LEO STRAUSS AND THE ARGUMENT OF NATURAL THEOLOGY*

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ABSTRACT
In this paper, I analyze the two versions of Leo Strauss’ argument of natural theology, presented respectively in Reason and Revelation (1948, 2007) and The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy (1954, 1979). In both cases, Strauss confronts this argument with major difficulties. On the one hand, with the mysterious character of an all-wise God; on the other hand, with the flawed response of modern science, represented by Spinoza’s attempt to obtain the system of nature, or the completed account of the whole, which would rule out the possibility of the existence of an omnipotent and unfathomable God. I will try to argue how natural theology may solve this major difficulties, namely by referring to the idea of justice as suggested in Strauss’ An Untitled Lecture on Plato’s Euthyphron.

KEYWORDS
Leo Strauss, natural theology, political philosophy, revelation, religion.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LEO STRAUSS’ ARGUMENT OF NATURAL THEOLOGY

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the alternative between “Jerusalem” and “Athens” in the thought of Leo Strauss.1 The well-known dichotomy expresses metaphorically the alternative between the philosophical life, that is a way of life guided by unassisted human reason, and a life rooted in obedience to the revealed law, that is, a life which conforms to the authority

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of the revelation of the living God. Along with other famous questions, such as
the “problem of natural right,” the “problem of Socrates,” the “problem of
Machiavelli,” the “quarrel between ancients and moderns,” and the “quarrel
between philosophy and poetry,” the alternative between Jerusalem and
Athens is often identified with Leo Strauss’ work and his fundamental
contribution to the rebirth of political philosophy in the twentieth century.
However, the alternative between Jerusalem and Athens is perhaps the most
controversial topic in the eyes of the students and interpreters of Strauss’ work.
The first distinction lies between those who believe that Strauss chose
Jerusalem and those who believe that he chose Athens. Yet among those who
take their bearings from Strauss’ philosophical self-characterization (moriatur
anima mea mortem philosophorum) there is a debate which is no less intense.

2 Cf. Leo Strauss, “Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization,”
Modern Judaism 1, no. 1 (1981): 17-45, see especially 33: “Western civilization consists of two
elements, has two roots, which are in radical disagreement with each other. We may call these
elements, as I have done elsewhere, Jerusalem and Athens or, to speak in non-metaphorical
language, the Bible and Greek philosophy.”

3 See for example David Lowenthal, “Leo Strauss’s Studies in Platonic Political
Philosophy,” Interpretation 13, no. 3 (September 1985): 297-320; Christopher Colmo, “Reason
and Revelation in the Thought of Leo Strauss,” Interpretation 18, no. 1 (Fall 1990): 145-162;
1, (Winter 1991): 75-99; Kenneth Hart Green, Jew and Philosopher: The Return to Maimonides
in the Jewish Thought of Leo Strauss (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993);
Harry V. Jaffa, “Leo Strauss, the Bible, and Political Philosophy,” in Leo Strauss: Political
Philosopher and Jewish Thinker, ed. Kenneth L. Deutsch, Walter Nicgorski (Lanham: Rowman
and Littlefield, 1994), 195-201; Susan Orr, Jerusalem and Athens: Reason and Revelation in the
Work of Leo Strauss (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995); Remi Brague, “Athens, Jerusalem,
Mecca: Leo Strauss’s ‘Muslim’ Understanding of Greek Philosophy,” Poetics Today 19, no. 2
(Summer 1998): 235-259; Kim A. Sorensen, “Revelation and Reason in Leo Strauss,” The
Review of Politics 65, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 383-408; Heinrich Meier, Das theologisch-politische
Problem. Zum Thema von Leo Strauss (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2003); Leora Batnitzky, Leo
Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy and the Politics of Revelation (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 2006); Heinrich Meier, Politische Philosophie und die
Herausforderung der Offenbarungsreligion (München: C.H. Beck, 2013); Alberto Ghibellini,
“Leo Strauss, Gershom Scholem, and the Reason-Revelation Problem,” Interpretation 40, no. 1
(Spring 2013): 57-78.

4 Cf. also Susan Orr, “Strauss, Reason, and Revelation: Unraveling the Essential Question,”
in Leo Strauss and Judaism, 26-30, 47.

