

LEO STRAUSS  
*on*  
MAIMONIDES

THE COMPLETE WRITINGS



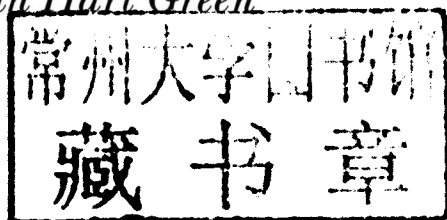
EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
KENNETH HART GREEN

# Leo Strauss on Maimonides

*The Complete Writings*

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**Leo Strauss** (1899–1973) was one of the preeminent political philosophers of the twentieth century. He is the author of many books, among them *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, *Natural Right and History*, and *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, all published by the University of Chicago Press. **Kenneth Hart Green** is associate professor in the Department for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto. He is the author of *Jew and Philosopher: The Return to Maimonides in the Jewish Thought of Leo Strauss*.

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# Leo Strauss on Maimonides

*In memory of four great teachers:*

EMIL FACKENHEIM

ALLAN BLOOM

MARVIN FOX

ALEXANDER ALTMANN

“There is no honor higher than that which is due to a teacher, and no reverence deeper than that which should be paid to him.”

MAIMONIDES, “HILKHOT TALMUD TORAH,” CHAPTER 5,  
PARAGRAPH 1, IN *SEFER HA-MADDA, MISHNEH TORAH*

“One repays a teacher badly if one always remains only a pupil.”

NIETZSCHE, “THE BESTOWING VIRTUE,” PART 1,  
CHAPTER 22, SECTION 3, IN *THUS SPOKE ZARATHUSTRA*

# Editor's Preface

The present volume is dedicated to offering in as complete a form as possible the chief essays and lectures of Leo Strauss on Moses Maimonides. It consists mainly of those essays that appeared in print entirely at Strauss's direction during his own life (1899–1973), but also those that were disseminated as lectures which he composed and delivered, and which remained unfinished as literary works.<sup>1</sup> Thus, this volume embraces sixteen works by Strauss; in

1. The six exceptions to works published by Strauss himself during his life are as follows, with the essential details presented insofar as they are known to the present editor. (1) The lecture "How to Study Medieval Philosophy" Strauss did not publish himself; he apparently delivered it as a lecture at the Fourth Institute of Biblical and Post-biblical Studies, held on 16 May 1944. However, this seems (as the evidence suggests) to have been delivered on several occasions, which might seem to make it closer to being a publishable piece—although it is no doubt still an unfinished lecture, as the notes to it will attest. (2) The lecture "Cohen and Maimonides" (originally "Cohen und Maimuni") was apparently delivered, in some form, on 4 May 1931 at the Academy for the Science of Judaism in Berlin. However, due to the shape of the manuscript, in what form it was delivered can no longer be determined with certainty; it seems unlikely to have been in the precise form of the manuscript, which in length alone (never mind its unfinished quality) seems impossible for the span of a single lecture. Thanks to the pioneering research and valiant deciphering labors of Heinrich Meier, yielding consistent and completed works based on both Strauss's handwritten manuscripts and his marginal notes to typed works, we currently possess Strauss's first nonhistoricist historical treatment of Maimonides' thought. In the lecture, Strauss criticizes the defense of Maimonides on modern, neo-Kantian grounds by Hermann Cohen; i.e., the former is considered, in principle, wiser than the latter, and hence the former is the superior of the latter with regard to philosophic thinking. But "Cohen and Maimonides" also assumes a very different sort of approach to how best to read Maimonides than the one derived from Cohen, never mind Spinoza. If this is the case, then perhaps it is better to say that in this lecture there is available the first prolonged "Straussian" reflection, which anticipates the approach of *Philosophy and Law*. That is to say, he uses a premodern thinker (Maimonides) as a standard against which a modern thinker (Cohen) is measured, which vastly surpasses the elements of such an approach as they started to embryonically manifest themselves in "Spinoza's Critique of Maimonides." This is a lecture that did not appear in print during Strauss's own life, but had to wait until Heinrich Meier made it accessible in *Philosophie und Gesetz: Frühe Schriften*, vol. 2 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, pp. 393–429. Meier published it, of course, in its German original; the version of it made available to readers in the present volume is its first English translation. Although it too is evidently not a completely finished piece, as a quick perusal of the text and the text-critical notes by the editor makes plain (pp. 429–36), it is certainly worthy of most careful consideration. Items (3) and (4) are the two brief "Notes": the first is on Maimonides' *Treatise on the Art of Logic*, and the second is on Maimonides' *Letter on Astrology*. All indications available to me are that the "Notes" were more or less finished, carefully composed pieces, and hence as close as possible to being publication ready. He planned for the two "Notes" to appear in print in his

