

QUAESTIONES DISPUTATAE

MICHAEL POLANYI'S
SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY
AND THE FUTURE OF LIBERALISM

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Michael Polanyi and the Theologico-Political Problem

Jon Fennell[†]

“... the quarrel between the Enlightenment and orthodoxy ... must be understood anew.”

— Leo Strauss²

Unexpectedly appearing within Michael Polanyi’s monumental critique of doubt (Chapter 9 of *Personal Knowledge*) is an explicit endorsement of Paul Tillich’s assertion that science and history (that is, systematic rational inquiry), on the one hand, and revelation, on the other, are so different in kind that they logically cannot conflict. In a long footnote Polanyi approvingly includes Tillich’s express statement on the matter:

“Scientific and historical criticism protect revelation; they cannot dissolve it, for revelation belongs to a dimension of reality for which scientific and historical analysis are inadequate. Revelation is the manifestation of the depth of reason and the ground of being. It points to the mystery of existence and to our ultimate concern. It is independent of what science and history say about the conditions in which it appears; and it cannot make science and history dependent on itself. *No conflict between different dimensions of reality is possible. Reason receives revelation in*

¹ This essay substantially benefitted from critical commentary by Timothy Burns, who remains in disagreement with aspects of the analysis of Strauss contained herein. The essay was also considerably strengthened through a careful reading by Charles Lowney, resulting in numerous useful suggestions.

² Leo Strauss, *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 26.

ecstasy and miracles; but reason is not destroyed by revelation, just as revelation is not emptied by reason.”³

This reference to Tillich occurs in a section titled “Religious Doubt.” The discussion is an aspect of Polanyi’s larger enterprise of protecting religious belief from the doubt-based critical assault that was propelled by, and largely defined, the Enlightenment. As we will see, the heart of Polanyi’s defense of religious belief is that it has been misunderstood by its critics. Echoing Tillich, Polanyi will maintain that religious belief, properly grasped, is fundamentally immune to critical reason. On his account, such belief (which is both the ground for and product of revelation) can be reconciled with the exercise of that faculty. Indeed, when reason (as well as doubt) is correctly understood, it can, according to Polanyi, serve as an ally of revelation, since it is through rational demonstration, after all, that he establishes its legitimacy and authority.⁴

There exists a very different understanding of the relationship between reason and revelation. Often referred to as “the theologico-political problem,” this conception of the two authorities understands them to be in active competition. The demands of one, fully comprehended and taken seriously, make it impossible to heed the demands of the other. The serious thinker is therefore faced with a choice regarding the thing most needful. At stake is the most important question: How is one to live? On this view, in opposition to what is said by Polanyi, conflict on this matter is unavoidable. Reconciliation between reason and revelation is not the sign of maturity but instead is evidence of misunderstanding, if not an unmanly refusal to face the truth. The theologico-political problem has in our time been clearly and forcefully outlined by Leo Strauss.⁵

³ These are Tillich’s words, quoted in Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 283, note 1. Emphasis added. Further references to the book will be noted as “PK.”

⁴ This perhaps explains an additional comment by Tillich (also cited in the note in *Personal Knowledge*): “Science, psychology, and history are allies of theology in the fight against the supranaturalistic distortions of genuine revelation” (ibid.).

⁵ To anticipate the direction in which we will be proceeding, let us note at the beginning that the capacity clearly and forcefully to outline a problem does not entail that the problem is necessary or unavoidable, nor does it entail that the most dramatic portrayal of the problem is the truest.

In what follows we will begin with a detailed portrayal of the theologico-political problem as frequently described by Strauss. After that we will bring Polanyi's thought to bear on what Strauss has set forth. At the outset the outcome of this engagement is unknown. It is possible that, just as under Strauss's rendering of the theologico-political problem the serious inquirer must choose between conflicting demands, it will be necessary to ally with either Polanyi or Strauss and impossible to endorse both. But it may also turn out that from the encounter between these two positions there will arise a perspective that reveals a faulty presupposition which, if abandoned, clears the way for a heretofore unimagined result.⁶

1. The Theologico-Political Problem

Leo Strauss is widely regarded as the most important (and for some the most controversial) student of political philosophy during the twentieth century. Among his achievements is definition and associated systematic study of political philosophy itself.⁷ On Strauss's analysis the meaning of political philosophy consists primarily not in a set of doctrines and certainly not in an assembly of settled conclusions but instead in an activity—an activity intellectual in nature, as well as serious and morally astute, made necessary by the existence of something that asks to be understood. And what is that? It is best at this point to let Strauss speak for himself:

⁶ In composing this study, it has been necessary (as well as very enlightening) to read a number of early essays by Strauss. Prominent in this early work is bitter criticism by Strauss of what he calls "conspectivism." (See Appendix A and pages 243-244 of Appendix C in *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s*, described in note 8 below.) This term, coined by Strauss, refers to the intellectually corrupt practice, inspired by an erroneous historicism, of establishing a synthesis of contemporary views that are properly preserved in their contradictory form. In establishing a bogus synthesis, the truth of the contradictory positions is compromised and the achievement of their authors is ignorantly and arrogantly denied. It would, of course, be ironic, to say the least, if a study of Polanyi in light of what is said by Strauss on comparable matters were to fall into the egregious error of conspectivism. Whether this in fact occurs in what follows is up to the reader to decide. What can be said at the outset is that your author rejects historicism (as does, incidentally, Polanyi). Moreover, not all reconciliations of seemingly inconsistent views are cheap and contrived; in some cases, there is only the appearance of conflict, and discovery of a common underlying principle or insight is a fruitful path to the truth—perhaps the sole path available to us.

⁷ Perhaps the best place to start in becoming acquainted with Strauss, certainly in regard to what he has to say about political philosophy, is "What Is Political Philosophy?" (henceforth "WIPP") in Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 9-55.

All political action is ... guided by some thought of better or worse. But thought of better or worse implies thought of the good. The awareness of the good which guides all our actions has the character of opinion: it is no longer questioned but, on reflection, it proves to be questionable. The very fact that we can question it directs us towards such a thought of the good as is no longer questionable. All political action has then in itself a directedness towards knowledge of the good: of the good life or of the good society.... If this directedness becomes explicit, if men make it their explicit goal to acquire knowledge of the good life and of the good society, political philosophy emerges.⁸

It is intrinsic to the character of political philosophy that it is sensitive to the distinctive nature of political life—to what, inter alia, we might call the physiology of the body politic, that is, political physiology, which encompasses illness as well as health. It turns out that this nature consists of a number of tensions or problems as well as a series of requirements. Because of this sensitivity political philosophy, even while engaging in its quest for knowledge of the good, never loses sight of the tensions, problems, and requirements that define political life. Arguably the most significant tension constituting political philosophy understood substantively is the theologico-political problem. It is at the heart of Strauss's work throughout his career, and recent translations of some of his early writings (from the 1920s and early 1930s), accompanied by

⁸ Strauss, "WIPP," 10. As we shall see below, a logical and unavoidable consequence of raising the question "What is political philosophy?" is emergence of the question "Why philosophy?" (which, for Strauss, is in classical thought largely equivalent to "Why science?"). The genesis of this latter question is elsewhere attributed by Strauss to classical philosophy's recognition of the need to justify itself to (politically powerful) non-philosophic opinion (and thus to itself), examination of which becomes, as we shall also see below, the precise focus of rejuvenated Socratic philosophic activity. (See "On Classical Political Philosophy" in *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 78-94, at 90-94.) At first glance, then, it might appear that Strauss is offering in the two essays conflicting alternative accounts of the origins of political philosophy (of, that is, the impulse to examine prevailing opinion), the first purely philosophical and the second largely politically practical. But this impression is misleading. The two accounts are complementary. There are two reasons for the philosopher to take opinion seriously, but they derive from a common passion to know the truth. Taken together the two essays provide a fuller picture than we receive from either one of them. It is useful and enlightening to view the matter in one way and then the other. But for a satisfactory account we must pay mind to both, and do so, as much as it is possible, in a single unified grasp of the situation.