5 Cf. Leo Strauss, Gesammelte Schriften. Band III. Hobbes’ politische Wissenschaft und
zugehörige Schriften – Briefe, ed. Heinrich Meier and Wiebke Meier (Stuttgart-Weimar: J.B.
Metzler, 2001), 742.
I am convinced that a particular argument, the so-called argument of natural theology, might represent a possible way to argue that Strauss had a rational justification to reject the claims of Jerusalem, or the Bible. In other words, what I consider to be of utmost importance is that the argument of natural theology offers more than it appears to offer at a first glance. Strauss left us no systematic or extended exposition of natural theology. The sources to which I will refer, *Reason and Revelation* and *The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy*, are, to my knowledge, the only texts in which Strauss articulates explicitly, although very briefly, the argument of natural theology. The first text was published in 2007 by Heinrich Meier. It is the manuscript of a lecture given at the Theological Seminary in Hartford on January 8, 1948. We are not dealing with a text written for readers, but with a lecture addressed to theologians by a non-theologian. The second text was originally published in January, 1954 in a Jewish journal, *Iyyun*, and then posthumously in 1979 in its original English version. Neither text was, in other words, published by Strauss as a chapter in one of his books. Only *The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy*, we may say, was designed for an audience of readers, even though, at least originally, not for an audience of English readers. We could say that, in both cases, Strauss turned to a very select audience: in the first case to his listeners, in the second case to connoisseurs of the Hebrew language. Both of these texts introduce the argument of natural theology without presenting it as a real solution to the problem of the alternative between Jerusalem and Athens. The third and final text which I will consider, and in which I see the greatest philosophical potential, is a lecture on a Platonic dialogue, from the early fifties. *An Untitled Lecture on Plato’s Euthyphron* was published posthumously by Thomas Leo Strauss and the Argument of Natural Theology

Did Strauss effectively refute the Biblical alternative? And if he did, which was his decisive argument?6


Pangle in 1989 and then, in a critical edition, in 1996 by Pangle, Christopher Bruell and David Bolotin. In this lecture, the concept of natural theology is not explicitly mentioned, but the same argument is further developed, and it seems to open possibilities which in *Reason and Revelation* and *The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy*, were left unmentioned or were not yet evident.

In the following section, I shall present the two main versions of the argument, and, in doing so, I will try to analyze their context as well as the differences and similarities between the two versions (§§ 2-3). In the next step, I will examine the objection raised against natural theology by Strauss himself and then Spinoza’s argument, which seems to suggest the impossibility of resolving the issue (§ 4). In conclusion, I will try to argue in favor of what seems to me to be the most helpful argument offered by *An Untitled Lecture on Plato’s Euthyphron* (§5). The result I hope to achieve is not so much to resolve the issue concerning the alternative between Jerusalem and Athens in the thought of Strauss, but rather to demonstrate the potential of a philosophical argument which—whatever its limits may be—seems to be deeper and more complex than Strauss was willing to make explicit.

**NATURAL THEOLOGY IN *REASON AND REVELATION* (1948)**

The text of the lecture of 1948 is very complex and philosophically dense. I therefore cannot analyze it here as thoroughly as it deserves. *Reason and Revelation*, as it has been reconstructed by Heinrich Meier, consists of two main parts: the actual text of the lecture and a long appendix with the title *Notes on Reason and Revelation*. It is unclear what Strauss had presented to his listeners. The argument of natural theology, however, is presented in the main text of the lecture, even if not as its main argument. It seems rather to belong to the various failed attempts by which philosophy seeks to demonstrate the impossibility of revelation. In the first part of the text, Strauss makes clear the meaning of the alternative between reason and revelation, explaining how he, in this lecture, does not identify “reason” with “rationality,” but with “philosophy.” Philosophy, as he understands it, is not a discipline among others (that, it goes without saying, could be subservient to the


authority of revelation.)  By “philosophy” Strauss means the philosophical way of life. This is a life dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge of the nature of all things, guided only by the cognitive powers of human reason, that is, unaided by superhuman powers. Revealed religion, as such, denies the very *raison d’être* of the philosophical way of life, by recurring to the authority of the true teaching given by God himself to man. A philosopher, as such, cannot afford to embrace the cause of a philosophical way of life by an act of faith, or by a blind decision. He must justify his way of life in a rational way. For the mere possibility of a divine revelation puts radically into question the meaningfulness of the philosophical life.  The philosopher must therefore confront the challenge posed by revealed religion beyond the political needs of his time. He has to compete with the most radical alternative to his way of life. As one can see, we are dealing here with the same problem that occupied the young Strauss since the twenties. His book *Die Religionskritik Spinozas* focused mainly on the difficulties encountered by a philosophy which cannot limit itself to a “defensive” critique of religion (as it were, destroying the edifice of theology, demonstrating how it rests on an act of faith and therefore that it is no science at all), but which needs to exercise an “offensive” critique. Philosophy, it seems, is unable to demonstrate the impossibility of the basic assumption of revealed religion, namely the existence of an omnipotent and unfathomable God. If a particular theology can be criticized and refuted, it still does not mean that the very possibility of revelation can be refuted, since the assumption on which the possibility of revelation rests seems to be an unassailable one.