twelve, what we see are finished essays, of widely varying length, which are mostly works of literary art, and which encompass topics as assorted in Maimonides' oeuvre as prophecy, providence, law, logic, theology, political science, astrology, codifying of law, numerology, hermeneutics, and imaginative or artistic style as it issues in cognitive purpose. And what we encounter in the three lectures (chronologically listed), "Cohen and Maimonides," "How to Study Medieval Philosophy," and "Introduction to Maimonides' *The Guide of the Perplexed*," are works originally designed for speaking, and yet very unevenly presented with regard to how finished they are, but since they were addressed to very different audiences and in very different times and places (as well as phases of his own life), also of unusually divergent character in terms of approach, style, and substance. At the end is an appendix, "The Secret Teaching of Maimonides." It consists of a brief fragment, formally a two-page academic proposal, which in content is mostly supplementary to Strauss's main corpus of works on Maimonides. However, the piece is still quite revealing for its reflection of the major turn in his thought about Maimonides as it was then just in process. This fragment shows the first signs of his detection that there is an esoteric literary dimension in Maimonides' *The Guide of the Perplexed*.

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last volume, whose contents and arrangement were of his own design—see *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*, with the comment by Joseph Cropsey, p. vii—but which he was not permitted to complete by his own hand. (5) "Introduction to Maimonides' *The Guide of the Perplexed*" is a lecture that Strauss delivered at the Hillel House of the University of Chicago in two sessions, on Sunday 7 February 1960 and on Sunday 14 February 1960. He neither published this lecture by himself nor even preserved it in written form, so as to allow for the use of a manuscript. Instead, the lecture has been transcribed by the present editor from five tapes which do survive (although the tapes have since been technically remastered to ensure greater accuracy); that makes this the first appearance in print of the lecture. (6) The fragment appearing as an appendix, "The Secret Teaching of Maimonides," was recently discovered in the Leo Strauss Archive in the library of the University of Chicago. No doubt numerous advantages accrue to us, helping advance our comprehension of Strauss's thought, from the fortunate survival of these materials, and especially as concentrated in the three lectures. Yet even with this advance, it is also fair to say that Strauss's published works by themselves represent perhaps his major legacy thus far and have already transformed Maimonidean studies in the 20th century. Indeed, it looks most likely that this revolutionary scholarly work, which appeared in print during Strauss's life, will continue to make a major impact on Maimonidean studies at the very least in the 21st century and perhaps beyond. Hence, it was thought best that these be brought together in one volume of their own, based on what was actually published through Strauss's efforts, and on what has become known about the lectures edited through the efforts of others. Besides the impressive essays of Strauss's (forming the bulk of the present volume), which so far have not diminished in their impact, it remains to be seen what force the previously unpublished or unfinished works will carry (just appearing in print in the present volume for the benefit of English-speaking readers): whether they will exercise an equivalently significant influence on future views of Maimonides, not to mention whether they will reshape our view of Strauss's own philosophic achievement and scholarly enterprise. And since a good deal of Strauss's youthful oeuvre remains untranslated (much with bearing on Maimonides), it is to be hoped that some serious and venturesome scholar will set it as his special task to translate this supplementary work, and thus make it better known in the future.



