Thinking Nietzsche Through and Strauss's Recovery of Classical Political Philosophy

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Leo Strauss is best and rightfully known for his recovery and defense of classical political philosophy. As a young man, however, Strauss was fascinated and persuaded by the thought of Nietzsche, a trenchant critic of the thought Strauss would come to defend.[1] Moreover, as a mature thinker Strauss placed a careful study of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* at the heart of his final work, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*. Thus we see a lifelong engagement and confrontation with Nietzsche's thought on Strauss's part. What, though, is the nature of this engagement and confrontation? Did the early Strauss, an admirer of Nietzsche simply become, as the later Strauss, a critic of Nietzsche and defender of classical political philosophy? Or, as Laurence Lampert has persuasively argued, is the relationship between Nietzsche and Strauss more complex and subtle?[2] Like Lampert, I would like to suggest that the relationship between Nietzsche and Strauss is indeed a complex and subtle one. Yet unlike Lampert, I would like to suggest that Strauss was ultimately a critic (albeit a grateful and admiring critic) of Nietzsche and a defender of classical political philosophy. This essay argues that Strauss's deep confrontation with and thinking through of Nietzsche's thought played an important role in his coming to see the possibility of returning to classical political philosophy.[3] The questions that Nietzsche powerfully but unsuccessfully grappled with helped Strauss, I submit, begin to see the possibility of how classical political philosophy might have successfully grappled with

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[1] Leo Strauss to Karl Löwith, 23 June 1935, in "Correspondence of Karl Löwith and Leo Strauss," trans. George Elliot Tucker, *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 5/6 (1988): 182–83.

[2] Laurence Lampert, *Leo Strauss and Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[3] A complete account of Strauss's recovery of classical political philosophy would, of course, require an account also of Strauss's rediscovery of the tradition of esoteric writing.

these same questions. In particular, Nietzsche's attempt to grapple with the question of how reason might successfully meet the challenge posed to it by revelation played an important role in the development of Strauss's own thought and ability to see the possibility of returning to classical political philosophy.

In his dense and rich "Note on the Plan of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*," Strauss argues that Nietzsche's thought, particularly his teaching on the will to power, "is in a manner a vindication of God."[4] It is a vindication of God "in a manner" because it does not prove that God exists, only that God or the divine might exist. For if the world is as Nietzsche claims—not entirely knowable—we cannot rule out the possibility of God's existence. Therefore, to ground as fully and reasonably as possible his hypothesis that "the world defined and determined according to its 'intelligible character'" is "'will to power' and *nothing else*"—i.e., not in any way divine or containing the divine—Nietzsche must somehow explain what God (or at least the human experience of God) is.[5] This, Strauss helps us see, is precisely what Nietzsche attempts to do in the third part of *Beyond Good and Evil.* Through a careful reading of the third part of *Beyond Good and Evil*, I will seek to show how thinking through Nietzsche's rich and thought-provoking account of religion, and how philosophy might meet the challenge posed to it by religion, helped Strauss begin to formulate the questions at the heart of his own thought and glimpse the possibility of a return to classical political philosophy.

I. Nietzsche's Account of the Religious Instinct

As Strauss observes, Nietzsche's account of "*das religiöse Wesen*" in the third part of *Beyond Good Evil* is an account not of the enduring essence or Being of religion and faith, but rather of the religious being or thing.[6] Focusing especially on the particular religious being or thing that came to be Christianity, Nietzsche sketches a theory regarding the natural origins of Christianity and its historical development. That is to say, he seeks to explain how what thoughtful men of faith, like Pascal, experience as God is, in fact, an entirely human experience capable of being explained by reason and reason alone.[7]

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[4] Leo Strauss, "Note on the Plan of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*" in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 178.

[5] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), 36. All references to Nietzsche's works are to the sections and subsections into which Nietzsche himself divided his works. I have made use of the English translations referenced in the notes, occasionally modifying them to render them truer to Nietzsche's German. For Nietzsche's German, I have relied upon Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980). On this aspect of Nietzsche's thought, see Strauss, "Note on the Plan," 177–78.

[6] Strauss, "Note on the Plan," 178.

[7] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 45.