burgeoning corresponding scholarship, show that Strauss's discovery of this problem as a young man accounts for the direction of his studies in the decades that followed.⁹

It is generally understood that “the theologico-political problem” is a label for the serious and thoughtful response to the irreconcilable claims of reason (which Strauss makes synonymous with “philosophy”¹⁰ and early on is referred to as “theory”) on the one hand, and those of revelation on the other. We will elaborate on this tension shortly. But, for now, let us note that the conflicting dicta of reason (“philosophy” or “theory”) and revelation represent only one element of the theologico-political problem, and in fact may not be the most fundamental element. Underlying the significance of the tension between reason and revelation is the tension between philosophy and politics. It is because revelation typically, in the form of (more or less concealed) religiously grounded strictures and guidelines, assumes political authority that

⁹ See *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s*, edited by Martin D. Yaffe and Richard S. Ruderman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). This volume contains eleven frequently illuminating essays and a most useful introduction. Even more important for students of Strauss who do not read German, this collection includes English translations, heretofore unavailable, of a number of Strauss's essays and other work from 1929-1939. Also indispensable for understanding the origins of Strauss's thought is Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theological-Political Problem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). To the list of indispensable studies should be added David Janssens, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Philosophy, Prophecy, and Politics in Leo Strauss's Early Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), a study that came to the attention of your author only during the final editing of the present study. In addition, and of considerable value in understanding “How Strauss Became Strauss” (the title of an essay by Meier contained in the Yaffe and Ruderman volume), are Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*; Eugene R. Sheppard, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The Making of a Political Philosopher*, and early portions of Kenneth L. Deutsch and Walter Nicgorski, eds., *Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker*. To reach a clearer understanding of Strauss's early development it is indispensable as well to study his own *Philosophy and Law* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995) which contains an introduction and three essays by Strauss from 1931-1935. Heinrich Meier, beginning in the later 1980s, has made significant contributions to our understanding of the young Strauss and the origins of his intellectual development. See, for example, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995). This dialogue, due to Meier, is no longer so hidden and Strauss's early encounter with Schmitt is now a well-known moment in Strauss's rapidly expanding ken.

¹⁰ In notes for a 1948 lecture, Strauss refers to philosophy in his sense as “a particular *interpretation* of reason” and “*the* perfection of reason, and *therefore* the perfection of man.” See “Reason and Revelation” contained in Meier's *Leo Strauss and the Theological-Political Problem* (page 141). Later in the same notes Strauss at some length indicates that in the conflict between reason and revelation the former refers to “philosophy” in the original (pre-modern) sense which was largely constituted by a quest for truth based on “the distinction between hearsay and seeing with one's own eyes—the beginnings of all things must be made manifest, or *demonstrated*, on the *basis* of what all men can see always in broad daylight or through *ascent* from the visible things” (145).

philosophy (the willful and presumably autonomous exercise of reason) publicly comes into conflict with it. (The conflict may of course be intensely experienced privately as well.) This is unsurprising because there is a close affinity between political authority and religion given that the former, even in allegedly secular or even professedly atheist regimes, rests upon an appeal to something higher which is an object of piety and therefore not in the eyes of the regime appropriately called into question. Given what is, for philosophy, the problematic character of the authoritative moral opinion that characterizes the regime, philosophy finds itself compelled to examine it.¹¹ Thus, while, granted, there exist regimes in which considerable broad and far-reaching inquiry exists and is openly, even piously, encouraged, there is a point, even there, at which the impulse to question (i.e., to live seriously in accordance with the principle that no authority is binding unless one sees its rationality and hence its legitimacy for oneself) challenges foundational political principle and thus is dangerous.¹² Philosophy therefore requires protection from the political, no less than the political requires protection from philosophy. The former is best provided to philosophy by philosophy itself insofar as it conceals its subversive activity and operates with prudence.¹³ The immediately important point is that philosophy (reasoned inquiry as a way of life and as the best thing possible) is equally at odds both with the demands of revelation and those of political life, to the extent that political life is necessarily upheld by orthodox authority. Because there exists a tension between philosophy and orthodoxy in *any* form, it is the *pair* of conflicts that constitutes, despite the apparent narrowness of the label, “the theologico-political problem.” Hence, the problem would persist even if one of the conflicts were somehow avoided or resolved.¹⁴

¹¹ Further, as discussed in note 7 above, philosophy is compelled to examine prevailing opinion as part of its internal obligation to justify itself before its own bar.

¹² Governed as it is by a desire to know the truth, reason (philosophy) must also turn its focus upon itself: “Why philosophy?” (“Why science?”). The search for justification is radical. It is because the questioning (the pursuit of the truth) is unlikely ever to end that we may regard the tension that occasions the inquiry to be fundamental (itself therefore a part of that truth).

¹³ A more subtle and ultimately more rewarding mechanism, albeit potentially more dangerous than the exercise of prudence, is for philosophy to act in its own defense through shaping the opinion of those with, or likely later to possess, political influence.

¹⁴ Such resolution surely appears impossible for the latter conflict since its existence is evidently attributable to the nature of (political) things.

But why is it the case that reason and revelation are necessarily in conflict? In answering this question, we are taken back to the young Strauss's encounter with Spinoza.¹⁵ Orthodoxy requires that we obey the word of God as revealed to the prophets and set forth in Scripture. Reason ("philosophy") in contrast urges us to accept only that authority whose basis is rationally clear to (each of) us. Spinoza for Strauss is a sterling representative of the rejection of orthodoxy (and a corresponding will to independence) carried out in the name of reason. What Strauss surprisingly discovers through his extensive study of Spinoza is that he (Spinoza) never succeeds in rationally demonstrating through argument the impossibility of revelation. Instead, Spinoza's putative discrediting of orthodoxy (i.e., belief in Scripture) in the final analysis consists only of mocking it.¹⁶ The reason that Spinoza is unable to do more than this is that orthodoxy begins, and never deviates, from belief in an unfathomable and all-powerful God. "There is but one thing needful," namely, piety and, through it, understanding of God in the sense, as opposed to theory, of "man's

¹⁵ Strauss's first book, written in 1925-1928 and published in 1930, was *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (hereafter cited as "*SCR*"). The preface to the 1962 edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997) is perhaps the most revealing statement by the often-enigmatic Strauss regarding his life's work and intellectual journey. Strauss, incidentally, was born in 1899 (and Polanyi in 1891).

Strauss reiterates the insights gleaned from this early study of Spinoza in writings (lectures as well as publications) throughout his career. For example, clearly and forcefully communicating Strauss's grasp of the theologico-political problem is a 1954 essay, "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy," reprinted in *The Independent Journal of Philosophy*, Volume III (1979), 111-118. See too the notes for the 1948 lecture, titled "Reason and Revelation" (followed by the even more dramatic "Notes on Reason and Revelation"), contained in Meier's *Leo Strauss and the Theological-Political Problem*. This is a strikingly explicit portrayal of the conflicting perspectives. For a comprehensive and extended discussion of these matters, see Strauss's "Progress or Return?" in Thomas Pangle, ed., *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 227-270.