Of the three spoken lectures by Strauss, the first is relatively youthful and is a trial-run attempt to differentiate Maimonides from his modern neo-Kantian admirer Hermann Cohen, in which he shows how Maimonides' wisdom perplexingly combined an astonishingly "modern" with a startlingly "unmodern" sensibility. Once Strauss had recognized this peculiar but compelling mixture of Maimonides, he was constrained to pry the medieval writer away from the smothering embrace of his modern admirer, for Cohen's was a blinding esteem that led him to distort Maimonides' true views and prevented him from reaching a sober assessment. The second (chronologically, although it appears first in the present book) is a rhetorically skilled and even polemical presentation of the proper manner of approach to historical and philosophical study of medieval texts, ideas, and thinkers, in which Maimonides is virtually the main focus, and by which Strauss attempts to show how we can move beyond the historicist approach to history, which thus can free us to read these authors as they wished to be read and not as modern prejudice tends to cause us to misread them. It also contains Strauss's very enlightening response to Gershom Scholem's famous blast in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* against the medieval Jewish philosophers, whom he criticized for the absence of a persuasive, compelling, and efficacious popular religious teaching, and whom he contrasted—much to the disfavor of the Jewish philosophers—with the Jewish mystics. And in the third, Strauss was concerned with leading students toward an accurate overview of Maimonides' thought and teaching, grounded in the mature understanding that Strauss had reached of *The Guide of the Perplexed*, which rather than mellowing with age had become radicalized. This is true even though it is also the case that the lecture is much clearer on the surface—and much gentler in presentation—than the parallel essay (i.e., number 11 in this book), which is the most carefully composed in its every detail, the deepest in its consideration of Maimonides' thinking, and yet undoubtedly the most difficult to penetrate of his works on Maimonides. This last lecture was delivered in 1960 at the Hillel House of the University of Chicago, and it shows Strauss's impressive ability to elegantly and articulately encapsulate his essential insights about Maimonides, while expressing those perceptions in a well-ordered and vividly dramatic fashion. Transcribed from tape recordings (almost complete, but still unfortunately fractional and imperfect), which have not previously been published, this introductory lecture focuses directly on Maimonides' *Guide* by addressing itself to the book's dialectical literary style and unfolding structure, as well as by awakening a needful uncertainty about its purpose. But it also limns in

broad contours Strauss's deepest insight about Maimonides, i.e., that *how* he expressed himself in his greatest book is the key to *what* he taught and thought. For Strauss indicates in this lecture that however much Maimonides may have allowed his thinking to be shaped and guided by his philosophic teachers (especially Plato, Aristotle, and Farabi), he always remained his own man as a thinker, and he never forgot to use what they taught him for his own original ends, which were fully in accord with the exigencies of the Jewish spiritual situation (such as the relation between reason and revelation, as it impinges on individual searchers and on the collective political entity) and its historical imperatives.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, Strauss also shows us in oblique fashion how surprisingly relevant Maimonides' seemingly "medieval" mode of thought as writer, thinker, and teacher is to our most modern concerns and issues, and hence how very much he still has to teach us, even while with our very different historical experience we should never merely imitate or blindly follow his instruction.

These works in their entirety span an almost fifty-year period, allowing us to observe Strauss as a highly resourceful, bold, free, and vigorous intellect while he excavates the lost treasure of a great mind, in the process of which he reaches ever-deeper levels in the penetration of his thought. In other words, these essays and lectures record Strauss's long way toward and deepening reflection on Maimonides. In them, we are also able to discern how Strauss's efforts moved him from what has been previously designated by the present writer as his first through his third stages of development with respect to his own thinking about Maimonides. These, combined as a totality, do not surpass one another so much as each obtains a further level of profundity in the ability to encompass Maimonidean thought as to what preceded it, forming a completed unity. To simplify these levels as each may be reduced to a single word, I believe that they may be summarized as follows: the theological; the political; and the esoteric.<sup>3</sup>

In the middle section of the present volume, entitled "On Maimonides," the essays appear in chronological order of publication (or if lectures, in order of composition and delivery). The first and the last items in the continuously numbered table of contents, because they are not devoted directly to Mai-

2. See "Introduction to Maimonides' *Guide*," chap. 10 below, i.e., his very last comment at the end of the discussion period.