Now Nietzsche suggests that all religions are naturally born of what he terms "the religious instinct" and that the conscience is perhaps the vital heart of this "religious" or "God-forming instinct" in all religions, including Christianity.[8] The experience of the conscience as such, of obligation, prompts us to believe in the existence of some greater being or beings, a Thou to whom I am greatly obligated. The conscience as it gives birth and shape to all forms of religious belief thus demands of us some form of sacrifice to the divine.[9] This conscientious demand for sacrifice of some sort is at the heart of the "religious instinct" and is to be found "wherever on earth" religion of any sort "has appeared."[10] Nietzsche argues, though, that Christianity manifests a particularly extreme form of this conscientious demand for sacrifice compared to other religious traditions. The religious beliefs of the Greeks, for example, required them to make sacrifices to the gods, but also showed, Nietzsche contends, great gratitude for and celebrated our freedom and instincts. Through their belief in the gods men were "able to rejoice in their freedom of spirit" and "*the animal* in man felt deified and did *not* lacerate itself, did *not* rage against itself."[11] Christianity, in contrast, demands that we sacrifice to God not animals, but ourselves and the very things that the Greeks celebrated and affirmed, "our strongest instincts" and our "freedom." "From the very start," Nietzsche argues, "the Christian faith is a sacrifice," and the Christian conscience demands ever greater sacrifices of its believers. [12] Christianity, in Nietzsche's view, promotes sacrifice to an extreme and elevates the ascetic ideal above all other ideals.

"The ground was prepared for Christianity['s]" elevation of the ascetic ideal, Nietzsche argues, "when the rabble gained the upper hand" and their "fear" began to shape religion and morality.[13] In other words, Christianity's elevation of the ascetic ideal was made possible by "the slave rebellion in morals," which Nietzsche suggests in *Beyond Good and Evil* can be understood as motivated especially by fear.[14] The weak fear their instincts and passions. They fear they may fail to satisfy their passions should they try, and they fear the ill consequences and suffering should they succeed. For such reasons, among

[8] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 53 and Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), 1038. For Nietzsche's suggestions regarding how the conscience might give rise to and shape one's view of the world, whether religious or philosophic, see *Beyond Good and Evil*, 6 and Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1989), II.19–21.
[9] *Genealogy of Morals*, II.19–20 and *Beyond Good and Evil*, 55.
[10] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 47; consider also 55.
[11] *Genealogy of Morals*, II.23. On this point, see also *Beyond Good and Evil*, 49.
[12] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 55 and 46.
[13] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 49.
[14] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 195, with 197–98 and 201. A full account of the character of slave morality as understood by Nietzsche would also, of course, have to discuss the role of the priestly type and of *ressentiment* in the origin and development of slave morality. See especially, *Genealogy of Morals*, I.6–16.

others, they deny rather than pursue their passions. In the process of doing so, however, the weak learn a new joy, the joy of self-mastery and self-conquest, a challenge and joy that Nietzsche suggests could not but eventually fascinate and attract the strong as well. In this way, first the weak and then the strong learned the "festive joy [that] lights up the eyes of the ascetic."[15]

Now Nietzsche suggests this "slave rebellion in morals" began with the Jews, who learned to deny, master, and sacrifice their instincts in order to obey the Law.[16] Through this denial and sacrifice of instinct, the Jews, Nietzsche argues, were able, collectively, to become a "people" and, individually, to enjoy the pleasure of "moral sublimity" that comes from mastering one's instincts and sacrificing them to the Law.[17] Nietzsche suggests that these political and moral rewards, purely this-worldly rewards, for ascetic self-denial and self-mastery differentiate Judaism from Christianity and are in many ways admirable.[18] Yet he also argues that Judaism is responsible for suggesting that self-denial, self-sacrifice, and suffering are also signs of our chosenness and bring us closer to God. Christianity adopts and develops this view from Judaism, according to Nietzsche, even though Christianity departs from Judaism in many fundamental respects. It is most fundamentally "*not* a counter-movement to the Jewish instinct, [but] . . . its very consequence, one inference more in its awe-inspiring logic."[19]

