Leo Strauss on the Origins of Hobbes's Natural Science

Timothy Burns*
(Skidmore College)

Leo Strauss's Unfinished Manuscript, *Hobbes' Critique of Religion* (1933–34), which Gabriel Bartlett and Svetozar Minkov have now translated into English,[1] belongs to the period that Strauss identifies as the crucial one in his intellectual development, when he underwent what he calls, in the 1965 preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, his "change of orientation."[2] He moved at this time from the premise that a return to premodern philosophy was impossible to the recognition that such a return is possible. That change had as its foundation the recognition, noted in his review of Carl Schmitt's *Concept of the Political*, that the modern attempt to see human evil as bestial and hence innocent evil was inferior to the starting point of Socratic dialectic, wherein evil is seen as moral depravity.[3] The unpublished and unfinished Hobbes manuscript from this period provides us with some important, if provisional, results of the ten-year study of Hobbes that Strauss undertook in his effort to understand the roots of the peculiar situation at which the project of modern rationalism had arrived. In it, Strauss argues that Hobbes's positivist-phenomenalist

---

* Timothy Burns is Associate Professor of Government, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY. is Associate Professor of Government at Skidmore College. He is the editor of *After History? Francis Fukuyama and his Critics* of *Recovering Reason: Essays in Honor of Thomas L. Pangle*, tand author of articles on Homer, Thucydides, Strauss, Fukuyama, Putnam, Chesterton, and modern liberal republican theory. This article appeared originally in *The Review of Metaphysics* 64 (June 2011), 823– 855. The author would like to express his gratitude to Jude Dougherty, editor of that journal, for his kind permission to reprint.

[1] Leo Strauss, *Hobbes's Critique of Religion and Related Writings*, translated and edited by Gabriel Bartlett and Svetozar Minkov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). Hereafter referred to as *HCR*. All translations are from this Bartlett-Minkov translation. Page numbers refer to this translation, followed in brackets by the page numbers of the German edition, that is, of volume 3 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Heinrich Meier (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2008), hereafter referred to as *GS*. The full title of the unpublished manuscript is *Hobbes's Critique of Religion: A Contribution to Understanding the Enlightenment*.

[2] "Preface," in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, trans. E. M. Sinclair (New York: Schocken, 1965), 31. For a very helpful presentation of the intellectual-biographical details surrounding the writing of the manuscript of *HCR*, see the "Introduction" to *HCR* (pages 1–19), which is a translation of an excerpt from Heinrich Meier's foreward to *Hobbes' politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schrifte—Briefe* [2001], 2nd edition, volume 3 of *GS*.

[3] "Comments on *Der Begriff Des Politischen* by Carl Schmitt," in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 344–5. The original German edition of *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* was published as *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft Untersuchungen zu Spinozas Theologisch-Politischem Traktat* (Akademi-Verlag, Berlin, 1930). The translation will hereafter be referred to as *SCR*.

science (that is, what Strauss in *HCR* calls "methodological materialism" or "hypothetical materialism") is a result of the somewhat unexpected realization that, as a working hypothesis, the omnipotent God has to be assumed to be behind nature, rendering nature unintelligible. That is, Strauss argues that according to Hobbes, the doctrine of an omnipotent God creating the world *ex nihilo* at each moment—a doctrine that Calvin, as well as the Islamic Kalâm, had come to adopt—had to be initially granted as a possibility, if revelation were to be refuted. Twenty years later, in *Natural Right and History*, chapter five, Strauss offers what appears to be a different account of the origin of Hobbes's natural science; he there argues that it resulted from Hobbes's recognition of the impossibility, for knowledge of anything, of conceiving of mind as derivative from matter and hence subject to the flux of mechanical causation, as both Hobbes and some pre-Socratics had wished to conceive of mind. [4] This article examines the similarities and differences between the two arguments, and attempts to explain why and to what extent Strauss abandoned his earlier argument in favor of the one he later articulated in *Natural Right and History*.

I.