3. The notion of Strauss's thought as passing through three distinguishable stages of development in his approach to Maimonides (and on which basis Strauss's entire thought may be analyzed) has been elaborated in Green, *Jew and Philosopher*.

monides per se, are presented in separate sections. The first item (number 1) is a lecture on studying medieval philosophy in general, although specific issues with respect to Maimonides are a constant point of reference. The last item (number 15) is an essay on rethinking Isaac Abravanel with regard to his philosophical and political orientation, although it emerges from this serious reconsideration that Abravanel is Maimonides' faithful student as well as antagonist. These first and last numbers not only do not address Maimonides directly, but also do not follow the chronological order of Strauss's essays as in the middle section. What they do both demonstrate, however, is how much Strauss's powerful thinking about the medievals was galvanized by his often-unpredicted sightings of a previously unseen Maimonides, which set much of the direction and agenda for his study of medieval philosophy, even though he elaborates on themes only obliquely related to his designedly Maimonidean essays.

The aspiration to completeness could not be achieved perfectly. First, all of *Philosophy and Law* (1935) has as its ostensible purpose a leading focus on Maimonides (and his "predecessors," i.e., Alfarabi and Avicenna), but it is already in print twice as an English-language book. As a result, only the chapter expressly dedicated to Maimonides, and several other paragraphs in which he is directly discussed by name, were selected for the present volume. Second, numerous mentions of, references to, or passages (occasionally substantial) on Maimonides dispersed through Strauss's other works could obviously not all be gathered or contained in the present volume if it was to achieve its intended aim of focusing mainly on Strauss's most impressive and transformative essays on Maimonides while confined to the limitations of a single book.<sup>4</sup> Third, Heinrich Meier, in the remarkable edition of Strauss's

4. The most striking of such mentions, which also in my opinion shows the direction in which Strauss's mind moved, is contained in the opening three paragraphs and the single closing paragraph of his first great essay on the "Second Teacher" (following Aristotle), i.e., Abu Nasr al-Farabi (c. 872–951): "Farabi's Plato," in *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume*, ed. Saul Lieberman et al. (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1945), pp. 357–93, especially pp. 357–58 and 392–93. For readers lacking ready access to Strauss's key Farabi essay, those essential paragraphs read as follows (shorn of the technical notes in the first three paragraphs):

It is generally admitted that one cannot understand the teaching of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* before one has understood the teaching of "the philosophers"; for the former presents itself as a Jewish correction of the latter. To begin with, one can identify "the philosophers" with the Islamic Aristotelians, and one may describe their teaching as a blend of genuine Aristotelianism with neo-Platonism and, of course, Islamic tenets. If, however, one wants to grasp the principle transforming that mixture of heterogeneous elements into a consistent, or intelligible, whole, one does well to follow the signposts erected by Maimonides himself.

In his letter to Samuel ibn Tibbon, he makes it abundantly clear that he considered the greatest authority in philosophy, apart from Aristotle himself, not Avicenna or Averroes, nor even

complete writings that he has so far produced and continues to work on, has managed to discover, decipher, and edit several manuscripts (some not smaller than the essays in the present volume) of youthful works related to Maimonides, even if not directly on him. This is not even to mention numer-

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Avempace [i.e., Abu Bakr ibn Bajja], but Farabi. Of Farabi's works, he mentions in that context only one by its title, and he recommends it to Ibn Tibbon in the strongest terms. Thus we may assume to begin with that he considered it Farabi's most important book. He calls that book *The principles of the beings*. Its original title is *The political governments*.

There can be no doubt as to the proper beginning, i.e., the only beginning which is not arbitrary, of the understanding of Maimonides' philosophic background: one has to start from an analysis of Farabi's *political governments*. It would be unwise to attempt such an analysis now. In the first place, we lack a satisfactory edition. Above all, the full understanding of the book presupposes the study of two parallel works of Farabi's, *The principles of the opinions of the people of the virtuous city* and *The virtuous religious community*, the second of which has not yet been edited at all. Maimonides presumably preferred *The political governments* to these parallel presentations. To discover the reason for that preference, or, at any rate, to understand *The political governments* fully, one has to compare the doctrines contained in that book with the doctrines contained in the parallel works, and thus to lay bare the teaching characteristic of *The political governments*. For that teaching consists, to some extent, of the silent rejection of certain tenets which are adhered to in the other two works.