Developing the logic of Judaism's conscientious demand for sacrifice, Nietzsche suggests, led to the Christian elevation of the ascetic ideal, of sacrifice and suffering, as *the* path to God and redemption. It led to the desire to transcend the Law in the direction of ever-greater self-sacrifice and self-conquest. For example, not only are we not to *commit* adultery, we ought to examine honestly our hearts for any *desire to commit* adultery and to rid ourselves of such thoughts and desires. Indeed, if possible, we are to conquer further our carnal instincts by avoiding marriage altogether.[20] We are to examine honestly our heart and mind and to confess our sinfulness, constantly struggling to overcome our sinfulness and to offer or sacrifice ourselves—body, heart, and mind—to God as wholly as possible.

Paradoxically, however, Nietzsche argues the logic of the Christian conscience and its call for ever greater acts of self-sacrifice are ultimately responsible for "the decline in

[15] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 55. See also 51 and *Genealogy of Morals,* II.16 and 18.
[16] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 195.
[17] *Genealogy of Morals*, III.22; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak,* trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 68.
[18] Consider, for example, *Daybreak*, 72, 205; *Beyond Good and Evil*, 52; *Genealogy of Morals*, III.22; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist,* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1982), 25.
[19] *The Antichrist,* 24.
[20] Matthew 5.27–30; 1 Corinthians 7.1–9.

European theism," the death of God, and "atheism today."[21] For, Nietzsche suggests, after having honestly examined and offered in sacrifice to God our body, heart, and mind, the only thing left to examine and sacrifice is our belief in God. Honestly examining our faith, might we not come to regard that faith as only a conjecture, and a questionable one at that?[22] Could belief in God as father be the product not of revelation, but of the historical evolution of the worship of an ancestral father?[23] Is not belief in God as "judge" and "rewarder" suspiciously in accord with our deepest hopes concerning happiness and virtue and perhaps too good to be true?[24] Why would a wise and loving God reveal himself in ways that seem so contradictory or confusing?[25] These and similarly skeptical questions, so typical of modern philosophy, are, Nietzsche argues, clearly "anti-Christian" in their implications, but "by no means anti-religious."[26] They are, in fact, the result of the thinking through of the religious instinct, particularly of Christianity's call to conscientious and ascetic self-examination and honesty.[27]

Thought through, the Christian conscience and its elevation of the ascetic ideal lead the greatest and most conscientious minds to modern philosophy and science. The skepticism and love of the truth—no matter how hard or painful that truth might be—that characterize modern philosophy and science are, Nietzsche argues, "*the latest and noblest form of*" the ascetic ideal.[28] Christian truthfulness develops into love of the truth, because it is harder and a greater act of self-sacrifice to love a truth that contributes to "the self-belittlement of man" by questioning, as modern philosophy and science do, whether man is created with an eternal soul in the image of God and to suggest instead that we are little different from the other animals.[29] The Christian conscience and its ascetic ideal develop into the intellectual conscience and its ascetic probity and love of the truth, perhaps especially hard truths. In this way, the development of the same conscience that once led man to believe in God and make sacrifices to God eventually leads man to regard all forms of "theistic satisfaction . . . with deep suspicion" and "to sacrifice God himself." In the ultimate act of self-sacrifice, the greatest and most conscientious minds are led to sacrifice "whatever is comforting, holy, healing; all hope, all faith in hidden harmony, in future blisses and justices." They are led "to sacrifice God for the nothing."[30] Thus, according to

[21] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 53.
[22] *Genealogy of Morals*, III.24.
[23] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 53; *Genealogy of Morals*, II.19.
[24] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 53 and 39; *Genealogy of Morals*, III.24.
[25] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 53; *Daybreak*, 91.
[26] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 54.
[27] See also Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 122 and 344.
[28] *Genealogy of Morals*, III.23 and III.23–27 generally.
[29] *Genealogy of Morals*, III.25; *Beyond Good and Evil*, 54.
[30] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 53 and 55.

