nietzscheanism arises again when considering the second “current” of Strauss scholarship Tamer mentions. According to Tamer, Meier and Pangle “see Strauss as a Platonic political philosopher”62 rather than as a “Jewish” thinker. Yet the similarity between Green’s, Meier’s, and Pangle’s, interpretations is that each scholar suggests Strauss is an atheist and that Strauss is intellectually close, in some way, to Nietzsche. Meier describes Strauss’s view of religion as follows:

In view of the fact that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam agree in their negation of the philosophical life, the dispute that the competing traditions of revelation carry out with one another over the truth of faith and that can, of course, be carried out only regarding content, only on the doctrinal plane, is of subordinate significance for Strauss. It is of no concern to him as a philosopher.63 [Italics added]

This has obvious parallels with Green’s reading. Meier notes, I believe accurately, that the battle between “competing traditions of revelation” is of little importance to Strauss. Akin to Green’s work, Meier’s reading of Strauss suggests that Strauss’s “mature” decision is not to publicly reveal his atheism for political reasons.64 Meier writes:

contends (ibid., 200-1n13 [Green’s italics]): “As the debate with Kojève makes plain, Strauss believes in the actuality of truth, in the eternity of Being, and hence in the possibility of philosophy, all of which he strives to truly know or comprehend. In other words, at least as I read him, Strauss’s philosophic position, whether well-grounded or not, differs on the most fundamental points from the position of Nietzsche.” Given our context, what deserves attention here is Green’s doubts about his interpretation of Strauss when it comes to the matter of Nietzsche’s influence.

62 Tamer, LSCM, 323.

63 Meier, Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem, 20. It might be objected that Meier’s view does not suggest atheism. Meier’s contention, however, needs to be read in the context of Strauss’s frequent assertion that to admit the possibility of revelation is to admit that philosophy, as a way of life, might not be the “true account and the right way of life” (“1962 Introduction,” SCR, 29). If Strauss can put theological doctrines aside, then he sides with philosophy. By Strauss’s own definition, to be a philosopher means to be an atheist.

64 See Meier, Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss, 87n112. In a lengthy footnote, Meier cites near-identical sections of PAW and “Farabi’s Plato,” passages that suggest that Strauss’s project amounts to the secret rule of “philosophers.” Hence the necessity of exoteric/esoteric writing. For analysis of Meier’s own politics, see Altman, The German Stranger, 349-52. Altman’s contention is that Strauss was sympathetic towards National Socialism and asks whether Strauss would have stayed in Nazi Germany had he not been Jewish (ibid., 410). Altman points out (ibid., 349) that Meier has attempted to “rehabilitate [as Carl] Schmitt by means of Strauss.” At ibid., 351, Altman claims that it “is not merely a question [sc. for Meier] of rehabilitating Schmitt; Meier is sending out evidence, to those who are interested and can read German, that Strauss kept the faith.” Some scholars have sought to distance Meier from Strauss. See Robert Howse, “The Use and Abuse of Leo Strauss in the Schmitt Revival on the German Right – The Case of Heinrich Meier.”
His [c. Strauss’s] rhetorical strategy can be characterized as follows: Political considerations induce him if not to rouse then at least to support the opinion in the great majority of his readers that in the confrontation with faith in revelation, he takes a decisionistic stance, whereas he gives the philosophical addressees to understand through his insistence on the requirement of a rational justification that they may not rest satisfied with a decisionistic position.65

Meier notes that Strauss operates with “rhetorical” and “political considerations” in mind, suggesting that Strauss purposely allows himself to be interpreted as advocating the tenability of religious belief in modernity. More accurately, Meier proposes that, according to the reading of Strauss advocated by the “majority of his readers,” Strauss advocates that a person can only make a decision in favour of either philosophy (reason) or revelation (faith), and that neither choice is more justified. The important point is that, at least for superficial readers, Strauss is interpreted as truly considering belief in revelation, or religious faith more generally, a credible alternative to philosophy.66 However, Meier believes that critical readers will question such a “decisionistic” interpretation of Strauss. To quote Meier again:

The notion of a blind alley or stalemate, the support of which prudence in political matters demands, is at the same time welcome to Strauss in view of the philosophical readers of his theologico-political treatises. For them, the stalemate harbors the demand to further question and to think for themselves; the blind alley contains the appeal to seek after paths that lead out of it. Strauss’s oeuvre shows such paths, or it points to them, as we have seen, from afar and not infrequently by arguing e contrario.67

While Meier documents four possible ways to interpret Strauss’s understanding of the relationship between philosophy and revelation,68 Meier does not believe that Strauss

65 Meier, Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem, 23-4. That Strauss can be read in this way is suggested by passages such as NRH, 74-5. Meier raises an important point: Strauss can be read as suggesting that the life of philosophy and the life of faith are mutually exclusive. The decision to live as a “philosopher” or a “believer” rests on an “unevident decision, or an act of the will” (“1962 Introduction,” ACR, 29). Strauss discounts the fact that “reason” can lead to “faith,” and that having “faith” does not mean one is inimical to “reason.” On this theme, see the commentary in Chapter 7 of the present thesis.

66 See note 65 above.

67 Meier, Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem, 24.

68 Ibid., 24-6. The four positions Meier outlines all revolve around the theme of what common ground is there, for Strauss, between philosophy and revelation, or what is the nature of the relationship between philosophy and
understands philosophy and revelation as permanently locked in battle, that is, as truly being on a par with one another. Rather, Meier understands Strauss as requesting his “philosophical readers” seek a way beyond the (exoteric) “stalemate” he presents. If I interpret Meier correctly, his view is that there is not, in truth, a battle between reason and revelation for Strauss. Both Meier’s and Green’s analysis thus suggest that Strauss does not truly believe in revelation or, for that matter, the metaphysical claims of ancient and premodern philosophy. On this note, it is worth considering that Meier emphasises Strauss’s acceptance of Nietzsche’s critique of modernity. In Meier’s view:

When Leo Strauss disparages a world that is merely entertaining and interesting, he does so because the men in that world remain far beneath the potential of their nature and are capable of actualizing neither their most noble nor their most excellent faculties. He rejects the illusory security of a status quo of comfort and ease because a life that does not subject itself to the danger of radical questioning and the exertion of self-examination appear to him to be not worth living. A comfortable, cozy interior hinders liberation from the cave and ascent into the open. Strauss rejects the homogenous world-state because he recognizes it as the state of Nietzsche’s “last man” and because he sees the end of the particular political community as followed by the end of philosophy on earth.\(^6^9\)

The parallels between Green’s and Meier’s readings are compelling. Neither scholar claims that Strauss’s endorsement of religion is based on genuine faith and both scholars imply that Nietzsche had a sizeable influence on Strauss. Importantly, Meier reiterates for us a crucial point made above: Strauss understands the “particular political community” – that is, differences between human beings – as the necessary means of guarding against the advent of the “last man.”

Pangle, another scholar Tamer views as representing the “Platonic” interpretation of Strauss, also does not consider Strauss a believing Jew or Platonic dualist. Pangle suggests Strauss is an atheist and that Strauss is receptive to “radical historicism.” This is an interesting claim as Strauss explicitly associates “radical historicism” with Nietzsche and Nietzsche’s “successors,” revelation? The question raised by Meier’s analysis is whether we accept that Strauss takes the task of finding such common ground, or understanding the relationship between reason and faith, seriously. Does this simply amount to losing ourselves in Strauss’s exoteric rhetoric?

\(^6^9\) Meier, \textit{Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss}, 47. See also ibid., 86n110. Nietzsche and Heidegger “exerted the strongest influence on him [to Strauss].” For Strauss’s reference to a “world of entertainment, a world of amusement, a world without seriousness,” see his review of Schmitt’s \textit{Concept of the Political} in \textit{Concept of the Political} (trans. Schwab), 116. It is apparent that, given Schmitt’s and Strauss’s view of the possibility that a “world of entertainment” might be actualised (a world without, presumably, suffering, loss, anxiety, philosophical questions, problems caused by scientific and technological advancement, and so on), they both believe humankind can indeed arrive at such an “ideal” state. On this reading, both thinkers are utopians.
notably Heidegger. Pangle’s position is best articulated by briefly outlining two points. The first comes from Pangle’s 2006 text on Strauss:

I believe that Strauss, for his part, never ceases to entertain, and to wrestle with, the possibility that the crucial claimed insights of radical historicism might be in a decisive sense sound.70

In order to contextualise this comment, it is crucial to note Strauss’s definition of “radical historicism.” As he writes in *Natural Right and History*:

The thesis of radical historicism can be stated as follows. All understanding, all knowledge, however limited and “scientific,” presupposes a frame of reference; it presupposes a horizon, a comprehensive view within which understanding and knowing take place. Only such a comprehensive vision makes possible any seeing, any observation, any orientation. The comprehensive view of the whole cannot be validated by reasoning, since it is the basis of all reasoning. Accordingly, there is a variety of such comprehensive views, each as legitimate as any other: we have to choose such a view without any rational guidance. It is absolutely necessary to choose one; neutrality or suspension of judgement is impossible. Our choice has no support but itself; it is not supported by any objective or theoretical certainty; it is separated from nothingness, the complete absence of meaning, by nothing but our choice of it.71 [Italics added]

There is clearly an existential tenor to Strauss’s position.72 A theist would claim that God is the basis, or creator, of existence and the foundation for our understanding of life, while a Platonist (in the classical, orthodox, or “anti-Straussian” sense) could make a series of claims regarding absolute knowledge and ultimate reality. In asserting that Strauss “never ceases to entertain, and to wrestle with” the “insights” of radical historicism, Pangle conveys that Strauss is, *at the very least*, sceptical towards claims that there are immutable and timeless standards. (This is a surprising claim given Strauss’s attack against historicism in the first chapter of *Natural Right and History.*) We might, however, justifiably make a further claim. Given that Strauss associates


72 Pangle asserts that Strauss takes radical historicism seriously, that the doctrine “might be in a decisive sense sound.” This is antithetical to what a believing Jew, Christian, or Muslim, would state. As mentioned in Chapter 1, for Strauss, the “crisis of our time” is a result of the crisis of “modern rationalism” (*CM*, 7; *LAM*, 26). Elsewhere, Strauss writes that the failures of positivism lead one to “turn to existentialism.” Strauss’s comments on existentialism, and particularly Heidegger, are often positive. See note 57 above.
“radical historicism” with Nietzsche and Heidegger, Pangle’s comment implies that we ought to recognise Strauss as sympathizing, in a philosophical sense, with those thinkers.

The above comments can be usefully contrasted with the following account. Recounting a lecture given by Pangle a decade after Strauss’s death, Harry Jaffa, a former doctoral student of Strauss’s, noted:

In a public lecture at Claremont, about three years ago, Pangle declared that Nietzsche was the philosopher, according to Strauss, and that it was in Nietzschean—that is to say, historicist—concepts that Strauss believed one must look for a solution of the dilemmas of contemporary social sciences and, indeed, of the dilemmas of modern man. This represented to me a reversal of nearly everything I believed I had learned from Strauss, and about Strauss, in an association of nearly thirty years. Strauss’s distinctiveness—indeed, his uniqueness, I had thought—lay above all else in the fact that he was the first great critic of modernity whose diagnosis of the ills of modernity did not end by seeking a solution of those ills through a radicalization of the principles of modernity.73 [Jaffa’s italics]

Jaffa believes that his interpretation of Strauss as an anti-modern, rather than a modern, is tenable. Jaffa continues:

Strauss was [in Jaffa’s view], in this decisive respect, unlike his great predecessors, Rousseau and Nietzsche. To be told by Pangle that he was in the decisive respect, not their opponent, but their follower, was astounding. In the discussion following Pangle’s lecture, I raised objections to what I had heard. I cited the Introduction of Natural Right and History in which Strauss declared that “the contemporary rejection of natural right leads to nihilism — nay, it is identical with nihilism.” I said I had always understood that to imply a rejection of Nietzsche’s rejection of natural right, however more sophisticated Nietzsche’s rejection may have been than any merely “contemporary rejection.” Pangle began his reply by declaring that he was obliged “to pull rank” on me. (These, his exact words, were my first intimation that “Straussians” were ranked.) He then said that Strauss never returned to the theme of natural right “in his later and mature works.” Apparently among the ranks of the cognoscenti Natural Right and History was an early and immature work.74


74 Jaffa, “Letters to the Editor.” Jaffa’s account of his exchange with Pangle raises the question of whether Pangle believes Strauss’s thoughts on “radical historicism,” as presented in Natural Right and History, may have been superseded in later works. It must be noted though that Strauss is careful in NRH not to align himself with any tenable natural right position. As Altman notes (The German Stranger, 361), Natural Right and History ends by detailing the crisis of natural right – Strauss has not found a solution to the problem.
Of interest here is not the internal dispute amongst Strauss’s students. The crucial matter is that the second “current” of Strauss interpretation that Tamer refers to – Strauss as “Platonic political philosopher” – has clear similarities with the “Jewish” interpretation of Green and the “sceptical” interpretations of Drury and Burnyeat. These “currents” align on the issue of Strauss’s atheism and all imply, in some way, Strauss’s proximity to Nietzsche. It is worth noting that other readers of Strauss, including Rosen (another of Strauss’s students) and Lampert, understand Strauss as intellectually close to Nietzsche. We can, then, say this much: as we have seen, Strauss opposes a liberal, culturally homogenizing, modernity on Nietzschean grounds. Strauss also appears to accept that the philosophic truth is “deadly,” that there are, and can be, no ultimate or binding moral-political truths. This leads to the following question: if we cannot, as Strauss writes in the context of Nietzsche, ever access the “text,” then does Strauss believe that all philosophers can do is offer “interpretations” or, more accurately, offer “artistic” readings of prior philosophers, readings that will, in Strauss’s case, oppose the world-state and advent of the “last man”? As we have already seen, Strauss writes concerning Machiavelli that “manifest blunders” are “intentional” and “indicate” Machiavelli’s intentions. That is to say that, in the context of commentary (and Strauss is often a commentator), an author’s mistakes can be revealing. We can add to Strauss’s hermeneutic claims concerning Machiavelli the following remark:

One must also consider “the customary mildness of the common people,” a good-naturedness which fairly soon shrinks from, or is shocked by, the inquisitorial brutality and recklessness that is

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75 Commenting on the Jaffa-Pangle exchange, Drury notes (The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss, 187) that, according to Jaffa, “Strauss accorded to faith and reason an equal dignity, and denied that either was superior to the other.” Furthermore [Italics Drury's]:

In Jaffa’s view, revelation is necessary to keep philosophy humble and to ensure that it is not disfigured by the lust for power. Despite the wisdom of Jaffa’s position, there is little evidence for it in the writings of Leo Strauss. As we have seen, Strauss believes that philosophy has refuted faith and has an absolute right to rule unhampered by law, even if these are “truths” that must be kept hidden.

76 See Chapter 1, note 33.

77 These claim are fully considered in Chapter 7 of the present thesis. That the “text” is inaccessible, and that all we can do is offer interpretations, is suggested by Strauss at JPPP, 176-7. The same passage (JPPP, 176-7) suggests that Strauss accepts the “deadly truths” outlined in Nietzsche’s Second Meditation. See Chapter 1, note 33.
required for extorting his serious views from an able writer who tries to conceal them from all but a few.78

As Strauss informs us, uncovering an “able writer’s” true views demands “inquisitorial brutality,” if not “recklessness.” We must, I believe, keep in mind the possibility that Strauss might be wilfully misrepresenting prior philosophers as part of a political project. Perhaps Strauss is using medieval philosophers as the vehicle for his own Nietzschean teaching. Accordingly, we have solid reasons to ask whether the controversial aspects of Strauss’s reading of medieval philosophy are not the result of interpretive flights of fancy, but represent a deliberate attempt at aligning medieval philosophers with Nietzsche.

2.3 Tamer’s criticisms of Strauss

In this Section, I will outline Tamer’s criticisms of Strauss, and argue that these criticisms indicate several reasons why we ought to consider Strauss an exoteric writer who may be purposely distorting medieval philosophers.

As already noted, Tamer believes Strauss’s political project involves the “instrumentalization” of religion; Strauss wants to “keep it [religion] acceptable to philosophers.” Although Tamer does not argue that the debatable aspects of Strauss’s reading of medieval Islamic philosophy are a means for Strauss to discreetly impart, or endorse, a political teaching, Tamer does believe that Strauss’s commentaries on various philosophers help to also reveal Strauss’s own views.79 Tamer suggests that Strauss uses other thinkers as (to use Strauss’s term) “mouthpieces.” However, Tamer does not view what he considers Strauss’s errors with medieval Islamic philosophy to be pedagogic or intentional. For example, with regard to Strauss’s work on Farabi, Tamer writes:

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78 P.185. See also TOM, 36. In the context of Machiavelli, Strauss writes that: “The most obvious and explicit, if initial and provisional statement concerning his intention guides us towards the adequate understanding of his intention, provided “we put 2 and 2 together” or do some thinking on our own.”

79 Note that Tamer does suggest that Strauss is an exoteric writer. At LSCM, 327 [Italics added]: “The atheist’s clinging to religion as a factor of social order and as a guide for non-philosophers leads Strauss to develop and provide a two-fold writing that consists in concealing philosophical views and revealing useful political teachings.” Tamer (ibid., 326) also suggests that Strauss accepted the “Platonic” method of communication, that a philosopher must, when communicating with others, distinguishes between the “wise” and the “unwise.”
In an almost self-descriptive manner, Strauss portrays Alfarabi in Farabi’s “Plato” as a true Platonist who is not concerned with the historical but rather interested in the philosophic truth which transcends historical context. Further, Alfarabi conceals his ideas behind his interpretations of previous authors. Tamer implies that Strauss’s reading of Farabi might tell us as much about Strauss’s philosophy as it will tell us about Farabi’s. Perhaps Strauss’s reading will tell us more about Strauss himself than Farabi, the supposed topic of Strauss’s investigation. Tamer further contends that:

Strauss underlines that Alfarabi, in conceiving philosophy as the theoretical consideration of beings, holds it to be the only necessary condition for happiness. However, in Strauss’s view, Alfarabi for political reasons had to conceal this belief. Strauss also considers Alfarabi to be the only interpreter of Plato who recognized in the Republic two different ways of philosophical communication: the way of Socrates, which is appropriate for philosophers who speak to the elite, and the way of Thrasy machus, which is appropriate only for philosophers who address the multitude. The Platonic political philosophy emerges from their combination. To this Strauss committed himself and for him it embraces all philosophical disciplines.

Tamer suggests that Strauss accepts a method of communicating described by Farabi. The “way of Socrates” means dialectical reasoning, or what Farabi refers to as “scientific investigation.” Farabi states this method of communication is only suitable when dealing with the elect, understood as philosophers. The “way of Thrasy machus,” on the other hand, means the use of allegory and metaphor. This method of communication is used when interacting with the non-philosophic majority. By suggesting that Strauss “committed himself” to what is described as Farabi’s “Platonic political philosophy,” and that this practice embraces “all philosophical disciplines,” Tamer seems to be acknowledging that Strauss communicates on two levels.

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81 There is a clear difference between Pangle’s and Tamer’s interpretation of Strauss. Tamer suggests Strauss seeks a timeless truth; Pangle believes Strauss may agree with the thesis of “radical historicism,” a thesis that denies the possibility of a philosophic truth which transcends history.

82 This claim is explored in Chapters 5 and 6 of the present thesis: it is possible that Strauss reveals his true views in the context of Farabi.


Straus is communicating on two levels, then Strauss must be employing certain literary techniques to do so. Tamer’s work does not, however, fully explore this possibility. (As the themes of Farabi’s and the fatwafa’s use of esoteric writing is of vital importance, the topic will be returned to in Chapters 3-6.)

Tamer’s other primary criticisms of Strauss’s reading of medieval Islamic philosophy are as follows. According to Strauss, whenever Farabi does not mention an important detail when summarizing one of Plato’s works, this should be interpreted as a hint from Farabi concerning his esoteric teaching.85 As Tamer notes, the assumption Strauss makes (or at least wants us to believe he has made) is that Farabi had access to the same complete Platonic manuscripts that we have today, that Farabi “knew Plato’s writings in their original form.” 86 It is only on this basis that Strauss can believe Farabi’s omissions or “silences” are significant.

Tamer argues, I believe correctly, that the “philological basis” of Strauss’s reading of Farabi is “weak”87 given that Strauss makes an untenable assumption. In order for Strauss’s exoteric/esoteric analysis of Farabi’s works on Plato to be considered plausible, we would need to know what Platonic manuscripts Farabi was working from. Without this information, we do not know whether Farabi’s inaccuracies when writing on Plato are deliberate mistakes that communicate an esoteric teaching (as Strauss suggests) or whether they are simply the result of incomplete manuscripts.88 Tamer offers a potentially devastating criticism of Strauss’s way of reading Farabi. However, another issue raised by Strauss’s debatable reading of Farabi, an issue Tamer does not explore, is whether Strauss’s way of reading Farabi is pedagogic: by paying attention to Farabi’s errors or oversights, we must ask whether Strauss is teaching us to pay attention to his own “mistakes.” These “mistakes” might be meaningful silences or omissions from Strauss, or Strauss incorrectly attributing an idea to another scholar. What we must also ask is that, as Strauss’s reading of Farabi is, as Tamer claims, questionable on scholarly or philological grounds, is the esoteric teaching Strauss finds in Farabi’s works really Strauss’s own teaching? The issue here is, once again, whether Farabi is simply utilised by Strauss as a “mouthpiece.”

85 This theme is investigated further in Chapters 5-6 of the present thesis. The texts Tamer’s criticism relates to are “Farabi’s Plato” and “How Farabi read Plato’s Laws.” That said, the same criticism regarding Strauss and “meaningful silences” could be applied to his interpretations of other philosophers, including Machiavelli. See note 38 above.

86 Tamer, LSWM, 327.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid. A further criticism from Tamer is that Strauss’s “identification of the Islamic figure of the prophet with Alfarabi’s concept of head of the perfect state is at variance with Alfarabi’s concept.” Alfarabi’s prophetology is discussed in Chapter 6 of the present thesis.
Tamer is also critical of Strauss’s view that one of Farabi’s works, the *Harmony of the Two Opinions of the Two Sages: Plato the Divine and Aristotle* (*Kitāb al-jam' bayna ra'yay al-bakūtayn Aflātūn al-ilāhī wa-Aristūlīs*), a work in which Farabi attempts to reconcile Plato’s and Aristotle’s philosophies with Islam, is an exoteric text. Tamer believes Strauss is incorrect on this point, and considers Farabi’s attempt at reconciling Greek philosophy with Islamic doctrines to be genuine. Tamer interprets Farabi, contrary to Strauss, as a believing Muslim.99 While Farabi’s *Harmony* is discussed further in Chapters 4 and 6 of the present thesis, it can be noted here that there is no means of comprehensively knowing whether Farabi’s *Harmony* is an exoteric text; the text is frequently attributed to Farabi, and one cannot claim to know exactly what Farabi’s intentions were when he wrote the book, if the text is indeed Farabi’s. Nevertheless, further to Tamer’s criticism of Strauss, it is worth asking, once again, whether Strauss’s controversial claim about Farabi’s *Harmony* is pedagogic. Strauss proposes that Farabi was an atheist who attempted a disingenuous reconciliation of Islam and aspects of Greek philosophy, a reconciliation carried out in order to disguise the atheistic nature of philosophy and to pacify the religious masses of Farabi’s age.90 In attributing this practice to Farabi, Strauss suggests that, in the past, atheist philosophers viewed religion as politically useful, and that it therefore should not be undermined. Furthermore, Strauss’s reading of Farabi suggests that the philosophers of the Middle Ages believed philosophy was to remain the “preserve of the few.”91 These ideas all seem very close to Strauss’s own views.92

Another substantial problem noted by Tamer is Strauss’s claim that Farabi and other medieval Islamic philosophers believed a rigid dichotomy existed between reason (as atheistic philosophy) and faith (as religion based on revelation).93 Yet, according to Tamer, in “Alfarabi’s harmonious system there is no place for conflict between reason and faith, because God is the

90 Ibid., 332-4.

91 See *NRH*, 263; *P-1W*, 18; *WPP*, 221.

92 Strauss frequently asserts that there is an immutable tension between society, based on beliefs (often, if not always, religious), and philosophy. See, for example, *P-1W*, 17-8; *WPP*, 221-2; *JPCM*, 463. Strauss’s most explicit claim comes at *OT*, 205-6: “In what then does philosophic politics consist? In satisfying the city that the philosophers are not atheists, that they do not desecrate everything sacred to the city, that they reverence what the city reverences, that they are not subversives, in short, that they are not irresponsible adventurers but good citizens and even the best of citizens.” On this theme, see Tamer, *LSCM*, 328. For Strauss, philosophers “find it impossible to take account of and give due weight to the many traditional moral and religious opinions which are the basis of society.”

93 This theme is dealt with in Chapters 4-6.
ultimate aim of both.” 94 In other words, by interpreting Farabi as believing in God, Tamer disagrees with Strauss’s view that Farabi is a crypto-atheist who believes in a rigid separation of philosophy and religion. (Farabi’s religious beliefs are examined in Chapters 4 and 6 of the present thesis.) In addition to these complaints, Tamer also objects to Strauss’s contention that Farabi did not believe philosophers had tangible pedagogic obligations to non-philosophers.95 In Tamer’s view, this is another crucial misunderstanding on Strauss’s behalf.

Tamer also makes an important complaint against Strauss’s interpretation of Avicenna. However, Tamer does not explore the prospect that Strauss’s problematic reading of Avicenna might not be the result of a hermeneutic flight of fancy so much as a deliberate attempt by Strauss to attribute his own views to a medieval philosopher.

Tamer believes Strauss is incorrect when Strauss asserts that a statement of Avicenna’s confirms the thesis that medieval Islamic philosophers were atheists or “Platonists”96 in the Straussian sense. As noted in Chapter 1, in the Divisions of the Rational Sciences, Avicenna implies (the statement is ambiguous97) that Plato’s Laws is of paramount importance for understanding

94 Tamer, LSCM, 334.

95 Ibid., 332. “By emphasizing the necessity for philosophers to use common words, Alfarabi seems to acknowledge a pedagogical responsibility of the philosopher to the non-philosophers. Apparently Strauss has misunderstood Alfarabi here.” At ibid., 334: “The virtuous order he [sc. Farabi] describes is the totality of all social, political, religious, and cultural conditions that are needed to perfect human abilities and to realize happiness for all its members, not only for the philosophers, as Leo Strauss understands it.” According to Tamer, Strauss gets Farabi wrong concerning the (i) philosophers’ pedagogic responsibility to the masses and (ii) the need for a society to ensure the happiness of all members, not just philosophers. The question is whether Strauss’s misreading of Farabi reveals Strauss’s intentions; a society that seeks the happiness (or contentment) of all its citizens would likely appear to Strauss as having the same goal as the universal state or “world of entertainment.”

96 That is, they are not metaphysicians. This is a theme discussed in Chapters 4-6.

97 Avicenna, “On the Divisions of the Rational Sciences” in MPP, 97; Fi Aqsām al-'Ulūm al-'Aqliyyah, 107-8. The vital question is whether Avicenna is actually referring to what we know today as Plato’s Laws. Morris (“The Philosopher-Prophet in Avicenna’s Philosophy,” in The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy, 169) translates the statement in a similar way to Strauss’s interpretation (Philosophy and Law, 122). Morris writes:

That [part] of this which is connected with kingship is included in the book of Plato and Aristotle about politics. And that which is connected with prophecy [nubuwwah] and the sharī‘ah is included in two books [kitābān humā], both about the laws [nawāmīl].

As Morris notes (169n16), with respect to the second part of the quoted passage, “translators have tended to assume that Avicenna must still be referring to Plato and Aristotle.” The term used for “polities” by Avicenna is “al-rājūsah.” Morris writes (169n15 [italics Morris]): “The term polītikos (al-rājūsah) also serves as the Arabic title of the shorter, late Hellenic paraphrase of Plato’s Republic known to Islamic philosophers and of Aristotle’s Politics. It is unlikely, however, that a complete translation of either work was available to Avicenna or his readers.” Mahdi (MPP, 97n2) believes
the role of prophecy and divine law. Specifically, Avicenna writes that Plato’s and Aristotle’s works, as works that teach political science, indicate why the "nomos is the law and the norm that is established and made permanent through the coming down of revelation."98 Strauss interprets this comment to mean that Avicenna accepts a Greek, or Platonic, philosophic paradigm as teaching why philosophers should not undermine public belief in revelation. Strauss suggests that, in accepting a pagan Greek paradigm (Plato’s Laws), Avicenna awarded primacy to a product of human reason (Plato’s pagan philosophy) over actual belief in, or faith in, revelation.99

Based on Avicenna’s statement, Strauss claims that the falasifa believed that the “philosophic discipline which deals with prophecy is political philosophy or political science.”100 “Political philosophy” means, for Strauss, “exoteric philosophy.” Strauss’s assertion that the falasifa considered revelation a matter dealt with by “political philosophy” appears to mean that the

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99 I.e., Avicenna (and other Islamic philosophers), as philosophers, understood the importance of supporting the notion of divine law because of Plato. Alternatively, we are to read Plato’s Laws as representing the falasifa’s view of religion. See Strauss’s claims at P-AW, 10-1. Note Strauss’s confidence: “It is therefore not surprising that, according to Avicenna, the philosophic discipline which deals with prophecy is political philosophy or political science, and the standard work on prophecy is Plato’s Laws.” As noted above, “political philosophy” is, for Strauss, often synonymous with “exoteric” philosophy (see P-AW, 18). Note also Strauss’s comments at “A Giving of Accounts,” JPCM, 463: “One day, when reading in a Latin translation of Avicenna’s treatise On the Division of the Sciences, I came across this sentence (I quote from memory): the standard work on prophecy and revelation is Plato’s Laws. Then I began to begin to understand Maimonides’s prophetology and eventually, as I believe, the whole Guide of the Perplexed. Maimonides never calls himself a philosopher; he presents himself as an opponent of the philosophers. He used a kind of writing which is, in the precise sense of the term, exoteric.” In the same interview, Strauss claims that, based on his engagement with the falasifa and Maimonides: “I arrived at a conclusion that I can state in the form of a syllogism: Philosophy is the attempt to replace opinion by knowledge; but opinion is the element of the city, hence philosophy is subversive, hence the philosopher must write in such a way that he will improve rather than subvert the city. In other words, the virtue of the philosopher’s thought is a certain kind of mania, while the virtue of the philosopher’s public speech is sophrosyne. Philosophy as such is transpolitical, transreligious, and transmoral, but the city is and ought to be moral and religious.” In addition to Strauss’s claims in Persecution and the Art of Writing regarding the importance of Plato’s Law for the falasifa and Maimonides, see also PL, 76; “The Place of the Doctrine of Providence According to Maimonides,” 9-10.

100 P-AW, 10. The premise of the argument is that, based on their rationality, philosophers are atheists. Furthermore, this atheism, based on “reason,” leads all philosophers to believe that religious doctrines ought to be employed on the masses. The assertion here is that reason leads only in one direction. This is a deeply unconvincing thesis. Witness, for example, the central tenet of modern liberalism: reason leads to confining religion to the private sphere, and, theoretically, excluding religion from public life.
*falasifa* viewed prophecy and divine law as politically useful, but ultimately untrue. The imperative claim from Strauss is, once again, that the *falasifa* are to be understood as atheists, that true philosophers do not take revelation seriously but instead consider it a subject of “political philosophy.”

Despite the importance Avicenna’s statement plays in Strauss’s works, particularly in terms of supporting Strauss’s thesis that the *falasifa* were Platonists who understood revelation and prophecy purely in a political sense, Strauss never seriously investigates whether Avicenna is, in fact, referring to the Platonic text we know today as the *Laws*. This is precisely Tamer’s objection. Tamer protests that Strauss does not seem concerned about the fact that apocryphal versions of Plato’s *Laws* were in circulation during Avicenna’s time. Some of these versions of the “*Laws*” suggested that Plato was a mystic and prophet. The implication is that when Avicenna suggests that Plato’s *Laws* provides a framework for assessing, or understanding the need for, revelation, Avicenna might not actually be referring to what we know today as Plato’s *Laws*. Rather, Avicenna might be referring to a spurious text. For this reason, Tamer concludes that Strauss’s understanding of Avicenna is based on an unfounded prejudice:

Strauss did not understand Avicenna as Avicenna understood himself. Strauss betrays his own hermeneutical principles. Based on Avicenna’s sentence, Strauss tries to connect Revelation with Plato’s *Laws* in order to interpret the transcendent origin of religious truth politically. The fact that the frame of reference of Avicenna’s thought is Islamic rather than Platonic undermines the historical and philosophical fundaments of Strauss’s thought.

This is a crucial point noted by Tamer, a weighty criticism of Strauss’s reading of medieval philosophy. Strauss never investigated whether his interpretation of Avicenna, and the thesis that key medieval Islamic philosophers were Platonists in the sense he describes, was accurate. Perhaps this is noteworthy given that, as mentioned earlier, Strauss had several decades to revisit his thesis; Strauss’s first use of the Avicennan passage comes in *Philosophy and Law*, written


102 Tamer, *LSCM*, 329-30. Brague makes the same point at *The Law of God*, 117-8; we do not know whether Avicenna is referring to the text we know today as Plato’s *Laws*, or whether Avicenna is referring to one of the apocryphal texts that were in circulation.

103 Tamer, *LSCM*, 331-2. In describing Avicenna’s thought as “Islamic,” Tamer suggests a connection for Avicenna (or the possibility of a connection) between humans and God, one in accordance with Sufi and Neoplatonic doctrines. For example, Plotinus writes of *henosis*, a union with the One, understood as the highest being (*Enneads*, 6.9.7; 6.9.11); a similar doctrine is expressed by Sufis, who seek mystical union with God. On these themes, see the commentary in Chapter 7 of the present thesis.
during the early 1930s, and first published in 1935. Furthermore, as noted in Chapter 1, *Strauss continually refers to the Avicennan passage in his works, emphasizing its significance.* In an interview given in 1972, just one year before Strauss’s death, Strauss attributes the utmost importance to Avicenna’s comment, stating that it was decisive in helping him understand Maimonides.104 As already mentioned, the passage is also used as the epigraph in Strauss’s *The Argument and Action of Plato’s Laws*, completed in 1971 and published posthumously in 1975. We return, then, to our earlier question: is Strauss’s debatable interpretation of Avicenna not the result of questionable hermeneutics being honestly and genuinely applied but, rather, a part of Strauss’s political project? That is, is it plausible that Strauss’s reading of Avicenna is not intended to be a genuine interpretation but is, instead, a deliberate falsification that provides support for a transhistorical “Platonic political philosophy,” a philosophy that is, at core, atheistic, anti-metaphysical, and involves, as Tamer writes, the “instrumentalization of religion”? Is it plausible that Strauss did not revisit his claims concerning Avicenna for this reason? A similar question could be asked regarding Strauss’s account of Farabi. “Farabi’s Plato” was published in 1945, and “How Farabi Read Plato’s Laws” was published in 1959. Strauss had significant time to revisit and revise his controversial theses, but never did.

Although Tamer’s reading is not guided by the question of whether Strauss purposely distorts medieval Islamic philosophy for strategic, pedagogic, or rhetorical, reasons, Tamer certainly does view several of Strauss’s assertions as weak or “overstated.”105 In drawing attention to Strauss’s most controversial claims about medieval Islamic philosophy, Tamer clearly points to the possibility I have outlined above: that Strauss uses medieval Islamic philosophy as a vehicle for his esoteric teaching and is, perhaps, not particularly interested in providing an accurate portrayal of these thinkers. A further example of the severity of Tamer’s criticism is indicated in the following passage:

> In one respect, at least, *Strauss’s interpretation of the Islamic philosophers seems incoherent*: on the one hand, Strauss claims that what distinguishes these philosophers from both the classical and the modern philosophers is their belief in the reality of Revelation, that they took Revelation seriously for its own sake. On the other hand, Strauss attributes to them the conviction that *nomos*, although not revealed, offers the philosophical basis for understanding *šarīʿah*, and that both are identical. This implies the denial of Revelation.106 [Italics added]

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105 Tamer, *LSCM*, 329: “The concept of political philosophy that Strauss ascribes to the medieval Islamic philosophers is overstated.”

Tamer suggests that Strauss’s reading of the Islamic philosophers is problematic insofar as Strauss implies, at times, that these philosophers believed in revelation while at other times Strauss suggests that the *falasifa* understood, via Plato’s *Laws*, revelation in purely a political sense. Strauss’s reading of medieval Islamic philosophy is not, however, “incoherent” if we accept that there is a substantial difference between Strauss’s “early” and “mature”107 works, a difference that involves Strauss obfuscating, in his later works, his true views. As will be discussed in Chapter 3 of the present thesis, in his early works, Strauss interprets the *falasifa* as genuine believers in revelation. In his “mature” works, Strauss no longer holds this view, however, Strauss suggests, *for rhetorical purposes*, reason and revelation as locked in existential battle. As Meier asserts, some readers will seek a means beyond this impasse. The way beyond the impasse is to differentiate Strauss’s “early” and “mature” readings; I will argue that when read carefully, the “mature” Strauss clearly interprets the *falasifa* as atheists who side with an anti-metaphysical “Athens.”

As the discussion in Chapters 3-7 indicates, Tamer is justified for criticising Strauss’s interpretation of medieval Islamic philosophy; there are, I argue, a number of difficulties with Strauss’s reading in addition to those identified by Tamer. The primary merit of Tamer’s work is that it emphasizes the problems with Strauss’s reading of medieval Islamic philosophy, problems that have too frequently been overlooked. Tamer’s work is an insightful and critical engagement with Strauss’s philosophy. The difference between my approach and Tamer’s is, to repeat, that I believe we must, when engaging with Strauss, ask whether the hermeneutic methods Strauss applies to other thinkers are to be applied to Strauss himself. As noted, Strauss – in the context of Maimonides, Farabi, Machiavelli, and those he deems to be “exoteric writers” generally – consistently suggests that intentional “blunders” can be highly revealing. By providing advice on how to interpret exoteric writers, and claiming that “one writes as one reads,” perhaps Strauss is requesting, albeit from “between the lines,” that his readers look for what is being discreetly suggested.108

107 See note 3 above. This theme is dealt with in Chapter 3 of the present thesis. Strauss’s view of medieval Islamic (and Jewish) philosophy undergoes a major change between the late 1930s and early 1940s.

108 *WPP*, 230 [italics added]: “Turning to the question of methods of reading, Belaval [i.e. Yvon Belaval’s review of *Persecution and the Art of Writing* in *Critique*, October 1953] takes issue with my “axiom” that *one writes as one reads.*”
2.4 Critical analysis of Tamer’s interpretation of Strauss

In this final Section of the Chapter, I wish to reiterate that Tamer’s analysis of Strauss provides support for my claim: we must be receptive to the notion that Strauss is, at base, sympathetic to Nietzsche and, as such, we must keep in mind the possibility that Strauss intentionally misreads – or Nietzscheanizes – medieval philosophic texts.

Tamer, like many of Strauss’s most critical readers, ultimately implies that Strauss believes that the philosophic truth is “deadly.” Tamer writes:

> Strauss raises the question of God within the framework of political philosophy, claiming to keep religion only for social purposes and to handle truth esoterically. Unlike Nietzsche, Strauss considers religion not as a compensation product for the weak, but rather, following Alfarabi and the Islamic philosophers, as a necessary postulate of reason.¹⁰⁹

Tamer can be read as suggesting that Strauss believes, like Nietzsche, that the “truth” is deadly (it must be “handled esoterically”) but that Strauss’s and Nietzsche’s philosophies are fundamentally different insofar as Nietzsche views religion as a “compensation product for the weak,” while Strauss sees religion as a “postulate of reason.” I believe that this claim of a fundamental difference between Strauss and Nietzsche needs to be qualified. Strauss and Nietzsche are united when it comes to an atheistic endorsement of religion based on the philosopher’s “reason.” As textual evidence from Nietzsche indicates,¹¹⁰ Nietzsche’s position amounts to rejecting the possibility, or truth, of revelation, while acknowledging that religion is necessary for the non-

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¹⁰⁹ Tamer, *LYCM*, 327-8. Religion as a “necessary postulate of reason” might be understood as implying a similarity between Strauss and Kant (and therefore a similarity between the Islamic philosophers and Kant). There are obvious difficulties with this view, notably the fact that Strauss is very dismissive of Kant (and others who believe reason can lead to a binding public moral code); this issue is discussed further in Chapter 3 of the present thesis. As Smith (*Reading Leo Strauss*, 108) notes, except for Strauss’s works on Weber and Nietzsche, “there are no works on such giants of the German *Aufklärung* as Mendelssohn, Kant, and Hegel to rival his studies of other seminal figures in the history of political thought.” As Smith continues: “for a thinker like Strauss who has emphasized that what a person does not say is almost as important as what he does say, such a startling omission calls for comment.”

¹¹⁰ See *Beyond Good and Evil* aps. 58, 61-2, 295. These aphorisms suggest Nietzsche considers religion “indispensable.” If we accept that Nietzsche *does* believe religion is necessary for “non-philosophers,” then Strauss’s position on this issue is, essentially, the same as Nietzsche’s. The primary difference being, as far as we can tell, that Strauss wants to communicate this teaching more discreetly, and with greater accuracy, than Nietzsche, who allows himself to be interpreted in numerous ways. Rosen (*HAP*, 137) writes that Strauss “rejected” Nietzsche’s “radical or rabble-rousing rhetoric” yet he believes Strauss is close to Nietzsche in several decisive respects. See Chapter 1 of the present thesis, note 33.
philosophic majority. On this interpretation, which I believe is accurate, Strauss is Nietzschean in at least this decisive respect. As Tamer writes, the “question of God,” the source of revelation, is raised by Strauss only “within the framework of political philosophy.” As noted, according to Strauss’s terminology, “political” means “exoteric.” Strauss, like Nietzsche, can therefore be understood as exoterically advocating religion while esoterically denying the possibility of revelation.

Nietzsche’s influence on Strauss can be squared with other important aspects of Tamer’s interpretation. Tamer is correct when he writes that Strauss believes the basis of a public morality cannot be secular or atheistic. Tamer contends:

[T]he political necessity of religion depends on two premises: an elitist understanding of the enlightenment, which is, consequently, only accessible to philosophers and thus cannot be universal, and the belief that evil cannot be eradicated from the world. According to Strauss, society’s need for religion derives from the need of the majority to be guided.112 [Italics added]

Strauss’s “elitist understanding of the enlightenment” suggests, once again, a Nietzschean politics: a sharp distinction between the philosophic few and the unenlightenable majority. Secondly, Tamer associates Strauss with the belief that “evil” cannot be eradicated. Tamer appears to be claiming that, as segments of the population cannot, on Strauss’s view, be enlightened, religion is necessary for keeping potentially “evil” women and men in check. Further still, religion, even in secularized form, is useful insofar as it acts as the basis for a political-legal framework that allows a society to function. As Tamer writes:

[T]he foundation of Strauss’s political philosophy is the dialectic of revelation and atheism. The disbeliever must emphasize God’s existence politically so as not to destroy the power of law-order. Such a position leads to the dichotomization of truth. Furthermore, Strauss’s conception of religion was intended to keep it acceptable to philosophers, whereas its value as law is mainly political. Such a conception implies that

111 See note 99 above. The problematic question of why Strauss believes that philosophers must work towards social and political stability, rather than criticizing or attempting to reform the beliefs of others, will have to be put aside for now. It is difficult to understand why a philosopher who accepts Nietzsche’s “deadly” truths has an on-going obligation towards social and political responsibility. Furthermore, Strauss’s claim that religion is somehow socially or politically stabilising can easily be disputed by referring to the general opinion of the philosophers of the modern Enlightenment. Nevertheless, as noted in this Chapter, Strauss clearly does accept Nietzsche’s critique of modernity and this appears to be one of the chief reasons – perhaps the real reason – why Strauss believes religion is to be retained in modernity: religion has, as he writes, a “particular and particularizing power” and therefore serves as a bulwark against the universal and homogenous state.

112 Tamer, LVCNM, 327.
religions lacking a substantial legal dimension are philosophically unacceptable. Strauss seems here to implicitly criticize Christianity.  

Tamer points out that Strauss, albeit on apparently atheistic grounds, values Judaism and Islam as they are (in Strauss’s view) religions that emphasize divine law rather than a “creed or a set of dogmas.” The important issue in the present context – and this is a topic that will be returned to in Chapter 3 – is that Strauss believes that the divine commandments of Judaism and of Islam necessitate the justification of philosophy. According to Strauss’s thesis, philosophizing cannot, for a Jew or Muslim, simply be undertaken; a believer who wishes to philosophize has to first seek approval from their divine laws. On the other hand, “for the Christian,” Strauss argues, the “sacred doctrine is revealed theology.” Thus in Christianity, “philosophy became an integral part of the officially recognized and even required training of the student of the sacred doctrine.” Tamer draws attention to the fact that, as Strauss believes in a rigid separation of religion and philosophy, Strauss approves of the perceived legalistic nature of Judaism and Islam. In Strauss’s view, such a separation serves to insulate, or protect, each way of life from the other.

The fact remains, though, that no matter what importance Strauss attributes to Judaism or Islam, his endorsement of these religions is, at its basis, atheistic. As Tamer reiterates:

Man is guided either by reason or by Revelation. Only philosophers among them can dispense with the guidance of Revelation since they are guided by reason. They are in fact atheists, and conceal their atheism for political reasons. Following Averroes, Strauss emphasizes that philosophers are not absolutely free in their treatment of religious texts. Thus, they are led to use exoteric kinds of

113 Ibid. In claiming that the “foundation of Strauss’s political philosophy is the dialectic of revelation and atheism,” Tamer might be interpreted as suggesting that the philosophy Strauss intended for the general public – Strauss’s “political philosophy” – is an exoteric, ultimately spurious, argument concerning the tension between revelation and an atheistic philosophy.

114 P-AIW, 9-10; 18-9.

115 Ibid., 20. This theme is returned to in Chapter 3.

116 Ibid., 18-9.

117 Ibid., 19.

118 In addition to the commentary in Chapter 1, see the sources cited in note 92 above. Strauss’s suggestion at P-AIW, 18 and OT, 205-6 is that philosophers use religious devotion as a means of disguise. This theme is further explored in subsequent Chapters.
writing so as to be able to philosophize without endangering the social order, or even themselves.119 [Italics added]

Ultimately, what we can extract from Tamer’s remarks is as follows. Tamer’s reading of Strauss has, in many respects, similarities with the analyses offered by Drury, Burnyeat, Green, Meier, and Pangle. Like these authors, Tamer attributes to Strauss a covert-atheism, contends that Strauss has a political project that involves the “instrumentalization” of religion, and that Strauss appears to agree with Nietzsche’s claim that the truth is “deadly.” The Strauss that emerges in Tamer’s work is a thinker who clearly views religion as a “political necessity.”120 All these interpretations fit with Hannah Arendt’s blunt assessment of Strauss as an “orthodox atheist.”121

119 Tamer, LSCM, 327.

120 See note 9 above. Tamer compares (LSCM, 329) Strauss to a religious “fundamentalist” for the reason that Strauss understands religion as necessary, yet this is, as Tamer notes, only a “functional similarity.” The difference between Strauss and a “fundamentalist” is that the latter truly believes in, and is motivated by, their religion. For example, see Sayyid Qutb, Ma‘ālim fī al-Ṭarīq (Milestones), 45: “Throughout every period of human history the call toward God has had one nature. Its purpose is “Islam,” which means to bring human beings into submission to God, to free them from servitude to other human beings so that they may devote themselves to the One True God, to deliver them from the clutches of human lordship and man-made laws, value-systems and traditions so that they will acknowledge the sovereignty and authority of the One True God and follow His law in all spheres of life.” Strauss never makes this kind of statement. Strauss, unlike Qutb, recognizes the philosophic life as – at the very least – a legitimate option. It is more likely that, as Strauss understands philosophy as the “highest” activity possible, the life of philosophy is, for him, the best life. See PAW, 18; WPP, 221; NRH, 263.

121 In a letter to Karl Jaspers, written in 1954, Hannah Arendt writes: “Leo Strauss is a professor of political philosophy in Chicago, highly respected. Wrote a good book about Hobbes (as well as one about Spinoza). Now another about Natural Law. He is a convinced orthodox atheist. Very odd. A truly gifted intellect. I don’t like him.” Arendt to Jaspers, July 24 1954, printed in Correspondence 1926-1969 (ed. Kohler & Saner), 244. Arendt worked with Strauss at the University of Chicago. On this topic, see Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, Hannah Arendt: For the Love of the World, 86:

Hannah Arendt’s tolerance for intellectuals who failed to understand the darkening political situation grew weaker as her alliance to the Zionists’ critique grew deeper. Leo Strauss, the author of a much admired critique of a different sort, Die Religionkritik Spinozas, met with a curt rejection from Hannah Arendt for his lack of awareness. Strauss, an associate of the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, met Arendt at the Prussian State Library and made an effort to court her. When she criticized his conservative political views and dismissed his suit, he became bitterly angry. The bitterness lasted for decades, growing worse when the two joined the same American faculty at the University of Chicago in the 1960s. Strauss was haunted by the rather cruel way in which Hannah Arendt had judged his assessment of National Socialism: she had pointed out the irony of the fact that a political party advocating views Strauss appreciated could have no place for a Jew like him.
Tamer finds evidence of a political teaching in Strauss’s works, a political message he extracts largely from Strauss’s commentaries. By doing so, he points to an important question: do Strauss’s commentaries reflect Strauss – that is, Strauss’s esoteric teaching – more than they reflect what Strauss really thought about Farabi, Avicenna, Averroes, or Maimonides?

Tamer writes that “[i]t would seem that Leo Strauss’s way of employing medieval Islamic philosophy in the search for answers to the challenges of modernity did not achieve the objectives he set for himself.”

This conclusion rests on the idea that, as Strauss makes several noticeable errors with medieval philosophy, Strauss’s suggestion that medieval philosophy can provide the basis for a social-political program to be used in modernity is compromised. Yet, according to the interpretation I am offering here, Strauss can be viewed as having utilised medieval Islamic philosophy very successfully. We must ask whether the “crisis of modernity,” whether intended rhetorically or not, provides Strauss with a reason to advocate a return to a medieval paradigm. Once his readers take that first, important, step – once readers have acknowledged that modernity is in “crisis,” and that they must therefore inquire as to what modernity has overlooked or forgotten – they are then led by Strauss to a political program attributed to several prominent medieval philosophers, a program based on what Strauss claims to have discovered “between the lines.”

As argued in subsequent Chapters, it is a program that rests on a very debatable reading of several medieval Islamic philosophers, particularly Farabi. It is a program that appears, at its foundations, sympathetic to, and guided by, Nietzschean philosophy.

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123 Ultimately, the question that arises is: should we be receptive to the claim that Strauss’s works on Islamic philosophy are not compromised by any type of hermeneutic or scholarly incompetence but, rather, by “world-constituting” ambition? See Rosen *HAP*, 125: “Within his powers, he [as Strauss] wished to create a world fit for the habitation of philosophers and nonphilosophers alike. As a resident of the twentieth century, he had necessarily to adapt his rhetoric to his own time. This required an ingenious mixture of frankness as well as of devices suited to prepare (in Kojève’s expression) “a pléiade” of disciples who would carry out the practical work. Those who regard such a project as “immoral,” or who believe themselves to be technicians of scientific progress, have either abdicated their political responsibility or are simply unconscious agents of the world-constituting projects of others.” This leads to Strauss’s view of “probity.” Probity is a virtue that Strauss considers unnecessary for philosophers. For example, see *PL*, 37-8. Strauss claims probity is a product of “Orthodoxy,” not philosophy. It is probity that, considering its origins, ironically motivates the Enlightenment’s refutation of religious belief. For elaboration of this point, see C. & M. Zuckert, *The Truth About Leo Strauss*, 33-4: “Nietzsche had insisted that the denial of God was a requirement of intellectual honesty, or probity, which, he thought, was our last virtue. Probity constituted a kind of spiritual courage or, in Heideggerian terms, resolution to face the utter meaninglessness of human life and the world. But, Strauss objected in his 1935 book *Philosophy and Law*, if the world is utterly meaningless, if there is no truth, then there is no basis for Nietzsche’s obligation to declare it or to live by it.” Strauss’s views on “probity” are discussed further in Chapter 3.
To me, only one thing was clear: that I cannot believe in God. I put this to myself in the following way: there is an *idea Dei innata*, *omnia hominis communis* [innate idea of God, common to all men]; to this idea I can give or refuse my *assenso* [assent]; I believed that I had to refuse it; I had to make clear to myself: Why? 1

The personal letters Strauss wrote in the 1930s are particularly revealing. A letter to Gerhard Krüger written at the beginning of the decade candidly indicates Strauss’s relation – at least at that point in time – to the “idea Dei innata.” Strauss’s declaration of atheism at the start of the 1930s provides an interesting backdrop for his later letters. In private correspondence written around the late 1930s to early 1940s, just a few years after the publication of *Philosophie und Gesetz* (*Philosophy and Law*), Strauss describes a scholarly achievement he believes he has made. He writes to Jacob Klein claiming, essentially, to have discovered Maimonides’s esoteric doctrine: atheism. In terms of Maimonides’s “beliefs,” he was, Strauss writes, “absolutely no Jew.”2 This discovery, or “recovery,” of medieval exotericism would have noticeable effects. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, Strauss’s reading of medieval philosophy changes radically between *Philosophy and Law* (1935) and *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952). There can be little doubt that the catalyst for this reorientation was Strauss’s in-depth study of Maimonides’s *Guide for the Perplexed*.

As *Persecution and the Art of Writing* comprises of articles written throughout the 1940s – i.e., following Strauss’s “recovery” of esotericism – it indicates what might be labelled Strauss’s “mature”3 reading of the *falasifa* and Maimonides. The purpose of this Chapter is to compare

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1 Strauss to Gerhard Krüger, 7 January, 1930. GS 3:380-1 [trans. Janssens, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 75]. Krüger was one of Heidegger’s students; he would later work at Marburg.

2 GS 3:550. Strauss’s letters from this period are discussed further in Section 3.4 below. In Strauss’s own words, Klein told him that “[w]e have rediscovered exotericism.” Note that in this interview (“A Giving of Accounts,” *JPCM*, 463), Strauss does not claim to have discovered Maimonides’s “esoteric” doctrine. A careful reading of Strauss’s mature works on Maimonides and the *falasifa* reveals, however, that this is precisely what Strauss is insinuating he has achieved. On this topic, see note 182 below.

3 As discussed in Chapter 2 (note 3), “mature” is my term. To my knowledge, Strauss never refers to his later works on medieval philosophy as representing his “mature” (or similar) views, despite the fact that there are notable differences between works written in the 1920s to mid-1930s and works written after that period.
Philosophy and Law with Persecution and the Art of Writing. The differences between the two texts raise several critical interpretive questions. For example, did Strauss come to genuinely believe that the falasifa practiced, en masse, precisely the same literary techniques, the same exoteric writing style, he considered Maimonides to utilise? Secondly, did Strauss come to truly believe around 1940 that the esoteric doctrine of Maimonides and the falasifa was indeed a covert-atheism? Furthermore, can Strauss’s claim in Persecution and the Art of Writing – that several prominent medieval philosophers disguised their disbelief in revelation for political reasons – be understood as a component of Strauss’s own rhetorical, or political, program? That is, does Strauss impose an atheistic philosophy on to the medieval philosophers he studies in order to discreetly endorse the philosophical-political position he sympathizes with?4

The first half of this Chapter (Sections 3.1 to 3.3) investigates Philosophy and Law, a text that allows us to understand the view of Maimonides and the falasifa that Strauss held in the 1930s. In terms of understanding Strauss, there are a number of reasons for considering Philosophy and Law a crucial text to engage with. Strauss wrote Philosophy and Law prior to incorporating the exoteric-esoteric distinction into his own works. In the words of Allan Bloom, it is the “pre-Straussian Strauss” who we meet on the book’s pages.5 We can therefore presume with some certainty that the arguments we find in Philosophy and Law are not rhetorical: as a text written before his “recovery” of medieval exotericism, Philosophy and Law may well lack the political considerations that characterise Strauss’s “mature” works.6 In some ways, given its themes, Philosophy and Law might well be considered a book written by a Jewish philosopher for

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4 As noted at the end of the last Chapter, in light of Strauss’s atheism and Nietzschean sympathies, there are strong reasons for questioning whether Strauss’s “mature” claims concerning the falasifa and Maimonides are indeed based on his genuine beliefs about these thinkers, or whether Strauss, for political reasons, intentionally imparted a distorted view of medieval philosophy. As indicated below (note 112), in Spinoza’s Critique of Religion and Philosophy and Law, Strauss interprets the falasifa and Maimonides as believers in revelation. That Strauss would later alter his reading of these medieval thinkers in a way that aligns them with his own atheistic position is, I believe, highly problematic. As was discussed in the introduction to Chapter 2, there are two interpretive options: (i) Strauss can be read as deliberately misreading these medieval thinkers, imposing on to them a Nietzschean philosophical position he knew was not substantiated in their texts. Alternatively, (ii) Strauss can be read as having accidentally misread these thinkers; i.e., he attributed to these thinkers a position he agreed with, yet did so as he was, perhaps, overly keen to find support for his own views. Both interpretive options are premised on the view that Strauss’s reading of the medievals is inaccurate. I argue that this is the case in Chapters 4-7.


6 See my comments on Strauss’s politics in Chapter 2.
other Jewish philosophers. 7 It might even be defensible to label it one of Strauss’s most honest works, a work that offers nothing more than a diagnosis of modernity. 8

The following themes from Philosophy and Law are investigated. In Section 3.1, we examine Strauss’s justification for comparing the modern Enlightenment against the medieval Enlightenment. We consider why Strauss is sceptical of the attempt – as represented by the modern European Enlightenment – to abandon, or severely reduce, the role religion has in society. With some of Strauss’s criticisms of the modern Enlightenment in mind, we then survey, in Section 3.2, the positive features of medieval philosophy that Strauss identifies. In Section 3.3, we consider Strauss’s principal contentions regarding Averroes’s and Maimonides’s treatment of divine law and philosophy.

With the main themes of Philosophy and Law noted, we then investigate, in Section 3.4, Strauss’s “mature” reading of the falasifa as provided in Persecution and the Art of Writing. There are obvious, if not revealing, differences between Strauss’s two books; most notable is how Strauss’s view of the falasifa’s relation to religion changes. Persecution and the Art of Writing also indicates the importance Strauss assigns to the medieval philosopher Farabi; it is a text that shows us why scrutinizing Strauss’s writings on Farabi might help us to understand Strauss’s deepest thoughts on “Platonic political philosophy.” Finally, Section 3.5 flags several potential criticisms of Strauss’s work. I will return to these criticisms in subsequent Chapters.

3.1 Philosophy and the need for law: Strauss’s criticisms of the modern Enlightenment and the basis of his investigation into medieval philosophy

Philosophy and Law (1935) consists of several articles written by Strauss in the early to mid-1930s. The book begins with a thoughtful polemic against the European Enlightenment, a piece of writing Meier justifiably describes as “among the most brilliant essays Strauss ever wrote.” 9 In

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7 Strauss put Philosophy and Law together in an attempt to gain employment at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. In a letter to Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, then working at the Hebrew University, described Philosophy and Law as a “suicide of such a capable mind.” Concerning Scholem’s view of Strauss, see note 52 below.

8 In Philosophy and Law, Strauss openly criticizes the Enlightenment, dogmatic atheism, political Zionism, and those who believe unassisted “reason” can lead to a binding moral code. Strauss is more reticent in later works; this reticence is, I believe, caused by the fact he is not diagnosing modernity but offering, from “between the lines,” his philosophical-political recommendations.

Strauss’s polemical introduction to *Philosophy and Law*, he criticises the foundations of modern philosophy and, in doing so, attempts to justify a return to the study of medieval philosophy.

In the book’s introduction, Strauss argues that the Epicurean critique of religion – the “classical means of allaying fear of divinity [Numen] and death by showing them to be “empty of content””10 – is the “foundation” or “foreground” of the Enlightenment’s critique of religion. Like the Epicureans, the thinkers of the Enlightenment were concerned with the “question of man’s happiness, his peace of mind,”11 aspects of human existence which were “threatened preeminently or exclusively by religious ideas.”12 Yet while the Epicurean critique of religion aimed “pre-eminently at the terror” of the religious “delusion,” Strauss argues that the modern Enlightenment “aimed preeminently at the delusoriness itself.”13 Describing the “essential change” the Epicurean critique of religion underwent during the modern Enlightenment, Strauss notes:

Regardless of whether the religious ideas are terrifying [furchtbar] or comforting [tröstlich] – qua illusions, they cheat men of the real goods, of the enjoyment of the real goods; they steer men away from the real “this world” to an imaginary “other world,” and thus seduce them into letting themselves be cheated of the possession and enjoyment of the real, “this-worldly” goods by the greedy clergy, who “live” from those delusions.14

The thinkers of the Enlightenment did not view religion as something “terrifying” to be overcome. Rather, for Strauss, the Enlightenment is characterised by criticizing religion as it represents a *dishonest* attempt to find comfort from the “terror and hopelessness of life.” On Strauss’s reading, the Enlightenment demanded rejecting any such “delusions,” no matter how “comforting” these “delusions” were or could be.15 The difference between the original

10 *PL*, 35; *PG*, 25. (When quoting from *Philosophy and Law*, I cite the Adler English translation first, followed by the corresponding page number in *Philosopwie und Gesetz*.)

11 *PL*, 36; *PG*, 25.

12 *PL*, 36; *PG*, 25.

13 *PL*, 36; *PG*, 25.

14 *PL*, 36; *PG*, 25.

15 “[T]he religious ideas are rejected not because they are terrifying but because they are desirable, because they are comforting; religion is not a tool which man has forged for dark reasons in order to torment himself, to make life unnecessarily difficult, but rather a way out chosen for very obvious reasons, in order to escape the terror and hopelessness of life, which cannot be eradicated by any progress of civilization, in order to make his life easier.” *PL*, 36; *PG*, 26.
Epicureans and the thinkers of the Enlightenment indicates, for Strauss, that a new ideal had emerged in 16th and 17th century Europe. Strauss describes this ideal as:

A new type of fortitude, which forbids itself every flight from the horror of life into comforting delusion, which accepts the eloquent descriptions of the misery of man without God as a proof of the goodness of its cause, reveals itself eventually as the ultimate and purest ground for the rebellion against the tradition of the revelation. This new fortitude, being the willingness to look man’s forsakenness in its face, being the courage to welcome the terrible truth, being toughness against the inclination of man to deceive himself about his situation, is probity [Redlichkeit].

The Enlightenment represents, then, for Strauss, “atheism stemming from probity,” a position that carries noticeable Nietzschean overtones. “Probity” is understood as the motivating principle of the Enlightenment. This probity demands the “courage to welcome the terrible truth” and interpret humankind’s situation according to the apparent conclusions of modern science. Freed “from the religious delusion,” human beings could comprehend their true situation faced with a “stingy, hostile, nature,” and without the protective care of God, humankind had to become “master and owner of nature.”

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16 PL, 37; PG, 26-7. Strauss refers (PL, 136n2) to Nietzsche’s radicalization of the Enlightenment’s critique of the Greek and Biblical traditions. Whether Strauss has Nietzsche’s critique in mind when discussing “probity” is worth considering. The Zuckert’s (see Chapter 2 of the present thesis, note 123) write that Strauss had realised by the time of Philosophy and Law that, if there was no truth, there was no need to embrace Nietzsche’s call for probity. See also Janssens (Between Athens and Jerusalem, 93). Janssens notes that when Strauss writes of “intellectual probity” as being the “ultimate and purest ground for the rebellion against the tradition of the revelation,” Strauss might be drawing from Nietzsche, Weber, or Heidegger. See notes 22 and 55 below.

17 PL, 38; PG, 28. See note 16 above. Consider also Nietzsche’s remarks at The Birth of Tragedy (72-4). Socrates represents “theoretical man” and, for the “theoretical man” (Nietzsche also mentions Lessing), the search for truth is worth more than truth itself.

18 PL, 37; PG, 26.

19 PL, 36; PG, 26.

20 The phrase “master and owner of nature” comes at PL, 36; PG, 26 (“indem er sich zum Herrn und Besitzer der Natur macht”). In his later writings, Strauss draws on Bacon’s reference to knowledge (or science) as the means for the “relief of man’s estate” (e.g.: CM, 3, 42; LAM, 225/SCR “1962 Preface,” 2; IPP, 88). Strauss writes that according to modern philosophy, human beings are not understood as members of the cosmos (i.e., beings who are a part of “nature”); rather, modern philosophy understands “nature” as a product of the human consciousness. Strauss mentions Descartes’s Meditations and Hobbes’s Leviathan as initiators of the modern Enlightenment (see PL, 22; 32). Strauss contends (IPP, 88) that “moderns” believe they have the capacity to create “nature” (or truth) through the powers of science. This is in opposition to the “pre-moderns” who took their bearings from the perceived order of the natural world.
Given the relation Strauss identifies between “probity” and Enlightenment, he asks why “probity” was viewed as such a supreme virtue. In a critical passage, he argues that “probity,” or truthfulness, is a specifically Biblical value; belief in the importance of “probity” had been, ironically, engendered by one of the Enlightenment’s primary targets. Perhaps even more ironically, adherence to “probity” – understood as a Biblical value – forbade any attempts at reconciling scientific and religious worldviews. Strauss argues:

It is this probity [Redlichkeit], “intellectual probity,” that bids us reject [sic] all attempts to “mediate” [vermitteln] between the Enlightenment and orthodoxy – both those of the moderate Enlightenment and especially those of the post-Enlightenment synthesis – not only as inadequate, but also and especially as without probity; it forces the alternative “Enlightenment or orthodoxy” and, since it believes it finds the deepest unprobity [tiefste Unredlichkeit] in the principles of the tradition itself, it bids us to renounce the very word “God.”