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It would be rash to maintain that the foregoing observations suffice for establishing what Farabi believed as regards the *substantiae separatae*. They do suffice however for justifying the assertion that his philosophy does not stand and fall with the acceptance of such substances. For him, philosophy is the attempt to know the essence of each of all beings: his concept of philosophy is not based on any preconceived opinion as to what allegedly real things are truly real things. He has infinitely more in common with a philosophic materialist than with any nonphilosophic believer however well-intentioned. For him, philosophy is essentially and purely theoretical. It is the way leading to the science of the beings as distinguished from the science of the ways of life. It is the way leading to that science rather than that science itself: the investigation rather than the result. [Strauss's note: Not without good reason does he introduce philosophy as the art which supplies the science of the beings, and not as that science itself. Consider also § 26.] Philosophy thus understood is identical with the scientific spirit "in action," with *skepsis* in the original sense of the term, i.e., with the actual quest for truth which is animated by the conviction that that quest alone makes life worth living, and which is fortified by the distrust of man's natural propensity to rest satisfied with satisfying, if unevident or unproven, convictions. A man such as Farabi doubtless had definite convictions concerning a number of important points, although it is not as easy to say what these convictions were as the compilers of textbooks and of most monographs seem to think. But what made him a philosopher, according to his own view of philosophy, were not those convictions, but the spirit in which they were acquired, in which they were maintained, and in which they were intimated rather than preached from the housetops. Only by reading Maimonides' *Guide* against the background of philosophy thus understood, can we hope eventually to fathom its unexplored depths.

As for Strauss's peculiar, ironic, and provocative comments in his letters, consider what he writes to his friend Gershom Scholem on 2 October 1935: "Provisionally I will publish an introduction to the *Moreh* with the title: 'Hobbes' Political Science in Its Development,' which should come out next year with Oxford Press." See *Hobbes Politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften—Briefe*, vol. 3 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, p. 716. If he is referring to *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1936), how precisely is it an "introduction" to the *Guide*? For further comments on Rambam in letters to Scholem, cf. also pp. 714, 715–16, and 742–44, for letters of 14 December 1934, 2 October 1935, and 22 November 1960.

ous enlightening passages in his letters (at least those which Meier has so far edited) that present moments of breakthrough to discovery. It was not possible to contain all of these youthful unfinished works or portions of unrelated mature works in a single volume; as for the letters, a separate volume dedicated to a selection of these is currently being worked on and will in due course appear in print.<sup>5</sup> However, the letters are referred to often and at length in the notes of the "Editor's Introduction," which can guide readers to the passages relevant to Strauss's thought on and rediscovery of Maimonides.

Hence, readers of Strauss's work and searchers in Strauss's thought should have no doubt in their minds that the impact made by Maimonides on Strauss as thinker and writer passes beyond the limits of the sixteen essays and lectures contained in this book. This larger impact is reflected by comments and thoughts that appear in numerous other works (as well as several key moments in which ideas of or passages in Maimonides are alluded to),<sup>6</sup> which is especially—although not only—the case in his analyses of the great Islamic philosophers. However, I do not hesitate to assert that this volume contains, to state my view unambiguously, the most significant, the deepest, and the most powerful contributions that Strauss made, in a bold and venturesome scholarly career, devoted to the rediscovery of a lost Maimonides, and to the recovery of his genuine thought and teaching (at least with regard to its essential insights) as in substantial measure expressing a still valid and still useful wisdom.<sup>7</sup> And this is not to obscure the fact that this "contribu-

5. It is to be edited and translated by Werner Dannhauser. One hopes that this will contain a goodly portion of the letters in which Maimonides is discussed.