Nietzsche, Christianity and the Christian conscience ultimately lead to the death of God, modern atheism, and nihilism. "All great things," Nietzsche argues, "bring about their own destruction through an act of self-overcoming," including Christianity; "Christianity as dogma," Nietzsche suggests, is "destroyed by its own morality" or conscientiousness.[31]

Nietzsche, then, contends that it is an act of *conscience* that initially leads to modern atheism. It is more honest and nobler, a greater act of self-sacrifice, not to accept the unproven and comforting belief that there is a God than to believe. In sacrificing one's belief in God, one sacrifices much, but still retains one's dignity as a man of profound honesty and intellectual conscience. Might this not mean, though, that such atheism merely repeats the experience and error of faith, but at a deeper level and in a stranger way? Might not the conscience as it has developed in the modern unbeliever lead him to have faith in atheism—to enjoy the moral dignity of being a martyr to the truth—just as much as the conscience of a Christian might lead him to have faith in God—to enjoy the moral dignity (and ultimate reward) of being a martyr to God? After all, the hard and pessimistic character of the atheistic view no more proves its truth than the comforting character of the theistic view proves its truth.

Modern atheism, then, no less than theism, is, Nietzsche suggests, a kind of faith one is led to by one's conscience. Thinking the religious instinct and conscience through, he suggests, one is led to a conscientious and "religious" (or faith-based) atheism. Yet Nietzsche also indicates that such a conscientious atheism, which one must choose or will to believe, is but one stage—an early and incomplete stage—one must pass through along the way to genuine godlessness.[32] "Atheism today"—a uniquely modern atheism born of the ruthless honesty or intellectual probity (*Redlichkeit*) at the heart of the intellectual conscience that constitutes "our virtue, the only one left us"—might come to mature and deepen in a rare few.[33] Living with and thinking through modernity's conscientious atheism—thinking through particularly its conscientious commitment or will to truth for its own sake might allow one, Nietzsche suggests, to transcend the plane on which conscientious atheism and conscientious theism do battle. As Laurence Lampert has observed, for Nietzsche "there is an inherent logic in Western spiritual history that forces atheism on it as a consequence of its will to truth . . . [b]ut that very logic points beyond the present atheism or nihilism."[34]

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[31] *Gay Science*, 357. Ronald Beiner, "George Grant, Nietzsche, and the Problem of a Post-Christian Theism," in *George Grant and the Subversion of Modernity*, ed. Arthur Davis (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 109–38, offers helpful suggestions as to how "certain decisive features of Christian theism [particularly of its moral teaching] have been responsible for the outcome of atheism in the West" (117).

[32] *Gay Science*, 153.

[33] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 53 and 227. For a good discussion of "our virtue" of *Redlichkeit*, see Laurence Lampert, *Nietzsche's Task* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 221–223.

[34] Lampert, *Nietzsche's Task*, 114.

The conscientiously honest and rigorous examination of one's conscientious commitment to honesty and rigor—so that "in us the will to truth becomes conscious of itself as a *problem*"—might lead one "beyond good and evil" and out from "under the spell and delusion of morality."[35] Overcoming one's conscientiousness, one might also overcome both conscientious theism and conscientious atheism. One might thereby discover a second atheism and a "second innocence" beyond and deeper than modern atheism, a simple godlessness. This, Nietzsche contends, "is the great spectacle in a hundred acts reserved for the next two centuries in Europe."[36] Conscientious and chosen atheism is only the first act in this spectacle, a "paradoxical" act "reserved for the generation that is now coming up" that will be overcome by a truly exceptional and rare few.[37] Such rare human beings will overcome the death of God and morality and the seeming nihilism and loss of all value and meaning that appear to attend their deaths. Living with and thinking through the deepest pessimism and nihilism, a truly rare and exceptional individual might be led to simply and amorally see, accept, and even affirm the goodness of things as they are and must be, godless and amoral though they are. Such a person might, Nietzsche argues, be transformed into "the most high-spirited, alive, and world affirming" of human beings, someone "who has not only come to terms and learned to get along with whatever was and is, but who wants to have *what was and is* repeated to all eternity, shouting insatiably *de capo*," willing the eternal return of the same, Nietzsche's "highest formula of affirmation" of the world as it is and the insight and experience he regarded as his greatest.[38]