Strauss clearly believes that the intellectual premises of the Enlightenment render it impossible to harmonize “Enlightenment” with “orthodoxy” and it is noteworthy that Strauss, while arguing that probity is a specifically “Biblical” virtue, is committed to probity himself. In terms of his

21 PL, 37; PG, 26. There is a similarity here between Strauss and Nietzsche; see note 22 below.

22 PL, 37; PG, 26-7. Strauss continues: “Thus it becomes clear that this atheism, compared not only with the original Epicureanism but also with the generally “radical” atheism of the age of Enlightenment, is a descendent of the tradition grounded in the Bible: it accepts the thesis, the negation of the Enlightenment, on the basis of a way of thinking which became possible only through the Bible. Although it refuses, since it is unwilling to disguise its unbelief in any way, to represent itself as a “synthesis” of the Enlightenment and orthodoxy, yet it itself is the latest, most radical, most unassailable harmonization of these opposed positions.” Does this statement point to a “faith-based atheism” as Strauss’s “secret solution” to the “theologico-political problem”? See Altman’s analysis at “Leo Strauss in 1962,” 100. Note also Meier’s comments on Strauss, quoted in Chapter 2 of the present thesis. Concerning probity as a Biblical virtue, see Nietzsche’s Will to Power, Book I, Aph. 5 [italics in original]: “But among the forces cultivated by morality was truthfulness.” See also Nietzsche’s Genealogy of Morals (ed. Ansell-Pearson), Third Essay, 111-2 [Italics in original]: “Our faith in science is still based on a metaphysical faith, - even we knowers of today, we godless anti-metaphysicians, still take our fire from the blaze set alight by a faith thousands of years old, that faith of the Christians, which was also Plato’s faith, that God is truth, that truth is divine…”

23 However Strauss is not, as the correspondence with Löwith clearly indicates, an “orthodox Jew” (see note 52 below). Strauss’s criticisms of the Enlightenment therefore cannot be understood as based on a commitment to “orthodoxy.” Rather, Strauss’s hostility towards the Enlightenment must be understood as, at base, political (see note 22 above). Here, I use “orthodoxy” as Strauss utilises the term. That is, as meaning a religion and tradition based on the idea of revealed laws. “Enlightenment” is understood to mean an intellectual, or theoretical, position “completely irreconcilable with the tradition” (PL, 135n1; PG, 13-4n1). Strauss introduces the term “orthodoxy” (PL, 22; PG, 10) after having listed the central doctrines of Judaism (and thereby the Abrahamic faiths more generally). See note 25 below.
commitment to “probity,” Strauss criticises the attempt of Moses Mendelssohn to fuse Jewish tenets (“orthodoxy”) with modern philosophy. According to Spinoza’s “God or Nature” formulation (Deus sive natura), if God is an extended thing (Deus est res extensa), if God is nature, then the idea of revelation being delivered by a transcendent, personal, God — a God outside or above nature — is no longer theoretically possible. A synthesis between the Jewish tradition and Spinoza’s philosophy therefore had to be rejected. The “attack of Hobbes, Spinoza, Bayle, Voltaire, Reimarus could not,” Strauss writes, “be warded off with the defences of a Moses Mendelssohn.”

Just as Mendelsohn’s attempt at moderating the Enlightenment has to be rejected, Strauss also writes that adherence to “probity” necessitates dismissing the “post-Enlightenment” synthesis of philosophy and “orthodoxy” as attempted by Hermann Cohen. Post-Enlightenment thinkers like Cohen had attempted to re-create religion in a modified “internalized” form and had denied core religious tenets at odds with Enlightenment metaphysics. As Strauss would note in a later work, God became in Cohen’s system “an idea and not a person,” and “[a]s for Spinoza’s denial of the possibility of miracles, Cohen gives an extremely brief summary of the chapter which Spinoza devotes to the subject of miracles, without saying a word in defense of miracles.” In Philosophy and Law, Strauss criticises what he considers Cohen’s hollow efforts at reconciling modern philosophy with the Jewish tradition:

24 PL, 23; PG, 11. To draw temporarily from the second chapter of Philosophy and Law (PL, 44; PG, 33 [Strauss’s italics]), Strauss contends: “[E]ven if the accommodation of Judaism with philosophy carried out (by Mendelssohn) on the basis of the modern Enlightenment is “essentially closer to the Jewish tradition” than the corresponding achievements of the medieval neo-Platonists and Aristotelians, nevertheless one cannot acquiesce in it. This is not only because Mendelssohn himself diverges from the Jewish tradition on one essential point, but also and especially because he clings to one premise of the entire Jewish tradition that he himself has already undermined: the idea of the revealed, given religion. Mendelssohn denies that the communication of rational truths by revelation is possible.”

25 PL, 23; PG, 10-1: “If, however, the foundation of the Jewish tradition is belief in the creation of the world, in the reality of Biblical miracles, in the absolutely binding character and essential immutability of the Law, resting on the revelation at Sinai, then one must say that the Enlightenment has undermined the foundation of the Jewish tradition.”

26 PL, 23; PG, 11.

27 Concerning Cohen, see PL, 24-7; PG, 12-6. Strauss’s principal criticism of Cohen comes in the second chapter of Philosophy and Law (50).

28 See notes 23, 24, and 25.

29 At SPPP, 236 [italics added]: “According to Cohen, the idea of God, God as an idea and not a person, is required in the first place in order to establish the indispensable harmony between nature and morality…[I]t is incorrect but not altogether misleading to say that, according to Cohen, God is postulated by ethical reason.” The quote on Spinoza and Cohen comes from Strauss’s 1962 introduction to Spinoza’s Critique of Religion, 27. See also note 30 below.
It is not at all difficult to see that the “internalizing” of concepts like creation, miracles, and revelation robs these concepts of their whole meaning. The “internalizing” of these concepts differs from the disavowal of their meaning only in the well-intentioned, if not good, purpose of its authors. If God did not create the world in the “external” sense, if He did not really create it, if the creation therefore cannot be affirmed theoretically – as simply true, as the fact of creation – then one must in all probity disavow the creation, or, at the very least, avoid any talk of creation. But all “internalizations” of the basic tenets of the tradition rest at bottom on this: from the “reflexive” premise, from the “higher level” of the post-Enlightenment synthesis, the relation of God to nature is no longer intelligible and thus is no longer even interesting.

The magnitude of Strauss’s claim must be emphasized. By “internalizing” central religious tenets, and therefore “robbing” them of their meaning, theoretically, the “relation of God to nature is no longer intelligible and thus is no longer even interesting.” Strauss rejects, in toto, Mendelsohn’s and Cohen’s positions as Strauss believes no philosophically defensible synthesis of Enlightenment and “orthodoxy” is possible. For Strauss, there is clearly an unbridgeable gap between the Enlightenment’s metaphysics (particularly the rejection of creation ex nihilo, the possibility of a personal God, and the possibility of miracles) and the central tenets of “orthodoxy.” What Strauss is suggesting is that Judaism as he understands it – and quite possibly Christianity and Islam too – must have a sovereign and personal God, a God who can have, and has, a relation to nature and human beings. This is, perhaps, the essential issue for Strauss in the early 1930s: there is a theoretical gulf between Enlightened Europe and the traditions that treat God and revelation as realities.

Yet what is perhaps most revealing about Strauss’s introduction to Philosophy and Law is not his scepticism towards the Enlightenment’s motivating principle, or his criticisms of attempts

30 PL, 24; PG, 12. In a late (1972) essay on Cohen, Strauss points out that, for Cohen, revelation is not a “historical act” but, rather, is connected to a human being’s capacity for reason. Love of God is, according to Cohen’s system, “love of an idea,” God is an “idea and not a person” (“Introductory Essay for Hermann Cohen,” SPPP, 233-6). At PL, 50; PG, 39, Strauss emphasizes the perceived failures of Cohen’s philosophy, describing an objection to Cohen’s theology provided by an orthodox Jew: “…and what has become of the בורא עולם [Creator of the World]?” Cohen had no answer than – to weep, and thus to confess that the gap between his belief and the belief of the tradition is unbridgeable.” Altman (The German Stranger, 177n142) notes a problem with the tale (which apparently originated with Strauss) about Cohen weeping and admitting his (Cohen’s) system did not accommodate the personal God of the Jewish tradition; there are reasons for asking whether Strauss’s remarks about Cohen are accurate.

31 See notes 23, 24, 25, 29, and 30 above.

32 The question arises as to why Strauss did not consider whether modern cosmology, specifically the theory of a “Big Bang,” allows for an attempt at harmonising faith (particularly the central doctrine of creation ex nihilo) and science, a harmonisation that Spinoza’s philosophy could not allow for. This issue is raised in Section 3.5 below.
at harmonizing philosophy and religion. What is noticeable is Strauss’s belief that the central figures of the Enlightenment had fundamentally misrepresented the power of human reason. Despite its intellectual, political, and social, consequences, the Enlightenment had, according to Strauss, never truly refuted the tenets of “orthodoxy.” The “importance of mockery for the Enlightenment’s critique of religion” is, Strauss contends, “an indirect proof of the irrefutability of orthodoxy.” If God is omnipotent and God’s will unfathomable, then God, and the possibility of miracles and revelation, cannot be disproven by human means. Strauss understands the Enlightenment to have only emphasized the “unknowability of miracles”; what is “decisive” about the Enlightenment is the promotion of the belief that modern science had refuted any “natural world-view,” including those of the Bible and Aristotelian philosophy.

33 Strauss mentions, at various stages of Philosophy and Law, several Enlightenment thinkers including Bayle (d. 1706), Reimarus (d. 1768), Voltaire (d. 1778), Kant (d. 1804), and their forerunners, Hobbes (d. 1679) and Spinoza (d. 1677).

34 PL, 30; PG, 19.

35 PL, 29-31; PG, 18-21.

36 PL, 32-3; PG, 22. As Strauss argues, the Enlightenment emphasized that “orthodoxy’s” fundamental tenets, including “the reality of creation, miracles, and revelation,” were not “known (philosophically or historically) but only believed” (PL, 30; PG, 19-20). The Enlightenment demonstrated that such beliefs “do not have the binding character of the known.” Regarding the end of the teleological view of nature and human beings, see NRH, 7-8. Compare with Lilla’s comments at The Stillborn God, 64-5:

We have never lived in a Copernican, or Newtonian, or Darwinian, or Einsteinian world. The fact that we can now draw up such a list proves the point: we have lost “the world,” if by world we mean the natural “whole” that Greeks and Christians once thought linked God and man. Instead, modern man lives with an ever-changing string of hypotheses about the cosmos and must resign himself to the fact that whatever picture he finds adequate today will probably be found inadequate tomorrow.

If the aim of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment science, primarily physics, is finding a way to control or overcome “natural” processes or “nature,” then the Biblical worldview (human beings as subject to the laws of nature created by God, or God’s eternal order) has clearly been compromised: the human conception of “nature” changes insofar as “nature” is viewed as morally neutral. See Strauss’s comments on the modern conception of nature at IPP, 88: “[N]ature supplies only the almost worthless materials. Accordingly the political society is in no way natural: the state is simply an artefact, due to covenants; man’s perfection is not the natural end of man but an ideal freely formed by man.” Similarly, the Aristotelian worldview and foundations of natural right (a teleological understanding of nature in which human beings are part of the natural world rather than “master” of it) can no longer be accepted. See notes 37 and 47 below.

37 The Aristotelian and Biblical “world-views” are, of course, radically at odds concerning the most fundamental matters, such as the creation of the world and the existence of a personal God. Strauss’s point appears to be that prior to the advent of modern science, it was believable that human beings had a natural tehos, for example, excellence or perfection. Note also that Strauss refers to the “natural world-view” (“natürliche Weltbild” and “natürlichen Weltansicht”)
Strauss does not believe that the Enlightenment truly refuted these natural “world-views.” In order to truly refute “orthodoxy” and go beyond simple assertions regarding the unknowability of miracles, or assertions regarding the falsity of prior “world-views,” modern science must, in Strauss’s view, create a comprehensive system.  

He begins:

[T]he Enlightenment was not distracted from the construction of its world by the failure of its attack on orthodoxy. One must rather say that it was forced into constructing [Aufbau] a world by this very failure. For it would not rest content with dismissing the tenets of orthodoxy as not known but merely believed; having been impressed by the claim of these tenets, it wanted to refute them.

Strauss then asserts that it was not, however, possible for the Enlightenment to entirely refute the tenets of “orthodoxy”:

[The] tenets that the world is the creation of the omnipotent God, that miracles are therefore possible in it, that man is in need of revelation for the guidance of his life, cannot be refuted by experience or by the principle of contradiction; for neither does experience speak against the guidance of the world and of man by an unfathomable [unergründlichen] God, nor does the concept of an unfathomable God contain a contradiction within itself. Thus if one wished to refute [Widerlegen] orthodoxy, there remained no other way but to attempt to prove that the world and life are perfectly intelligible [völlig verständlich] without the assumption of an unfathomable God.

Simply “mocking” religious beliefs and claiming, for example, that it is illogical to assume the existence of an unfathomable God, is not enough. Strauss believes the Enlightenment’s attack against “orthodoxy” was therefore “Napoleonic” insofar as the Enlightenment bypassed “orthodoxy” without ever refuting its fundamental tenets. In Strauss’s view, the refutation of “orthodoxy” requires absolute knowledge of nature being attained; the complete refutation of “orthodoxy” depends on human beings unlocking the mysteries of the universe:

that “the Bible depends” on. See PL, 32-3; PG, 22-3. In lectures delivered in 1952 however (see JPCM, 111), Strauss would state that “[T]here is no Hebrew-biblical term for nature, the Hebrew word being derived very indirectly from a Greek word which is an equivalent of “nature” in Greek, charakter, tora in Hebrew.”

38 PL, 31; PG, 20-1.

39 PL, 31; PG, 20-1.

40 PL, 31; PG, 21.

41 PL, 32; PG, 21.
The refutation of orthodoxy required the success of a system. Man had to establish himself theoretically and practically as master of the world and master of his life; the world created by him had to erase the world merely “given” to him; then orthodoxy would be more than refuted – it would be “outlived” [überlebt].

This contention of Strauss’s places “orthodoxy” in a position of immense power; Strauss effectively insulates “orthodoxy” entirely. Interpreted literally, he suggests that if humankind cannot reach a final, comprehensive, understanding of the universe (or “nature”) for themselves, then the possibility of an “unfathomable” God remains. Strauss claims in *Philosophy and Law* that the atheistic worldview represented by the modern Enlightenment cannot be viewed as premised on a “love of truth.”

Another argument in Strauss’s polemical introduction to *Philosophy and Law* concerns the limitations of modern science. Strauss writes that the Enlightenment represented the belief that modern science could shape a new type of society and, therefore, that science could justifiably replace religious beliefs and moral teachings. In a passage that emphasises the perceived legal, moral, and political ramifications of the European Enlightenment, he argues:

There was only one reason why it was temporarily possible to attempt to ground [Begründen] the modern ideal, the ideal of civilisation, by means of [zu modern] natural science: it was believed that the new concept of nature [Naturbegriff] was the adequate foundation of the new ideal precisely because the old concept of nature had been the adequate foundation of the old ideal. But this was a delusion. It had yet to be ascertained that the “end-free” and “value-free” nature of modern natural science can say nothing to man about “ends and values,” that the “Is,” understood in the sense of modern natural science, involves no reference at all to the “Ought,”

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43 Strauss appears to have never denied this premise. See *JPCM*, 128-9; C & M Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss*, 33-4.

44 *PL*, 137n13; *PG*, 26n1.

45 For Strauss’s views on this topic, see *PL*, 31-2, 37, 137-8n13; *PG*, 20-1, 26. Modern atheism is, for Strauss, capable of being turned into a “dogmatic premise” given that the non-existence of God is as equally unprovable as God’s existence. For similar comments from Strauss, see *SCR* “1962 Preface,” 28-9; “Progress and Return,” *JPCM*, 122-3.
and that therefore the traditional view that the right way is a life according to nature becomes meaningless under the modern premise.\textsuperscript{46}

Strauss’s point is that modern empirical science cannot validate a series of “oughts,” nor does modern science inform us of a human \textit{telos}.\textsuperscript{47} Aristotle’s teleological metaphysics or the Bible’s account of humankind’s purpose provided socially and politically useful belief systems as, with these accounts of nature or humankind, claims about human perfection, flourishing, ethical actions, and human life having an implicit purpose, could be believed in. A science that is understood as objective, “value-neutral,” and “end-free,” cannot provide the same foundations. To quote Strauss again:

[I]f modern natural science cannot justify the modern ideal \textit{[sc. the ideal of civilisation]}, and if there is nonetheless unmistakably a relation between the modern ideal and modern natural science, one sees oneself compelled to ask whether it is not, on the contrary, the modern ideal that is in truth the basis of modern natural science, and thus whether it is not precisely a new belief \cite{Glaube} rather than the new knowledge \cite{Wissen} that justifies the Enlightenment.\textsuperscript{48}

Strauss’s criticism is that modern natural science only recognises facts, not values; modern science tells us the “is,” not the “ought.”\textsuperscript{49} Given that this science is “value-free,” it cannot inform us as to why we ought to choose an “enlightened” civilisation; modern natural science is therefore unable to defend the “modern ideal.” The question Strauss raises is whether the Enlightenment does not rest on any actual “new knowledge” derived from modern science. Rather, is the Enlightenment grounded in \textit{belief} only; specifically, the “new belief” that a civilisation can repudiate, and successfully continue without, “orthodoxy” and prior conceptions of human nature?

Many of these themes are undoubtedly pressing concerns for Strauss. Recalling that the introduction to \textit{Philosophy and Law} was written in the mid-1930s, one of Strauss’s concerns is the

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{PL}, 34; \textit{PG}, 23-4.

\textsuperscript{47} Strauss will later remark (\textit{NRH}, 7-8): “[N]atural right in its classic form is connected with a teleological view of the universe. All natural beings have a natural end, a natural destiny, which determined what kind of operation is good for them.” However, the teleological view of the universe “would seem to have been destroyed by modern natural science.”

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{PL}, 34; \textit{PG}, 24.

\textsuperscript{49} Compare with Strauss’s statements on the social sciences and Auguste Comte at \textit{WPP}, 18-9. On the distinction between facts and values more generally, see \textit{NRH}, chapter 2.
theoretical tenability of Zionism. If the alternatives are “orthodoxy” or “Enlightenment,” and these alternatives are mutually exclusive, then the situation:

[A]ppears to be insoluble for the Jew who cannot be orthodox and who must consider purely political Zionism, the only “solution of the Jewish problem” possible on the basis of atheism, as a resolution that is indeed highly honorable but not, in earnest and in the long run, adequate.50

There are reasons to believe that Strauss is referring to himself. Although he offers a series of insightful criticisms against the Enlightenment, and although he argues that “orthodoxy” has not been definitively refuted, it is difficult to believe that Strauss actually wishes for, or is planning, a personal return to “orthodoxy.” Strauss’s Zionism appears to be the “purely political” variety he refers to, the type that has an “insoluble” problem insofar as a purely “human solution” to the “Jewish problem” is the only solution available to a Jewish atheist yet, as Strauss would later openly acknowledge, this “human solution” undermines the entire Jewish identity and Jewish tradition.51

In light of all of these factors, Strauss considers whether an “enlightened” return to religion is possible:

If finally there is in the modern world only the alternative “orthodoxy or atheism,” and if on the other hand the need for an enlightened Judaism [aufgeklärten Judentums] is urgent, then one sees oneself compelled to ask whether enlightenment is necessarily modern enlightenment.52

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50 PL, 38; PG, 28.

51 At “1962 Introduction,” SCR, 6: “Yet the foundation, the authoritative layer, of the Jewish heritage presents itself, not as a product of the human mind, but as a divine gift, as divine revelation…[W]hen religious Zionism understands itself, it is in the first place Jewish faith and only secondarily Zionism. It must regard as blasphemous the notion of a human solution to the Jewish problem.” Concerning Strauss’s political Zionism, see Ahman, The German Stranger, 75-142; Sheppard, Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile, 17-53; Zank, Leo Strauss: The Early Writings, 63-137. As noted in-text, it is difficult to believe that Strauss seeks a personal return to “orthodoxy” given what is known today about Strauss’s atheism and support for political Zionism. There is also the issue of Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s influence on Strauss. That said, based on a reading of Philosophy and Law only, one might indeed think that it is a believing Jew who writes the work. This is precisely the conclusion Karl Löwith arrived at. See note 52 below.

52 PL, 38; PG, 28. The introduction to Philosophy and Law led Karl Löwith to believe Strauss was an “orthodox Jew.” Strauss emphatically denied Löwith’s assessment (see Strauss’s letter to Löwith, 23 June 1935, GS 2:xxvi). The response of Gershom Scholem to Philosophy and Law is equally interesting. Scholem did not interpret Strauss’s comments in the introduction to Philosophy and Law to be a defense of “orthodoxy.” In a letter to Walter Benjamin (The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932-1940, 156-7), Scholem writes:

Any day now, Schocken [sc. the initial publisher of Philosophie und Gesetz] will bring out a book by Leo Strauss (I devoted great energy to obtaining an appointment for Strauss in Jerusalem), marking the occasion of the
The introduction to *Philosophy and Law* indicates that, by the mid-1930s, Strauss is keenly aware of the Enlightenment’s apparent theoretical contradictions and that Strauss is cognisant of the legal, political, and *state*-founding uses a (apparently theoretically irrefutable) religion can have. These appear to be some of the primary reasons for Strauss’s interest in medieval philosophy. The implicit meaning of Strauss’s call for an “enlightened Judaism” seems to be that, given the uses religion can have, and given the theoretical problems he perceives with the modern Enlightenment, philosophers need to reconsider the place of religion in modernity. For Strauss, in the mid-1930s, the key to an “enlightened Judaism” is Maimonides:

> [O]ne sees oneself induced – provided one does not know from the outset, as one cannot know from the outset, that only new, unheard-of, ultra-modern thoughts can resolve our perplexity – to apply for aid to the medieval Enlightenment, the Enlightenment of Maimonides.

Curiously, in detailing his return to medieval philosophy and Maimonides, Strauss writes of “unheard-of, ultra-modern thoughts.” Does Strauss mean to evoke Nietzsche? Strauss certainly understands Nietzsche to have “radicalized” the Enlightenment’s critique of the principles of the Greek and Biblical traditions and that, by effectively undermining those sources of authority, Maimonides anniversary. The book begins with an unfeigned and copiously argued (if completely ludicrous) affirmation of atheism as the most important Jewish watchword. Such admirable boldness for a book that will be read by everybody as having been written by a candidate for Jerusalem! It even outdoes the first 40 pages of your postdoctoral dissertation! I admire this ethical stance and regret the – obviously conscious and deliberately provoked – suicide of such a capable mind. As is to be expected here, only three people at the very most will make use of the freedom to vote for an appointment of an atheist to a teaching position that serves to endorse the philosophy of religion.

Strauss’s response to Löwith in the June letter (“By the way, I am *not* an Orthodox Jew!”), indicates that Scholem’s interpretation is accurate: Strauss writes *Philosophy and Law* as an atheist. Strauss does not consider the problems of his position however: why should an atheist (especially one who agrees with the Nietzschean claim that “probity” became a virtue due to Biblical religion) defend “orthodoxy” and emphasize the theoretical contradictions of the Enlightenment? What Strauss means precisely by “enlightened Judaism” is therefore worth asking. As far as I am aware, this term only appears once in *Philosophy and Law*, and is the only time Strauss uses the term in his works. Zank notes that at the time of writing the introduction to *Philosophy and Law*, around 1935, the Nazis were putting the Nuremberg Laws into effect (Zank, Leo Strauss: The Early Writings, 23-4, 45). What did Strauss believe an “enlightened Judaism” could deliver? See notes 53 and 55 below.

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53 At *PL*, 38-9; *PG*, 28-9: “[W]e shall attempt in what follows to point out the leading idea of the medieval Enlightenment that has become lost [abhanden] to the modern Enlightenment and its heirs, and through an understanding of which many modern certainties and doubts lose their force: the idea of Law.”

54 *PL*, 38; *PG*; 28.
Nietzsche gives access to “an original understanding of these [sc. Greek and Biblical] principles.” As we will see in Section 3.2, what Strauss finds in the works of the *falasifa* and Maimonides is a teaching concerning the need for religious law. It is a teaching that means “enlightenment,” understood as movement away from religion, is to be restricted.

### 3.2 Strauss *contra*-Guttmann: the primacy of divine law for medieval philosophers

A discernible theme in the first two chapters of *Philosophy and Law* is Strauss’s opposition to attempts at harmonizing religion and philosophy. Strauss’s comments on Guttmann’s *Philosophies of Judaism* (1934) emphasise precisely this point. Strauss is skeptical of Guttmann’s thesis that medieval philosophers believed “unassisted reason” could arrive at the same “truths” communicated by revelation and Guttmann’s claim that, given the perceived power of “unassisted reason,” medieval philosophers assigned to revelation “a merely popular pedagogical significance.” This is a central thesis of *Philosophy and Law* (and would become a central thesis of Strauss’s career). Strauss argues, *contra*-Guttmann and others, that the approach to revelation taken by several medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers was superior insofar as these medieval thinkers did not claim reason and revelation were, so to speak, on a par with one another. These thinkers did not, Strauss contends, believe that reason and revelation led to the same

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55 Note Strauss’s claims concerning Nietzsche and the “radical Enlightenment” at PL, 136n2; PG, 13-4n1. Similarly, in “Religiöse Lage der Gegenwart,” a text written in 1930, Strauss writes: “Through Nietzsche, tradition has been shaken to its roots. It has completely lost its self-evident truth. We are left in this world without any authority, any direction” (GS 2:389 [Italics in original]). On this theme, see Strauss’s similar remarks, made in the late 1960s, at LAM, 8. These comments suggest that Strauss understands Nietzsche’s “radicalisation” of the Enlightenment’s critique to indicate that (i) there is no true source of, or grounds for, political authority yet (ii) Nietzsche’s critique demonstrates the need for authority, i.e., why the Greek (specifically, the Platonic) and Biblical traditions emphasised law.

56 Julius Guttmann (1880-1950) was the head of the Academy for the Science of Judaism (*Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*) located in Berlin. In 1934, Guttmann became a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Strauss came to Guttmann’s attention after writing an article criticizing Cohen’s views on Spinoza. Strauss was employed at the *Akademie* from 1925-31. While Strauss’s criticisms of Guttmann in *Philosophy and Law* have been described as a “broadside” (Smith, “Introduction,” CCLS, 20), Guttmann reportedly wanted Strauss to join the Hebrew University; Strauss had been unsuccessful in obtaining employment at the Hebrew University in the mid-1930’s (see note 52 above). Prior to his death, Guttmann was, apparently, saddened that Strauss chose to remain at the University of Chicago. On Strauss and Guttmann, see CCLS, 16, 20-1, 35; JPCM, 4; Leo Strauss: The Early Writings, 10; Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile, 73-4. Guttmann’s *Philosophies of Judaism* was originally published in German in 1933; an English translation, based on a slightly amended Hebrew edition, was published in 1964.

57 PL, 72; PG, 60-1.
metaphysical truths and moral code; rather, Strauss asserts, divine revelation was recognised as having a series of social and political applications unassisted reason could not have. Strauss’s approach to Guttmann’s work might come as no surprise; akin to his criticisms of Moses Mendelsohn and Herman Cohen in Philosophy and Law, Strauss can be interpreted as arguing that philosophy and religion cannot be meaningfully reconciled, in whatever manner.

Strauss’s argument against Guttmann can be mapped out as follows. Strauss notes that a major contention of Guttmann’s is that the “form” of Biblical religion – as doctrines revealed miraculously by a personal, caring God – was “better preserved” by the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic metaphysics of the Middle Ages than by the mechanistic metaphysics of the Enlightenment. According to Guttmann’s thesis, medieval metaphysics could accommodate the “form” of Biblical religion (i.e., the idea of revelation) as God’s commandments could be reconciled with Aristotle’s teleology. The notion of revealed laws, laws that would lead human beings to moral and intellectual perfection, could be harmonised with a teleological understanding of human beings and nature.

However, while the teleological metaphysics of the Middle Ages could accommodate the “form” of Biblical religion (revelation), harmonising Aristotelian and Neoplatonic philosophical systems with religious tenets meant sacrificing Biblical “content,” as ancient Greek philosophy (particularly Aristotelianism) was often at odds with core religious doctrines, such as a creator God, creation ex nihilo, the notion of an immortal soul, and so on. This situation was effectively

58 See Guttmann’s claims at Philosophies of Judaism, 62-3. The discussion at this point in Guttmann’s text centers on the medieval philosopher Saadia B. Joseph’s (d. 942) understanding of the relationship between reason and revelation. Guttmann writes that the “content” of “truly divine revelation is identical in Saadia’s eyes with the content of reason. Negatively, this means that there is no contradiction between the two spheres; positively, it signifies that reason is capable of reaching through its own powers the content of the divine truth.” The thesis that reason makes “fundamental metaphysical truth” and the “moral demands of revelation” evident, and that revelation was understood as only possessing a “pedagogic value” was, Guttmann contends, accepted by many of Saadia’s successors. The idea of revelation having a primarily pedagogic value “was taken over by the rationalistic trend in Jewish religious philosophy, which was dominant during the Middle Ages.” Notably, Guttmann writes that this conception of reason and revelation appears in Maimonides’s works and that “[e]ven the modern Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, insofar as it maintains the idea of revelation, views the relationship between religion and revelation in fundamentally the same manner.” I.e., although revelation provides the truth, the absolute truth, to everyone, the “acquisition of truth by rational means is a religious precept [i.e. for Saadia].” The task of philosophy is, then, to understand why these truths were provided by the revelation.

59 PL, 44-5; PG, 33.

60 PL, 44-5; PG, 33.

61 PL, 45; PG, 33. For Guttmann’s statement regarding Jewish doctrines being altered to accommodate Aristotelian philosophy, see Philosophies of Judaism (trans. Silverman), 182.
reversed by Spinoza’s pantheistic “transformation” of metaphysics: mechanistic metaphysics and belief in monism meant that the Bible could no longer be understood as teachings delivered by a personal God. God is, according to Spinoza’s system, interpreted to be the universe. Accordingly, the Bible had to be understood as comprising of doctrines deduced by the human being’s “religious consciousness.”62 Once understood as a product of human beings, rather than a product of divine revelation (i.e., as absolute truth claims), the teachings of the Bible no longer had to be reconciled with the truths of reason or science. As religious beliefs were understood as based on the individual’s “religious consciousness” rather than divine revelation, mechanistic metaphysics better preserved religious “content.” However, this was achieved at the cost of sacrificing the “form” of Biblical religion: according to mechanistic metaphysics, revelation is not possible.63

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62 PL., 44-5, 52-3; PG, 33-4, 41-2.

63 As Strauss writes, following Spinoza, philosophy of religion “no longer consists in the harmonizing of the doctrines of revelation with the doctrines of reason, but in the analysis of the religious consciousness.” PL., 45 [Italics added]; PG, 34. Strauss’s comments at this part of Philosophy and Law are unfortunately quite brief; some commentary based on Guttmann’s work is required to understand Strauss’s point of reference (page numbers cited hereafter refer to Guttmann’s Philosophies of Judaism [Silverman trans.]). Briefly stated, Guttmann draws attention to the fact that the metaphysics of the Middle Ages were teleological; the philosophers who followed Aristotle considered creation as having an inbuilt purpose. Aristotelian teleological metaphysics could, then, “compromise” with key religious doctrines. For example, the Aristotelian/Neoplatonic idea of union with the Active Intellect could be reconciled with the doctrine of the immortality of the soul (281). However, Spinoza’s metaphysical goal, “to comprehend nature as a mathematical-causal nexus,” necessarily led to a “break” with both revealed religion (267, 281) and Neoplatonic emanation. The doctrine of emanation was seen as “arbitrary” and “obscure” (271). Spinoza attributed the eternal laws of nature to God (271, 273, 280-1); in contrast to the Neoplatonists, God was no longer viewed as the “primary substance” from which other substances emanated (271). On this basis, miracles (understood as the idea of a break in the eternal laws of nature) became impossible (282). Guttmann notes Spinoza’s “intentional ambiguity,” i.e., Spinoza’s attempt to disguise the fact that revelation is impossible according to his system (282). For Spinoza, God is only the source of morality in the sense that God is the source of an eternal order that gives deeds either benign or evil consequences (282-3). Importantly, with God conceived of as the “foundation of mathematical necessity,” an “abyss” between human beings and the idea of a personal God (281) was created. Spinoza’s break with Maimonides (as well as with the Islamic Aristotelians) had two important consequences: Spinoza made prophecy entirely dependent on the imagination (284) and, given the differences between his system and the metaphysics of medieval philosophy, Spinoza did not attempt to reconcile revealed religion with philosophy (265).

As Philosophy and Law makes evident (and as noted in-text above), Strauss understands Guttmann as arguing that medieval Jewish Aristotelians placed the “content” of the Bible (its teachings) at risk by attempting to reconcile revealed religion with Aristotelian philosophy. However, Jewish and Islamic Aristotelians could retain belief in the “form” of Biblical religion; i.e., that the Bible or Quran was based on God’s revelation to humankind. In contrast, the philosophy of the Enlightenment, based on mechanistic metaphysics, entirely removed the possibility of direct revelation or miracles: if the universe is understood as a machine, and God is that machine, what room is there for a transcendent and personal God? While the “content” of the Bible could be preserved as teachings deduced by a human being’s “religious consciousness,” Biblical “content” could no longer be understood as having been given personally to
For Strauss, the problem with Guttmann’s “extraordinarily attractive”\textsuperscript{64} thesis is similar to the problem he identifies in Mendelsohn’s and Cohen’s works. The Enlightenment’s mechanistic philosophy means a loss of “belief in the authority of revelation”; the notion of a personal God who delivers prophecy out of divine love, a personal God who rules nature, is no longer tenable.\textsuperscript{65} As Strauss writes:

Modern philosophy – so runs his [sic. Guttmann’s] thesis in truth – is more capable than medieval philosophy in preserving intellectually the “inner world” of belief; but it is less capable of acknowledging the essential relation of the God who rules this “inner world” to “external” [äußeren] nature. The least one has to demand under these circumstances is that modern and medieval philosophy must somehow supplement each other.\textsuperscript{66} [Strauss’s italics]

Strauss’s concern is clear enough. If God is no longer understood as ruling “external” nature, if revelation is not theoretically possible, and if religion in post-Enlightenment Europe is to be understood as “inner” belief, or resting on one’s personal “religious consciousness,” then the normative force of religion (commands from the Creator God) is clearly lost.\textsuperscript{67} If the “form” of religion (\textit{i.e.}, the possibility of revelation from the one true God) is no longer believable, there is, perhaps, no tangible basis for defending communities that were founded on, and remain tied to, the belief that God has revealed to them a series of laws or commandments. Given Strauss’s criticisms of political Zionism – namely, that it means a “human solution” to the “Jewish problem,” that it requires having to “make peace with traditional Jewish thought” about the \textit{Galut}, and that it is not, therefore, “in earnest and in the long run, adequate” – this might humans via a miraculous intervention in the natural order. For Guttmann’s entry on Spinoza and medieval philosophy, see \textit{Philosophies of Judaism}, 265-85. Strauss notes the “pantheistic adornments” of mechanistic metaphysics at \textit{SCR}, 107.

\textsuperscript{64} \textit{PL}, 45; \textit{PG}, 34.

\textsuperscript{65} At \textit{PL}, 45-6 [italics added]; \textit{PG}, 34: “[T]he adequate scientific knowledge of Judaism is bought \textit{at the cost of the belief in the authority of revelation}, \textit{at the cost of a considerable loss to the Jewish “substance of life,”} generally stated, that the owl of Minerva begins its flight at dusk. Guttmann however does not think so fatalistically, so hopelessly.”

\textsuperscript{66} \textit{PL}, 51; \textit{PG}, 40.

\textsuperscript{67} At \textit{PL}, 52; \textit{PG}, 40-1: “[E]ven if he [sic. Guttmann] concedes to modern philosophy a certain superiority over medieval philosophy, still he makes even this concession only with a view to the fact that modern philosophy brings the “central religious ideas” [\textit{zentralen religiösen Gedanken}] of the Jewish tradition into prominence more than medieval philosophy does: he thereby acknowledges the Jewish tradition, and thus a non-modern, pre-modern court [\textit{vormoderne Instanz}], as the judge [\textit{Richterin}] of modern thought, in this way demonstrating most clearly his insight into the essential inadequacy of modern thought.” “[f]inner world of belief” and “religious consciousness” come at \textit{PL}, 51, 53; \textit{PG}, 40-1.
constitute one of the primary reasons for Strauss’s attack against Guttmann’s thesis.68 As Strauss writes in the introduction to *Philosophy and Law*, the Enlightenment’s metaphysics created a position from which the “relation of God to nature is no longer intelligible and thus is no longer even interesting.” Strauss suggests that if religion is to retain any meaningful place in modernity, then it is fundamental that the possible truth and authority of revelation can be recognised.

It is in this regard that Strauss’s elevation of the “form” of religion, and the position that he attributes to medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers, becomes relevant. In Strauss’s opinion, Guttmann underestimates the significance medieval philosophers attributed to the revealed character of religion.69 Strauss argues that, as human beings, and therefore as political beings, medieval philosophers believed that laws safeguarding the “welfare of the body”70 were required. They recognised the need for laws that could establish and maintain a community; as philosophers, they wanted to live under rational laws, understood as laws that led “to the perfection proper to man.”71 Strauss believes Guttmann is incorrect as Guttmann interprets medieval philosophy through a distinctly modern paradigm. Guttmann reads medieval philosophers and the philosophers of the European Enlightenment generally as believing that revelation and reason lead to the same metaphysical truths and moral demands.72 By interpreting medieval philosophers in this way, Strauss considers Guttmann to overlook the political and legal dimensions revelation held for these thinkers. It is the “form” of monotheistic religion – as revealed law – that is important. As Strauss writes:

[H]is [sc. Guttmann’s] central presentation gives the impression that for the rationalists of the Middle Ages, the communication of truths, and not the proclamation of the law, is the primary end of the revelation. And since the truths communicated by revelation are, in the view of these rationalists, accessible also to unassisted reason, there arises the still more dubious impression that these philosophers attributed to revelation, ultimately and in earnest, a merely popular pedagogical significance. The community-founding, state-founding meaning of revelation becomes in Guttmann a secondary end.73 [Strauss’s italics]

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68 I am partly drawing here from Strauss’s “1962 introduction,” SCR, 4-6. There are clear parallels between Strauss’s “mature” position on revelation, and the position he takes in *Philosophy and Law*; the question must be asked, however, whether his “mature” position on revelation is rhetorical, or “exoteric.”

69 PL, 71-2; PG, 59-60.

70 PL, 70; PG, 59.

71 PL, 71; PG, 59-60.

72 See note 58 above.

73 PL, 72; PG, 60-1.
Strauss argues that several medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers did not understand revelation as communicating “truths” that could also be arrived at by “unassisted” reason. Rather, as the idea of revelation could be used to create binding political-legal codes (its “state-founding” function), Strauss believes medieval philosophers considered themselves “dependent” on revelation. When Guttmann labels the argument of some medieval Jewish philosophers concerning the ethical need for revelation to be “primitive” (i.e., the claim that reason needs to be supplemented by revelation, and that revelation is therefore required to complete “ethical commandments”), Strauss makes a strong criticism of Guttmann’s assessment. Strauss emphasizes a key difference he believes Muslim and Jewish philosophy (which Strauss understands as emerging from religions that emphasize “law” above “creed” or “dogmas”) had with “Christian” thought:

We would accept this adjective [sc. “primitive,” from Guttmann’s reading], if only in its primitive, original sense: the Islamic and Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages are “more primitive” [und primitiver] than the modern philosophers because they are guided not, like them, by the derived idea of natural right [Idee des Naturrechts], but by the primary, ancient [ursprünglichen, antiken] idea of law as a unified [einheitlichen], total [totalen] regimen of human life; in other words, because they are pupils of Plato [Schüler Platons] and not pupils of Christians. [Strauss’s italics]

On Strauss’s reading, medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers understood divine laws to be necessary since, although beliefs considered “rational” might be discovered or argued for, these philosophers understood that rational beliefs needed divine backing to become ethically or

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74 PL, 73; PG, 61-2. For Guttmann’s claim, see Philosophies of Judaism (trans. Silverman), 70: “Reason teaches us that creatures are obliged to give thanks to God for his mercies, and forbids us to blaspheme his name or to injure one another. From this latter rule Saadia derives most important ethical considerations in a somewhat primitive utilitarian manner. No less primitive is the argument – used by many later Jewish thinkers – contending that these commandments need supplementing by means of revelation.”

75 For Strauss’s most explicit elucidation of this theme, see PAI, 9-10: “To understand these obvious differences [sc. that medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophy has with medieval Christian philosophy], one must take into consideration the essential difference between Judaism and Islam on the one hand and Christianity on the other. Revelation as understood by Jews and Muslims has the character of Law (torah, shari‘a) rather than of faith. Accordingly, what first came to the sight of the Islamic and Jewish philosophers in their reflections on Revelation was not a creed or a set of dogmas, but a social order, if an all-comprehensive order, which regulates not merely actions but thoughts or opinions as well.” See also the discussion in Section 3.4 below.

76 PL, 73; PG, 62. See note 92 below.
politically “effectual.” It is noteworthy in this regard that Strauss contends medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers did not believe in a distinction between religion and politics (the religious law provides a “unified, total regimen of human life”). For this reason, Strauss argues that medieval Islamic and Jewish thinkers are to be considered “pupils” of Plato; the Islamic Aristotelians even understood their prophet as “under Plato’s instruction.” As Strauss continues:

According to the doctrine of the Islamic Aristotelians, transplanted into Judaism particularly by Maimonides, the prophet, as philosopher and legislator in one, is the proclaimer of a law whose aim is the specific perfection of man. But every law aims at making community life possible. Hence the prophet is the founder of a community directed towards the specific perfection of man, and is thus the founder of the ideal state. The classic model of the ideal state is the Platonic state. In fact, and even expressly and programmatically, the Islamic Aristotelians understand the ideal state founded by the prophet under Plato’s instruction [Tatsächlich und sogar ausdrücklich und programmatisch verstehen die islamischen Aristoteliker den vom Propheten gestifteten idealen Staat gemäß der Platonischen Anweisung]. They understand the prophet as founder of the Platonic state, as Platonic philosopher-king; the prophetic legislator has fulfilled what the philosopher Plato called for but could only call for. [Strauss’s italics]

According to this argument, the Islamic Aristotelians viewed prophets through Plato’s paradigm, a paradigm that stressed the law-giving, state founding, capabilities of leaders backed by God, or a divine source of knowledge. These medieval thinkers interpreted Plato’s philosopher-king not as the founder of an ideal state “to be awaited in the future” but, rather, as an “actual prophet who existed in the past,” a prophet who, as mentioned, was “under Plato’s instruction.” Several medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers are, Strauss writes, therefore Platonists insofar as “they modify Plato’s answer in the light of the revelation that has now actually occurred.” These philosophers recognised that, due to their “Platonic” prophet, they already had, unlike Plato, the political basis for an “ideal state.” These medieval philosophers had a prophet who had brought comprehensive divine laws. This is the reason why Strauss declares that the topic of the foundation of law was of little interest to several medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers, “even the last

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77 PL, 73; PG, 61.

78 PL, 73-4; PG, 62.

79 See “Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi,” 15-6. Strauss notes that Maimonides does not describe Moses as a Platonic legislator “explicitly,” but that Maimonides points readers towards such a view.

80 PL, 75; PG, 63.

81 PL, 75; PG, 63.
theme of their philosophy." As the state-founding law had been “given” by revelation, it “no longer needs to be sought.” The “philosophy of law” found in medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophy therefore “does not have the sharpness, originality, depth, and – ambiguity of Platonic politics.”

Strauss clearly views Islamic and Jewish Aristotelians as having been influenced by the political elements of Plato’s philosophy; their interpretation of revelation “must,” Strauss claims, “be understood fundamentally as derivative from Platonic philosophy.” Yet despite offering this thesis against Guttmann’s work, Strauss concedes that supporting evidence is difficult to obtain:

[I]t is not enough to trace this teaching [i.e., the primacy of the revealed law] down from Platonic philosophy on the evidence of exact source analysis. On the contrary, the emergence of this teaching from Platonic philosophy must be conceived in its potentiality. [Strauss’s italics]

Strauss is aware of a significant problem with his reading of medieval philosophy. Modern scholars are unlikely to find in medieval Muslim or Jewish philosophic texts the claim that Plato had directly indicated to them (the medievals) why they ought to believe in, or accept the necessity of, divine laws. Similarly, medieval Islamic philosophers are unlikely to write that they understood their prophet as having been “under Plato’s instruction.” The interpretive problem Strauss has is that if medieval philosophers are read as believing Muslims or Jews (i.e., they are considered to have genuinely believed, for example, in the commands of Allah via Muhammad, or to have genuinely believed in the commands of Yahweh via Moses) then, by definition, these medieval thinkers already accepted the notion of prophets with divine laws. The influence Plato’s works would have had on these thinkers therefore becomes less certain. If medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophers already believed in, or were at least already receptive to, concepts such as prophet-legislators, divine laws, metaphysical knowledge, and an “ideal” state, why did they need Plato’s works except to, perhaps, validate (or further validate) beliefs they already held? As

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82 PL 75; PG 64.

83 PL 75; PG 64.

84 PL 75; PG 64. At PL 76; PG 64 [Strauss’s italics]: “[I]t is necessary first of all to identify the highest perspective acknowledged in common by both Plato and the medieval philosophers. This perspective proves to be the idea of a rational law, that is, a law directed to the specific perfection of man. But such a law – and only such a law deserves the name “law” – can only be of divine origin. The idea of the divine law is the required highest perspective.” Concerning this point, see Plato’s Laws, 624.

85 PL 76; PG 64 [Strauss’s italics].

86 PL 76; PG 64.
Strauss concedes, the importance Platonic philosophy had to these thinkers can only be “conceived in its potentiality.”

Interpreting medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers as believers in revelation presents Strauss with other difficulties. Strauss writes that medieval philosophers needed revelation not only for its “state-founding” function; they also depended on revelation as they could not decisively answer theoretical questions such as whether the world was created or eternal. In this regard, Strauss notes Maimonides’s claim that reason “has a limit and must therefore accept the suprarational doctrines of revelation.” Philosophy and Law therefore indicates an attempt by Strauss to position medieval philosophers between a pagan Platonism and a genuine belief in, and reliance upon, revelation. This reading of medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophy is particularly evident when Strauss refers to Plato’s Laws:

The interpretation of Platonic philosophy, which is the indispensable presupposition of a radical interpretation of medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophy, has to begin not from the Republic but from the Laws. It is in the Laws that Plato undoubtedly stands closest to the world of the revealed law, since it is there that, in accordance with a kind of interpretation anticipating the philosophic interpretation of the revealed law among the medieval thinkers, Plato transforms the “divine laws” of Greek antiquity into truly divine laws, or recognises them as truly divine laws [wahrhaft göttliche Gesetze]. In this approximation to the revelation without the guidance of the revelation we grasp at its origin the unbelieving [ungläubige], philosophic foundation of the belief in the revelation.

This passage further emphasizes the problem with Strauss’s “radical interpretation.” The assertion that medieval thinkers understood Plato as a pagan philosopher (rather than being interpreted as divinely inspired, as ancient and medieval texts sometimes suggest) raises a critical issue. A pagan philosopher calling for philosopher-kings or divinely inspired prophets would cast doubt on the legitimacy of revealed religions, particularly a religion like Islam whose primary prophet came long after Plato’s works were written. Given the similarities discerned between

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87 PL, 64; PG, 52.

88 PL, 66; PG, 55.

89 PL, 76; PG, 64-5. At PL, 76; PG, 63: “[I]n the foundations of philosophizing itself, they are guided by Plato to answer a Platonic question within a framework laid out by Plato.” For Strauss, the difference between Plato and the medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers is that, for the medievals, the “founder of the ideal state is not a possible philosopher-king to be awaited in the future, but an actual prophet who existed in the past.” See note 92 below.

90 This theme is raised in Chapter 4 of the present thesis.
Platonism, Judaism and Islam (most notably, the concept of a prophet-legislator), Strauss asserts that medieval Islamic rationalists had recognised the “aporia” Platonistic philosophy faced:

Plato’s approximation to the revelation furnishes the medieval thinkers with the *starting-point* [Ansatz] from which they could understand the revelation philosophically. But if they were not to lose confidence in the revelation because of Plato, then it had to be the case that Platonic philosophy had suffered from an *aporia* in principle that had been remedied [behoben] only by the revelation. The radical interpretation of the doctrine of the Islamic Aristotelians and their Jewish pupils presupposes, therefore, an interpretation of Plato’s *Laws* attentive to the fact that the *Laws* point to the revelation, but only point to it.91

If “they were not to lose confidence in the revelation” is the decisive point, Strauss seems to recognise that a key aspect of his reading is unclear. Why did Islamic or Jewish philosophers need *Platonic philosophy* to inform them that divine laws were necessary? According to the reading Strauss gives in *Philosophy and Law*, these philosophers already believed in God, revelation, the possibility of metaphysical knowledge, and the concept of a prophet-legislator. Strauss’s answer to this interpretive problem is, as mentioned, to state that these medieval thinkers considered Platonic philosophy “to have suffered from an *aporia*.” That is, medieval philosophers saw that Plato recognised the need for divine laws, *yet there was no prophet in Plato’s Athens.* It is crucial to note that, in *Philosophy and Law*, Strauss does not suggest that medieval philosophers interpreted Plato to be a pagan philosopher who called, from “between the lines,” for men to *pose* as prophets and attribute laws to God in order to create virtuous regimes. If medieval philosophers

91 *PL*, 76; *PG*, 64-5.

92 Compare with “Some remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi,” 4-5:

*[T]here is a profound agreement between Jewish and Muslim thought on the one hand and ancient thought on the other: it is not the Bible and the Koran, but perhaps the New Testament, and certainly the Reformation and modern philosophy, which brought about the break with ancient thought. The guiding idea upon which the Greeks and the Jews agree is precisely the idea of the divine law as a single and total law which is at the same time religious law, civil law and moral law. And it is indeed a Greek philosophy of the divine law which is the basis of the Jewish and Muslim philosophy of the Torah or the Shari’a; according to Avicenna, Plato’s *Laws* is the classic work on prophecy and the Shari’a. The prophet occupies in this medieval politics the same place the philosopher-kings occupy in Platonic politics; by fulfilling the essential conditions of the philosopher-kings, enumerated by Plato, he founds the perfect city, i.e., the ideal Platonic city.*

This passage anticipates the claims made in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. See Section 3.4 of the present Chapter.
had interpreted Plato in this way, they would have, of course, lost all faith in the revelation. This is why Strauss must, in *Philosophy and Law*, describe an “aporia.” Strauss seriously entertains the notion that the *falsafija* and their Jewish pupils truly believed in the revelation yet they were, simultaneously, serious readers of Plato, the pagan philosopher who had documented the need for divine laws several hundred years prior to Islam and (on Strauss’s reading) entirely independently of the Jewish tradition.

As we will see in Section 3.4, the tension in Strauss’s reading is resolved in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. Post-*Philosophy and Law*, Strauss interprets medieval Islamic and Jewish thinkers as atheists who side wholeheartedly with a secular, anti-metaphysical, Platonic political philosophy. On Strauss’s “mature” reading, it was Plato’s works that caused, or at least encouraged, medieval thinkers to disbelieve, on a personal level, in divine laws. However, Plato’s works helped the same medieval thinkers to recognise how widespread belief in divine laws could be socially and politically beneficial. As documented below in Section 3.3, the basis of Strauss’s “mature” position is seen, to some degree, in *Philosophy and Law*.

### 3.3 The divine law as comprehensive: Averroes, Maimonides, and the restriction of “enlightenment”

As discussed, Strauss argues in *Philosophy and Law* that, in terms of the creation of a comprehensive legal-political order, medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers considered revelation, the divine law, to have several benefits over unassisted reason. The idea of divine law was considered the best means of creating a binding legal code; the idea of divine law was therefore eminently useful for the operation of a political regime. Furthermore, the divine law could definitively answer theoretical questions that philosophers could only debate, such as the

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93 Note that, at this point in his career, Strauss *is* interpreting medieval philosophers as true believers in revelation. At PL, 58-9 [Italics in original]; PG, 47: “[T]here may be debate [i.e. by medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers] about what must be considered the content of revelation; there may thus be debate about the createdness or eternity of matter, about whether immortality belongs to the soul or only to the intellect, about the eternal perdurance or future destruction of the present world, etc. etc.; but no debate is possible about the reality of the revelation and about the obligation to obey it. And it also means: the recognition of the authority of the revelation is “self-evident” [selbstverständlich]. The medieval philosophers do indeed strive to demonstrate the philosophic possibility of the revelation and the historical reality of the revelation, but these arguments only confirm what was already established before argument, what was evident “of itself.” For the possibility of the revelation follows from its reality [Wirklichkeit], but its reality is known immediately – in spite of and because of the mediating tradition, it is known immediately. That the revelation is real is *seen* by the seeing Jew in the superhuman wisdom and justice [übermenschlichen Weisheit und Gerechtigkeit] of the Torah, is *seen* by the seeing Muslim in the superhuman beauty [übermenschlichen Schönheit] of the Qur’an.”
question of whether the world was created or eternal. Insofar as medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers considered the divine law to provide for a “unified, total regimen of human life”\footnote{PL, 73; PG, 62.} – because the divine law was understood as comprehensive – Strauss writes that the “most pressing concern” (dringlichster Anliegen)\footnote{PL, 60; PG, 48.} of these philosophers was demonstrating how the divine law allowed for philosophy; medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers had to establish the “legal foundation of philosophy.”\footnote{PL, chapter 2. The claim is made specifically at PL, 60; PG, 48. Gutas criticizes the idea that philosophy had to be, for medieval philosophers like Averroes, justified according to the divine law. The “religion versus philosophy issue” was not, he argues, a “central concern” for medieval thinkers. See “The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century,” 14-5.} Strauss believes that the practice of treating the divine law as paramount, as the comprehensive source of law, indicates that medieval Islamic and Jewish thinkers sought to restrict the extent of “enlightenment.” These thinkers sought to establish clear boundaries for philosophy; they sought to limit the extent to which the divine law could be questioned.

Strauss considers three medieval thinkers to epitomize the practice of justifying philosophy by appealing to the divine law: the Muslim jurist and philosopher Averroes (for Strauss, the exemplar), the Rabbi and philosopher Maimonides, and the Jewish philosopher Gersonides. Strauss asserts that despite their different religions, Averroes and Maimonides demonstrate a series of remarkable similarities; Gersonides, in Strauss’s view, occupies a slightly different position.\footnote{PL, 92-100; PG, 79-86. Strauss (PL, 92; PG, 79) considers Gersonides to represent a middle position between Averroes (who asserts the “sufficiency” of reason) and Maimonides (who asserts the “insufficiency” of reason). As noted above, Strauss ultimately considers Averroes and Maimonides (Strauss’s “classic of rationalism,” see PL, 21; PG, 9) similar in several decisive respects.} Strauss does not refer to any medieval Christian thinker when describing the practice of philosophizing “within” the religious law.\footnote{There are very few references to Christianity in Philosophy and Law; see PL, 44, 73, 141n25; PG, 33, 62.}

Strauss describes the following similarities between Averroes and Maimonides. First, both thinkers argue that the Quran or Torah allows for, or commands, some men to philosophize.\footnote{PL, 90; PG, 76-7.} Second, both contend that if a disagreement between the literal sense of the religious law and philosophy arises (i.e., if there is a disparity between a literal interpretation of the religious law and what is demonstrable via science), then the literal sense of the religious law

\textit{From Modern to Medieval Enlightenment}
is to be “interpreted.”\(^{100}\) This task of interpretation is, however, only to be conducted by “men of
demonstration,” understood as philosophers. In these cases, the religious teaching is no longer to
be understood literally but figuratively. Figurative teachings are to be considered edifying parables
intended for the non-philosophers.\(^{101}\) The third similarity Strauss identifies is that both Averroes
and Maimonides believe that the “inner” meaning of religious laws or teachings – the non-literal
meaning – is to be kept secret.\(^{102}\) There are strict limitations as to what knowledge “men of
science” can impart.\(^{103}\)

For Strauss, Averroes’s and Maimonides’s works indicate an attempt to allow for
philosophy (understood in its broadest sense, as including the natural sciences, mathematics,
logic, and so on) while simultaneously striving to preserve belief in divine laws. While Strauss
expresses doubt as to whether Averroes truly believed in the superiority of revelation (on the
basis that Averroes suggests there are religious “dogmas”\(^{104}\)), Strauss concludes in Philosophy and
Law that, whatever his true views about philosophy and unassisted reason might have been,
Averroes ultimately emphasises the primacy of the divine law; Averroes was not “the Voltaire of
the twelfth century.”\(^{105}\) Strauss emphasises how the medieval Islamic and Jewish approach to
revelation, religion, and the diffusion of knowledge, was entirely different to modern approaches.
Despite the fact that some medieval philosophers questioned aspects of their religion, Strauss
notes that:

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\text{[O]ne must not for a moment leave any doubt that these medieval philosophers were precisely not Enlighteners in the proper sense; for them it was precisely not a question of spreading light [Licht zu}
\]

\(^{100}\) PL, 86; PG, 72.

\(^{101}\) PL, 85, 90; PG, 71-2, 77.

\(^{102}\) PL, 85, 90; PG, 71-2, 77. Strauss writes at PL, 86: “[Averroes] says that in speculative matters a true consensus can never be confirmed, and cannot be confirmed for the very reason that, according to a view widespread in the early period of Islam, the “inner” (the “inner” sense that diverges from the literal sense) must not be openly imparted.” The notion that Quranic verses have both “literal” and “inner” meanings, and the ramifications this has for Strauss’s reading of medieval Islamic philosophy, is discussed in Chapter 4 of the present thesis.

\(^{103}\) Strauss documents minor exceptions to this rule according to Maimonides (PL, 90; PG, 76-7): “To be interpreted are preeminently all scriptural passages that attribute corporeality and mutability to God. In this case it is a duty to convey to the multitude, too, that the passages in question must not be understood literally: no man must be left to believe in the corporeality of God, just as no man must be left to believe in the nonexistence of God or in the existence of other gods.”

\(^{104}\) PL, 88; PG, 74.

\(^{105}\) PL, 89; PG, 75.
According to Strauss, medieval philosophers did not believe in disclosing the “rationally” known truth. Strauss considers this “truth” is, for Maimonides, that the “life of theory” as described by Aristotle – the life characterised by “freedom of thought” – is the highest good. Yet the philosophic life was not for all human beings. For these medieval philosophers, the revelation, understood as “binding,” only “summoned” to the “Greek ideal of the life of theory” those “suited to it.” Islamic and Jewish thinkers therefore restricted the extent of their philosophizing. Religious texts could answer, for the non-philosophers, important theoretical questions and, given its role as the basis of social and political order, Islamic and Jewish thinkers did not want to compromise the “multitude’s” belief in divine laws (“the highest perspective acknowledged in common by both Plato and the medieval philosophers”). Against this approach to the divine law, the modern Enlightenment is, Strauss claims, “exoteric” given that immoderate, if not at times radical, philosophical inquiry is increasingly publicized. Modern thinkers believe in the power of “practical” reason, and that their philosophical views need to be widely disseminated: they broadcast their “convictions” from the “house-tops.”

106 Strauss continues: “To be sure, even in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there were men who, to quote Voltaire, claimed: “Quand la populace se mêle à raisonner, tout est perdu;” and on the other hand, even men like Maimonides had in mind a certain enlightenment [gewisse Aufklärung] of all men. But if one considers that the modern Enlightenment, as opposed to the medieval, generally publicizes its teachings [im allgemeinen ihre Lehren propagiert], one will not object to the assertion that the medieval Enlightenment was essentially esoteric [esoterisch], while the modern Enlightenment was essentially exoteric [exoterisch].” PL, 102-3 [Italics in original]; PG, 88-9. Curiously enough, Nietzsche uses the same quote from Voltaire at Human, All too Human, aph. 438.

107 PL, 103; PG, 89.

108 PL, 103; PG, 89 [Strauss’s italics]. As mentioned above, Strauss writes that Maimonides depends on revelation to deal with those theoretical questions that reason or science cannot comprehensively answer. See PL, 64-5; PG, 52-3. See note 97 above.

109 PL, 76, 104-5; PG, 64, 90-1. See also Strauss’s comments on the Enlightenment and “nomos which gave us authoritative guidance” at L-AM, 8.

110 See Strauss’s comments on Kant and “practical reason” at PL, 103; PG, 89 [Strauss’s italics]. Strauss can be understood as critical of Kant, Cohen, and Guttmann, for precisely this reason: in some way, all overlook the legislative, “community-founding, state-founding” (see PL, 72; PG, 60-1) meaning of revelation. For Strauss, the most commanding, or binding, political-legal code appears to depend on revelation. See, for example, Strauss’s comments at
These themes – esotericism versus exotericism, reason versus revelation, the few versus the many – will characterise Strauss’s next book on medieval philosophy. *Persecution and the Art of Writing* is a book in which, as noted earlier, Strauss offers a far more radical claim concerning the *falasifa’s* and Maimonides’s relation to the divine law.

### 3.4 Strauss’s evolving understanding of the *falasifa*: from believers in the divine law to advocates of an atheistic “Platonic Political Philosophy”

We are now in a position to consider how Strauss’s interpretation of the *falasifa* and Maimonides alters after *Philosophy and Law*. As stated above, the major change in Strauss’s reading is that, by the 1940s, Strauss reads the *falasifa* and Maimonides as having harboured a very particular esoteric doctrine.

It is noteworthy that Strauss is aware of the possibility of exoteric writing in *Philosophy and Law*. He is aware of the anthropological distinctions made by medieval thinkers between philosophers and non-philosophers. He is also well aware of the possibility that Averroes, Maimonides, and other medieval philosophers may have accepted Aristotelian doctrines entirely at odds with religious teachings, such as creation *ex nihilo*.

During the 1940s, Strauss suspects that some medieval thinkers considered the philosophic life the highest form of life and, furthermore, Strauss understands medieval philosophers to have disagreed with the notion of unqualified, or mass, enlightenment. Yet while Strauss may have doubted just how committed to their religions medieval philosophers truly were, both *Philosophy and Law* and *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* ultimately indicate that, in these early works, Strauss interprets medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers as having believed in divine revelation. In these texts, Strauss does not make any strong, or controversial, claims about medieval esotericism.

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*PAW*, 140 and *RCPR*, 250-1: “The force of the moral demand is weakened in Greek philosophy because in Greek philosophy this demand is not backed up by divine promises.” The “house-tops” comment comes at “Farabi’s Plato,” 37. See Chapter 1, note 33.

111 Strauss raises the question of whether Averroes and Maimonides accepted the doctrine of the world’s eternity at *PL*, 91-2; *PG*, 78-9.

112 See *SCR*, 151 (lines 23-5). Compare though with Strauss’s statements on the political use of religion according to Averroist doctrine at *SCR*, 47-9. Zank (*Leo Strauss: The Early Writings*, 24) points out that Strauss’s interpretation of Maimonides in both *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion and Philosophy and Law* is essentially the same: Maimonides is considered in these texts as “in line with the Orthodox Jewish tradition.” Batmírsky (*Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas*, 6, 146) describes *Philosophy and Law* as a “transitional” work. However, note Altman’s claim (“Leo Strauss in 1962,” 100) that Strauss was advocating a “faith-based atheism” from the mid-1930s. In Section 3.4, I have not discussed the themes
The major difference between Philosophy and Law and Persecution and the Art of Writing concerns the “Platonism” Strauss believes influenced the falasifa and their Jewish pupils. In Persecution and the Art of Writing, “Platonism” is understood as atheistic and non-metaphysical, it is a Platonism without the World of Being, theory of Ideas, and doctrine of the immortal soul. Strauss can be understood, then, as radicalising the thesis offered in Philosophy and Law. The primary contention in Persecution and the Art of Writing is that several premodern philosophers agreed, on an esoteric level, with Plato: divine laws and prophet-legislators were the best means for founding a state and creating a binding legal-political code. However, and crucially, this agreement with Plato was not based on the belief that revelation was true, or that divine knowledge was a possibility; rather, on Strauss’s “mature” interpretation, medieval philosophers only disingenuously endorsed revelation and religion. In the later text, the task of disingenuously endorsing revelation is understood by Strauss as part of the falasifa’s and Maimonides’s exoteric doctrine. As documented below, a close reading of Persecution and the Art of Writing suggests that Strauss’s “mature” reading of medieval philosophy amounts to interpreting the falasifa and Maimonides as atheists.