This is the context in which Strauss introduces the possibility of the argument of natural theology, guided by the intention to demonstrate the impossibility of revelation. It is important to note that Strauss’ argument does not deny the existence of God (nor is it meant to prove it, as is the case with traditional natural theology.) It rather focuses on the attributes of God and tries to verify if divine attributes are compatible with what is stated in the

16 On the difficulties faced by the argument which demonstrates the impossibility of rejecting the existence of God, cf. Hadley Arkes, “Athens and Jerusalem: The Legacy of Leo Strauss,” in *Leo Strauss and Judaism*, 14-17.
Bible.\textsuperscript{17} In other words: are the theological theses implicit in the Bible true or false? This is how Strauss introduces the topic:

To prove that revelation or miracles are impossible, means to prove that they are incompatible with the nature of God as the most perfect being. All proofs of this kind presuppose that there is a natural theology. Hence to-day, when the possibility of natural theology is generally denied, a refutation of the belief in revelation is not even imaginable. On the other hand, however, a \textit{hypothetical} natural theology, a theology arguing for the mere \textit{notion} of a most perfect being, would suffice.\textsuperscript{18}

The argument of natural theology, as Strauss says, can also be valid in an era that tends to deny the possibility of a natural theology.\textsuperscript{19} It would seem that, in order to demonstrate the impossibility of revelation, one simply needs to appeal to the concept of a most perfect being which is a person and to proceed by developing a hypothetical natural theology, based on the analogy with the wise man. Here is the entire passage in which Strauss develops this argument:

\begin{quote}
For it is hard to deny for anyone that, if there is a God, he must be absolutely perfect. The purely philosophic doctrine of God, i.e. the only theology which is unequivocally \textit{natural} theology, was based on the analogy of the wise man: the most perfect being as known from experience, the wise man, gives us the only clue regarding the most perfect being simply. E.g., a wise man would pity the fools rather than wax indignant about their criminal or monstrous actions; he would be kind to everyone, he would not care particularly for anyone except for his friends, i.e. those who are actually or potentially wise. Accordingly, God cannot be conceived to condemn men to eternal damnation. He cannot even be conceived as exercising individual providence. He cannot be conceived as \textit{loving} men, i.e. beings who are infinitely inferior to him in wisdom.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} One may object that, since “the notion of \textit{physis} is alien to the Bible” (Leo Strauss, \textit{Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy} [Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983], 162) a natural theology would be useless against the God of the Bible. Still, the argument would retain its effectiveness as long as the statement “God is the most perfect being” is generally accepted. In other words, one can also say that this objection can be avoided by speaking of attributes instead of nature. See Strauss, \textit{Liberalism Ancient and Modern}, 176-77, 181.

\textsuperscript{18} Strauss, “Reason and Revelation,” 153.

\textsuperscript{19} Cf. Strauss, \textit{Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy}, 151: “owing to the victory of science over natural theology the impossibility of miracles can no longer be said to be simply true but has degenerated to the status of an indemonstrable hypothesis.” See also Leo Strauss, “On a New Interpretation of Plato’s Political Philosophy,” \textit{Social Research} 13, no. 1 (1946): 326-367, especially 339, where he says that “Whatever may be the limitations of modern natural science, its obvious success has brought about a situation in which the possibility of natural theology has lost all the evidence it formerly possessed.”

\textsuperscript{20} Strauss, “Reason and Revelation,” 153-54.
This formulation reveals at least a major difficulty, which is due to the fact that the argument developed so far has not actually demonstrated that the nature of God is incompatible with miracles (revelation being a miracle among others.) It seems rather to prove the incompatibility of anger and indignation with divine nature.\(^{21}\) This difficulty can perhaps be resolved by referring to the denial of providence, and especially of particular providence. A God who is analogous to the wise man would not care for human beings; he would neither love them nor punish them.\(^{22}\) In other words, there would be no reason for a God to reveal a law to human beings. The kindness of the wise toward everyone, which would be the model on the basis of which we may be able to think the kindness of God toward human beings, is not equipollent to zealous love. The incompatibility between the nature of God and the possibility of revelation will become somewhat clearer in the analysis of the other version of the argument.