For those capable of willing the eternal return, the most serious and grave pessimism and nihilism might be replaced by a spirit of the greatest playfulness, levity, and cheerfulness; a grave and conscientious science ascetically devoted to "the love of truth" for its own sake might be replaced by a "joyous science" or knowledge of things as they are characterized by a child-like and innocent "curiosity" and playfulness.[39] As Nietzsche puts it, one might be born again not as a believer, a "burnt" child, but as an "eternal child" capable of willing the eternal return and thereby be transfigured into a philosopher.[40]

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[35] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 56; *Genealogy of Morals*, III.27 end.
[36] *Genealogy of Morals* II.20 and III.27.
[37] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 55.
[38] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 56; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo Ecce Homo*, "Zarathustra" 1.
[39] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 56–57 and 45 end; *Genealogy of Morals*, Preface 7. In Lampert's felicitous formulation, "love of truth grows into love of the true." Lampert, *Nietzsche's Task*, 120. Lampert, 116–22 presents a highly illuminating general account of the character of this final and most difficult act of overcoming resulting in the affirmation of "the world in its generation of its rational viewer consciously loving what he views" and a "love of the true" (119–20), an act of ultimate overcoming and affirmation so tersely and enigmatically encapsulated in Nietzsche's formula of willing the eternal return.
[40] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 57 and 59. Consider also Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1966), "On the Three Metamorposes."

II. Nietzsche on the Rebirth of Religion and Philosophy's Political Project

Having theorized on the past and future of "the religious instinct," particularly as it has manifested itself in Christianity, Nietzsche offers his "appraisal of religion as a whole" in the final aphorisms of the third part of *Beyond Good Evil* and argues that philosophy should undertake responsibility for "the overall development of man."[41] Despite his many criticisms of religion, Nietzsche maintains that there is still much that "religions are good for." Accordingly, he argues that philosophy should "make use of religions" as part of its "project" for the "cultivation and education" of the future of humanity, even going so far as perhaps favoring and promoting the rebirth of religiously serious societies.[42]

Nietzsche critically notes the indifference of modern man to religion. He is particularly critical of the indifference to religion displayed by those who constitute the intellectual elite in the modern age, professional academics and scholars—a group Nietzsche suggests is unable to experience "the problem of religion" except second-hand and as a matter of historical curiosity, rather than "on the basis of *personal* experience.[43] Compared to the "religious man," such human beings come to light as inferior, as "presumptuous little dwar[ves] and rabble m[e]n."[44] Men of great faith, Nietzsche contends, were deeper than modern scholars and thinkers. They glimpsed but were unable to bear the truth he saw and was able to bear and affirm. Unable to be reborn, like Nietzsche, as "eternal child[ren]," men of great faith became "burnt children," burnt by their profound but incomplete insight into the world and eager to hide from that insight by falsely "beautifying" the world with their belief in God. In doing so, men of faith went greatly astray, but astray "most beautifully" and in a way that gave us what "has so far been the noblest and most remote feeling attained among men."[45] This, Nietzsche suggests, renders "religious man" superior to religiously indifferent and insensitive modern man and makes a rebirth of religion at least potentially desirable.

Now Nietzsche suggests that a rebirth of religion is not only potentially desirable, but also possible. For Nietzsche indicates that modern man's indifference to religion need not (and probably will not) last forever. In seeing and affirming the eternal return of all things, Nietzsche seems to have seen and affirmed the recurrence of, among other things, religion. Nietzsche suggests that the same "religious instinct" that he sees as "growing powerfully" and currently contributing to the death of God might one day, as a "religious

[41] Strauss, "Note on the Plan," 178; *Beyond Good and Evil*, 61.
[42] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 61.
[43] *Beyond and Evil*, 58 (emphasis added).
[44] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 58.
[45] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 60.