By reading medieval philosophers in this way, the central tension of Philosophy and Law – why believing Muslims and Jews needed Plato to validate the importance of divine laws – is resolved. This takes us to an important historical point that must be noted. Persecution and the Art of Writing was released in 1952 and was based on research conducted during the late 1930s and 1940s. It was published several years after Strauss wrote (in private correspondence) of having uncovered, principally through his work on the Guide for the Perplexed, Maimonides’s esoteric doctrine. For example, in a letter to Jacob Klein in February 1938, Strauss notes:

You can’t imagine with what endless finesse and irony Maimonides treats “religion”: a remark about the stench in the Temple owing to the many sacrifices finds nothing comparable in the raised in chapter 3 of Philosophy and Law for the reason that Strauss’s discussion of the falasifa’s prophetology cannot be compared to statements made in Persecution and the Art of Writing. In the latter text, “prophetology” is not discussed; it has, apparently, been dismissed as an exoteric topic.

Lampert (“Nietzsche’s challenge to philosophy in the thought of Leo Strauss”; “Strauss’s Recovery of Esotericism,” CCLS, 63-92) provides analysis of this period of Strauss’s career. Tanguay considers Strauss’s writing style to have altered around 1940, and that the first “esoteric” piece Strauss wrote was “The Literary Character of the Guide for the Perplexed” (1941). See Tanguay, Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography, 74, 222n45.

Persecution and the Art of Writing brought together several of Strauss’s earlier articles on medieval philosophy, including “Farabi’s Plato” (1945) (an article that is notably condensed in Persecution and the Art of Writing), “Persecution and the Art of Writing” (1941), “The Literary Character of The Guide for the Perplexed” (1941), “The Law of Reason in the Kuzari” (1943), and “How to Study Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise” (1948). Meier (Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem, 72n21) draws attention to an important note being omitted in the reprint of the essay “Persecution and the Art of Writing.”
whole of Voltaire, and 1000 other things besides. One does not understand Maimonides simply because one does not reckon with the possibility that he was an “Averroist”: consider it and all the difficulties in principle just dissolve.\textsuperscript{115}

In the same letter, Strauss writes that Maimonides “in his beliefs was absolutely no Jew.”\textsuperscript{116} Strauss now appears to consider Maimonides – the “Averroist” – to have understood religion as necessary for the masses, while philosophy was suited for only a few. The subtext here is, undoubtedly, Maimonides’s perceived atheism and esoteric commitment to philosophy, understood as unassisted reason. Strauss’s letter reveals his awareness of the implications his interpretation might have. Maimonides is, for Judaism, “more important than the Bible.” To “pull Maimonides out of Judaism is to pull out its foundation.”\textsuperscript{117} As Lampert has noted, at this point in his career, Strauss clearly believes he holds scholarly “dynamite.”\textsuperscript{118}

Lampert and Tanguay have offered commentary on this crucial, yet unfortunately largely mysterious, period of Strauss’s intellectual development. Suffice it to say that, no matter what can be inferred from Strauss’s letters to Klein during the late 1930s to early 1940s, Strauss’s “mature” interpretation of Maimonides as an atheist remains highly controversial.\textsuperscript{119} One of the reasons for this controversy is that Strauss does very little to validate what he asserts openly in private correspondence and “between the lines” in his “mature” works. For example, in “The Literary Character of The Guide for the Perplexed,” the third and central chapter of Persecution and the Art of Writing, Strauss claims that the “interpreter” of Maimonides is, “to some extent,” “confronted with a prohibition against explaining a secret teaching and with the necessity of explaining it.”\textsuperscript{120}


\textsuperscript{116} GS 3:550: "dass Maim. in seinem Glauben schlechterdings kein Jude war." It is important to note Strauss’s terminology here. In his “beliefs” (\textit{Glauben}), Maimonides was not a Jew. In his \textit{practices}, Maimonides was a Jew. As mentioned in Chapter 2 (see note 121), Hannah Arendt described Strauss as a “convinced orthodox atheist.” It is not difficult, I believe, to discern a similarity between the position Strauss attributes to Maimonides and Strauss’s own position. Whether accurately or not (see notes 182 and 183 below), Strauss considered Maimonides an atheist who continued to practice Judaism. The evidence suggests that Strauss adopted the same approach.

\textsuperscript{117} GS 3:549.


\textsuperscript{119} For Strauss’s influence on Maimonides scholarship, see Davidson, Moses Maimonides, 393-402; Sharpe, “In the Court of a Great King’: Some Remarks on Leo Strauss’ Introduction to the Guide for the Perplexed,” 141-4. See also notes 182 and 183 below.

\textsuperscript{120} PAW, 56.
The solution is, he writes, to “steer a middle course.” 121 This means “attempting an esoteric interpretation of the esoteric teaching of the Guide.” As the Guide is itself an “esoteric interpretation” of the Bible’s “esoteric teaching,” Strauss recognises that it may sound “paradoxical and even ridiculous” to attempt an “esoteric interpretation of an esoteric interpretation of an esoteric teaching.” 122 This is, however, precisely what Strauss does. Although Strauss’s approach to Maimonides might certainly be viewed as inviting criticism, what bears emphasizing is that, at some point around 1940, Strauss begins to believe that a careful study of Maimonides’s works leads to uncovering a covert atheism, although Strauss does not state this directly in texts intended for a general audience. Nevertheless, Persecution and the Art of Writing indicates the results of Strauss applying similar exoteric-esoteric analyses to several other medieval and premodern philosophers, notably Farabi, Judah Halevi, and Spinoza. Strauss uncovers a series of connecting threads; the most obvious connecting thread is that, like Strauss’s Maimonides, these thinkers are read as having personally disbelieved in revelation yet simultaneously recognised the political need for revelation. In this regard, these thinkers are all interpreted as having been committed to “Platonic political philosophy.”

This returns us squarely to the role of Plato and Platonism in Persecution and the Art of Writing. As noted, Strauss argues that an atheistic, secular, Platonism shaped the thought and politics of several medieval philosophers. 123 He writes:

To recognize the fundamental difference between Christian scholasticism on the one hand, and Islamic and Jewish medieval philosophy on the other, one does well to start from the most obvious difference, the difference in regard to the literary sources. This difference is particularly striking in the case of practical or political philosophy. The place that is occupied in Christian scholasticism by Aristotle’s Politics, Cicero, and the Roman Law, is occupied in Islamic and Jewish philosophy by Plato’s Republic and his Laws. Whereas Plato’s Republic and Laws were recovered by

121 PAW, 56.

122 PAW, 56. That is, an esoteric interpretation (Strauss’s interpretation of Maimonides) of an esoteric interpretation (Maimonides’s interpretation of the Bible) of an esoteric teaching (found in the Bible). Strauss’s “esoteric” reading is certainly problematic. As Davidson (Moses Maimonides, 397) writes, Strauss’s “own esoteric and enigmatic prose prevented him from stating outright what any of these clues [sic from Maimonides] is supposed to signify.” Similarly, at ibid., 401: “Because the ultimate esoteric interpretation of the Guide for the Perplexed which makes Maimonides a covert atheist, is so outlandish and since Strauss conveyed it in his habitual enigmatic and opaque fashion, it has failed to register in academic circles.”

123 In Philosophy and Law, Strauss emphasizes the importance of the prophet-legislator. In Persecution and the Art of Writing, Strauss emphasizes the Platonic philosopher-legislator. Compare, for example, PL, 120-1 with PAW, 13, 182.
the West only in the fifteenth century, they had been translated into Arabic in the ninth century.124

On Strauss’s reading, an inspection of “literary sources” helps to reveal why Islamic and Jewish philosophy is different to Christian scholasticism. Aristotle’s *Politics* – a text Strauss claims was central to Christian scholasticism – gave priests an essentially ritualistic role.125 The aim of the state, as a “creation of nature,” was to cultivate the “good life.”126 And, although Cicero appeals to a lawmaking God, laws – natural laws – are derived from God through reason.127 In an entirely different fashion, according to Strauss, Islamic and Jewish philosophers read Platonic texts that called for rule by a philosopher-king or prophet-legislator. Strauss is explicit about the difference between the “Islamic world” and the “western Christian world.” Reading Plato had a remarkable influence on the practice of philosophy for Muslims and Jews:

Two of the most famous Islamic philosophers wrote commentaries on them: Farabi on the *Laws*, and Averroes on the *Republic*. The difference mentioned implied a difference, not only in regard to the content of political philosophy, but, above all, in regard to its importance for the whole of philosophy. Farabi, whom Maimonides, the greatest Jewish thinker of the Middle Ages, regarded as the greatest among the Islamic philosophers, and indeed as the greatest philosophic authority after Aristotle, was so much inspired by Plato’s *Republic* that he presented the whole of philosophy proper within a political framework.128 [Italics added]

Strauss’s claim is that Platonism led medieval Islamic and Jewish thinkers, most notably Farabi, to present the “whole of philosophy” within “a political framework.” Echoing one of the central theses of *Philosophy and Law*, Strauss suggests that Plato’s works showed medieval thinkers why divine laws should not be undermined. Plato’s works indicated why philosophizing (at least any potentially public philosophizing) had to be moderated by political considerations.129 Yet, unlike

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126 Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a1; 1280a32.

127 Cicero, *On the Commonwealth* (ed. Zetzel), Book 3, Section 33: “He [ie. God] is the author, expounder, and mover of this law; and the person who does not obey it will be in exile from himself. Insofar as he scorches his nature as a human being, by this very fact he will pay the greatest penalty, even if he escapes all the other things that are generally recognised as punishments.”


129 See note 92 above.
Philosophy and Law, actual belief in the divine law is not proposed: an atheistic Platonism is suggested to have been the guiding light for these medieval Islamic and Jewish thinkers. In order to emphasize the differences Islamic and Jewish philosophy had with Christian scholasticism, and in order to again indicate the importance Platonism had for medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers, Strauss refers to a passage – one he clearly considers decisive – from Avicenna’s *Divisions of the Rational Sciences*:

Philosopher-kings, and communities governed by philosopher-kings, were however the theme not of Aristotelian but of Platonic politics. And divine laws, which prescribe not merely actions but opinions about divine things as well, were the theme of Plato’s *Laws* in particular. It is therefore not surprising that, according to Avicenna, the philosophic discipline which deals with prophecy is political philosophy or political science, and the standard work on prophecy is Plato’s *Laws*. For the specific function of the prophet, as Averroes says, or of the greatest of all prophets, as Maimonides suggests, is legislation of the highest type.

One of the main claims from *Philosophy and Law* is manifestly intensified: prophecy and divine law (the terms are arguably conflated at this point in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*) become purely “political” matters. As a subject dealt with by “political philosophy or political science,” Strauss implies that prophecy was not understood as pointing to an ultimate reality or ultimate truth, or to God. (Given what Strauss suggests was the esoteric doctrine of the falasifa and Maimonides, his use of the term “divine” is problematic.) Strauss considers medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers to have been highly influenced by Plato’s philosophy. Alternatively, Strauss might be interpreted as contending that Plato’s *Republic* and *Laws* exemplified ideas these medieval thinkers believed in since the latter were (like Strauss’s “mature” reading of Plato) rationalists and atheists. The key point is that, according to Strauss’s “mature” position, medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers recognised the divine law as politically necessary as it provided “legislation

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130 *PAW*, 10. Compare with Strauss’s earlier statements at *PL*, 73-4; *PG*, 61-2. Regarding the connection between “prophecy” and “divine law,” see *PAW*, 166: “The doctrine of divine justice deals especially with prophecy, law and providence. This order is necessary because providence, or divine reward and punishment, presupposes the existence of a divine law, and the divine law in its turn presupposes divine revelation or prophecy.” Note also Lerner’s comments at “Moses Maimonides,” *HPP*, 234-5.

131 Strauss’s comments in “Some remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi” (see note 92 above) and *Philosophy and Law* (see note 89 above) imply that Strauss takes the first interpretive option noted here: for Strauss, Plato’s works heavily influenced these medieval thinkers. Concerning the remark from Avicenna, Strauss does not ask whether Avicenna is, in the *Divisions of the Rational Sciences*, actually referring to what we know today as Plato’s *Laws*. On this theme, see Tamer’s criticisms of Strauss, noted in Chapter 2, Section 3. See also Chapter 2, note 97.
of the highest type.” The notion of divine law was the best means for creating and maintaining
the “perfect political order” or “virtuous city.”132

Not undermining the divine law was, then, a perfectly appropriate philosophical
procedure as political considerations were, according to Strauss’s reading, paramount for these
philosophers. Yet it was not only the legal-political uses of divine law that medieval philosophers
were concerned with. Strauss claims that in the “Islamic-Jewish world,” philosophy was viewed
with suspicion: philosophy therefore had to be conducted with political considerations in mind.
Strauss writes:

The precarious status of philosophy in Judaism as well as in Islam was not in every respect a
misfortune for philosophy. The official recognition of philosophy in the Christian world made
philosophy subject to ecclesiastical supervision. The precarious position of philosophy in the
Islamic-Jewish world guaranteed its private character and therewith its inner freedom from
supervision.133

According to Strauss, within the medieval Christian world, philosophy “became an integral part
of the officially recognised and even required training of the student of the sacred doctrine.”134
Medieval Christianity was receptive to reconciling philosophy with religion.135 Conversely, the

132 P.AW, 10-1, 15-7. At P.AW, 10-1:

Plato’s Laws were known in the period under consideration as “Plato’s rational laws (nomoi).” The falasifa
accepted then the notion that there are “rational laws.” Yet they rejected the notion of “rational
commandments.” The latter notion had been employed by a school of what one may call Islamic theology
(kalam), and had been adopted by certain Jewish thinkers. It corresponded to the Christian notion of “the
natural law,” which may be identified with “the law of reason” and “the moral law.” By rejecting the notion
of “rational commandments,” the falasifa implied that the principles of morality are not rational, but
“probable” or “generally accepted.” “The rational laws (nomoi)” which they admitted, are distinguished from
“the rational commandments,” or the natural law, by the fact that they do not have obligatory character. [Italics
added]

Compare with “Farabi’s Plato,” 24n55: “Farabi’s view is closely akin to that of Cicero…according to whom the Republic
deals with the best political order and the Laws deal with the best laws belonging to the very same best political order.”
See also P.AW, 135-41. Plato’s Laws provide (P.AW, 137) “the rational laws par excellence.” In the closing pages of his
article on Halevi, Strauss reiterates that, for some medieval philosophers, reason led to endorsing divine laws: divine
laws – only divine laws – “make possible genuine morality.”

133 P.AW, 21.

134 P.AW, 19.

135 P.AW, 18-21. Regarding textual sources, note, for example, Averroes’s claim (Averroes on Plato’s Republic (trans.
Lerner), 4) that Aristotle’s Politics was not available to him.
Islamic civilisation was, Strauss claims, inimical to philosophy. It bears noting that, other than claiming Islam was a religion of “law,” Strauss does not disclose why Islam was fundamentally opposed to philosophy. (Strauss’s belief that philosophy occupied a “precarious” position within Islamic societies is problematic and, as noted above, will be returned to in Chapter 4.)

While several similarities between Persecution and the Art of Writing and Philosophy and Law can be discerned, it is, as mentioned, the subject of the "falasifa’s" apparently atheistic, non-metaphysical, or secular Platonism that constitutes the key difference between the two texts. In order to argue that this type of “Platonism” – one eminently concerned with political matters – was the "falasifa’s" and Maimonides’s esoteric doctrine, Strauss appeals to Farabi’s references to Plato’s philosophy. Of primary importance to Strauss is Farabi’s text On the Purposes of Plato and of Aristotle.

Strauss writes that two points from Farabi’s On the Purposes of Plato and of Aristotle “strike one most.” First, Farabi states that he is concerned with the “restoration” of philosophy “after it has been blurred or destroyed” and, second, Farabi wishes to document the similarities between Plato and Aristotle. Farabi is, Strauss notes, concerned with the “purpose” of philosophy’s two highest authorities, and thus the purpose of philosophy generally. Strauss describes Farabi’s text the Philosophy of Plato, the central chapter of On the Purposes of Plato and of Aristotle, as the “clue par excellence to the falsafa as such.”

It is at this point that Strauss’s interpretation of medieval Islamic philosophy becomes, perhaps, even more controversial. Strauss contends, uses Plato as a “mouthpiece.” In Farabi’s Philosophy of Plato, Farabi is not, according to Strauss, actually summarizing Plato but using Plato to communicate Farabi’s own views. The message Strauss finds in Farabi’s Philosophy of Plato is, essentially, a covert rejection of Islam and religion generally. Based on his exoteric/esoteric reading of Farabi’s Philosophy of Plato, Strauss claims:

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136 See Chapter 2 of the present thesis, note 52. This term is used by Altman to describe Strauss’s reading of Plato.

137 PAW, 12.

138 PAW, 12.

139 PAW, 12. Note that Strauss uses the word “falasifa” here, the “Arabic transcription of the Greek word for "philosophy."” Is Strauss suggesting that Farabi provides a clue to the true philosophy of the Islamic Aristotelians and ancient Greek thinkers like Plato and Aristotle? The method that Strauss uses to award primacy to Farabi’s Philosophy of Plato (Falasfat Aflāṭūn) is discussed in detail in Chapter 5. Strauss refers to Farabi’s Falasfat Aflāṭūn as the “Plato.”

140 Some of the difficulties with Strauss’s reading of medieval philosophy are outlined in Section 3.5. The problems with Strauss’s interpretation of Farabi are explored in Chapters 4 to 6.

141 PAW, 13.
Through the mouth of Plato, Farabi declares that religious speculation, and religious investigation of the beings, and the religious syllogistic art, do not supply the science of the beings, *in which man’s highest perfection consists*, whereas philosophy does supply it. He goes so far as to present religious knowledge as the lowest step on the ladder of cognitive pursuits, as inferior to grammar and to poetry.\(^{142}\) [Italics added]

Unlike *Philosophy and Law* – a text in which Strauss appears to consider medieval Islamic philosophers and their Jewish pupils true believers in the divine law – philosophy is, in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, identified as the *sole* and highest good, the sole source of truth: philosophy alone supplies the “science of the beings” in “which man’s highest perfection consists.” In *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Strauss demotes the life of religious devotion: the philosophic life is insinuated to be the life that accepts that the “truth” is “deadly”; it is therefore the best, highest and most honest, type of human life.\(^{143}\) Strauss reads medieval philosophers like Farabi as secretly devoted to philosophy, and philosophy alone. Strauss is unequivocal on this point: he writes that Farabi describes Plato as having realized that “man’s happiness consists in a certain science and in a certain way of life.”\(^{144}\) The science “in question proves to be the science of the essence of every being, and the art which supplies that science proves to be philosophy.”\(^{145}\) If philosophy is the “art” that supplies the “science of the essence of every being,” then the question arises as to whether, to use Strauss’s own words, “philosophy is ontology.”\(^{146}\)

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\(^{142}\) *PAW*, 13.

\(^{143}\) *PAW*, 18: “They [i.e. the *falasifa*] defended the interests of philosophy and of nothing else. In doing this, they believed indeed that they were defending the highest interests of mankind.” See also *PAW*, 104-5, 107. At 104-5: “Halevi knew too well that a genuine philosopher can never become a genuine convert to Judaism or to any other revealed religion. For, according to him, a genuine philosopher is a man such as Socrates who possesses “human wisdom” and is invincibly ignorant of “Divine wisdom.” It is the impossibility of converting a philosopher to Judaism which he demonstrates *ad scelus* by omitting a disputation between the scholar and the philosopher.” Reading “between the lines” here, there is, in Strauss’s view, no real choice to be made between “Athens” and “Jerusalem.” Strauss’s claim appears to be that the “genuine philosopher” recognises an atheistic rationalism, a godless “Athens” (“human wisdom”), as the only legitimate option.

\(^{144}\) *PAW*, 12.

\(^{145}\) *PAW*, 12-3. According to Strauss’s reading, Farabi elevates philosophy to the highest position: “philosophy does not need to be supplemented by something else, or by something that is thought to be higher in rank than philosophy, in order to produce happiness.” See note 143 above.

\(^{146}\) Heidegger’s influence on Strauss is salient here. As Strauss writes (*WFPP*, 247 [italics added]): “Riezler learned from Heidegger above all that *philosophy is ontology.*” For philosophy as ontological investigation, see Chapter 4, note 4. See also the commentary on “Farabi’s *Plato*” in Chapters 5 and 6 of the present thesis.
By defining philosophy as the “art” that supplies the “science of the beings,” and by reading Farabi as an atheist (a point further documented below), Strauss appears to be claiming that philosophy can be understood as an ontological investigation that leads to the only type of happiness available; a temporal happiness that consists, at least partly, in the philosopher recognising the absence of God and therefore a limitless intellectual freedom. One can therefore contemplate “Being” or the “beings” without genuine concern for the teachings of revelation. This might mean that Strauss understands “philosophy” as an existential phenomenological investigation, a subjective approach to the “beings” that rejects “metaphysics” insofar as the possibility of God, an ultimate reality, divine revelation, the supernatural and suprasensible, are dismissed. Strauss’s definition of philosophy as the “art” which supplies the “science of the essence of every being” is, perhaps, Strauss’s means of discreetly indicating that “philosophy” is not fundamentally different to poetry; how “Being” or “beings” are interpreted, or understood, is a matter of perspective. If the “art” which supplies the “science of the essence of every being” is historically situated and finite (i.e., there is no metaphysical anchor), “philosophy” seems to become, in light of the “deadly truth,” the search for subjective meaning and nothing more.

Nevertheless, one of the decisive points here is that Strauss insinuates medieval thinkers like Farabi considered the “philosophic” life as premised upon complete disbelief in the revelation (this view is problematic, as I argue in Chapters 4 and 6). Strauss makes his claim by drawing attention to what he understands to be meaningful silences from Farabi:

At the beginning of the treatise On the Attainment of Happiness with which he [i.e. Farabi] prefaces his summaries of the philosophies of Plato and of Aristotle, Farabi employs the distinction between “the happiness of this world in this life” and “the ultimate happiness in the other life” as a matter of course. In the Plato, which is the second and therefore the least exposed part of a tripartite work, the distinction of the two kinds of happiness is completely dropped. What this silence means becomes clear from the fact that in the whole Plato (which contains summaries of the Gorgias, the Phaedrus, the Phaedo, and the Republic), there is no mention of the immortality of the soul: Farabi’s Plato silently rejects Plato’s doctrine of a life after death.147

By positioning Farabi as the key representative of the falasifa, Farabi’s supposed rejection of Plato’s notion of an immortal soul and Plato’s doctrine of Ideas becomes highly significant.148 If Farabi – the key representative of the falasifa – rejects Plato’s doctrine of the life after death, then, presumably, Farabi also rejects Islam’s doctrine of the life after death. Strauss does not claim that


148 Strauss’s statements on the falasifa’s esoteric doctrine occur at P.A1F, 13-7, and “Farabi’s Plato,” 6, 15-21. In both cases, the esoteric doctrine is understood in a similar way: disbelief in the possibility of metaphysical knowledge and disbelief in the possibility of an afterlife.
Farabi accepts one but denies the other. By appearing to conflate Platonic and Islamic doctrines, Strauss implies that we should be aware of the potential similarities between Platonism and Islam. The question arises as to whether Strauss views Islam as, to quote Nietzsche’s assessment of Christianity, another “Platonism for the people.” Strauss appears to be claiming, “between the lines,” that Farabi believed Islam had entirely human, all too human, origins. Strauss’s reading of Farabi is certainly “secular” or “temporal” insofar as Farabi, as well as the falasifa generally and their Jewish counterparts, are interpreted as unconcerned, on the esoteric level of their philosophy, with another world or level of existence, a claim that aligns with the view that these thinkers disbelieved in transcendent entities such as the Active Intellect. Based on Strauss’s reading, we are to believe that Farabi, Avicenna, Ibn Bajja, Averroes, Maimonides, and Halevi, were members of a Platonic “class” that took its bearings directly from a naturalistic philosophy, a philosophy that comprised of “human wisdom only.”

Strauss does not find fault with the atheistic, anti-metaphysical, position he attributes to these medieval thinkers. It is notable that Strauss does not complain that, without belief in an absolute reality and the possibility of metaphysical knowledge, revelation becomes merely instrumental, merely political, and merely human. Nor does Strauss write that, according to his reading of ancient and medieval philosophy, revelation becomes bereft of any spiritual or higher meaning. Similarly, Strauss does not mention that the Socratic endorsement of the ascetic life and “practising death,” witnessed prominently in the Phaedo, makes no sense unless one believes in

149 For Nietzsche’s comment concerning Christianity as a “Platonism for the people,” see Beyond Good and Evil, preface.

150 An argument implied by Strauss and his student Mahdi. See Mahdi’s comments in his entry on Farabi in the (Strauss and Cropsey edited) History of Political Philosophy. At 207: “There are a number of striking resemblances between many of the fundamental features of Islam and the good regime envisaged by classical political philosophy in general, and by Plato in the Laws in particular.” Note also Mahdi’s comments concerning the similarities between Platonism and Islam at 208-9, 212; concerning the primacy of philosophy for Farabi, see 223-4. Note the Straussian overtones of Mahdi’s comments at Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy, 221-2 [Mahdi’s italics]: “What he [i.e. Farabi] plans to teach the philosophers of his time and his coreligionists is that their religion consists of similitudes of true philosophy. And what he plans to do for his coreligionists is to reform the religion in this direction (acting as a theologian who discovers “theoretical and universal practical affairs which the founder of the religion has not declared”…) He may also have in mind such things as the history of the influence of Platonic “religious” ideas on Christianity and Islam and on the dialectic and rhetoric of the Muslim theologians, which he, in turn, brings to completion or perfection by recovering the most perfect philosophy, the true origin of that “religion.”” See also Chapter 6 of the present thesis, note 69.

151 Strauss writes, at the beginning of P-AIF (7-8), of the “sociology of philosophy.” The sociology “failed to consider 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.”

152 “Farabi’s Plato,” 17n41. See also P-AIF, 13, 105, 107, 107n33; “Progress and Return,” JPCM, 121.
another realm, or type, of existence. Crucially, Strauss overlooks the importance the notion of transcendence has in Platonic and Farabian philosophy; all metaphysics, all theology, gets to be discarded. To retain our focus on medieval Islamic philosophy, we can say that Strauss’s reading is problematic for the following reasons. Strauss writes that Farabi “identifies the philosopher with the king.” That is, Farabi endorses a Platonic teaching that relies, in Plato’s works, on the possibility of the metaphysical Ideas and an ultimate reality despite not believing, in Strauss’s view, in any part of Plato’s metaphysical teaching. As will be discussed further in Chapters 4-6, one of the fundamental problems with Strauss’s reading of medieval philosophy concerns the relation between philosophy and politics. As we have seen, Strauss writes that medieval thinkers like Farabi endorsed philosophy completely. Yet, if these thinkers did not believe philosophers could access the highest knowledge, as Strauss’s reading of ancient and medieval philosophy frequently implies, it is not clear why these philosophers considered themselves best suited to rule or best suited to provide advice on political matters. For example, Strauss writes that in “the last paragraphs of the Plato, “philosopher,” “king,” “perfect man” and “investigator” on the one hand, and “legislator” and “virtuous men” on the other, are treated as interchangeable.” Based on this reading of Farabi, Strauss asserts:

[T]he supplement to philosophy which, according to him [sc. Farabi], is required for the attainment of happiness is not religion or Revelation but politics, if Platonic politics. He [sc. Farabi] substitutes politics for religion. He thus may be said to lay the foundation for the secular alliance between philosophers and princes friendly to philosophy, and to initiate the tradition whose most famous representatives in the West are Marsilius of Padua and Machiavelli. According to Strauss’s reading of Farabi (the philosopher whose work provides the “clue par excellence to the falsafa as such”), philosophy is divorced from revelation and religion. Philosophy alone supplies the “science of the beings,” hence the “secular alliance between philosophers and princes.” As these medieval thinkers considered philosophy – understood as speculative and theoretical – incapable of guiding the masses, religions based on divine revelation were necessary; religion and revelation were, for the falsafa, the subject of “Platonic politics.”

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153 Phaedo, 63e-69e.

154 PAW, 15n10, 17.

155 PAW, 15. A very similar statement comes at “Farabi’s Plato,” 22.

156 See particularly PAW, 12-3; “Farabi’s Plato,” 13-5.

157 As noted, Strauss’s “mature” reading of medieval philosophy suggests that the medievals sided with a godless “Athens” and therefore only endorsed the idea of divine laws for political-legal reasons. As discussed in Chapter 2,
These claims lead Strauss to an important qualification: although medieval philosophers recognised the political utility of religion, they were aware of the potential tyrannising that could ensue from the unchecked rule of religion. Strauss refers to the criticisms of the “priestly city” – the city ruled entirely by religion – made by Ibn Bajja, Averroes, and possibly Maimonides.\footnote{Strauss implies in \textit{Persecution and the Art of Writing} that medieval Islamic philosophers (and possibly Maimonides) considered their respective holy books insufficient for political guidance. The \textit{falsaf\i} did not believe a regime with a religious leader (“the priestly city”) was desirable; it would be a “bad regime.” See \textit{P-AW}, 91n156 (Strauss refers to both Ibn Bajja and Averroes). Strauss’s assertions in \textit{Persecution and the Art of Writing} can be usefully compared with those at \textit{WPP}, 157-8; \textit{SPPP}, 207; \textit{TOM}, 184-5; \textit{L-AM}, 190-1. For the “secular alliance between philosophers and princes,” see “Farabi’s \textit{Plato},” \textit{P-AW}, 22; \textit{P-AW}, 15. Concerning religious absolutes not allowing “latitude” for statesmen, see \textit{NRH}, 157-64; \textit{TOM}, 157.} What is again implied is that the \textit{falsaf\i} and their Jewish successors indicate that religion is most useful when put into the service of “Platonic” politics.\footnote{See note 158 above and Strauss’s statements at \textit{P-AW}, 17. The “Platonic” approach to religion is further discussed in Chapters 4–6 of the present thesis.}

This takes us to the final point concerning Strauss’s “mature” reading of medieval Islamic philosophy that needs to be noted in this Chapter. As was briefly discussed in Chapter 2, Strauss understands Farabi to endorse a “Platonic,” as opposed to a “Socratic,” method of communication.\footnote{See Chapter 2 of the present thesis, Section 2.3. This matter is discussed further in Chapters 5 and 6.} The “Platonic” way of communicating involves combining the “intransigent way of Socrates,” which is suitable “only for the philosopher’s dealing with the elite,” with the way of “Thrasymachus,” which is “both more and less exacting than the former” and “appropriate when dealing with the vulgar.”\footnote{\textit{P-AW}, 16-7.} Farabi’s reason for outlining these two methods of communication is, Strauss implies, to discreetly outline a political teaching.

Strauss writes that, in the \textit{Philosophy of Plato}, Farabi refers two times to the quest for the “other” (or “another”) city.\footnote{\textit{P-AW}, 15-6.} In describing the life of Socrates, Farabi notes that Socrates was unable to philosophize as he lived in a city that did not allow freedom of teaching and of investigation. Barred from philosophizing, Socrates could not attain perfection and therefore preferred death to life. Yet when Farabi discusses several of Plato’s other texts, including the \textit{Republic}, \textit{Timaeus}, and the \textit{Letters}, he mentions how Plato planned to reform the corrupt...
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“multitude” gradually.\textsuperscript{163} For Strauss, Farabi’s comments – his two references to founding “other” cities – indicate that Socrates’s “revolutionary” quest for the “other city” is not “necessary” for all Platonists.\textsuperscript{164} Rather than taking Socrates’s “intransigent” and “revolutionary” approach to creating the “other city,” the city ruled by philosophers, Strauss writes that, according to Farabi, Plato was far more careful:

Plato substituted for it a more conservative way of action, namely, the gradual replacement of the accepted opinions by the truth or an approximation of the truth. The replacement of the accepted opinions could not be gradual, if it were not accompanied by provisional acceptance of the accepted opinions: as Farabi elsewhere declares, conformity with the opinions of the religious community in which one is brought up, is a necessary qualification for the future philosopher.\textsuperscript{165} [Italics added]

Farabi is, Strauss implies, subtly informing potential philosophers that they are not to openly admit their disbelief in the possibility of metaphysical knowledge or divine revelation. Farabi is also indicating to potential philosophers that they are not to admit that they seek power or that they intend to “gradually” reform their community or nation.\textsuperscript{166} Rather, according to Strauss, Farabi alludes to the need for secrecy. As Strauss asserts:

We may say that Farabi’s Plato eventually replaces the philosopher-king who rules openly in the virtuous city, by the secret kingship of the philosopher who, being “a perfect man” precisely because he is an “investigator,” lives privately as a member of an imperfect society which he tries to humanize within the limits of the possible. Farabi’s remarks on Plato’s policy define the general character of the activity of the falasifa.\textsuperscript{167} [Italics added]

Strauss’s reading of Farabi indicates that the philosopher does not “rule openly” but, rather, practices both the “way of Thrasymachus” and the “way of Socrates” in order to “live privately”

\textsuperscript{163} Farabi, Falsafat Aflāṭūn, 19-20, sec. 25; Philosophy of Plato (trans. Mahdi), 64-6.

\textsuperscript{164} \textit{PAW}, 16.

\textsuperscript{165} \textit{PAW}, 17. Meier draws attention to this passage, and its original source (“Farabi’s Plato”), at Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue (87n112). Meier notes how the “essay to which Strauss refers [ie. “Farabi’s Plato”] is one of his most important and one of the most helpful for the understanding of his philosophic project.” Strauss’s reading of Farabi will be discussed in Chapters 4-6.

\textsuperscript{166} Note Meier’s comments concerning Strauss’s “rhetorical strategy” at Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem, 23-4.

\textsuperscript{167} \textit{PAW}, 17.
and potentially rule in secret. This accords with the view that a Platonic philosopher will
disbelieve in the truth of revelation, yet will still conform “with the opinions of the religious
community” they belong to for the sake of their political project. Furthermore, in claiming that
Farabi’s remarks “define the general character” of the *falasifa’s* activity, Strauss clearly conveys
that he considers Farabi a thinker of great significance. Strauss’s comments indicate why a
thorough investigation of his reading of Farabi is justified: Farabi may well provide the clearest
insight into Strauss’s own philosophical and political views.

### 3.5 Difficulties with Strauss’s reading of the *falasifa* and Maimonides

Having established an outline of Strauss’s reading of the *falasifa*, several criticisms can be briefly
noted. These topics will receive further attention in Chapters 4 to 6.

Perhaps the most significant criticism relates to Strauss’s atheistic endorsement of
religion. The introduction to *Philosophy and Law* led Karl Löwith to interpret Strauss to be a
believing Jew, an interpretation Strauss was quick to reject in private correspondence. If we
understand Strauss as (at least from the 1930s) an atheist – an interpretation Strauss himself
endorses – then the question arises as to why he is committed to defending “orthodoxy.”

Given the tenor of his statements in *Philosophy and Law*, the most obvious answer seems to be
that, in the 1930s at least, Strauss believed in the social and political utility of religion even
though religious doctrines were, for him, ultimately untrue. The fact that Strauss would, in the
decade following *Philosophy and Law*, and following his “recovery” of esoteric writing, attribute to
medieval philosophers an atheistic endorsement of religion very similar (if not identical) to his
own is, I believe, highly problematic. Returning, momentarily, to questions raised in Chapter 2,
we must ask whether Strauss – whether deliberately or not – imposed his own views on to the
medieval philosophers he studied. Did Strauss conclude too quickly that some of the greatest
medieval philosophers were not only atheists, but that they also agreed with him concerning the
social and political utility of religion? This leads to a criticism of Strauss’s reading of Maimonides.

What Strauss believed he found during the late 1930s to early 1940s in Maimonides’s
works, and his actual method of interpreting Maimonides’s *Guide for the Perplexed*, has to be
deduced from his letters and “esoteric” commentaries. As Davidson has highlighted, despite

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168 The problems with Strauss’s position are discussed further in Chapters 4-7.

169 See note 23 above.

170 See notes 23 and 52 above.
Strauss writing lengthy articles on interpreting Maimonides, Strauss chose never to disclose everything. Given that Strauss chose to write “esoteric” commentaries on “esoteric” texts, we do not know how to uncover Maimonides’s esoteric doctrine in the same way as Strauss apparently did. Even if we accept, for a moment, that Strauss did find indisputable evidence that Maimonides did not believe in the fundamental tenets of Judaism, there is the pressing question of whether Strauss is justified for reading Islamic philosophers as disbelieving entirely in the principles of their religion. After all, Strauss was deeply versed in the Jewish tradition, and he writes that he spent a lifetime studying Maimonides’s Guide; perhaps some of his claims about Maimonides are justifiable and indeed worth scrutinizing. However, it might be asked, particularly given the criticisms scholars of medieval Islamic philosophy make against Strauss, how well Strauss understood medieval Islamic philosophy, and Islam more generally.

Another criticism that can be made relates to Strauss’s core claim that the falasifa (and their Jewish counterparts) were Platonists in the Straussian sense. As we have seen, Strauss refers to a passage in Avicenna’s Divisions of the Rational Sciences to support the view that the falasifa considered Plato’s Laws, as a work of pagan political science, the book that taught philosophers how to treat, or deal with, divine law. However, as mentioned in Chapter 2, we cannot be sure whether Avicenna is referring to what we know today as Plato’s Laws, a point Tamer and Morris have drawn attention to. At the very least, the fact that Strauss’s interpretation of the falasifa appears to rely heavily on Avicenna’s ambiguous comment is problematic.

Another difficulty involves the debatable assertions Strauss makes in Philosophy and Law. These assertions appear to indicate, to some degree, the view of medieval philosophy that Strauss held in the 1930s and beyond. To return to one questionable argument from Philosophy and Law, Strauss writes:

Through knowledge of the essential dependence [wesentlichen Abhängigkeit] of the Islamic Aristotelians and their Jewish pupils on Plato, the concrete possibility of a coherent and authentic interpretation of these medieval philosophers is delineated. This teaching must be understood fundamentally as derivative from Platonic philosophy. Thus it is not enough to trace this teaching down from Platonic philosophy on the evidence of exact source analysis. On the contrary, the emergence of this teaching from Platonic philosophy must be conceived in its potentiality.

[Strauss’s italics]

171 See note 122 above.


173 On this point, see the discussion in Chapter 4.

174 PL, 75-6; PG, 64.
That the *falasifa* “depended” on Plato “must,” Strauss claims, “be conceived in its potentiality.” Strauss can be criticised for basing his reading of the *falasifa* on a largely unprovable, not to mention opaquely expressed, argument. He contends that the possibility Plato’s political teachings substantially influenced how medieval Islamic philosophers viewed the divine law needs to be accepted despite the lack of clear and compelling evidence. A similar criticism can be made concerning the following assertion:

The radical interpretation of the doctrine of the Islamic Aristotelians and their Jewish pupils presupposes, therefore, an interpretation of Plato’s *Laws* attentive to the fact that the *Laws* point to the revelation, but only point to it. The next step is to investigate the modifications of Platonic politics in the Hellenistic age, for it is in this age that the concept of the philosopher-king is transformed into the concept of the prophet.175 [Strauss’s italics]

Strauss’s claim is difficult to accept for a number of reasons. Strauss never comprehensively investigates the “modifications of Platonic politics in the Hellenistic age,” despite labelling that “the next step.” He does not thoroughly investigate Platonism after Plato; as discussed in Chapter 6, Strauss is silent on Neoplatonism. Strauss’s interpretation is also arguably compromised due to his approach to pre-Platonism; he rarely points out that Plato might have been influenced by other traditions. As Strauss undoubtedly knew, the concept of a prophet communicating with the divine clearly predates Platonism; for example, the idea of God speaking to a prophet in a cave is found in the tale of Elijah, circa-9th century B.C.E. and written sometime in the sixth century B.C.E.176 Strauss’s belief – particularly apparent in his “mature” works – is that, on a very deep and fundamental level, “philosophy” always influences “religion.” Yet, as is discussed in Chapter 4, the connection between “philosophy” and “religion” is surely more complicated than what Strauss seems, at times, to be suggesting. For example, Philo, a Jewish philosopher Strauss remains largely silent about,177 used Plato’s philosophy in the first century to

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175 *PL*, 76-7; *PG*, 64-5. At *PL*, 74; *PG*, 62-3: “The transition from the philosopher-king to the prophet as philosopher-legislator is by no means a more original achievement than the transition of the Demiurge of Plato’s *Timaeus* to the creator-God of the revelation.” This claim again emphasises the importance of Plato, however the doctrine of the creator-God predates Plato; the book of Genesis, for example, dates to 5-6th century BCE, if not earlier. The question then becomes whether medieval philosophers were aware of this chronology. See note 185 below.

176 1 Kings 19:9-13. Strauss describes (for example, at *RCPR*, 246-52) important similarities between Greek philosophy and Biblical religion. Yet Strauss ultimately claims (*ibid.*, 260) that philosophy and the Bible are the “alternatives,” the “antagonists in the drama of the human soul.” They are “incompatible,” they are “two opponents.”

177 For Strauss’s fleeting comments on Philo, see *SCR*, 266; *PL*, 129, 154n75; *JPCM*, 249.
better understand Moses and the books of Deuteronomy. Philo’s predecessor, Aristobulus, believed Plato was inspired by Jewish doctrine. As early as the second century of the Common Era, several philosophers, including Numenious and Eusebius, compared Plato to Moses (“What is Plato but Moses Atticizing?”). Cyril of Alexandria makes a similar claim. In some way, these thinkers all believed Moses, or Jewish doctrine, had influenced Plato. While the comments of these ancient scholars might be dismissed as religious apologetics, there is also the question of what Plato learnt while in Egypt, if he did travel there. Although the question of whether “religious” concepts influenced Plato is beyond the scope of the present thesis, we can state at least this much: Strauss’s claim that an esoteric interpretation of many philosophers — including, notably, medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers — reveals a secret atheism and covert love of a philosophy that repudiated the divine and supernatural has many bizarre implications. As just one example, anything Maimonides writes about God has to, on the Straussian reading, be dismissed as a prudential accommodation to the religion Maimonides was born into. On Strauss’s interpretation, Maimonides’s statements about God may reflect Maimonides’s political views (that belief in God and divine law is politically necessary) but cannot be taken as expressing Maimonides’s genuine, or personal, spiritual views. Davidson argues that Strauss’s interpretation

178 Regarding this claim, see Bartlett (ed.), Jews in the Hellenistic and Roman Cities, 164; Rubenstein, Stories of the Babylonian Talmud, 175.

179 Welkenhuysen (ed.), Mediaeval Antiquity, 333.

180 Russell, Cyril of Alexandria, 195.

181 Riginos writes: “Some interpreters of Plato found in the stories of his instruction by Egyptian wise men evidence of Plato’s dependence on their teachings and hence lack of originality. Christian writers, however, argue not for dependency on Egyptian learning but rather for his drawing on the Old Testament, particularly the Book of Moses. For these writers Egypt becomes the place where Plato could have been instructed in the writings of Moses, and therefore Plato’s travel to Egypt is mentioned frequently by early Christian writers.” Riginos, Platonica, 65. For Plato’s references to Egypt, see, for example, Laws, 656d-657b, 799a, 819a-b; Critias, 113a; Timaeus, 21c.

182 As just one example, Maimonides (Guide, 366-7) understands the prophecy of Moses to be the result of an “overflowing from God.” On the Straussian reading, any such comment has to be interpreted as exoteric. Davidson makes the same point (Moses Maimonides, 400) in relation to Maimonides’s views on creation ex nihilo. “The esoteric engine is driven by an inner momentum. If one can accept that Maimonides devoted a tenth of the Guide for the Perplexed to a meticulous and original defense of the creation of the world while secretly believing that the world is eternal, why not go the whole hog and conclude that he believed nothing he wrote in the Guide for the Perplexed? When the mature Strauss is read with the care that he demanded of readers of serious writing, he points precisely in that direction.”
makes Maimonides’s *Guide* “one of the most grotesque books ever written.” 183 Furthermore, and as will be discussed in Chapter 4, it is entirely plausible that medieval philosophers did not believe in a clear separation between philosophy and religion insofar as one (philosophy) was taken to explain the symbolism of the other (religion). Farabi offers this thesis explicitly. 184 And, concerning Farabi, it must also be noted that Strauss’s decision to interpret Farabi *and* make claims about the *falasifa* more generally based on an “esoteric” reading of a single text (the *Philosophy of Plato*) is, to say the least, controversial. Strauss’s claims about Farabi will receive further attention in Chapters 4-6.

Finally, a point concerning cosmology deserves to be noted. Strauss has much to say about the problem Spinoza’s work caused for Orthodox Judaism. In the 1930s, a static model of the universe, one that roughly accorded with Spinoza’s cosmology, was prevalent. As discussed in this Chapter, the Spinozist view of the universe contradicts the fundamental premise of the Abrahamic faiths: creation *ex nihilo*. Yet, at a very deep and basic level, modern cosmology – based on the theory of a “Big Bang” – can be viewed as able to accommodate religious views on creation. At the very least, modern cosmology allows for the possibility of a personal God, and revelation, in a way that Spinoza’s philosophy never could. The “Big Bang” theory gained prominence around the 1930s, and was firmly established by the 1960s.

It could be argued that Strauss overstates Spinoza’s importance. Strauss chose never to investigate how contemporary cosmology might allow for an honest return to Judaism and other faiths dependent on the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. Strauss does not ask whether modern cosmology allows contemporary philosophers to return honestly to a range of beliefs, including the possibility of a creator God. 185

183 Davidson, *Moses Maimonides*, 401-2: “Both theses – that Maimonides was an atheist and that he was an agnostic – transform the *Guide for the Perplexed* into one of the most grotesque books ever written.”


185 Note Altman’s contention at *The German Stranger*, 390-2. Strauss is committed to arguing that there is an “unbridgeable gulf” between “Athens” and “Jerusalem.” Curiously, however, Strauss is willing to depart from traditional interpretations of Genesis: “Moses does not explicitly teach creation *ex nihilo*.” See *PAW*, 199; *JPCM*, 362.
Strauss’s hermeneutics: persecution, metaphysics, and esotericism in medieval Islamic philosophy

We must be aware of the fact that the vitality and the glory of our Western tradition are inseparable from its problematic character. For that tradition has two roots. It consists of two heterogeneous elements, of two elements which are ultimately incompatible with each other – the Hebrew element and the Greek element. We speak, and we speak rightly, of the antagonism between Jerusalem and Athens, between faith and philosophy.1

In the last Chapter, we noted how Strauss’s interpretation of the falasifa undergoes significant revision after Philosophy and Law. As discussed, the catalyst for Strauss’s reassessment of the falasifa was his “recovery” of exoteric writing2 sometime around the late 1930s to early 1940s. Following this recovery, Strauss contends that key medieval Islamic philosophers – notably, Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes – recognised in Plato’s works a kindred spirit; as Platonists (in the sense Strauss describes), the falasifa considered widespread belief in divine laws, and therefore organised religion, essential for creating a “virtuous city” or the “best political order.”3 As was also discussed in Chapter 3, Strauss does not interpret the falasifa’s belief in the necessity of divine laws as related to their own religious convictions. In Persecution and the Art of Writing (and its related articles), Strauss suggests that, despite understanding the social and political need for divine revelation, the falasifa, as atheists, did not truly believe divine revelation was possible. As such, the falasifa did not consider revelation to supply the “science of the beings.”4 Rather, the

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2 See Chapter 3, note 2, and note 34 below. Although Strauss writes of discovering “exoteric writing,” he is clearly discussing what he contends are “esoteric” doctrines.

3 PAIF, 15-7. As noted in Chapter 3 (Sections 3.2 and 3.4), Strauss can be understood as arguing that the falasifa were either: (i) decisively influenced by Platonic philosophy and, as students of Plato, believed in the necessity of divine laws or (ii) as rationalists and atheists, like Strauss’s Plato, the falasifa also arrived at the conclusion that belief in divine laws was necessary. On the second reading, reason leads philosophers, albeit from different historical circumstances, to the same conclusions.
philosophical truth and political wisdom came from, or was exemplified in, works by a metaphysics-less Plato and an Aristotle untainted by the influence of Neoplatonism. These medieval Islamic thinkers were, on this reading, atheists attempting to enact a “secular alliance” with princes “friendly to philosophy.” With the principal details of Strauss’s reading of the

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4 Further to the comments in Chapter 3, Section 3.4, the term “science of the beings” suggests a phenomenological, or ontological, examination. This may well be an allusion to Aristotle. However, the “ancient science of Being” is mentioned notably by Heidegger. See *Being and Time*, 48; Heidegger refers to Aristotle’s “essay on time” (*Physics*, book IV). Heidegger also refers to the “science of beings.” See, for example, *Phenomenological Interpretation of Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 23-30; *Off the Beaten Track*, 146. The question of Heidegger’s influence on Strauss might therefore be raised, as it is noticeable that Heidegger was speaking of the “science of beings” in lectures in the late 1920s. In a lecture course delivered in 1927 at Marburg (Strauss’s friends attended Heidegger’s classes regularly, see *JPCM*, 462), Heidegger contends that the “basic components of a priori cognition constitute what we call phenomenology. Phenomenology is the name for the method of ontology, that is, a scientific philosophy.” In the same lecture, Heidegger claims: “Being is to be laid hold of and made our theme. Being is always being of beings and accordingly it becomes accessible at first only by starting with some being. Here the phenomenological vision which does the apprehending must indeed direct itself toward a being, but it has to do so in such a way that the being of this being is thereby brought out so that it may be possible to thematize it. Apprehension of being, ontological investigation, always turns, at first and necessarily, to some being, but then, *in a precise way, it is led away from the being and led back to its being.* We call this basic component of phenomenological method – the leading back or re-duction of investigative vision from a naively apprehended being to being – *phenomenological reduction.*” Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (trans. Hofstadter), 20-1 [Italics in original]. Is this the type of investigation that Strauss refers to when he writes of the *falāsifah*’s “science of the beings” and, if it is, is this an example of modern philosophy being applied to medieval philosophy? While Aristotle writes of “being qua being” (*Metaphysics*, IV), the first use of the word “ontology” was in the 17th Century, by Jacob Lorhard and Rudolph Göckel. To claim Farabi, and the *falāsifah*, are “ontologists” would be to impose a modern classification on to their work; it is, perhaps, more accurate to claim that these philosophers considered themselves as examining “metaphysics,” rather than “ontology.” Semantics aside, when Strauss writes that medieval philosophers like Farabi were concerned with the “science of the beings,” but that these philosophers did not believe in absolute knowledge (that is, they secretly denied the possibility of God and metaphysical knowledge), their “science of the beings” must then be understood as a subjective science, or a science tied to their “Dasein” – their being *there* in a medieval Islamic society. As Heidegger writes “Dasein, as essentially understanding, is proximally alongside what is understood” (*Being and Time*, 207). Similarly, “[o]f course only as long as Dasein is (that is, only as long as an understanding of Being is ontically possible), ‘is there’ Being. When Dasein does not exist, ‘independence’ ‘is’ not either, nor ‘is’ the ‘in-itself.’ In such a case this sort of thing can be neither understood nor not understood” (*Being and Time*, 255). While we can speculate what Heideggerian overtones might be found in Strauss’s works, Strauss’s commentary in “Farabi’s *Plato*” (13-4) suggests that the philosopher uses their knowledge to reform their political community, *i.e.*, “philosophy” and the “royal art” are intimately connected. The pressing question though, as already flagged in Chapters 2 and 3 of the present thesis, is how does the philosopher come to such “knowledge”?

5 A pure Aristotelianism with no traces of Neoplatonism (notably Neoplatonic notions of transcendence) is important for Strauss’s reading of the *falāsifah*. This theme is discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 of the present thesis. Note Altman’s observation at *The German Stranger*, 408n25: Strauss must minimise the differences between Plato and Aristotle in order to present the “ancestors” as unified.

6 *PAIF*, 13, 15-6.
falasifa now established, this Chapter further examines some of the hermeneutic issues raised by Strauss’s interpretation, including whether it is justifiable to assume outright that the falasifa faced persecution, the connection between the falasifa’s metaphysics and their politics, and whether exoteric writing has to be understood as a “Platonic,” rather than an Islamic, practice.

The outline of this Chapter is as follows. Section 4.1 examines a possible interpretation of Strauss’s hermeneutic thesis; namely, that the threat of persecution existed within the medieval Islamic civilisation to such an extent that philosophers writing from different locations and from separate centuries can all be considered exoteric writers. I argue that if this is accepted as Strauss’s view, then Strauss’s thesis is implausible. As noted in Section 4.1, there is evidence that suggests medieval freethinkers, including Farabi’s near contemporaries al-Razi (d. 925-935) and al-Rawandi (d. 911 (?)), composed heretical works and publicly expressed “unorthodox” views. This historical evidence leads us to a complicated question about Strauss’s hermeneutics: does exoteric writing – a key component of Strauss’s “Platonic politics” – depend on the threat of harassment, oppression, or victimization, existing? I argue that, according to the parameters Strauss establishes in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, the answer is no. Properly understood, Strauss is not claiming that exoteric writing is utilised only due to an existential threat of persecution; rather, what is central to his thesis is the idea that a Platonic philosopher’s attitude towards revelation makes exoteric writing a necessity. This makes Strauss’s contention problematic: how do we know that a philosopher did indeed take a “Platonic” (in the Straussian sense) view of revelation, and that an author therefore believed in consistently applying the exoteric/esoteric distinction to their works? As an exoteric writer would never openly admit their “Platonic politics,” we cannot be sure that the falasifa were adherents of Strauss’s “Platonic political philosophy.” Accordingly, I argue that, given the deficiencies of Strauss’s reading, there are good reasons for refusing Strauss’s view that we ought to interpret the falasifa’s metaphysical views, their advocacy of revelation and religion, and their belief that religion symbolises philosophic truths, as merely “exoteric” segments of their philosophy.

Section 4.2 proceeds to the topic of the falasifa’s metaphysics, a theme Strauss awards little attention to in texts such as “Farabi’s Plato,” *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, and “How Farabi read Plato’s Laws.” I argue that Strauss’s contention that medieval Islamic thinkers philosophized “beneath” the religious law (or “conformed” to their religious communities disingenuously) is problematic as the falasifa’s works contain metaphysical propositions at odds with Islamic doctrines. The question raised is whether Strauss’s thesis – that the falasifa

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7 *PAW*, 10, 15.

8 As noted in Chapter 3, one of the similarities between *Philosophy and Law* and *Persecution and the Art of Writing* is that, in both texts, Strauss does not consider the falasifa and their Jewish successors to have been “Enlighteners.” In *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (17), Strauss writes of the falasifa’s belief that “conformity with the opinions of the religious community in which one is brought up, is a necessary qualification for the future philosopher.” That is, philosophers
“conformed” disingenuously to the beliefs of their religious communities—can be reconciled with the metaphysical doctrines we find in the *falasifa’s* works; metaphysical propositions that, according to their critics, undermined Islam. If these thinkers strictly “conformed” to the religious law when philosophizing, as Strauss suggests they did, why did Ghazali, for example, strongly attack Farabi’s and Avicenna’s doctrines? In Section 4.2, we also investigate one of the consequences of Strauss’s “secular” or “atheistic” reading of the *falasifa*. I argue that dismissing the *falasifa’s* metaphysical doctrines as “exoteric” causes several problems. The greatest difficulty for Strauss’s thesis is that the *falasifa’s* metaphysics and their political philosophy are intimately connected; the notion of *transcendence*—whether a transcendent God, a transcendent Active Intellect, or the possibility of personal transcendence—is an integral part of the *falasifa’s* political doctrine. As noted in Chapter 7 of the present thesis, transcendence is also a vital component of Platonic philosophy. Strauss must overlook all metaphysical and theological doctrines in order to interpret the *falasifa* (and Plato) as “secular” political philosophers.

In Section 4.3, we turn our attention to a hermeneutic matter that was never investigated by Strauss. As was noted in Chapter 3, according to Strauss’s “mature” reading of the *falasifa*, exoteric writing is considered a distinctly Platonic or philosophical phenomenon. Strauss is curiously silent—albeit with one early exception—on the deep history of esotericism (i.e., the notion of secret knowledge) within Islam. Our question is whether the medieval thinkers Strauss interprets from the 1940s onwards as residents, so to speak, of Plato’s “Athens,” were influenced not only by Plato. Rather, were these thinkers influenced by hermeneutic traditions that existed within Islam itself? I argue that examining the source of the *falasifa’s* hermeneutics leads us to doubt that the *falasifa* made a strict distinction between “Athens” and “Mecca,” between “philosophy” and “theology.” As discussed in Section 4.3, contemporary scholars assert that medieval Islamic

disingenuously conform to the religion they are born into. On this theme, compare *PL*, 102-3 with *PAW*, 17, 182; “Farabi’s Plato,” 17n41, 27-8. Strauss’s contention is problematic, as noted in this Chapter.

9 As was discussed in Chapter 3, in *Philosophy and Law*, it is clear that Strauss understands that Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism posed major problems to revealed religion in the Middle Ages; attempts were made to reconcile Aristotelian and Neoplatonic doctrines with religious beliefs. Yet Strauss does not argue this point in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. He suggests (see note 8 above) that the *falasifa* largely left religious teachings and beliefs alone, which is not true—their writings can be understood as “tampering” with Islamic doctrines, hence the reason for Ghazali’s attack in the *Tahāfut al-falāsifa*.


11 *PL,* 86.

12 Strauss frequently uses the terms “Athens” and “Jerusalem” (see Chapter 1, note 123). The use of “Mecca” in this context comes from Brague’s “Athens, Jerusalem, Mecca: Leo Strauss’s “Muslim” Understanding of Greek Philosophy.” Whether these distinctions are tenable is discussed in Section 4.3 below.
thinkers did not make the types of distinctions Strauss believes in; separating “philosophy” from “theology” (or “reason” from “faith”) appears to be an imposed, artificial, hermeneutic practice, one that follows from pedagogic classifications made, post-Averroes, in medieval European universities. In this regard, Strauss can be seen as imposing a classification on to medieval Islamic philosophy that does not belong there.

The underlying theme of this Chapter is whether Strauss’s “mature” reading of the falasifa is tenable, or whether aspects of his reading are overtly arbitrary. As I argue, there are strong reasons for doubting several aspects of Strauss’s interpretation; there are also good reasons for considering, once again, as to whether Strauss attempts to align the falasifa, at a basic level, with Nietzschean philosophy.

4.1 The question of persecution: working towards a deeper understanding of Strauss’s hermeneutics

In Persecution and the Art of Writing, there are five passages vital for understanding Strauss’s “mature” hermeneutic approach to the falasifa. The first passage comes after having outlined Farabi’s reading of Plato. As noted in Chapter 3, Strauss emphasizes that Farabi does not mention Plato’s doctrine of the Ideas, or Plato’s notion of the immortal soul. Strauss offers the following contention:

[I]t would appear to be rash to identify the teaching of the falasifa with that which they taught most frequently or most conspicuously. The attempt to establish their serious teaching is rendered still more difficult by the fact that some opponents of the falasifa seem to have thought it necessary to help the falasifa in concealing their teaching, because they feared the harm which its publication would cause to those of their fellow-believers whose faith was weak.

Strauss cites no particular text or scholar at this point in Persecution and the Art of Writing. Presumably Strauss refers to Ghazali, the most notable opponent of the falasifa. If this is the case, then a criticism of Strauss’s thesis must be immediately noted. Ghazali’s attack would have drawn attention to the falasifa’s problematic beliefs, particularly their views on the world’s pre-eternity,

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13 See the discussion and sources cited at the end of Section 4.3 below.

14 See Chapter 3, Section 3.4.

15 PAW, 17.
their view that God’s knowledge did not include the temporal particulars, and their denial of bodily resurrection.16 Ghazali’s attack points, then, to the detrimental effects on faith that the *falasifa*’s doctrines had, or might have; such an attack was surely predicated on the *falasifa*’s doctrines being available. Accordingly, what Strauss would consider *heterodox* ideas (disbelief in literal interpretations of religious doctrines) clearly was, to some degree, an element of Islamic societies. This leads to a second point. Ghazali’s attack against the *falasifa* undermines Strauss’s claim, noted in Chapter 3, that the *falasifa* attempted to disingenuously “conform” with their religion. Had they “conformed,” so to speak, there would have been no attack from thinkers like Ghazali or Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328).17 The only way I believe Strauss could respond to this criticism would be by arguing that, by attempting to reconcile Aristotelian, Neoplatonic, and Quranic doctrines, the *falasifa* were somehow attempting to “hide” philosophy. That is, they sought, in order to (disingenuously) protect the Islamic faith, to prove that the Quran and elements of Greek philosophy were in agreement concerning the most important matters. This view is, however, problematic when we consider that Farabi does attempt such a reconciliation in one work, the *Kitāb al-jam’ bayna ra’yay al-ḥakīmayn Aflāṭūn al-ilāhī wa-Aristīṭālis*, but then proposes entirely different metaphysical doctrines in other works, for example, in *Mabādi’ ārā’ ahl al-madinat al-fāḍilah*. Accepting Strauss’s claim requires believing that the *falasifa* went to great lengths to dishonestly render Greek philosophy palatable to non-philosophers, an argument that contradicts Strauss’s thesis that the *falasifa* wanted philosophy to remain “esoteric.”

Nevertheless, these important topics will be returned to later in the Chapter. For now, let us consider Strauss’s second major proposition concerning the *falasifa*. Strauss claims:

Farabi’s *Plato* (sc. as an embodiment of the *falasifa*’s writing practices) informs us about the most obvious and the crudest reason why this antiquated or forgotten distinction (sc. between the exoteric and esoteric) was needed. Philosophy and the philosophers were “in grave danger.” Society did not recognize philosophy or the right of philosophizing. There was no harmony between philosophy and society. The philosophers were very far from being exponents of society or of parties.18

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18 *P.AIF*, 17-8.
Strauss’s assertion is clear enough. He proposes, albeit in a contestable and ahistorical way, that there was an inherent tension between philosophy and “society” at large.\textsuperscript{19} The third, related, statement is as follows:

He [\textit{e.g.} Farabi] shows by his whole procedure that there was even less freedom of philosophizing in the cities and nations of his own time, i.e., “after philosophy had been blurred or destroyed.” The fact that “philosophy” and “the philosophers” came to mean in the Islamic world a suspect pursuit and a suspect group of men, not to say unbelief and unbelievers, shows sufficiently how precarious the status of philosophy was: the legitimacy of philosophy was not recognised.\textsuperscript{20}

The vital point is, once again, the hostility towards “philosophy” within Islamic societies. Strauss repeatedly emphasizes this view, as his fourth major assertion makes apparent:

\textit{[T]he status of philosophy was, as a matter of principle, much more precarious in Judaism and in Islam than in Christianity: in Christianity philosophy became an integral part of the officially recognised and even required training of the student of the sacred doctrine. This difference explains partly the eventual collapse of philosophic inquiry in the Islamic and in the Jewish world, a collapse which has no parallel in the Western Christian world.}\textsuperscript{21}

There is no doubt that Strauss understands Islam as having been inimical to philosophy, and that he believes philosophy “collapsed” at a certain point within Islamic societies. The fifth quote from Strauss relating to philosophy in medieval Islamic societies reads:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{19} It is historically inaccurate insofar as Farabi, Avicenna, Averroes, and Maimonides are all associated with various political figures from that age (see note 61 below). The generalisation that these philosophers remained at the periphery of society is therefore problematic. Strauss’s other key assertion, that “society did not recognise” philosophy, is also inaccurate. As just one example, from around the middle of the 8\textsuperscript{th} century CE, there clearly were many Muslims who viewed Greek philosophy as providing the necessary tools for debating Christian theologians, hence the translation of Greek philosophy and the development of Islamic “rational” and “speculative” theology. On this theme, see Reisman & McGinnis, \textit{Classical Arabic Philosophy}, xviii. Gutas connects the Graeco-Arabic translation movement with the unique culture in Baghdad that existed from the 8\textsuperscript{th} to 10\textsuperscript{th} centuries (Greek Thought Arabic Culture, 135 [italics in original]): “With regard to the question of patronage, therefore, it appears relatively clear that the translation movement was a result of a common effort of the majority, if not the totality, of economically and politically significant – actually, dominant – groups in Baghdad during the first two ‘Abbāsid centuries, regardless of ethnic and religious background, because it served their various purposes both individually and collectively…”
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{PAW}, 18.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{PAW}, 19.
\end{quote}
If it is true that there is a necessary correlation between persecution and writing between the lines, then there is a necessary negative criterion: that the book in question must have been composed in an era of persecution, that is, at a time when some political or other orthodoxy was enforced by law or custom.²²

Perhaps this quote requires us, as Strauss’s readers, to put “2 and 2 together.”²³ Strauss has told us that Islamic societies were hostile to philosophy, and that philosophy therefore “collapsed” as a matter of course. His claim concerning the circumstances that make exoteric writing necessary (“a time when some political or other orthodoxy was enforced by law or custom”) leads us to believe that medieval Islamic philosophers, aware of an all-encompassing “orthodoxy,” had to write using the exoteric/esoteric distinction.²⁴

In terms of Strauss’s hermeneutics, the message that might be extracted from his assertions in Persecution and the Art of Writing is as follows. By contesting that the falsafis’s writings were deeply influenced by their historical circumstances (the existence of “some political or other orthodoxy,”²⁵ and therefore the threat of persecution), Strauss suggests many aspects of their texts are to be treated as exoteric. As was discussed in Chapter 3, any metaphysical claims from the falsafis – belief in suprarational teachings or truths communicated by revelation, belief in God or metaphysical sources of knowledge such as a transcendent Active Intellect, belief in a divine soul and an afterlife, and so on – become “exoteric” aspects of the falsafis’s works. On Strauss’s “mature” reading, the falsafis’s metaphysics can be conceived of as “prudential accommodations to the accepted dogma,”²⁶ exoteric statements made due to the falsafis’s historical circumstances (yet, as noted below, there are problems with this view).²⁷ However, Strauss directs virtually no attention to a historical analysis of medieval Islam, and therefore does not prove the existence of the “orthodoxy” his hermeneutic thesis appears to presuppose. Certainly, there was a reaction to

²² P-AIF, 32.
²³ TOM, 36.
²⁴ Incidentally, it is worth noting that, if this is interpreted to be Strauss’s contention, then it is paradoxical: philosophy is best practiced, on this reading, in societies where it is persecuted, and eventually eradicated. The “subversive” nature of true philosophy appears to lead to the demise of that same philosophy. For philosophy as “subversive,” see JPCM, 463. Compare with Strauss’s statements at OT, 205-6; P-AIF, 19. See note 110 below.
²⁵ P-AIF, 32.
²⁶ “Farabi’s Plato,” 19; P-AIF, 15.
²⁷ Consider the similarity Strauss points to between Farabi’s age and Socrates’s at “Farabi’s Plato,” 17n41. Note also the comparison between Halevi’s age and Socrates’s at P-AIF, 107n33.
the falasifa, as Ghazali’s *Tabāfut al-falāsifa* (*Incoherence of the Philosophers*) makes clear. However, this book came long after the deaths of Ghazali’s two principal targets, Farabi and Avicenna. The issue here is whether Strauss’s hermeneutics rest on a questionable assumption and, if so, whether Strauss’s reading of medieval Islamic philosophy is tenable.