6. It is difficult to know for certain (but, I would venture to say, highly unlikely) whether Strauss's revolutionary approach to Plato (from which most of the best of recent Platonic studies have derived, even if these are not "Straussian") would have been possible if it had not been preceded by his great discovery of the "esoteric-exoteric" divide in Maimonides' *Guide*. This is the once-ignored fact that Plato was deliberately a writer of dialogues (and not treatises), in which a hidden dimension—and perhaps ultimately the most significant dimension—resides beneath or beyond the literary surface of the characters, speeches, actions, etc., as defined by the author, who controls the story told as a work of art. To know the teaching and thought of Plato requires a double awareness of what occurs on the surface and what is being conveyed (and concealed) in a subtler sense beneath the surface. See Laurence Lampert, "Strauss's Recovery of Esotericism," in *Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, especially pp. 63–69. He notices and traces, in Strauss's letters of 1938–39 to his friend Jacob Klein, the phases in Strauss's process of "recovering" esotericism as he moves almost directly from Maimonides to Plato.

7. With regard to the title of this book, *Leo Strauss on Maimonides: The Complete Writings*, it is entirely the decision of the present editor. I assume full responsibility for the title, although it is only proper to acknowledge that it was arrived at in consultation with Professor Nathan Tarcov, administrator of the Leo Strauss Literary Estate, and with John Tryneski of the University of Chicago Press. However, for any who might be surprised by "The Complete Writings" because it might seem to imply that the present works were all equally finished writings, I have already discussed the need to keep in mind the literary

tion" (as Strauss also chose for the subtitle of the four still-noteworthy essays in *Philosophy and Law*) remains highly controversial, almost fifty years since the last of Strauss's major works on Maimonides were produced. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to suggest that this may have been one of the four great scholarly rediscoveries of the 20th century in the field of Jewish studies (to which field, besides philosophy and political science, he formally contributed his study of Maimonides), on par with his friend Gershom Scholem's recovery and presentation of Kabbalah, with the rescue, retrieval, and editing of the treasure trove of medieval materials stored in the Genizah of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo, and with the accidental uncovering in the modern state of Israel and the gradual editing by scholars around the world of the ancient Dead Sea Scrolls of Second Temple-era Judea.

This points to one of the key tools of investigation that enabled Strauss to make his revolutionary rediscovery: though not a historicist, he was keenly conscious of history and historical context. He insisted that Maimonides' achievement, as teacher, writer, and thinker, must be considered in the proper historical context of medieval Jewish philosophic thought primarily as it emerged from and related itself to Muslim philosophic, political, and theological thought. This is to be contrasted with the Christian philosophic, theological, and political thought on which Maimonides would subsequently exercise an enormous influence, especially but not solely through Thomas Aquinas, and in which light Maimonides' achievement tended to be seen by most 18th-, 19th-, and 20th-century Western scholars. It is not that this historical impact, which he may well have made, is to be slighted, and it is not to dismiss the possibility that considering on whom Maimonides' teaching made its greatest impact may even reveal something significant about this teaching itself; it is only to maintain that it is a distorting lens through which to view Maimonides himself in his own right, and not as one who merely prepared subsequent trends. Indeed, this had been the tendency of most scholarly work on Maimonides until Strauss appeared on the scene and forced a

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dissimilarity between the two types of works in this book, i.e., the need to read the essays and the lectures according to a different standard. But it should at least be noted that the lectures in this book were originally delivered by Strauss in written form; and since two of the three of them have previously appeared in print, they have already entered the world as separate, essay-like written works. With regard to titles, and especially that of the companion volume, Kenneth Hart Green, *Leo Strauss and the Rediscovery of Maimonides* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), I refer readers to Strauss's frequent use of the word "rediscovery" in the essays and lectures of this book: see especially "Cohen and Maimonides," "The Literary Character of *The Guide of the Perplexed*," and "Notes on Maimonides' *Book of Knowledge*," chaps. 3, 8, and 12 below.