instinct," contribute to a rebirth of belief and religion. For example, Nietzsche, as we have seen, argues that the "epistemological skepticism" of modern philosophy and science's conscientious and ascetic love of truth can lead to questions and doubts regarding God's existence.[46] Yet that same "epistemological skepticism" about our ability to know the ultimate truth, especially when it "fail[s] to satisfy" and "contradicts" many of our deepest desires, also makes it possible for one to believe again in the existence of God. If one cannot *know* that there is no such thing as God, then there *might* be such a thing as God. Our deepest desires, Nietzsche suggests, might lead us to reason, however erroneously, that "there is no knowledge: *consequently*—there is a God."[47] Thus Nietzsche anticipates a possible, even likely, future rebirth of religion despite the death of God, questioning only whether such a rebirth will take the shape of a revival of Christianity or (as Nietzsche hopes) a revival of a religiosity more Dionysian in spirit.[48]

Despite his absolute disagreement with religious faith, then, Nietzsche's hope for the future of religion is not its abolition, but its reform. To be sure, Nietzsche voices grave reservations about the "uncanny dangerousness" a rebirth of religion might pose to future philosophers and their efforts to provide for the "education and cultivation" of the future of humanity.[49] Religion cannot be easily cultivated and controlled by philosophy. It seeks to have its "own *sovereign* way."[50] When it does so, Nietzsche suggests, it can easily do more harm than good to the cause of humanity, as indeed Nietzsche argues has been the case with Christianity.[51] For while Nietzsche gratefully acknowledges that religion can contribute (and Christianity has contributed) to the spiritualization of man, making him deeper and more "interesting," Nietzsche also contends that religion often confers this benefit at a considerable cost, a cost sometimes perhaps greater than the benefit religion confers on humanity.[52] For example, religion can lead, as Nietzsche argues Christianity has led, man to sacrifice and deny all that is best in the world and himself, to "invert all love of the earthly and of dominion over the earth into hatred of the earth and the earthly" (62).[53] Still, despite the danger, the rebirth of religion and religiously serious societies is so potentially desirable for future philosophers and their efforts in Nietzsche's view that he urges future philosophers not only to accept their rebirth but to desire their rebirth as useful and good for the whole of society: the masses, the political elite, and the intellectual elite.

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[46] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 53–54; *Genealogy of Morals*, III.23–27.
[47] *Genealogy of Morals*, III.25. See also *Beyond Good and Evil*, 34.
[48] *Genealogy of Morals*, III.25 end; *Ecce Homo* "Destiny" 8 and 9. On the possibility, even likelihood, of a rebirth of religion in Nietzsche's view, see Strauss, "Note," 178–81; Lampert, *Nietzsche's Task*, 114–136.
[49] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 62.
[50] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 62.
[51] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 62.
[52] *Genealogy of Morals*, I.7.
[53] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 62.

Religion and religiously serious societies can be useful and good for "the vast majority" of people, Nietzsche claims. They help elevate the lives of "ordinary human beings" and offer them meaning and solace, "spread[ing] the splendor of the sun over such ever-toiling human beings." Moreover, Nietzsche argues that the rebirth of religion and religiously serious societies could also provide the political elite with a useful political tool, a kind of civil religion that offers them a powerful means for "overcoming resistances" and ensuring obedience. Perhaps most intriguingly, however, Nietzsche suggests that the rebirth of religion and religiously serious societies can be useful and good for the intellectual elite, for philosophers and would-be philosophers. Religion and religiously serious societies, Nietzsche argues, can provide *those who are philosophers* with the possibility of "a more withdrawn and contemplative life" apart "from the *necessary* dirt of all politics," such as the life enjoyed by the Brahmins, for example, or perhaps the life of those in a religious order of some sort. They also, Nietzsche further and intriguingly suggests, can provide *would-be philosophers* with the kind of "instruction and opportunity" they need to become philosophers. Religion and religiously serious societies can help train and "test the feelings of great self-overcoming, of silence, and solitude" so necessary to future philosophers, and they offer helpful "nudges and temptations . . . to walk the paths to higher spirituality." They are thus, Nietzsche claims, "almost indispensable means for educating and ennobling" those who would work their "way up to future rule."[54] Simply put, living in and being shaped by (at least initially) a religiously serious society constitutes a desirable, even vital, part of the education of future rulers, including rulers of the highest and most spiritual order, future philosophers.[55]

As we have seen, Nietzsche suggests that thinking through religion and the conscience that helps give birth and shape to religion is one important path (perhaps even a necessary path) to what he regards as his greatest thought and deepest insight, his teaching on the eternal return. Nietzsche, however, cannot think his thought for other philosophers, passing it on to them as something given and to be accepted without question. Indeed, the free and independent spirit of future philosophers would never allow them even to want to accept anything as simply given or without question, as an article of faith. As philosophers,

[54] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 61. See also *Gay Science*, 300.