¹⁶ The standard critique of Scripture, focusing on specific assertions (e.g., "that Scripture is verbally inspired, that Moses composed the Pentateuch, that the text of Scripture has come down to us without corruption and without falsifying modifications, that the miracles recounted in Scripture actually happened") "has a prospect of success, not by direct argumentation, but only by virtue of the mockery that lends spice to the arguments, and lodges them firmly in the hearer's mind. Reason must turn into 'esprit' if reason is to experience her more than royal freedom, her unshakeable sovereignty, and to realize it in action. Through laughter and mockery, reason overleaps the barriers that she was not able to overcome when she proceeded pace by pace in formal argumentation. But all the self-consciousness of the Enlightenment cannot conceal the fact that this critique, peculiar to the Enlightenment—historically effective as it was—does not reach the core of revealed religion, but is only a critique of certain consequences and is therefore questionable" (*SCR*, 145-146).

learning to depend utterly on God, to fear God, to trust and obey God”¹⁷ In contrast, the assault by philosophy unavoidably proceeds from a standard of rational plausibility (that is, a conception of knowledge) that presupposes what is essentially at issue, namely, that the word of God is not simply seen and understood (self-evident) but is instead subject to evaluation by some theoretic standard independent of Him. Spinoza, says Strauss,

places full trust in the findings of his own intelligence. This trust is ‘the first principle,’ the pre-condition of all philosophizing, preceding all substantive considerations. Before philosophizing can ever be begun, belief in revelation, which calls trust in human reason into question, must itself first be questioned. In this sense the critique of revealed religion is not the achievement, but the very basis of free science.¹⁸

When philosophy victoriously declares that events recorded in Scripture, especially miracles, defy belief and that the command of God as set forth there is suspect, orthodoxy observes in such criticism merely the absence of the vital elements, that is, faith, trust, and obedience (and, in conjunction with them, a sort of knowing unacknowledged by Spinoza and his world).¹⁹ In the eyes of orthodoxy it is the will underlying the philosophical urge for independence, the will to establish rationally compelling grounds for belief, which is suspect.²⁰ The critique launched by

¹⁷ Strauss, *SCR*, 194.

¹⁸ Strauss, *SCR*, 113.

¹⁹ Spinoza discredits miracles on the basis of our inability to establish their existence. But the impulse to “establish” the legitimacy of miracles is alien, from the outset, to obedience to Scripture. Spinoza’s critique is sterile because “establishing” what has been written has no currency for the mind prepared to believe, a mind that “waits in faith or in doubt for the coming of the miracles” (Strauss, *SCR*, 214). What for Spinoza is a primitive and now superseded form of thinking is, to itself, in possession of the superior acumen. For it, there is no reason to “establish” anything, and the impulse to do so is evidence of decadence and an instance of heresy. Strauss strikingly observes, “The weapon which the positive mind believes it has discovered in the fact that the assertion of miracles is relative to the pre-scientific stage of mankind, is taken away from the positive mind by the observation that this fact permits the opposite interpretation” (ibid.). The weakness and error responsible for the impulse to establish the truth of miracles is present as well in the attempt to employ them as proof of the veracity of Scripture. Both manifest a dependence on human reflection that appears necessary and authoritative only following initial disobedience (Strauss, *SCR*, 197).

²⁰ “Is not the insensitivity to the command and the grace, to the Law and the blessing, a matter of will?” (Strauss, *SCR*, 145). Strauss then adds, “In so doing [prizing reason or theory over the command of Scripture], does it not

philosophy, whose heretical nature thus becomes increasingly clear, is precisely opposite to the proper response to doubt.

If, however, orthodoxy is not and cannot be defeated by philosophy through argument, it is also the case that philosophy cannot by argument be overcome by orthodoxy. This is because orthodoxy, the life lived in obedience to revelation, is founded on faith, i.e., it proceeds from something unproven. It is the product of *belief*, and, as its critics typically fail to realize, does not, *in the sense embraced and asserted by Spinoza*, claim clearly and distinctly to *know*.²¹ That revelation exists must by that standard remain uncertain. But, of course, the life of belief never claimed to offer more than this.²² The monumental question highlighted by Strauss is whether life lived in conformance with reason (in accordance with “philosophy”) is not itself similarly limited. After all, if philosophy cannot refute revelation, and given that revelation explicitly states that the one thing needed is obedience to Scripture, then to continue in accordance with philosophy (where the one thing needed is to see for oneself) is a decision (a “*blind* decision,”

admit that it lacks an organ, that it is blind? This is not a reproach that can be volleyed back against the opponent, for the believer sees everything that the unbeliever sees, sees it also exactly as the opponent sees it, and yet nevertheless sees *more*.” Cf. *SCR*, 112: “A certain liberation of the will must precede philosophic liberty.”

In a revealing and surprisingly dramatic account of Strauss’s early thought, David Janssens shows that for Strauss we have in Spinoza’s assault on orthodoxy a battle between two wills, namely, positive spirit’s “will to immediacy” and the believer’s “will to mediacy.” While the former focuses on the immediately given and acknowledges in the effort to establish the truth no need to go beyond that, the latter emphasizes the necessity of tradition and, thereby, through obedient attention to the word of the prophets, affirms the significance of the divine power. For Spinoza and the positive spirit, the mediacy of tradition is a source of contaminating prejudice. In the eyes of orthodoxy, the will to immediacy reveals a blind and presumptuous refusal to receive vital guidance. See *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Philosophy, Prophecy, and Politics in Leo Strauss’s Early Thought*, 50 and 52-53.

²¹ “Preface” to *SCR*, 28. For orthodoxy to make such a claim to knowledge would needlessly expose it to possibly fatal criticism by philosophy.

²² Cf. Strauss in “On the Interpretation of Genesis” in *L’Homme: Revue française d’anthropologie*, Tome XXI, Numéro 1 (Janvier-Mars 1981 [a lecture delivered in 1957]), 5-20, at 7: “the improbable character of biblical belief is admitted and even proclaimed by the biblical faith itself.” Strauss adds an observation that is markedly redolent of Polanyi’s comments on Christianity in *Personal Knowledge*: “The faith could not be meritorious if it were not faith against heavy odds” (7). (A French translation of the lecture follows the English version.) Note too the explicit statement by Strauss in *Philosophy and Law* at 30: “Through the quarrel between the Enlightenment and orthodoxy it became more clearly and easily recognized than it had been before that the premises of orthodoxy—the reality of creation, miracles, and revelation—are not known (philosophically or historically) but only believed, and that they therefore do not have the binding character peculiar to the known.”

suggests Strauss²³) that is made without assurance that it is the proper course of action. If he is honorable, the philosopher must admit that he may be wrong in regard to the most important question (*viz.*, how properly to live). Revelation may in fact be possible, and it possibly has occurred. Were it true that revelation exists, then philosophy, because of its estrangement from the truth, would be meaningless. And yet the philosopher proceeds (he does *not* remain tentative)—and he does so with as little certainty as the individual who elects to live in obedience to Scripture. For each of them the question is the same: am I to be guided by man or guided by God?²⁴ And, in moving ahead, each acts “on an unevident assumption.”²⁵ Thus, Strauss observes, the “cognitive status” of the alternatives is the same.²⁶ What cannot be the same, however, is our response to this equivalent cognitive status. Where the believer, upon realizing the fundamental role of belief in his life is prompted all the more to believe, the philosopher in such realization is scandalized.²⁷ The scandal is that philosophy itself, “the quest for evident and necessary knowledge,” no less than orthodoxy, rests on what is not evident and necessary. As Strauss observes, to be born of an act of will, of an un-evident premise, “is fatal to any philosophy.”²⁸

We are, then, seemingly led to the conclusion that there is a logical standoff between reason and revelation, between philosophy and orthodoxy.²⁹ Each remains immune to the strongest

²³ Strauss, “Notes on Reason and Revelation,” 175. Cf. Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965 [first published in 1950]), 75.