radical transformation in understanding (whose unfolding has not yet been fully completed), overturning several centuries of entrenched conventional scholarly wisdom, for he also insisted on a thoroughly revised view of what the Islamic philosophers expressed in their books.<sup>8</sup> Strauss also maintained that Maimonides must be compared with the very greatest thinkers in the history of philosophy, from Plato on the one end to Machiavelli on the other. Further, this requires the consideration of his thought as much in relation to political science, to philosophy, and to literary art as to theology, Judaism, and the study of religion in its historical aspect. Last but not least, while it may be true that Strauss's writings encompass several stages in the development of his thought as it spanned almost fifty years,<sup>9</sup> even so and in the spite of these significant changes, this body of work evinces greater impressiveness for the unity of his thought in its essential contours. For almost from the beginning to the end of his life he perceived the heart and soul of Maimonides' thought in his capacity to make greater cognitive and moral sense of the conflict between reason and revelation, and hence to reconcile these two forces better, than any modern thinker with whom he was acquainted.<sup>10</sup> At the very least we can suggest about this rediscovery that, if not for his transformative and even electrifying relation to Maimonides established during his 1920s spiritual struggles and his 1930s wanderings around Europe and eventually to America, Strauss would likely not have "become Strauss," i.e., the Leo Strauss who is known to us from his fully mature American achievements.<sup>11</sup>

8. See Georges Tamer, *Islamische Philosophie und die Krise der Moderne: Das Verhältnis von Leo Strauss zu Alfarabi, Avicenna, und Averroes* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2001). See also "Introduction to Maimonides' Guide," chap. 10 below: "A more adequate understanding of Maimonides may be said to have started when people began to take seriously what Maimonides said himself about his [own] background. . . . It compels us to make an entirely new beginning, which is in fact identical with Maimonides' own beginning."

9. For a differently oriented study from the analysis mentioned in n. 3 above, one which lays greater stress on the connection with Farabi as most vital to Strauss's thought, see Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Christopher Nadon (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

10. Shlomo Pines, a friend of Strauss's since his youth in Germany, made the following, rather astonishing statement: According to Pines, recalling Strauss in 1920s Berlin, he "was in this period already familiar with Plato's *Laws*, and had begun to discover the medieval Jewish philosophers and their Islamic predecessors. As a result, he came to the conclusion that Maimonides was a deeper thinker than Spinoza. Many of the opinions that he held until the end of his life crystallized already in those days, and I remember things that he said then which [I] find in writings that he wrote some thirty years later." See "On Leo Strauss," trans. Aryeh Leo Motzkin, *The Independent Journal of Philosophy* 5, no. 6 (1988): 169–71.

11. See Heinrich Meier, "How Strauss Became Strauss," in *Enlightening Revolutions: Essays in Honor of Ralph Lerner*, ed. Svetozar Minkov (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), pp. 368–70; "Vorwort des Herausgebers," in *Philosophie und Gesetz: Frühe Schriften*, vol. 2 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, pp. XX–XXVIII; *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s*, ed. Martin D. Yaffe and Richard S. Ruderman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming). See also Green, *Jew and Philosopher*, pp. 93–109.



It is unusual, if not altogether rare, for a great scholar to also be a great thinker or philosopher: Strauss was one. (To be sure, he modestly referred to himself only as a scholar, albeit among those who "can try to philosophize.")<sup>12</sup> Is this concurrence of scholar and thinker then an accident, or are there aspects of his purposes as a thinker that are manifested or fulfilled in his scholarly work and action, and vice versa? His rediscovery of Maimonides' literary artfulness, political genius, depth of thought, and rootedness in esotericism is not only one of the great moments in modern historical scholarship of the 20th century in the history of philosophy and Jewish thought, but it also continues to bear fruit, first, in the amount of impassioned debate about Maimonides it still manages to generate; and second, especially in its effort to revive Maimonides as a "contemporary" philosopher and Jewish thinker, with regard to which endeavor Strauss seems to have been triumphant. As for the passionate scholarly efforts to refute Strauss's rediscovery, these show no signs that they have abated or are likely to subside; this is undoubtedly another indication of the excellence and vigor of Strauss's scholarly work as a challenge which continues to provoke and so vivify contemporary thought, and which cannot be so readily disposed of, because it is grounded in obstinate facts. But however factual, Strauss knew that this rediscovery was revolutionary: in a letter to a friend about his first reading, he speaks of what he will write as if equal to "dropping a bomb."<sup>13</sup> Nahum Glatzer warned Strauss that this claim about Maimonides, if misconstrued or wrongly presented, might threaten the very future of Judaism.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Glatzer's warning seems to have acutely alerted

12. See "What Is Liberal Education," in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*, p. 7. The full sentence is "We cannot be philosophers, but we can love philosophy; we can try to philosophize."