[55] A number of scholars offer helpful discussions of how Nietzsche's project for cultivating the future of humanity leads him to favor religiously serious and aristocratic societies. Beiner, "George Grant," 120–128; Gregory Bruce Smith, *Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Transition to Postmodernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 146–47; Frederick Appel, *Nietzsche Contra Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 132–136; Lampert, *Nietzsche's Task*, 128–36; Juliann Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 138–43. None of them, however, bring out what seems to me Nietzsche's most important and thought-provoking suggestion as to why a religiously serious society is valuable and necessary: a personal confrontation with religious faith, with the question of reason or revelation, constitutes a vital part, even the heart, of the philosopher's own education.

they must question and think things through for themselves. Accordingly, they must inevitably and necessarily think Nietzsche's thought and insight, if true, for themselves. This, in turn, means that it is extremely helpful, maybe even necessary, that would-be philosophers grapple with "the problem of religion" *personally*, not merely as a matter of historical interest in the manner of modern scholars.[56] Religion and the problem of religion pose perhaps the most fundamental question that one must grapple with and think through for oneself to arrive at what Nietzsche regards as his most profound insight into and experience of the world and to become, in Nietzsche's view, genuinely philosophic. Thus, so that philosophy might remain a possibility in the future, Nietzsche suggests that it might also be desirable that religion remain (or come to be again) a living and vital presence in the society of the future, preferably a religion more Dionysian than Christian in spirit that accepts and affirms (rather than judging and rejecting) the world and our humanity as they are. For such religiously serious societies provide particularly fertile ground for the cultivation of philosophy.

III. Nietzsche, the Problem of Morality, and Strauss's Recovery of Classical Political Philosophy

Nietzsche's rich and thought-provoking account of religion in the third part of *Beyond Good and Evil* arguably helped the young Strauss begin to formulate and resolve those questions that became the very core of his own thought, like the question of how philosophy might best understand and meet the challenge posed to it by revelation. That is to say, Nietzsche helped to set Strauss down a path of thought that he continued to share with Nietzsche, but which also became very much his own. For I would like to suggest that Strauss, seeing certain problems with Nietzsche's thought, was able to go farther down the path of thought he shared with Nietzsche than was Nietzsche himself. Doing so, I would further like to suggest, helped Strauss begin to see the possibility of returning to classical political philosophy. To be more precise, I would like to propose that Strauss learned from Nietzsche how fundamental our moral experience of the world is to our humanity and to a believer's experience of revelation. Yet Strauss also saw that Nietzsche failed to adequately articulate and understand our moral experience of the world, which helped Strauss begin to see how classical political philosophy had more adequately explored and understood our moral experience of the world.

The mature Strauss observes that Nietzsche "makes higher demands on the student of religion than on the student of morality" and thus suggests that morality might be

[56] On the importance Nietzsche placed on thinkers grappling with important questions and problems personally and not in a merely academic or theoretical manner, see *Gay Science*, 345.

overcome and transcended somewhat more easily than religion.[57] Strauss thus leads us to wonder if Nietzsche grappled as fully and adequately with the problem of morality as he did the problem of religion. In particular, I would like to suggest that Strauss came to think that Nietzsche perhaps too quickly assumed that he knew *what morality is*, or more precisely, *how morality came to be* and developed—its genealogy. That is to say, Nietzsche too quickly and without sufficient examination accepted the modern, historicist premise (questioned so intransigently by Strauss) that the conscience and our moral beliefs have a genealogy and are the products of a historical process. As Strauss helps us see, accepting this premise too quickly is arguably the single greatest, although perhaps not the only, reason why Nietzsche failed to grapple fully and adequately with the problem of morality.