**NATURAL THEOLOGY IN THE MUTUAL INFLUENCE OF THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY (1954)**

The version of the argument of natural theology contained in *The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy* seems in some respects clearer than the one of *Reason and Revelation*. By that I mean that the incompatibility of the nature of God with revelation seems more evident, since the difference in wording is more focused on verbal inspiration (a prerequisite of revelation.) However, the argument is advanced and somehow introduced by a direct

\(^{21}\) One could object that indifference to moral evil could not be becoming to a god, as Strauss writes, quoting Brunner: “The philosophers are blind to the fact, and the power, of *sin*. ‘Philosophic ethics...knows less of (moral) evil than the man in the street’ (Brunner 327). But for this blindness, the philosophers could never have elaborated, and used, their natural theology which is based on the analogy of the wise man. The philosopher who complacently asserts that God could not visit men with eternal punishment, because he, the philosopher, would never take sins of less wise beings as seriously, merely shows by this argument his callousness, or at best he reveals his dim notion that he would be lost, if God were to take sins seriously.” (Strauss, *Reason and Revelation*, 162) To this objection, Strauss rejoins acutely by showing how the moral standard by which the philosopher is condemned presupposes the faith in the God of the Bible. Therefore, what to the believer appears as sin, to the philosopher appears merely as intellectual or cognitive deficiency.

\(^{22}\) The wise man analogy rejects the possibility that God can behave like a gentleman, that is, that God may punish anyone who does not simply trust him, but prefers to cross-examine his statements: “Biblical insistence on man’s *faith, on trust*, in God would be ridiculed as implying a gentleman’s view of the first cause: every gentleman is offended if one does not believe him or his word (Cyrop. VII 2, 15-17)—a wise being would not be offended by doubt, but would *encourage* doubt of everything not evident.” (Strauss, *Reason and Revelation*, 170-71)
reference to the possibility that the philosopher who, as such, does not accept anything that is not evident and clear, can be punished for his lack of faith. It almost seems that the first reason that drives the philosopher to the refutation of the claims made by the Bible is the fear of eternal punishment for his disbelief. This is how Strauss introduces the core of natural theology in the context just described:

[The philosopher] 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? In the extreme case, it would be eternal damnation. Now the philosophers of the past were absolutely certain that an all-wise God would not punish with eternal damnation or with anything else such human beings as are seeking the truth or clarity. We must consider later on whether this reply is quite sufficient.23

A few pages later, upon showing the limits of some inadequate arguments in favor of revelation and the limits of a merely defensive philosophical criticism, Strauss admits that faith rests on itself, and that, as faith, it has no need to be established by any argument. The philosopher, for this reason, after having refuted any inadequate defense of revelation, must refute the very possibility of revelation. He could do it along one of these two alternative ways:

We would have to be in possession of either a proof of the non-existence of an omnipotent God, who alone could do miracles, or of a proof that miracles are incompatible with the nature of God. I see no alternative to that. Now the first alternative—a proof of the nonexistence of an omnipotent God—would presuppose that we have perfect knowledge of the whole, so as it where we know all the corners, there is no place for an omnipotent God. In other words, the presupposition is the completed system. We have the solution to all riddles. And then I think we may dismiss this possibility as absurd. The second alternative—namely, that miracles are incompatible with the nature of God—would presuppose human knowledge of the nature of God: in traditional language, natural theology. Indeed the basis, the forgotten basis, of modern free thought, is natural theology. When the decisive battles were waged, not in the nineteenth century, but in the eighteenth and seventeenth, the attempted refutation of miracles, etc., were based on an alleged knowledge of the nature of God—natural theology is the technical name for that.24

This passage points to the fact that Strauss does not believe in the validity of any proof of the non-existence of an omnipotent and unfathomable God, since that would imply a complete account of the whole, which seems to him impossible. But when he refers to the second alternative, that is, natural

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In his study of natural theology, he mentions in particular the natural theology developed in the 17th and 18th centuries. To whom specifically does he refer? If I am not mistaken, in the writings published in his lifetime the only modern philosophers to whom he explicitly attributes a natural theology are Hobbes and Rousseau. Is the natural theology of these two philosophers based in the same way on the analogy of the wise man as the natural theology presented by Strauss? It is not possible here to examine this aspect, which would require a detailed study of Strauss’ sources. Rather, we must focus on the presentation of the argument, which in this version seems to be slightly clearer than in *Reason and Revelation*.