²⁴ And what about remaining neutral? Strauss observes, “But: neutrality is a *philosophic* attitude > victory of philosophy” (Strauss, “Notes on Reason and Revelation,” 174).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 175. Cf. *Natural Right and History*, 75.

²⁶ “Preface” to *SCR*, 29. The very phrase “cognitive status” betrays the influence of philosophy and, moreover, the influence of *modern* philosophy (*viz.*, the Cartesian aesthetic). Thus, in the very phrasing here of the problem, Strauss occupies the perspective of modern philosophy. As we will see, the tension between reason and revelation in some ways appears different to an earlier form of philosophical inquiry, and thus may move in a direction impossible for the later form.

²⁷ See “Notes on Reason and Revelation,” 176: “the justification of philosophy is *circular*—i.e., is a scandal.”

²⁸ “Preface” to *SCR*, 30.

²⁹ On page 75 of *Natural Right and History*, Strauss, after showing that “Philosophy, the life devoted to the quest for evident knowledge available to man as man, would itself rest on an unevident, arbitrary, or blind decision,” concludes that “This would merely confirm the thesis of faith” and “The mere fact that philosophy and revelation cannot refute each other would constitute the refutation of philosophy by revelation.” The conditional “would” is, however, vital to understanding these passages. The logic outlined here by Strauss is attributed to Weber (the subject of the larger discussion within which these comments occur). We have here what *Weber* evidently concluded. A deeper grasp of the possibilities would show that both the life of revelation (obedience to the Word) *and* the life of

assault of its adversary. The antinomy appears to be in the nature of things, an indelible feature of serious and thoughtful human existence. There exists, however, for Strauss the possibility of an exit from this condition. This possibility to a considerable degree accounts for the direction of Strauss's intellectual career, especially his deep and systematic turn to medieval thought and, through it, to the ancients. As he says at the close of the Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (written in retrospect in 1962), after having so carefully engaged Spinoza and modernity more generally, "I began therefore to wonder whether the self-destruction of reason was not the inevitable outcome of modern rationalism as distinguished from pre-modern rationalism, especially Jewish-medieval rationalism and its classical (Aristotelian and Platonic) foundation"³⁰ As we will see, it is in the positing of such a third path that Strauss and Polanyi may well come together in a most extraordinary and rewarding fashion.

2. A Polanyian Response to the Theologico-Political Problem

Soon after citing Tillich as a means of clarifying his own position, Polanyi summarizes his own thoughts in the following manner: "The two kinds of findings, the religious and the natural, by-pass each other in the same way as the findings of law courts by-pass ordinary experience"³¹ He adds, as an example, that "[t]he acceptance of the Christian faith does not express the assertion of observable facts and consequently you cannot prove or disprove Christianity by experiments or factual records"³² We are reminded of Strauss's assertion that orthodoxy is founded on faith and is the product of belief as opposed to a claim, in Spinoza's sense, to know.

Polanyi refers here to law courts because in the section of *Personal Knowledge* just prior to the one mentioned above, he had argued that "the supposedly open mind of an unbiased court

reason (allegiance to what is rationally evident, or cogent) proceed from faith. The irreconcilable conflict between the two stances coexists with the victory of faith, and in fact owes its existence to the power of that faith.

³⁰ Strauss, *SCR*, 31. Cf. *Philosophy and Law* at 38: The alternative, "orthodoxy or Enlightenment," which has evolved into the alternative "orthodoxy or atheism," comprises a situation that "not only appears insoluble but actually is so, as long as one clings to the modern premises." Given the unacceptable character of this situation, "one sees himself compelled to ask whether enlightenment is necessarily modern enlightenment."

³¹ Polanyi, *PK*, 284.

³² *Ibid.*

can be sustained only by a much stronger will to believe than the usual beliefs of a person discharging no judicial responsibility.”³³ What he means in saying this is that a court of law is an instance of a specialized practice, “a social life,” that is defined by a “peculiar context” and is constituted “for the occasion.”³⁴ In the case of a court, the occasion is to decide fairly and justly. Under its rules, a court will for example deem inadmissible the testimony of a person who wishes to share what he heard from someone who witnessed a crime. Similarly, Polanyi observes, in the case of a married couple who drowned together a court will rule that the older person died first, even though the court has no information to this effect. In its operation and deliberation, a court will strictly exclude information “that would normally be relevant.”³⁵ Such rules and practices are justified on the basis of the purpose of the particular enterprise (for a law court, to arrive at a fair and just decision). As Polanyi states, “The dogmatic and often arbitrary character of legally imposed beliefs is justified by the peculiar context in which they are established and affirmed.” He then adds, “There is therefore, strictly speaking, no possible contradiction between the factual findings of a court of law and those of scientific and ordinary experience. They by-pass each other.” Experience is not in itself authoritative. Rather, experience “serves as a theme for an intellectual activity which develops one aspect of it into a system that is established and accepted on the grounds of its internal evidence.”³⁶ Among the most interesting features of Polanyi’s account of the law court (and thereby of such parallel enterprises as art, mathematics, and physics) is the role of *will*. Such “will,” constituting evidence of commitment to the ideals whose pursuit defines the enterprise, gives rise to a particular context marked by presumptions and emergent rules that in turn yield justifiable beliefs. For Polanyi the justification of belief within the enterprise is comparable in authority to that which exists outside it (but within a different enterprise). It is a mistake, says Polanyi, to assert that facts established by the one enterprise are in conflict with those established by another. Due to their contextual nature and origins, they do not and cannot in reality engage. Again, “They by-pass each other.”

³³ Ibid., 279.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 278.

³⁶ Ibid., 279.

We are now better able to understand what Polanyi means to say in regard to reason and revelation. Religious belief, including acknowledgement of the legitimacy of revelation, is an affirmation in the face of doubt that is given life by a competing context of understanding. Such belief is not a literal assertion of fact and therefore is immune to any attempt by reason (critical thought) to undermine it by calling into question what is or is not empirically claimed in a particular case. "God exists," Polanyi observes, is not an ontological claim but instead an indwelling of a possibility and an affirmation of faith. It is "an a-critical act of assertion"³⁷ Similarly, then, "God became man" and "Christ died to save us from our sins and afford eternal life" are disclosures that would also be affirmations rather than statements of fact (though certain facts have a significant, even vital, bearing on the believability of what is affirmed).³⁸ What offends reason may well inspire reinvigorated faith. In this connection Polanyi refers to miracles. It is the outlandish report, for example, that water was turned into wine, which is the occasion for wonder and the exercise of faith. Success in demonstrating experimentally that water can in fact be transmuted into wine (or that virgin birth is possible), far from a boon to religious faith, would serve to undermine it. This is because what was hitherto an exceptionally effective occasion for surrender and gratitude has been reduced to the quotidian. The miracles that had been clues giving rise to a dramatic religious form of personal knowing no longer exist. The elevation and grandeur which it is the purpose of the enterprise of religion to provoke will accordingly have been lost.

Let us now apply Polanyi's analysis to Strauss's theologico-political problem. At first glance there appears to be agreement: in both cases we are presented with a pair of disparate enterprises. That similarity immediately fades, however, in light of Strauss's strenuous contention that the life of orthodox belief and the life of reason (autonomous philosophic inquiry) are actually in fundamental conflict and, taken together, force upon us what is perhaps the most significant choice imaginable. The alternatives in the case of the theologico-political problem thus touch

³⁷ Ibid., 280.