To better grasp the intention of the earlier work, it may be helpful to consider first Strauss's remarks about its immediate predecessor, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. Both books manifest what Strauss later (in his 1965 German Preface to *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*) describes as his "philosophic interest in theology," an interest prompted by the failure of modern philosophic rationalism's attempt to liberate the West from biblical revelation and direct it by rational norms.[5] As Thomas Pangle has shown in his very helpful explication of that preface and of the Strauss letter to Gerhard Krüger of January 7, 1930,[6] Strauss understood his *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* to be a book on Heidegger, in two senses. First, it was originally conceived from a position that was fundamentally Heideggerian as regards the theological question: Strauss himself continued, as he tells Krüger, to have the "will" (*Wille*) and "stance" (*Gesinnung*) of the Enlightenment, and Strauss understood that will or stance to have reached "its completion in *Being and Time*—I

[4] *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 166–202. Hereafter referred to as *NRH*.
[5] An English translation of this preface is available as chapter 16 of Kenneth Hart Green's *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 453–6. I here use Green's translation.
[6] Thomas L. Pangle, "On the Strauss/Krüeger Correspondence." Paper presented at the Goethe Institute Conference on Strauss and Schmitt, Buenos Aires, September 2008. I have relied on the translations of the Strauss-Krüger correspondence made by Pangle in this paper.

mean in the interpretation of the call of conscience, and in the answer given there to the question" of who is calling, that is, the atheistic answer. Second, Strauss undertook an explication of the historical forms of pre-Heideggerian philosophic atheism precisely in order to clarify the various grounds of Heidegger's atheistic predecessors; the resulting work clarified the various modern versions of the "Epicurean" will, the "stance" (*Gesinnung*) that he found merely presupposed in, though meant to be vindicated by, Heidegger's *Dasein*-interpretation, a stance Heidegger himself had failed to bring to light.[7]

As Strauss explains in the letter to Krüger, the Enlightenment's attempt to defeat revelation depended on its refutation of the possibility of miracles. Summarizing the findings of his Spinoza book on the achievement of the Enlightenment with respect to miracles, Strauss claims that achievement to be limited to this:

> that the already enlightened human being, is immune to miracles; [the Enlightement] has created a position that is unreachable by miracles. But a miracle is, according to its own meaning, only capable of being experienced as a miracle on the foundation of faith—and thereby, the Enlightenment offensive is thus rendered impotent. At this point, . . . it becomes clear that the Enlightenment does not owe its victory to assertions of the scientific *refutation* of revealed religion. It owes its victory to a certain will, which one may, with a grain of salt, characterize as Epicurean. This will seems to me to be no foundational justification for the Enlightenment, against revealed religion . . . [I]n order for the social victory of the Enlightenment . . . to become total, there must emerge another will against revealed religion. Such a will I see disclosed in Machiavelli, Bruno, and Spinoza . . . reaching its most extreme representation in Nietzsche, and its completion in *Being and Time*—I mean in the interpretation of the call of conscience, and in the answer given there to the question; who is calling? It is in Heidegger's *Dasein*-interpretation that for the first time an adequate atheistic interpretation of the Bible becomes possible. Religion is then for the first time

[7] For the German original of the quotations, see GS, vol. 3. Both the influence of Heidegger and the critique of Heidegger are manifest in the following passage of *SCR*: "Just as the assertion of miracles is called in question by the positive mind, positive critique of miracles is called in question by the mind that waits in faith or in doubt for the coming of the miracles. The weapon which the positive mind believes it has discovered in the fact that the assertion of miracles is *relative to the prescientific stage of mankind*, is taken away from the positive mind by the observation that this fact permits the *opposite* interpretation. Is the *will* to 'establish,' which needs only to have become victorious for experience of miracles to become impossible, itself something to be taken for granted? Does not man come to his most weighty and impelling insight when he is *startled out* of the composure of observation by which facts are 'established,' when he finds himself in the condition of *excitation*, in which alone miracles become perceptible at all?" Strauss, *SCR*, 214.
One sees here the raising of Heideggerian arguments, not only in the denial of the depth of the everydayness of facts but in the reference to the agitated zone between life and death in which there is an intensification of experience that permits an "event" to happen. As Strauss here suggests, however, the atheism that one sees in Spinoza, and that Strauss understands to have reached its culmination in Heidegger's *Dasein* interpretation of the call of conscience, the atheism of the positive or scientific mind, is something that Strauss understood to rest on a "will," not on an establishable progress of consciousness.