Let us sketch the general character of this argument. God is the most perfect being. This is what all men mean by God, regardless of whether He exists or not. Now the philosophers claim that they can prove the incompatibility of revelation and of any other miracle with divine perfection. I will try to sketch this argument by going back to its human roots. Fundamentally, the philosophic argument in natural theology is based on an analogy from human perfection. God is the most perfect being. But we know empirically perfection only in the form of human perfection, and human perfection is taken to be represented by the wise man or by the highest human approximation to the wise man. For example, just as the wise man does not inflict infinite punishment on erring human beings, God, still more perfect, would do it even less. A wise man does not do silly things or purposeless things, but to use the miracle of verbal inspiration, for example, in order to tell a prophet the name of a pagan king who is going to rule centuries later, would be silly.

As anticipated, this version expresses more explicitly the incompatibility of God’s perfection with any silly revelation, or with any purposeless verbal inspiration. However, the manner in which Strauss explains this incompatibility can leave room for doubts. God, like a wise man, does nothing silly or without purpose. The example is that of a verbal inspiration, which seems silly to Strauss (he refers to Isaiah and the prophecy of Cyrus the Great.) But God could, nevertheless, use the verbal inspiration for things that are neither silly nor purposeless. The revelation of the Ten Commandments, or at


26 We would, in the first place, distinguish between natural religion and natural theology: on this subject, see Meier, *Politische Philosophie und die Herausforderung der Offenbarungsreligion*, 84n72.

least its second half, for example, would seem neither silly nor purposeless. In this case, as before, it seems necessary to resort to what is implied by divine perfection. God, being perfect, would have no need of anything that comes from something else, most certainly not from an absolutely lower creature such as man. Therefore, why should a perfect God need to reveal a law to man, or to be concerned with man? If God reveals himself to man out of love for man, does such a love not demonstrate a lack of self-sufficiency, and therefore a need? Natural theology would point out, again, the divine self-sufficiency implied by the perfection of God. If we think thoroughly this godlike self-sufficiency we may exclude in principle also a reason for creating heaven and earth. In this sense, the God of natural theology would not be a creator, and we should think of him not as the efficient cause of the world, but as its final cause.

THE MAJOR DIFFICULTY OF NATURAL THEOLOGY, AND THE SYSTEM OF NATURE

The major problem of the argument of natural theology is the following: the analogy of the wise man only apparently makes knowable the nature of God. On the contrary, just as the wise man is incomprehensible to the common people, an all-wise God would be incomprehensible to every human being, even to the philosopher. Here below are the two formulations of this decisive objection:

A God who is infinitely superior to man in wisdom, may be said to be **inscrutable**: He is **mysterious**. All the difficulties against which natural theology seemed to protect men, come in again: a mysterious God may well be the God of revelation.

God’s perfection implies that he is incomprehensible. God’s ways may seem to be foolish to man; this does not mean that they are foolish. Natural theology would have to get rid, in other words, of God’s incomprehensibility in order to refute revelation, and that it never did.


30 See a similar argument in Strauss, *On Tyranny*, 42.


Between the two versions of the objection, the one presented in *Reason and Revelation* seems to be less peremptory and slightly more understandable. However, the content is the same: the analogy, which seemed to provide to philosophy a victorious argument, turns itself upside-down, and opens again the way to the mysteriousness of God and the possibility of miracles. This is a point of great importance. Strauss in both texts continues by presenting the argument of Spinoza, or what could be described as the attempt of modern science to address the challenge of revealed religion. The problem is that this peculiar argument is not the best answer to the difficulty faced by natural theology: it may be sufficient to refer to the fact that, elsewhere, Strauss suggested looking for Spinoza’s “strictly atheistic beginning or approach”33 not in his *Ethics*, but in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*.