³⁸ See Polanyi, *PK*, 284: "Of course, an event which has in fact never taken place can have no supernatural significance; and whether it has taken place or not must be established by factual evidence." For the Christian narrative to possess its religious significance, it must be the case (among other things) that Jesus was in fact born and later died.

one another in a way that is denied by Polanyi's account. Making this especially interesting is that Strauss, much in the spirit of Polanyi's reference to discrete enterprises and contexts, argues that neither reason nor revelation possesses the capacity rationally to defeat its adversary. While for Strauss this comes from an equal inability to justify the foundations from which they start, for Polanyi it is because the two enterprises, as indicated in the long passage from Tillich, necessarily speak past each other.

What underlies the forced choice outlined by Strauss? How do the alternatives touch so that they can be in conflict? The answer is that what makes this possible is, on the philosophic side, an ardent individual captured by the spirit of probity.³⁹ This person wishes, above all, to do the right thing. And thus, he is serious.⁴⁰ Due to the probity, this individual will accept as authoritative nothing that is not clearly and distinctly known (and thus, ironically, imposes upon himself a restriction of possible understandings). Strauss indicates that were such an individual more reflective, he would see that the demands of both revelation and reason are predicated on an un-evident premise and, therefore, neither can defeat the other via rational argument. Strauss observes that for the individual at this point to remain neutral in regard to the conflicting demands is in fact to make a decision, viz., it is to think philosophically. That is, in light of what revelation demands, anything other than obedience to the Law as set down in Scripture is willful rebellion.

³⁹ The actual complexity of Strauss's position approaches the surface when he asserts in the Introduction to *Philosophy and Law* (137, note 13) that "The new probity is somewhat different from the old love of truth...." The animating spirit of the vehement rejection of revelation that he outlines in such detail is a "new" probity that self-consciously, and indeed proudly, refuses in principle to entertain the possibility of other ways of knowing. In the grips of such vehemence, the new probity is dogmatically inattentive to what might be visible to an earlier and gentler form of philosophic inquiry.

⁴⁰ While we have so far emphasized the differences between life in accordance with philosophy and life in accordance with revelation, it is important to notice what they have in common, not the least because this is in the end accounts for the conflict between them. In "Progress or Return?" Strauss states, "the Bible and Greek philosophy agree in regard to what we may call, and we do call in fact, morality. They agree ... regarding the importance of morality, regarding the content of morality, and regarding its ultimate insufficiency. They differ as regards that *x* which supplements or completes morality, or, which is only another way of putting it, they disagree as regards the basis of morality" (246). It is of considerable significance that it is morality (moral opinion) that is a primary focus and the ultimate concern of Socratic dialectic (discussed below). As for what in fact completes morality, see 250.

But if to opt for neutrality is to side with philosophy, what are we to say about the decision to accept Strauss's antinomy and forced choice or, more fundamentally, about the presupposition that an opposition exists to begin with? Might not a forced choice be the product of philosophy (critical reason) as well? What ought we to think about the starting point for the reason vs. revelation aspect of the theologico-political problem—the demanding individual in the grip of probity? What is responsible for *that*?

There would be no conflict without the two opposing stances. One of those stances, "reason" (the philosophical life) is defined by its refusal to accept as authoritative anything that the individual does not clearly and distinctly see for himself. But is not this insistence on seeing clearly and distinctly for oneself (after carefully and thoroughly eliminating any residue of inappropriate influence or "prejudice") precisely the hallmark of Cartesian-based modern rationality? Were this in fact the case, then the explicit conflict between reason and revelation might possibly presuppose the imperious (and, for Polanyi, the unrealistic) demands of modern rationality. Hence, with Strauss's indicated return to an earlier conception of rationality, the conflict might as a result be circumvented, thereby suggesting the possibility of reconciliation between Strauss and Polanyi (a prospect rendered markedly plausible by the latter's move to post-critical reason). But there is, of course, an intimidating obstacle to this line of thought. Strauss asserts that the theologico-political problem (and, especially, the tension between philosophy and orthodoxy) is a permanent tension—it is in the nature of things. Thus, it existed long before Descartes. Indeed, the paradigmatic model for Strauss of the philosophical life is offered by Socrates. In order to contend with this obstacle, it will therefore be necessary to return to Socratic rationality. In what did it consist? As we do so it is important to recall that the tension between reason and revelation is a subordinate aspect of the broader theologico-political problem. The former might well have a variety of instantiations while the latter, consisting of the tension between philosophy and politics, remains fundamentally the same.

3. Pre-Modern or Socratic Rationality

In Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates, looking back on his life, recounts that, having become disappointed with the results of his prior mode of inquiry, he had "recourse to a second-best method".⁴¹ He adds, "I decided I must take refuge in propositions, and study the truth of things in them"⁴² Strauss usefully observes, "In present-day parlance one can describe the change in question [noted here by Socrates] as a return to 'common sense' or to 'the world of common sense.'"⁴³ What Socrates has done is redefine the starting point for rational inquiry. That is, we are now to begin "from what is first for us, from what comes to sight first, from the phenomena," i.e., from "the opinions about the nature of things" which provide "the most important access to reality which we have, or the most important vestiges of the truth which are within our reach."⁴⁴ Highlighting the dramatic contrast between pre-modern and modern rationality, Strauss adds that in redefining the starting point Socrates "implied that 'universal doubt' of all opinions would lead, not into the heart of truth, but into a void."⁴⁵ In sum, then, our ascent to the truth will under

⁴¹ Plato, *Phaedo*, 99c. An alternative translation has "the second sailing." Each of the translations is somewhat misleading, but taken together they satisfactorily capture Socrates' meaning. He adopts the "second" path due to the manifest deficiencies of the first.

⁴² Plato, *Phaedo*, 99d.

⁴³ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 123.

⁴⁴ Ibid. Cf. Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963 [first published in 1936]), 153: "For to give up orientation by speech means giving up the only possible orientation, which is originally at the disposal of men, and therewith giving up the discovery of the standard which is presupposed in any orientation, and even giving up the search for the standard." Strauss at this point points us to *Republic*, 472c-e. To better understand *Phaedo* 99e-100a, Strauss on 144 cites *Republic* 473a.

⁴⁵ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 124. Cf. "The Intellectual Situation of the Present" in Yaffe and Ruderman, *Reorientation*, where Strauss, after observing that Nietzsche, by calling into question "[n]ot only the traditions but the principles of the tradition," thereby effecting the "*completion of the Enlightenment*," concludes that "The intellectual situation of the present is characterized by our knowing nothing anymore, by our knowing nothing" (242). He adds, "while the present is as *compelled to question as any age, it is less capable of questioning than any age. We must question without being capable of questioning*" (ibid.). Doubt has become so comprehensive and thoroughgoing that a successful and respectable outcome for inquiry is inconceivable. These observations could serve as an accurate summary of Polanyi's critique of objectivism. See, for example, *PK*, 286: "Objectivism has totally falsified our conception of truth, by exalting what we can know and prove, while covering up with ambiguous utterances all that we know and *cannot* prove, even though the latter knowledge underlies, and must ultimately set seal to, all that we *can* prove."

pre-modern rationality depend upon and be “guided by” examination of (contradictory) opinion.⁴⁶ We have here Plato’s well known “dialectic” or “dialectics.”⁴⁷

It is the very nature of dialectic—that is, of the systematic examination of men’s opinions about things—that suggests the possibility of overcoming the impasse between reason and revelation that, up to now, has been such a dramatic feature of our analysis of the theologico-political problem. The “scandal” for philosophy noted by Strauss might be avoided. In “Progress or Return?”⁴⁸ Strauss outlines the reply by Socrates to the discovery that philosophy, as much as revelation, proceeds from an un-evident premise and thereby is itself unphilosophical. He states:

the question of utmost urgency, the question which does not permit suspense, is the question of how one should live. Now, this question is settled for Socrates by the fact that he is a philosopher. As a philosopher, he knows that we are ignorant of the most important things. The ignorance, the evident fact of this ignorance, evidently proves that *quest* for knowledge of the most important things is the most important thing for us. Philosophy is then evidently the right way of life. This is, in addition, according to him, confirmed by the fact that he finds his happiness in acquiring the highest possible degree of clarity which he can acquire. He sees no necessity whatever to assent to something which is not evident to him. And if he is told that his disobedience to revelation might be fatal, *he raises the question*, What does fatal mean? ... [P]hilosophy is meant, and that is the decisive point, not as a set of propositions, a teaching, or even a system, but as *a way of life*, a life animated by a peculiar passion, the philosophic desire, or eros.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ See *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 143: “The fact that what men say is contradictory proves that there is truth in what they say...”