overcome, when it can be given an adequate atheistic interpretation. Therefore: the victory of the Enlightenment, that is, the victory of the "scientific view of the world"—which I *only* understand to include, the loss of the possibility of believing in miracles—is justifiable only on the ground of a certain intellectual stance (*Gesinnung*), not on the ground of this 'worldview' itself.[8]

The victory of the Enlightenment that had come about through the activity and spread of modern natural science was not, Strauss had concluded, a victory that was justified; not the findings of science, but the will and stance behind those findings, was responsible for the limited victory, and the stance was unable to sustain a justification of itself against the alternative stance—unable, that is, to defeat the most radical position of revelation, that of Calvin, as Strauss had brought out in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (and as he reminds us, in footnote references to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, in *Hobbes' Critique of Religion*).

Second, and relatedly, Strauss had come to recognize that the modern enlightenment project was failing. Here is how he puts his recognition of that failure in the 1952 Preface to the American edition of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, describing the perspective from which that book was written:

I had seen that the modern mind had lost its self-confidence or its certainty of having made decisive progress beyond pre-modern thought; and I saw that it was turning into nihilism, or what is in practice the same thing, fanatical obscurantism.[9]

As noted above, and as both *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* and *Philosophy and Law* reveal, Strauss had in this situation already worked his way out of the "powerful prejudice" against a return to premodern philosophy.[10] But he still sought to unearth the fullest or strongest version of the modern attempt to dispose of the theological-political problem and, in the process, to understand the peculiar impetus behind modern (as opposed to ancient) natural science. He did so while simultaneously (in other researches and writings) clarifying ancient/medieval rationalism. It is possible that in his long study of Hobbes Strauss might have discovered a more satisfactory critique of miracles, and hence of revelation, than he had found in Spinoza, or a better understanding of the relative success and failure of the Enlightenment.

---

[8] Strauss letter to Krüeger, January 7, 1930. Translation by Pangle.
[9] *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis And Its Genesis*, translated by Elsa M. Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952). This English translation was originally published by Oxford University Press in 1936, with a Foreward by Ernest Barker. As note 11 on page 31 [275] of *HCR* makes clear, Strauss had already completed this work as he continued composing *HCR*.
[10] *SCR*, "Preface," 31.

II.

The opening of *Hobbes' Critique of Religion* suggests that he may have. Strauss claims that while Spinoza's theologico-political treatise is bolder than *Leviathan*, the boldness is "purchased at the price of renouncing the proper foundation of the critique [of religion], which is found much more in *Leviathan* than in the theologico-political treatise."[11] Spinoza had remained a metaphysical or systematic materialist, but Strauss was persuaded by Tönnies's argument that Hobbes's natural philosophy is "not so much a materialistic metaphysics as a foundation of modern natural science,"[12] and hence that the critique of religion is not a "byproduct" of Hobbes's natural philosophy, as indeed Strauss himself seems to have thought it to be when he wrote the Spinoza book.[13] Instead, Hobbes's critique is, at least initially, an "integral feature" of his political science, and even the "presupposition of modern politics." His critique of the philosophic politics of classical antiquity, the denial of their acceptability, itself rests on the "polemic against revelation."[14] For since an effective political order required the elimination of "fear of powers invisible," Hobbes had to overcome the Christian teaching on hell, and ancient philosophic politics, far from being helpful on this score, had provided theologians with the "dangerous weapon" of the doctrine of incorporeal substances that supported the teaching on hell.[15]