Nonetheless, Strauss seems to respond to the difficulty cited above by proposing the approach adopted by the argument of Spinoza's *Ethics*. Spinoza is presented as a philosopher who denies both the legitimacy of the analogical knowledge of God and the incomprehensibility of God’s nature.34 Spinoza assumes God’s nature to be as clear and distinct as the nature of, say, a triangle. The reference to the definition of God in the *Ethics* is explicit in *The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy*, while just implicit in *Reason and Revelation*. However, the criticism that Strauss brings forth against Spinoza’s attempt is the same in both essays. Spinoza aims at obtaining a clear and evident account of the whole which would rule out the possibility of miracles. This account of the whole is based on a hypothetical premise, his definition of substance. The validity of this fundamental definition depends on the effective success of the system of nature, that is, on the success of one of the two alternatives that Strauss had presented in *The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy* as the only ones able to overcome the challenge posed by revealed religion (an alternative that Strauss himself seemed to have put aside as implausible.) For “every sane person would prefer the clear and distinct account to the obscure account,”35 the first being Spinoza's account of the whole, the second being the Biblical account. But, according to Strauss, Spinoza’s attempt fails for two reasons: on the one hand, his account of the whole is far from being clear and distinct (Strauss hints at his analysis of emotions); on the other hand, a clear and evident account of the whole is not necessarily a true account of the whole. All the more, it wouldn't be an effective account of the whole because of its methodological abstraction from

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33 Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 189.
34 Strauss, “*Reason and Revelation*,” 154.
35 Strauss, “*The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy*,” 117.
those facts which are not clear nor evident. Once again we are dealing with a defective critique of theology, and not with a critique that effectively manages to refute the presuppositions of faith in revelation. The analogical knowledge of God and the system of nature seem, therefore, unable to meet the challenge of revelation.

Strauss would then seem to suggest that the view of Spinoza, or the clear and evident explanation of the whole offered by modern science, was the only way left to deal with the predicament into whose grip the analogy of the wise man is taken. However, we are persuaded that the challenge presented by the difficulty faced by natural theology can be met by insisting on the analogy with which we began. If a perfectly wise God becomes a mysterious and incomprehensible God like the God of the Bible, we must first ask ourselves what is wisdom. If we admit that wisdom is some kind of knowledge, we must ask whether a perfectly wise God should be incomprehensible to everyone, or only to common people but not, at least, to philosophers. To put it differently, is the difference between God’s wisdom and human wisdom qualitative or quantitative? For, if it is only quantitative, why would divine wisdom contradict human wisdom? The problem then arises if divine wisdom is qualitatively different from human wisdom. So, in this sense, human wisdom and divine wisdom would be two completely different things. With what right then can we use the same word for two different things? Strauss makes it clear from the outset that the position of faith recognizes the legitimacy of reason, but only as subject to the revealed truth. It is the philosophical life as a form of life guided only by the lumen naturalis, which looks like foolishness before the God of the Bible and before reason guided by revelation. This is due to the fact that revelation, as such, maintains an essential and decisive suprarational

36 Cf. Strauss, “The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy,” 117 with Strauss, “Reason and Revelation,” 154. The argument of Spinoza maintains, ultimately, that revelation, as such, is not a clear and evident fact. But this is precisely what revelation itself admits: revelation, being a miracle, is an extraordinary event: “The biblical God is a mysterious God; He comes in a thick cloud (Exod. 19:9); He cannot be seen; His presence can be sensed but not always and everywhere; what is known of Him is only what He chose to communicate by His word through His chosen servants.” (Strauss, Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy, 162.)

37 “Socrates...identified wisdom, or the goal of philosophy, with the science of all the beings” (Strauss, Natural Right and History, 122); God, at the end of the creation of something, saw that it was good: that implies that God possesses the knowledge of the nature of his creations and creatures, since “The completed thing, the complete knowledge of the completed thing, is knowledge of the good” (Strauss, “Progress or Return?,” 43). See as well Xen. Memorabilia 4.6.7.

38 See for example 1 Corinthians 1:19: “For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.”
element which marks the specific difference between man and God. What could be a possible human answer to the problem posed by the transcendent wisdom of the living God?