Nietzsche calls on us to undertake, and he himself engaged in, extensive and thoughtful "*historical* studies" and analyses of morality as it has been understood and experienced by "different peoples, times, and past ages."[58] From a young age, and continuing throughout his life, Nietzsche acknowledges that questions of conscience and morality were of great concern to him, and such questions are penetratingly discussed and examined throughout his works.[59] Yet Nietzsche also suggests that, from the start, he was interested in "*historical* studies" meant to lay bare the "*origin*" of the conscience and morality.[60] Moreover, while Nietzsche candidly confesses that his own efforts to provide a genealogy or "natural history of morals" (as he puts it in part five of *Beyond Good and Evil*) are hypothetical and less than definitive, he still expresses confidence that future scholars might successfully complete this task.[61] But is not this confidence at least somewhat problematic? Does it not perhaps indicate an over-confidence in the historicist view that morality is the product of a historical process, despite the fact that (as Nietzsche admits) the evidence is not yet in and this view is still therefore insufficiently established?

To be sure, historicism is a serious and thoughtful theory. But still, it is just that—a *theory*—and a contested one at that. After all, would a conscientious and deeply moral Jew, Christian, or anyone else accept as quickly as Nietzsche (or ever) that his moral beliefs are the products of a historical process? Or would he not instead argue that his moral beliefs are timeless, ahistorical truths? Is this not also a powerful and serious human understanding and experience of morality? Such an understanding and experience of morality might well and reasonably seem problematic to a mind as subtle and penetrating as Nietzsche's, especially in light of modern man's knowledge and experience of the vastly different ways

[57] Strauss, "Note on the Plan," 182; see also 176. On the relative ease with which Nietzsche suggests morality might be transcended or overcome in comparison to the transcending and overcoming of religion, compare, for example, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 45 and 186.
[58] *Genealogy of Morals*, I.17; *Beyond Good and Evil*, 186.
[59] *Genealogy of Morals*, Preface.
[60] *Genealogy of Morals*, Preface 2 and 3.
[61] Consider *Genealogy of Morals*, Preface 5 and 7, I.17.

this ahistorical understanding and experience of morality has historically manifested itself (from the Greeks to the Christians to modern, secular Europeans). But might not seeing the ahistorical understanding of morality as problematic from the start have led Nietzsche to adopt perhaps too quickly and uncritically the alternative historicist understanding of morality, causing Nietzsche to leave the important and powerful (even if problematic) ahistorical understanding of morality insufficiently examined? If so, Nietzsche's failure to confront fully and adequately the complete human understanding and experience of morality—an experience whose power to shape (even confuse) our thought is so compellingly explored by Nietzsche—could be thought (on Nietzsche's own terms) to have left him less liberated from morality, less beyond good and evil, than he supposed. After all, one might well wonder if Nietzsche, with his "conscience for the overall development of man" and willingness to bear the burden of this "most comprehensive responsibility," is truly as free from conscientiousness, so beyond good and evil, as he claims to be.[62]

Nietzsche's thought, then, along with his own continued conscientiousness, suggest that morality and the conscience might be still more complicated and more deeply (perhaps even naturally) a part of us than even Nietzsche recognized. Fully thought through, Nietzsche's thought suggests that morality and the conscience understood on their own terms—i.e., not as simply a historically-created part, even the core, of a religious instinct that leads us to posit and believe in the divine—constitute the most fundamental part of our humanity and what we must therefore most reflect upon and clarify if we hope to achieve genuine philosophic clarity. Fully thought through, then, Nietzsche's thought points to the necessity of the task Strauss came to see as the central task of the tradition of classical political philosophy inaugurated by Socrates. It points to the need to turn, like Socrates, from the study of nature and the causes of things simply to the study also of the nature of morality and justice—asking not so much the sophisticated, philosophic questions Nietzsche asks about the origins of morality and justice (e.g., How does justice come to be?), but rather the simpler, pre-philosophic questions Socrates asks about the nature of morality and justice (e.g., What is justice?).[63] In this way, I would like to suggest, Strauss's youthful confrontation with and thinking through of Nietzsche's thought helped prepare him for his eventual recovery of classical political philosophy.

[62] *Beyond Good and Evil*, 61.
[63] Consider, for example, Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 120–26.