But in undertaking his critique of revelation for the sake of an effective political order, Strauss claims, Hobbes's critique became the "presupposition of Hobbes' philosophy in general" or "the genuine *founding* (*Grundlegung*) of . . . his whole philosophy."[16] What Strauss means by this remarkable claim emerges late in the text. Before explaining it, however, he attempts to account for the fact that *Leviathan* seems to show that the very opposite is the case—that the critique of revelation "rests on [Hobbes's] elaborated philosophic teaching," that is, on a materialist physics. Against this, Strauss argues that the "structure of *Leviathan*" conceals "the real foundational relation between…philosophy in general and the critique of revelation;" the critique that we see in *Leviathan* is not one that "sets forth his actual opinion unequivocally." Instead, Hobbes proceeds "by beginning with fully or mostly orthodox-sounding statements, in order to lead these statements afterwards,

[11] *HCR*, 23 [267].
[12] *HCR*, 24 [267–8].
[13] See Strauss, *SCR*, 90: "He does not contend against religion, but against unmethodical seeking after causes. The anti-religious implication is not primarily intended. His critique of religion is not the object, but only the subsidiary result of analyzing and defining science."
[14] *HCR*, 25, 26 [269, 270].
[15] *HCR*, 28 [272].
[16] *HCR*, 30 [274–75,].

in a more or less veiled manner, *ad absurdum.*"[17] To understand the true foundation of the critique of revelation in *Leviathan*, Strauss argues, one must "extract the truly foundational elements of the critique of revelation."[18] Roughly the first half of Strauss's manuscript consists of this extraction. That is, Strauss there attempts to lead the reader in the direction that Hobbes wished to lead the attentive reader. That direction is toward the manifestation of a deficiency in the surface argument of *Leviathan*, a deficiency of which Hobbes was aware.

For example, the first part of Strauss's argument (to 45 [293]) details Hobbes's critique of immaterial substances on the basis of Scripture, and hence Hobbes's critique of the possibility of suffering eternally in hell. But:

> It . . . is . . . not to be doubted that it was fully clear to Hobbes that the denial of spirits, taken by itself, would not suffice to secure the absolute unity of the civil power, that is, the absolute exclusion of a spiritual power. For since Hobbes has to carry out his critique of spiritualism on the basis of Scripture, he has to acknowledge the dualism of God and creation as Scripture understands it, and therefore the possibility of *miracles*."[19]

While writing *Leviathan* Hobbes could not exclude this possibility "insofar as he did not openly want to renounce his belief in Scripture." The result is that while Hobbes provides a critique of spiritualism in order to secure an absolute unity for the civil power, "[b]ecause this critique does not exclude the possibility of miracles, it has holes in it that can be filled in only by a special investigation."[20] The whole critique of Scripture on the basis of Scripture is, Strauss eventually says, "exercised merely fictitiously and merely subsequently on the basis of Scripture, [but] in truth and originally on the basis of philosophic presuppositions thoroughly independent of Scripture." So while Strauss goes through that critique, it "is not," he states, "that critique of religion which we identified at the outset as the presupposition of both Hobbes' political science as well as of his philosophy in general."[21]

What, then, is the latter critique? Strauss first identifies its "foundation" as "*Epicureanism*"—by which he means not the doctrine of Epicurus "but rather an interest natural to man, a uniform and elementary outlook (*Gesinnung*), which merely found its

[17] *HCR*, 28, 30, 32 [272, 274, 277].
[18] *HCR*, 30 [275].
[19] HCR, 45 [292–93].
[20] *HCR*, 45, 46 [293, 294].
[21] *HCR*, 64 [314].