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 143 and 153.

⁴⁸ Note 15 above.

⁴⁹ Strauss, “Progress or Return?”, 259. Emphasis added. Philosophy’s “un-evident premise” is that revelation is disproved. Strauss on the next page adds, “But the very uncertainty of all solutions, the very ignorance regarding the most important things, makes quest for knowledge the most important thing, and therefore makes a life devoted to it the right way of life” (360). Of course, this reply by philosophy to the challenge of orthodoxy makes evident that philosophy is the right way of life only to those for whom the question of how best to live is itself evident and urgent (and for whom the absence of a fully satisfying response to that question is also evident and urgent). One wonders

What is most notable in this reply by Socrates is the supremacy of the act of questioning itself. Even when faced with the most terrifying of questions—that is, whether remaining aloof from revelation might lead to the worst imaginable consequences—Socrates asks yet another question.⁵⁰ We are witnessing here examination of the (contradictory) opinions of men, which is to say Socrates is practicing dialectic, and he is doing so for the most morally serious of reasons: to uncover the truth. Socrates in this fashion transcends the scandal by reaffirming, precisely in

if the orthodox believer might be capable of transcending this condition. If so, the circularity of the philosophic reply itself becomes evident. Placing the problem of reason vs. revelation (Athens vs. Jerusalem) within the context of conflicting interpretation of Strauss's meaning by his variegated students is a useful and enlightening (albeit complicating) discussion by Michael P. Zuckert and Catherine H. Zuckert in *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 313-327. For the reply of philosophy to orthodoxy see, in particular, 326-327. The position on Strauss's understanding of the philosophy vs. orthodoxy question arrived at in the present study is an instance of what the Zuckerts label the "zetetic" perspective (315; 326). That arrival entailed your author's abandonment of a variety of the "faith-based" resolution of the question—one that they explicitly associate with Harry Jaffa (315; 323). See Jon Fennell, "Harry Neumann and the Political Piety of Rorty's Postmodernism," *Interpretation*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Winter 1999), 257-273, especially the Addendum.

⁵⁰ And does Socrates in fact encounter the word of God? See *Apology*, 21a-b, 28d, and passim; and also *Phaedo*, 60e-61a. In an essay encountered only after the present study was written and repeatedly revised, Mark J. Lutz shows that for Strauss not only was Plato cognizant of the challenge to philosophy from divine law, but also that he was understood to be deeply insightful on the matter by Avicenna (and, presumably, by Maimonides as well). Lutz adds, "If this is correct, Plato understood the challenges posed by theology in all its forms." See "Living the Theologico-Political Problem: Leo Strauss on the Common Ground of Philosophy and Theology" in *The European Legacy*, DOI: 10.1080/10848770.2018.1544763, 1-23, at 16.

the face of the terrible question, the life of questioning.⁵¹ The response to the challenge that grows out of the activity is to embrace the activity all the more.⁵²

It would appear, then, that an older rationality permits philosophy to escape from scandal by transferring the principal philosophical concern from proceeding from an indubitable premise and thereby reach a certain conclusion to the act of questioning itself (that is, to dialectic as the path to truth). Philosophy, in the estimation of the philosopher, thus emerges ascendant. (It is not, as it must be for modern rationality, merely a choice or decision made between two alternatives equally based on faith.) And, quite conveniently, it is precisely such careful and responsible questioning, especially in regard to what is possible, that defines the philosophical life and constitutes its *arête*. Specifically, when it comes to the claims of revelation, dialectics makes it possible for the philosopher to see as does the orthodox believer. The moral demand

⁵¹ It was reassuring, after having written these words, to find this conclusion confirmed by a penetrating commentator on Strauss. Timothy Burns, after showing that it is accurate to “conclude that Strauss did indeed think the question [whether to follow reason (philosophy) or revelation (what Burns labels “faith”) as the right way of life] had been not only raised but *settled*... by Plato,” asks “But how?” His answer is “by political philosophy, or Socrates’ turn to the human things.” See Timothy Burns, “Ancient and Modern Political Rationalism in the Thought of Leo Strauss” in *Gladly to Learn and Gladly to Teach: Essays on Religion and Political Philosophy in Honor of Ernest L. Fortin*, eds. Michael Foley and Douglas Kries (Lexington: Lexington Books, 2002), 148. Cf. 151.

Less friendly to this account of a *dénouement* under which Socratic rationality escapes embarrassment is the analysis of Werner J. Dannhauser who perceives in this stance “Socratic atheism” which, while demonstrating the wisdom to avoid the unthoughtful dogmatism of claiming to know what cannot be known (*viz.*, that God does not exist), nevertheless depends on “extravagant claims”: “The philosopher does not just claim that philosophy can in effect prove a negative, but also that it knows that divine revelation is an impossibility for all time to come.” (See “Athens and Jerusalem or Jerusalem and Athens?” in *Leo Strauss and Judaism: Jerusalem and Athens Critically Revisited*, ed. David Novak (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 155-172, at 166-169.) Dannhauser, however, too readily assigns unnecessary attributes to the Socratic philosopher. To the degree that atheism entails the assertion or positive belief that God does not exist, then the ever-questioning philosopher, open always to further possibilities, does not qualify. And if such assertion or positive belief is absent, how can we say that atheism is present? Disinterest in God is not atheism. (What is presupposed in alleging that it is?) And it is not agnosticism either (see Dannhauser, 169), since the Socratic philosopher does not assert that there can be no proof of God and in fact must remain open to that possibility. The Socratic philosopher is committed to inquiry and bewitched by its charms. It is not evident that such a life is dependent on the claims identified by Dannhauser. It is true, of course, that in that life orthodox belief is absent.

⁵² Some readers of Strauss will at this point recall his analysis of “radical historicism” in which Heidegger, responding to the standard critique of historicism on the grounds of internal contradiction, embraces without reserve the historicity of historicism. See Strauss, “Relativism” and “An Introduction to Heideggerian Existentialism” in *The Rebirth of Classical Rationalism*, 13-26 and 27-46, respectively.

resident in philosophy is satisfied through the thorough investigation of the moral opinion of that believer. Philosophy in this fashion becomes cognizant of the orthodox call for obedience and of the guilty conscience that obedience aims to circumvent.⁵³ As a result pre-modern rationality encounters revelation on its own ground. This is what Spinoza, satisfied instead with mockery, failed to do.⁵⁴

To say, however, that pre-modern philosophy out of moral obligation carefully and responsibly investigates the sense of moral obligation animating the orthodox believer is to acknowledge a common ground between the two lives.⁵⁵ To take seriously the claims of revelation is of the same cloth as taking seriously the piety of the city (and the associated claims of political life) which philosophy, precisely because it asks “Why philosophy?,” takes seriously indeed. The pre-modern philosopher, never losing sight of the possibility that the tension between philosophy and politics is in the nature of things and that the legitimacy of philosophy may thus eternally remain in question, is equally well-positioned to appreciate the challenge of revelation. God may

⁵³ In contrast, it is characteristic of modern rationality to reduce or in some other way discredit conscience (Freud comes to mind, as does of course Marx and his innumerable epigones). One might say that reduction of the stature of conscience is a necessary condition for any evidently successful effort to overcome the authority of revelation.