Prior to continuing, it can be noted how scholars of medieval philosophy have tended to interpret Strauss’s hermeneutic thesis. Strauss is frequently understood as arguing that the threat of persecution in certain societies resulted in exoteric writing. This interpretation of Strauss’s thesis has led several scholars of medieval Islamic philosophy, including Gutas, Nasr and Leaman, to maintain that such a threat – if it indeed existed in medieval Islamic societies – was not significant enough to have warranted the composition of the exoteric “political philosophy” Strauss describes. Furthermore, it bears noting that historians would dispute the existence of the ahistorical Islamic “orthodoxy” Strauss appears to presuppose. For example, Stroumsa writes:

> [I]t becomes increasingly obvious that doctrines and ideas which in the tenth and eleventh century were presented as basic tenets of Islam, or belonging to a given theological school, had in fact been originally absent from Islam, or from the same school. It may have taken many years for doctrines to crystallize and become canonized. It is thus possible that some views, which would be considered shockingly heretical in the fifth Islamic century, could still have offered a legitimate option a century earlier.

[Italics added]

Walker also questions the existence of a medieval Islamic “orthodoxy” on the basis that harsh criticisms of Islam and the idea of revelation seem to have been expressed by prominent

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28 Ghazali’s *Tabāfut al-falāsifa* is believed to have been written between 1091 and 1095 (CE), several decades after Avicenna’s death, and almost a century and a half after Farabi’s death. As Ghazali’s and Averroes’s works make apparent, openly questioning religious laws, and attempting to fuse philosophic doctrines with religious beliefs, had deleterious effects on the practice of Islam. While both thinkers can be understood as having attempted, in different ways, to limit the negative consequences philosophy and philosophical questioning had on Islam, Ghazali and Averroes were writing long after Farabi and Avicenna, and neither Ghazali nor Averroes was against philosophy in toto. See Averroes, *Kitāb faṣl al-maṣādīl* (ed. Butterworth); Ghazali, *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (ed. Bejou); *Deliverance from Error* (trans. McCarthy).

29 For a critical overview of Strauss’s “political approach” to medieval Islamic philosophy, see Gutas, “The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century,” 19-25.


philosophers living within medieval Islamic societies.\textsuperscript{32} If Strauss is understood as asserting that the occurrence of exoteric writing within medieval Islam was due to the threat of persecution, one can, as is shown below, argue against Strauss on historical grounds.\textsuperscript{33} As I will demonstrate, if we understand Strauss as arguing that the threat of persecution results in exoteric writing, then Strauss’s thesis is implausible: there are accounts of heterodox thinkers seemingly not being oppressed or victimized.\textsuperscript{34} Considering some of these examples of “heterodoxy” in medieval Islam allows us to better understand why several contemporary scholars view the historical aspect of Strauss’s thesis as problematic.

In terms of a heterodox thinker not being persecuted, an apt figure to consider is the near contemporary of Farabi’s, the polymath Abu Bakr al-Razi (d. 925-935).\textsuperscript{35} Razi, at his most

\textsuperscript{32} See the quote from Walker cited in-text, and notes 43 and 44, below.

\textsuperscript{33} Although the caveat has to be noted that comments from al-Jawzi, Ghazali, and Ibn Taymiyya indicate that Strauss’s assertion that philosophy “came to mean in the Islamic world a suspect pursuit and a suspect group of men, not to say unbelief and unbelievers…” (\textit{PAW}, 18 [italics added]) is partly accurate. For example, Ibn Taymiyya (\textit{Ibn Taymiyya Against the Greek Logicians} (trans. Hallaq), 66; Ibn Taymiyya, \textit{Jahd al-Qarīha}, 136-7) makes a noteworthy criticism of philosophy: Islamic philosophers attribute a reformatory function to religious duties and argue that, as they (the Islamic philosophers) have attained the knowledge required for the soul’s perfection, they are absolved from performing religious duties. That said, despite this type of account, it would be entirely incorrect to assign to medieval Islamic societies, as Strauss’s thesis seems to require, overwhelming hostility towards philosophy generally; historical evidence shows that this claim cannot be convincingly made. While one can find evidence of Islamic theologians accusing philosophers of heterodoxy, or criticizing philosophers for attempting to use Islam politically, one can find ample historical evidence that suggests “freethinking” in medieval Islamic societies.

\textsuperscript{34} I am not claiming that we need to conduct a detailed historical investigation of the occurrence of persecution in every medieval Islamic society (a topic too immense for a single thesis, and outside the boundaries of a thesis on Leo Strauss). The reason for this discussion is to demonstrate how Strauss’s generalizations in \textit{Persecution and the Art of Writing} can be questioned by appealing to only a few prominent cases of “heterodox” thought. If Strauss wished to make the historical existence of persecution the basis for reading medieval Islamic philosophy, it was incumbent on Strauss to prove that the threat of persecution existed in all of those societies. This is something Strauss did not do. As noted below, however, persecution becomes only “the most obvious and the crudest” (\textit{PAW}, 17) reason for exoteric writing. This raises the question of why Strauss places the word “persecution” in the title of his text and suggests philosophers were/are a “persecuted” class. If the Platonism Strauss describes permanently necessitates exoteric writing, i.e., Platonic philosophers are not committed to enlightenment and therefore never publish materials against the “kingdom of general darkness” (see \textit{PAW}, 33), why would a Platonic philosopher ever be persecuted? All their works would be, presumably, “exoteric.” Strauss implies precisely this point. At \textit{PAW}, 35: “Writings are naturally accessible to all who can read. Therefore a philosopher who chose the second way \textit[i.e. those who choose to write, rather than “limiting themselves to oral instruction of a carefully selected group of pupils” (\textit{PAW}, 34-5)] could expound only such opinions as were suitable for the non-philosophic majority; all of his writings would have to be, strictly speaking, exoteric.” See note 158 below.

\textsuperscript{35} An in-depth overview of medieval heresy is Stroumsa’s study: \textit{Free-thinkers of Medieval Islam: Ibn al-Rawandi, Abu Bakr al-Razi, and Their Impact on Islamic Thought}. This text is cited hereafter as \textit{Free-thinkers}. Regarding Razi, see also Kraus and
polemical moments, is said to have argued that the notion of prophecy was a deception. Razi’s example – if taken to be true – forcibly indicates that “heterodox” ideas (in the sense of severe criticisms of Islam and revealed religion) were publicly expressed. If these reports are believed, Razi’s case also indicates that the prosecution of freethinkers was by no means a certainty; there are no accounts of Razi, or his near-contemporary Farabi, as having suffered persecution. An Isma’ili critic of Razi’s, (the similarly named) Abu Hatim al-Razi (d. 933), provides an account that relates the extent of Razi’s heresy. Abu Hatim recounts in his Kitāb ʿAlām al-nubuwwah a public debate (apparently in the presence of the governor of Rey) between the two. In this account, though admittedly from a critic, Razi is reported to have stated that:

If the people of this religion are asked about the proof for the soundness of their religion, they flare up, get angry and spill the blood of whoever confronts them with this question. They forbid rational speculation, and strive to kill their adversaries. This is why truth became thoroughly silenced and concealed. They adopted this approach as a result of their being long accustomed to their religious denomination, as days passed and it became a habit. Because they were deluded by the beards of the goats, who sit in ranks in their councils, straining their throats in recounting lies, senseless myths and “so-and-so told us in the name of so-and-so,” deceitfully and falsely, and transmitting contradictory traditions.

While the accuracy of Abu Hatim’s account of Razi’s heretical statements might be questioned, if the statements attributed to Razi are true, then he publicly made clear and damning attacks

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36 See the commentary at Stroumsa, Freethinkers (93-107). Razi allegedly criticized revealed religion in several texts.

37 Walzer (“Introduction,” On the Perfect State, 4) notes that there are no accounts of Farabi suffering “any kind of official or popular persecution.”

38 Stroumsa, Freethinkers, 87, 117 (“our sources are unanimous in saying that Razi lived and died in peace”). While Stroumsa considers Kraus as having written (along with Pines) a “masterly,” “penetrating” piece on Razi – the “cornerstone of any study” (Freethinkers, 89, 89n11) – Stroumsa rejects Kraus’s view that Razi was “overly cautious” or that heretical thinkers always attributed their own opinions to others (for example, to the Sabeans or Barahima) due to fear of persecution (Freethinkers, 164). Stroumsa makes a similar statement concerning Strauss at Freethinkers, 71.

39 Translation: Book of the Signs of Prophecy.

40 Stroumsa contends that Razi may be speaking of Islam generally or more specifically of the Isma’ilis. Freethinkers, 98.

against religion. In Kraus and Pines’s view, Razi’s criticisms amount to “the most violent polemic against religion that appeared in the course of the middle ages.” Razi’s statements (if we believe he indeed made such remarks) inform us that persecution for freethinking occurred within medieval Islamic societies; Razi himself mentions the harm that could come to those who questioned religious doctrines. However, the accounts of Razi’s own life indicate that, despite his alleged apostasy, he did not suffer from oppression, harassment, or victimization. In fact, Razi is said to have enjoyed a stable and successful professional career. While different hypotheses might be suggested as to why Razi escaped punishment (for example, the fact he was director of hospitals in Rey and Baghdad), Razi’s case raises questions regarding the occurrence of persecution during his (and, therefore, Farabi’s) time. Walker is led to the following conclusion about an Islamic “orthodoxy” and Razi:

Several times in public sessions at court he faced one of his most vociferous critics, the Ismaili missionary Abu Hatim al-Razi, and contended with him on issues of great importance and profound sensitivity. Needless to say, his orthodoxy [i.e. Abu Bakr al-Razi], if there was in fact anything like an orthodoxy at the time and in the places he lived, was clearly jeopardized by his preference for what he thought were the dictates of free, scientific investigation. These, apparently, he neither concealed nor masked by the subterfuge of esoteric expressions. His was a full and rich career, and it ended naturally after he had reached the pinnacle of success – having by then written over 200 epistles, pamphlets, and books…

The question of whether persecution for heterodox thought was a definite facet of medieval Islamic societies is also raised when examining the case of ibn al-Rawandi (d. 911 [?]). According to existing sources, Rawandi was a member of Baghdad’s Mu’tazilite until the age of


45 Information on Rawandi is provided by Stroumsa in Freethinkers, chapter 2 and passim. See also Stroumsa’s entry on Rawandi in Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia, 349. Much like Razi, the second-hand accounts concerning Rawandi’s life are often contradictory and therefore need to be treated with caution. See Freethinkers, 37-8, 45.

46 The Mu’tazilite were one of the main groups of speculative theologians in Baghdad and Basrah in the ninth century. They enjoyed considerable political support under several Caliphs. Another principal group of speculative theologians, the Ash’arite, came from this movement, when al-Ashari (d. 935) abandoned the Mu’tazilite school due to theological differences. Ghazali was an Ash’arite, although note Averroes’s criticism of Ghazali at Kitāb faṣl al-maqāl (ed.
forty when he dramatically altered his intellectual direction. Following this turn, Rawandi is believed to have published several works arguing against the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, against prophets, against the notion of God’s wisdom, and essentially against revealed religion in general.47 According to one medieval source, Rawandi’s works, some of which were possibly written in conjunction with another medieval freethinker, al-Warraq (d. 861), were “famous and well known.”48 Rawandi is said to have made “no secret of his heresy” and openly declared himself an apostate.49 Stroumsa describes Rawandi’s attitude towards religion, one that bears notable similarities to Razi’s, as follows:

In his *Book of the Emerald* he argued that the human intellect makes revelation superfluous. God has provided humanity with the intellect. This intellect, which is part of the definition of humanity, is given equally to all human beings and is sufficient to guide them. The pretenders to prophecy are thus nothing but impostors and charlatans who exploit their knowledge of natural phenomena in order to manipulate and delude simple people. In this book [ *Ibn al-Rawandi’s Book of the Emerald*] those who serve as Ibn al-Rawandi’s mouthpiece and who present his antiprophetic lore are the so-called Brahmans: Indian polemicists who uphold the intellectual and spiritual equality of all humans. This literary device may reflect actual contacts with Indian philosophy, but it also may have been conceived to ward off accusations of heresy, and as a protective device against persecution.50

While the fear of retribution for criticising religion clearly existed at different times and places, to varying degrees, in the Islamic Middle Ages, al-Rawandi’s case again suggests that heretical beliefs were publicly expressed and possibly even widely circulated.51 Despite the claims made about

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47 *Freethinkers*, 39. The question of whether Rawandi did express heterodox views or whether he was constructed as a *bête noire* by former *Mu'tazilite* colleagues is raised at *Freethinkers*, 45, 70.

48 *Freethinkers*, 40.

49 *Freethinkers*, 40. Farabi is said to have written polemical responses against Rawandi, although these have not survived. See *Freethinkers*, 69, 69n134, 169, 186, 188.


51 Stroumsa (“Ibn al-Rawandi,” *Medieval Islamic Civilization*, 349) believes Rawandi may have attributed his most polemical ideas to:
Rawandi’s heresy, Rawandi’s persecution (or the threats of persecution levelled against him) may have come late in life. According to one historian of that age, the delay in dealing with Rawandi’s heresy was attributed to the overall weakness of faith at that time. As Rawandi’s case suggests, those defending nascent Islam had to deal with a series of competing ideas that came from other faiths, sects, and cultures; for example, ideas from Judaism, Christianity, Manichaeanism, Zoroastrianism, Sabianism, and Greek philosophy. There were also ideas sourced from, or attributed to, groups such as the Brahmans. In addition to this, there were heterodox intellectual movements such as the Dahriya, a sect Rawandi and Razi are sometimes affiliated with. Accounts of the Dahriya come from Ghazali and Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 1200), a Hanbalite jurist who investigated deviations from conservative interpretations of Sunni Islam. Al-Jawzi provides the following account in his Kitāb Akhbār as-Ṣifāt, written around 1180-1190:

[W]e said to the dahrīya: ‘What is your view of the prophets?’ They replied: ‘They are authors of legal codes (nawāms) and are persons endowed with wisdom (ḥikma). However, what they promise concerning the hereafter is groundless. They make promises and issue threats only to instill fear in the hearts of people and to convince them to postpone enjoyment of the present life.’ I asked them if there would be any unfortunate consequences for me if I chose to follow the prophets, and they replied: ‘No, but you will waste your time; and as to whether there will be a punishment or reward [in the hereafter], the answer is no.’

Note that Rawandi may, though, have been expressing what he had learnt from “actual contact” with Indian philosophers.

52 Stroumsa, *Freethinkers*, 117, 117n168. The important point here is that Rawandi was, apparently, able to publish several heretical works.

53 On this theme, see Guttmann, *Philosophies of Judaism*, 51.

54 The term translates to “materialists” or “secularists.” For Rawandi as a possible member of this group, see Stroumsa, *Freethinkers*, 45, 232.


The account of the Dahriya is remarkable in that it reiterates that criticism against the idea of prophecy appears to have been openly expressed in late 12th century Baghdad. Rawandi and Razi had been writing against revealed religion some two centuries earlier.

At the least, these accounts point to the fact that, when it comes to discussing medieval Islam, it is difficult to agree that there was clear consensus as to what constituted “heterodox” thought. Strauss can be understood (as the interpretations of some of his critics indicates) as claiming that we are justified in applying a blanket hermeneutic rule to medieval Islamic philosophy; specifically, we are to look for an “esoteric” message when reading texts written by medieval Islamic philosophers on the basis that we are to believe that, without a doubt, these philosophers were likely to have written their works fearing persecution. The critical response to this interpretation of Strauss’s thesis is forcibly indicated by Gutas:

[T]here is not a single such philosopher who was ever persecuted, let alone executed, for his philosophical views – but it is wrong even in the case of Maimonides; he and his family were persecuted by the Almohads and had to leave Spain in 1149 not because Moses was a philosopher – in any case, he was barely in his teens at the time – but because they were Jews. Furthermore, it is patently absurd to claim that philosophy was in a hostile environment in Islamic societies when it was practised in various times and places throughout Islamic history for well over 10 centuries.57

Gutas points out that it is difficult to believe that Strauss’s generalisations ought to be accepted without qualification. Critics could argue that Strauss overlooks an important historical complexity: there never were Islamic religious institutions similar to those of the Orthodox or Catholic Church.58 The historical existence of a medieval Islamic “orthodoxy” is therefore open to debate.59 Claims about the existence of a medieval Islamic “orthodoxy” inimical to philosophy are also difficult to agree with given the successful Graeco-Arabic translation movement, a

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57 Gutas, “The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century,” 20-1. While it could be argued that Gutas’s comments fail to adequately explain Ghazali’s, or Ibn Taymiyya’s, attacks against philosophy, or Averroes’s persecution in 1195 and exile from Cordova, these attacks need to be contextualised; philosophy was clearly not always viewed as a problem, or as inimical to Islam, as the success of the Graeco-Arabic translation movement proves. Contemporary Muslim scholars continue to ponder the overall impact Ghazali’s attack had on Islamic philosophy. See, for example, Ahmed’s commentary in Postmodernism and Islam, 85; Journey into Islam, 150-1.

58 Gutas, Greek Thought, Arabic Culture, 155, 168.

59 On this topic, see Stroumsa, Freethinkers, 110. See also ibid., 118 regarding the “volatile political (and therefore, religious) conditions in Razi’s time.”
movement that spanned around two centuries. Furthermore, a critic might argue that if it is questionable as to whether opponents of Islam like Razi and Rawandi were persecuted, then is it likely that the *falasifa* – whose remarks on Islam are far more favourable – wrote fearing persecution? As noted below, the *falasifa*’s statements might also be viewed as posing a problem for Strauss’s hermeneutic thesis.

The *falasifa* exhort, quite clearly, that religious beliefs be forced on to populations. While their works report the prevalence of heterodox thought (again, defined broadly as disbelief in, and criticisms of, Islam and revelation), the *falasifa* indicate their support for Islam; as the following statements show, the views the *falasifa* express are overtly political. This suggests that the *falasifa* were possibly either (i) genuine believers in the divine law and religion or (ii) that the *falasifa* disingenuously supported the divine law and religion for, perhaps, political and social reasons. If we accept that the *falasifa*’s statements confirm the first case – that they were indeed genuine believers in divine revelation – then there are, clearly, major problems with Strauss attributing to these philosophers an atheistic, secular, “Platonic political philosophy,” and with Strauss claiming that these philosophers were not “exponents” of “society or of parties.”

Accepting the second possibility – that the *falasifa*’s support for Islam was disingenuous – means that anything the *falasifa* write concerning the harmonisation of philosophy and Islam (see Section 4.3) has to be dismissed as “exoteric.” Several of Strauss’s critics find the second possibility, what I have referred to generally as Strauss’s “mature” position on medieval Islamic philosophy, arbitrary and implausible. According to Strauss’s “mature” position, there is no chance the *falasifa* believed in the possibility of God or metaphysics; we are to believe that the *falasifa* were involved in a highly elaborate scheme to publicly endorse a religion they did not truly believe in.

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60 Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, passim. Gutas describes the translation movement as “truly epoch-making” (8) and on par with the achievements of classical Greece, or the Renaissance, or the European Enlightenment. Gutas writes that the reason the translation movement ended was because the “Arab philosophical and scientific enterprise” became autonomous” (ibid., 152).

61 *PAW*, 17-8. Strauss implies that these philosophers accepted the religious law (they “conformed” with the “opinions” of their “religious community”) and then carried out their philosophizing in private, therefore not involving themselves in political matters; in Strauss’s words, the *falasifa* “were very far from being exponents of society or of parties.” This claim is inaccurate: the *falasifa* clearly were involved politically and with their societies. For example, Farabi with prince and ruler Sayf al-Dawla (d. 967), Avicenna’s patronage by the al-Dawla family in Persia, Averroes’s position with the Almohad Caliphate, Maimonides’s possible employment with Saladin, and so on. Strauss does not deal with this issue. Nor does Strauss deal comprehensively with the *falasifa*’s statements endorsing religion.

62 See the sources cited at note 30 above. See also Tamer’s criticisms of Strauss’s reading in *Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne*. 
Nevertheless, let us inspect the pertinent statements from the *falasifa*. Farabi suggests apostates are to be either re-educated or expelled from virtuous cities.\(^63\) Akin to his recommendation that “bestial” men be treated like “harmful animals,”\(^64\) Farabi seemingly endorses holy war against disbelievers who do not recognize what is “best” for them. He writes in his *Aphorisms*:

> War is [a] for repulsing an enemy coming upon the city from outside. Or it is [b] for earning a good the city deserves from outside, from one in whose hand it is. Or it is [c] for carrying and forcing a certain group to what is best and most fortunate for them in themselves, as distinct from others, when they have not been cognizant of it on their own and have not submitted to someone who is cognizant of it and calls them to it by speech. Or it is [d] warring against those who do not submit to slavery and servitude, it being best for them and most fortunate that their rank in the world be to serve and to be slaves. Or it is [e] warring against a group not of the inhabitants of the city against whom they have a right, but they withhold it. And this is something shared with two [of the preceding] concerns: [one is] earning a good for the city and the other is that they be carried to give justice and equity.\(^65\) [Italics added]

Farabi is cognisant of the existence of disbelief and recommends religion (seemingly, if necessary, to be imposed by force) for the general populace.\(^66\) Much more explicit statements on the existence of disbelief and the necessary enforcement of religion come in the works of Avicenna.


\(^{64}\) Farabi, *The Political Regime* (trans. Najjar), MPP, 42; Farabi, *al-Siyāsa al-Madaniyya* (ed. Najjar), 57. See also Averroes on Plato’s Republic, 14-5. Compare with PPIV, 117m67:

> The philosopher does not say that the religion of the philosophers objects to the killing of any human beings. The killing of bestial men, of men on the lowest level of humanity…was considered legitimate by the philosophers; see Farabi *k.al-siyāsāt al madaniyya* [c. The Political Regime].

On the “religion of the philosophers,” see PPIV, 120-1.


Regarding suspicion towards revelation, we find in Avicenna’s *Divisions of the Rational Sciences* the following remark:

*By the nomoi, the philosophers do not mean what the vulgar believe, which is that the nomos is nothing but a device and deceit. Rather, according to them, the nomos is the law and the norm that is established and made permanent through the coming-down of revelation.*

Avicenna writes that the “vulgar” do not believe in prophecy. His response to heterodoxy is particularly harsh, as indicated repeatedly in passages of his *Kitāb al-Shifāʾ* (*Book of Healing*):

[The legislator] must then decree in his law *sunna* that, if someone secedes and lays claim to the caliphate by virtue of power or wealth, then it becomes the duty of every citizen to fight and kill him. If the citizens are capable of so doing but refrain from doing so, then they disobey God and commit an act of unbelief *kufr*. The blood of anyone who can fight but refrains becomes free for the spilling after this [fact] is verified in the assembly of all. *The legislator must lay down a law that, next to belief in the prophet, nothing brings one closer to God, exalted be He, than the killing of such a usurper.*

Avicenna indubitably connects religion and politics, positions himself as an advocate of the legislator, and outlines severe punishment for those who undermine the caliph. In another passage, Avicenna makes a similar claim:

*As for enemies and those who oppose the law *sunna*, [the legislator] must decree waging war against them and destroying them — after calling them to accept the truth *ḥaqq* — and [decree] that their property and women must be declared free for the spoil.*

Once again, Avicenna unambiguously calls for war against those who oppose the caliph. He also writes that rules must be in place so that those who, due to disbelief in an afterlife, violate divine laws receive punishment:

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67 For Strauss’s use of this text, see the discussion in Chapter 2 (Section 2.3) and Chapter 3 (Section 3.4) of the present thesis.


The legislator must also impose punishments, penalties, and prohibitions to prevent disobedience to the divine Law [shari'a]. For not everyone is restrained from violating the law because of what he fears of the afterlife. Most of these [punishments and prohibitions] must pertain to acts contrary to the law that are conducive to the corruption of the city’s order.\footnote{Avicenna, \textit{Kitâb al-Shifâ’} (ed. Marmura), 377.}

Avicenna is aware that opposition to the divine law is due to the fact that some do not “fear” the afterlife or because some oppose the caliph. Avicenna’s response is unequivocal; he speaks of “destroying” non-believers.

Averroes’s position is similar. He notes the existence of disbelief and writes that apostates should be put to death. Quite significantly, these statements come within the \textit{Tahāfut al-Tahāfut} (Incoherence of the Incoherence), a work dedicated to defending philosophy.\footnote{See Also Averroes, \textit{On Plato’s Republic}, 33, 134.} Averroes writes in the context of belief in the afterlife:

\begin{quote}
And Ibn Abbas said: ‘There is no relation in the other world to this world but the names.’ And he meant by this that the beyond is another creation of a higher order than this world, and another phase superior to our earthly. He need not deny this who believes that we see one single thing developing itself from one phase to another, for instance the transformation of the inorganic into beings conscious of their own essences, i.e. the intellectual forms. \textit{Those who are in doubt about this and object to it and try to explain it are those who seek to destroy the religious prescriptions and undo the virtues. They are, as everyone knows, the heretics and those who believe that the end of man consists only in sensual enjoyment. When such people have really the power to destroy religious belief both theologians and philosophers will no doubt kill them, but when they have no actual power the best arguments that can be brought against them are those that are contained in the Holy Book.} \footnote{Averroes, \textit{The Incoherence of the Incoherence} (trans. Van Den Bergh), 362-1; \textit{Tahāfut al-Tahāfut} (ed. Bouyges), 585-6. See also Averroes, \textit{On Plato’s Republic}, 33, 134.} \footnote{See Quran 21:52-73. The reference is to the prophet Abraham being cast into a fire (by Nimrod) that did not burn him. This is a topic in Ghazali’s \textit{Tahāfut al-falāsifa} (169-70).}[Italics added]
\end{quote}

Averroes contends that theologians and philosophers are in accord; those who would undermine or “destroy” religious belief, and who have power, must be killed. Averroes also writes:

\begin{quote}
As to that objection which Ghazali ascribes to the philosophers over the miracle of Abraham, such things are only asserted by heretical Muslims.\footnote{See Quran 21:52-73. The reference is to the prophet Abraham being cast into a fire (by Nimrod) that did not burn him. This is a topic in Ghazali’s \textit{Tahāfut al-falāsifa} (169-70).} The learned among the philosophers do not
\end{quote}
permit discussion or disputation about the principles of religion, and he who does such a thing needs, according to them, a severe lesson. For whereas every science has its principles, and every student of this science must concede its principles and may not interfere with them by denying them, this is still more obligatory in the practical science of religion, for to walk on the path of the religious virtues is necessary for man’s existence, according to them, not in so far as he is a man, but in so far as he has knowledge; and therefore it is necessary for every man to concede the principles of religion and invest with authority the man who lays them down. The denial and discussion of these principles denies human existence, and therefore heretics must be killed. Of religious principles it must be said that they are divine things which surpass human understanding, but must be acknowledged although their causes are unknown.75

As noted, these comments can be read as indicating that the falasifa either (i) genuinely believe in Islam or, alternatively, (ii) that these are the words of Platonic philosophers who understand the political value of religion, as Strauss suggests. There are few problems with the first thesis as it means we are allowed to accept the many pages of the falasifa’s works that deal with the topics of God, metaphysics, and the harmony of faith and reason (see Section 4.3) as representing their true views. Alternatively, if we believe that much of the falasifa’s work is exoteric “political philosophy,” then their comments supporting revelation or the possibility of metaphysical knowledge can be dismissed as disingenuous. Yet is such a view convincing? We are to believe that all the falasifa’s efforts in terms of their learning and writing amount to a cynical political project rather than a genuine pursuit for knowledge and a true account of reality. The question posed is whether Strauss’s reading involves, as one critic argues, a “hermeneutical libertarianism”76 that results in analysis “closer to belles-lettres” than “historical scholarship.”77

I believe that, with the information we have to hand, we can state at least this much: if we understand Strauss as suggesting that there was a continuing tension between philosophers and a powerful religious “orthodoxy,” and that this alone was the cause of exoteric writing, then Strauss’s

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76 Gutas, “The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century,” 21:

To begin with, it [i.e. Strauss’s theory on exoteric writing] has created a hermeneutical libertarianism, or arbitrariness, among its proponents when they read Arabic philosophical texts. That is to say, if one assumes a philosopher not to have meant what he said and always to have concealed his true meaning, how is one to understand his text? In other words, how is one to find the ‘key’ with which to unlock his allegedly secret meaning? Straussians, of course, always claim to have the right key and to be able to read correctly between the lines, but their claim by itself cannot hide the arbitrariness of their enterprise nor the fact that if there are no rules to the game then anybody’s interpretation of a philosophical text would be equally valid. [Italics added]

thesis is vulnerable to at least one serious criticism. Historical accounts of intellectual attacks against Islam from within Islamic societies pose a problem for Strauss’s thesis. Even if historical accounts of polemicists like Razi are discarded, the falsafija themselves indicate that views against Islamic, or religious, doctrines were being expressed. Further still, as Ghazali and Averroes testify, the Islamic Empire had descended into competing dynasties, political movements, and sects by the 11th and 12th centuries. In al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl (Deliverance from Error), Ghazali, for example, identifies a large number of groups not in accordance with, or in danger of not being in conformity with, his understanding of Islam. Correspondingly, Averroes expresses concern with the timocratic direction of the rulers of Alandalus, lamenting the decline of truly “Islamic” rule centuries earlier. The claim of a unified, hegemonic, medieval Islamic orthodoxy as having caused philosophic exoteric writing – and the claim that a blanket hermeneutic rule can be applied to medieval Islamic philosophy – just does not seem to be that persuasive.

Yet what is remarkable is that, if Strauss’s claims are closely analysed, then the threat of persecution may not, in-fact, be a necessity for exoteric writing. In this respect, attacking Strauss for suggesting persecution alone results in exoteric writing would mean overlooking an important element of Strauss’s hermeneutic thesis. To repeat two important statements from Persecution and the Art of Writing, Strauss writes:

Farabi’s Plato informs us about the most obvious and the crudest reason why this antiquated or forgotten distinction [sc. between the exoteric and esoteric] was needed. Philosophy and the philosophers were “in grave danger.”

And, second:

If it is true that there is a necessary correlation between persecution and writing between the lines, then there is a necessary negative criterion: that the book in question must have been composed in an era of persecution, that is, at a time when some political or other orthodoxy was enforced by law or custom.

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79 Averroes on Plato’s Republic, 121-5.

80 PAW, 17.

81 PAW, 32.
If the task of a Platonic philosopher is seeking to create the best regime, a regime in which religion is used disingenuously for its political purposes, and if this quest is necessarily “esoteric,” then these Platonic goals would not be revealed. As Strauss essentially admits, even in the Platonic regime, philosophy must remain hidden due to its naturally “subversive” nature; the Platonic regime rests on a noble lie that the philosopher cannot publicly question or disclose. Whether we understand this noble lie as a falsehood about a people’s “rootedness” in a particular land, or a people’s “chosen” status, or a people’s elite rank as “philosophers” or “gentlemen,” makes no difference. If philosophers are to create and maintain closed societies that rest on noble lies—useful but untrue myths that have a “particular and particularizing power”—then a philosopher can never reveal their enterprise. What is curious is that Strauss continually suggests a connection between persecution and the exoteric art of writing (as the comments above emphasise, and as the interpretation of several critics indicates) yet, upon close analysis of his claims, the threat of persecution is only a peripheral consideration. Note, for example, Strauss’s conditional clause: “If it is true that there is a necessary correlation between persecution and writing between the lines.” For Strauss, exoteric writing is clearly necessitated on grounds other than the explicit threat of persecution; namely, the philosopher’s sense of rank, their commitment to a religious community, pedagogy, and, most importantly, their political goals. It seems fair to say, then, that in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, persecution is an exoteric or at least a peripheral theme: Platonists, on Strauss’s understanding, have to incorporate the exoteric/esoteric distinction given the politics they adhere to. The fact that Strauss does not consider persecution the main, or even a very important, reason for exoteric writing might provide a clue as to why he does not seek to prove the existence of an all-encompassing Islamic “orthodoxy”: Strauss’s thesis, properly understood, does not call for one. In this respect, some of Strauss’s critics can be viewed as having misunderstood him. Strauss’s hermeneutic thesis does not revolve around persecution; the possibility of persecution is merely one potential reason, “the most obvious and the crudest reason,” for exoteric writing.

82 In his commentary on the *Republic*, Strauss notes that the Platonic city depends on a noble lie and that the many (the “city”) oppose philosophy. See the discussion in Chapter 5, Section 1. As discussed in Chapter 1, philosophy is, for Strauss, “subversive.” See CM, 102-3, 125; “A Giving of Accounts,” JPCM, 463.

83 See the discussion in Chapter 2, Section 1. Strauss clearly opposes the idea of an “open” society.

84 Strauss to Kojève, 22 August 1948, printed in OT, 238.

85 See the discussion in Chapter 3, Section 4; Chapter 5, Section 2.

86 *PAIP*, 15, 17, 33-7.
Even with this understanding of Strauss’s thesis in mind, there are, however, still sizable problems to contend with. The suggestion that we attribute a series of political goals to the falasifa and then believe that, as these unstated political goals guided their writing practices, we can justifiably apply a range of “Straussian” hermeneutic tools, appears arbitrary. Strauss can be accused of creating a thesis about exoteric writing that places the author’s exotericism beyond question: even if we can prove that an author did not face the threat of persecution, one could, on the Straussian reading of medieval philosophy, still claim that the author’s commitment to “Platonic political philosophy” led to writing exoteric books anyway.

These themes can be approached from another angle. The fact that Strauss disregards the falasifa’s metaphysical doctrines leads to questioning what Strauss considers the absolute foundation of the falasifa’s politics. The issue here is, once again, whether Strauss’s reading of medieval Islamic philosophy is vulnerable to the criticism that it is overtly arbitrary: does Strauss simply discard the elements of medieval philosophy that are unpalatable to him?

4.2 Strauss’s dismissal of the falasifa’s metaphysics: returning to the question of “Nietzscheanizing” medieval Islamic philosophy

It would be defensible to claim that, in his “mature” works, Strauss does not treat the falasifa’s metaphysics with any degree of seriousness. As was discussed in Chapter 3, Strauss is far more interested in the fundamentally atheistic political philosophy he believes the falasifa to advocate, a philosophy that, as we have seen, assigns revelation and religion a purely political value. On Strauss’s “mature” reading of medieval philosophy, the falasifa believed in “human wisdom only,” they did not “comprehend” divine wisdom. Plato’s metaphysical doctrine – or, more accurately, all metaphysical doctrines – are viewed as exoteric. It is worth noting here that Strauss’s dismissal of metaphysics is witnessed in his own commentaries on Plato. In his own commentaries, Strauss largely refrains from discussing the Platonic Ideas or the doctrine of the immortal soul, a fact that has led several scholars to suggest that Strauss closely follows the reading of Plato that he (Strauss) assigns to Farabi. (This crucial theme will be returned to in

87 See Chapter 3, Section 4. See also “Farabi’s Plato,” 8-9, 15-7, 17n41; P,AW, 11-7; 107n33.

88 Concerning Strauss’s interpretation of Plato, see Lampert, Leo Strauss and Nietzsche, 18-9. Also relevant is Tanguay’s discussion of Strauss’s “Farabian turn” at Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography, 97. See also Pangle’s “Introduction” in SPPP, 2-4, 2n1; Pangle, Leo Strauss, 36-7, 58; Zackert, Postmodern Plato, chapter 4. Smith (Reading Leo Strauss, 100) notes that in Strauss’s commentary on Plato’s Republic in The City and Man, “only about two pages out of eighty-eight are devoted to the theme that occupies center stage in most other interpretations [i.e. the Platonic Ideas].” Strauss’s interpretation of Farabi and Plato is discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 of the present thesis.
Chapters 5 and 6.) Following his “recovery” of exoteric writing, it is fair to claim that Strauss sets aside Plato’s and the falasifa’s metaphysics on the basis that they are merely “likely tales” provided for salutary reasons.

Let us examine two questions posed by Strauss’s reading. The first question is whether Strauss’s position on metaphysics leads to a coherent interpretation of the falasifa: what happens to medieval Islamic philosophy if we attempt to discard its metaphysical aspects? The second question is whether Strauss’s exoteric/esoteric reading of the falasifa – the removal of the falasifa’s metaphysics – amounts to these thinkers being “Nietzscheanized.” Are these medieval thinkers made, via an exoteric/esoteric analysis, to accord with an atheistic, fundamentally Nietzschean philosophy?

Let us begin with the first issue. As noted, Strauss argues that the falasifa attempted to conform to their religious communities; they did not want their philosophizing to undermine belief in divine laws. Yet if medieval Islamic philosophers – as advocates of the “Platonic political philosophy” Strauss describes – viewed divine laws as paramount, the question arises as to why these thinkers seem to have compromised Islamic teachings by publicising entirely contrary metaphysical doctrines. These were, after all, doctrines that would eventually raise the ire of scholars like Ghazali. While it is certainly true that the falasifa write of the necessity of religion and religious belief (as the comments in Section 4.1 indicated), their Aristotelian and Neoplatonic doctrines are often at odds with what might be labelled “conventional” Islamic beliefs. This fact is difficult to reconcile with Strauss’s claims about medieval thinkers disingenuously conforming to the religion they were born into.

We can explore the falasifa’s divergences from Islamic doctrines by reflecting on the following information. The proceeding table is based on Ghazali’s criticisms of Islamic Aristotelianism in his Tahāfut al-falāsifa. A caveat must be noted however that, given Ghazali’s exemplars of Islamic Aristotelianism (Farabi and Avicenna) hold different positions on key

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89 PAW, 35.

90 “Farabi’s Plato,” 17n41; see also 19, 27-8; PAW, 17, 182.

91 One reading of the falasifa, the most obvious given their explicit statements, is that they viewed philosophy as a means of explaining what was represented symbolically in religious texts (see note 66 above and the discussion in Section 4.3 below). In terms of “conventional” Islamic beliefs, I use Ghazali’s Tahāfut as a general guide. Although one might complain that Ghazali’s text represents Ash’arite theology, Ghazali indicates, to some extent, prevalent beliefs at that time. As noted in this Chapter, it is difficult however to claim that, in nascent Islam, religious doctrines were static and unchanging.

matters, and given that the *falasifa* do not necessarily maintain the same position on any particular topic, the following table only emphasizes the broad differences between the *falasifa* on the one hand, and central Islamic tenets (as represented largely by Ghazali’s position), on the other:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Islamic Teaching</th>
<th>Falasifa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>God as creator/Creation <em>ex nihilo</em></td>
<td>God as “First Cause” or “Necessary Existent”/Eternal emanation(^{94})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God possesses free will</td>
<td>Emanation as necessary overflowing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God creates matter</td>
<td>Matter exists permanently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God is “Allah”</td>
<td>“Allah” is a symbolic representation of the “First Cause”(^{95})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{93}\) I can only touch on this matter given its magnitude. As one example, in Ḥāyī ibn Yaqẓān, Ibn Tufayl attacks Farabi (as Strauss notes at “Farabi’s Plato,” 16; *PAW*, 14) for having expressed, in different texts, conflicting views about the afterlife. The question raised is which view of Farabi’s is genuine. Of course, Farabi might have changed his opinions about the afterlife over time, and was merely recording his different views. (For discussion of this topic, see Chapter 6, Section 2.) Another example is Averroes’s comments on the matter of the Active Intellect; as Falhrī notes, Averroes alternates between the Active Intellect as transcendent and the Active Intellect as immanent (Falhrī, *Averroes*, 70-3). Regarding the *falasifa’s* lack of consensus on key themes, perhaps the most important fact is that Averroes criticises Farabi and Avicenna for having altered Aristotle’s doctrines. See Averroes, *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* (ed. Bouyges), 181-90; *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* (trans. Van Den Bergh), 109-14. It would be inaccurate to claim that these thinkers held identical positions. I have used the debate between Ghazali and Farabi/Avicenna as a general guide only.

\(^{94}\) Farabi and Avicenna use different terms for God; for example, “First Cause” (*al-Sabab al-Awwal*) and “Necessary Existent” or “Necessary Being” (*wājib al-wujūd*). See note 95 below.

\(^{95}\) Brague notes in *The Legend of the Middle Ages*, 67-8:

> The [c. medieval Islamic] philosophers speak of the “First” (*al-Awwal*). Does this entity coincide with the Allah of Islam? Not really. In his work on the opinions of the inhabitants of the virtuous city, Farabi, to pick one example, begins with a detailed description of the “First” in which the name of Allah does not appear. It appears for the first time late in the text, in the context of a doctrine of prophecy put into operation by the imagination. Among the objects of that faculty, there are Allah and the angels.

> The point Brague makes aligns with the view that the *falasifa* considered religion to symbolically represent philosophic truth.
Revelation comes from an “angel”\textsuperscript{96}\hfill Revelation from Active Intellect; can come to prophet or philosopher; the philosopher’s knowledge is superior\textsuperscript{97}

Divine predestination (depending on how the Quran is interpreted)\hfill Immortality dependent on intellectual perfection or having attained life’s purpose

God knows universals & particulars\hfill God knows universals only

Resurrection of the dead\hfill Immortality only applies to rational intellect/rational soul; no bodily resurrection

Prophecy based on superior morality\hfill Prophecy based on perfect intellect and perfect imaginative faculty; perfect morality a pre-requisite

Egalitarian (?)\textsuperscript{98}\hfill Elitist; views religion as philosophy in symbolic form. Philosophy, \textit{i.e.}, truth, limited to a few

\textsuperscript{96} On the Active Intellect as an “angel,” see note 133 below. As Fakhry writes (\textit{Averroes}, 112), Averroes may have criticised Neoplatonic cosmology but seems to have accepted (at least at times) the premise of conjunction with an Active Intellect.

\textsuperscript{97} On the superiority of the philosopher’s knowledge, see Farabi, \textit{Mabādi’ arā’ ābl al-mādīnāt al-fādīlāb} (ed. Walzert), chapter 17, sec. 2. This does not apply to Avicenna, who seems to place the prophet’s knowledge as highest. See Avicenna, \textit{Fi tishbät al-nubwawat}, 123-4; “On the Proof of Prophecies” (trans. Marmura) in \textit{MPP}, 115. For Strauss’s commentary on this aspect of Avicenna’s prophetology, see \textit{PL}, 116-7.

\textsuperscript{98} Some very brief remarks on this complex topic will have to suffice. As noted in Section 4.3, there is the matter of how one interprets verses in the Quran such as the verse of lights (24:35) and references to “men of understanding” (\textit{ulū l-alḥabī}), for example, at 3:7. The notion of distinction between human beings – whether based on, for example, intellect, piety, spirituality, or access to esoteric knowledge – is notably witnessed in Islamic philosophy, Shia Islam, and Sufism. One can argue though that Islam’s emphasis on social justice indicates that, at its basis, Islam is essentially egalitarian.
The fact that the *falasifa*’s metaphysical doctrines diverge readily with “Islamic” teachings – at least as Ghazali understands them – cannot be convincingly reconciled with Strauss’s thesis that, for political reasons, the *falasifa* disingenuously conformed to Islamic tenets. The only convincing interpretation here is, I believe, that the *falasifa* understood themselves as working towards a deeper understanding of the Islamic revelation, hence their willingness to contradict literal interpretations of Islamic teachings. To consider how Strauss might respond to this problem, let us recall his claim that philosophy is “subversive” given that it “attempt[s] to replace opinion by knowledge” and that philosophy tries to “gradually” “humanize within the limits of the possible.” A vital contention on this topic comes in *On Tyranny*:

In what then does philosophic politics consist? In satisfying the city that the philosophers are not atheists, that they do not desecrate everything sacred to the city, that they reverence what the city reverences, that they are not subversives, in short, that they are not irresponsible adventurers but good citizens and even the best of citizens. This is the defense of philosophy which was required always and everywhere, whatever the regime might have been. For, as the philosopher Montesquieu says, “*dans tous les pays du monde, on veut de la morale*” and “*les hommes, fripons en détail, sont en gros de très bonnes gens; ils aiment la morale.*” This defense of philosophy before the tribunal of the city was achieved by Plato with a resounding success (Plutarch, *Nicias* ch. 23). The effects have lasted down to the present throughout all ages except the darkest ones. What Plato did in the Greek city and for it was done in and for Rome by Cicero, whose political action on behalf of philosophy has nothing in common with his actions against Caetilian and for Pompey, for example. It was done in and for the Islamic world by Farabi and in and for Judaism by Maimonides.

What might be extracted from Strauss’s statement, as well as from the contentions he offers in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* more generally, is that the *falasifa*’s metaphysical doctrines were rhetorical or explanatory, *i.e.*, the *falasifa* attempted to disingenuously demonstrate how revelation, or key religious beliefs, accorded with Greek philosophy. As they understood, as rationalists and as atheists, the benefit of widespread public belief in revealed laws, the *falasifa* attempted to fuse

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99 See *PAW*, 17.

100 Note Tamer’s similar remarks concerning Farabi, and the problems with Strauss’s reading of medieval Islamic philosophy, at *Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne*, 332-4.


102 See Strauss’s comments at *PAW*, 17; “Farabi’s *Plato*,” 27.

103 *OT*, 205-6.
Greek philosophy with Islam for edifying purposes; namely, to fortify belief in divine laws and central Islamic teachings.

Yet if this is what Strauss means when he writes of Farabi’s “philosophic politics,” then Strauss’s claim comes with several difficulties. First, can Farabi (as well as Avicenna and Averroes) be understood as truly philosophising “beneath the law” and as attempting to “conform” with religious tenets in the sense Strauss suggests? Let us be clear: Strauss’s claim in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* is that the philosopher “conforms” with the “opinions of the religious community” and that, when attempting to “gradually humanize” the many, the philosopher will not “flagrantly contradict the accepted opinions.”  

The problem with Strauss’s thesis is that several of the falasifa’s doctrines (for example, Neoplatonic emanation) undermine central Islamic teachings such as creation ex nihilo. Furthermore, the idea that Farabi was attempting to render philosophy more palatable to an Islamic audience might only explain one of his metaphysical doctrines. As mentioned earlier, in his *Harmonisation of the Opinions of the Two Sages* (Kitāb al-jam’ bayna ra‘ayay al-hakimayn Aflāṭūn al-ilāhī wa-Aristūṭālis) Farabi attempts, sure enough, to reconcile Greek philosophy with Islam: he writes that Plato and Aristotle are in accordance regarding a cosmic “Creator,” thereby bringing Plato’s and Aristotle’s philosophic doctrines close to the descriptions of God and God’s creation found in the Quran. Farabi also maintains in the *Harmonisation of the Opinions of the Two Sages* that Greek philosophic views on the afterlife are close to Islamic tenets, a reading made possible by referring to the Republic’s myth of Er. For these reasons, Strauss considers the *Harmonisation of the Opinions of the Two Sages* an “exoteric” work due to Farabi’s aim of blending, or fusing, philosophy and Islam. It is therefore possible that when Strauss writes of Farabi’s “philosophic  

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104 PAW, 17: “The replacement of the accepted opinions could not be gradual if it were not accompanied by the suggestion of opinions which, while pointing toward the truth, do not too flagrantly contradict the accepted opinions.”


107 Strauss claims the *Harmonization* (he refers to it as the “Concordance”) is an exoteric work at “Farabi’s *Plato*,” 3, *PAW*, 18. Importantly, Strauss suggests the Neoplatonism of the *falasifa* was exoteric. I discuss this point in detail in Chapter 6.
politics,” and public “defense” of philosophy, that Farabi’s *Harmonisation of the Opinions of the Two Sages* could be used to support such a view. However, even if Farabi’s *Harmonisation of the Opinions of the Two Sages* is taken to confirm the thesis that Farabi attempted a public “defence” of philosophy, we are still left with a significant problem given that, in his other texts, Farabi presents metaphysical doctrines that are incompatible with what is described in the *Harmonisation of the Opinions of the Two Sages*. If we accept Strauss’s argument that the metaphysical doctrine contained in the *Harmonisation of the Opinions of the Two Sages* is exoteric, how can we explain the Neoplatonic emanationist metaphysics Farabi provides in other texts?

For example, the metaphysics contained in Farabi’s *On the Perfect State* (*Mabādī’ ārā’ ū al-madīnat al-fāḍilāb*) is a part-Aristotelian, part-Neoplatonic, emanationist scheme; it is far from creation *ex nihilo*. Furthermore, in *On the Perfect State*, the Islamic tenet of bodily resurrection is not mentioned; rather, Farabi limits immortality to the rational faculty of a select few. We therefore have one metaphysical program that aligns with Islamic beliefs, and one that, in representing Aristotelian and Neoplatonic doctrines, “flagrantly contradicts” a literal interpretation of Islamic teachings. Accordingly, even if we consider Farabi’s *Harmonisation of the Opinions of the Two Sages* an exoteric text (as Strauss suggests) – that it was indeed a public “defense” of philosophy – what do we make of Farabi’s other metaphysical programs, programs that, on Strauss’s reading, also have to be understood as exoteric? Is Farabi to be interpreted as advocating two diverse *exoteric* metaphysical programs and, if so, at whom was the Aristotelian-Neoplatonic program aimed at? Strauss’s claim is that Farabi was committed to disingenuously defending Islamic beliefs (“the opinions of the religious community in which one is brought up”), yet if this was the case, *why do some of Farabi’s metaphysical doctrines readily conflict with literal interpretations of Islamic teachings*?

The only tenable position is, in my view, that Farabi is not purposefully attempting to “defend” philosophy in the sense Strauss describes, nor is he

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109 See note 104 above. Strauss maintains the *falāsifa* would not “flagrantly contradict the accepted opinions.”

110 Given Strauss’s claim that philosophy ended in the “Islamic and in the Jewish world” (see *PAW*, 19), Lampert (*Leo Strauss and Nietzsche*, 175n8) asks how Strauss can also assert Farabi successfully defended philosophy. As Lampert writes, Strauss’s “discussions of Alfarabi’s successful strategy have very little to say about “the eventual collapse of philosophical inquiry in the Islamic…world” merely a few centuries later.” Perhaps Strauss means that Farabi’s “successful strategy” led to philosophy collapsing, i.e., the true philosopher, knowing that philosophy is subversive, wishes to hide it, and this is what Farabi was able to accomplish (at least on Strauss’s reading).
purposefully trying to undermine Islamic doctrines with Greek philosophy. Rather, Farabi is attempting to genuinely arrive at a philosophical understanding of Being or Creation, a subject he understood, as he himself claims, as outlined only in symbolic form in religious texts.\textsuperscript{111}

Regarding the overall coherence of Strauss’s reading, there is also the question of how Strauss’s interpretation can explain the metaphysical views evidentl y connected to the \textit{falasifa’s} understanding of the physical world, views that appear to us as their genuine “ontological” beliefs. If we accept Strauss’s thesis, what sections of these parts of the \textit{falasifa’s} works are to be understood as exoteric, and how can such interpretive decisions be made in a way that allows one to avoid the criticism of “hermeneutical libertarianism”? For example, Strauss’s thesis implies that Farabi’s commitment to a “First Cause” (\textit{al-Sabab al-Awwal}), Farabi’s metaphysical centre of existence, is not to be understood as one of Farabi’s genuine views for the reason that the First Cause is a subject of metaphysics. Yet the First Cause is a necessity for Farabi’s understanding of the existence of the physical world: the “ontological” postulate at the heart of Farabi’s physics is also, as mentioned, a metaphysical postulate. Strauss’s reading dissolves what Farabi provides as the basis for understanding existence. Furthermore, Farabi and Avicenna posit a largely Neoplatonic emanationist metaphysics that includes a transcendent Active Intellect (also mentioned by Averroes).\textsuperscript{112} The Active Intellect has a vital place in the \textit{falasifa’s} epistemology (see Section 4.3). If these medieval philosophers did not truly believe in the Aristotelian-Neoplatonic notion of a transcendent Active Intellect, then their views concerning conjunction, immortality, metaphysical knowledge, prophecy, and human perfection, must \textit{all} be understood as “exoteric.” One implication of Strauss’s reading, an implication that deserves immediate mention, is that Ghazali must be understood as having concerned himself with, and attacked, the \textit{falasifa’s} exoteric metaphysical views (for example, the \textit{falasifa’s} views on the pre-eternity of the world, God’s knowledge, and the afterlife). Is it believable, however, that Strauss understands the \textit{falasifa} better than Ghazali?

The point here is that if we are to dismiss the \textit{falasifa’s} metaphysics \textit{en bloc}, then we must view the \textit{falasifa} as believing that Aristotle’s teleological metaphysics were, in-truth, a “noble lie” and that human beings had no “natural” purpose.\textsuperscript{113} This leaves the \textit{falasifa’s} political philosophy – philosophy apparently orientated by supposing a purpose for human beings – without

\textsuperscript{111} See notes 66 and 133. Similarly, see Tamer’s criticisms of Strauss’s reading at \textit{Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne}, 332-4. In order to explain the differences between Farabi’s \textit{Harmonisation} and his other works, and contrary to Strauss’s claim that it is an exoteric text, it could be argued that (i) Farabi did not write the \textit{Harmonisation} (see note 105 above) or (ii) that it is one of Farabi’s early works, and his later texts represent his mature metaphysical views.

\textsuperscript{112} See note 96 above.

\textsuperscript{113} \textit{I.e.}, all philosophical doctrines become “exoteric.” See notes 34 and 158.
foundation. Given the complexities caused by Strauss’s reading, complexities Strauss leaves unresolved, it appears justifiable to ask whether Strauss is attempting to force medieval philosophy to conform to a post-modern – that is a post-metaphysics, secular and atheistic – paradigm. Prior to asking why this might be, it bears noting that other scholars of medieval philosophy complain that Strauss’s effort to remove the metaphysical basis of medieval Islamic philosophy brings a range of (unanswered) complications. Guttmann, for example, writes:

[I cannot] agree with Strauss’ hypothesis that one must set the political interpretation of prophecy as the foundation stone for the understanding of the whole of medieval philosophy. Just as in revelation, the laws and statutes set forth are means to an end which belongs not to the practical but to the theoretical sphere, so we find that in philosophy in general, for Plato and Aristotle and their medieval disciples, politics and statecraft are based upon the doctrine of the final end of man and, therefore, ultimately on metaphysics. This hierarchy is also applicable to the philosophic interpretation of revelation. Therefore, the relation of reason to revelation also cannot be understood from this “political viewpoint.”¹¹⁴ [Italics added]

Guttmann is skeptical of Strauss’s attempt to remove the metaphysical basis of the falasifa’s politics.¹¹⁵ The legal-political code brought by revelation only makes sense in the context of a “final end,” an “end” which is the subject of the “theoretical sphere.” In other words, prophecy, or revelation, is contextualised by metaphysics. A purely “political” interpretation of revelation, an interpretation absent of any larger conception of ends (law for the sake of law), is incoherent. Guttmann further emphasizes the problem with Strauss’s political interpretation of revelation when he writes:

In his later essays, Strauss sets down the thesis that for medieval philosophers there is an abyss between the exoteric and esoteric interpretations of their own doctrines, an abyss far deeper than


¹¹⁵ Averroes, as one example, indicates the problem with Strauss’s reading. In his commentary on Plato’s *Republic*, Averroes – much like Farabi – bases political society on the idea of human excellence, that is, on a teleological metaphysics. At Averroes on Plato’s *Republic*, (49-50):

Good government and good council are undoubtedly a kind of knowledge. But [we] cannot say that good governance and good council are in this city on account of wisdom in the practical arts such as agriculture, carpentry, and so on. Since this is so, then it can [only] be wise through that knowledge on whose track we are. It is evident that this wisdom can only be completed through knowledge of the end of man since this governance moves in that direction. And it is evident that we can only perceive the end of man through the theoretical sciences. Hence this city is necessarily spoken of as wise in two kinds of knowledge simultaneously – i.e., the theoretical and the practical. [Italics added].
has been realized heretofore. Concerning their esoteric doctrines, he has not yet expressed himself in a systematic way, and thus it is impossible to form a decisive estimate of his position. But at present, it is clear, that for him, philosophy in its esoteric sense has no connection with revelation, as had been surmised in his earlier essays, but is completely autonomous.  

This criticism is, I believe, fundamentally sound: Strauss cannot presuppose a political need for revelation without also making a claim regarding the ultimate purpose of political society and human beings. To assert that regimes ought to aim at cultivating “virtue,” or that human beings are political animals that ought to live together harmoniously, or that regimes ought to aim at nurturing the “public good,” would be to make morally normative claims that Strauss’s *falasifa* do not, according to the premises of his reading, have access to. The problem with Strauss’s “political” reading of medieval philosophy is emphasized by Strauss’s own definition of “virtue”:

> Human nature “is” in a different manner than its perfection or virtue. Virtue exists in most cases, if not in all cases, as an object of aspiration and not as fulfilment. Therefore, it exists in speech rather than in deed. Whatever may be the proper starting point for studying human nature, the proper starting point for studying the perfection of human nature, and hence, in particular, natural right, is what is said about these subjects or the opinions about them. [Italics added]

By this apparently secular definition, “virtue” is understood based on what is claimed (“what is said about”) the subject. Yet, unless we accept Strauss’s “mature” reading as sound, this is not the *falasifa*’s understanding of virtue. These thinkers had firm beliefs about what constituted “virtue” based on, at the least, the Quran, prophets, and Aristotelian philosophy. That is,

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117 On the one hand, it can be claimed that Strauss is committed to the “Socratic questions” (see, for example, Pangle, “Editor’s Introduction,” *RCPR*) and believes, as he writes in *On Tyranny* (196) that philosophy “is nothing but genuine awareness of the problems, i.e., of the fundamental and comprehensive problems.” On the other hand, there clearly is a political program advocated in Strauss’s works, for example, the endorsement of esoteric writing, the endorsement of philosophy, the need for political and social stability, the need for religion, Strauss’s hostility to the homogenous world-state, and so on. This reveals an attempt at responding to the “Socratic questions.” It reveals that Strauss acts with a conception of the good in mind, i.e., that Strauss understands some regimes as preferable to others.

118 *NRH*, 145-6. Strauss asserts that Machiavelli represents the decisive break with classical philosophy (see, for example, *NRH*, 178; *IPP*, 84; *SPPP*, 210-3; *TOM*, 173); by taking his bearings from how human beings live, rather than appealing to ideals, Machiavelli lowers political and social standards (see *WPP*, 41). Strauss appears to impose a similar conception of virtue on to the *falasifa*: the *falasifa* do not believe, on Strauss’s reading, that absolute ideals or standards exist.
medieval thinkers had a metaphysical context (teleological metaphysics and belief in a final end for human beings) that the revelation was a part of. Strauss appears to presuppose a modern understanding of “virtue” insofar as, after Nietzsche and “post” metaphysics, we measure competing views on “virtue” and determine, for ourselves, what “virtue” is. It is entirely debatable, however, whether the *falsaf* understood themselves as inhabiting such an atheistic, secular, anti-metaphysical, world; a world where what constituted “virtue” could be subjectively determined.

This returns us to the question of Nietzsche’s influence on Strauss, and the possibility that, for political reasons, Strauss interprets medieval philosophers in a particular way. Strauss insists that the *falsaf* viewed belief in revelation, and religion generally, as politically useful insofar as it could assist with creating “virtuous” regimes. Yet, if the *falsaf* did not believe there was an objective good, a *sumnum bonum*, to orientate their philosophy, we must ask whether Strauss is claiming that the *falsaf* viewed revelation as politically useful as it could serve their (subjective) goals and aspirations. On this reading, the *falsaf* were motivated purely by self-interest: they advocated belief in revelation not because they themselves regarded any aspect of it as true, but because they thought belief in revelation would somehow benefit them. The idea that the *falsaf* viewed belief in revelation as serving their interests, and that they therefore *willed* that revelation and religion *ought* to be used for any political benefits it might confer upon them, reminds one of the claim Nietzsche makes about the (unnamed) “actual” philosopher. Upon deciding on a view — a *perspective* — deemed appropriate for shaping the future, the “actual” philosopher validates the “truth” of their idea via “will to power,” proclaiming “thus it shall be!” It could be argued, then, that Strauss’s interpretation appears entirely arbitrary insofar as the *falsaf* are made to comport with Nietzschean philosophy: the *falsaf* are read in a way that

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> Certain it is that Spinoza cannot legitimately deny the possibility of revelation. But to grant that revelation is possible means to grant that the philosophic account and the philosophic way of life are not necessarily, not evidently, the true account and the right way of life: philosophy, the quest for evident and necessary knowledge, rests itself on an unevident decision, on an act of the will, just as faith does. Hence the antagonism between Spinoza and Judaism, between unbeliev and belief, is ultimately not theoretical but moral.

Rosen (*Hermeneutics as Politics*, 110-1, 137, 180) views Strauss’s “conception” of philosophy as “Nietzschean.” For Strauss, philosophy is an act of the will insofar as philosophy follows from an “unevident” decision: “orthodoxy” (*i.e.*, the life of “faith”) cannot be completely refuted or denied as the existence of a “mysterious” God remains a possibility. A choice, an act of the will, therefore has to be made, a choice that makes one a philosopher or a believer. On this theme, see the discussion in Chapter 7, Section 3.
has them, as atheists and anti-metaphysicians, uniformly endorse the political use of religion. They do so despite not having an objective conception of the good to guide them.\(^{120}\)

Similar to Guttmann, Gutas notes the crucial link between the *falasifa*’s metaphysics and their politics. Gutas also criticises Strauss’s belief that a *separate* discipline called “political philosophy” existed for medieval Islamic philosophers:

The truth of the matter is that there is no political philosophy as such in Arabic, as the term is normally understood, before Ibn Khaldun; there is, in other words, no independent field of study within Arabic philosophy which investigates political agents, constituencies, and institutions as autonomous elements that operate according to their own dynamic within the structure of the society. The discussion on the perfect or virtuous ruler that we do find in al-Farabi is centred on emanationist metaphysics and the theory of the intellect (noetics) of Alexander of Aphrodisias as developed by al-Farabi himself.\(^{121}\)

Gutas draws attention to the fact that the basis of Farabi’s politics is an Aristotelian and Neoplatonic metaphysics according to which human beings are understood as possessing a natural *telos*; specifically, that of seeking transcendence. Farabi’s metaphysical and political views therefore cannot be treated in isolation; his political system presupposes his metaphysics. The crux of Gutas’s censure is, once again, Strauss’s view that the *falasifa*’s political doctrines can be effectively insulated from the rest of their philosophy.\(^{122}\) However, as we have seen, dismissing the *falasifa*’s metaphysics has a range of implications for their understanding of existence (or Being), their epistemology, and their politics.

Gutas, Guttmann, Davidson,\(^{123}\) and Tamer\(^{124}\) can be understood as criticising Strauss for offering a reading of medieval philosophy that, at times, is far from clearly expressed. Repudiating the metaphysical views of the *falasifa* means ignoring vital components of their

\(^{120}\) See the discussion on Strauss and Nietzsche in Chapter 2, Section 4. See also the discussion in Chapter 7, Section 1.

\(^{121}\) Gutas, “The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century,” 23. The connection between Farabi’s and Alexander of Aphrodisias’s thought is mentioned in Chapter 6. Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) is sometimes compared with Machiavelli, as his method is also empirical; the *falasifa*, influenced by Greek philosophy and Islam, are more (to quote Rosenthal) “speculative.” See Rosenthal, *Political Thought in Medieval Islam*, 105-6.

\(^{122}\) With regard to reading Farabi without metaphysics, and in addition to Gutas’s comments, note Alexander Altmann’s criticisms of Mahdī’s translation of Farabi’s *Falsafat Aristotēlēs* at *Von der mittelalterlichen zur modernen Aufklärung*, 99-100. See Chapter 5, note 53.

\(^{123}\) See Chapter 3, notes 122, 182, and 183.

\(^{124}\) See Chapter 2, Section 3.
philosophical systems. Like these critics, I believe we must be very skeptical of Strauss’s claim that we can cheaply and all too easily dismiss the falasifa’s metaphysical doctrines and focus solely on an isolated “political philosophy.” In order to accept Strauss’s interpretation, we must view the falasifa as involved in a highly elaborate, exceedingly dishonest, scheme. And, even more problematically, it might be claimed that Strauss’s “mature” reading of the falasifa makes these thinkers endorse the same political teachings Strauss himself appears to believe in.