13. See letter to Jacob Klein of 16 February 1938, in *Hobbes Politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften—Briefe*, vol. 3 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, pp. 549–50.

14. Nahum Glatzer (1903–90) was an eminent Jewish scholar who wrote about rabbinic literature, the history of Jewish philosophy, Franz Rosenzweig, and Franz Kafka. He was born in Lemberg, Austria-Hungary, and died in Tucson, Arizona. Glatzer followed Martin Buber as professor of Jewish religious history at the University of Frankfurt. On the advent of Hitler he fled Germany and immigrated to Palestine. Eventually he moved to the United States, in the late 1930s. Starting in the early 1950s, Glatzer taught for several decades in the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies at Brandeis University, and from the mid-1970s at Boston University in a postretirement career of teaching in Jewish studies. He was responsible for editing numerous distinguished anthologies: ancient, medieval, and modern sources of Judaism; the book of Job as viewed in its commentary tradition; Kafka's complete stories; Buber's essays *On the Bible*; and selected stories of Israeli Hebrew writer S. Y. Agnon. He also edited *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought*. And perhaps most famously, Glatzer was the chief disciple of Franz Rosenzweig, whose monumental spiritual biography (*Life and Thought*) first brought Rosenzweig to the attention of, and forever made his name in, the English-speaking world. The book was unique for its ability to speak both to the scholars and to the faithful. Strauss had likely been acquainted with Glatzer ever since their common days of teaching together during the 1920s at Rosenzweig's "Lehrhaus" in Frankfurt.



Strauss to a dilemma or quandary and directed him to rethink how to present the results of his great rediscovery, which, once begun, produced in him an almost unquenchable fascination with the study of Maimonides, seemingly lasting until the very end of his life. Certainly a second reading seems to have taught Strauss, awakened by Glatzer, to temper what he judged the quality of dynamite in what he was conveying. This issued in a presentation of Maimonides' teaching that manifested the artful care, intellectual precision, moral purpose, and skillful literary restraint which Maimonides himself had exercised, and which he expressly intended his readers to imitate.<sup>15</sup>

The efforts to refute and reverse Strauss's rediscovery of Maimonides (encompassing esotericism and beyond), which do not seem likely to cease in the immediate future, may also represent a sign of Strauss's compositions on Maimonides as an unyielding challenge to the contemporary self-image. This is perhaps because the contemporary mind (often called "postmodern") is bothered by the notion that the specific conflict between reason and revelation may not have been settled (even if the preference of "postmodernism" in general is for unsettled issues). It is also bothered by the possibility that Maimonides may have thought this conflict through better than the leading modern philosophers, and especially than the principal "postmodern" thinkers like Martin Heidegger. Besides that, Maimonides is further faulted (as this must be laid beside his concern with revelation) for his criticism of reason because it is put together with his (almost unconditional) defense of reason. It is also likely a motive for some, in wishing to get rid of Strauss's goad, that esotericism presents something embarrassing about Maimonides, as this brings to light his "free mind," which some (both religious and secular) might wish to bury beneath traditional notions of what is allowed to be contained in the (medieval) religious mind, and certainly in an authoritative Jewish mind who was one of the greatest teachers ever of the divinely revealed law.

It may also be the case that this forces the confrontation with Strauss as the main blockage to long-established (but certainly respectable, and perhaps even noble) efforts to duly subordinate both Judaism and philosophy to Hermann Cohen, to neo-Kantianism, and to the modern moral interpreta-

15. See especially "Literary Character," chap. 8 below. See Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, trans. Marcus Brainard (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 23, n. 32, for Strauss's first response to Glatzer's remark, in a letter of 16 February 1938 to Jacob Klein, and for his fascinating letter of 20 May 1949 to Julius Guttmann, in which he mentions his "hunch" that "Maimonides was a 'philosopher' in a far more radical sense than is usually assumed today." If this is true, as he continues, esotericism imposes a responsibility on the writer, and makes it, "as one says these days, an 'existential' concern."