⁵⁴ The suggestion that Socratic or pre-modern philosophy is effective in a manner closed off to modern philosophy is supported by Richard L. Velkley in *Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011). Velkley captures Strauss stating that modern philosophy “is one very special form of philosophy; it is not the primary and necessary form” and then observes that, unlike the case with modern philosophy, Strauss, by affiliating with Socratic rationality, “does not leave the argument between reason and revelation at an impasse for both parties” (151). In a note (n. 43 on 193) Velkley adds that Strauss “did, however, argue that modern philosophy, as lacking the Socratic response to human ignorance of the whole, was less able than the Socratic to address the challenge of revelation.” Cf. 160 and, especially, 196: “Classical or Socratic philosophy seems capable of giving an account of its own necessity.”

⁵⁵ The existence and significance of such common ground is well illuminated by Timothy W. Burns in “Strauss on the Religious and Intellectual Situation of the Present” in Yaffe and Ruderman, *Reorientation*, 79-114, especially 90-91. Lutz (note 39 above) also refers to “the common ground of theology and Greek philosophy” (12). In explanation, he states that, for Strauss, “the Bible and Greek philosophy share the same beliefs not only about morality but also about justice as the most important aspect of morality.” That is, “[b]oth the Bible and Greek philosophy would appeal to people’s understanding of justice prior to and independent of their experience of philosophy and revelation” (ibid.).

well be speaking in both instances.⁵⁶ The philosopher therefore listens as attentively as does the orthodox believer. For this reason, the philosopher perpetually remains “the potential believer.”⁵⁷

Despite this common ground, the life of philosophy and the life lived in response to revelation are experienced very differently. Strauss captures this difference with a pair of powerful images: “the philosopher lives in a state above fear and trembling as well as above hope, and the beginning of his wisdom is not, as in the Bible, the fear of God, but rather the sense of wonder; Biblical man lives in fear and trembling as well as in hope. This leads to a peculiar serenity in the philosopher....”⁵⁸ At the root of this serenity is the assurance that in recognizing and fully exploring the problems or tensions marking human existence the philosopher has done all that it is possible to do, and he has acted in (what appears to be) a morally exemplary manner. Those problems and tensions are evidently permanent and in the nature of things, a nature of things that must always remain uncertain, and in fact cannot be said to exist, for the orthodox believer who understands himself to be in the presence of an omnipotent and inscrutable Creator which is the antithesis of impersonal necessity. For the philosopher, resolution of the problems and tensions is perhaps not realistically to be expected. The quest for the truth may be all there is and, far from a source of discomfort, this realization produces a deep satisfaction. He is, after all, unlike the modern mind found in Spinoza, open to the full range of possibilities, including, above all, those articulated by orthodoxy. The aesthetic dimension (the grounds for such

⁵⁶ Cf. the strikingly apposite paraphrase of Strauss from *Thoughts on Machiavelli* offered by Heinrich Meier: “the demands of morality presuppose the truth of religion, without whose main concept and center they lose their obligatory character.” This appears in Meier, *Political Philosophy and the Challenge of Revealed Religion* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 50.

⁵⁷ Strauss, quoted by Burns, in “Strauss on the Religious and Intellectual Situation of the Present,” 90. Burns elsewhere quotes Strauss at greater length: “the moral man as such is the potential believer.” The serious philosopher is, of course, “a moral man.” See Timothy Burns, “Ancient and Modern Political Rationalism in the Thought of Leo Strauss,” 151. In note 30 of this article Burns identifies the Straussian source for this phrase as page 128 of “On Abravanel’s Philosophical Tendency and Political Teaching” in *Isacc Abravanel*, eds, J. B. Trend and H. Loewe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937). See, too, the nearly identical phrase from Strauss’s *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988 [1952]) in the essay titled “The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*” at 140: “moral man as such is the potential believer.”

⁵⁸ Strauss, “Progress or Return?,” 251.

satisfaction) resident in the philosophic way of life is in marked contrast to that informing the life inspired by revelation.⁵⁹

4. Thoughts on Polanyi's Position

In light, then, of the transformation of the theologico-political problem effected by the substitution of pre-modern for modern rationality, how ought we to assess Polanyi's affirmation that reason and revelation cannot and hence do not conflict—that they “by-pass” one another? To address this question let us again visit the phenomenon of doubt. For modern rationality doubt is elevated to supreme arbiter and exercises “veto power” over “mere” opinion and common sense. Under a regime of suspicion toward whatever might be personal or contingent (i.e., “prejudice”), respect under modern rationality is reserved for that which survives rigorous and aggressive elimination of that which can be doubted (that is, for unalloyed objectivity). By this standard the claims of revelation—and, indeed, claims to its very existence—are outrageous and constitute a target which evidently easily succumbs to the assault. In contrast, both the orthodox believer and the pre-modern philosopher find in doubt an opportunity and are therefore appreciative of and in contrasting senses friendly toward it. Rather than strive to eliminate doubt, each in its own way humbly seeks to exploit it. As noted above, in the face of doubt, the orthodox believer, prizing obedience to Scripture, is prompted all the more to believe. The seemingly ineradicable character of doubt, insofar as it affords the opportunity for an exercise of faith leading to fertile discovery, becomes therefore a gift. We can say that the believer has faith in faith and believes in belief. And, as just outlined, the pre-modern philosopher, in the prizing of

⁵⁹ This is to say that each is the product of a distinctive education (of what Strauss discovers Maimonides referring to as “*habit and schooling*”). (See “The Intellectual Situation of the Present,” 248.) However, where Strauss, following Maimonides, regards habit and schooling as a potential impediment to philosophy (as surely it may be), might it not also be the case that the philosophical way of life, as much as any alternative (such as, for example, the life of obedience to Scripture), depends upon and follows from a particular initiation (i.e., a careful and specialized habituation and schooling)? We should not expect Strauss to concur, for he seems to hold out as a possibility, and as the necessary prerequisite for the genuine philosophical pursuit of the truth, an openness and clarity of perception whose hallmark is precisely the absence of distorting (and typically implicit) opinions that inevitably are the product of “habit and schooling.” See Janssens, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 102-104. This certainly is an appealing ideal. But is it in fact possible to see while not “seeing as” or “seeing in terms of”?

questioning above all else, finds in the experience of doubt the necessary springboard for dialectical inquiry, the reward of which is ever greater understanding rather than arrival at some final destination. Insofar as the philosopher possesses faith in the outcome of such inquiry and believes that it constitutes the life most worth living, he too can be said to have faith in faith and believes in belief. For orthodox believer and philosopher alike there exists a “virtuous circle” which defines a meaningful existence that eschews the harsh and dictatorial effort to eliminate doubt that characterizes modern rationality. In sharp contrast with the modern stance (which, ironically, may itself be a “prejudice”), both the life of the orthodox believer and the life of philosophy begin with the belief that there is something splendid to be discovered, and that such discovery may be had if only we allow for it to emerge.⁶⁰ In this sense the process of discovery is in both cases circular. But the circularity, far from an embarrassment, is now to be embraced. There is, then, in pre-modern philosophy a prefiguring of Polanyi’s monumental articulation of the limits to, and the inescapable essential personal character of, rational justification, whether it be the justification of factual truths or of truths pertaining to matters affecting the mode of our being.⁶¹ It is on this vital common ground that both pre-modern philosophy and Polanyi’s post-critical approach stand united in opposition to modern rationality.