4.3 The source of the falasifa’s hermeneutics: Greek philosophy or Islam?

We are now aware of Strauss’s claim that Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes – as adherents of “Platonic political philosophy” – understood that belief in divine laws was necessary for creating regimes similar to those outlined by Plato in the Republic and Laws.125 If we are to accept Strauss’s thesis concerning the falasifa’s quest for a “secular alliance” with princes “friendly to philosophy,” then we must, as noted, interpret these medieval thinkers as members of what Strauss refers to as “Athens.”126 We must believe that the falasifa accepted “human wisdom only”127 and were, ultimately, unconcerned with the metaphysical validity of religion. That is, we must believe that religion was, for the falasifa, of little “cognitive value” and that the concept of divine wisdom was, on an esoteric level, “politely rejected.”128 For Strauss, the falasifa repudiated “Mecca.”129

Strauss’s reading rests, then, on the view that the falasifa followed a series of Platonic (as Strauss understands it), rather than Islamic, teachings. In his “mature” works, Strauss is asserting

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125 As mentioned in Chapter 3, the “Platonic” understanding of prophecy is one of the notable theses Strauss brings from Philosophy and Law to Persecution and the Art of Writing, although the thesis is considerably altered in the later text.

126 Concerning Strauss’s use of the term “Athens,” see note 12 above. Regarding the “secular alliance between philosophers and princes friendly to philosophy,” see P-AIF, 15.

127 “Farabi’s Plato,” 17n41; P-AIF, 107n33. That Strauss believes such a distinction between the life of philosophy and the life of faith exists is indicated notably in “Progress or Return,” JPCM, 122-3. Refer also to note 119 above.

128 “Farabi’s Plato,” 13-4, 17-8; P-AIF, 13, 182. At P-AIF, 107n33: “The saying of Socrates which is quoted twice in the Kuzari… viz. that he does not grasp the Divine Wisdom of the people to whom he is talking, is evidently a polite expression of his rejection of that wisdom.”

129 See note 12 above.
that the *falasifa's* practice of exoteric writing was a direct result of their adherence to “Platonic political philosophy.”130

The problem with Strauss’s reading is that Strauss overlooks the indigenous history, within Islam, of the type of esotericism that fascinates him. Indeed, with the exception of a single comment in *Philosophy and Law*, Strauss does not mention the significant history of Islamic esotericism, a facet of Islam that undoubtedly blurs his dichotomy between faith and philosophy.131 The existence of esotericism in Islam, specifically the notion of the Quran having “inner” and “outer” meanings, raises the question of whether multi-layered texts and belief in a natural hierarchy of human beings can be argued as Islamic (or “religious”), rather than “Platonic,” concepts.132 The existence of the concept of esotericism in Islam leads to asking whether the *falasifa* truly believed, as some of their explicit statements suggest, that Islamic doctrines were *symbolic representations* of the philosophic, or scientific, truth. According to this thesis, “Allah” was the exoteric representation of the First Cause, Quranic references to an “angel” were allusions to the Aristotelian-Neoplatonic Active Intellect, and the Islamic prophet brought the philosopher’s *nomos* to the non-philosophers through using rhetorical or poetic arguments; these are, after all, all positions we find openly expressed in the *falasifa’s* works.133

130 “Farabi’s Plato,” 19, 19n44; *P-4IF*, 35-6, 35n17. Strauss presents Farabi’s writing practices as *Platonic*. In the context of Farabi, Strauss refers, at various times, to Plato’s *Phaedrus*, *Timaeus*, and *Seventh Letter*. As noted in Chapter 3, Strauss suggests Farabi’s esoteric doctrine accords with Plato’s.

131 The reference to the “inner sense” of the Quran comes at PL, 86.

132 The point here concerns the distinction Strauss appears to make between “Platonic” or “philosophic” texts, and “religious” texts. As argued in this Chapter, if the *falasifa* viewed both “philosophic” and “religious” texts as often incorporating the same literary devices, what is the basis for believing that the *falasifa* viewed “philosophy” and “religion” as representing separate realities and ways of life, a point of view necessitated by Strauss’s reading? As noted, what is at stake is Strauss’s rigid dichotomy between an atheistic “Athens” (which Strauss contends the *falasifa* belonged to) and religion (“Jerusalem”). These issues extend beyond Strauss’s reading of the *falasifa*. To take just two non-Islamic examples, Maimonides clearly considers religious texts to be multi-layered, as his dedicatory and introduction to the *Guide of the Perplexed* make apparent. St. Augustine also discusses the use of allegory and symbolism in the Bible and in religious narratives (see, for example, *The City of God* (ed. Dyson), book 13, chapter 21; book 15, chapter 27). The question is whether we can justify applying Strauss’s interpretive categories (atheistic philosophy versus “faith”) on to ancient and medieval philosophy; the “art of writing” Strauss associates with “Platonism” and “philosophers” can arguably be found in “religious” texts being used by “prophets.”

133 For example, Farabi, Avicenna, and Avernoes, all refer to the Active Intellect as a “Holy” or “trustworthy” spirit, descriptions provided by the Quran at 16:102 (*rih al-qudat*) and 26:193 (*rih al-amin*). Farabi writes: “[O]f the Active Intellect, it ought to be said that it is the trustworthy spirit and the holy spirit; and it is called by names resembling these two.” Farabi, *Kitāb al-Siyāsa al-Madaniyya* (ed. Bou Melham), 23; *The Political Writings*, 111 (trans. Butterworth); compare with *Maḥādīʿ ārāʿ abl al-madinat al-fādition*, 39-41. Avicenna writes: “When this man’s [i.e. the prophet’s] existence comes about, he must lay down laws about men’s affairs by the permission of God, exalted be He, by his
The idea that the Quran has an inner, or esoteric, meaning can be traced to either the Islamic prophet directly or to the prophet’s son-in-law, the fourth caliph ‘Ali ibn Abī Ṭālīb. The idea of an esoteric teaching concealed within the Quran is a vital component of Shia Islam and Sufism. The notion that the Quran has inner (esoteric) and outer (exoteric) dimensions can therefore be argued as being distinctly “Islamic” (although the idea of multi-layered texts clearly has Jewish and other parallels). The point here is that esotericism in Islam does not have to be understood as a phenomenon derived from Greek (or Platonic), Stoic, Jewish, or Christian, traditions. What is noteworthy about esotericism in Islam is that, while a Christian might apply the idea of allegory to the Old Testament as a means of historicizing the earlier text, the Quran applies – to itself – the idea that elements of the text are symbolic and point to a deeper, esoteric, meaning. For example, the “verse of light,” or “light verse” – a passage commented on by, among others, Avicenna (who references Aristotelian philosophy to explain the underlying command, inspiration, and “the descent of the Holy Spirit [rūḥ al-qudus]” on him.” Avicenna, Kitāb al-Shīfāʾ (ed. Marmura), 365. See also Avicenna, Fi āqīm al-‘Ulām al-Aqīlyab, 107-8; Divisions of the Rational Sciences (trans. Mahdi) in MPP, 97: “The Arabs, too, call the angel that brings down the revelation, a nomos.” Similarly, when speaking on prophecy and the Active Intellect, Averroes writes: “The ancient philosophers assert about revelation and dreams only that they proceed from God through the intermediation of a spiritual incorporeal being which is according to them the bestower of the human intellect, and which is called by the best authors the active intellect and in the Holy Law angel.” Averroes, The Incoherence of the Incoherence (trans. Van Den Bergh), 316; Tahāfut al-Tahāfut (ed. Bouyges), 516. See also Averroes on Plato’s Republic, 93-4. There are also explicit statements from the Islamic Aristotelians that describe religion as symbolising philosophic truth. See Farabi’s Kitāb Taḥṣīl al-Saʿāda (ed. Bou Melham) 89-91; The Attainment of Happiness (trans. Mahdi) in Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, 44-5; compare with Mabādiʾ ārāʾ ahī al-madīnāt al-fāṣīlih, chapter 17. Averroes’s position is similar to Farabi’s: “In short, the religions are, according to the philosophers, obligatory, since they lead towards wisdom in a way universal to all human beings, for philosophy only leads a certain number of intelligent people to the knowledge of happiness, and they therefore have to learn wisdom, whereas religions seek the instruction of the masses generally.” Averroes, The Incoherence of the Incoherence (trans. Van Den Bergh), 360; Tahāfut al-Tahāfut (ed. Bouyges), 582-3. See also Averroes’s statements on demonstrative versus rhetorical or poetic arguments in Averroes On Plato’s Republic, 10-2, 17-8, 24.

134 As mentioned, Strauss is aware of the idea of an “inner” meaning to the Quran; the topic arises in Philosophy and Law when Averroes is discussed. See PL, 86.

135 Gutas notes that “allegorical interpretation of religious texts is as old as at least the Stoics and had been in constant use throughout the centuries in all religious traditions in the Middle East until the time of Maimonides.” Gutas, “The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century,” 19. Brague (The Law of God, 99-100) also notes the Quran’s self-referential nature; the “allegorical method” is applied to the Quran by the Quran itself.

136 See, for example, Brague, The Law of God, 100. The Fathers of the Church applied the allegorical method to the Old Testament.
meaning of the verse) and Ghazali\(^{137}\) – is pertinent in this respect. The light verse (\(\text{āyat al-nūr}\)) reads:

> Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The Parable [\text{mathal}] of His Light is as if there were a Niche and within it a Lamp: the Lamp enclosed in Glass: the glass as it were a brilliant star: Lit from a blessed Tree, an Olive, neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil is well-nigh luminous, though fire scarce touched it: Light upon Light! Allah doth guide whom He will to His Light: Allah doth set forth Parables for men: and Allah doth know all things.\(^{138}\)

The Quran proposes that it contains parable or allegory; there are, notably, several similar verses.\(^{139}\) We can contrast the idea of a hidden meaning within the Quran with the fact that the Quran reports that it can be understood on varying levels. The following verse from the Quran’s third Surah, “The Family of Imran,” had vital political ramifications for the Shia generally and notably, given our present context, for Averroes. The verse reads:

> He it is Who has sent down to thee the Book: In it are verses basic or fundamental (of established meaning); they are the foundation of the Book: others are allegorical [\text{mutashābihāt}]. But those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part thereof that is allegorical, seeking discord, and searching for its hidden meanings [\text{ta’wīl}], but no one knows its hidden meanings except Allah. And those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say: “We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord:” and none will grasp the Message except men of understanding.\(^{140}\)

The Sunni rendition of the verse is different in a crucial respect to the interpretation of the Shia and Averroes,\(^{141}\) who interpret the verse not as:

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\(^{137}\) See Avicenna, \textit{Fi isḥāk al-nuḥawāwīt}, 120-3; “On the Proof of Prophecies” (trans. Marmura), \textit{MPP}, 113-4. For commentary on Avicenna’s account of the “light verse,” see Heath, \textit{Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna}, 183-6. For Ghazali’s account of the light verse, see his \textit{Mishkāt al-Anwār}.


\(^{139}\) For example, Quran 2:26; 6:59; 14:24-5.

\(^{140}\) Quran 3:7 (trans. Y. Ali).

\(^{141}\) Taking Averroes as his exemplar, Arberry notes the “philosophers claimed the reference [\textit{tc.} at Quran 3:7 regarding understanding the Quran’s hidden meanings] was to themselves.” Arberry, \textit{Reason and Revelation in Islam}, 16-7. See also Rosenthal’s discussion in “The Place of Politics in the Philosophy of Ibn Rushd,” 256.
...no one knows its hidden meanings except Allah, and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge... [Italics added]

Rather, the Shia and Averroes interpret the verse as:

...no one knows its hidden meanings except Allah, and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge... [Italics added]

Removing the full-stop between “Allah” and the conjunction “and [wa]” allows for the interpretation that some human beings – rather than God only – are capable of understanding the hidden meanings of the Quran. In brief, the importance of this reading for a Shi’ite is that such verses are viewed as legitimising a direct succession of leaders from the family of the prophet, hence Shia support for ‘Ali and a series of infallible Imams who could claim to know the secrets of the Quran.143 A Sufi will consider mystical awareness, rather than familial ties, necessary for understanding the Quran’s esoteric dimensions.144 Perhaps following an example set by Farabi, Averroes’s interpretation of the verse renders the philosophers those who can comprehend the Quran’s hidden meanings.145

The reason why the notion of the Quran having inner and outer meanings is relevant to our discussion is as follows. Farabi can be viewed as applying to Plato’s texts exegetical practises used for interpreting the Quran.146 Farabi believes that Plato’s works, like the Quran, also contain parables and allegories. What we must ask, then, is whether Farabi applies to Plato’s works an Islamic hermeneutic practice, i.e., a practice that was followed due to the education Farabi received

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143 For example, Quran 2:269: “He granteth wisdom to whom He pleaseth; and he to whom wisdom is granted receiveth indeed a benefit overflowing; but none will grasp the Message but men of understanding.” This might be interpreted as a reference to ‘Ali. See The Qur’an: An Encyclopaedia (ed. Leaman), 29.

144 On this theme, see, for example, Katz, “Mysticism and the Interpretation of Sacred Scripture,” Mysticism and Sacred Scripture, 30.

145 Averroes, Kitāb fiṣal al-maqāl (ed. Butterworth), passim; The Decisive Treatise, passim.

146 The difference between tafsir (exegesis) and ta’wil (allegorical exegesis, or esoteric interpretation), including whether such a differentiation was made in early Islam, is noted at The Qur’an: An Encyclopaedia (ed. Leaman), 624-35; see also Peters, The Children of Abraham, 95-6. The term ta’wil is generally used to describe uncovering the concealed (ḥāsin) meaning of the Quran. Interpreting the outer (ẓahīr) meaning is generally referred to as tafsir.
as a Muslim. We might also ask whether Farabi did not believe it was necessary to draw a strong distinction between “philosophic” and “religious” texts. Did Farabi consider that both philosophic and religious texts – as authoritative books – were composed to disguise some of their key teachings? If Farabi truly believed, as he and other Islamic philosophers write, that the source of knowledge for both philosophers and prophets is an emanation via the transcendent Active Intellect (an angel) from the First Cause (God), then why should Farabi have viewed prophets and philosophers as utilising different methods of communication? These hermeneutic issues are readily highlighted in the following passages. Farabi writes:

In his earlier days, Plato used to refrain from putting any of the sciences in writing and depositing them in the interior of books instead of in unsullied breasts and congenial intellects. When he became fearful of becoming negligent and forgetful as well as of losing what he had inferred, discovered by thinking, and achieved in areas where his knowledge and wisdom had been established and developed, he resorted to allegories and riddles. He intended thereby to put in writing his knowledge and wisdom according to an approach that would let them be known only to the deserving, to those worthy of comprehending them because of research, investigation, examination, struggle, study, and genuine inclination. [Italics added]

And, again from Farabi:

It is sufficient for us to mention his [Aristotle’s] famous letter to Plato in response to what Plato had written in reproaching him for putting books in writing, ordering the sciences, and bringing this out in complete and exhaustive compositions. In this letter to Plato, he states explicitly: “Although I have put these sciences and their well-guarded and sparingly-revealed maxims in writing, I have nevertheless ordered

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147 It seems plausible that Farabi’s hermeneutics were, to some degree, influenced by Greek philosophy. He was a part of a “mastir” (hidden, masked) tradition that is said to have come from Jacobite teachers in Alexandria. See Mahdī, “The Editio Princeps of Farabi’s Compendium Legum Platonis,” 3. Gutas (“The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century,” 19-20) argues that any use of exoteric writing by Farabi was for pedagogical reasons. According to Gutas, Farabi incorporated a practice used by the Aristotelians of Alexandria: Aristotle, and his students, wrote obscure works to test a student’s suitability for learning and knowledge, a process undertaken to avoid teaching philosophy to those who did not deserve it, and to train the mind of the student. While it might be argued that Farabi’s hermeneutics were influenced by Greek philosophy, is a similar claim about Avicenna and Averroes possible? Each thinker is likely to have learnt the Quran, and potentially learnt Islamic hermeneutic practices, prior to engaging with Greek philosophy. See note 166 below.

them in such a manner that only those suited for them will get them, and I expressed them in an idiom that only those adept in them will comprehend.”

The method of writing Farabi assigns to Plato and Aristotle, and therefore the advice he provides about engaging with their texts, aligns with hermeneutic traditions that exist within Islam. Strauss implies that the falsafī’s hermeneutics were entirely “Platonic,” that we can trace the falsafī’s alleged use of exoteric writing to their Platonism. However, it is questionable whether a thinker like Farabi viewed “religious” texts as representing a different reality to what was represented in “philosophic” texts, and whether Farabi considered “religious” and “philosophic” texts to be written in an entirely different manner. Whether Farabi therefore engaged with “philosophic” and “religious” works in a similar fashion deserves consideration. Importantly, Farabi understands two of the originators of philosophy (Plato and Aristotle) as having believed philosophical (or scientific) knowledge was not suitable for all human beings; Farabi’s works indicate his view that some authoritative philosophic texts contain secret or esoteric knowledge. The same view of human nature and the dissemination of knowledge might be extracted from the Quran. Although Strauss recognises the Torah as an “esoteric” text, and therefore the possibility that exoteric writing is not necessarily a “Platonic” or “philosophic” practice, Strauss never asserts that the existence of esotericism in Islam is problematic for his reading of the falsafī. Strauss appears to ask readers to accept an interpretation of medieval philosophy that rests on believing that the falsafī’s hermeneutics and literary practices can justifiably be conceived of as traceable to an atheistic “Platonism,” and only to an atheistic Platonism. If Strauss admits the possibility that the falsafī were influenced by Islamic traditions, his strict distinction between “Athens” and “Jerusalem” is called into question.

Similar questions about the falsafī’s hermeneutics are raised when we consult Avicenna’s writings. In his works Fī ithbāt al-nubuwwāt (On the proof of prophecies) and the Mi’raj Nāma (Book of Ascent or Ascension of Muhammad), Avicenna assigns the practice of writing in parable and metaphor to both religious and philosophic figures. Avicenna considers the mandate that one not reveal the “truth” (i.e., philosophy in its fullest sense) to “outsiders” a religious duty. In a curious passage, Avicenna writes:


150 See note 147 above.

151 On the Torah as esoteric, see PAW, 56.
It has been said that it is incumbent upon the prophet that his speech be symbolic [ramūz] and his expression be hints [īmā']. As Plato states in the Laws: whosoever does not understand the meaning of the apostles' symbols [ramūz] will not attain the Divine Kingdom. Similarly, the foremost Greek philosophers and prophets employed symbols and signs [ishārāt] in their books through which they hid their secrets – men like Pythagoras, Socrates and Plato. Plato even blamed Aristotle for divulging wisdom and making knowledge manifest that Aristotle said, “Even if I have done so, I have still left in my books many a pitfall which only the initiate among the wise and learned can comprehend.” And how else could the prophet Muhammad (may God’s prayers and peace be upon him) have brought knowledge to the uncouth nomad, not to mention the whole human race, since he was sent a messenger to all of them? As for political guidance, it and the imposition of obligations on people is an easy matter for prophets.[152] [Italics added]

Similarly, from Avicenna’s Mi’raj Nāma:

I enjoin that these words be withheld from those who are unworthy, foolish, and uninitiated ignoramuses. For reticence with outsiders in (revealing) truths is one of the religious duties. The Seal of the Apostles, upon whom be blessings and peace, said “Do not cast pearls before the feet of dogs.” It has also been said, “Secrets, protect them from outsiders!” And it has been said, “Keep your secret, even from your lord!” May that person who would reveal these words to every inferior person be unsuccessful, because he or she would be a traitor and scoundrel. “Whoever betrays us, is not of us.” That person would fall into perdition, and perdition and punishment would come to the writer as well.[153] [Italics added]

Avicenna conflates what we would refer to today as “philosophy” and “religion.” He mentions “prophets” alongside Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. By discussing Plato (and other philosophers) in the same context as religious prophets, Avicenna’s comments suggest that Plato was understood as both a philosopher and a religious figure.[154] The question we return to is whether these passages indicate that the falasifa truly did view both “philosophic” and “religious” works as genuine sources of knowledge, and that allegory, symbolism, and other literary devices were utilised, to varying degrees, in both types of text. As mentioned, these matters call Strauss’s strict distinction between Platonism, as an atheistic rationalism, and Islam into question.

Passages in Averroes’s works emphasize the same hermeneutic issues. In the Kitāb faṣl al-maqāl (Harmony of Religion and Philosophy or Decisive Treatise), Averroes writes that “we, the

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152 Avicenna, quoted in Heath, Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna, 151; Avicenna, Fi isḥāṣat al-nubuwsa’s, 124-6.

153 Avicenna, quoted in Heath, Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna, 125; Avicenna, Mi’raj Nāma, 99-100.

154 That is, similar to how early Jewish and Christian philosophers interpreted Plato. See the discussion in Chapter 3, Section 5.
Muslim community, know firmly that demonstrative reflection does not lead to differing with what is set down in the Law.” Averroes explicitly contends that the truths of philosophy correspond with the revealed law. As with Farabi’s and Avicenna’s works, a distinction between “philosophic” and “religious” knowledge is not particularly evident in Averroes’s texts. Explaining the reasons behind the multi-layered Quran, Averroes writes:

The reason an apparent [zāhir] and an inner sense [bātin] are set down in the Law [sharī’a] is the difference in people’s innate dispositions and the variance in their innate capacities for assent. The reason contradictory apparent senses are set down in it is to alert “those well grounded in science” [i.e. the men of “demonstration” or men of “wisdom”] to the interpretation [ta’wīl] that reconciled them. This idea is pointed to in His statement (may he be exalted), “He it is who has sent down to you the Book; in it, there are fixed verses…” on to His statement, “and those well grounded in science” [3:7].

Averroes notes there are natural differences between human beings; a hierarchy of beings is an accepted truth, rather than a truth that belongs specifically to “philosophy” or to “religion.” As Averroes’s work makes apparent, the difference between philosophy and religion is that religion presents truth symbolically in order that the religious law be communicated to the greatest number.

As noted in this Chapter, Strauss’s reading requires us to believe that many of the falasifa’s explicit remarks – notably those concerning the harmony of faith and reason – were exoteric. Strauss’s claim is, we must recall, that “Jerusalem” and “Athens,” “faith” and “philosophy,” are “incompatible.” In his “mature” works, Strauss suggests we read medieval philosophers as understanding that the “life of faith” and the “life of philosophy” were, in truth,


158 RCPR, 72; SPPP, 149. As noted, Strauss believes that Farabi, the falasifa, and their Jewish pupils were atheists (they “rejected” divine wisdom which suggests, at the least, an existential atheism, an “act of the will” in favour of Strauss’s anti-metaphysical “Athens”). As I have argued, according to the parameters Strauss establishes, the falasifa’s attempts at explaining the Quran’s “inner” meaning therefore have to be understood as disingenuous; all statements from the falasifa concerning the underlying meaning of religious concepts (“Allah,” the “Holy Angel,” “prophecy,” and so on) become examples of the falasifa’s exoteric “political philosophy.” As discussed in Chapter 3, Strauss suggests Platonists use metaphysics rhetorically. Note that in “Farabi’s Plato” (19), Strauss considers whether “all [philosophical] writings…are exoteric.”
irreconcilable. We are therefore to understand these thinkers as involved in a highly elaborate, apparently cynical, scheme that blended aspects of Greek philosophy with revealed religion. We are led to believe that this scheme was carried out in order to hide the same “deadly truth” identified by Nietzsche and in order to confer some personal advantage on to the *falasifa*.159 The impasse here is that, when faced with the criticism that he overlooks the existence of esotericism in Islam, or that he completely discards many of the *falasifa’s* express statements on the harmony of philosophy and faith, Strauss could simply argue that the *falasifa’s* “Platonic political philosophy” must be subtly discerned from “between the lines,” and that the explicit comments of the *falasifa* or the existence of Islamic esotericism means very little.

One way to attempt to resolve this impasse is, perhaps, to again consider the historical or factual difficulties with Strauss’s reading. For example, Gutas notes that:

> [Throughout this period [sc. the 8th-10th century Graeco-Arabic translation movement] there was no confrontation between what Western scholars call “reason” and “faith.” The question of how faith is to be defined certainly played a key role in the theological developments of the period, but it was not opposed to “reason”; if anything, reason was used as a tool in all these discussions. Furthermore, reason was not something championed exclusively by the scholars in favor of Greek sciences as opposed to the “faith” of benighted Muslims (this dichotomy is a distinctly Western theologoumenon that has nothing to do with Islamic realities).160 [Italics added]

For Strauss’s distinction between an atheistic “Platonic philosophy” and Islam to hold, we must believe there really was, for medieval Islamic thinkers, a conflict between “Athens” and “Jerusalem.” We must believe that these philosophers recognised philosophic reason and religious faith as entirely separate. Yet, for Gutas, Strauss’s “orientalist notion that all of Arabic philosophy is about the conflict between religion and philosophy” is “untenable.” Strauss incorrectly assumes, according to Gutas, that Islamic philosophers worked in hostile environments and therefore had to hide “their real philosophical views.”161 Similarly, Corbin contends that the “conflict which split the Occident,” the distinction “between theology and philosophy, between faith and knowledge, between symbol and history” occurred largely

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159 On this theme, see the discussion on Strauss and esoteric writing in Chapter 1, Section 1, and the discussion on Strauss’s Nietzschean politics in Chapter 2, Section 1.

160 Gutas, *Greek Thought Arabic Culture*, 158-9. Compare with Gutas’s review of Mahdi’s *Alfarabi and the Foundations of Islamic Political Philosophy*. Gutas claims that Mahdi’s interpretation of Farabi rests on outdated (Straussian) hermeneutics; Mahdi’s text is an “antiquated curio.”

following Averroes’s time; it was a “split” assisted by the development of “Averroism”\(^\text{162}\) (in the West) after the 12th century. This “split” was not, then, a medieval Islamic reality, a reality of the “Orient.” Akin to Gutas’s and Corbin’s remarks, Wisnovsky asserts that drawing a distinction between “philosophy” and “theology” when examining medieval Islamic texts is an imposed and artificial practice, one traceable to classifications made originally in medieval European universities.\(^\text{163}\) Stroumsa’s comments also point to a difficulty with Strauss’s strict separation between “philosophy” and “faith.” According to Stroumsa:

> Although the [medieval] philosophers did not treat their sources with the same reverence that was given to holy scriptures, it seems that their references to foreign wisdom were done with all the seriousness of treating authoritative texts.\(^\text{164}\) [Italics added]

Strauss’s rigid distinction between “reason” and “faith” must be approached with caution. The central difficulty with the view that the falasifa sided with an atheistic rationalism and followed a series of “Platonic” philosophical writing techniques is that the same literary and interpretive practices – the belief that authoritative texts do not communicate their truths openly on the basis that there exists a hierarchy of human types – can equally be conceived of as “Islamic.”\(^\text{165}\)

### 4.4 Concluding Remarks

In this Chapter, I have argued that Strauss makes a series of debatable assertions concerning the “precarious” position of philosophy in medieval Islamic societies and that Strauss’s understanding of Islam’s history is questionable. I have also argued that Strauss emphasizes a thesis about an esoteric Platonism that has little supporting evidence; it is a thesis that rests largely on what we believe motivated the falasifa. As noted in Section 4.1, even if historical evidence leads one to believe that persecution was not a likely consideration for a particular author, Strauss would claim that an author’s commitment to “Platonic political philosophy” would have resulted in the author composing an “exoteric” book. The implication here is that for

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162 Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*, 12-3.


164 Stroumsa, *Freethinker*, 137.

165 Would Strauss respond, however, by arguing that “Islamic” practices are “Platonic,” as Islam is a “Platonism for the people”? See the discussion in Chapter 3, Section 4.
Strauss’s hermeneutics

Strauss’s reading to remain coherent, we must accept one of his fundamental claims on principle: that the *falasifa* really were atheist “Platonic philosophers.”

The division Strauss makes between “philosophy” and “faith” – a distinction at the core of his thesis that the *falasifa* were Platonists – is problematic for historical and philological reasons. By insinuating that the *falasifa’s* thought was, in truth, fundamentally atheistic and opposed to metaphysics, Strauss creates, as Guttmann notes, an unbridgeable space between medieval philosophy and faith. It is not apparent, however, that the *falasifa* ever considered such a space to exist. Importantly, Strauss does not provide a substantial explanation as to why philosophers such as Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, were predisposed towards a skeptical assessment of Islamic doctrines, including the notion of metaphysical knowledge and an ultimate reality. The idea of an ultimate reality – of God, prophecy, and a divine soul – can be found, in competing formulations, within ancient Greek philosophy, within Islam, and within other world religions. As far as we know, these “metaphysical” beliefs were a vital component of the world the *falasifa* inhabited. There appears to be few sound reasons for interpreting these medieval philosophers as not believing, from the outset, in the possibility of something more than the rationalistic atheism Strauss attributes to them.  

The next topic for further investigation is Strauss’s understanding of “Platonic political philosophy.” In order to investigate this critical matter, we must examine Strauss’s interpretation of the relationship between Plato and Farabi.

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166 Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, for example, may have been influenced by Islamic doctrines at an early age. According to Avicenna’s autobiography, he had memorized the Quran by the age of 10. Averroes was a member of a prominent family of Islamic judges; according to biographic details, Averroes studied Islamic law and tradition prior to his engagements with medicine and philosophy. There is no detailed biography of Farabi’s life. The *falasifa* may have become aware of many concepts Strauss would label “Platonic” (e.g., the prophet-legislator, exoteric writing, and the natural differences between human beings) prior to reading, or engaging with, Greek philosophy.
As noted by several scholars – including Zuckert, Lampert, Tanguay, and Pangle – there are a number of similarities between Strauss’s interpretation of Farabi and Strauss’s reading of Plato.¹

The purpose of this Chapter is to explore Strauss’s interpretation of each thinker; particular emphasis is given to Strauss’s account of Farabi. My principal contention is that Strauss’s reading of Farabi is, ultimately, unconvincing. Strauss’s interpretation of Farabi is based largely on an esoteric analysis of a single text, the *Falsafat Aflāṭūn* (*Philosophy of Plato*, referred to by Strauss as the *Plato*). The procedure Strauss uses to award prominence to the *Philosophy of Plato*, and the hermeneutics Strauss uses to interpret that text, are, I contend, entirely debatable. Given the connection that appears to exist between Strauss’s reading of Plato and Strauss’s account of Farabi, we are justified in questioning the merits of Strauss’s claims about “Platonic political philosophy.”

The structure of the Chapter is as follows. In Section 5.1, I outline the pivotal details of Strauss’s “mature” reading of Plato, a reading that has attracted a vast amount of attention.² I then review, in Sections 5.2 and 5.3, Strauss’s 1945 article: “Farabi’s *Plato*.⁴ Several scholars have noted the vital place “Farabi’s *Plato*” occupies in the Straussian corpus.³ It is particularly

¹ See the sources cited in Chapter 4, note 88 of the present thesis.

² Strauss wrote several works on Plato. To inventory, there is Strauss’s article in *The History of Political Philosophy*, this work is similar, though not identical, to the article in *The City and Man* (on this point, see Strauss’s “Preface” in CM). The *HPP* article deals with the *Republic* (34 pages), the *Statesman* (10 pages), and the *Laws* (10 pages). Strauss’s article on Plato in *CM* focuses on the *Republic*. Also relevant are Strauss’s works *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, *The Argument and Action of Plato’s Laws, Socrates and Aristophanes; On Plato’s Symposium*. Comments on “Platonic political philosophy” are found throughout Strauss’s works, including *On Tyranny, Natural Right and History*, and *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. A significant amount of commentary on Strauss’s reading of Plato exists; the following list is not intended to be comprehensive: Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics*, chapter 3; Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche*, chapters 3, 4; Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos*, chapters 4-6; Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss*, chapter 4; Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, chapters 2, 4; Pangle, *Leo Strauss*, chapter 2; Altman, *The German Stranger*, chapter 9; Burney, “Sphinx Without a Secret”; Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, chapters 2-4, 9; Robertson “Leo Strauss’s Platonism”; Blackburn, *Plato’s Republic*, 5, 34, 156.

³ “Farabi’s *Plato*” appeared originally in the *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume* (1945). The article also appears in *Essays on Medieval Jewish and Islamic Philosophy* (ed. A. Hyman). “Farabi’s *Plato*” is the basis of the first chapter of *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, the article is considerably condensed. Several authors describe “Farabi’s *Plato*” as an important article. Most notable is Meier, who writes (Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss, 87n112) that
noteworthy that “Farabi’s Plato” – an article that focuses on the alleged esoteric Platonism of the medieval philosopher Farabi – was composed prior to Strauss writing his own lengthy commentaries on Plato’s philosophy. Having outlined the main details of Strauss’s readings of Plato and Farabi, I argue in Section 5.4 why Strauss’s interpretation of Farabi warrants scepticism.

5.1 A summary of Strauss’s reading of Plato as presented in The City and Man

Perhaps the two most significant aspects of Strauss’s reading of Plato are the claims that Plato is to be understood, and interpreted as, an exoteric writer, and that scepticism, if not indifference, towards Plato’s metaphysics and theology is therefore warranted.

Strauss contends that Plato accepts the premises expressed in the Phaedrus concerning the superiority of oral, over written, communication; this notion is, for Strauss, to be considered alongside the elitist views Plato conveys regarding the differences between human beings. Strauss’s assertion is that, as Plato considered writing a flawed method of communication, he veiled his true views, the philosophic “truth,” through utilising a series of writing devices including irony, repeating themes or ideas, utilising different characters as “mouthpieces,” placing important ideas in the centre of texts, and using specific “deeds” or actions within a dialogue for

“Farabi’s Plato” “is one of his [e. Strauss’s] most important and one of the most helpful for the understanding of his philosophic project.” Lampert (Leo Strauss and Nietzsche, 137) writes that Strauss is “most candid about Alfarabi” in “Farabi’s Plato.” Lampert notes that Strauss never had the article reprinted in later collections of his works. Druy (The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss, 212n11) makes a similar point. Zuckert (Postmodern Platos, 303n32) also mentions the “importance of this essay [cf. “Farabi’s Plato”].” In addition to “Farabi’s Plato,” Strauss’s other notable writings on Farabi include “How Farabi Read Plato’s Laws” in WPP (a central chapter in the book), “Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi,” and Philosophy and Law.

4 CM, 52-4. Strauss also mentions how Xenophon reported Socrates’s style of conversing; Socrates approached men differently depending on whether the man possessed a “good nature” (ibid., 53). For the applicable section of the Phaedrus, see Strauss’s references at CM, 53n4. For Strauss’s comments on irony in the Platonic dialogues, see AAPL, 62.

5 That is, if “truth” claims are, on the Straussian reading, made at all in the Platonic dialogues. Noting that Plato takes “full responsibility for the titles of dialogues,” Strauss writes that there is no dialogue entitled “Nature or Truth” (CM, 55-6 [Strauss’s italics]). In “Farabi’s Plato” (19, 19n44), with reference to the Phaedrus, Timaeus, Seventh Letter, and Maimonides’s Guide, Strauss asks whether “all writings [e. composed by “the philosophers”] as such are esoteric.” On this point, see P.AIF, 35-6. As mentioned in Chapter 1 (Section 1.1), for Strauss, the theoretical “truth” is “deadly.”
Strauss’s esoteric Farabi

metaphoric significance. Accordingly, Strauss’s reading of Plato can be understood as based on the premise that only those who understand the art of exoteric/esoteric writing can decipher Plato’s true teaching. These scholars will be able to find the teachings Plato had communicated orally to “sensible friends” but was forced to hide within texts he knew would be read by a variety of people, including those not suited to the life of philosophy.

Strauss distinguishes his interpretation of Plato from “Christian Platonism.” He suggests that Christian prejudices lead to interpretive faults in their interpretations. In opposition to the pagan Greek worldview that emphasises both the comedic and tragic aspects of life, Christian philosophers, versed in the narrative of Jesus’s suffering, are inclined towards a tragic view of the world. Based partly on this prejudice, Strauss views Christian thinkers as having been preoccupied with the ascetic, metaphysical, and theological subjects – specifically the otherworldly idealism and eschatological transcendence – found in Plato’s texts, as opposed to

6 For Socrates’s use of “irony,” see CM, 50-3; for “repetition,” see ibid., 115, 135; in terms of distinguishing Plato from his “characters,” see ibid., 57-9, HPP, 33; for the use of the centre, see CM, 73; for Plato’s use of metaphors, see Strauss’s commentary on “speeches” and “deeds” at CM, 58-9. Strauss describes similar exoteric writing practices at P.AW, chapter 2; passim.

7 “Sensible friends” is taken from CM, 54. At CM, 53: “The proper work of a writing is to talk to some readers and to be silent to others.” Strauss also mentions (CM, 53) “logographic necessity.” For use of this term, see TOM, 121; AAPL, 167; WPP, 31; LAM, 54.

8 CM, 61-2.

9 According to Strauss’s reading (see Chapter 3, Section 3.4), Christian philosophers were more concerned with “faith,” “creed,” or “dogmas,” than with “law” (see P.AW, 9, 19-21; PL, 73; PG, 61-2). The other issue regards Rechtlichkeit (probity). Strauss’s comments (“1962 Introduction,” SCR, 12-3; PL, 37; PG, 26-7) suggest that it was “Biblical morality” that made “probity” a virtue. We might ask whether Strauss’s opinion is that a commitment to “probity” obstructed believing Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, philosophers from considering whether aspects of Plato’s dialogues may have been included merely for dramatic or rhetorical effect, i.e., considering whether Plato’s Socrates was, in fact, a “dissembler.” At CM, 77: “He [sc. Thrasymachus] is sure that Socrates is ironic, i.e. a dissembler, a man who pretends to be ignorant while in fact he knows things very well; far from being ignorant and innocent he is clever and tricky; and he is ungrateful.”

10 Drawing on Thomas More’s Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation, Strauss notes More’s statement that Jesus is said to have wept “twice or thrice, but never find we that he laughed so much as once.” Socrates, Strauss writes, “left us no example of weeping, but, on the other side, he left us example of laughing.” CM, 61. Similar commentary from Strauss comes at RCPR, 106-8.
focussing on the more “primitive,” and temporal, political themes.11 Strauss is more interested in the latter.

Contrary to “Christian Platonism,” Strauss proposes that as Plato was an exoteric writer, Plato’s metaphysics and theology can be understood as part of his salutary, or exoteric, teaching.12 In what is arguably Strauss’s most well known presentation of Plato in *The City and Man*, the Platonic doctrine of Ideas, or Forms, is described as follows:

The doctrine of ideas which Socrates expounds to his interlocutors is very hard to understand; to begin with, it is utterly incredible, not to say that it appears to be fantastic. Hitherto we had been given to understand that justice is fundamentally a certain character of the human soul or of the city, *i.e.* something which is not self-subsisting. Now we are asked to believe that it is self-subsisting, being at home as it were in an entirely different place from human beings and everything else participating in justice (cf. 509d1-510a7; *Phaedrus* 247c3). No one has ever succeeded in giving a satisfactory or clear account of this doctrine of ideas.13

The claim from Strauss is clear enough: the “ideas” (noting that Strauss does not capitalise the word) represents a complicated, if not entirely unbelievable, doctrine. In stating that “no one”

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11 There is, Strauss asserts, “a difference between Christian and primitive Platonism.” Strauss describes the *Republic* as “the most famous political work of Plato’s, the most famous political work of all times” (*CM*, 62; see also *HPP*, 33). At *CM*, 56: “[T]he theme of the dialogues, in so far as it is revealed by the titles, is preponderantly political.”

12 Although Strauss largely dismisses belief in the possibility of metaphysical knowledge when writing on ancient and medieval philosophy, the issue of how Strauss understood the Platonic Ideas himself is subject to debate. When writing on the “fundamental problems,” “fundamental alternatives,” and liberation from “historical limitations,” Strauss suggests he believes in something akin to Plato’s Ideas (see, for example, Strauss’s statements at *NRH*, 32; *OT*, 196). There is also the point, noted by Brague (“Athens, Jerusalem, Mecca: Leo Strauss’s “Muslim” understanding of Greek Philosophy,” 244), that if Strauss considers Plato’s texts capable of delivering Plato’s “silent *i.e.* esoteric” oral teaching” (*i.e.*, by understanding exoteric writing, an author living in the 20th or 21st century can extract from Plato’s works the teaching Plato would have provided orally to his best students), then these texts can speak to us across time and without historical detritus obstructing our understanding. Rosen (*Hermeneutics as Politics*, 130, 205n77, 205n88) asserts that if Strauss is arguing that access to pretheoretical knowledge is possible (that we can access “pretheoretical kinds”), then Strauss’s description of the Ideas as “utterly incredible” and “very hard to understand” is inconsistent. See also Smith’s comments at *Reading Leo Strauss*, 17. Smith considers Strauss to be arguing that the Ideas are “not a system of metaphysical absolutes, but something like the permanent problems or questions of life to which thoughtful men and women would always, but inconclusively, return.” Smith’s comments, read alongside Rosen’s, return us to the point that if the “permanent problems” or “questions of life” can indeed be “permanent” and understood in a similar way – between, say, Plato and a modern philosopher – then this suggests we can attempt to access knowledge (*i.e.*, access “Ideas” like the Good or Justice) in the sense Plato’s doctrine describes. That said, Rosen’s assessment (*Hermeneutics as Politics*, 125, see also 180) of Strauss as “closer to Kant in the roots of his thought,” appears accurate.

13 *CM*, 119.
has ever given a satisfactory account of the Ideas, Strauss appears to implicitly criticise Plato and Plato’s Socrates; the suggestion from Strauss is, perhaps, that Plato did not need to give a comprehensive account of an exoteric doctrine. Strauss understands the Ideas as an essentially pedagogic doctrine, a doctrine that leads potential philosophers away from the views of their fathers concerning the gods. Strauss writes:

Now while it is obviously reasonable to say that a perfect circle or perfect justice transcends everything which can be seen, it is hard to say that a perfect bed is something on which no man can ever rest or that a perfect howl is completely inaudible. However this may be, Glaucon and Adeimantus accept this doctrine of ideas with relative ease. They surely had heard of the ideas, even the idea of the good, many times before. This does not guarantee however that they had a genuine understanding of that doctrine. Yet they have heard still more frequently, and in a way they know, that there are gods like Dike (536b3; cf. 487a6), or Nike who is not this or that victory, nor this or that statue of Nike, but one and the same self-substiting being which is in a sense the cause of every victory and which is of unbelievable splendour. [Italics added]

Strauss’s point appears to be that by comparing the Ideas with the pre-existing Greek gods, Socrates elevates philosophy while simultaneously leading potential philosophers away from belief in the gods. As Strauss claims, those who “have come to accept that theology are best prepared for accepting the doctrine of ideas.” As Green suggests, the Ideas appear, on Strauss’s reading, to be a “transitional pedagogical teaching to true and pure philosophizing”: the Ideas help bridge the gap between theology, or at least religious beliefs, and “pure” (to use Green’s term) philosophy. What I take Strauss to be implying is that, in moving the potential philosopher away from the beliefs of their city about the gods towards beliefs about permanent and self-subsisting Ideas, the potential philosopher can begin to be educated on one of the most important matters: the gods do not exist, but are important to “put a stamp” on a particular set of beliefs. As a heuristic, transitional, teaching, the doctrine of Ideas is therefore subversive. It is a

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14 CM, 120; see also HPP, 53-4.

15 CM, 121.

16 Green, Jew and Philosopher, 167n127. See the commentary in Chapter 2 (Section 2.2), and note 36 below.

17 See Strauss’s comments at PL, 76; PG, 64; PAW, 10-1, 139-40; RCPR, 251. Commenting on the “noble lie,” Strauss describes (CM, 102-3) how inequality between human beings can be attributed to a god; the “god did not however create the brothers unequal by arbitrary decision, as it were choosing some for rule and others for subjection; he merely sanctioned a natural difference or put a stamp on it.”
doctrine that corrupts the youth (note Strauss’s claim that Glauc on and Adeimantus accept the doctrine of Ideas with “relative ease”) by making them question the things the city reveres.18

It is difficult to believe that Strauss accepts the Ideas as anything more than a pedagogic, or heuristic, doctrine. As Smith has noted, in the eighty-eight page commentary on the Republic in The City and Man, Strauss devotes around two pages to the Ideas, a theme that, in most other analyses, “occupies center stage.”19 Equally noteworthy is Strauss’s relative dismissal of Plato’s doctrine of the immortal soul.20 This doctrine appears to be, on Strauss’s reading, merely didactic: Strauss notes the “parallel” between the Republic’s initial discussions of justice (in which justice is proved as “salutary”) and the end of the Republic where the doctrine of the immortal soul is presented. In the Republic, Socrates “proves the immortality of the soul without having brought to light the nature of the soul.”21 Strauss suggests that such “abstractions” concerning justice and the soul are required for salutary reasons.22 Strauss’s commentary implies, then, that the doctrine of the immortal soul is, like the doctrine of Ideas, an exoteric Platonic theme. The vital point is that Strauss’s reading remains largely indifferent to Plato’s metaphysics and theology.

Another significant aspect of Strauss’s reading of Plato is the claim that Plato uses various “mouthpieces” and that Socrates – the philosopher who expounds the doctrine of Ideas and doctrine of the immortal soul – is not, therefore, to be understood as Plato’s sole spokesman. On Strauss’s reading, a host of Platonic characters, including Polemarchus and Thrasymachus, assist in announcing Plato’s deepest thoughts.23 The role Strauss attributes to Thrasymachus is particularly noteworthy. Strauss defines Thrasymachus, one of the Republic’s 11

18 This is the charge levelled against Socrates. See Apology, 24b8-c1. The reference to “deities of his own invention” could be interpreted as an allusion to the Ideas.

19 Smith, Reading Leo Strauss, 100.

20 See CM, 137-8; HPP, 67. Strauss’s remarks are somewhat ambiguous. It could be argued that Strauss is more direct about his view of Platonism (see note 3 above) in “Farabi’s Plato.” In that article, Strauss considers Farabi to believe that Plato’s doctrine of the immortal soul was exoteric.

21 CM, 137-8.

22 CM, 137-8.

23 For example, Strauss notes (CM, 73) that Polemarchus’s view that justice consists in “helping one’s friends, i.e. one’s fellow citizens, and in hating one’s enemies, i.e. the foreigners” is a view “which is entirely preserved in the positive or constructive part of the work.” Strauss describes (CM, 123-4) Thrasymachus as occupying the “central place among the interlocutors of the Republic.”
characters, as the text’s “central” interlocutor. 24 The “immoral” Thrasymachus – a sophist who defines justice as the “advantage of the stronger” 25 – is typically understood as a person of suspect, if not outrageous, opinions, a useful opponent for Socrates to undermine and defeat in the name of a noble and pure philosophy. 26 Strauss notes, however, that in the Republic, Socrates does not entirely refute Thrasymachus; rather, Thrasymachus’s “principle” – the “most savage thesis on justice” – remains victorious. 27 By implying that Socrates and Thrasymachus help to reveal Plato’s true teaching (i.e., Thrasymachus is “central” to the dialogue), Strauss’s reading might be interpreted as suggesting that Plato’s esoteric doctrine is to publicly praise and defend a definition of morality or justice acceptable to the majority, as Socrates does (for example, at Republic 433a-b), while adhering, at heart, to the “savage” view of Thrasymachus. That is, by combining the views of two of Plato’s “mouthpieces” – Socrates and Thrasymachus – we arrive, perhaps, at the true Platonic view. This is that justice is the advantage of the stronger, however

24 See note 23 above. At CM, 73: “The discussion with him [i.e. Thrasymachus] forms by far the largest part of the first book, although not its central part. In a sense, however, it forms the center of the Republic as a whole…” In the context of creating a “just city,” Strauss (CM, 123) writes: “[w]e are compelled to expel Homer and Sophocles but we must invite Thrasymachus.”

25 CM, 74, 77, 87.

26 Consider, for example, the remarks of the late Neoplatonist Proclus (Proclus’ Commentary on Plato’s Parmenides, 44-5):

Since when he (sc. Socrates) is contending with the sophists masquerading, as they always do, as experts and masters of wisdom, all the methods of dialectic are ready to his hand to show his adversaries where they contradict themselves, and since these dialectical methods are in some way cathartic of overweening self-opinion, his adversaries may eventually, after being pounded from all sides, be brought to a recognition of their own false pretenses. Many examples of this kind of Socratic dialectic are found in the Gorgias and the Protagoras and in other dialogues that attack the theses of the sophists, for example the arguments Socrates puts together in the Republic against the ingenious Thrasymachus.

Similarly, drawing on commentary from Diogenes Laertius’s Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers, a text that dates from around the third century CE, Tarrant (Plato’s First Interpreters, 27-8) notes:

It was not only ‘Socrates’ who was seen as a spokesman for Plato. In Diogenes Laertius (3.52) we are told that Plato reveals ‘that which seems so to him’ through four characters: ‘Socrates’, ‘Timaeus’, and the Athenian and Eleatic Strangers. On the other hand he uses the characters of ‘Thrasymachus’, ‘Gorgias’, ‘Protagoras’, ‘Euthydemus’, ‘Hippias’ and others like them for the victims of his refutation-processes. In effect we have a list of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ characters, a list which leaves out many others, most of whom could be regarded as Socrates’ acquaintances. [Tarrant’s italics]

27 CM, 84. Note also Strauss’s comments at CM, 74: “It seems to be entirely fitting that the most savage man present [i.e. Thrasymachus] should maintain the most savage thesis on justice.”
the philosopher cannot, or should not, state this directly. The philosopher conceals, in other words, the truth about justice by means of an esoteric political philosophy. Whether intentionally or not, by emphasising, in the context of Plato’s understanding of justice, the importance of Thrasymachus, Strauss’s reading aligns Plato with a Nietzschean power politics; this is a common complaint made by Strauss’s critics.

Thrasymachus is important in Strauss’s reading for other reasons. One of the primary themes of the *Republic* is, for Strauss, the antagonism between philosophy (as independent, free thinking) and the necessary beliefs and opinions of the *polis*. This antagonism relates to the fact that the philosopher’s *eros* is for universal knowledge or wisdom and, given this priority, the philosopher is, by nature, averse to the worldly demands of the *polis* and political life; they are disinclined towards “human affairs” or the “human things.” As the philosopher is only interested in universal knowledge, the virtues themselves, or the Ideas, and as the philosopher is independent and contemplative by nature, the majority of the citizens of the *polis* view the

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28 This is, as mentioned, one plausible interpretation. Strauss’s text might be interpreted in other ways.

29 See, for example, Altman’s reading of Strauss, *The German Stranger*. With regard to Strauss’s interpretation of the *Republic*, Altman writes (508): “From the opening word (“I went down”), Plato is offering the world the great justification of the political life precisely because the theoretical life is more attractive and thus more advantageous in a purely selfish sense for the philosopher. Only on this basis can the esoteric essence of Platonic justice be revealed as altruism. As a radical immoralist, Strauss can’t or won’t see this, and it hardly matters which of the two you are willing to grant to him.” Altman further contends (*ibid.* [Altman’s italics]): “Indeed (and this is the burning question that takes the lovely form of the passed λαμπάδια [sc. small torch] of 328a3:) if Platonic philosophers were not persuaded to overcome their natural inclination to selfishness, who would be left to fight the Nazis?” For criticism of Strauss’s “Nietzschean” reading of prior philosophers, see Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, 170; Blackburn, *Plato’s Republic*, 5, 34, 156-7.

30 CM, 124: “Why are the philosophers unwilling to rule? Being dominated by the desire, the *eros*, for knowledge as the one thing needful, or knowing that philosophy is the most pleasant and blessed possession, the philosophers have no leisure for looking down at human affairs, let alone for taking care of them. They believe that while still alive they are already firmly settled far away from their cities in the “Islands of the Blessed.”” Compare though with Strauss’s comments regarding Thrasymachus at CM, 74. Strauss makes a rare spelling mistake: Thrasymachus “is lawless and shameless in deed and in speech; he blushes only on account of the heat. And, needless at [sic] it may be to say so, he is greedy for money and prestige.” If Plato announces his true views through both Socrates and Thrasymachus, then the philosopher appears to be, on Strauss’s reading, at least partly interested in material goods and “worldly glory” (see TOM, 175). On this theme, see also Chapter 2, note 58, of the present thesis.

31 Strauss appears to differentiate between Plato’s philosopher who knows the Ideas, and Strauss’s “secular” philosopher, at CM, 122 [italics added]: “If justice is giving or leaving to each what is good for his soul but what is good for the soul is the virtues, it follows that no man can be truly just who does not know “the virtues themselves” or generally the ideas, or who is not a philosopher.”
philosopher with suspicion. While the philosopher may be the person best suited to rule, given their superior understanding of justice and the virtues, the city and the philosopher move in opposite directions. As Strauss writes, the cities “are like assemblies of madmen which corrupt most of those fit to become philosophers.” There are then, Strauss notes, a variety of reasons as to why the rule of philosophers is, for Plato, “extremely improbable.” However, we must recall that Strauss implies Thrasymachus also speaks for Plato. This means that we must pay careful attention to what Strauss states regarding rulership in the context of Thrasymachus.

In light of the antagonism that exists between philosophy and the city, Strauss considers the Republic to indicate that if a philosopher could be persuaded to seek rulership, or if a philosopher wanted to rule based on the fact that they had love (philia) for a people, the philosopher would have to use both the way of Socrates (understood as dialectical reasoning and appearing virtuous) and the way of Thrasymachus (understood as the use of rhetoric or sophistry) in order to attain power. Strauss writes:

32 CM, 123-5. According to Strauss’s account of Platonic philosophy in The City and Man, there are two related reasons why the philosophers’ rule is unlikely. The philosophers do not want to rule; they are not interested in “the human things” (see notes 30 and 31 above). Furthermore, the philosophers know that the non-philosophers’ “cherished convictions possess no higher status than that of opinions.” If true philosophy is concerned with universal knowledge, then philosophy is antithetical to closed regimes, the regimes that the non-philosophers, who are attached to their opinions, need or desire; regimes that require “noble lies.” Recall Strauss’s claim (JPCM, 463) that philosophy is “subversive.” That said, in “Farabi’s Plato,” Strauss implies that “Platonists” become involved in politics. See Section 5.3 below.

33 See CM, 69, 125, 128; HPP, 46, 60. Yet at CM, 128: “For one might say that there is no reason why a philosopher should not engage in political activity out of that kind of love of one’s own which is patriotism.” Strauss also writes (“Farabi’s Plato,” 22) that the philosopher engages in political activity for “philanthropic” reasons. Similarly, Strauss asserts (OT, 200) that the philosopher “cannot help being more attached to his family and his city than to strangers…” See Section 5.3 below.

34 CM, 123-5. The passage in-full reads: “He [Socrates] traces the antagonism of the cities to the philosophers primarily to the cities: the present cities, i.e. the cities not ruled by philosophers, are like assemblies of madmen which corrupt most of those fit to become philosophers, and to which those who have succeeded against all odds in becoming philosophers rightly turn their backs in disgust.”

35 CM, 125. See note 33 above.

36 “Philia” is mentioned at CM, 102. Strauss asks if Thrasymachus “is the only artisan present” at CM, 80. At CM, 121 [italics added]: “The movement to which the reader of the Republic is exposed leads from the city as the association of the fathers who are subject to the law and ultimately to the gods toward the city as an association of artisans who are subject to the philosophers and ultimately to the ideas.”
To bring about the needed change on the part of the city, of the non-philosophers or the multitude, the right kind of persuasion is necessary and sufficient. The right kind of persuasion is supplied by the art of persuasion, the art of Thrasymachus, directed by the philosopher and in the service of philosophy. No wonder then that in this context Socrates declares that he and Thrasymachus have just become friends, not having been enemies before either. The multitude of the non-philosophers is good natured and therefore persuadable. Without “Thrasymachus” there will never be a just city. We are compelled to expel Homer and Sophocles but we must invite Thrasymachus. Thrasymachus justly occupies the central place among the interlocutors of the Republic…

Strauss considers Thrasymachus to indicate (or to help indicate) Plato’s view that if a philosopher seeks power, the non-philosophic majority will never readily accept the type of city that the philosopher believes is best. On Strauss’s reading, the Republic is taken to demonstrate that in order to create the philosophic city, the philosopher could only reason with some while others would have to be persuaded by rhetoric directed by the philosopher, rhetoric in the service of the philosopher’s project. Hence the need to “expel” the poets who teach, Strauss writes, the “wrong kind of untruth”: there must be a rhetorical project, a noble poetry or noble “untruth,” that enacts the philosophic city. If Thrasymachus’s art is “arousing the many to anger,” as Strauss writes, then Strauss appears to assert – albeit enigmatically – that the creation of the philosophic city requires speech, or perhaps events, that upset the majority. The majority then compel the philosophers to rule or, at the least, the majority are made more receptive to the regime the philosopher seeks to create.

Ultimately, in his reading of the Republic, Strauss deemphasises Plato’s metaphysics and theology. Although exploring all the merits and difficulties of Strauss’s Plato is beyond the scope of this thesis, one epistemological problem must be mentioned. As noted by critics such as Altman and Burnyeat, an issue overlooked by Strauss is how is it possible, given what Strauss dismisses as “exoteric” Platonic themes, for the philosopher to teach others in the sense of helping others from the “cave” of opinions to the highest knowledge? This is the glaring problem with Strauss’s reading. Strauss interprets Plato as an anti-metaphysician (Strauss is, at the

37 CM, 123-4.

38 The “wrong kind of untruth” occurs at CM, 135. It does not appear, however, that attaining the “truth” is possible in Strauss's view. See “Farabi's Plato,” 20, 20n48, 28. See also note 5 above and note 83 below.

39 CM, 124.

40 This is one of the primary criticisms in Altman's The German Stranger. Strauss often suggests he believes in a stable standard of good. As noted in Chapter 1 however, on inspection, it is clear that Strauss accepts no such standard exists. For Burnyeat’s criticisms of Strauss, see Chapter 2 of the present thesis, note 36.
least, indifferent to Plato’s metaphysics). What it means to leave the cave of ignorance, one of the central themes of the Republic, is left unspecified (note also Socrates’s “second sailing” [deuteron ploun], his turn from natural philosophy to the Ideas, at Phaedo, 99c-100d). As noted, Strauss implies the Ideas are only for instructional purposes; Plato’s doctrine is to be understood as establishing theoretical entities that are on a par with the gods, thereby leading potential philosophers to question the authority, and eventually the existence, of the gods. As Green’s reading of Strauss suggests, the Ideas are, for Strauss, merely a “transitional pedagogical teaching to true and pure philosophizing.” Strauss – at least as I interpret him – does not believe that there is an Idea of the Good, or any other “Idea,” to ascend to. There is only, at the beginning and end of the philosopher’s quest, the philosopher’s eros or “nature.”

In terms of actual knowledge, it is unclear as to what Strauss’s Platonic philosopher has that the non-philosophers do not; Strauss does not inform us what the Platonic philosopher actually attains. Several tensions in Strauss’s thought are, I believe, exposed in his reading of Plato. If the philosopher understands the life of theory as the most “blessed” or “highest” form of life, then this fact alone does not endorse the philosopher as leader. Similarly, if philosophy culminates in the knowledge of one’s ignorance, or the knowledge that the truth is “deadly,” or the knowledge that the “truth” is illusory (and, as argued in Chapter 1, Strauss does appear to consider the theoretical truth to be “deadly”) then it is, once again, unclear as to how Strauss’s Platonic philosopher is qualified for leading others. We are led to question what, on Strauss’s reading, is the tangible difference between the philosophers and the non-philosophers, between the philosophers and the poets. On the basis of the Ideas, Plato’s endorsement of philosophy, and putting “politics” into the service of “philosophy,” makes sense. Strauss does not point out that his way of reading Plato actually undermines the authority of Platonic philosophy.

With the principal details of Strauss’s interpretation of Plato noted, we are now able to explore Strauss’s account of Farabi, and consider the similarities between the two readings.

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41 Concerning the philosopher’s eros or nature, see CM, 138. Zuckert’s claim (Plato’s Philosophers, 353) that Socrates “acts as a poet” and emphasizes the “limits” of philosophy aligns with the tenor of Strauss’s reading of Plato. Strauss does not deal with the epistemic problems an anti-metaphysical Platonism leads to. It is difficult to argue that there truly is, for Strauss, a tangible difference between philosophy and poetry. At “Farabi’s Plato,” 20n48: “It should be noted that Farabi’s rejection of poetry applies – just as Plato’s rejection of poetry – to common poetry only.” See notes 83 and 115 below. The problems with Strauss’s conception of philosophy are discussed in Chapter 7 of the present thesis.
5.2 “Farabi’s Plato”: The three definitions of Platonic Philosophy identified by Strauss

“Farabi’s Plato” is a dense piece of commentary that a number of scholars – critics and supporters alike – view as crucial for fully understanding Strauss’s conception of “Platonic political philosophy.” There are several similarities between the reading of Plato that Strauss attributes to Farabi, and Strauss’s own reading of Plato.

One obvious similarity is Strauss’s claim that both Plato and Farabi are exoteric writers. Akin to his reading of Plato, Strauss writes that Farabi’s true philosophy, or esoteric teaching, is communicated via a range of literary devices and techniques. These techniques include meaningful silences, contradictions, placing important ideas in the centre of lists or texts, repetition, veiling himself as a “commentator,” and only “alluding” to, “hinting” at, or “intimating,” certain ideas. It is easy to discern a close similarity between the hermeneutics Strauss applies to Plato and those utilised when interpreting Farabi.

As has been noted in Chapters 3 and 4, by applying an exoteric/esoteric analysis to Farabi’s works, Strauss can claim that Farabi is not to be understood as having been wholly influenced by Islamic, Aristotelian, and Neoplatonic doctrines. This is, of course, a controversial view as it contradicts the majority of contemporary interpretations of Farabi. What Strauss suggests is that, when read “between the lines,” Farabi’s philosophy is, in fact, far removed from

42 See notes 1 and 3 above.

43 “Farabi’s Plato,” 2, 15, 16, 17n42, 19, 20, 21, 24, 35. For Farabi’s “silences,” see also WPP, 138. I note the difficulties with the premise that one can read into Farabi’s “silences” in Section 5.4 and Chapter 6.


46 Ibid., 26; see also WPP, 135. Strauss notes Maimonides (“Farabi’s Plato,” 26) and Plato (P-All’, 64n79) also used repetition as a pedagogic device.

47 “Farabi’s Plato,” 19.

48 For Farabi “intimating” his thoughts, see “Farabi’s Plato,” 13, 19, 24, 26, 29, 37; providing “hints,” see 19; “alluding,” see 8; being purposely ambiguous, see 13. Compare with WPP, 138, 141-2.

49 Strauss’s reading of Farabi is entirely different to the interpretation given by other medievalists, such as Walzer, Netton, Fakhry, Gutas, Reisman, Leaman, Tamer, and Fraenkel. As documented in this thesis, several of these medievalists have criticised Strauss’s reading.
any adherence to Neoplatonism; rather, Farabi is a “true Platonist.” On Strauss’s reading, Farabi is a thinker whose political thought is guided by, or akin to, Plato’s views in the Republic and Laws. Like his interpretation of Plato, Strauss understands Farabi in the same secular, atheistic, sense. This contention – Farabi and Plato as rejecting the suprasensible and transcendent – can be understood as the essential characteristic of the Straussian interpretation. Given the secular, anti-metaphysical, account of Farabi that Strauss presents, the subtext of “Farabi’s Plato” might be that true Platonism (as Strauss understands it) transcends time and place.

50 See “Farabi’s Plato,” 1-6. For the term “true Platonist,” see ibid., 21. At ibid., 3: “He [viz. Farabi] held the view that Plato’s philosophy was the true philosophy.” Regarding Farabi’s Plato showing “no trace whatever of Neo-Platonic influence,” see P-AIF, 18. I discuss Farabi’s Neoplatonism in Chapter 6.

51 See the discussion in Chapter 3 of this thesis, and “Farabi’s Plato,” 24n55.

52 See Nietzsche’s remarks at The Gay Science, aph. 344. Strauss (“Farabi’s Plato,” 9) writes that Farabi points to a definition of philosophy as an investigation of the “divine and the natural beings.” Given how Strauss interprets Farabi, “divine” does not appear to mean “transcendent” or “supernatural.”