**A POSSIBLE DEVELOPMENT OF NATURAL THEOLOGY IN AN UNTITLED LECTURE ON PLATO'S EUHYTHRON**

One possible development seems to be offered by a lecture on Plato’s *Euthyphron* held in the early fifties. Of course, our hypothesis is open to many difficulties, first of all the fact that this lecture did not deal directly with the problem of revealed religion nor with the theology on which it is founded. Strauss, in interpreting this Socratic dialogue, did indeed tackle the problem of piety, in close connection with the charges of atheism brought against Socrates. As we know, the prosecution will demand the conviction and death of Socrates. The problem addressed in the dialogue therefore touches directly on the conflict between the philosopher and the believers in the gods of the city. It is up to the reader to try his hands on elaborating arguments which may verify whether the Platonic dialogue can be useful to understand or articulate the challenge posed to philosophy by revealed religion. Nevertheless, the leap from the gods of Olympus to the God of the Bible seems to be made less implausible thanks to one of the arguments which were developed in this lecture. Strauss seems to put forward in a new direction exactly the argument of natural theology, although this term never occurs. The need to define what piety is leads Strauss to wonder, following the Platonic drama, whether men should do what the gods tell them to do or whether men should do what the gods do. The initial position of Socrates’ interlocutor is the latter one (even though he is not able to grasp its deep, philosophical implication; Euthyphron is a caricature of Socrates.) However, it is put into question by the fact that different gods behave in different ways. The gods are in conflict with each other. How can we choose or determine which god should be taken as a model? Of course, this is a problem that arises in the case of polytheism. It is

39 Lowenthal developed a form of the argument of natural theology in his review essay of *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*: He maintained that the difficulties which Socrates faced in the *Euthyphron* could have been, to some extent, identical to those raised by the God of the Bible. I do not know if Lowenthal was present at Strauss’ *Euthyphron* lecture. However, he agrees with Pangle as he finds a common ground between the Bible and Greek poetry. See David Lowenthal, “Leo Strauss’s Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy,” 316; Thomas L. Pangle, “Introduction,” in Strauss, *Studies in Platonic political philosophy*, 1-26.

necessary, argues Strauss, that man be able to refer to a higher standard, such as a notion of justice, in order to have a principle of preference. But if man, without superhuman help, can go back to the notion of justice, he could directly adjust himself to this standard and the belief in the gods would eventually become superfluous. Strauss then articulated the only possible alternative:

Either the highest beings are fighting gods, or else the highest beings are the ideas. If one denies the primacy of the ideas, one arrives at the belief in fighting gods. Why? Why do the gods fight? Ultimately, because they do not know. But knowledge, genuine knowledge, is the knowledge of the unchangeable, of the necessary, of intelligible necessity, of the ideas. That of which knowledge is knowledge, is prior. The ideas are prior to knowledge of the ideas. There cannot be knowledge if there is no primacy of the ideas. Therefore, if one denies the primacy of the ideas, one denies the possibility of knowledge. If the ideas are not the primary beings, the primary beings or the first things cannot be knowing beings. Their action must be blind. They will collide; they will fight. In other words, if the primary beings are the gods, and not the ideas, whatever is good or just will be good or just because the gods love it, and for no other reason, for no intrinsic reason. The primary act is not knowledge or understanding but love without knowledge or understanding, i.e., blind desire. But is this alternative not overcome in monotheism? It is impossible to decide this question on the basis of the *Euthyphron*, in which I believe the singular “God” never occurs.41

By articulating the implications of the alternative between the primacy of ideas and the primacy of the gods, Strauss seems to argue that the gods are in conflict with each other because (1) there are no standards according to which they can rationally regulate their behavior, or because (2) the gods lack knowledge of ideas and thus knowledge of the idea of justice. In the first case one cannot advance beyond that blind desire that drives each god; it would be impossible to justify any decision, and nothing would remain but sheer arbitrariness and endless conflict between the different positions. If, on the other hand, we are able to assume, nay, if we are able to demonstrate the primacy of ideas, we must grant that the fighting gods are ignorant and therefore neither worthy of being worshiped, nor of being recognized, as gods. Man can adapt his way of life directly to the idea of justice, based on knowledge of necessity and nature. To the philosopher this means, in other words, that any divine revelation would be superfluous.42 The question with

42 See how Strauss sketches the position of the typical thoroughgoing rationalist in Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 209: “He regard[s] unassisted reason not only as man’s ‘only star and compass’ but as sufficient for leading man to happiness, and hence reject[s] revelation as superfluous and therefore as impossible.”
which Strauss concludes this line of argument thus offers, in our opinion, a possible development of natural theology. Does biblical monotheism overcome the former alternative between the primacy of the ideas and the primacy of the gods? Of course, the Platonic dialogue did not deal directly with this possibility, and Strauss proceeded cautiously: the word “god” in the singular does not occur in this Platonic dialogue. Nevertheless, it is possible to further develop the argument assuming monotheism as a starting point:

Still the *Euthyphron* seems to suggest that even the oldest god must be conceived of as subject to the ideas. It is true that if there is only one God, there is no difficulty in thinking that piety consist in imitating God. One must know that God is good or just or wise, i.e., that God complies with the rules of justice. If that rule were subject to God, or dependent on God, or made by God, if it could be changed by God, it could no longer serve as a standard. God must be thought to be subject to a necessity, an intelligible necessity, which he did not make. If we deny this, if we assume that God is above intelligible necessity, or not bound by intelligible necessity, he cannot know in the strict sense, for knowledge is knowledge of the intelligible and unalterable necessity. In that case, God’s actions would be altogether arbitrary. Nothing would be impossible to him. For example, he could create other gods, and the many gods, who, of course, cannot have knowledge, would fight.43

The passage just cited amounts to what, in my opinion, is a decisive step. If God is mysterious and incomprehensible, do we not find ourselves facing a challenge similar to the one represented by the gods in conflict with each other? In other words: if the one God is mysterious and incomprehensible, how are we supposed to know that piety consists in imitating or obeying Him? One may answer: because He told us to do so. But how are we supposed to determine if it is right to obey such a mysterious and incomprehensible God, or even to be able to correctly understand Him,44 given that there is more than one interpretation of the same revelation, to say nothing of other revelations? As Strauss suggests, “One must know that God is good or just or wise, i.e. that God complies with the rules of justice.” This is, in my opinion, an argument that belongs to natural theology, even though Strauss does not mention “natural theology” in these pages: the reference to wisdom, justice, and goodness reminds the reader of the divine attributes.45 If we can say that a perfectly wise God would conform his actions to an objective standard, that is,

to an intelligible necessity (like the idea of justice) in the same way as the wise do, the argument of natural theology overcomes the difficulties it had to face. On the other hand, if this standard can be changed by God because it was created by God, or if God is not subject to any intelligible necessity, then there is no objective standard to which we can refer. God would act in absolute freedom, that is, without any ground; he would be unfathomable. But He would not be capable of genuine knowledge, since knowledge, as such, is knowledge of an intelligible necessity. God would be led by his blind will, just like the gods in conflict with each other. But if God is incapable of knowledge, how can we attribute to him any form of wisdom, may it even be a wisdom that transcends the capacity of human mind? God can only be imagined as an omnipotent, and therefore unfathomable God at the price of making him an arbitrary God who is merely driven by irrational desire, and who is unable to

46 Cf. Hadlez Arkes, “Athens and Jerusalem: The Legacy of Leo Strauss,” in Leo Strauss and Judaism, 10-11. See also Leo Strauss, The City and Man, (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 180: “To draw a line between superstition and religion in a universally valid manner is not an easy task, especially after natural theology has ceased to be the generally accepted basis of discussion.”


48 Cf. Strauss, Liberalism Ancient and Modern, 151: “creation is an absolutely free act of God...God alone is the complete good that is in no way increased by creation;” 177: “the hidden God who created the world out of nothing not in order to increase the good—for since He is the complete good, the good cannot be increased by His actions—but without any ground, in absolute freedom, and whose essence is therefore indicated by ‘Will,’ rather than by ‘Wisdom.’”

49 On the contrary, a defender of Biblical faith would argue that only God knows us, because he made us: cf. David Novak, “Philosophy and the Possibility of Revelation,” in Leo Strauss and Judaism, 183.
know himself. What would be then the difference between such a God and sheer chance?

50 Cf. Heinrich Meier, *Die Lehre Carl Schmitts. Vier Kapitel zur Unterscheidung Politischer Theologie und Politische Philosophie* (Stuttgart-Weimar: J.B. Metzler, 2012), 141-47; Meier, *Über das Glück des Philosophischen Lebens*, 328; Meier, *Das theologisch-politische Problem*, 43-44; Meier, *Politische Philosophie und die Herausforderung der Offenbarungsreligion*, 99-100. - The major objection to natural theology must face the difficulty of accepting a God to whom everything is possible except knowledge, and thus justice, wisdom, and goodness. We may add a further remark, which is not directly connected with the argument of natural theology but which, nonetheless, may be helpful in order to trace another of the contradictions in which the claim to omnipotence incurs. If knowledge is knowledge of necessity, a God, to whom everything is possible except knowledge, would be eventually limited by an impossibility, that is, by some necessity. An omnipotent God cannot be omnipotent.