Because of the common ground between orthodox believer and philosopher afforded by pre-modern philosophy, there exists, despite the conflict in ultimate allegiance, a degree of compatibility between the two ways of life. From the point of view of philosophy, the powerful opinion of the orthodox believer is a valuable stimulus to the ongoing sustained inquiry that

⁶⁰ Both are open to possibilities—seriously open—in a way that the modern perspective is not.

⁶¹ The classic statement by Polanyi on this matter occurs on p. 299 of *Personal Knowledge*. He states, “Any inquiry into our ultimate beliefs can be consistent only if it presupposes its own conclusions. It must be intentionality circular.” Significantly, he adds, “The last statement is itself an instance of the kind of act which it licenses. For it stakes out the grounds of my discourse by relying essentially on the very grounds staked out; my confident admission of circularity being justified only by my conviction; that in so far as I express my utmost understanding of my intellectual responsibilities as my own personal beliefs and can hold them in a responsible manner, even though I recognize that such a claim can have no other justification than such as it derives from being declared in the very terms which it endorses.” Polanyi elsewhere refers to the perspective defined by this “post-critical” expression of belief as “the balanced mind.” The characteristics of that mind, and its central place in Polanyi’s enterprise taken as a whole, are explored at length in Jon Fennell, “Balance of Mind’: Polanyi’s Response to the Second Apple and the Modern Predicament,” *Tradition and Discovery*, Vol. XLIV, No. 2 (July 2018), 47-63.

constitutes the philosopher's esteemed way of life. The orthodox believer, on the other hand, while perhaps harboring deep concerns for the fate of the ever-questioning philosopher, can find in the incessant philosophic challenge a constant stimulus for renewed commitment and belief, and thereby for that which follows from it. As Strauss has noted, what could be more nourishing and worthy of our attention than the ongoing fruitful exchange between the two perspectives? This tension which so largely defines Western civilization may properly be viewed as the primary contribution of that civilization.⁶²

There exists, then, under the Straussian portrayal of the reason vs. revelation aspect of the theologico-political problem an approximation of the "by-pass" between reason and revelation noted by Polanyi. This is most evident in the serenity of the pre-modern philosopher in the wake of the dialectical and seemingly eternal encounter with the claims of revelation. Perhaps it is because the tension shows no sign of being resolved that the philosopher, captured by wonder, is all the more interested in examining it further. There is no better way to spend one's life. The orthodox believer, in the face of the ongoing philosophical challenge, and perhaps to a considerable degree stimulated by it, finds satisfaction in ever-renewed communion with the word of God as set forth in Scripture. We can say that both parties to this exchange are sustained by belief in what they do and commitment to how they live, which is to say by a passion to know the truth. It would seem, moreover, that each has incentive to invite the existence of the other. The result is a fertile conflict, among the most important consequences of which is the realization that the philosophical life, no less than that of the orthodox believer, is grounded in faith.

Yet, the "by-pass" we thereby discover in the pre-modern situation, precisely because it is constituted by a search in common by philosophy and orthodoxy for "the one eternal truth" (a search that is the product of "the natural desire for truth"⁶³), can be no more than an approximation of what is outlined by Polanyi.⁶⁴ Moreover, we must wonder, especially in light of

⁶² Strauss, "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy," esp. 111. Cf. "Progress or Return?", 270: "It seems to me that this unresolved conflict is the secret of the vitality of Western civilization.... The very life of Western civilization is the life between two codes, a fundamental tension."

⁶³ Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 26.

⁶⁴ Strauss's approach catches what Polanyi would call the fiduciary basis of both endeavors, and the ultimate circularity of the independent justifications for two different ways of life that, in their search for truth, share a common goal. Polanyi, however, would presumably find Strauss's sterner approach less cognizant and appreciative

the fact that Polanyi offers a revolutionary epistemology distinguished by its criticism and correction (i.e., its *rejection*) of modern rationality, why he remains wedded to the view (itself, as we shall suggest, the product of an unnecessary concession to modern rationality) that reason and revelation are so different in kind that their claims to truth cannot properly be said to be in conflict with one another. As the surprising conclusion to our inquiry, let us say a few words on this matter.

During our lengthy journey we have seen that Strauss perceives two understandings of the relationship between reason and revelation, or philosophy and orthodoxy. The first of these belongs to modern rationality, and the other to pre-modern or Socratic rationality. In both cases there is a tension between the claims of the two parties. Where, however, the latter sees this tension existing within a common search for “the one eternal truth” that makes the competing orientations in an important sense mutual allies, the former conceives them as in deep conflict, with the victory of either impossible without the defeat of the other.

Where in this account are we to position Polanyi’s understanding of reason and revelation as two fundamentally different guides to a life properly lived, each offering access to a truth belonging to it and not accessible to the other? Polanyi, following Tillich, aims to establish a peace between the two authorities. Strauss emphasizes, however, that so long as we proceed under the premises of modern rationality this conciliatory prospect is a delusion (for the reasons laid out so boldly in his repeated demonstration of the conflict between philosophy and orthodoxy). And, he adds, were we to escape from the confines of modern rationality and instead occupy the perspective of Socratic rationality, we would see, in light of the fruitfulness of the tension between the two authorities, the tragic consequences—both in regard to where it leads and for what it inhibits—of a two-roads-to-separate-truths resolution of the competing calls for our allegiance.⁶⁵

of the different sorts of questions, existential or empirical, that bring us to incommensurable interpretive contexts that can both reveal truths about one reality. Strauss is less sanguine regarding the prospect, via alleged incommensurability, of avoiding conflict. Cf. note 5 above.

⁶⁵ Adding to our concluding perplexity is the fact that Polanyi is abundantly aware of these very consequences, and is both forceful and persuasive in outlining them as the product of the bankruptcy of modern rationality (i.e., partaking of “the second apple”).

In sum, Polanyi's ingenious by-pass is an unnecessary and comparatively sterile *modus vivendi*. It is only because he in this regard remains confined by the modern premise regarding the measure of genuine knowledge (while, in supreme irony, doing so much to illuminate and overcome it) that he concedes the vital ground by asserting that reason and revelation, respectively, offer independent truths that belong to each and are available only to the one or the other. This attempt at "harmonization" or a "happy synthesis" is an unproductive concession, and indeed an impossibility, resulting from insufficient confidence in orthodoxy's capacity to survive in the hostile atmosphere created by the presupposition that the Enlightenment's "refutation of orthodoxy" through the ascendancy of "the new natural science" is sound (or at least efficacious).⁶⁶ An uncompromised respect for revelation, for the Word of God, would refuse to make such a concession, even were it in fact true that its adversary had seized the high ground and thereby made revelation's claims widely inconceivable and for so many even meaningless. Rather than deny the tension, let us instead embrace it. The conflict between belief and unbelief, despite appearances, is perennial. It is also a gift.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 32-33. Strauss goes on to observe, "for ultimately these harmonizations always function as vehicles of Enlightenment, not as dams against it: the moderate Enlightenment is the best preparation of the soil for the radical Enlightenment" (33). For "happy synthesis" and the impossibility of arriving at such, see Strauss, "On the Interpretation of Genesis," 19.