53 Following Strauss’s reading closely, Mahdi contends that Farabi’s adherence to Neoplatonic doctrines is to be considered “suspect” (Mahdi, Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy, 2-3). Does Mahdi’s Straussian understanding of Farabi influence his translation of Farabi’s texts? Notably, Mahdi translates a passage of Farabi’s Philosophy of Aristotle (Farabi, Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle (trans. Mahdi), 130; Falsafat Aristiṭāṭīlah, 132-3) as “to perfect our defective natural science, for we do not possess metaphysical science.” The context of the statement is Farabi’s discussion of the purpose of Aristotle’s Metaphysics, a discussion that takes place at the end of the Falsafat Aristiṭāṭīlah. In line with Strauss’s interpretation, Mahdi’s translation of the final lines of Farabi’s text suggests that Farabi’s true philosophy is secular and atheistic, i.e., that Farabi rejects the possibility of metaphysical knowledge. Altmann (Von der mittelalterlichen zur modernen Aufklärung, 100n43) draws attention to a lectio recorded by Mahdi (“idha lam yakun ma’na”) which is followed by “al-ilm aladhi ba’d al-ṭabī’at.” Altmann argues that Mahdi’s translation of this section of Farabi’s text “flatly contradicts the tenor of al-Farabi’s previous remarks.” In accordance with the Hebrew version of Farabi’s statement in Falaqera’s Reḥšit ḥokhmah (ed. David), Altmann translates Farabi’s sentence as “to perfect what we miss in natural science, and this [ultimate] science is metaphysics.” Altmann also (Von der mittelalterlichen zur modernen Aufklärung, 100n44) criticises Strauss’s interpretation of Farabi. Strauss writes (“Farabi’s Plato, 55) that in “the sequel to his Plato, Farabi does not discuss Aristotle’s metaphysics.” Strauss’s remark, Altmann states, “implies that Farabi had no use for metaphysics as a science of supersensible beings. In light of our analysis this assumption is unwarranted.” Also contrary to Mahdi’s interpretation, Druart writes that Farabi’s statements on metaphysics in the Falsafat Aristiṭāṭīlah are a “polite way of pointing to the inadequacies and the incompleteness of Aristotle’s Metaphysics.” See Druart, “Metaphysics,” Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy, 333-4. For “Straussian” readings of Farabi, see Parens, An Islamic Philosophy of Virtuous Religions; Colmo, Breaking with Athens. Gutas (“The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century,” 24) claims that: “the prevalence of the Straussian interpretation of al-Farabi has had a chilling effect on mainstream studies of this very significant philosopher…”

54 See note 65 below.
The argument of “Farabi’s Plato” is as follows. Strauss’s investigation of Farabi is premised on gaining a better understanding of Maimonides and Maimonides’s esoteric *Guide of the Perplexed*. This is Strauss’s claim at the outset of his article. Strauss suggests a potential hint for comprehending Maimonides’s “teaching” comes in a letter from Maimonides to fellow philosopher Samuel ibn Tibbon (d. 1230). Strauss draws attention to the fact that Maimonides recommends to ibn Tibbon a work by Farabi entitled the *Political Governments*. In order to attain a “full understanding” of this Farabian text, and begin one’s journey towards comprehending Maimonides’s esoteric *Guide of the Perplexed*, Strauss asserts the reader should compare Farabi’s *Political Governments* with two other texts by Farabi: *The Principles of the Opinions of the People of the Virtuous City* and *The Virtuous Religious Community*. However, having stressed the importance of Farabi’s *Political Governments* and its concomitant texts, Strauss notes that satisfactory editions of these works are not available. Nonetheless, Strauss writes that one important feature of the *Political Governments* can be noted, a feature that, Strauss believes, helps one begin to understand Maimonides’s esoteric teaching. The “most striking trait” of Farabi’s philosophy is that, contrary to Aristotelian or Neoplatonic doctrines, the *Political Governments* sees Farabi present philosophy as contained “within a political framework.” Based on this “political” approach to philosophy, Strauss interprets Farabi as following Platonic teachings sourced from the *Republic* and *Laws*.

Having drawn attention to the “most striking trait” of Farabi’s philosophy, and having noted that there are, however, no satisfactory editions of the *Political Governments* or its “parallel works” to examine in detail, Strauss suggests that another work by Farabi on Platonic

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55 “Farabi’s Plato,” 1, 4.

56 *Ibid.*, 1. Strauss is referring to Farabi’s *al-Siyasa al-Madaniyya*, also known as the *Principles of the Existent Beings or Political Regime*. Strauss writes: “Of Farabi’s works, he [i.e. Maimonides] mentions in that context only one by its title, and he recommends it to ibn Tibbon in the strongest terms. Thus we may assume to begin with that he [i.e. Maimonides] considered it Farabi’s most important book.”

57 “Farabi’s Plato,” 2.

58 *Ibid.*, 2. Strauss’s claim at this point in “Farabi’s Plato” seems to be that Farabi does not isolate philosophical discussions from political matters; Farabi gives philosophical works “political” titles and therefore makes philosophy a subject of politics.

59 “Farabi’s Plato,” 2-5. Strauss appears to assume (*ibid.*, 5) that Farabi had complete, or near complete, versions of the *Republic*, *Timaeus*, and the *Laws*.

60 “Farabi’s Plato,” 2, 2n2.
philosophy be analysed. To better understand Farabi’s “Platonizing procedure” of treating philosophy “within a political framework,” Strauss advocates the study of a section of Farabi’s tripartite text: *The Aims of the Philosophy of Plato and of Aristotle* [hereafter: the *Aims*]. Strauss notes the full title of the central section of this Farabian text: “The philosophy of Plato, its parts, and the grades of dignity of its parts, from its beginning to its end” [hereafter: the *Plato*]. As the name Farabi gives his text on Plato suggests a comprehensive account of Platonic philosophy, Strauss asserts that any Platonic doctrine or concept not discussed by Farabi must have been considered “unimportant” or “merely exoteric.” Strauss immediately assigns importance to Farabi’s “silences.”

Turning his attention to the central section of Farabi’s *Aims*, the section dealing with Plato’s philosophy, Strauss writes how Farabi describes Plato as having been guided by the question of man’s “perfection” or “happiness.” According to Farabi, Plato considered happiness to be “inseparable” from both a “science” and a “way of life.” As Plato was unsatisfied with *endoxa*, and as Plato did not view history as indicating the “philosophic” or “essential” truth, Farabi recounted that Plato had been “compelled” to find out what type of “science” and what “way of life” were necessary for happiness. Strauss observes that, according to Farabi, Plato had found the “science” that provided happiness was philosophy, while the “way of life” that provided happiness was the “royal or political art.” Once this conclusion had been reached,

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61 *Ibid.*, 1-4. As discussed in Section 5.4 below, Strauss does not interpret Farabi via the book Maimonides recommends to ibn Tibbon (al-*Siyāsa al-Madaniyya*: the *Principles of the Existent Beings or Political Governments*). Rather, Strauss refers to Farabi’s text the *Philosophy of Plato*. This practice is strange given that in the letter to ibn Tibbon, Maimonides recommends Aristotle’s works over Plato’s.

62 “Farabi’s *Plato*,” 2-4; compare with *PAW*, 11.

63 “Farabi’s *Plato*,” 4. For the importance of book titles according to Strauss, see *PAW*, 18, 33; *TOM*, 28, 37.

64 “Farabi’s *Plato*,” 5.

65 *Ibid*, 4-5: “The procedure which he [av. Farabi] chooses, may be called genetic.” See also 4n7: “How little Farabi was concerned with history, is shown most clearly by the fact that he presents Plato’s investigations as entirely independent of the investigations of any predecessors…” Strauss also writes that “Farabi was a man of a different stamp” (*ibid.*, 18). According to Strauss, Farabi’s Plato is a “man who had to discover the very meaning of philosophy entirely by himself, thus implying that he had no philosophical predecessors whatsoever” (*ibid.*, 20). The argument is that the Platonic philosopher accesses “truth” regardless of history: “For Platonists are not concerned with the historical (accidental) truth, since they are exclusively interested in the philosophic (essential) truth” (*ibid.*, 20-1). Strauss appears to mean that, as the “essential truth” is recognised as “deadly” (see Chapter 1, note 33), the philosopher discovers a radical freedom.

66 *Ibid.*, 5. Strauss uses the Greek ἐπιστήμη (episteme) and βίος (bios).
Plato had, according to Farabi, ascertained that as both philosophy and kingship were necessary for happiness, they were to be considered “identical.”

Although Farabi initially defines philosophy as implicitly tied to politics, Strauss notes that Farabi does not provide any analysis of Plato’s metaphysical doctrines including, noticeably, the questions posed about “justice and the virtues.” Farabi’s text, Strauss writes, is noticeably silent on Plato’s metaphysics. Even more perplexingly, Strauss points out that following Farabi’s initial definition of philosophy as implicitly tied to politics, Farabi then proceeds to delineate the “scientific investigation concerning justice and the virtues” (mentioned in the *Plato as the “way of Socrates”*) and the “way of Thrasy machus” as separate from Platonic philosophy.

The question Strauss raises is whether philosophy is, for Farabi, truly concerned with political matters, as Farabi had initially suggested. Strauss writes:

[Farabi] distinguishes philosophy as unmistakably from “the way of Socrates” as he distinguishes it from “the way of Thrasy machus”. Philosophy could be identical with political philosophy, if “justice and the virtues” were the main subjects of philosophy, and this would be the case, if justice and the virtues were the highest subject in general. A Platonist who would adopt such a view, might be expected to refer to the “ideas” of justice and the other virtues: Farabi is completely silent about these as well as about any other “ideas.” His Plato is so far from narrowing down philosophy to the study of political things that he defines philosophy as the theoretical art which supplies “the science of the essence of each of all beings.” That is to say: he identifies philosophy with the “art of demonstration.” Accordingly, his Plato actually excludes the study of political and moral subjects from the domain of philosophy proper. [Italics added]

The crucial point is that Farabi begins his text, on Strauss’s reading, by identifying Plato as having been motivated by the quest for happiness. Farabi narrated how Plato viewed both the philosophical life and political rulership as necessary. According to this view, theory and praxis, philosophy and rulership, were required in conjunction for happiness. As Farabi does not discuss the metaphysical themes of the Platonic dialogues, Strauss claims that Farabi presents philosophy, at first, as essentially political in nature. However, although this definition of Platonic

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67 *Ibid.*, 5-6. Importantly, Strauss considers that this view “…cannot be traced to Neoplatonism.” See note 50 above.

68 “Farabi’s Plato,” 8.

69 *Ibid*.


philosophy might initially be inferred from the *Plato*, Farabi then proceeds to indicate, “between the lines” so to speak, that philosophy *does not* actually involve political or moral investigations whatsoever: Farabi distinguishes Platonic philosophy from both the “way” of Socrates and the “way” of Thrasydamus. In what can be viewed as Farabi’s second definition of Platonic philosophy, Strauss asserts philosophy is, for Farabi, *above* moral and political themes. Strauss understands Farabi as suggesting that philosophy is “the theoretical art” that “supplies the science of the essence of each of all beings.” Philosophy is, on this definition, a type of ontological investigation.72 As Strauss writes:

The science of the beings is supplied by philosophy which is a theoretical art fundamentally distinguished from the practical arts, whereas the desired way of life is supplied by the highest practical art, i.e. the royal art. With a view to the fact that the theoretical art called “philosophy” (i.e. the art of demonstration) is the only way leading to the science of the beings, i.e. the theoretical science *par excellence*, the science of the beings too is called “philosophy.”73

Strauss’s argument is that philosophy – that which supplies the “science of the essence of each of all beings” – is a “theoretical art” and, therefore, true philosophy is separate from practical, *i.e.*, “political and moral” subjects. By this definition, it seems that philosophy is, in its purest sense, contemplation, a phenomenological investigation of the “beings.” As Strauss suggests in *The City and Man*, to truly philosophize is to believe one is firmly settled in the “Islands of the Blessed” and have no interest in “looking down at human affairs”74 (*i.e.*, “political and moral” subjects). The same sentiment appears to be what Strauss is pointing towards in “Farabi’s *Plato.*” In a rare case of using a first person pronoun (which occurs only three times in the entirety of “Farabi’s *Plato*”),75 Strauss continues:

Theoretical science (the science of Timaeus) is presented in the *Timaeus* whose subjects are “the divine and the natural beings”, and practical or political science (the science of Socrates) is presented (in its final form) in the *Laws* whose subject is “the virtuous way of life”. Since

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72 On the “science of the beings,” see Chapter 3, Section 3.4, and Chapter 4, note 4, of the present thesis.

73 “Farabi’s *Plato,*” 9.

74 *CM*, 125. See note 30 above.

75 Strauss rarely uses first person singular pronouns. I attach significance to his use of first person pronouns for this reason. In “Farabi’s *Plato,*” the three instances of Strauss utilising first person singular pronouns are: “…seems to me…” (9), “I do not…” (18), and “I am…” (35).
Strauss’s esoteric Farabi

philosophy is essentially theoretical and not practical or political, and since it is essentially related to theoretical science only, only the subjects of the *Timaeus*, and not moral or political subjects, can be called philosophic in the precise sense of the term. This, it seems to me, is, according to Farabi, “the aim” of Plato.76

Philosophy in its “precise sense” is contemplating the “divine and the natural beings,” the “subjects of the *Timaeus*.” “Moral or political subjects” are of a lesser rank.77 It is important to immediately note, in this regard, Strauss’s subsequent description of the connection between philosophy and politics. Strauss writes that “political philosophy” exists only to disguise the philosopher’s ontological investigations and “transcendence.” He asserts:

> [T]he philosopher who, *transcending the sphere of moral or political things*, engages in the quest for the essence of all beings, has to give an account of his doings by answering the question “why philosophy?” That question cannot be answered but with a view to the natural aim of man which is happiness, and in so far as man is by nature a political being, it cannot be answered but within a political framework.78 [Italics added]

According to Strauss’s reading of Farabi, the philosopher only engages with moral or political themes, and writes “political philosophy,” since the philosopher “has to give an account of his doings.” As a member of a political community, the philosopher must provide an *exoteric* justification for philosophy.79 Strauss reiterates the difference between true philosophy and the exoteric concern a philosopher must have for moral, political, or *human*, subjects. He suggests the possible divinity of the true philosopher:

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76 “Farabi’s Plato,” 9.

77 Strauss could claim that the first word of the *Republic* (κατέβην: “I went down”) is another indication from Plato that the philosopher is to descend into the political, lower, realm (see note 29 above). However, as discussed at the end of Section 5.1, Strauss reads Plato as an anti-metaphysician. We must ask what actual “knowledge” Strauss’s version of the Platonic philosopher can attain and take with them into the political realm.

78 “Farabi’s Plato,” 9-10.

79 *Ibid.*, 9-10, 18-9. *At ibid.*, 15: “Aristotle was free to state that doctrine [*i.e.* that happiness consists “in consideration scientiarum speculativarum”] without much ado since he was under no compulsion to reconcile it with the belief in the immortality of the soul or with the requirements of faith, to disregard here political requirements proper. Medieval thinkers were in a different position.”
[It must be understood that philosophy proper on the one hand and the reflection on the human or political meaning of philosophy, or what is called moral and political philosophy, on the other, do not belong to the same level.\textsuperscript{80} [Italics added]

An interest in the “political,” “moral,” or “human” – the lower levels of “philosophy” – is, then, a requirement of living among non-philosophers. Strauss’s contention is that Farabi’s second, central, definition of Platonic philosophy holds that philosophy is a purely theoretical pursuit and that contemplation alone is all that is required for the philosopher’s happiness.\textsuperscript{81} According to Farabi’s second view, the true Platonic philosopher contemplates freely; the philosopher’s thought is entirely unconstrained by historical prejudice, dogma, and opinion.\textsuperscript{82} Importantly, Strauss does not specify what the philosopher finds or contemplates in their theoretical pursuits that are “above” the \textit{polis}. Problematically, Strauss’s reading of Farabi promotes philosophy as a speculative endeavour concerned with the “essence” or nature of “beings,” yet Strauss simultaneously undermines the possibility of metaphysical knowledge, such as the suprasensible Ideas, or divine (in the sense of transcendent or supernatural) entities, such as the Active Intellect or God. As noted below, in “Farabi’s \textit{Plato},” Strauss reads Farabi as an atheist, and does not suggest Farabi finds evidence for God (\textit{the} “divine” being) when philosophizing. What Strauss seems to be arguing is that Platonic philosophers recognize that there is no definitive or meta-truth except that there is no “truth.” There are no boundaries when it comes to philosophizing. All comprehensive doctrines – the comprehensive doctrines that could threaten the freedom of philosophy – are merely human constructions: they are “noble delusions.”\textsuperscript{83}

In addition to the two explanations of Platonic philosophy outlined above, Strauss writes that Farabi provides one other description. What Strauss understands as Farabi’s third definition

\textsuperscript{80} \textit{Ibid.}, 10.

\textsuperscript{81} \textit{Ibid.}, 14-5, 25.

\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Ibid.}, passim. For philosophy resulting in happiness, see \textit{ibid.}, 14, 25, and 29. For Farabi distinguishing “between perfection and happiness,” see \textit{ibid.}, 22-3. As discussed in Section 5.3, Strauss implies that philosophy supplies “perfection” to the philosopher and, if the philosopher rules, philosophy will supply “happiness” to the non-philosophers.

\textsuperscript{83} At \textit{NRH}, 26: “The theoretical analysis of life is noncommittal and fatal to commitment, but life means commitment. To avert the danger to life, Nietzsche could choose one of two ways: he could insist on the strictly esoteric character of the theoretical analysis of life – that is, restore the Platonic notion of the noble delusion – or else he could deny the possibility of theory proper and so conceive of thought as essentially subservient to, or dependent on, life or fate. If not Nietzsche himself, at any rate his successors adopted the second alternative.”
of Platonic philosophy has the philosopher and king described as “rendered perfect by one function and one faculty.” Strauss writes:

[I]n the last of his three statements on the subject Farabi practically identifies philosophy with the royal art: philosophy proves to contain the royal art (since it supplies the right way of life which is the product of the royal art) and the royal art proves to contain philosophy (since it supplies the science of the beings which is the product of philosophy).

According to what Strauss identifies as Farabi’s third, and final, definition of Platonic philosophy, philosophy is described as “containing” the royal art while the royal art “contains” philosophy. Similar to Farabi’s first explanation that tied philosophy to politics, Farabi’s third definition of Platonic philosophy also has philosophy and the royal art (i.e., politics) described as “coextensive.”

It is, significantly, at almost the precise centre of “Farabi’s Plato” that Strauss begins to examine why Farabi’s second, or central, definition of Platonic philosophy is to be understood as Farabi’s true view. Strauss believes that in the Plato, Farabi intentionally contradicts himself when defining Platonic philosophy; this is done for pedagogic and prudential reasons. What Strauss considers Farabi to attempt in the Plato is, essentially, to teach his readers a valuable lesson; Farabi endeavours to gradually move his more thoughtful readers from an exoteric, salutary position to the “genuinely Platonic view” in need of dissembling, and then away from the true Platonic view to another contradictory, although edifying, definition. On Strauss’s

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84 “Farabi’s Plato,” 11; see also PAW, 12-3.

85 “Farabi’s Plato,” 11-2.

86 Ibid., 12. Strauss’s three definitions of Platonic philosophy in “Farabi’s Plato” are, then, that: (i) philosophy and politics must be practised together for happiness; (ii) that philosophy is not concerned with moral and political subjects. The philosopher contemplates the “science of the beings.” i.e., philosophy involves questioning and contemplating all matters without restraint. Importantly, this alone is sufficient for the philosopher’s happiness; (iii) that philosophy and the royal (or political) art are “coextensive.”

87 Ibid., 12-3: “We certainly cannot assume that the average reader will consider Farabi’s second or central statement his last word on the subject.” That Strauss believes Farabi’s second definition reflects Farabi’s genuine view is indicated at ibid., 25 [Strauss’s italics]: “Happiness consists “in consideratione scientiarum speculativarum” and of nothing else. Philosophy is the necessary and sufficient condition of happiness.” See note 79 above.

88 Ibid., 13.

89 Ibid., 7, 14.
account, Farabi nests the truth about philosophy amongst two politically useful definitions. The reason for Farabi’s reticence in expressing his true view of Platonic philosophy is, according to Strauss, that Farabi’s true opinion is that philosophy is not constrained by popular opinions, including the doctrines of revealed religion. Aware of the fate of Socrates, Farabi dissimulated his true views so that he did not endanger himself, compromise the respectability of philosophy, or undermine religious doctrines that served immediate pedagogic, social, and political purposes. Strauss’s claims require believing, of course, that Farabi considered himself at risk of persecution. We are led to believe that Farabi wrote his text fearing that what had happened to Socrates in ancient Greece might also happen to him in a medieval Islamic society. Yet, as discussed in Chapter 4, there are several reasons why Strauss’s claims about persecution in medieval Islamic societies are difficult to accept.

In order to support the contention that Farabi truly viewed Platonic philosophy as being above “moral or political subjects,” that philosophy was a “theoretical art” that supplied “the science of the essence of each of all beings,” Strauss refers to the comprehensive nature of the title of Farabi’s work. While Farabi indicates in the title of the Plato that he will discuss all the “parts” of Plato’s philosophy “from beginning to end,” Strauss asserts that neither Plato’s doctrine of Ideas nor doctrine of immortal soul are mentioned (however, as noted below in Section 5.4, Strauss’s position requires qualification). Questioning this “silence,” Strauss asserts that it is within the Plato that Farabi, writing from behind the mask of a “commentator,” “silently rejects Plato’s doctrine of immortality, or rather he considers it an exoteric doctrine.” As additional proof that Farabi considers Plato’s doctrine of the immortal soul exoteric, Strauss

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90 Ibid., 15. See notes 79 and 87 above.

91 Ibid., 17n41: “But divine worship is not rejected by Farabi either who, explicitly following Plato, considers conformity with the laws and beliefs of the religious community in which one is brought up, a necessary qualification for the future philosopher.” Note also Strauss’s claim that “Farabi speaks, not of religious worship, but of the cognitive value of religion.” Strauss understands Farabi as being “in full agreement with Plato’s view.”

92 Strauss considers Farabi an atheist and a “true Platonist” as he believed, on Strauss’s reading, that philosophy was not to be constrained by religious doctrines. Yet, as Farabi and other Islamic Aristotelians contend, religion expresses truth in symbolic form (see Chapter 4). In accordance with this view, Farabi openly questioned, or reinterpreted, Islamic views about creation and the afterlife – doctrines viewed as allegorical or metaphorical – so that they were closer to the “science” of Farabi’s age. Furthermore, it was common in Farabi’s age for religious doctrines to be supplemented by Greek philosophy; consider, for example, the rational theology of the Mu’tazilah who, at least at one point, enjoyed considerable political support. It is also relevant to mention that there are several hadiths (Prophetic sayings and traditions), including those from al-Tirmidhi (d. 892) and Ibn Majah (d. 886), imploring Muslims to seek knowledge.

notes that at the beginning of the *Aims*, Farabi writes of the distinction between the “happiness of this world in this life” and “the ultimate happiness in the other life.”94 In the *Plato*, the middle and “least exposed part of a tripartite work” (the *Aims*), Farabi drops the distinction between the “two beatitudes.”95 This all indicates, Strauss believes, that Farabi considers humankind’s true aim as attaining happiness in the present world, rather than believing in an afterlife.96 As was argued in Chapter 3 (Section 3.4), to reject certain Platonic doctrines appears to mean, on Strauss’s reading, to simultaneously reject their Islamic equivalents. Strauss insinuates a connection between what he understands as Plato’s “exoteric” doctrines, particularly the notion of an immortal soul, and central Islamic beliefs.

As further support for his thesis that Farabi considers Plato’s doctrine of Ideas and doctrine of the immortal soul to be exoteric, Strauss refers to a statement from the medieval philosopher Ibn Tufayl (d. 1186). According to Ibn Tufayl, in a commentary on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Farabi had written that happiness was only available in one’s mortal life and that all other notions were “ravings and old women’s tales.”97 Strauss also draws attention to the fact that in Farabi’s *Enumeration of the Sciences*, a work in which Farabi “speaks in his own name” and not as a commentator, the religious sciences (*fiqh* and *kalām*) are described as only “corollaries to political science.”98 This alleged demotion of religion, Strauss believes, indicates Farabi “merely wants to say” that:

[R]eligion, i.e. revealed religion, i.e. the revealed law (the *shari’a*) comes first into the sight of the philosopher as a political fact: precisely as a philosopher, he suspends his judgment as to the truth of the super-rational teaching of religion. In other words, one might believe that Farabi’s description of the religious sciences is merely a somewhat awkward way of making room for a possible revealed theology as distinguished from natural theology (metaphysics). Every ambiguity of this kind is avoided in the *Plato*. Through the mouth of Plato, Farabi declares that religious speculation, and religious investigation of the beings, and the religious syllogistic art do not supply

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94 “Farabi’s *Plato,*” 15.

95 “Farabi’s *Plato,*” 15; similar commentary comes at *PAIC*, 13.

96 See note 87 above.

97 “Farabi’s *Plato,*” 16; *PAIC*, 14. Compare with *Symposium* 206c-207a; *Laws* 721b-d. Strauss comments on immortality and Plato’s *Laws* at *AAPL*, 63. Farabi’s text on the *Nicomachean Ethics* is discussed in Chapter 6.

98 “Farabi’s *Plato,*” 16; *PAIC*, 13.
the science of the beings, of which man’s highest perfection consists, whereas philosophy does supply it.99

This is, perhaps, one of Strauss’s most direct statements on the politics of a “true Platonist.” As has already been discussed in Chapters 2-4, Strauss’s reading holds that Farabi adhered to a rationalistic atheism (i.e., a philosophy that believed in “human wisdom only”), and that Farabi wished to use revealed religion in order to actualise regimes similar to those described by Plato. Our next task is to explore in greater detail the political program Strauss attributes to Farabi.

5.3 The Platonic Political Paradigm in “Farabi’s Plato”

As noted, Strauss understands Farabi to express, albeit from “between the lines,” that true philosophy transcends moral and political subjects. As philosophy is, on Strauss’s reading, all that is required for happiness, Strauss writes that a philosopher can achieve happiness in almost any regime. He writes:

Farabi makes it absolutely clear that there can be, not only philosophers, but even perfect human beings (i.e. philosophers who have reached the goal of philosophy) in imperfect cities. Philosophy and the perfection of philosophy and hence happiness do not require – this is Farabi’s last word on the subject – the establishment of the perfect political community: they are possible, not only in this world, but even in these cities, the imperfect cities. But – and this is the essential implication – in the imperfect cities, i.e. in the world as it actually is and as it always will be, happiness is within the reach of the philosophers alone: the non-philosophers are eternally barred, by the nature of things, from happiness. Happiness consists “in consideratione scientiarum speculativarum” and of nothing else. Philosophy is the necessary and sufficient condition of happiness.100 [Strauss’s italics]

99 “Farabi’s Plato,” 16-7. Strauss repeatedly claims in “Farabi’s Plato” that philosophy leads to man’s “highest perfection.” See ibid., 14-5, 23-4, 28-9. Philosophy is defined as being in the “highest interests of mankind” at PAW, 18.

100 “Farabi’s Plato,” 25. The terminology Strauss uses is inconsistent with his readings of Plato and Farabi. As discussed further in Chapter 6, Farabi could write of “perfection” as the goal of philosophy was, for him, conjunction with the transcendent Active Intellect. Similarly, Farabi could believe in the possibility of “perfect” regimes given that he understood human beings to have a tehs to aspire to, and that regimes could promote the attainment of this tehs (as noted in Chapter 4, Section 4.2).
Strauss believes Farabi indicates that, no matter their political circumstances, happiness is within the reach of the philosophic few alone. Farabi’s statements seem, then, “tantamount to closing the very prospect of happiness to the large majority of men.” Furthermore, as Farabi does not consider the type of regime the philosopher lives in as impacting on the philosopher’s ability to attain happiness, Farabi appears to discourage philosophers, or exempt them, from becoming politically engaged. Yet, that said, Strauss interprets Farabi as suggesting that philosophers should undertake political reform for “reasons of philanthropy.” Strauss contends that Farabi’s accounts of Socrates’s life indicate that political action may also help preserve true philosophy.

To elaborate, Strauss understands Farabi to convey that a Platonist should gradually attempt to actualise the political paradigms (or elements drawn from the political paradigms) supplied by Plato in the Republic and Laws. This is done in order to establish the conditions necessary for the non-philosophers’ temporal, or worldly, happiness. In Strauss’s words:

For reasons of philanthropy, if for no other reason, Farabi was compelled to show a possibility of happiness to men other than philosophers. Therefore, he distinguishes between perfection and happiness: he asserts that philosophy, being a theoretical art, supplies indeed the science of the beings and thus man’s highest perfection, but has to be supplemented by the right way of life in order to produce happiness. More generally expressed, he accepts to begin with the orthodox opinion that philosophy is insufficient to lead man to happiness. Yet, he makes clear, the supplement to philosophy which is required for the attaining of happiness, is supplied, not by religion, or revelation, but by politics. He substitutes politics for religion. He thus lays the foundation for the secular alliance between philosophers and enlightened princes.

According to Strauss’s reading, the philosopher can attain happiness and perfection. For “philanthropic” reasons, the philosopher is compelled to help non-philosophers attain happiness in their present, worldly, life. By joining forces with political powers, the philosopher undertakes a program to bring about the happiness of others. Strauss’s comments can be interpreted in two ways. The philosopher can be understood as helping his or her own people attain happiness due to patriotism or “love of one’s own,” as Strauss suggests in The City and Man. Alternatively, Strauss can be understood as reading Farabi (albeit strangely) as recommending the global rule of philosophers. This position appears to be implied when Strauss writes:

101 “Farabi’s Plato,” 22.

102 Ibid., 22. See note 33 above.

103 “Farabi’s Plato,” 22; compare with P.4W, 15.

104 See note 33 above.
He [e.g. Farabi] adds the clause that philosophy produces the happiness, not only of the philosophers, but of all other human beings as well. This extravagantly philanthropic remark would have to be dismissed as a sheer absurdity, or its text would have to be emended, if it were meant to be final; for how can the mere fact that a single philosopher is in existence somewhere in India have the slightest influence on the happiness, or misery, of people living in the remotest parts of Frankistan who have nothing in common with him or philosophy? The statement that philosophy produces the happiness of all human beings merely serves the purpose of indicating the whole extent of the difficulty facing Farabi; it thus paves the way for a provisional solution and therewith indirectly for the final solution. The provisional solution is that philosophy produces the happiness of the philosophers and of all those non-philosophers who are actually guided by philosophers. In other words, the required supplement to philosophy is, not just the royal art, but the actual exercise of the royal art by philosophers within a definite political community.105 [Italics added]

If the “provisional solution” is the rule of philosophers in one part of the world, and this produces happiness for those people (i.e., the non-philosophers in that location), then the “final solution” appears to be the global rule of philosophers. The global rule of philosophers means that happiness is created for “all human beings” through politics. Does this mean that philosophers create myths and political narratives to interest, distract, or subdue, the non-philosophers? Strauss’s comments on what the rule of philosophers entails exactly are vague and enigmatic, and it is not entirely clear from “Farabi’s Plato” alone what Strauss is suggesting. Nevertheless, Strauss clearly does understand Farabi as recommending political action that involves the displacement of religion and religious ideals. As Strauss contends:

He [e.g. Farabi] calls the virtuous city emphatically “an other city”: he thus indicates that he means to replace, not simply religion in general by politics in general, but “the other world” or “the other life” by “the other city”. “The other city” stands midway between “this world” and “the other world”, in so far as it is an earthly city indeed, but a city existing, not actually, but only “in speech”.106 [Italics added]

Strauss does not describe the characteristics of Farabi’s “virtuous” or “other” city explicitly; as mentioned, Strauss’s remarks on this topic are enigmatic. It is notable though that the defining feature of the “virtuous city” appears to be the rule of philosophy.107

105 “Farabi’s Plato,” 22-3.


107 “Farabi’s Plato,” 24-5. Strauss claims that Farabi “takes it for granted that there could be a plurality of virtuous cities, thus excluding the belief in a single true, or final, revealed religion.”
According to Strauss, the philosopher engages in politics for reasons other than bringing about the happiness of the non-philosophers. As noted above, Strauss believes Farabi’s text the *Plato* also signals, albeit from “between the lines,” that if philosophers were to abstain from attempting any political reform whatsoever, then there could be significant detrimental consequences for philosophy itself. Strauss understands Farabi to be implying that if a philosopher does not seek to change imperfect cities, the likelihood of a philosopher suffering a fate similar to Socrates’s increases.108 Strauss writes that Farabi presents two separate accounts of Socrates. In Farabi’s first account, Socrates is depicted as “merely a moral philosopher,” a man who, as noted earlier, openly investigated political and moral subjects.109 As the moralizing Socrates never looked beyond the alternatives of complying with society’s rules or challenging them directly, Socrates became a victim of the non-philosophers. This first account of Socrates is, in other words, one in which Socrates is depicted as a philosopher who did not recognise the need for exercising caution when among non-philosophers.110 Farabi’s second account of Socrates, Strauss writes, points towards Plato’s “correction of the Socratic attitude, or with Plato’s attitude.”111 Strauss asserts:

[Plato] considered philosophy an essentially theoretical pursuit, and therefore he was not a moralist: his moral fervor was mitigated by his insight into the nature of beings; thus he could adjust himself to the requirements of political life, or to the ways and opinions of the vulgar. In his treatment of the subjects in question, he combined the way of Socrates with the way of – Thrasymachus. While the intransigent way of Socrates is appropriate in the philosopher’s dealings with the political élite only, the less exacting way of Thrasymachus is appropriate in his dealings with the vulgar and the young.112

We must recall here that Strauss understands Farabi to believe that Platonic philosophy is, in truth, only concerned with moral and political themes as such a concern is required for

108 At “Farabi’s *Plato*,” 26: “For the philosopher necessarily lives in political society, and he thus cannot escape the situation created by the naturally difficult relations between the philosopher and the non-philosophic citizens, “the vulgar”: the philosopher living in a society which is not ruled by philosophers, i.e., the philosopher living in any actual society, is necessarily “in grave danger”. Farabi intimates his solution by speaking of the twofold account which Plato gave of Socrates’ life.” See also *ibid.*, 9-10; *P.AW*, 17-8.


110 *Ibid*.


“exoteric” reasons. And, as noted, Strauss considers Farabi to insinuate that given philosophy—
or contemplation—alone leads to the philosopher’s happiness and perfection, a Platonist can
happily exist within perfect or imperfect cities. That said, however, the differences between
Farabi’s accounts of Socrates (i.e., first as a moralist and then as a theoretical seeker who
dismelled his continuing interest in the “science of the essence of each of all beings”) suggests
that Plato had, in light of his teacher’s fate, acknowledged the benefits of philosophers engaging in
gradual political reform. Strauss believes Farabi shows that a philosopher must moderate his or
her public speech (as the Platonic Socrates did) rather than attempting to openly challenge the
prevailing morality or the commonly accepted social and political ideals. Farabi’s account of Plato
indicates that:

The “revolutionary” quest for the other city [i.e. Socrates’s quest] ceased to be a necessity [i.e. for
Plato]: Plato substituted for it a much more “conservative” way of action, viz. the gradual
replacement of the accepted opinions by the truth or an approximation to the truth. The
replacement, however gradual, of the accepted opinions is of course a destruction of the accepted
opinions. But being emphatically gradual, it is best described as an undermining of the accepted
opinions. For it would not be gradual, if it were not combined with a provisional acceptance of
the accepted opinions: as Farabi elsewhere declares, conformity with the opinions of the religious
community in which one is brought up, is a necessary qualification for the future philosopher.
The goal of the gradual destruction of the accepted opinions is the truth, as far as the elite, the
potential philosophers, is concerned, but only an approximation to the truth (or an imaginative
representation of the truth) as far as the general run of men is concerned.113

On Strauss’s reading, Farabi indicates that Platonic philosophers instigate political reform that is
measured and continuous rather than “revolutionary.”114 Potential philosophers, as the “elite,”
are to understand that the “accepted opinions” are being gradually destroyed for the sake of the
“truth.” This “truth” might be that the rule of philosophers is best. The “general run of men” is
not provided with the same “truth.” The non-philosophers are instead guided towards accepting
a regime that “approximates” or is an “imaginative representation” of the “truth.”115 Perhaps
Strauss means that, as the philosophers cannot rule openly, there must be leaders who
“approximate” or “imaginatively represent” the philosophers. There are, then, two points worth

113 “Farabi’s Plato,” 27-8; compare with PAW, 16-7, 137.
114 See Strauss’s comments on Machiavelli’s view of Christianity, and the success of “unarmed prophets,” at TOM,
172-3.
115 The question arises as to what “truth” means precisely in this context. See notes 5 and 83 above.
noting: (i) the philosophers do not rule openly, and (ii) the philosophers attempt to lead suitable others to the highest form of life. As Strauss writes:

We may say that Farabi’s Plato replaces Socrates’ philosopher-king who rules openly in the perfect city by the secret kingship of the philosopher who lives privately as a member of an imperfect community. That kingship is exercised by means of an exoteric teaching which, while not too flagrantly contradicting the accepted opinions, undermines them in such a way as to guide the potential philosophers toward the truth. Farabi’s remarks on Plato’s own policy define the general character of all literary productions of “the philosophers.”

Essentially, what Strauss attributes to Farabi is a quest for political reform and, beyond that, the rule of philosophers. According to the Platonic paradigm Strauss finds in Farabi’s works, the quest for political reform is conducted gradually, partly through the use of exoteric writing. Attributing these goals to a philosopher interpreted by Strauss as an anti-metaphysician is, however, problematic. Farabi does not, according to Strauss’s reading, believe in a transcendent, or objective, truth. Strauss’s use of the term “truth” in “Farabi’s Plato” therefore leads to questions that Strauss leaves unanswered. For example, if Strauss believes that the theoretical “truth” is “deadly” (as was noted in Chapter 1), then it appears that the philosopher can only search for an existential, subjective, “truth.” After all, we are not told what “knowledge” Strauss believes a philosopher can, via phenomenological or ontological investigation, the so-called “science of the beings,” arrive at. While Strauss does not write what the outcome of an ontological investigation is, he certainly implies that the philosopher somehow gains the highest, or most “divine,” theoretical perspective possible. This leads to questioning why, on Strauss’s reading, Farabi thought the philosophers were best suited to rule. I return to this theme in Chapter 6.

Furthermore, Strauss does not inform us as to the specifics of Farabi’s politics. Strauss omits a discussion of how the non-philosophers were to be made “happy” in Farabi’s apparently secular regime. The issue of how Farabi could, in the absence of belief in absolute standards, identify a “perfect” or “imperfect” regime is also not dealt with. Ultimately, Strauss’s commentary on Farabi is often – presumably for “esoteric” reasons – highly enigmatic.

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Having outlined some of the philosophical and political matters Strauss leaves unresolved in “Farabi’s Plato,” I now wish to document some of the hermeneutic problems with Strauss’s reading of Farabi.

Strauss considers the Plato to provide a key insight into Farabi’s esoteric doctrine and, by describing Farabi as a “true Platonist,” Strauss implies that Farabi’s text also informs us of Plato’s secret teaching. In order to award such importance to the Plato, Strauss refers to a large volume of texts. Strauss’s hermeneutic procedure can be understood as follows. First, Strauss notes the esoteric character of Maimonides’s Guide of the Perplexed. From this point, Strauss’s second hermeneutic manoeuvre is to examine Maimonide s’s letter to Samuel ibn Tibbon in the hope of finding a “hint” as to how to interpret Maimonides’s esoteric Guide of the Perplexed. In light of what is asserted in Maimonides’s letter, Strauss then progresses – his third step – to Farabi’s text the Political Governments. Given that adequate editions of Farabi’s works, including the Political Governments, are not available, Strauss then proceeds – his fourth hermeneutic move – to Farabi’s text the Aims. The fifth stage of Strauss’s hermeneutic strategy is the claim that the Plato (the central section of Farabi’s Aims) is to be awarded primacy on the grounds that Farabi seemingly follows the Platonic model of presenting philosophy and politics together. Strauss’s sixth hermeneutic step is to inform readers that an esoteric analysis of the Plato is justified. Finally, the seventh component of Strauss’s hermeneutic strategy is the assertion that a number of medieval philosophic texts need to be referred to in order to adequately understand Farabi’s Plato. Strauss draws upon, notably, Ibn Tufayl’s account of Farabi’s commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics. Strauss also refers to several of Farabi’s works, including the Enumeration of the Sciences, the Political Governments, the Harmonization of Plato and Aristotle, On the Perfect State, and the Philosophy of Aristotle.

With Strauss’s hermeneutic procedure in mind, we must ask whether the following proposition from Strauss is problematic:

Farabi avails himself [sc. in the Plato] then of the specific immunity of the commentator, or of the historian, in order to speak his mind concerning grave matters in his “historical” works rather than in the works setting forth what he presents as his own doctrine. This being the case, one has to lay down, and scrupulously to follow, this canon of interpretation: Apart from purely philologic and other preliminary considerations, one is not entitled to interpret the Plato, or any

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117 It may be argued that Strauss overemphasises the importance of the Plato, Strauss’s reading implies that, had the Plato been lost to history, we might never have been able to understand the esoteric philosophy of Plato and the falsafa. The value Strauss assigns to the Plato is rendered all the more problematic given the complicated hermeneutics Strauss has to use to justify analysing that text in the context of Maimonides.
part or passage of it, by having recourse to Farabi’s other writings. One is not entitled to interpret the *Plato* in the light of doctrines, expounded by Farabi elsewhere, which are not mentioned in the *Plato.* It goes without saying that in case the teaching of the *Plato* is in conflict with the teachings of the *Tahṣīl, The political governments, The enumeration of the sciences* and so on, the presumption is in favor of the teaching of the *Plato.* Compared with the *Plato,* all these other writings are exoteric. And if it is true, as Farabi intimates by reminding us of the teaching of the *Phaedrus* concerning the deficiencies of writing as such, that all writings as such are exoteric, we have to say that the *Plato* is merely less exoteric than the other works indicated and therefore that every hint however subtle which occurs in the *Plato,* deserves to take precedence over the most emphatically and the most frequently stated doctrines of his more exoteric works.\(^\text{118}\)

Strauss states, with conviction, that “one is not entitled to interpret the *Plato,* or any part or passage of it, by having recourse to Farabi’s other writings.” In Strauss’s view, the *Plato* is to be understood and analysed independently of Farabi’s other works. However, Strauss himself violates this hermeneutic principle in both how he arrives at, and how he interprets, the *Plato.* When interpreting Farabi, Strauss relies heavily on texts other than Farabi’s *Plato.* Strauss refers to Farabi’s corpus generally, to Maimonides’s texts, and to Ibn Tufayl’s comments in *Hayy ibn Yaqẓan.* This constitutes, I believe, more than what Strauss refers to as “purely philologic” or “other preliminary considerations.” There is also the pressing matter of why Strauss, at the very beginning of “Farabi’s *Plato,*” emphasises the *Plato* based on Maimonides’s authority.\(^\text{119}\) In his letter to ibn Tibbon, and perhaps indicative of the philosophical currents of his time,\(^\text{120}\) Maimonides

\(^{118}\) “Farabi’s *Plato,*” 19. Based on this passage, it would be fair to claim that Strauss violates the hermeneutic dictum he publicly endorsed, i.e., that, when engaging with premodern texts, contemporary scholars are not to suppose that they understand “old” authors better than the author understood themselves (see RPCR, 207-8; WPP, 67-8). Strauss asserts the *Plato* is Farabi’s most important work, with little evidence from Farabi or Maimonides to back his claim. See note 117 above.

\(^{119}\) As Strauss writes (“Farabi’s *Plato,*” 1), Maimonides refers ibn Tibbon to Farabi’s *The Political Governments,* a book in which, according to Strauss (“Farabi’s *Plato,*” 16), Farabi “pronounces more or less orthodox views concerning the life after death.”

\(^{120}\) Brague writes that medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophers, writing from within “an Arab cultural world largely dominated by Aristotelianism,” considered Plato “simply a poor writer who says just about the same thing as Aristotle, but says it less well.” Brague, *The Law of God,* 114; 115-8. Although similarly to Strauss, Brague notes that the *falasifa* might have preferred Plato’s *political* writings as Plato refers to philosopher-legislators and divine laws. Concerning Maimonides’s preference for Aristotle, see Pines, “Translator’s Introduction,” *The Guide of the Perplexed,* bccv. Gutas notes that the second half of the ninth century Graeco-Arabic translation movement saw Aristotle’s works and commentaries (as well as Neoplatonic works) awarded greater primacy than the Platonic dialogues: “On the Arabic side, neglect of the Platonic material most probably has to do with the rise of Aristotelianism as represented by Abu-Bīr Mattā and his student al-Farābī...” Gutas, *Greek Thought Arabic Culture,* 186.
largely dismisses Plato’s works, preferring Aristotle’s instead. In “Farabi’s Plato,” Strauss does not mention this important aspect of Maimonides’s text. The letter to ibn Tibbon reads:

The discourse of Plato, the teacher of Aristotle, in his books and compositions, contains enigmas and parables and are also superfluous for an intelligent man; for the books of his pupil Aristotle cover all that was composed previously. His opinion – I mean to say, the opinion of Aristotle – is the ultimate of human opinion, save for those who received the divine overflow, so that they attained the rank of prophecy, which is the highest rank.121

Strauss follows the same practice in “Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi,” a text in which Strauss also appears to selectively quote from Maimonides’s letter; Strauss does not mention that Maimonides considered Aristotle a higher authority than Plato.122 In the same letter to ibn Tibbon, Maimonides writes:

In general, I say to you: Do not concern yourself with books on logic except for what the philosopher Abu Nasr al-Farabi composed: for all that he wrote in general, and in particular his *Principles of the Existent Beings* [i.e. the *Political Regime*], is wheat without chaff, and one should pay attention to his words and understand what he says, for he was exceedingly wise. Likewise, Abu Bakr Ibn al-Sa‘igh [Ibn Bajja] is a great philosopher, and his words and compositions – *all are straightforward to the intelligent man, and right to those who have attained knowledge* [Prov 8:9].123

Maimonides recommends Farabi’s text the *Principles of the Existent Beings* (*al-Siyāsa al-Madaniyya*), the text Strauss refers to as the *Political Governments* and Farabi’s works on logic. Maimonides does not refer specifically to Farabi’s *Plato* or Farabi’s other “political” texts. While Strauss might assert that Maimonides made disparaging statements about Plato, and only draws attention to one of Farabi’s works, for reasons of secrecy (i.e., in order not to lead unworthy readers towards Farabi’s *Plato*), we are then left with an interpretation entirely at odds with – that is, one completely unverified by – our textual sources. It could be asserted that one cannot criticise Strauss for failing to identify a better series of esoteric hints as “precise” (my term) hints are disallowed according to the very parameters of exoteric writing. However, as mentioned in Chapter 4, one could respond by arguing that, if we are to interpret texts in the way Strauss does,


one could arrive at a range of interpretations. These interpretations would not necessarily validate any aspect of Strauss’s reading. Nevertheless, the key point here is that the hermeneutics Strauss uses to establish, or justify, the *Plato* as being the key text for understanding Farabi, the *falsifa* more generally, and Maimonides, are deeply flawed.

A further difficulty with Strauss’s reading is the actual teaching he believes Farabi is imparting. Strauss claims that Farabi viewed Plato’s otherworldly or metaphysical doctrines, including the notion of an immortal soul, as “exoteric,” or “utterly erroneous.” Strauss also writes that Farabi “suspends his judgement as to the truth of the super-rational teaching of religion,” and that he only attributed to religion a political value. As was discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, Strauss considers Farabi’s loyalties lay with a speculative “science of the beings,” although this “science” does not seem to have included speculation about supernatural or suprasensible beings. This speculative “science” was concealed by a “Platonic political philosophy,” understood as an exoteric concern with political and moral matters; political considerations – the differences between human beings – meant that this speculative “science of the beings” had to remain esoteric. Despite this reading of Farabi and the *falsifa* however, Strauss mentions in the closing pages of “Farabi’s *Plato*,” or in the article’s footnotes, a number of matters that cast doubt on his interpretation. Importantly, these statements come largely after Strauss has already drawn his conclusions.

For example, one matter that casts doubt on Strauss’s interpretation – a matter Strauss mentions after having offered his principal arguments – is as follows. Farabi’s *Philosophy of Plato* is the middle section of a tripartite work referred to as the *Falsafat Aflāṭūn wa Arisṭālīs* (*The Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* or *The Aims of the Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*). The first section of the *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* is the *Tahṣīl al-saʿāda* (*The Attainment of Happiness*). The second, or middle, section is the *Falsafat Aflāṭūn* (*Philosophy of Plato* or *Plato*). The third section is the *Falsafat Arisṭālīs* (*Philosophy of Aristotle*). As mentioned, Strauss writes that Farabi does not discuss metaphysical themes in the *Plato* (the middle section of Farabi’s text, and the section Strauss believes is the most important). Strauss claims this perceived omission is highly significant. However, Strauss also asserts that Farabi does not discuss metaphysics when summarising Aristotle’s philosophy in the third section of the same text:

> We observed already the deep silence of the *Plato* about the *voi*, the *substantiae separatae*, as well as about the “ideas.” We have to add that in his treatise on Aristotle’s philosophy, which is the sequel to his *Plato*, Farabi does not discuss Aristotle’s metaphysics.\(^{125}\)

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\(^{124}\) “Farabi’s *Plato*,” 15, 19.

\(^{125}\) “Farabi’s *Plato*,” 35. Curiously, Strauss’s statement references Farabi’s text on Plato, not Aristotle (*ibid.*, 35n94). Strauss’s (and Mahdi’s) claim that Farabi is, in the *Falsafat Arisṭālīs*, sceptical about the possibility of metaphysical knowledge, is debatable. See note 53 above.
Strauss’s comment leads us to ask whether Farabi’s esoteric teaching is revealed in the *Plato*, the central part of Farabi’s three-part text; this is the interpretation Strauss suggests in the majority of “Farabi’s Plato.” Alternatively, are we to understand that Farabi’s esoteric teaching is revealed in both the central part (on Plato) and the outer part (on Aristotle) of the *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*? (However, as Altmann has argued, in the context of Mahdi’s interpretation of Farabi’s *Falsafat Afsatul*, it is problematic to assign to Farabi’s text on Aristotle disbelief in the possibility of metaphysical knowledge). Strauss clearly believes the central section of Farabi’s *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* is the most important, and considers Farabi’s second of the alleged three definitions of Platonic philosophy his true belief. (As noted above, Strauss discusses what he contends to be Farabi’s esoteric doctrine in the centre of “Farabi’s Plato.”) Strauss unmistakably views the centre of Farabi’s *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* (the *Plato*) as the locus of the esoteric doctrine, yet he implies that Farabi’s disbelief in the possibility of metaphysical knowledge is also evident in the outer, third, section of the text. If Farabi also reveals his esoteric doctrine in the third, outer, section of his text (the section on Aristotle’s philosophy), then Strauss contradicts his own claim that the centre of Farabi’s text (the section on Plato) is the location of the esoteric teaching, couched amidst exoteric outer layers. Furthermore, Strauss’s claim regarding the importance of Farabi’s central definition of philosophy in the *Plato* is also problematic; what Strauss presents as Farabi’s second, and central, definition of Platonic philosophy is, in the ordering of the *Plato*, Farabi’s first.

Another issue is that, as we have seen, Strauss attributes great significance to Farabi’s “silences” on religious matters in the *Plato*. However, Strauss acknowledges that Farabi does refer in the *Plato* to “spiritual things,” “divine things,” “divine desires,” and “divine love.” At stake is Strauss’s claim that Farabi is “silent” about, and therefore disbelieves in, anything related to metaphysics or theology. As Strauss writes:

> But does he [sc. Farabi] not explicitly mention, if only once, “spiritual things”, thus admitting quite unequivocally the existence of substantiae separatae? Our first answer has to be that spiritual

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126 See Strauss’s comments on the importance of the “central passage,” at *P-AW*, 24-5. Concerning Altmann’s criticisms of Strauss and Mahdi, see note 53 above.

127 Given how Strauss orders the definitions of philosophy in “Farabi’s Plato,” Farabi’s second, or central, definition of Platonic philosophy becomes the “theoretical art which supplies ‘the science of the essence of each of all beings.’” Yet Farabi provides this definition in the opening sections of his work. See *Falsafat Afsatul*, sec. 2; *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* (trans. Mahdi), 54 (sec. 3). Note Strauss’s reference to the second section of Farabi’s text at “Farabi’s Plato,” 8n20.

128 “Farabi’s Plato,” 35; see also *WFP*, 149.
things are not spiritual beings. Yet, someone might retort, there cannot be spiritual things, if there are no spiritual beings, just as there cannot be a δαίμονας, if there are no δαίμονες. However this may be, it suffices to state that Farabi’s only mention of spiritual things occurs in a summary of popular opinions, or at any rate of opinions of men other than Plato, about a certain subject. In the same context, he uses four times the term “divine things”. In three out of the four cases, he attributes the use of the term to people other than Plato. The only remark in which he mentions “divine things” while relating Plato’s views, refers to the desire for divine things which is distinguished from bestial desire. He does not explain what these divine things are. I am inclined to believe that they are identical with the science of the beings and the right way of life. He mentions in the same context divine desires and divine love, evidently understanding by them passions or qualities of human beings; somewhat later, he calls these passions or qualities “praiseworthy and divine”, thus indicating that “divine” does not necessarily refer to the superhuman origin of a passion e.g., but may simply designate its excellence.

The question is whether Farabi is indeed “silent” in the Plato on metaphysical and theological themes. Strauss makes a number of concessions to this particular aspect of his reading (although, as mentioned, he does so after he has stated his conclusions regarding Farabi’s esoteric doctrine). Regarding Farabi mentioning “divine” and “spiritual” things, Strauss refers specifically to one section of the Plato. In that section, Farabi describes how the “man who is resolved to become a philosopher or a statesman and achieve something good ought to be, and how he ought to be possessed by what he seeks, not think of anything else, and revel in it.” What Farabi summarizes are the ways in which Plato considered human beings to become inspired. Farabi writes:

Others associate the poets [šu‘arā’] who are skilful in making poems with spirits [rāḥāniyyāt: spiritual things or beings] as the cause of their enchantment and madness. These and similar things belong to praiseworthy enchantment and madness. He [i.e. Plato] investigated the praiseworthy seduction, revelling, rapture, enchantment, and madness, when it is divine, in what manner it occurs, in which soul [nafs] it occurs, and in which man it occurs. He mentioned that he who praises this is convinced that it occurs in the man whose soul is divine: that is, the man who craves and longs for divine things [ilāhiyyāt]. He began to investigate the character of this soul [nafs]; and how some revelling, seduction, rapture, madness, and enchantment is praiseworthy and divine, while some is blameworthy and human […] He investigated all of these things,

129 Strauss cites the Apology, 27b3-c3. At Apology 27c: “Is there anyone who believes in supernatural matters and not in supernatural beings [daemonia]?”

130 “Farabi’s Plato,” 35.

131 Farabi, Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle (trans. Mahdi), 61-2 (sec. 25); Falsafat Aflūṭun, sec. 22.
distinguished bestial [bāhīmī] revelling from revelling in divine things, and investigated the kinds of enchantment and revelling in virtuous things, which are associated with divine causes. And he explained that philosophy, statesmanship, and perfection [kamāl] cannot be achieved unless the soul [nafs] of the man who seeks them revels in them and in the end that he seeks; neither the philosopher nor the statesman [madār] can perform his activity with which he seeks the virtuous end unless that very revelling continues to be in him.132

Strauss’s argument is that despite the occurrence of terminology in the Plato that translates as “divine,” “soul,” “perfection,” “virtuous,” “spiritual things,” and so on, Farabi can be considered “silent” on metaphysics and theology. Yet this claim clearly appears untenable. Strauss might assert that the Arabic term “nafī” – arguably the only term relevant in this discussion that has a debatable meaning – can be understood as denoting the “self,” rather than the “spirit” or the “soul.” However, it is worth noting that this term appears in other works by Farabi. For example, in Mabādī ārā’ abl al-madinat al-fāḍilah (On the Perfect State), Farabi uses the word “nafī” (nafsuhu: “his soul”) in the context of considering immortality and a human telos; the term clearly can carry metaphysical overtones when it appears in Farabi’s works. As Farabi writes in Mabādī ārā’ abl al-madinat al-fāḍilah:

His soul [sc. the perfected human being, the philosopher] is united as it were with the Active Intellect [wa-takūn nafsuhu ka-l-muttaḥida bi-l-‘aql al-fa’āl].133

Concerning Farabi’s “silence” on metaphysical and theological doctrines, we must also consider the following. Strauss asserts that there is a “deep silence” from Farabi on nous (νοῦς) and noi (νοῖ).134 As has been discussed, Farabi is interpreted by Strauss as an anti-metaphysician entirely skeptical of the truth claims of revealed religion; according to Strauss, part of Farabi’s esoteric teaching is that Plato’s doctrine of the immortal soul (or “the other life”) is “utterly erroneous.”135 Platonic and Islamic metaphysics are, on Strauss’s reading, rejected en bloc. Strauss

132 Ibid.

133 Farabi, Mabādī ārā’ abl al-madinat al-fāḍilah, 244-5. Farabi uses “nafī” in a similar way at ibid., chapter 13, sec. 5. See also Walzer’s “Commentary” at ibid., 409-10. Note also the appearance of “nafsuhu” at Quran 50:16; the term is translated as “his soul,” “his self,” “his mind,” and “his ownself.” The most common translation of the term in that particular verse of the Quran is “his soul.” For Farabi’s use of the word “nafī” in the context of conjunction, see Radtke, “How Can Man Reach the Mystical Union,” in The World of Ibn Ṭufayl: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Ḥāfiẓ ibn Yaqẓān (ed. Conrad), 172-3.

134 “Farabi’s Plato,” 16.

135 Ibid., 19.
Strauss’s esoteric Farabi

mentions however, in footnotes, that Farabi refers to noēin,\(^{136}\) to the “corpus animatum,”\(^ {137}\) to the “root verb of sharī‘a (shara‘a),”\(^ {138}\) and, in two sections of the Plato, to “belief.”\(^ {139}\) It is also of interest that the Arabic manuscript of the Plato begins with the basmala (Islamic invocation), a point Strauss overlooks.\(^ {140}\) Furthermore, Farabi uses the Arabic term ma’nā (idea)\(^ {141}\) in the Plato. The word (ma’nā) occurs when Farabi writes of the “idea” of what is “good” or “gainful” and when Farabi writes of the “idea of the philosopher” and “idea of the prince and statesman.”\(^ {142}\) Although this Arabic term is ambiguous, it can carry metaphysical connotations.\(^ {143}\)

Farabi’s terminology in the Plato, as documented above, indicates that he is not completely “silent” on metaphysical or theological matters. A reader sympathetic to Strauss might respond that Farabi’s few references to metaphysical and theological themes, as outlined above, do not suffice for undermining Strauss’s interpretation. On a sympathetic reading, we

\(^ {136}\) Ibid., 16n38.

\(^ {137}\) Ibid.

\(^ {138}\) Ibid., 16n40. One might ask why Strauss expects Farabi to discuss the sharī‘a in the context of Plato.

\(^ {139}\) Ibid.

\(^ {140}\) Farabi, *Falsafat Aflāṭūn*, 1. Bismillāhi rahmāni rahimī [in the name of God, most gracious, most merciful].

\(^ {141}\) *Ma’nā* refers to the meaning, idea, or essence of a word, whereas *lafẓ* means a “vocable,” whether a word, expression, or term. The medieval philosophic meaning of *ma’nā* has been described as “a concept or idea (often in the Platonistic sense), the ‘essence’ of a thing.” See *Encyclopædia of Arabic Literature*, Volume 2, 504; see also ibid., 461-2. Walzer remarks (“Commentary,” *Mabādī‘ ara‘ abd al-madīnat al-fāṣīlih*, 342) that it is “hopeless to attempt an adequate translation of *ma’nā*. Greek equivalents are *noēma*, *prāγma*, *lekton*. Still, *ma’nā* plausibly translates to a “thought” or the “thing” being thought about. The meaning of *noēma* is “what is thought about” while *prāγma* and *lekton* are viewed as synonyms in Stoic terminology; in general terms, *prāγma* and *lekton* mean the “thing signified by the sound, meaning.” On this point, see C.H.M. Versteegh’s discussion in *Greek Elements in Arabic Linguistic Thinking*, 182-6. See note 143 below.

\(^ {142}\) Farabi, *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* (trans. Mahdi), 58, 60 (sec. 14, 19, 21); *Falsafat Aflāṭūn*, sec. 12, 16, 18.

\(^ {143}\) Colmo also draws attention to this facet of the Plato, and the ensuing difficulty it has for Strauss’s reading. Colmo notes that Farabi uses the term (*ma’nā*) in the *Attainment* to denote the “single intelligible idea of man” and that Farabi also uses the term in the Plato. Colmo offers commentary as to why Strauss’s thesis that there is “no explicit reference to the ideas in the Plato” remains “defensible” (Colmo, *Breaking With Athens*, 74-7). For Farabi’s reference to “Man as a single intelligible idea,” see Farabi, *Taḥṣīl al-Sa‘āda*, 52; *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* (trans. Mahdi), 27. While Farabi’s use of the term *ma’nā* raises several interpretive issues, the Plato, like many texts, could be dissected indefinitely. The broader question is why we should attempt to interpret Farabi, and the *falsafīḥa*, and Maimonides, via Strauss’s “esoteric,” and therefore debatable, interpretation of a single section of a single book.
ought to expect – as Strauss does – that Farabi’s text on Plato will include lengthy discussions on God, the immortal soul, and the Ideas; we ought to approach Farabi’s medieval text anticipating that he will make a serious attempt at harmonizing Platonic doctrines with Islamic beliefs. The response to such a criticism would be to note how Strauss divorces Farabi from his historical context, and therefore misreads Farabi. By overlooking Farabi’s historical circumstances, Strauss appears to have approached Farabi’s texts with a poor understanding of medieval Platonism. If we take heed of Farabi’s historical circumstances, however, we are able to understand why Farabi’s text on Plato appears as it does. Writing summaries of Plato’s works was, during Farabi’s age, by no means a strange practice. Farabi was, after all, influenced by a school of Christian Aristotelianism; Farabi may well have viewed Plato, as other thinkers of that age did, as a thinker supplanted by Aristotle. Furthermore, for all we know, Farabi might have been using incomplete or inaccurate translations of Plato’s works. It is also worth emphasising that Farabi clearly has a preference for a Neoplatonic/Aristotelian metaphysics, as is witnessed in Mabadi’ ārā’ abl al-madinat al-fādilah. As Farabi’s use of Aristotelian and Neoplatonic doctrines makes apparent, the focus of philosophy was clearly not a pure, original and pristine, Platonism. Ultimately, Farabi’s alleged lack of interest in certain Platonic doctrines can be explained by the fact that Plato’s philosophy – as with ancient Greek philosophy in general – had been modified and developed over time. Kraemer supports precisely this contention: he draws attention to the many problems caused by Strauss’s ahistorical reading:

Strauss presented Alfarabi as an innovator who studied Plato politically. He wrote as though Alfarabi had the dialogues before him without considering the millennium and a third that had elapsed between Plato and Alfarabi. He took Alfarabi’s Plato to be the original Plato, but Alfarabi’s Plato had been filtered through a long interpretive tradition. Alfarabi tells us about his intellectual forebears: his Christian teachers in Aleppo and Harran and the ultimate starting point in Alexandria. For instance, Strauss put great stock in Alfarabi’s omission of the Platonic “Ideas.” Yet by the time of Middle Platonism, the Ideas were either immanent in existing beings or

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144 Plato’s works were generally not translated in full, only summarised. See note 120 above. McGinnis (Avicenna, 9) notes that “[M]ost of the Platonic dialogues were not translated into Arabic, which may perhaps be owing to the high literary and even poetic style of Plato’s writings, which makes it often difficult, if nigh impossible, to capture in translation. Instead, most frequently only philosophical synopses of Plato’s works were available.” Farabi is certainly more interested, for the most part, in Aristotle’s works, and it is noteworthy that Farabi was frequently referred to as al-Mu’ālim al-Thānī (the second teacher) after Aristotle, al-Mu’ālim al-Awwal (the first teacher).

145 Strauss acknowledges this point at “Farabi’s Plato,” 4-5. Although, as already mentioned (see note 59 above), Strauss appears to assume that Farabi had access to complete editions of the Republic, Timaeus, and Laws. See Tamer’s criticisms of Strauss at Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne: Das Verhältnis von Leo Strauss zu Alfarabi, Avicenna und Averroes, 326-7.
thoughts in the mind of God. The dramatic form of the dialogues was dropped in favor of summaries of Plato’s philosophy as we find in Alfarabi’s *Philosophy of Plato*.146

The critical question is why Strauss chooses to interpret Farabi without considering that Platonism had, by Farabi’s age, been radically modified. Strauss dismisses Farabi’s adherence to key Aristotelian, Neoplatonic, and Islamic doctrines, doctrines we find consistently detailed in Farabi’s works. We are to believe that the combination of Aristotelian, Neoplatonic, and Islamic, beliefs generally found in Farabi’s works are merely Farabi’s “silver,” teachings “useful for the ordering of human society,” and that this “silver” hides the “gold”: the esoteric teaching that “conveys” Farabi’s “true beliefs.”147

Upon close analysis, the hermeneutics Strauss uses to preference, and interpret, the *Philosophy of Plato* are problematic. The conclusions Strauss reaches regarding Farabi’s philosophy are therefore suspect. Given the problems with Strauss’s account of Farabi, and given the apparent connection between Strauss’s interpretations of Farabi and Plato, we must ask whether Strauss’s “Platonic political philosophy” is compromised.148 This is one of the themes of Chapter 6.


147 See Strauss’s remarks on Maimonides at *L-4M*, 164, 168.

148 Critics such as Altman (*The German Stranger*, 140, 153, 242-3, 378, 381, 460-4) and Drury (*The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, 170) believe that Strauss intentionally misrepresents Plato and other philosophers. Even if this critical view is dismissed, Strauss’s reading of Plato still has a sizeable difficulty. A comprehensive defense of Strauss’s reading of Plato necessitates claiming that Strauss’s interpretation is not dependent on his (problematic) account of Farabi. Yet, as this Chapter has shown, there clearly are similarities between Strauss’s readings of the two philosophers, and it is certainly notable that Strauss’s major studies of medieval philosophy were conducted prior to writing his texts on Plato. It is also worth mentioning that in Strauss’s most well known articles on Plato in *The History of Political Philosophy* and *The City and Man*, Strauss largely avoids referencing medieval Islamic philosophers. We only find references in *The City and Man to Averroes* (26n30, 27n31, 27n32) in the article on Aristotle’s *Politics*; there are no references to Farabi or Avicenna.
Farabi’s metaphysics

As discussed in Chapter 5, Strauss’s account of Farabi, and the falasifa generally, is heavily reliant on an esoteric analysis of a single text. I have argued that the method Strauss uses to award primacy to Farabi’s text the Falsafat Aflāṭūn (The Philosophy of Plato or the Plato) is questionable. Similarly, the hermeneutics Strauss utilises to interpret Farabi’s Falsafat Aflāṭūn present a number of difficulties. As Farabi’s text appears to have provided Strauss with what he believed were crucial insights into “Platonic political philosophy,” Strauss’s reading of Plato must also be questioned: if there are problems with Strauss’s Farabi, there are problems with Strauss’s Plato.¹

The aim of this Chapter is to complete the analysis of Strauss’s reading of Farabi. To do so, I examine several themes Strauss largely passes over. In Section 6.1, I review some of the relevant components of Farabi’s metaphysical doctrine and his historical circumstances; this discussion helps lay the foundations for understanding Farabi’s view of the afterlife, the topic of Section 6.2. In Section 6.3, I consider the extent of Farabi’s adherence to Neoplatonism. Finally, in Section 6.4, I investigate what Farabi writes about Thrasymachus in the Falsafat Aflāṭūn. I argue that examining each of these themes in detail indicates that the main contention of Chapter 5 – that Strauss’s reading of Farabi and the falasifa is fundamentally flawed – is correct and compelling.

6.1 Farabi as “system-builder”

Farabi was a highly respected philosopher of his age, known to his successors as the “Second Master” or “Second Teacher” (al-Mu’allim al-Thānī) after Aristotle.² To mention only two facts to indicate Farabi’s importance, we see Ghazali refer to Farabi as a key representative of Islamic

¹ The question we return to is whether engaging with Farabi’s texts laid the foundations for Strauss’s later works on Plato. See Chapter 5, note 148.

² Concerning Farabi’s elevated place in the history of Islamic philosophy, see, for example, Netton, Al-Farabi and His School, 1, 92n1; Fakhry, Al-Farabi, 6-7; Mahdi, Al-Farabi, 1.
Aristotelianism. Maimonides, operating from within the Jewish tradition, describes Farabi as “exceedingly wise.” In contemporary scholarship, Farabi is recognised as not only a key exponent of Islamic Aristotelianism, but also as being the “founder” of Islamic Neoplatonism; Farabi was the first thinker to systematically fuse a Neoplatonic emanationist scheme with concepts drawn from Islam.

Farabi was influenced by several intellectual traditions. His text the *Fī ṭuhūr al-falsafa* (On the Appearance of Philosophy) reports that Farabi’s teachers were Nestorian Christians whose intellectual roots lay in the Alexandrian neo-Aristotelian tradition. It is notable that Farabi apparently broke with the Syrian Christian tradition of only reading the first parts of Aristotle’s *Organon*. Farabi discusses the history of philosophy in the *Taḥṣīl al-sa’āda* (The Attainment of Happiness). In the *Taḥṣīl*, Farabi writes that philosophy passed from Iraq, to Egypt, to the Greeks, then to the Syrians, and finally to the Arabs. Given what is known about Farabi’s influences, and given what he himself tells us concerning the history of philosophical inquiry, it is difficult to agree with Strauss’s assertion that Farabi was unconcerned with history, started afresh, and discovered “Platonic” philosophy for himself.

Farabi’s philosophy is elaborate; he has been described as a “system builder.” At the beginning of his philosophic system is a First Cause (*al-Sabab al-Awwal*). Farabi believes in

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7 Farabi, “On the Appearance of Philosophy,” in Ibn Abi Usaybi’a, *‘Uyūn al-anbā’*, II, 134-5. An English translation appears in Rosenthal, *The Classical Heritage*, 50-1. See also note 6 above. Importantly, the Alexandrian school’s Aristotelian doctrines had been modified to include Neoplatonic teachings, notably Plotinian emanation. Farabi reports that, for religious reasons (the threat to Christianity), Christian Bishops decided that Aristotle’s works on logic could only be studied up to the first half of the *Analytica Priora*.


9 See Chapter 5, note 65.

ultimate truth as he writes that, through philosophy or religion (religion imitates the truths of philosophy), the citizens of the “excellent” city can, and ought to, know “the First Cause and all its qualities”; the necessary condition of being a ruler of an “excellent” city is revelation from the “real” and “true” (ḥaqq) First Cause. Farabi’s First Cause has similarities with Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover and Plotinus’s concepts of the transcendent One and Nous. The First Cause is understood as that which precedes, or is “prior” to (aquant), every other existence, is the cause of all existence (wujūd), and is perfect, everlasting, unequalled and immaterial. While Farabi’s First Cause emanates (fayḍ, “emanation” or “overflow”) existence like Plotinus’s One, the First Cause is not above thought but is, rather (and similar to Aristotle’s God and Plotinus’s Nous), defined as “intellect and intelligized and thinking.” Following Neoplatonic doctrine, the First Cause emanates a series of Second Causes (incorporeal substances or intellects) which Farabi considers connected, and emanating alongside, the heavenly bodies known in Ptolemaic astronomy. The process of intellects being emanated ends with the tenth intellect, the “Active” or “Agent” Intellect (al-aql al-fa”āl), a concept frequently compared with that implied in Book 3 of Aristotle’s De Anima (the nous poiētikos). Farabi’s transcendent Active Intellect acts as the link between thought and the transcendent First Cause.

11 See Farabi, Mahādī’ al-a’rā ahla al-madīnatin al-fāḏīlah (ed. Walzer), chapters 1, 2 (see especially sec. 9), 15 (sec. 10-1), 17 (sec. 1). I have used Mahādī’ al-a’rā ahla al-madīnatin al-fāḏīlah as a general guide to Farabi’s philosophy as the text is considered one of Farabi’s last works (see Walzer’s comments at ibid., 1, 20). Nasr (Islamic Philosophy from its Origin to the Present, 138) considers the text Farabi’s “definitive masterpiece.” Concerning Farabi’s view on revelation, see note 33 below. Farabi’s discussion of the ruler (ra’i) of the excellent city clearly has Platonic overtones.

12 Fakhry (Al-Farabi, 3) notes that Farabi comes close to Aristotle when he considers God as “thought thinking itself.” This can be compared against Plotinus’s “the One” that is “utterly perfect above all” and therefore above thought (see, e.g., Enneads 5.4.1; 6.9.2). As Netton comments (Al-Farabi and His School, 45-6): “For al-Farabi’s perfect epistemological paradigm is that in which the Being who knows (al-’āqil), the intellect (al-’aql) and the intelligible or that which is known or comprehended (al-Maqūl) are merged indisissibly and ineluctably in the One who is, of course, God himself.” On this theme, see Farabi, Mahādī’ al-a’rā ahla al-madīnatin al-fāḏīlah (ed. Walzer), 71. It is Farabi’s doctrine of emanation that makes him a Neoplatonist (Fakhry, Al-Farabi, 78). The possibility Farabi considered emanation an Aristotelian doctrine is discussed in Section 6.3 below.


14 See note 12 above; Metaphysics, 1074b34-5; Enneads, V.5.

15 For in-depth commentary on Farabi’s emanationist doctrine, see Netton, Allah Transcendent, chapter 3; Netton, Al-Farabi and His School, chapter 2; Fakhry, Al-Farabi, chapter 6; Davidson, Alfarabi, Averroes, and Averroes, on Intellect, chapter 3.
between the imperfect sublunary world, the world of becoming or corporeal bodies, and the eternal and perfect celestial worlds.\textsuperscript{17}

As discussed in Chapter 4, Farabi’s Aristotelian and Neoplatonic cosmological hierarchy provides the basis for his political thought. As seen in \textit{Mabādi’ ārā’ abl al-madinat al-fādilah}, the first ruler (\textit{al-ra’is al-awwal}), the person who has received revelation (\textit{waḥy}), is the worldly representative of the First Cause. Importantly, Farabi accepts (albeit with a decisive Neoplatonic modification) Aristotle’s teleological metaphysics. Farabi views the human \textit{telos} as attaining “conjunction” (\textit{ittiṣāl})\textsuperscript{18} with the Active Intellect.\textsuperscript{19} Farabi writes how upon reaching perfection, the “soul is united as it were with the Active Intellect” [\textit{wa-takūn nafsuhu ka-l-muttaḥida bi-l-‘aql al-fa‘āl}].\textsuperscript{20} Several similar passages are found in Farabi’s works, including in his text on Aristotle’s philosophy (\textit{Falsafat Aristiṣṭābī}), the text that directly follows the \textit{Falsafat Aflātūn} (\textit{Philosophy of Plato}).\textsuperscript{21} As O’Meara has contended, Farabi’s idea of conjunction with the Active Intellect can be understood as corresponding with Neoplatonic notions of divination: the philosopher

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} See Davidson, \textit{Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect} 14, 46-7; Fakhry, \textit{Al-Farabi}, 73. Walzer notes that the statement in Aristotle’s \textit{De Anima} (Book 3, Section 5) cannot be viewed as the sole influence for Farabi’s notion of the Active Intellect as that passage is only a few lines and there is no identification there with a divine mind. Walzer believes the Neoplatonist Marinus of Sichem may have influenced Farabi. Marinus had called the Active Intellect “daemonic” and “angel-like.” See Walzer, “Commentary,” \textit{Mabādi’ ārā’ abl al-madinat al-fādilah}, 403-4.

\item Farabi, \textit{Mabādi’ ārā’ abl al-madinat al-fādilah}, chapters 3 & 4.

\item On this theme, see Walzer, “Commentary,” \textit{Mabādi’ ārā’ abl al-madinat al-fādilah}, 442-3.

\item An interesting comparison can be made here between Farabi’s view and Aristotle’s \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, Book 10, Section 7, 1177b27-1178a1. As Fakhry notes, Farabi’s departure from Aristotelianism towards Neoplatonism is due to the fact that Farabi writes of attaining conjunction with (or proximity to) the Active Intellect as opposed to the philosophic life being one of contemplation. The other divergence from Aristotle is that Farabi (and Avicenna) write of the Active Intellect as moving the sublunar world and as the “giver of forms” (\textit{wāhib al-ṣuwar, dator formarum}). See Fakhry, Al-Farabi, 75, 153.

\item Farabi, \textit{Mabādi’ ārā’ abl al-madinat al-fādilah}, 244-5.

\item For a useful overview of Farabi’s statement on conjunction, see Radtke, “How Can Man Reach the Mystical Union,” in \textit{The World of Ibn Tufayl: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Hayy Ibn Yaqẓān} (ed. Conrad), 172-3. Radtke documents thirteen statements from Farabi about conjunction. At \textit{Falsafat Aristiṣṭābī} (ed. Mahdi), 128: “\textit{wa-anna l-‘aql al-insānī idhā balagha aqṣā kumāṭhi ša‘a qarišan fi jawharī bi-nis jawbar hādīh l-‘aql fa-summiya hādīh l-‘aql al-fa‘āl}” [“If the human intellect reaches its highest perfection, then in its substance it draws near to the substance of this [other] intellect which is called the \textit{intellectus agens}?”].
\end{itemize}
experiences a transcendent connection or union (in Farabi’s case, with the Active Intellect), and
then returns to the “providential role” of guiding non-philosophers.22

To elaborate on Farabi’s idea of conjunction, we can note that he understands the human telos – “perfection” (kamāl) or “felicity” (sa’āda) – entails knowledge of all the “intelligibles” or “rational concepts” (ma’qūlāt). Human beings attain perfection and seek their way back to the Divine through a process of gaining comprehensive theoretical knowledge. As noted by Davidson, it was plausible for Farabi to believe such knowledge was attainable, given that the medieval world was considered finite and knowable.23 Farabi distinguishes between immaterial, eternal, and transcendent intelligibles, and intelligibles that exist in matter.24 Farabi’s differentiation between intelligibles that are “abstracted” from matter and intelligibles that are comprehended by rational intuition appears to point to a “synthesis” of Aristotle’s immanent forms and Plato’s transcendent Ideas.25

Farabi describes three stages of intellect: the material (or potential), the actual, and the acquired. The human intellect is “actualised” by the transcendent Active Intellect, it is at this point that the human intellect becomes aware of this higher power.26 Farabi believes knowledge

22 O’Meara, Platonopolis, 191-2. O’Meara (ibid, 10) compares this aspect of Neoplatonism with Plato’s allegory of the cave; the philosopher transcends to the Idea of the Good, then descends to help the non-philosophers. Plotinus can be read as suggesting something akin to this at Enneads 6.9.7. See note 33 below.

23 Davidson, Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellec, 49.

24 Farabi, Mabādi’ ārā’ abl al-madinat al-fāḍilah, chapter 13. Farabi’s views are seen as influenced by Alexander of Aphrodisias (see Walzer, “Commentary,” ibid., 401-2). In terms of the intelligibles that exist in matter, Farabi mentions stones, plants, and “everything which is itself body or in a material body and matter itself…” (ibid., 199). Farabi writes of the Forms within God, or “in his self,” (fi ḍabīrīh) at Kitāb al-jamʿ bayna raʿay al-ḥakimayn Aflāṭūn al-ilāhī wa-Aristāṭēs in L’harmonie entre les opinions de Platon et d’Aristote (trans. Najjar/Mallet), 147. See Bashier’s commentary at The Story of Islamic Philosophy, 68. Bashier considers Farabi’s position Neoplatonic.

25 Walzer “Commentary,” ibid., 402. See also Fakhry, Al-Farabi, 73.

26 Farabi writes that all human beings begin with a “material” or “potential” intellect; at this level, the intellect is “potentially” capable of receiving “imprints of the intelligibles” (Mabādi’ ārā’ abl al-madinat al-fāḍilah, 199). The importance of the transcendent Active Intellect is to begin, or initialise, the thinking process in human beings, taking a person from a “potential” to an “actual” intellect; at this stage, the connection between particular material things can be made through understanding there are universal “intelligibles.” Farabi compares this process to the effect sunlight has on vision; we have the “potential” to see, however we require the light of the sun (or another source) to actually see material, or physical, things. This is, seemingly, Platonic (see ibid., chapter 13, sec. 2. As being Platonic, see Walzer, “Commentary,” ibid., 403). Farabi writes that through “illuminating” the human mind and initialising the thinking process, the Active Intellect becomes known to that being (ibid., chapter 13, sec. 2). Following the intellect’s initial illumination, Farabi writes of the intelligibles that are “common to all men” becoming known. These common immaterial intelligibles include the basic principles of mathematical science, ethics, physics, and metaphysics (ibid., chapter 13, sec. 3). In listing the types of first intelligibles that become known, Davidson (Alfarabi, Avicenna, and
of the common intelligibles — the basic principles of mathematical science, ethics, physics, and metaphysics — are provided by the transcendent Active Intellect. These principles are used to develop one’s rational capabilities (or rational intuition) and moral character. This development is undertaken in the pursuit of perfection or felicity and, ultimately, in order to attain immortality.\(^{27}\)

Walzer has noted that this doctrine of Farabi’s represents a deviation from Islamic teachings about predestination. Farabi understands immortality as dependent on an individual’s actions; he views human beings as responsible, and accountable, for their own behaviour.\(^{28}\) This relates to Farabi’s moral philosophy; he believes voluntary good actions assist one in attaining felicity, or the “ultimate perfection” (or entelechy) \([\text{al-istikmāl al-akhīr}]\), while evil (\([\text{sharr}]\)) actions hinder this end.\(^{29}\) The ultimate goal of developing the intellect is, as mentioned above, conjunction. In Farabi’s words:

\[\text{[The intelligibles are supplied to him only in order to be used by him to reach his ultimate perfection, i.e. felicity [saʿāda]. Felicity means that the human soul [nafs] reaches a degree of perfection in (its) existence where it is in no need of matter for its support, since it becomes one of the incorporeal things and of the immaterial substances and remains in that state continuously for ever. But its rank is beneath the rank of the Active Intellect [dān rūḥat al-ʿaql al-faʿāl].}}\(^{30}\)

Farabi views the source of knowledge for all human beings — including both philosophers and prophets — as the Active Intellect, hence the comparison made between the Active Intellect and the archangel \(\text{Jibrīl (Gabriel), the angel who, according to Islamic belief, delivered revelation to the prophet Muhammad.}}\(^{31}\) Farabi’s belief that religion helps communicate the philosophic truth in “symbolic” form, a view he attributes to the “ancients,” corresponds with the idea that there is

\(^{27}\) Farabi, \(\text{Mabādiʿ arāʿ abl al-madinat al-fāḍilah,}\) chapter 13; chapter 15, sec. 11, chapter 17, sec. 1. Note also Farabi’s comments at \(\text{al-Siyāsah al-Madaniyya (ed. Najjar), 49-51; The Political Regime, MPP, 36-7.}}\)


\(^{29}\) Farabi, \(\text{Mabādiʿ arāʿ abl al-madinat al-fāḍilah,}\) chapter 13, sec. 5-6.

\(^{30}\) Farabi, \(\text{Mabādiʿ arāʿ abl al-madinat al-fāḍilah,}\) chapter 13, sec. 5. See also \(\text{ibid.,}\) chapter 16; Walzer, “Commentary,” \(\text{ibid.,}\) 443.

\(^{31}\) Concerning the Holy Spirit, the \(\text{rūḥ al-qudus,}\) see Chapter 4, note 133.
one absolute source of knowledge, one source of truth.32 There is a difference, however, in Farabi’s view, between the type of knowledge available to the philosopher and the type available to the prophet. The perfected philosopher’s knowledge is superior on the grounds that the philosopher comes to know the intelligibles via the rational faculty of his soul. In contrast, the prophet is delivered imitations of the intelligibles via the imaginative faculty; given the prophet’s “imaginative” capabilities, the prophet is able to communicate conceptual truths to the masses.33 Farabi’s contention about a human being’s ability to access, or be guided by, divine knowledge, has led some scholars to consider him as having “Shi’ite leanings.”34 This point is sometimes supported by reference to Farabi’s patron, Sayf al-Dawla, whose political sympathies lay with the Shia. Gutas has suggested that speculating about Farabi’s religious loyalties should be avoided given the lack of historical information available.

As noted, Strauss asserts that it is tenable to believe that Farabi was, in terms of his esoteric doctrine, a thinker divorced from Neoplatonism and Islam. In what follows, I question whether this claim is tenable. With an overview of Farabi’s philosophy now in place, one of the


33 Farabi understands revelation as an emanation from the First Cause to the Active Intellect to the perfected human being. His view of revelation relates to his Aristotelian understanding of the soul. He writes that the soul has five main qualities: nutritive, sensory, imaginative, appetitive, and rational. Divine revelation (waḥy) comes to a philosopher based on his or her perfected imaginative and intellectual abilities. In contrast, visionary prophecy (nubuwwa) comes to the prophet based on his or her perfected imaginative abilities. A prophet receives imitations of the intelligibles whereas the philosopher attains “an intellect of divine quality” (Mabādi’ ārā’ ahl al-madīnat al-fāḍilah, chapter 15, sec. 10). Walzer describes waḥy as “identical with the supreme insight of the metaphysician” (ibid., 332). See Mabādi’ ārā’ ahl al-madīnat al-fāḍilah, chapter 10; chapter 14, sec. 9 (Farabi writes here of the highest capability of the imaginative faculty; it receives “imitations” of the transcendent intelligibles); chapter 15, sec. 10-1. Hawi writes (Islamic Naturalism and Mysticism, 55): “One cannot expect al-Farabi to consider the Prophet as a logician or a philosopher; for the life and character of the Prophet do not support such a contention. Nor can one place the Qur’anic verses among the results of the discursive reasoning of the mind […] For one thing, with his Aristotelian background al-Farabi would not and could not accept miracles; he always tried to seek causal factors behind appearances. His interpretation of prophecy in terms of the imaginative faculty is not as simple and naive as Ibn Tufayl, in his passing remark, makes it seem. Prophecy occupies an important, logical, and acceptable place in al-Farabi’s philosophic system among the other faculties and powers of the soul.”

34 Netton, Al-Farabi and His School, 3-4; see also Walzer’s “Introduction” and “Commentary,” Mabādi’ ārā’ ahl al-madīnat al-fāḍilah, 2, 4; 441-2. The topic relates to the Shi’a belief that divinely appointed Imams could understand the esoteric meaning of the Quran. See, however, Gutas’s biographical comments regarding Farabi (Gutas, “Biography” in “Abu Nasr Farabi,” Encyclopaedia Iranica). Gutas states speculation regarding Farabi being an Imami Shi’i (or Mahdi’s speculation that, to explain Farabi’s Platonism, we must consider Farabi to have studied in Constantinople) is “speculative in the extreme and…best avoided.”
key aspects of Strauss’s interpretation of Farabi can be examined: Farabi’s apparent disbelief in an afterlife.

6.2 Was Farabi’s esoteric teaching disbelief in an afterlife?

As noted in Chapters 3-5, Strauss asserts that Farabi did not believe in any doctrine concerning human immortality. Although Strauss specifically refers to Farabi disagreeing with Plato’s doctrine, Strauss appears to conflate Platonic, Islamic, and medieval Neoplatonic-Aristotelian views of the afterlife. Strauss does not claim that Farabi denied one but accepted another.

In order to advance his thesis concerning Farabi’s disbelief in an afterlife, Strauss refers to an account of Farabi’s commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* provided by Ibn Tufayl in *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*. The reason why Strauss refers to an account of this Farabian text is due to the fact that Farabi’s commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* is no longer extant. We only have reports of this text available to us. The relevant section of Ibn Tufayl’s *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* reads as follows:

As to the books of Abu Nasr [Alfarabi] that have reached us, the majority are on logic. The ones that deal with philosophy proper are plagued with doubts. For example, he affirms in the *Virtuous Religion* that the souls of the wicked are doomed after death to infinite suffering for an infinite time. Then he declares in the *Political Regime* that they dissolve into nothingness and that only the virtuous and perfect souls survive. Then in his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he describes an aspect of human happiness and affirms that this is achieved only in this life and in this very world. He then adds a remark whose meaning can be summed up as follows: all that is said contrary to this is senseless jabber and tales told by old women [ḥadhayān wa-khurāfāt ‘ajā’iz]. A doctrine like this leads all men to despair of God’s mercy, and places the wicked and the good in the same category since, according to this doctrine, all men are destined for nothingness. This is a slip that cannot be rectified, and a false step that cannot be remedied. This, aside from his declared disbelief in prophecy, namely, his assertion that it is the exclusive property of the imaginative faculty; and not to mention his preference for philosophy over prophecy, and many other things into which we need not now go.

35 On this theme, see the discussion in Chapter 3, Section 4; Chapter 4, Sections 1, 2; Chapter 5, Section 2.

36 “Farabi’s Plato,” 16; P.AIF, 14.

37 Concerning Farabi’s lost texts, see Fakhry, *Al-Farabi*, 52-3. Attempting to ascertain Farabi’s final views on a given subject is difficult as several of his texts have been lost, and there is no adequate chronology of his works.

38 Ibn Tufayl, *Hayy the Son of Yaqzan*, MPP, 140; *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* (ed. Gauthier), 13-4. If this was Farabi’s esoteric doctrine, Ibn Tufayl, a fellow philosopher, did his best to disclose it.
Ibn Tufayl castigates Farabi for having held – and reported – diverse ideas regarding the afterlife. That said, Ibn Tufayl overlooks the fact that the majority of Farabi’s statements on the afterlife are similar; Farabi continually writes of the existence of an Active Intellect, an Intellect that is connected to his “First Cause.”

In addition to Ibn Tufayl’s polemical account, Ibn Bajja (Avempace) and Averroes also provide us with details of Farabi’s now-lost commentary. It is noteworthy that Strauss does not directly quote from Ibn Bajja’s, or Averroes’s, account. Furthermore, Strauss does not refer to Maimonides’s brief mention of Farabi’s commentary. In his Guide of the Perplexed, Maimonides’s short statement concerning Farabi’s lost text does not relate any heterodox views as having been expressed.

In Ibn Bajja’s account of Farabi’s lost commentary, he suggests, contrary to Ibn Tufayl, that the idea Farabi considered the afterlife an “old women’s tale” was a falsely attributed view. As Davidson has noted, a pertinent question is what Ibn Bajja means when he writes that Farabi made the remark “at his first reading” or “at first reading” the Nicomachean Ethics. Does this suggest Farabi had, upon initially reading Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, interpreted the text as

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39 Regarding Ibn Tufayl’s attack against Farabi, see Hawi’s remarks at Islamic Naturalism and Mysticism, 54-6. Radtke (“How Can Man Reach the Mystical Union,” The World of Ibn Tufayl: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Hāfiẓ Ibn Yaqūn (ed. Conrad), 173-4) documents Farabi’s various views on conjunction and the afterlife; Radtke notes that Farabi’s formulations are “inconsistent.” However, “inconsistent” or not, we find, in so many of Farabi’s texts, claims regarding an Active Intellect and the possibility of conjunction.


41 Maimonides, Guide of the Perplexed, III sec. 18, 476.

42 Concerning Farabi’s lost commentary and the medieval controversy that seems to have surrounded this text, I am indebted to Davidson’s careful research (references noted below) on Maimonides and the falsafīya.

43 Ibn Bajja, Rasā’il Falsafīyyah li-Abī Bakr Ibn Bājjah (ed. Alawi), 197. For commentary, see Davidson, “Maimonides on Metaphysical Knowledge,” in Maimonidean Studies, Vol. 2, 56-9. Davidson notes several difficulties with Ibn Bajja’s account, including that it is “not written with care” and that the work might not actually belong to Ibn Bajja.

44 “Maimonides on Metaphysical Knowledge,” 57. See also Davidson, Alfarabi, Aristotle, and Averroes, an Intellect, 71:

Ibn Bajja mentions unnamed interpreters who read Alfarabi’s Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics as denying an afterlife. For his part, Ibn Bajja rejects the interpretation, although it is uncertain whether he takes issue with the interpretation as such or with the supposition that the Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics represented Alfarabi’s final stand on the subject.
indicating that any notions of an afterlife (such as those proposed in Islamic doctrine) were “old women’s tales”? Had Farabi then altered his view in some way? Ibn Bajja’s commentary presents another difficulty as he writes that Farabi’s text contains “attributed” statements, and that Farabi had the “desire to advance a censorious refutation of them.” Also noteworthy is the point that, according to Ibn Bajja, Farabi had written in the commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the purpose of society was to allow, or facilitate, people in developing their intellect. Such a remark raises the question whether Farabi had – despite whatever views were expressed in his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* regarding the afterlife – continued to believe that the purpose of human beings was intellectual perfection. What is interesting is that Ibn Bajja’s statements on Farabi’s lost commentary conflict with those provided by Ibn Tufayl. Importantly, Ibn Bajja’s account does not overtly suggest that Farabi disbelieved in the possibility of a transcendent Active Intellect.

Averroes also writes on Farabi’s commentary, however it is unknown whether he had immediate access to Farabi’s text. Davidson has mentioned the possibility that Averroes was working from Ibn Tufayl’s and Ibn Bajja’s reports. In one of Averroes’s accounts, he relates Farabi’s “old women’s tales” comment; however, he then proceeds to note that Farabi had written of the transcendent Active Intellect in the commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Farabi had, according to Averroes, maintained belief in a metaphysical Active Intellect and had, significantly, retained the belief that human perfection came through obtaining maximum knowledge in the theoretical sciences. Averroes relates that Farabi had deduced that, should the...

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47 On this theme, see Davidson, “Maimonides on Metaphysical Knowledge,” 59; Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect*, 73.

48 Ibid.


50 Averroes, *Epistle on the Possibility of Conjunction*, 108; Davidson, “Maimonides on Metaphysical Knowledge,” 60-1. Note also Averroes’s claim at *Long Commentary on the De Anima of Aristotle* (trans. Taylor), 346: “[I]n his [i.e. Farabi’s] *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics* he seems to deny that there is conjoining with the separate intelligences. He says that this is the opinion of Alexander and that it should not be held that the human end is anything but theoretical perfection. Ibn Bajjah, however, expounded his own account and said that his opinion is the opinion of all Peripatetics, namely, that conjoining is possible and that it is the end [for human beings].”
human intellect “conjoin” with the Active Intellect, the human intellect would become indestructible. According to Aristotle, anything generated was destructible. There was, then, a logical contradiction.\textsuperscript{51} Averroes writes that Farabi’s skeptical remarks towards an afterlife had been made following Farabi’s failure to conjoin with the Active Intellect.\textsuperscript{52} Farabi had, though, according to Averroes’s commentary, continued to believe that perfection came as a result of the acquisition of knowledge, including knowledge of the theoretical sciences. Farabi had also maintained belief in a transcendent Active Intellect.  

In light of the evidence provided by Ibn Tufayl, Ibn Bajja, Averroes, and Maimonides, Davidson suggests that Farabi’s lost commentary “recognized the existence of at least one nonphysical substance, the transcendent active intellect.” Furthermore:

The accounts of Ibn Tufail and Averroes concur in the attribution to the Commentary of the sentiment about immortality’s being an old wives’ tale. In Averroes’ account, the Commentary on the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} based its rejection of the possibility of conjunction and human immortality on grounds that had nothing to do with the limitations of human science; the grounds were the Aristotelian rule that what is generated cannot become indestructible. Moreover, according to Averroes, the Commentary on the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, like Alfarabi’s earlier works, regarded perfection in the theoretical sciences – which would ordinarily include the science of metaphysics – as the goal of human life. According to a similar, although more guarded report in the Ibn Bajja text, the conclusion of the lost Commentary represented the true goal of the state as helping citizens to develop their intellect.\textsuperscript{53}

Davidson raises a crucial point directly applicable to Strauss’s reading of Farabi. Farabi might well have continued to believe in a transcendent Active Intellect despite not believing in human immortality. Disbelief in conjunction, or disbelief in Plato’s or Islam’s notion of an afterlife, does not necessitate disbelief in the possibility of metaphysical knowledge, including the possibility of revelation or prophecy.\textsuperscript{54} After all, the evidence is, as Davidson writes, “too thin to make a


\textsuperscript{52} Averroes, \textit{Drei Abhandlungen über die Conjunction}, 46.

\textsuperscript{53} Davidson, “Maimonides on Metaphysical Knowledge,” 61. See also Davidson, \textit{Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect}, 72-3.

\textsuperscript{54} See Davidson, “Maimonides on Metaphysical Knowledge,” 61-2. Davidson criticises Pines’s view of Maimonides. At \textit{ibid.}, 62.
confident judgement about what Farabi in fact said in the Commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*.” Stroumsa reaches a similar conclusion; Stroumsa believes Farabi’s and Maimonides’s positions align:

[T]here are indications that, at times, Farabi and Maimonides doubted that it was possible for human beings to achieve this conjunction [i.e. *ittiṣṭāl* conjunction with the Active Intellect]. In this context, it is interesting to note Maimonides’ reference to the “old wives tales” (*khurāfāt al-‘ajā’iz*) that fill the heads of people who have pretentions to be the wise of Israel (a clear reference to the Gaon). This is the exact expression that, according to Ibn Tufayl, was used by Farabi in his lost commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he is supposed to have denied the immortality of the soul. Nevertheless, even if Maimonides and Farabi doubted at times the possibility of intellectual conjunction, they still regarded this as the goal to which the philosopher must aspire. [Italics added]

Altmann’s remarks correspond, to some degree, with Davidson’s and Stroumsa’s. Altmann treats Farabi’s alleged comment about the afterlife with caution:

Maimonides may have indeed been influenced, as Shlomo Pines suggests, by the skeptical attitude displayed by al-Farabi in his (lost) Commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* where he is reported

[I]t is wholly conjectural that Maimonides knew Alfarabi’s entire Commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that he, like Pines, discovered a rejection of metaphysical knowledge there, and that he was influenced by the Commentary’s putative rejection of metaphysical knowledge. The suggestion that Alfarabi’s Commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* represented human eudaemonia as political or civic in character is, in a word, uncertain; even if the Commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* took such a position, there is no evidence that the Commentary rejected the possibility of metaphysical knowledge; and there is no evidence that Maimonides knew anything about, and was influenced by, the putative rejection of metaphysics in the Commentary.

Furthermore, at *ibid.*, 67:

[T]hat Alfarabi’s Commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* ruled out the possibility of metaphysical knowledge is conjectural. Pines’ contention that the Ibn Baja text ruled out the possibility of metaphysical knowledge runs counter to what the text expressly affirms.

See also Altmann’s considered analysis of Maimonides’s views at *Von der mittelalterlichen zur modernen Aufklärung*, 90-1.

55 Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect*, 73.

56 Stroumsa, *Maimonides in His World*, 181. Concerning Maimonides’s relationship to the Gaon, see *ibid.*, 18, 121, 166-76.

57 See note 54 above. For Pines’s contention, see “The Limitations of Human Knowledge.”
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to have derided the alleged possibility of conjunction as “old women’s tales”…[However] Maimonides did not go the whole way with al-Farabi’s abjuration of previously held views. Thus, he did not abandon the latter’s well-attested earlier theory of the coming-into-being of the acquired intellect as a stage at which the intellect in actu becomes self-sufficient and qualifies for survival. In fact, it is this theory which is firmly upheld by Maimonides, as we have tried to show.58 [Italics added]

What is notable about these scholars’ comments is that – unlike Strauss – they are hesitant to accept that Farabi definitely59 expressed doubts about the afterlife, and that we can therefore attribute with any certainty to Farabi (and, by implication, Maimonides and other medieval philosophers) complete disbelief in the possibility of metaphysical knowledge and disbelief in the existence of transcendent entities.60 This is not to deny that Farabi may have believed at some point in his career that conjunction with the Active Intellect was not possible, and perhaps Farabi suspected Plato’s accounts of the immortal soul and Islam’s Jannah were edifying myths, symbolic representations of the truth.61 (Although it does not appear surprising, in my view, that a philosopher like Farabi – who claims religion symbolically communicates truth – would reject literal interpretations of Islam’s conception of the afterlife). Nevertheless, even if Farabi denied the possibility of an afterlife entirely, if he truly did not believe in Platonic and Islamic conceptions of the afterlife or in the possibility of conjunction, it is not obvious that we need to connect this denial to a wholesale rejection of the Neoplatonic system he presents, or that we must believe Farabi was entirely doubtful of the possibility of metaphysical knowledge. This appears to be a non sequitur from Strauss: rejecting belief in an afterlife does not necessarily entail a simultaneous rejection of belief in God, a transcendent Active Intellect, and the possibility of divine inspiration. Many of these themes arise again when we consider Strauss’s treatment of Farabi’s Neoplatonism.

58 Altmann, Von der mittelalterlichen zur modernen Aufklärung, 90-1.

59 In addition to Davidson claiming the evidence is “too thin” to confidently judge what Farabi said in the commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Stroumsa writes that Farabi is “supposed” to have denied the possibility of conjunction. Altmann’s language is similar: Farabi is “reported” to have denied the possibility of conjunction. Unlike Strauss, these scholars are reluctant to establish – or justify – a reading of Farabi based on a statement Farabi might have made.

60 On Altmann’s reading (see Chapter 5, note 53 of the present thesis), Farabi did not reject the possibility of metaphysical knowledge.

6.3 Farabi’s politics: Neoplatonic metaphysics versus a “secular” Machiavellianism

As noted in Chapter 5, Strauss believes that we must dismiss Farabi’s Neoplatonic emanationist doctrine as an “exoteric” aspect of his philosophy. While some scholars consider Farabi the “founder”\textsuperscript{62} of Islamic Neoplatonism, or view his works as representing “late antique”\textsuperscript{63} Neoplatonism, Strauss contends such readings are “superficial.”\textsuperscript{64} The first article in which Strauss forcefully advances this view is “Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi” (1936). He asserts that, for some scholars:

[T]he doctrine of Maimonides and the \emph{falasifa} is an Aristotelianism contaminated or corrected by neo-Platonic conceptions. \textit{This opinion is not false, but it is superficial.} As soon as it has been uttered, one is obliged to give an account of the relation between the Aristotelian elements and those of a neo-Platonic origin and to pose this question: Why does the Aristotelianism of Maimonides and the \emph{falasifa} admit of such a great influence from neo-Platonism (or vice versa)? It does not suffice to reply that this amalgam was something brought about before the advent of Muslim and Jewish philosophy – at least not until one proves in advance (as no one has yet done) that the \emph{falasifa} were conquering barbarians who took what they found and not philosophers who were searching.\textsuperscript{65} [Italics added]

Strauss asks why the Aristotelianism of the \emph{falasifa} and Maimonides shows the influence of Neoplatonism. The question itself is problematic as, in other contexts, Strauss emphasizes the influence of Plato on these thinkers. If Strauss is willing to claim that Plato’s works had a sizeable impact on medieval philosophers (which he is), then why must we understand any similarities with Plotinus, or any other “Neoplatonist,” as particularly anomalous or “superficial”? Plotinus writes in the \textit{Enneads} that his work is a \textit{continuation, or explanation,} of Plato’s philosophy; the classification “Neoplatonism” was only made in 18\textsuperscript{th} century scholarship to distinguish several thinkers, like

\textsuperscript{62} See note 5 above.

\textsuperscript{63} O’Meara, \textit{Platopolis}, 12, 185-97.

\textsuperscript{64} Strauss, “Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi,” 5.

\textsuperscript{65} \textit{Ibid.}
Plotinus, from Plato. Why, then, should the “Neoplatonism” of the falasifa and Maimonides be treated with scepticism from the outset?

With that said, we can provide a better answer to Strauss’s question about the falasifa’s Neoplatonism. Farabi – one of the most important and influential philosophers of medieval Islam – describes how he belonged to a philosophic tradition that, as previously mentioned, originated partly in Alexandria. This tradition was comprised of Aristotelian philosophy modified with Neoplatonic concepts. We must keep in mind that Farabi was writing over a millennium after Aristotle’s death; Strauss appears to assume that philosophical traditions, such as Aristotelianism, would not have altered dramatically over time. There is also the fact that at least one major Neoplatonic work was in circulation during Farabi’s age that was falsely attributed to Aristotle: the Uthūlūjiyā Arisṭūṭālīs (Theology of Aristotle). This work was based on books four, five, and six, of Plotinus’s Enneads. Based on this fact, even if we assume that Farabi did not want to be influenced by “Neoplatonism” for some reason (of course, this then raises the question of why we ought to read Farabi with this assumption in mind), Farabi may well have thought some of Plotinus’s doctrines belonged to Aristotle. One can argue that Farabi was influenced by a philosophical tradition and that this tradition included Neoplatonic doctrines (without of course assenting to Strauss’s description of philosophers influenced by prior traditions as “conquering barbarians who took what they found”). Indeed, Farabi tells us who his teachers were, a point that, as noted, runs counter to Strauss’s assertion that Farabi discovered “Platonic philosophy” for himself.

The scepticism towards Farabi’s Neoplatonism as seen in “Some Remarks on the Political Science of Maimonides and Farabi” increases noticeably in Strauss’s later writings. Strauss moves from a general suspicion towards Farabi’s Neoplatonism to the wholesale rejection of this aspect of Farabi’s thought. As noted in previous Chapters, in “Farabi’s Plato,” Persecution and the Art of Writing, and “How Farabi read Plato’s Laws,” Strauss divorces Farabi from Neoplatonism. Strauss insists that Farabi’s use of the Uthūlūjiyā Arisṭūṭālīs (Theology of Aristotle) was entirely disingenuous. For example, in “Farabi’s Plato,” Strauss writes:

66 On the origins of the term “Neoplatonism,” see “The Platonic tradition” in The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus, 21-3. That Plotinus viewed his work as an explanation or continuation of Platonic philosophy is stated directly at Enneads 5.1.8.

67 On the Theology of Aristotle generally, see Adamson, The Arabic Plotinus: A Philosophical Study of the ’Theology of Aristotle’.

68 See notes 6 and 7 above. On Farabi’s “Platonism,” see Chapter 5, note 65.

69 See Chapter 5, note 53. Following Strauss closely, Mahdi (Alfarabi, 34) considers Farabi’s Neoplatonism entirely exoteric. Mahdi offers the following ipse dixit.
To reconcile his [sc. Farabi’s] Platonism with his adherence to Aristotle, he could take three more or less different ways. First, he could try to show that the explicit teachings of both philosophers can be reconciled with each other. He devoted to this attempt his Concordance of the opinions of Plato and Aristotle [sc. Kitāb al-jam’ bayna ra’ayay al-hakimayn Aflāṭūn al-ilāhī wa-Aristāṭālis or Harmonization of the Opinions of the Two Sages: Plato the Divine and Aristotle]. The argument of that work is partly based on the so-called Theology of Aristotle by accepting this piece of neoplatonic origin as a genuine work of Aristotle, he could easily succeed in proving the substantial agreement of the explicit teachings of both philosophers concerning the crucial subjects. It is however very doubtful whether Farabi considered his Concordance as more than an exoteric treatise, and thus whether it would be wise of us to attach great importance to its explicit argument.70

Similarly, in Persecution and the Art of Writing:

It is not impossible that the title “the two philosophies” by which his [sc. Farabi’s] treatise On the Purposes of Plato and of Aristotle was known, intimated the difference between “the two philosophies” or “the two doctrines”: the exterior and the interior. This possibility cannot be neglected in any serious evaluation of the Platonism or rather Neo-Platonism of the falasifa, and in particular of the use which they sometimes made of the Neo-Platonic Theology of Aristotle. It suffices here to remark that Farabi’s Plato shows no trace whatever of Neo-platonic influence.71

The common front marched to embrace the revealed religions with Plotinus (the other-worldly Greek sage who enchanted everyone with his divine speech) in front, followed by the divine Plato, with Aristotle kept in the background, hardly to be seen, and not to be read by students unless prepared for reading him first by Plotinus and then by Plato. It is well known that at some undetermined date a clever fellow decided that Aristotle deserved to become known as the author of certain extracts from Plotinus’s Enneads and Proclus’s Elements of Theology put together under the title of the Theology of Aristotle. Some like-minded students of philosophy (smiling smugly, no doubt, under their beards) thought this a capital idea and attributed to him other Neoplatonic writings also.

Regarding the “Straussian” interpretation of medieval Islamic philosophy, see Fakhry’s review of Paren’s Metaphysics as Rhetoric and McGinnis’s review of the Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy.


71 PAIF, 18.
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Strauss argues that Farabi’s use of the Neoplatonic *Uthūlūjiyā Aristīṭālis* (*Theology of Aristotle*) is suspect and that the *Plato* – the key text, in Strauss’s view, for understanding Farabi and the *falāṣifā* – shows “no trace whatever of Neo-platonic influence.” Strauss’s argument is, then, that Farabi’s *Plato* is, if read “esoterically,” the key text for understanding the medieval philosopher, that the *Plato* shows no sign of Neoplatonic influence, and that Farabi used Neoplatonic doctrines and the incorrectly named *Theology of Aristotle* for exoteric, or political, reasons only. In other words, Farabi’s works containing Neoplatonic doctrines are to be understood as Farabi’s “political” philosophy.

The implication of Strauss’s claim is, I believe, as follows. As noted, Strauss clearly implies that Farabi rejects the existence of transcendent entities and the possibility of metaphysical knowledge; as Strauss writes, it “may be said” that Farabi laid “the foundation for the secular alliance between philosophers and princes friendly to philosophy.” Farabi is therefore to be understood as a forerunner of (Strauss’s version of) Machiavelli. Farabi is a philosopher who, as discussed in Chapters 3–5, does not believe in the truth claims of revealed religion, yet believes, like Strauss’s Machiavelli, in the political use of religion. The proximity of

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72 Ibid. See also Strauss’s comments at ibid., 12. Regarding Farabi’s use of the *Theology of Aristotle*, this is an issue of some controversy given the difference between Farabi’s usual Aristotelian views and the views he attributes to Aristotle in the *Harmonisation*. In the *Harmonisation*, Farabi refers to the *Theology of Aristotle* repeatedly and even quotes directly from the work. See, for example, Farabi, *Kitāb al-jam’ bayna ra’yay al-hakimayn Afsāṭun al-slābi wa-Aristīṭālis* in *L’harmonie entre les opinions de Platon et d’Aristote* (trans. Najjar/Mallet), 131-3, 143-5, 153-5; Farabi, *The Harmonization of the Two Opinions of the Two Sages: Plato the Divine and Aristotle* (trans. Butterworth), in *Alfarabi: The Political Writings*, 155-6 (sec. 56); 161 (sec. 66); 164 (sec. 75). Farabi never refers to the *Theology of Aristotle* as being a falsely attributed work. On this point, see Fahārti, *Al-Farabi*, 152; Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect*, 8. The exact origins of the *Theology of Aristotle* are unknown, although it has been argued that the work originated in the school of al-Kindī (d. 870). On the history of the *Theology of Aristotle* generally, see Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, 125. Some scholars question whether Farabi wrote the *Harmonisation*. See Chapter 4, note 105.

73 See note 69 above. In terms of how Farabi’s Neoplatonism is interpreted, there seems to be no substantial difference between Mahdī’s and Strauss’s readings.

74 *PAW*, 15; “Farabi’s Plato,” 22.

75 Ibid.

76 See *TOM*, 205: “According to Machiavelli, Biblical religion and pagan religion have this in common, that they are both of merely human origin.” At *TOM*, 227-8: “In his usage, a virtuous prince is not so much a prince possessing moral virtue as a prince of strong mind and will who [sic] prudently uses his moral virtue and vice according to the requirements of the situation. A virtuous prince in this sense cannot be religious. In other words, a prince need not be religious and ought not to be religious, but it is most important for him to appear to be religious. Machiavelli does not resist the temptation to say on one occasion that the appearance of religion is more important for the prince than anything else. On the other hand, it seems to be highly desirable that his soldiers should possess fear of God.” At *TOM*, 130-1: “We suspect that Machiavelli sometimes uses “princes” in order to designate superhuman powers. And
Strauss’s Farabi to Strauss’s Machiavelli can be understood by considering the following passages from “How Farabi read Plato’s Laws.” The first concerns the lifespan of religion. Strauss writes:

At the beginning of the third chapter [sc. of Farabi’s Summary of Plato’s Laws] he says: “He [Plato] began to explain that the establishment of laws, their destruction, and their restoration is not a novelty belonging to this time, but something that happened in the past and will happen in the future.” It would seem that Farabi means by “this time” his own time, although not merely his own lifetime. Immediately afterward he summarizes Plato’s natural explanation of the coming into being as well as of the perishing of “the divine law” (cf. 18,14). The mere possibility that Farabi applied to his own time a remark which Plato might be thought to have made about his time would force one to wonder whether he contemplated the application to Islam of what Plato had said about the natural beginning and the necessary perishing of every code.77

There is a lot of conjecture from Strauss in this passage. Nonetheless, if we keep in mind Strauss’s assertion that Machiavelli viewed all religions as being of human origin, and that all religions last between 1,666 to 3,000 years,78 we can see a key resemblance between Strauss’s readings of Farabi and Machiavelli. For both thinkers, religions naturally develop and they necessarily perish. The philosophers, contemplating the eternal, know that religions are mutable and, ultimately, subject to destruction. As Tamer notes, and as was discussed in Chapters 3–5, Strauss attributes to Farabi the “view that religion is a mere political necessity, deprived of any true theological dimension.”79 When it comes to the political use of religion, there appears to be no substantial difference between Strauss’s account of Farabi and Strauss’s interpretation of Machiavelli. Tamer also asserts that Strauss “raises the question of God within the framework of political philosophy, claiming to keep religion only for social purposes and to handle truths esoterically.”80 The fact that Strauss finds remarkable similarities, “between the lines,” in works

vice versa, since he sometimes uses “human beings” for designating the people, common men or the subjects, there is no reason that he should not, on the proper occasion, use “the people” to designate human beings as distinguished from superhuman beings. At any rate, for the same reason for which the peoples are the repository of morality, they are also the repository of religion.” At TOM, 133: “The characteristic theme of the Discourses is the people as the maintainer of established modes and orders, or as the repository of morality and religion.” At TOM, 226: “Machiavelli was not the first man to assert that religion is both untrue and salutary.”

77 WPP, 145.

78 TOM, 32, 142; HPP, 314; SPPP, 226.

79 Tamer, Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne: Das Verhältnis von Leo Strauss zu Alfarabi, Avicenna und Averroes, 326.

80 Ibid., 327.
by philosophers as diverse as Farabi and Machiavelli leads us again to wonder whether Strauss’s esoteric analyses are tendentious: Strauss appears to consistently discover support for his own views (i.e., the political use of religion) reflected in the texts he interprets. This returns us to the question of whether Strauss approaches texts with illegitimate prejudgements. For example, Strauss appears to either want to believe, or intentionally manufacture the view, that there is a “Platonism” that transcends time and place. According to this view, the true Platonist, or true philosopher, always understands philosophy as an investigation of the “beings.” This is an investigation that, at its core, is atheistic as it denies the transcendent, supernatural, and suprasensible. Strauss implies this type of philosophy is the highest good, and that those who practice this philosophy are best suited to rule.

Nevertheless, the question of whether Strauss deliberately attempts to align Farabi with an atheistic philosophy is forcefully emphasized when we consider another key similarity between Strauss’s account of Farabi and Strauss’s interpretation of Machiavelli. Strauss claims that Farabi does not believe in God or a divine power, and that the only thing that influences “human affairs” is chance; this is a key component of Strauss’s reading of Machiavelli. To quote again from “How Farabi read Plato’s Laws,” Strauss writes:

81 As discussed in Chapter 2 of the present thesis, Tamer’s study (Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne: Das Verhältnis von Leo Strauss zu Alfarabi, Avicenna und Averroes) points to the significant problems with Strauss’s reading of medieval philosophy. Tamer asserts, I believe correctly, that Strauss’s study of Farabi is “almost self-descriptive.” Tamer suggests that Strauss accepts a practice he attributes to Farabi: concealing one’s ideas behind “interpretations of previous authors.” Although Tamer does not read Strauss as wilfully distorting prior philosophers, Tamer’s study points towards this possibility. Note Tamer’s highly damaging criticisms of Strauss’s reading of Farabi (summarised at ibid., 326-7, 332-4) and Avicenna (summarised at ibid., 329-32). Furthermore, as was discussed in Chapter 5, Strauss’s claims in “Farabi’s Plato” suggest a philosopher’s “literary productions” are all “exoteric.” See “Farabi’s Plato,” 19-21, 28; see also WPP, 154. As I argue in Chapter 7, there are good reasons for asking whether Strauss deliberately misinterpreted philosophic texts.

82 TOM, 245: “In accordance with the fact that he teaches throughout his two books what man ought to do, he explicitly rejects the opinion of “many” who hold that chance and God govern all things of the world: that opinion is incompatible with the recognition of free will and therewith of prudence and virtue. Chance, he declares, rules half of our actions whereas “our free will” or “we” rule the other half. “Our free will” or “we” seem to be limited only by chance; there seems to be no room for nature or necessity. Chance is irresistible to everything except virtue or the wise use of our freedom; virtue can limit, if not break, the power of chance; virtue can subjugate chance, i.e. it can put chance into its service.” Similarly, at TOM, 221: “Machiavelli therefore judges that one half of our actions is determined by Fortuna whereas the other half, or about the other half, is left to our own determination.” In the same paragraph: “He [sc. Machiavelli] hardly sheds further light on Fortuna, or on chance, by saying at the end of the chapter that Fortuna is like a woman who can be vanquished by the right kind of man. For if Fortuna can be vanquished, man would seem to be able to become the master of the universe. Certainly Machiavelli does not recommend that Fortuna be worshiped: she ought to be beaten and pounded.”
Summarizing *Laws* 709b-c where Plato speaks of the rule of God and Chance over human affairs, *Farabi preserves only the mention of Chance*. Summarizing *Laws* 716a, he fails even to allude to Plato’s opening remark according to which “God holds the beginning, the end, and the center of all beings” and to Plato’s immediately following remark that “God is the measure of all things” (23, 14-16).83 [Italics added]

Very similarly, in the same article, Strauss writes:

> At the beginning of the fifth chapter, which is literally the central chapter, Farabi does exactly the same thing that he did at the end of the fourth chapter: he drops Plato’s repeated and unambiguous reference to the gods (726a1,3; 727a1).84 [Italics added]

These passages help indicate what appear to be Strauss’s questionable assumptions. In order to consider Farabi’s Neoplatonism (alongside his theology and metaphysics generally) as exoteric, Strauss has to, first, interpret Farabi *only* via his texts on Plato. Second, Strauss must imply that the appearance, in the *Talkhīṣ Nawāmīs Aflāṭūn*, of any terms like “soul” (*nafs*), “divine things” (*al-amīr al-ilāhiyya*: divine matters), of the *basmalah* (in the name of God, the most Gracious, the most Merciful, noted at the beginning of the work), and so on, can all be legitimately dismissed (as we must do with the *Falsafat Aflāṭūn*) as Farabi’s “political philosophy.”85 Third, Strauss must suggest that Farabi was working from absolutely complete translations of Plato’s works. That is, Strauss has to intimate that Farabi’s “silences” in the *Talkhīṣ Nawāmīs Aflāṭūn* are entirely intentional and have meaning.86 Tamer has pointed out that this assumption by Strauss, that we can assume Farabi was working from complete Platonic manuscripts, is problematic given that we have no way of knowing the quality of the manuscripts Farabi worked from.87

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83 *IIfPP*, 147-8.


85 Strauss refers to these terms (“soul” and “divine things”) at *IIfPP*, 148. For Farabi’s use of these terms, see *Talkhīṣ Nawāmīs Aflāṭūn* (ed. Gabrieli), 25 (Arabic), 19 (Latin). The *Basmalah* is at *ibid.*, 1.

86 See note 87 below.

87 See the commentary in Chapter 2, Section 3. Tamer writes (*Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne: Das Verhältnis von Leo Strauss zu Alfarabi, Avicenna und Averroes*, 326-7) that Strauss’s approach to Farabi’s *Talkhīṣ Nawāmīs Aflāṭūn* “presupposes” that “Alfarabi knew Plato’s writings in their original form – [a] supposition that cannot be proven.” Tamer labels the “philological” basis of Strauss’s reading of Farabi “weak.” Similarly, Tamer writes (*ibid.*, 330-1) that Strauss takes for granted that, in *On the Divisions of the Rational Sciences*, Avicenna is referring to Plato’s *Laws*. However, there existed “at least three works entitled *Nawāmīs Aflāṭūn*, and two of them are pseudepigraphic.” Tamer concludes that Strauss “did not understand Avicenna as Avicenna understood himself. Strauss betrays his own hermeneutic principles.” See note 106 below.
As noted, Strauss understands Farabi as Machiavelli’s forerunner; Farabi is read as a philosopher who, like Strauss’s Machiavelli, believed in using religion and the concept of divine revelation for political purposes. For this reading to be tenable, Strauss has to dismiss Farabi’s Neoplatonism given that Neoplatonism teaches that the universe is essentially good and just. Given the Quran’s description of Allah, the same can be said regarding why Strauss must reject Farabi’s adherence to Islam. If Farabi is interpreted as believing in a higher power that maintains justice – as believing in a merciful and benevolent God – it is, of course, easy to claim that Farabi’s philosophy cannot be meaningfully compared with the “immoral” and “selfish” philosophy of Strauss’s Machiavelli.

The interpretive issue here is that Strauss’s apparently “Machiavellian” Farabi cannot be aligned with a Farabi whose Neoplatonism is taken seriously. As mentioned in Section 6.1, Farabi’s philosophic system begins with a First Cause from which all creation emanates; as Fakhry has noted, the “pivotal point” of Neoplatonism is the doctrine of emanation. Importantly, this First Cause is described as “generous” (jawād), “just,” and as having “justice” (adl, ṣadāq); its “justice is in its substance (jawhar).” In Neoplatonic terms, Farabi writes of the First Cause as the most beautiful, perfect, being, the being that generates existence and truth to all creation. Similarly, in a section of his Fusūl al-madani (Aphorisms of the Statesman), Farabi describes creation as inherently good, and explains good (khayr) as the result of the First Cause.

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88 The fact that Strauss aligns Farabi with Machiavelli appears to relate to Strauss's contention that philosophers “form a class by themselves” (PA W, 8), and his suggestion that “genuine philosophers” (ibid.) are in fundamental agreement regarding the best political order (“Farabi’s Plato,” 22; PA W, 15).

89 For example, see Enneads 2.9 “Against the Gnostics.” See also Enneads 3.2, 3.3 “On Providence.” For Machiavelli as “teacher of evil,” see TOM, 9. Strauss suggests a connection between Machiavelli and the falsafa at TOM, 175. For Strauss’s comments that fortuna can be regulated, see TOM, 216. See also note 82 above.

90 At TOM, 80: “Is it not possible to understand the patriotic conclusion of the Prince as a respectable coloring of the designs of a self-seeking Italian prince? There can be no doubt regarding the answer; the immoral policies recommended throughout the Prince are not justified on grounds of the common good, but exclusively on grounds of the self-interest of the prince, of his selfish concern with his own well-being, security, and glory.” For Machiavelli’s “teaching” as “immoral and irreligious,” see also TOM, 11-2.

91 Fakhry, Al-Farabi, 78.

92 Farabi, Mabādi' ārā' ahl al-madīnat al-fāḍilah, chapter 2, sec. 2. On the Quranic influence on Farabi, see Walzer, “Commentary,” ibid., 360.

93 Farabi, Mabādi' ārā' ahl al-madīnat al-fāḍilah, chapter 1, sec. 11-14; see also Enneads, 1.6 (“On Beauty”), 5.2 (“The Origin and Order of the Beings.”)
Evil is explained as “voluntary,” a result of human volition. Farabi expresses belief in a fundamentally good cosmic-order when he writes that:

\[\text{existence is only good when it is with merit [isti\'h\=al], and non-existence (bad) when it is without merit, and similarly pleasures and pain. What exists and does not exist without merit is bad. None of these things exist anywhere in the spiritual worlds, for no one thinks that in the spiritual and heavenly (worlds) anything happens contrary to merit…}\]

Farabi describes the “good” in the worlds as according to “harmony [ni\c{z}\={a}m] and justice with merit.” Fakhry believes statements like these demonstrate Farabi’s proximity to the Neoplatonic view of the world as fundamentally good or just. Furthermore, the terms used by Farabi (such as fayd or \=sud\={a}r) to describe emanation are borrowed directly from Neoplatonic texts.

I have argued that Strauss’s practice of interpreting Farabi via “esoteric” analyses of Farabi’s short commentaries on Plato is highly questionable. Defending Strauss’s interpretation of Farabi requires providing a convincing answer as to why Neoplatonic doctrines, concepts, and terminologies – such as those outlined – appear in his works. If one accepts Strauss’s interpretation, there is the issue of whom, precisely, did Farabi want reading his “exoteric” Neoplatonic doctrines. As discussed in Chapter 4 (Section 2), Neoplatonic emanation clashes with Islam’s doctrine of creation \textit{ex nihilo}; it is therefore difficult to believe Strauss’s claim that Farabi was attempting, in Machiavellian fashion, to disingenuously conform “with the opinions of the religious community” he belonged to. Furthermore, as was also mentioned in Chapter 4, dismissing Farabi’s Neoplatonic metaphysics – particularly the Active Intellect that is emanated from the First Cause – has obvious implications for Farabi’s political system. As discussed, Farabi bases his political order on a cosmological hierarchy and, in texts like \textit{Mab\=adi\'\=ar\=a\'\=ahl al-

madinat al-f\={a}\=d\=ilah}, Farabi’s approach to organising human society revolves around belief in a human \textit{telos}. Virtuous regimes are those that encourage human excellence and assist human

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94 Farabi, \textit{Fa\={s}\={u}l al-mad\={a}nii} (ed. Dunlop) 150 (aph. 69); \textit{Aphorisms of the Statesman} (trans. Dunlop), 59. Note also Farabi’s statements at \textit{ib\=id}, aph. 82.

95 Farabi, \textit{Fa\={s}\={u}l al-mad\={a}nii} (ed. Dunlop) 150-1 (aph. 69); \textit{Aphorisms of the Statesman} (trans. Dunlop), 59.

96 \textit{Ib\=id}.

97 Fakhry, \textit{Al-Farabi}, 96.

98 Fakhry, \textit{Al-Farabi}, 78; Netton, \textit{Allah Transcendent}, 114-5; Walzer “Commentary,” \textit{Mab\=adi\'\=ar\=a\'\=ahl al-madinat al-f\={a}\=d\=ilah}, 354-5.

99 See the commentary in Chapter 4, Section 2 of the present thesis.
beings in attaining happiness. The leaders of virtuous regimes are those who possess knowledge
from the highest metaphysical source: the First Cause via the Active Intellect.\textsuperscript{100}

Another matter to consider regarding Strauss’s account of Farabi’s Neoplatonism is what
Strauss actually \textit{understands} by “Neoplatonism.” This is, undoubtedly, a difficult question as
Strauss never wrote a commentary on Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus, or any other
Neoplatonist. Nevertheless, based on the few comments on Neoplatonism found in Strauss’s
works, one could argue that Strauss accepts what O’Meara refers to as the “conventional” view
of Neoplatonism; namely, that the Neoplatonists devalued political life and did not possess a
political philosophy.\textsuperscript{101} O’Meara contends that there was, however, an implicit political
philosophy that developed within the “otherworldly” outlook of the Neoplatonists and that
several lines of “convergence” can be seen between Farabi and “late antique” Neoplatonism.\textsuperscript{102}
O’Meara asserts that Farabi’s philosophy should be considered Neoplatonic on the grounds that,
first, the ideal political structure is modelled on a metaphysical order; second, the political order
is used to attain transcendence (although Farabi stresses the attainment of knowledge rather than
mystical union); third, the philosopher-king is inspired by a transcendent intellect, the (modified)
Aristotelian Active Intellect; fourth, religious views are provided with a political function.\textsuperscript{103}
O’Meara’s contention that Farabi’s “political project corresponds” with “later Greek Neoplatonic
political philosophy”\textsuperscript{104} casts doubt on Strauss’s claim that Farabi’s politics are to be understood
as distinctly \textit{Platonic} (in the Straussian sense). When Strauss writes of the importance Farabi

\textsuperscript{100} Concerning this aspect of Strauss’s reading, and in addition to Guttman’s and Gutas’s criticisms of Strauss (noted in
Chapter 4, Section 2), see Tamer, \textit{Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne: Das Verhältnis von Leo Strauss zu Alfarabi,
Avicenna und Avernoes}, 333. Tamer also emphasizes how God and metaphysics are crucial to Farabi’s political
philosophy. Politics “seems to depend on metaphysics.” The “perfect ruler fulfills the same function in the state which
God fulfills in the cosmos. Ideal political rule corresponds to God’s rule.” Furthermore, “metaphysics, physics and
psychology precede \textit{[for Farabi] ethics and politics.” At \textit{ibid.}, 334: “In Alfarabi’s harmonious system there is no place
for conflict between reason and faith, because God is the ultimate aim of both.”

\textsuperscript{101} O’Meara, \textit{Platonopolis}, 3-5. Based on what Strauss asserts in the opening pages of “Farabi’s \textit{Plato}” and in the first
chapter of \textit{Persecution and the Art of Writing}, it seems likely that Strauss understood Neoplatonism as largely unconcerned
with politics. Strauss does not appear to have responded to Kojève’s haughty attack against Neoplatonism: “So, up to
the 6th century there were men who preserved the philosophical tradition in all its purity, and who despised the neo-
Platonic nonsense as much as they did Christian “theology.”” Kojeve to Strauss, April 11, 1957, \textit{OT}, 269; see \textit{ibid.}, 270
for similar remarks from Kojève about Neoplatonism.

\textsuperscript{102} O’Meara, \textit{Platonopolis}, 195.

\textsuperscript{103} \textit{Ibid.}, 195-7. On the political use of religion, see note 33 above.

\textsuperscript{104} O’Meara, \textit{Platonopolis}, 195.
assigned to creating the political conditions necessary for happiness, a view Strauss considers entirely “Platonic,” Farabi can be understood as following a Neoplatonic philosophy that emphasized perfection or felicity through knowledge as the means to transcendence.

Finally, two points concerning Farabi’s use of the *Uthūlūjiyā Ṭūṭālīs* (Theology of Aristotle) can be noted. As discussed, Strauss asserts that Farabi’s use of the *Uthūlūjiyā Ṭūṭālīs* was disingenuous. However, Farabi never refers to the *Uthūlūjiyā Ṭūṭālīs* as spurious. If Farabi accepted the *Uthūlūjiyā Ṭūṭālīs* as a genuine text of Aristotle’s – which is certainly a possibility – then perhaps Farabi truly did accept Neoplatonic doctrines on the basis he believed they were Aristotelian. Furthermore, Farabi’s use of the *Uthūlūjiyā Ṭūṭālīs* indicates that Farabi’s textual sources were not always accurate. As we have seen, Farabi’s “silences” are a vital – if not the decisive – feature of Strauss’s interpretation. Yet, with Farabi’s use of the *Uthūlūjiyā Ṭūṭālīs* in mind, we must ask what doctrines Farabi may have incorrectly, but honestly, associated with two philosophic authorities, Plato and Aristotle.

6.4 The role of Thrasymachus in Farabi’s *Plato*

In this Section, we examine what Farabi writes about Thrasymachus in the *Falsafat Aflāṭūn* (Philosophy of Plato). As discussed in Chapter 5, in his articles on Plato in the *History of Political Philosophy* (1963) and *The City and Man* (1964), Strauss describes Thrasymachus as the central

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105 See note 72 above.

106 As was discussed in Chapter 2, there is the matter of the overall quality and accuracy of the manuscripts that Farabi was working from. Strauss frequently assumes that Farabi had access to the same complete (or near-complete) versions of Plato’s works as were available to him in the mid-20th century. Yet, as Brague has noted (Brague, *The Law of God*, 117), the:

> Platonism of the great dialogues on the polis was not passed on to the Middle Ages, or only in fragments in such writers as al-Amiri or al-Biruni. The dialogues may have been known through Galen’s summaries, which Alfarabi probably used in his own summary of the *Laws* and Averroes used in his compendium on the *Republic*. These gaps were compensated for by apocryphal writings treating the topic of politics in whole or in part, such as the so-called *Laws of Plato*.

Kraemer (see Chapter 5, Section 4) and Tamer (see Chapter 2, Section 3) both criticise Strauss’s hermeneutic approach. Although Strauss does consider Farabi may have only had poorly translated, incomplete, or apocryphal texts (see “Farabi’s Plato,” 4-5), Strauss esoteric analysis (as Kraemer and Tamer both note) depend on the idea that Farabi had *complete* Platonic manuscripts. If Strauss does not make this assumption, reading into Farabi’s “silences” would be pointless. See also Chapter 5, note 145.
Farabi’s metaphysics

interlocutor in the *Republic*. As we have seen, the basis for Strauss’s claim about Thrasymachus appears to be Farabi’s text. “Farabi’s *Plato,*” the article in which Strauss discusses the “ways” of Socrates and Thrasymachus based on classifications he finds in Farabi’s *Falsafat Aflāṭūn,* was published in 1945. It is notable that “Farabi’s *Plato*” was written prior to Strauss composing his major texts on Plato and ancient Greek philosophy.107

One of the applicable passages in the *Falsafat Aflāṭūn (Philosophy of Plato)* concerning Thrasymachus is as follows. The context is Farabi summarising, with regard to Plato’s investigations, how citizens were to have their “character formed” (*ta’dīb*).108 Farabi writes:

> Here he [α. Plato] delineated once again Socrates’ method for realizing his aim of making his own people understand through scientific investigation the ignorance (*jahl*) they were in. He explained Thrasymachus’ method (*ṭarīq*) and made it known that Thrasymachus was more able than Socrates to form the character of the youth and instruct the multitude (*ta’dīb al-ähltād wa-ta’līm al-jumbāt*); Socrates possessed only the ability to conduct a scientific investigation of justice (*’adl*) and the virtues (*faḍā’il*), and a power (*quwwa*) of love (*maḥabba*), but did not possess the ability to form the character of the youth and the multitude; and the philosopher, the prince (*malik*), and the legislator (*wāḍi’ al-nawāmīs*) ought to be able to use both methods: the Socratic method with the elect (*khawāṣṣ*), and Thrasymachus’ method with the youth and multitude.109

There are, clearly, noticeable similarities between this passage of Farabi’s and Strauss’s own contentions about “Platonic political philosophy.” Although Strauss does not refer to Farabi’s texts in his prominent articles on Plato (the chapters on Plato in the *History of Political Philosophy* and *The City and Man*), a comment from Strauss appears to validate Farabi’s importance. In “The Problem of Socrates,”110 Strauss writes that:

107 See Chapter 5, Introduction and Section 2. The “way of Thrasymachus” is mentioned at “Farabi’s *Plato,*” 8, 27. At *ibid.*., 27, the context is “Plato’s correction of the Socratic attitude” with regard to political matters. See also Tamer’s comments (noted in Chapter 2, Section 3) on the influence Farabi had on Strauss.

108 *Falsafat Aflāṭūn,* 22 (sec. 30); Farabi, *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* (trans. Mahdi), 66 (sec. 36). Farabi’s reading of Plato accords with his comments in the *Taḥṣīl al-Sa’āda* generally on the formation of character. See *Taḥṣīl al-Sa’āda,* 71-81; *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* (trans. Mahdi), 34-41. Note Averroes’s very similar statements at *Faṣl al-maqāl* (ed. Butterworth), 8. Averroes also describes using different methods of communication on different people, *i.e.*, depending on their nature (*ṭibā’*), in order to call them to God.


110 For details on Strauss’s six-part lecture series, see Pangle, “Introduction,” *RCPR,* xxcoi. The lectures were delivered at the University of Chicago in 1958.
Thrasy machus must be integrated into the best city because the best city is not possible without the art of Thrasy machus. To the best of my knowledge the only student of the Republic who has understood this crucial fact was Alfarabi, an Islamic philosopher who flourished around 900 and who was the founder of medieval Aristotelianism. According to Alfarabi the way of Socrates, which is appropriate for philosophers dealing with the elite, must be combined with the way of Thrasy machus, which is appropriate for the philosophers dealing with the multitude. 111

As far as we are aware, it was Farabi who indicated to Strauss the “crucial fact” regarding the Platonic philosopher’s need for the “art,” or “way,” of Thrasy machus. 112 While the distinction between the “ways” of Socrates and Thrasy machus is fundamental to Strauss’s “Platonic political philosophy,” for unknown reasons, Strauss does not directly state that his reading of the Republic is based on, or relies in some way on, an interpretation of Farabi’s texts. 113 Nevertheless, given the importance Thrasy machus has in Strauss’s reading of the Republic, and given that Strauss seems to have learnt of this importance from Farabi, there are, I believe, three pertinent questions to ask.

First, we must ask what dialogue Farabi is referring to in the Falsafat Aflāṭūn when he mentions the Platonic character “Thrasy machus.” In a footnote to “Farabi’s Plato,” Strauss writes that when Farabi mentions Thrasy machus, Farabi may, in fact, be referring to the Thrasy machus of the Cleitophon, not the Thrasy machus of the Republic. 114 This question is significant as, in the Falsafat Aflāṭūn, Farabi appears to discuss the Republic (al-siyāsah) in one particular part of the work (section 25), and then describes the “method of Thrasy machus” in a different section (section 30). In the Falsafat Aflāṭūn, Farabi generally attributes one Platonic dialogue to each

111 RCPR, 159; compare with CM, 73-4, 102, 123-4.

112 Although the influence Lessing had on Strauss’s approach to Plato may be worth considering. At “Exoteric Teaching,” RCPR, 66-7 [Strauss’s italics]:

Some readers might be inclined to dismiss Lessing’s whole teaching at once, since it seems to be based on the obviously erroneous, or merely traditional, assumption that all the ancient philosophers have made use of exoteric speeches. To warn such readers, one must point out that the incriminated sentence permits of a wholly unobjectionable interpretation: Lessing implicitly denies that writers on philosophical topics who reject exotericism deserve the name of philosophers. For he knew the passages in Plato in which it is indicated that it was the sophists who refused to conceal the truth.

113 See the conclusion to Chapter 5.

114 “Farabi’s Plato,” 27n65.
paragraph-long summary. The notion that Farabi’s comment on the “method” of Thrasymachus relates to the Cleitophon has a degree of merit given that this Platonic dialogue involves the question of virtue and statesmanship. The Cleitophon ends, moreover, with the unanswered criticism against Socrates that while he can speak well of, and exhort, justice and the virtues, he cannot force all people to be just and virtuous (Cleitophon, 410b-d). This matter – how justice and the virtues can be actualised – is exactly what Farabi’s comments on the “ways” of Socrates and Thrasymachus relate to.

The second question is whether Farabi requires the premise of metaphysical knowledge to discuss sophistry as he does in the Falsafat Aflāṭūn. For example, in one passage, Farabi writes:

Then he [as Plato] made a similar investigation of the art of sophistry and whether or not sophistry is the inquiry that supplies the desired [maṭlah] knowledge. He explained that sophistry does not supply that knowledge and that sophistical inquiry is not the way to that knowledge. He explained, further, the value [ghanā’] of sophistry […] For in his book known as the Sophist he made known what the art of sophistry is, what it does, and how many aims it pursues; what is the sophistical man, how many kinds of him there are, and into what sort of affairs he inquires; and that he does not conduct the investigation that leads man to the desired knowledge and does not inquire at all into matters subject to knowledge. As for the Euthydemus, he explained in it the manner of sophistical inquiry and sophistical teaching, how it comes pretty close to being play, and how it does not supply that knowledge or lead to a knowledge useful either in theory [naẓār] or in practice [‘amal].

Farabi’s statements appear predicated on the belief that true “knowledge” is accessible to the philosopher (who, in Farabi’s system, has conjunction with the Active Intellect and therefore ultimate “truth” to aspire to). On Strauss’s reading, Farabi does not appear to believe that

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115 Walzer claims that the section of the Plato where Farabi mentions Thrasymachus relates to the Cleitophon. See Walzer’s notes to the Latin translation, Corpus Platonicum, 27 (note 30). For the reference to “al-siyāsah,” see Falsafat Aflāṭūn, 20 (section 25). Some dialogues are, however, mentioned more than once. For example, Timaeus (sections 26, 28), Laws (sections 27, 28), Apology (sections 23, 24). For reference to “al-siyāsah” (translated as “Republic”), see Kitāb al-jam‘ bayna ra’yay al-hukmāyay Aflāṭūn al-ilāhī wa-Aristīyāy in L’harmonie entre les opinions de Platon et d’Aristote (trans. Najjar/Mallet), 109, 159. Farabi refers to the Timaeus and the “Ablīṭīyā” in ibid., 133. Mahdi believes “Ablīṭīyā” is a reference to Plato’s Republic (Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, 143, section 33, note 1), however Butterworth (Alfarabi: The Political Writings, 156) writes that Mahdi’s conjecture does not answer why Farabi also refers to the Republic as “al-siyāsah.”

116 Butterworth and Pangle (“Foreword,” Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, 8) believe Farabi’s statements about the “methods” of Socrates and Thrasymachus relate to the Republic.

117 Falsafat Aflāṭūn, 8-9 (sec. 10); Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle (trans. Mahdi), 57 (sec. 11).
philosophy can reach anything more than a subjective “truth.” We are, therefore, to interpret 
Farabi as not genuinely considering “demonstration” (burhān) capable of discovering 
metaphysical, political, or ethical truths. If Strauss’s view is accepted, then the distinctions 
Farabi makes between philosophy and sophistry, philosophy and religion, and philosophy and 
poetry, collapse: Farabi could not have known what constituted “truth” or the best set of 
philosophical or political beliefs.

Strauss could assert that this controversial reading of Farabi is supported by the 
discussions in the Charmides (166e-167a) or Apology (23b, 28e) that suggest Plato believed that 
“knowledge of knowledge” results only in “knowing thyself” or understanding the limitations of 
knowledge. Strauss could claim that these comments from Plato influenced Farabi. On the 
Straussian reading, it seems we are to believe that Farabi dismissed, in toto, any of Socrates’s 
statements about the possibility of metaphysical knowledge (e.g., Republic, 508d-509b), mystical 
intuition (e.g., Apology, 31c-32a), or philosophy being a gift from the gods (e.g., Apology, 30d).

The same issues are raised in another passage dealing with sophistry. Farabi notes:

Then he investigated whether that desired perfection [kamāl] and desired end are obtained by the 
way of life of the hypocrites and those who falsify their purposes before people [nās] by feigning 
nobility and hiding another end. For this is the way of life in which the multitude [jumhūr] saw 
strength and fortitude and for which they would envy a man. Hence he also investigated whether 
this way of life is what the multitude believes it to be. That is to be found in two of his books, 
which he named after two men who were extreme hypocrites and extremely false in their ways of 
life and in their actions and who were considered sophists […] He explained regarding this way of 
life [i.e. that of the sophists], too, that it does not supply the desired end but leads far away from 
it.119

Farabi writes of the differences between philosophy and sophistry; he does not disguise, 
however, the fact that Thrasymachus’s art can, in his view, be used legitimately. Farabi mentions 
the capability or utility [ghanā‘] of sophistry. The third question raised by Strauss’s reading is, 
then, whether Strauss unnecessarily looks for an esoteric teaching concerning sophistry in 
Farabi’s work. Contrary to Strauss, I would argue that Farabi’s understanding of the “ways” of

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118 See Farabi’s discussion on the differences between philosophy and religion at Mabādi’ ārā’ abāl al-madīnat al-fādilah, chapter 17. Farabi writes (ibid., chapter 17, sec. 3): “When these things thus held in common [i.e. what the people in the 
excellent city ought to know] are known through strict demonstration, no ground for disagreement by argument can be 
found in them, neither by introducing sophistic fallacies nor by somebody’s lack of understanding.” Concerning the 
problem of how Strauss can objectively distinguish between philosophy and poetry, see the discussion in Sharpe, “The 
Poetic Presentation of Philosophy: On Leo Strauss’s Symposium.”

119 Falsafat Aflāṭūn, 11 (sec. 14); Farabi, Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, 59 (sec. 17).
Socrates and Thrasymachus does not point to an esoteric “Platonic” teaching at odds with the *Tahṣīl al-saʿāda*. Rather, Farabi’s comments can be viewed as supporting a contention offered in the *Tahṣīl al-saʿāda*.

As has been noted, in medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophy, we often find the belief that religion represents, in symbolic form, the truths of philosophy. For example, in the *Tahṣīl al-saʿāda* and *Mabādiʿ ārāʾ abl al-madinat al-fāḍilah*, Farabi writes that, in order to create a virtuous city, a leader needs to have the ability to instruct different varieties of people. A similar theme is raised in Farabi’s *Fuṣūl al-madani* when Farabi writes of the differences between “virtuous” and “ignorant” regimes. There is “nothing in common between the ideal and all the ignorant types of polities,” as the calibre of the leader, and therefore his or her rulership, is vastly different.

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[C]ase is similar for all scientific and practical matters such as rhetoric, sophistry, dialectic and the art of poetry, for the man who occupies himself with them without knowledge of them, only thinking and supposing that he employs demonstration, is mostly found to employ it mixed in different ways. [Italics added]

Strauss divorces Farabi’s reference to the “way” of Thrasymachus from views Farabi expresses elsewhere. This is problematic as Farabi’s comments on Thrasymachus can be understood in the broader context of Farabi’s philosophy. Farabi is, I contend, only able to make a distinction between sophistry as acceptable (or as possessing some type of value) and sophistry as not supplying the desired knowledge, on the basis that he believes in ultimate truth. Farabi uses terms such as “truth” and “reality” (*ḥaqq, haqīqa*) in the context of the First Cause; he distinguishes the true (*ḥaqq*) philosopher from the “counterfeit” (*zūr*: untruth or falsehood), “fake” (*babraj*), and

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120 See notes 33 and 108 above. See also Chapter 4, Section 3. Farabi writes of the need for legislators to use persuasion (*iqlaḍ*) in the *Tahṣīl al-saʿāda*. See Farabi, *Tahṣīl al-saʿāda* (ed. Bou Melhem), 95; Farabi, *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle* (trans. Mahdi), 47 (sec. 59). Tamer remarks (Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne: Das Verhältnis von Leo Strauss zu Alfarabi, Avicenna und Averroes, 332-3) that Farabi accentuates “philosophy’s usefulness in illuminating various difficult theological themes, not only in order to defend philosophy against religion, but also because he seems convinced that both have ultimately the same aim: the knowledge of God through the knowledge of God’s works. Philosophy and religion have different ways of acquiring and transmitting knowledge: philosophy operates by way of intellectual perception or conception, religion by way of imagination. Whereas philosophy demonstrates, religion persuades.” See note 125 below.


122 Ibid.

123 Ibid., aph. 86.
“vain” (bāṭil), philosophers. Farabi believes it is possible to differentiate truth from error; he writes of “virtuous” and “ignorant” regimes. He comments on the proper use of sophistry, poetry, and rhetoric. There are few good reasons for viewing these claims as “exoteric.”

6.5 Concluding remarks

Strauss dismisses Farabi’s belief in the possibility of metaphysical knowledge, and implies Farabi did not believe in a higher, divine, power. Farabi’s entire philosophy is, however, premised on these beliefs. Farabi writes that ultimate reality or truth is accessible to the philosopher. He considers “philosophy” superior to “religion” as the truths of philosophy are universal, whereas religion is either historically or culturally particular. Philosophers learn the truth for themselves through demonstration (burhān) and insight; religion (milla) provides non-philosophers with the truth in an accessible, symbolic, form. This type of argument continues notably in the works of Averroes.

As was discussed in Section 6.2, Strauss asserts that the remarks of Farabi’s successors indicate that Farabi did not truly believe in the possibility of an afterlife. Strauss ties the remarks Farabi allegedly made about the afterlife to a dismissal of metaphysical knowledge and transcendent entities more generally. Yet, as was argued, Farabi’s rejection of the possibility of metaphysical knowledge and transcendent entities is by no means confirmed in the accounts we have from Ibn Tufayl, Ibn Bajja, Averroes, and Maimonides. While it is plausible that Farabi came to disbelieve, or disbelieved at some point in his career, in the account of the afterlife that we often find described in his texts, this does not mean that he rejected belief in the possibility of metaphysical knowledge, or belief in an Active Intellect and a First Cause. Furthermore, Strauss’s opinion that Farabi rejected Platonic and Islamic conceptions of the afterlife is noteworthy insofar as it appears to be a misreading by Strauss. Farabi explicitly indicates, on a number of occasions, that his view of the afterlife is not the same as Plato’s or Islam’s. Farabi’s view of


125 See notes 33 and 120 above. At Farabi, Mabādi’ ārā’ al-madīnat al-fāḍilah, chapter 17, sec. 2: “Therefore it is possible that excellent nations and excellent cities exist whose religions differ, although they all have as their goal one and the same felicity (sa’āda) and the very same aims.” Walzer (ibid., 475-6) describes “milla” as a “comprehensive term for the religious community.”

126 Averroes, Tahāfut al-Tahāfut (ed. Bouyges), 582-6; The Incoherence of the Incoherence, 360-1.
religion would suggest Islam’s literal teaching about the afterlife symbolises a more universal, philosophic, truth.

I have also argued that Strauss cannot assert that Farabi adhered to an atheistic, anti-metaphysical, “Platonic political philosophy” unless he finds a way to dismiss Farabi’s Neoplatonism. As discussed in Chapter 4, if Farabi’s Neoplatonism was “exoteric,” as Strauss implies, then Farabi undermined Islam’s doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* for no reason. Viewing Farabi as engaged in a genuine quest for truth, rather than as deliberately attempting to sabotage Islamic doctrines, is, I believe, the most compelling interpretation. It is an interpretation that would explain Farabi’s willingness to contradict literal Islamic teachings and adopt Platonic, Aristotelian, and Neoplatonic, doctrines in his texts.

Strauss asks us to set aside much of Farabi’s philosophy as “exoteric” or “political.” However, we are not told why Farabi was engaged in such an immense philosophical-political operation. Strauss leaves the implications of his assertions – and they are, for the most part, only assertions – unanswered. While it could be argued that Strauss did so for pedagogic reasons, to invite scholars to investigate his claims for themselves, such a response, in my view, hardly suffices. In light of the many difficulties with Strauss’s account of Farabi, and in light of the apparent connection between Strauss’s Farabi and Strauss’s Plato, Strauss’s “Platonic political philosophy” does not appear to be truly “Platonic.”
Conclusion

I cannot fail to mention the remarkable juxtaposition [merkwürdige Zusammenstellung] of Plato and Muhammad in Nietzsche's *Will to Power*, Aph. 972.¹

There are a number of striking resemblances between many of the fundamental features of Islam and the good regime envisaged by classical political philosophy in general, and by Plato in the *Laws* in particular.²

Christianity, we must add in order to complete Machiavelli’s statements, was forced to retain the Latin language because it was not, like Islam, a religion that conquered by force. Christianity was forced to preserve its enemy to some extent.³

[I]f wisdom does not become common property, the mass remains in the thrall of religion, that is to say of an essentially particular and particularizing power (Christianity, Islam, Judaism…), which means that the decline and fall of the universal-homogenous state is unavoidable.⁴

This Chapter provides a summary of the thesis’ principal themes. In Section 7.1, we return to a question raised by Strauss’s controversial reading of ancient and medieval philosophy: the extent of Nietzsche’s influence on Strauss. In Section 7.2, I provide an overview of the problems with Strauss’s reading of medieval Islamic philosophy. In Section 7.3, I offer my final thoughts on Strauss’s philosophy.

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¹ PL, 141n25; PG, 62n1: “Ich möchte nicht verfehlen, auf die merkwürdige Zusammenstellung Platons und Muhammeds in Nietzsches »Wille zur Macht« Aph. 972 hinzuweisen.”


³ TOM, 144.

⁴ Strauss to Kojève, 22 August 1948, in *OT*, 238. At L-AM, 105: “Given the fact that many men, nay, almost all men, will always refuse to listen to the Epicurean teaching, religion will always serve a good purpose.”
7.1 The Question of Strauss’s Nietzscheanism

In Chapter 1, I argued that Strauss’s endorsement of exoteric writing is premised on his belief that the truth is “deadly.” Strauss appears to accept the Nietzschean doctrines of the sovereignty of becoming, the fluidity of all concepts, and the lack of distinction between man and beast. Strauss opposes a universal and homogenous state on Nietzschean grounds; like Nietzsche, Strauss believes a universal and homogenous state would mean the death of philosophy and advent of the “last man.” As noted in Chapters 1 and 2, Strauss views religion as valuable as it creates and solidifies differences between peoples, thereby repelling the universal and homogenous state. Religion has, Strauss writes to Kojève, a “particular and particularizing power.” Religion also serves to disguise the “deadly” truth from the masses, and acts as a basis for a political-legal framework. Despite his own atheism, Strauss finds several reasons for endorsing religion.

As discussed in Chapters 3-6, when engaging with premodern texts, Strauss often finds views that align with Nietzsche’s philosophy. This is problematic as it leads to questioning whether Strauss’s Nietzschean sympathies influenced his reading of prior philosophers. Strauss’s debateable interpretations of ancient and medieval thinkers might be plausibly explained by the hypothesis that Strauss is not truly attempting to understand these thinkers. It is, after all, remarkable that Strauss finds in works by Plato, Farabi, Avicenna, Maimonides, Averroes and other philosophers, a worldview that is, at its core, anti-metaphysical, and atheistic. On Strauss’s reading of the history of philosophy, true philosophers appear to have always understood, despite any statements to the contrary, that metaphysics is impossible, that there are no transcendent or supernatural beings, and no suprasensible realm. True philosophers have always recognised, Strauss implies, that there is no God, or at least no knowable God. What might be

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5 See Chapter 1, note 33. If Strauss accepts Nietzsche’s claim that the truth is “deadly,” that concepts are “fluid,” and that a distinction between man and beast is not possible, then Strauss’s assertion that the “philosophic” life is highest is subjective; it is his view.

6 See Chapter 1, note 132; Chapter 2, Section 1, and note 69. It is worthy of note that Kojève is very close to Strauss concerning the “last man” who exists at the end of history. See Kojève to Strauss, 19 September 1950, in OT, 255. Concerning Kojève’s “poor account of Hegel,” and Strauss “implicitly accepting” this account, see MacDonald & Craig, Recovering Hegel from the Critique of Leo Strauss: The Virtues of Modernity, 14, 20.

7 As discussed in Chapter 2, Tamer understands Strauss’s reading of medieval Islamic philosophy to contain what he considers genuine oversights or errors. Tamer’s study of Strauss uncovers several historical, philological, and philosophical difficulties with Strauss’s work. Scholars engaging with Strauss’s texts should also, I have argued, be receptive to the claim that Strauss purposefully misreads prior philosophers as part of a long-range political project.
extracted from Strauss’s commentaries is the suggestion that philosophers cannot intuit, or know of, anything “above” or “beyond” reason. As I argued in Chapters 5 and 6, Strauss insinuates that there is no “primordial” transcendence; there is no Good beyond, or transcending, essence (ἐπέκεινα τῆς ὀντικέτης). There can be, then, no “transcendent natural right” or transcendent goals. If these facets of Strauss’s philosophy are acknowledged – if one is willing to read Strauss as a Nietzschean – then one must confront the tension in Strauss’s philosophical enterprise. Strauss continually suggests his *sumnum bonum* is “philosophy” yet, given the Nietzschean elements of Strauss’s thought, what “philosophy” investigates, and what it can achieve, appears entirely uncertain. This is what is inconsistent: Strauss suggests in “Farabi’s Plato” that true Platonic philosophy is above, that it “transcends,” political and moral themes. Strauss also interprets Farabi as secretly rejecting revelation, religion, and the possibility of metaphysical knowledge. The definition of philosophy that Strauss provides in the context of Farabi implies that, ultimately, the theoretical truth is “deadly.” As philosophy is, on this account, “subversive,” it must remain “esoteric.” As noted in Chapter 5, if the theoretical “truth” is “deadly,” then the philosopher can only work towards discovering a subjective meaning for life. The question then arises as to how philosophy can be considered fundamentally different to poetry, and how philosophy can be politically and ethically valuable.

Let us return to the first component of my argument, the possibility that Strauss may have wilfully misinterpreted other thinkers. A sympathetic reader of Strauss’s works – particularly one who considers Strauss a “Jewish thinker” or a “conservative” – might assert that Strauss was

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Though in Plato transcendence was not investigated down to its genuine roots, the inescapable pressure of the phenomenon nevertheless brought to light the connection between the transcendent intended by the idea and the root of transcendence, πρᾶξις [praxis]. The idea is the correlate of intuition, but there is a passage in Plato according to which the *idea of the good*, the ἰδέα τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, still lies beyond beings and *οὐσία* [ontic, essence], beyond the *ideas*, ἐπέκεινα τῆς ὀντικέτης. Here a transcendence emerges that one must consider the most primordial, insofar as the ideas are themselves already transcendent with regard to the beings that change. What the idea of the good means is not simple to ascertain on the basis of what we have from Plato. It is certain that this ἰδέα τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ still has, in the end, a mythic quality such that the philosophical point is not yet exposed by this suggestion.

Compare with Plotinus’s remarks on “The One” at *Enneads* 5.3.13. See note 68 below.

9 A term Strauss uses. See *WPP*, 51.

10 See *JPCM*, 463.

11 See the discussion in Chapter 1.
merely a “scholar”\(^\text{12}\) and that Strauss had no intention of, or reason for, purposefully misreading prior philosophers. A sympathetic reader might interpret Strauss’s errors with philosophical texts, including Islamic philosophical texts, as genuine mistakes rather than deliberate attempts at falsification. However, against such an interpretation, it must be noted immediately that several of Strauss’s remarks clearly support the more sceptical reading I have suggested. These passages, even if only read literally and not as esoteric “hints” from a “master of the art of writing,” are highly suggestive.

The first indicative remark comes from a lecture on medieval philosophy. The lecture was delivered in 1944. In “How to Begin to Study Medieval Philosophy,” Strauss states:

> The task of the historian of thought is to understand the thinkers of the past exactly as they understood themselves, or to revitalise their thought according to their own interpretation of it.\(^\text{13}\) [Italics added].

This suggestive comment can be usefully compared with a very similar passage found in one of Strauss’s final works, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*. There, Strauss writes:

> Among the many things that make Heidegger’s thought so appealing to so many contemporaries\(^\text{14}\) is his accepting the premise that while human life and thought is radically historical, History \[sic\] is not a rational process. As a consequence, he denies that one can understand a thinker better than he understood himself and even as he understood himself: *a great thinker will understand an earlier thinker of rank creatively, i.e. by transforming his thought, and hence by understanding him differently than he understood himself*. One could hardly observe this transformation if one could not see the original form. Above all, according to Heidegger all thinkers prior to him have been oblivious of the *true ground of all grounds, the fundamental abyss*.\(^\text{15}\) [Italics added]

\(^{12}\) *RCPR*, 29. Note Nietzsche’s distinction between “philosophers” and “scholars” at Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, aph. 6.

\(^{13}\) *RCPR*, 209. See also Strauss’s almost identical remarks at *WPP*, 67.

\(^{14}\) Strauss’s remark raises the question of whether he, one of Heidegger’s contemporaries, finds Heidegger’s thought “appealing.”

\(^{15}\) *SPPP*, 30. It could be claimed that Strauss is merely supporting the Nietzschean-Heideggerian belief that modern science points to the lack of an inherent or divine meaning in nature, and that this belief serves as a solid foundation for a critique of modernity. However, as argued in-text, it seems justifiable to consider what else is being offered in the passage “between the lines.”
Strauss might be interpreted as offering nothing more than commentary on Heidegger. However, there seems to be much more to this passage, especially given that Strauss—a writer who undoubtedly chooses his words very carefully—writes of Heidegger’s “appeal” to his “contemporaries,” the “true ground of all grounds,” and the philosophic practices of “great thinkers.” Strauss might well be implying that, as the author’s understanding of their text—their intention—will never be totally accessible to others, a “great thinker” will recognize that the texts of “earlier thinkers” can be incorporated for the sake of one’s own art, one’s own contemporary project. That is, Strauss is, perhaps, implying that a “great thinker” ought to utilize “an earlier thinker of rank creatively,”16 that a “great thinker” ought to, by means of a novel interpretation, “transform” an earlier philosopher’s texts and philosophy. This possibility is suggested when we examine other claims from Strauss, such as those made in the revealing article “Farabi’s Plato.” One particularly curious passage—a passage Strauss omits from the version of “Farabi’s Plato” that appears as the introductory chapter to Persecution and the Art of Writing17—reads as follows:

His [i.e. Farabi’s] attitude to the historical Plato is comparable to the attitude of Plato himself to the historical Socrates, and to the attitude of the Platonic Socrates himself to, say, historical Egypt: “With what ease dost thou, o Farabi, invent Platonic speeches.” By this very fact he reveals himself as a true Platonist. For Platonists are not concerned with the historical (accidental) truth, since they are exclusively interested in the philosophic (essential) truth. Only because public speech demands a mixture of seriousness and playfulness, can a true Platonist present the serious teaching, the philosophic teaching, in a historical, and hence playful, garb.18 [Italics added]

According to Strauss, Farabi uses the “historical Plato” as part of his own project; the “true Platonist” can “invent,” the “serious teaching” is put into the “playful garb” provided by “historical” characters. A very similar comment comes at the end of “How Farabi read Plato’s Laws,” a central chapter in Strauss’s What is Political Philosophy? There, Strauss asserts:

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16 This of course goes against what may be Strauss’s exoteric claim that we must aim to understand an author “as he understood himself.” See P-AI, 159, 187-8; RCPR, 208; WPP, 67-8.

17 As has been noted, the first chapter of P-AI is based on “Farabi’s Plato.” Strauss has, he writes in the book’s preface, “made free use” of that article (“Farabi’s Plato”). Meier (Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss, 87n112) interprets Strauss’s comment as a significant “hint.”

18 “Farabi’s Plato,” 20-1. In this section of “Farabi’s Plato,” Strauss references Plato’s Phaedrus (275b3-4): “Socrates, how easily you make up stories, from Egypt or from anywhere else you like.” Strauss also writes that Farabi, like Plato, rejects “common poetry only” (“Farabi’s Plato,” 20n48).
Yet, as Farabi indicates by his remark about the Platonic writings in his preface to the *Summary* [i.e. of Plato's *Laws*], all Platonic writings presuppose already Plato’s correction of the Socratic teaching [i.e. combining the way of Socrates and way of Thrasymachus]. It follows therefore that not everything Farabi says in characterizing the content of the Platonic dialogues is meant to be borne out by the text of the Platonic dialogues [i.e. as Farabi was (i) “inventing” rather than attempting to accurately portray Plato's teaching or (ii) because Farabi knew there were teachings Plato could not declare publicly]. This conclusion is confirmed by the comparison of the remark on the *Laws* in the *Philosophy of Plato* with the *Summary*, to say nothing further about the *Summary* taken by itself. *We admire the ease with which Farabi invented Platonic speeches.* 19 [Italics added]

Strauss also writes that the “literary productions” of the philosophers are “exoteric,” 20 that Plato did not write a dialogue entitled “truth” or “nature,” 21 and insinuates that philosophy is essentially the same as poetry. 22 If, according to Strauss, the Platonic Socrates invented a “historical Egypt,” and if Plato invented a “historical Socrates,” and if Farabi invented a “historical Plato,” we are led recursively to an obvious question: did Strauss similarly “invent” a “historical Farabi,” a “historical Avicenna,” a “historical Maimonides,” and so on? This appears to be what Strauss is implying: in light of the “deadly” truth, the philosopher, the “true Platonist,” invents; the philosopher, like the poet, creates “art.” It is worth asking whether Strauss puts this “serious teaching” into a “playful” garb, a “garb” that comprises of, among others, medieval philosophers.

If I am correct, what Strauss is hinting at is that contemporary writers are allowed to use prior philosophers and their texts “creatively.” Strauss’s “true Platonism” might be Nietzschean in a decisive respect. 23 This possibility would most plausibly explain why there are so many difficulties with Strauss’s works on medieval Islamic philosophy: his reading into Farabi’s “silences”; his refusal to consider whether Farabi is referring to apocryphal or incomplete texts;

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19 IFPP, 154.

20 See Chapter 5, Section 3.

21 See Chapter 5, note 5.

22 See Chapter 5, Section 1 and notes 5 and 41. At RCPR, 179: “‘[A]s is shown clearly by Plato’s demand for the noble delusion, he himself is far from disapproving altogether of the poet’s activity. In principle the poets do exactly the same thing as Plato himself.’”

23 Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (ed. Geuss and Speirs), 40 [italics in original]: “Art alone can re-direct those repulsive thoughts about the terrible or absurd nature of existence into representations with which man can live; these representations are the *sublime*, whereby the terrible is tamed by artistic means, and the *comical*, whereby disgust at absurdity is discharged by artistic means.”
his failure to note that Farabi’s political system makes no sense without Farabi’s cosmological hierarchy and metaphysics; the problems with Strauss’s reading of Avicenna, including not asking whether Avicenna was referring to apocryphal texts; his claim that Maimonides believed in, essentially, the opposite of what he wrote; his debatable understanding of medieval Islamic societies, including his negative view of an ahistorical Islamic “orthodoxy” inimical to philosophy. Given Strauss’s intellectual and scholarly capabilities, we are led to ask whether all of these difficulties can be dismissed as honest mistakes. The view that Strauss deliberately misreads Islamic philosophy as part of a philosophical-political project would explain why a range of medievalists, including Rosenthal, Guttmann, Gutas, Davidson, Kraemer, Nasr and Leaman, Tamer, and Fraenkel, have criticised Strauss’s works. Perhaps we must, to borrow an expression from Strauss, arise from our “slumber” and “see the wood for the trees.” Strauss tells us that a “careful writer wants to be read carefully.” Does Strauss “carefully” make “mistakes” with medieval philosophy in order to reveal the “serious teaching”?

This leads to the second component of my argument: if philosophy culminates in (or necessitates) recognising that the truth is “deadly,” that there is no ultimate reality and that there can only be “art,” what can philosophy really achieve? As Strauss comments in the context of the “great thinker” Heidegger – a position Strauss does not contest – the “true ground of all grounds” is “the fundamental abyss.” Strauss’s comments on Nietzsche are equally telling:

If we may make a somewhat free use of an expression occurring in Nietzsche’s Second Meditation Out of Season, the truth is not attractive, lovable, life-giving, but deadly, as is shown by the true doctrines of the sovereignty of Becoming, of the fluidity of all concepts, types and species, and of the lack of any cardinal difference between man and beast (Werke, ed Schlechta, I 272); it is shown most simply by the true doctrine that God is dead. [Italics added]

Strauss seems to admit that he agrees with Nietzsche. While a reader sympathetic to Strauss could claim that Strauss often adopts the “voice,” so to speak, of the author he is writing on –

24 For criticism of Strauss from medievalists, see Chapter 1, Introduction; Section 2; notes 90-4. Criticisms of Strauss’s works were also noted in Chapters 2-6.

25 PAIF, 30, 36.

26 PAIF, 144.

27 SPPP, 30 [italics added]. At RCPR, 28 [Italics in original]: “Heidegger did face the problem. He declared that ethics is impossible, and his whole being was permeated by the awareness that this fact opens up an abyss.” See also Strauss’s comments at ibid., 33-4, 36. For Heidegger as a “great thinker,” see ibid., 29-30.

28 SPPP, 176-7.
that Strauss’s commentary often merges so closely with the philosopher being discussed that Strauss’s own “voice” is lost – Strauss could have, surely, qualified some of his remarks. It is certainly strange that Strauss, a man who escaped Nazi Germany and who was well aware of the connection both Nietzsche and Heidegger had to National Socialism, chose not to criticize some of the most debatable aspects of each thinker’s philosophy. Strauss does not write that certain philosophical and political positions are “true only for Nietzsche” or “true only for Heidegger.” Strauss could also have noted that there are many other “great thinkers” “in our time” besides Heidegger, yet Strauss does not do this. Rather, Heidegger is described as the “only great thinker in our time,” the only “great thinker” who “could help us in our intellectual plight,” the “only man who has an inkling of the dimensions of the problem of a world society,” the only “great thinker” who could save “rational liberalism.” Strauss positions Nietzsche and Heidegger as great thinkers. What we appear to receive from Strauss – in an entirely Nietzschean fashion – is the endorsement of the view that belief in a “real world,” “truth,” and “God,” be replaced by new forms of art, by new life-affirming fictions. Strauss writes:

The “world in itself,” the “thing-in-itself,” “nature” (aph. 9) is wholly chaotic and meaningless. Hence all meaning, all order originates in man, in man’s creative acts, in his will to power. Nietzsche’s statements or suggestions are deliberately enigmatic (aph. 40). By suggesting or saying that the truth is deadly, he does his best to break the power of the deadly truth; he suggests that the most important, the most comprehensive truth – the truth regarding all truths – is life-giving. In other words, by suggesting that the truth is human creation, he suggests that this truth at any rate is not a human creation. One is tempted to say that Nietzsche’s pure mind grasps the fact that the impure mind creates perishable truths. Resisting that temptation we state Nietzsche’s suggestion following him in this manner: the philosophers tried to get hold of the “text” as distinguished from “interpretations”; they tried to “discover” and not “invent.” What Nietzsche claims to have realized is that the text in its pure unfalsified form is inaccessible (like the Kantian Thing-in-itself); everything thought by anyone – philosopher or man of the people – is in the last analysis interpretation. But for this very reason the text, the world in itself, the true world cannot be of

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29 Strauss makes some criticisms of Nietzsche at WPP, 54-5. The question arises as to whether these criticisms were “exoteric.” Altman (The German Stranger) claims Strauss sympathized with National Socialism, and was intellectually close to Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Schmitt. Drury (Leo Strauss and the American Right) makes the same claim.

30 RCPR, 29; 43.

31 Nietzsche, Will to Power (ed. Kaufmann), aph. 461. As Nietzsche writes (ibid., aph. 617), to “impose upon becoming the character of being – that is the supreme will to power.” Compare with Nietzsche’s remarks at Twilight of the Idols, “Reason in Philosophy,” Section 1.
any concern to us; the world of any concern to us is necessarily a fiction, for it is necessarily anthropocentric; man is necessarily in a manner the measure of all things.\footnote{SPPP, 177. As noted in-text, if all truths are “perishable,” the result of a finite “perspective,” philosophers cannot seriously consider the “abyss,” the need for art, and so on, “truths.”}

Prior philosophers “tried,” Strauss writes, to “discover” rather than “invent.” Surely this is a remarkable passage, a concession from Strauss that his readers must take seriously. It suggests, once again, that Strauss’s esoteric view, his true view, is that due to the “deadly” truth, “invention” and the creation of “art” are the philosopher’s goals. There appear to be solid reasons for asking whether Strauss is endorsing Nietzsche’s “creative call to creativity,”\footnote{WFPP, 54: “But he [or Nietzsche] expected or hoped that his call, at once stern and imploring, questioning and desirous to be questioned, would tempt the best men of the generations after him to become true selves and thus to form a new nobility which would be able to rule the planet. He opposed the possibility of a planetary aristocracy to the alleged necessity of a universal classless and stateless society.”} and for asking whether Strauss is engaged in this “creative call” himself.

If Strauss accepts the fundamentals of Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s positions – and I believe the evidence indicates that he does – then his suggestion that the philosopher’s task is “inventing” art or the “noble lie”\footnote{Republic, 414b-c.} outlined by Plato has no strong theoretical basis. The claim that the philosopher has the role of global poet or global artist\footnote{See CM, 97, 112-3. Philosophy is the highest art, the “art of arts.”} is surely, given the philosophic “truth” Strauss recognises, itself a “noble lie.” Strauss is certainly aware that the doctrine of “will to power” might well represent a “relapse into metaphysics.”\footnote{This is what is suggested at PAW, 35-7. At Leo Strauss on Plato’s Symposium, 93: “Think of the noble lie in the Republic. The rulers, the philosophers, deceive the demos, and it is noble for the demos to be deceived. It is also noble for the philosophers thus to deceive.” Note Strauss’s comments at NRH, 26: “According to Nietzsche, the theoretical analysis of human life that realizes the relativity of all comprehensive views and thus depreciates them would make human life itself impossible, for it would destroy the protecting atmosphere within which life or culture or action is alone possible.” See also Strauss’s remarks (quoted in Chapter 5 of the present thesis, note 83) on Nietzsche restoring “the Platonic notion of the noble delusion.” That particular passage of NRH indicates that there were only two options available to Nietzsche. Compare with Strauss’s statements on the deficits of reason and science at RCPR, 33 (although Strauss clearly sides with reason, in terms of siding with a Godless “Athens”).} Equally problematic are the

\footnote{RCPR, 26. Strauss’s closing paragraph in “Relativism,” and his final sentence on Nietzsche in SPPP ("Die vornehme Natur ersetzt die göttliche Natur") suggest the philosopher becomes “compassionate” (see SPPP, 191) and creates (from solitude), “art” for the many. Surely this is Nietzsche’s own attempt at “art” – to persuade the “noble” to exercise their “creativity.”}
claims that the “abyss” is the “true ground of all grounds” (for on what basis does one get to assert the reality of the “abyss” but not God?) and that nature is “wholly chaotic and meaningless.” The latter claim raises the question of whether “nature” is knowable (it must be said that the manifold, testable and tested claims of the modern sciences appear to confirm to us that “nature” is, fundamentally, complexly ordered in ways we continue to uncover).

By making claims about ultimate reality – the truth of the “abyss,” that “nature” is “chaotic,” and that “art” is absolutely necessary – we are led back to metaphysics. This is what is inconsistent: Strauss appears to endorse the Nietzschean claim that all we have are individual perspectives or interpretations, that “the truth is human creation,” yet Strauss appears to make objective truth claims. If all we have are interpretations or perspectives, then the thesis that the truth is “deadly,” or that nature is “chaotic,” or that “art” must disguise the “deadly” truth, or that there is a categorical difference between “philosophers” and “non-philosophers,” can only be interpretations. If one claims that “truth” is a matter of perspective, then a series of assertions about God and nature cannot be awarded the status of transhistorical, or ultimate, or transcendent, “truths.” I am not aware of Strauss proposing a way to extricate himself from Nietzsche’s problematic epistemology.

Nevertheless, the artistic, or poetic, element of Strauss’s enterprise appears clear in passages such as this:

The true philosophers fulfil the absolutely necessary function of being the guardians of virtue or the free society. Being the teachers of the human race, they, and they alone, can enlighten the peoples as to their duties and as to the precise character of the good society. In order to fulfil this function, Socratic wisdom requires as its basis the whole of theoretical science; Socratic wisdom is the end and crown of theoretical science. Theoretical science, which is not intrinsically in the service of virtue and is therefore bad, must be put into the service of virtue in order to become good. It can become good, however, only if its study remains the preserve of the few who are by nature destined to guide the peoples; only an esoteric theoretical science can become good. This is not to deny that, in times of corruption, the restriction on the popularization of science can and must be relaxed.

Strauss insinuates that “theoretical science” reveals to us that the truth is “deadly” (theoretical science “is not intrinsically in the service of virtue and is therefore bad”) and, characteristically, appears to recommend “theoretical science” be disguised by “political philosophy.”

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38 See Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, aph. 37.

39 *NRH*, 263. As noted in Chapter 5, Section 1, there is no transcendent “Good” to orientate Strauss’s Plato.

40 As several of his remarks in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* suggest. See the commentary in Chapter 1, Section 1, of the present thesis.
essential point here is that, when critically assessed, Strauss’s enterprise is incoherent: on the esoteric level, Strauss appears to consider God dead (or at least unknowable), and believes that we can only know that nature or the “world in itself” is “wholly chaotic and meaningless.” Furthermore, Strauss suggests all comprehensive doctrines are “noble lies.” If this is the case, then the concepts and terms that permeate Strauss’s works – “virtue,” “good,” “wisdom,” “moderation,” “teaching” or “guiding” the peoples, creating a “free” society – have to be understood as having no objective basis. It is language that supports a myth. It is language that supports Strauss’s own “art.”

I am claiming that Strauss’s “noble lie,” his “art,” is his view that the philosopher must seek to create political stability so that the philosophic life, “the highest activity of man,” can be secured. The assertion that there are “true” philosophers and that they advance or defend the “highest interests of mankind,” must also be interpreted as part of Strauss’s rhetorical, or poetic, enterprise. If Strauss accepts Nietzsche’s theoretical position, there is no way, except for the individual’s perspective, to establish an order of rank. Based on the premises he seems to have accepted, Strauss’s endorsement of political stability and the philosophic life can only be “noble lies.”

My point, then, is this: Strauss’s exhortation that philosophers “invent,” or become artists, has no firm normative or theoretical basis; it is as arbitrary as any other claim. If Strauss considers the theoretical truth “deadly,” it is unclear what the difference is between Strauss’s position and the social scientific “value-free” positivism he lambasts. Strauss’s defenders might

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41 See Chapter 5, Section 2.

42 At SPPP, 180: “Nietzsche does not mean to sacrifice God for the sake of the Nothing, for while recognizing the deadly truth that God died he aims at transforming it into a life-inspiring one or rather to discover in the depth of the deadly truth its opposite.”

43 WPP, 221. Philosophy or science is “the highest activity of man.” Note that there are only a few who deserve the title “philosopher” according to Strauss. See Chapter 1 of the present thesis, notes 59 and 67.

44 P.AIF, 18.

45 I.e., the demos require myths, only philosophers are able to create such myths, ergo the philosophers are the most important. See note 36 above.

46 At RCPR, 26: “[H]e [i.e. Nietzsche] discovered that the life-giving comprehensive truth is subjective or transtheoretical in that it cannot be grasped detachedly and that it cannot be the same for all men or for all ages.”

47 See, for example, NRH, chapter 2; IFPP, chapter 8; LAM, 223. It is an inconsistent claim however, given the philosophic “truth” Strauss recognises. Concerning the definition of “deadly truth,” see Chapter 1, note 33.
respond that the difference here is that “value-free” positivism is a form of nihilism (or leads to nihilism), yet social scientists do not recognise positivism for what it is. The difference then is that Strauss’s position amounts to understanding nihilism for what it is. This aligns with what appears to be Strauss’s esoteric teaching: philosophers are to hide the philosophic truth (nihilism), create political and social stability, and (simultaneously) attempt to preserve difference and closed societies. Whether Strauss’s political program is entirely coherent is questionable. Ultimately, if nihilism is the philosophic truth then, on Strauss’s account, all political action is done for the sake of a “philosophy” that is fundamentally indistinguishable from “poetry.” Any constructive, life-giving, production of a philosopher or poet is, in the final analysis, merely a noble lie; the recognition of nihilism, of the abyss, means we are not morally obligated to attempt any type of response, nor can we claim one type of response is better, more “philosophically” sound, or intrinsically more preferable. By failing to inform us what the difference is between “philosophy” and “poetry,” Strauss’s teaching appears to be morally and metaphysically baseless. It is, I believe, a teaching that resulted from Strauss’s position in history: Strauss appears entirely indebted to Nietzsche.

7.2 The problems with Strauss’s approach to medieval Islamic philosophy

As Strauss may well have “playfully” utilised texts by premodern philosophers, I believe scholars of medieval Islamic philosophy will be best served by being aware of Strauss’s major contention (the possibility of authors disguising, to some degree, their true views) but treating his claims, particularly those suggesting, essentially, an esoteric Nietzscheanism, with a healthy dose of scepticism. Scholars must also be cautious of Strauss’s broad, often misleading, generalisations about medieval Islam. As argued in Chapter 4, Strauss’s reading of Islam denies the reality of how pluralistic and receptive to philosophy these societies often were. Medieval Islam helped create, we must recall, thinkers of the stature of Farabi, Razi, Avicenna, Ghazali, Averroes, al-Haytham (d. 1040), al-Biruni (d. 1048), and Ibn Arabi (d. 1240). Medieval Islam helped keep philosophy and science, including Aristotelianism, alive. For Strauss, Islam is a non- or anti-philosophical religion of law, a religion spread by an armed prophet, a religion that conquered

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48 On this point, see McShea, “Leo Strauss on Machiavelli,” 796.

49 Strauss’s assertion that Islam is a religion of “law” is highly debatable. The Quran contains over 6000 verses (Ayat), only 500 of which have “legal content.” See Hallaq, A History of Islamic Legal Theories, 3. The message of the Islamic prophet was not a message of law but a message of faith; faith precedes the law.
by force.\textsuperscript{50} It is a religion that Strauss insinuates was an outgrowth of Plato’s philosophy.\textsuperscript{51} While this thesis has taken, I believe, important steps towards understanding Strauss’s view of Islam, the political implications of Strauss’s position are yet to be fully understood.\textsuperscript{52}

Based on what has been argued throughout this thesis, defending Strauss’s reading\textsuperscript{53} of Islamic philosophy will likely require addressing several problems:

1. Strauss’s Nietzschean sympathies and apparent advocacy of “inventing” historical characters suggests he may have purposefully distorted Farabi, and other medieval philosophers, to assert the historical existence of an anti-metaphysical, atheistic, “Platonic political philosophy.” The question of whether Strauss is creatively interpreting prior thinkers needs to be engaged with. If not, Strauss’s works on prior philosophers will remain vulnerable to the criticism that Strauss uses esoteric/esoteric writing to “discover” Nietzschean philosophical doctrines he agrees with.

2. If Strauss’s works are interpreted favourably (\textit{i.e.}, Strauss is not read as a Nietzschean creating “art”), Strauss’s insufficient knowledge of Islam’s history suggests he is not in a position to offer hermeneutic tools to be used for interpreting medieval Islamic philosophy. It is not evident why Strauss’s hermeneutics ought to be applied, indiscriminately, to premodern authors, including several prominent medieval Islamic philosophers. Furthermore, if one can produce compelling evidence that supports Strauss’s claim that medieval authors did write “exoteric” or “political” philosophy, more precise methods for interpreting medieval texts are required.\textsuperscript{54} Strauss’s hermeneutics are,

\textsuperscript{50} See Strauss’s remarks at \textit{TOM}, 84, 144. Contemporary scholars such as Arjomand (“Islam,” \textit{Global Religions}, 30) contend: “As a result of modern scholarship, we know that Islam, as distinct from Arab domination, was not spread swiftly by the sword but rather gradually and by popular missionary movements, often in defiance of the fiscal interest of the state.” See also Rahman’s remarks at \textit{Major Themes of the Quran}, 63. Even Qutb, the “Islamist ideologue,” writes that Islam’s intention is not to impose beliefs on people. See \textit{Ma‘ālim fī al-Ṭarīq}; Milestones, chapter 4.

\textsuperscript{51} See Chapter 3, Section 4; Chapter 5, Section 2.

\textsuperscript{52} A recent investigation of Strauss’s political influence is Hirst, \textit{Leo Strauss and the Invasion of Iraq: Encountering the Abyss} (2013).

\textsuperscript{53} I only offer suggestions here, and perhaps they are unnecessary. McGinnis (Review of \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy}) noted in 2005 that, when it comes to medieval philosophy, there appears to be a movement away from “a Straussian paradigm.”

\textsuperscript{54} Furthermore, if these philosophers did have an “esoteric” teaching, one might ask whether this teaching could not, like the mystical core of religion or the Tao, be expressed in words. See note 68 below.
as mentioned, vulnerable to the criticism that they are entirely arbitrary, and lead to “hermeneutical libertarianism.”

3. As discussed in Chapter 3 (Section 5), Strauss claims that an “esoteric” Platonism influenced medieval Islamic philosophers, yet this assertion is backed by little evidence. Given Strauss’s view that “true” Platonists will not disclose their Platonism (i.e., “true” Platonism remains “esoteric”), Strauss’s contention appears to be impossible to adequately validate. If one believes his assertion then there is no possibility of meaningful debate: Strauss’s view is not supported by (or is outside of) textual and historical evidence. Nevertheless, adopting Strauss’s reading of medieval Islamic philosophy requires providing compelling reasons as to why claims about an “esoteric” Platonism are, despite any tangible evidence, justifiable.

Very similarly, I have argued that Strauss’s reading of Plato presents many difficulties. In my view, those wishing to argue that Strauss’s trans-historical, anti-metaphysical, Platonism is defensible need to respond to the problems caused by Strauss’s apparently Nietzschean politics, the highly contestable nature of his hermeneutics, and the fact that Strauss’s interpretation appears premised on a highly problematic account of Farabi. Rosen’s claim that Strauss is at times close to Kant is worthy of attention, as it suggests Strauss’s thought is an outgrowth of Enlightenment philosophy. It is noticeable that Strauss does not consider the Platonic Ideas to have a separate ontological status; Strauss suggests the doctrine of Ideas is only an “exoteric” Platonic theme. A


56 Rosen, Hermeneutics as Politics, 125-6. See Kant’s comments on transcendental ideas as “heuristic fictions” (Critique of Pure Reason, A771/B779) and human reason having a “natural propensity” to overstep boundaries (ibid., A642/B670). At ibid., A5/B9:

Captivated by such a proof of the power of reason, the drive for expansion sees no bounds. The light dove, in free flight cutting through the air the resistance of which it feels, could get the idea that it could do even better in airless space. Likewise, Plato abandoned the world of the senses because it set such narrow limits for the understanding, and dared to go beyond it on the wings of the ideas, in the empty space of pure understanding. He did not notice that he made no headway by his efforts, for he had no resistance, no support, as it were, by which he could stiffen himself, and to which he could apply his power in order to put his understanding into motion.

Kant is clearly critical of Plato’s mysticism and the ontological status of the Ideas. The Platonic Ideas structure the world of Becoming; the world of Becoming is a copy of the world of Being (see Timaeus, 29b-c). The Platonic Ideas are transcendent: perfect, separate, and unchanging. Concerning the Ideas, Strauss is a Kantian, as the commentary on Plato in The City and Man indicates.
defense of Strauss’s reading of Plato would also require, in my view, arguing that “Neoplatonism” does not represent a continuation of Plato’s true doctrines.

7.3 Final Remarks

Strauss’s reading of medieval Islamic philosophy is difficult to accept for several reasons. To briefly repeat three important points: how do we view Strauss’s categorical dismissal of “Neoplatonism”? As discussed, the “neo” classification was a construction of the 18th century; why should the *falasifa*’s “Neoplatonism” be regarded as suspect, particularly as there are few solid reasons for doing so? Secondly, how do we respond to Strauss’s claim that the *falasifa* practiced an atheistic “science of the beings,” an ontology premised on a secular worldview? As noted, the classification “ontology” began in the 17th century, not in the Islamic Middle Ages, and the atheistic worldview Strauss attributes to the *falasifa* – a radical scepticism of the transcendent and suprasensible – is unfounded. Why are we to believe that the closest thinker to Farabi is, apparently, Heidegger? Thirdly, what do we make of Strauss’s belief in a rigid separation of “philosophy” and “religion”? This separation is, perhaps, a result of the transmission of Averroes’s philosophy into the Western world; it is not, however, an Islamic reality.

In light of Strauss’s problematic account of Farabi, I argued in Chapters 5 and 6 that Strauss’s “Platonic political philosophy” is not truly Platonic. Strauss’s treatment of Plato’s metaphysics and theology is unconvincing as Strauss’s approach appears, at best, as arbitrary; at worst, Strauss’s approach to these texts appears to have been guided by his Nietzschean sympathies. The fact remains that, if we take Plato seriously, then we must, unlike Strauss, investigate and consider Plato’s claims that there is something beyond, something that cannot be scientifically known, something that can only be seen through the “eye of the soul” or the “indwelling power in the soul and the instrument whereby each of us apprehends.”

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57 See Chapter 6, Section 3.

58 See Chapter 4, note 4.

59 See Corbin’s comments on Averroes and Ibn Arabi at *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*, 12-3. See also the remarks at the end of Chapter 4, Section 3, of the present thesis.

60 *Republic*, 533c.

61 *Republic*, 518c.
reason why Sufis and medieval philosophers labelled Plato “divine.” 62 Strauss’s view of philosophy ironically ( ironic given that Strauss situates himself as a critic of the European Enlightenment63) appears to be an outgrowth of the European Enlightenment’s ideal of absolute knowing and technical mastery, the dream of an existence that has no space for metaphysics, divinity, or transcendence. This is a dream that involves overlooking the fact that, according to modern cosmology, we cannot assent to Aristotle’s claim that the world is eternal.

Despite Strauss’s assertion that reason cannot refute revelation, a claim that begins in Spinoza’s Critique of Religion and continues into Strauss’s American-era texts, many readers would agree that, at the least, Strauss appears to take a decisionistic position in favour of an atheistic “Athens.”64 However, when read critically, it is difficult to believe that Strauss takes religious traditions seriously, and that he really believes that a thoughtful person needs to make, or ought to make, a decision between “Athens” and “Jerusalem.” Unlike Farabi, Strauss does not consider there to be any real similarities between philosophy and religion: Strauss accentuates their

62 For example, the “divine Plato” is used in the title of Farabi’s Kitāb al-jam’ bayna ra’yay al-hakimayn Aflāṭūn al-ilāhī wa- Aritātūlī. Ghazali uses the same term at Tabāfūt al-falāsifa, 4. See also Avicenna, Fi ḫibbat al-nubuwāt, 124-6. We also find references to Plato in the works of the mystical poet Rumi (for example, his “Song of the Reed”). Chittick points to the fact that Ibn Arabi viewed the “great man,” the “divine Plato,” as a philosopher who could be used as a standard to judge the practices of his contemporaries; Plato was viewed as similar to the religious prophets. See Chittick, Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity, 135, 185n5; The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination, 203.

63 In addition to Strauss’s remarks on the European Enlightenment, documented in Chapter 3, see TOM, 173; WPP, 46. At TOM, 221: “For if Fortuna can be vanquished, man would seem to be able to become the master of the universe.”

64 That the “Enlightenment” had to “laugh orthodoxy out of a position from which it could not be driven by any other means” is asserted at SCR, 143-4. Strauss repeats the claim in his “1962 Preface” to SCR (28-9) and in PL, 29-30; PG, 19. It could be asserted that Strauss’s comments (for example, at NRH, 75-6) indicate that Strauss does not believe philosophy, or reason, can ever truly refute revelation. The remarks in his “1962 Preface” (SCR, 29 [Italics added]) read as follows:

Certain it is that Spinoza cannot legitimately deny the possibility of revelation. But to grant that revelation is possible means to grant that the philosophic account and the philosophic way of life are not necessarily, not evidently, the true account and the right way of life: philosophy, the quest for evident and necessary knowledge, rests itself on an unevident decision, on an act of the will, just as faith does. Hence the antagonism between Spinoza and Judaism, between unbelief and belief, is ultimately not theoretical but moral.

As argued in Chapter 2, many of Strauss’s readers understand him to be an atheist. According to Strauss’s ecoteric position, we have to make a decision as to whether or not we accept the truth claims of revelation. In practice, however, Strauss makes his decision clear to serious readers: he is an atheist, and true philosophers can, in his view, side only with a godless “Athens.”
incompatibility. Strauss leads us to believe that thoughtful men and women will dismiss the Judaism that has a living God, “metaphysical” Platonism, Islam, Christianity, mysticism, and matters of the spirit or soul. Strauss implies that all “true Platonists,” and thereby all true philosophers, are anti-metaphysicians, that they will not believe in the supernatural or transcendent.

My point is that, on the exoteric level, Strauss suggests “faith” is an option yet, when his remarks are critically assessed, Strauss considers religion a dishonest escape from the “deadly” truth. Strauss does not, then, ask his readers to take the “moral” life of “faith” seriously; “all objective certainties are,” he writes, “sham.” Strauss does not ask his readers to wholeheartedly devote themselves to a philosophic life that involves searching for, or attempting to justify, transcendent goals or truths. We do not find in Strauss’s works an endorsement of Plato’s “Athens,” the “Athens” that points us towards the World of Being. We do not find in Strauss’s texts tangible, honest, support for the “Jerusalem” of Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, the “Jerusalem” that points to the God of revelation. What Strauss continually supports is an atheistic, anti-metaphysical, philosophy, a philosophy with noticeable Nietzschean overtones. By suggesting Nietzsche’s theoretical position is the “truth,” Strauss implies that anyone who is honest enough will not genuinely consider “faith” an option.

If I interpret Strauss correctly, he believes that the radically “Enlightened” mind is the only valid form of guidance. However, the radically “Enlightened” mind represents just one human possibility. Strauss can be criticized for attempting to remove the heart and soul from both philosophy and religion. An “act of the will,” a decision, in favour of an atheistic, anti-metaphysical philosophy is not our only option, and the belief that philosophy is necessarily “atheistic” and “anti-metaphysical” is, according to Strauss’s own terms, only one interpretation. Strauss fails to understand what philosophy is. The history of human thought, and the essential human experience, demonstrates that we do not have to separate “philosophy” from “religion.”

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65 See note 64 above. See also RCP R, 36; Rosen, Hermeneutics as Politics, 111, 121, 127, 180.

66 RCP R, 36. Strauss’s distinction between the “moral” life of faith and, presumably, the “amoral” life of philosophy, once again points to Nietzsche, who consistently refers to “we immoralists.” See Beyond Good and Evil, aph. 32; Twilight of the Idols, V.3 and V.6; Daybreak, preface, aph. 4.

67 For the “radical enlightenment,” see PL, 136n2; PG, 13-4n1; “Religiöse Lage der Gegenwart,” 389. Compare with Strauss’s remarks on the loss of all “authoritative traditions” at LAM, 8. When read together, these texts reiterate the influence Nietzsche’s critique of Platonism and the Bible had on Strauss, and that Strauss believed, from at least 1930, that we “are left in a world without any authority, any direction” (“Religiöse Lage der Gegenwart,” 389).
The essential human experience demonstrates that we seek, and that there are, paths towards the Truth. 68

68 For Strauss’s endorsement of a Nietzschean philosophy and politics to be successful, he has to claim that a rigid separation between “Athens” and “Jerusalem” is possible, that Plato’s metaphysics were a likely tale and not something enigmatically expressed as it represented Plato’s true views (e.g., the famous passage at Republic, 509b), and that Plotinus was not, in-fact, Plato’s successor but someone who (to quote Kojève) was lost (like Kojève’s “Christians”) in Platonic “nonsense” (see Chapter 6, note 101). Yet, as argued in Chapter 6, Plotinus clearly did understand himself as a successor of Plato’s, and there are scholars who argue for a strong connection between Plato and “Neoplatonism” (for example, Krämer, Plato and the Foundations of Metaphysics). Strauss cannot admit that there is at least one good reason for believing that there is a connecting thread between Platonism, “Neoplatonism,” Christian Gnosticism, Islamic Mysticism, and so on: several great thinkers have admitted a form of experience which transcends reason, something we cannot adequately describe via appeals to reason alone. For example, Ghazali writes at al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl (ed. Saliba & Ayyad), 101; Deliverance from Error (trans. McCarthy), 52 [Italics added]:

Then it became clear to me that their [sc. the Sufis’] most distinctive characteristic is something that can be attained, not by study, but rather by fruitional experience [dhawq: taste] and the state of ecstasy [ḥāl: mystical or spiritual state] and “the exchange of qualities” [tabaddul al-ṣifāt].

McCarthy (Deliverance from Error, 103n162) draws attention to the similarity between the Sufi concept of dhawq and Psalm 34:8 (“Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him”). Regarding the heart as a “focus for knowledge,” and reason as delimiting, see Ibn ‘Arabi, Fushṣūl al-hikam, chapters 5 & 12; Chittick, The Sufi Path of Knowledge, 106-7. Correspondingly, Meister Eckhart (Book of Divine Consolation, in Selected Writings, 83), an influence on Heidegger (see Zur Eroberung der Gelassenheit. Aus einem Feldweggespräch über das Denken), writes:

“I,” the Father says, “will lead her into the wilderness and speak to her heart” (Hos: 2:14). Heart to heart, one in one, is how God loves.

Kant (Critique of Pure Reason, “Of Ideas in General”) criticizes Plato’s “mystical deduction” and “hypostatization” of the Ideas (see also Kant’s Lectures on Metaphysics, 29:946-55). Similarly, God, the soul, and the world, become only regulative ideas beyond experience. Medieval philosophers and mystics, unlike Enlightenment philosophers such as Kant, recognised the possibility of faith grounded in “mystical” or “fruitional” experience. Strauss seems to be a product of post-Kantian German philosophy as he does not acknowledge such possibilities. One of modernity’s characteristics for Heidegger is the “flight of the gods” [die Flucht der Götter] (see Heidegger, Introduction to Metaphysics, 40), however, Heidegger at least suggests openness to the “mystery” [Geheimnis] faced in the technological age. When read critically, Strauss does not suggest such “mystery.” While Strauss’s comments (e.g., at IFPP, 91; “Farabi’s Plato,” 15; PAW, 114, 137, 139; NRH, 261, 291-2) imply that philosophy is the life of contemplation, that philosophy is a “way of life,” Strauss appears to consider it acceptable to answer all the “fundamental and comprehensive problems” (OT, 196; NRH, 23-4, 32, 35) by “willing” answers. Compare with Quran, 13:28; 51:20-23; 58:22.
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TOM  Thought on Machiavelli (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958)

WPP  What is Political Philosophy (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959)

PPH  The Political Philosophy of Hobbes (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963)

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