classical expression in the philosophy of Epicurus."[22] At least to this point in his work, then, Strauss has arrived at something like the position that he had concluded with respect to Spinoza in his first book: whatever Hobbes's genuine critique of revelation may be, the Epicurean *Gesinnung* is its foundation. According to Strauss, both the "will for the critique of religion" and the "structure of the critique" is "predetermined by this stance," one that is revived generally in the seventeenth century and one that entails a mechanistic determinism.[23] "Hobbes's critique of the religious tradition presents itself as a post-Christian modification of Epicureanism,"[24] that is, Socianism, a latitudinarian Christianity that was the unitarian universalism of his day.[25] Epicurean unbelief is likewise presupposed in the "historical critique" of Scripture that Hobbes uses to attack the knowability of revelation, rather than being a consequence of that critique.[26] To attack those who believe in the revealed character of Scripture, Hobbes was aware, and wished his attentive readers to be aware, that he had to move from such an attack on the knowability of revelation to an attack on its possibility. And at this point in his argument Strauss refers the reader, in a footnote,[27] to those pages in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* where he had spelled out the inadequacy of Spinoza's attempted critiques of orthodoxy and of the

[22] *HCR*, 64, 65 [314, 315–16].

[23] Strauss goes through the features of this outlook on 65–67 [316–7] of *HCR*: Fear of gods and of death prevent man's happiness and can be banished by the science of nature alone, which demonstrates that the fear is based on ignorance of nature. Science comprehends all of nature as necessitated or determined, not arbitrary or chaotic, and hence nature is not in need of gods. Nature is without riddle or secret in principle. "[T]hus only corporeal substances could be acknowledged as substances, and only local motions as alterations: the Epicurean outlook demands a mechanistic-corporealistic physics." (*HCR*, 66–67 [317]) This is followed by an account of Socianism as the outward, exoteric version of Epicureanism.

[24] *HCR*, 67 [317].

[25] *HCR*, 67ff. [317ff.] According to Strauss this "modification" is prepared by Epicurus himself, who argues for following the myth of beneficent gods rather than "'to be a slave to the fate of which the physicists speak.'" (Strauss, *HCR*, 67 [318]) This "slavery" seems to be what, in chapter five of *Natural Right and History*, Strauss concentrates on as the problem that led Hobbes to phenomenalist science. While Hobbes outwardly adopts all kinds of things from the Socinians, his "critique of the tradition . . . is based on . . . an Epicureanism that ventures into the light only under the cover of Socinianism." (*HCR*, 72 [322]) Nevertheless, Strauss indicates that Hobbes did take something of importance away from Socinianism: "From Socinianism, accordingly, Hobbes came to understand the hope for immortality in the true Epicurean way of thinking as a simple guarantee against the fear of death, and not primarily as the reproachful reminder of man's duty and guilt. The presupposition for this conception of immortality is that the significance of God's punitive justice, if it is not denied in general, at any rate recedes behind his mercy." (*HCR*, 70 [320]) That is, the link between justice or the moral life and the erotic longing for immortality, so crucial to Socratic political philosophy, was severed.

[26] *HCR*, 75–81 [326–34].

[27] The footnote (number 203, on 82 [334]) reads "Cf. in this connection *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 144f., 204ff. 144f is the conclusion of chapter five of *SCR*, "The Critique of Orthodoxy." Here Strauss states that the "positive mind" (moved by empirical and positive science) can be said to lack an organ, to see less, than the believer. It succeeds only by mockery of belief, not by successfully defeating the believer in argument. At 204ff, part of the section called "The Critique of Calvin," Strauss presents it as impossible for the positive mind to offer a sufficient critique of the unfathomable God.

unfathomable God. That is, Strauss signals that Hobbes, who had become aware of these deficiencies, goes beyond Spinoza in the reach of his critique, and Strauss aims in the rest of the book to spell out in what way he does so.

Strauss accordingly moves (on 81 [334] and following) from Hobbes's critique of the tradition to his critique of the possibility of revelation. Here again, Hobbes does not "express" his denial of this possibility but "does no more than *lead* the reader to it."[28] Hobbes begins, as he had in the critique of the tradition, by "granting" the revealed character of Scripture. He presupposes the impossibility of prophecy on the "conviction" that "it is impossible that God *speaks*," on the rejection of "inspiration," and so forth.[29] This is not, however, decisive concerning the possibility of revelation. And now Strauss states the point most clearly, and with the ground now cleared, it seems, he lays out the issue to which Hobbes has led us:

> If God is omnipotent and incomprehensible, one can indeed prove that human *statements* about God's activity are *absurd*, but one can never refute the claim that God's *activity* is carried in a manner fully *incomprehensible* to man, that God therefore in particular brings forth, in a fully incomprehensible, supernatural manner, dreams and visions that, in contrast to the natural products of the imagination, have as their purpose and content the divine guidance of man. In other words, as long as the presupposition of the incomprehensible omnipotence of God, as long as the possibility of miracles is not shaken, the impossibility of prophecy and revelation has not been proven. The critique of revelation leads further, therefore, to a critique of miracles: *the critique of miracles is the center of the critique of religion*.[30]

The footnote accompanying this statement again points us to passages in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, this time to passages arguing that the positive or scientific mind rests on a "will," not on an establishable progress of consciousness, at least in the case of the Spinozistic Enlightenment.[31] This is the point, in other words, at which Spinoza's positive

---

[28] *HCR*, 82 [334].
[29] *HCR*, 82, 84, [337, 338].
[30] *HCR* 85 [338].
[31] The footnote instructs us to see pages 212 and following of *SCR* (in the English translation). There, in section E of "The Critique of Calvin" chapter, Strauss states the following: "[T]he basically problematic character of [Spinoza's critique of revealed religion] . . . becomes most plainly manifest when brought face to face with the position upheld by Calvin . . . ." That position, the position of "revealed religion," has as its "central assumption" that "God is unfathomable will." Strauss's claim is that "[p]ositive critique finds itself face to face with this central assumption in particular when it contests the reality of miracles." The faith of the one who makes the assumption that God is unfathomable will is characterized by "Trust in God, obedience to him," and this trust discerns "in each cosmic process (not only in the stirrings of the human heart), the hand of God at work," and does not distinguish between miracles and nature. (*SCR*, 213) Strauss includes as part of

"positive critique" of miracles the argument concerning a progressive development of consciousness, and indicates that such an argument dooms the positive critique, in the end. He initially suggests, on 212, that this attempt of positive critique, as opposed to "systematic critique," cannot refute the possibility of miracles. On 213, however, he argues that in fact positive critique has been the most effective critique:

> Positive critique does not merely prove that miracles are not knowable for the unbelieving understanding. It simultaneously detects, by virtue of the self-consciousness of the positive mind, the relativity of the accounts of miracles to the prescientific "vulgar" stage of mankind. But is the assertion of miracles not more completely undermined by this than by any fruitless demonstrations that miracles are not possible? When one considers the final result from all the efforts made in the course of seventeenth and eighteenth century critique of miracles, one cannot but conclude that positive critique of miracles, which at first sight appears to be so inconspicuous and which does no more than inquire how miracles are to be recognized, is of more enduring significance than the attempt, at first sight so attractive, made in the metaphysics of the Enlightenment, to prove the impossibility of miracles. Positive critique demonstrates that the positive mind, applying precise observation and stringent analysis, is incapable of perceiving miracles. Previous to this, positive critique establishes that miracles must be accessible to that mind if they are to be indubitably established.

Then Strauss pivots, however, and shows that positive critique ultimately fails in this historicizing effort. He first raises an objection that Spinoza seems able to answer, concerning the disposition of the positive mind as one that matches a disposition described in Scripture:

> But are miracles—understood as primarily meant—"established"? Are not miracles looked forward to, implored in prayer and supplication? In Spinoza's sense, one may say against this, that according to the testimony of Scripture miracles were experienced also by those who did not await them in trust and faith. (*SCR*, 213–14)

He then points out that the apparent parallel adduced by Spinoza does not in fact obtain: the unbelieving spectators in the contest between Jahweh and Baal, cited by Spinoza, experienced doubt, but this is quite different from the disposition or moral attitude of the positivist mind:

> These unbelieving "spectators" were however not convinced by merely seeing the miracle, but by a form of seeing which had a peculiar presupposition. They see—after waiting, not in faith, but in doubt, in uncertainty, to see whether the *event* announced will occur, by which the question, "Javeh or Baal" will be decided. Can the man who has understood the meaning of this question even wish to "establish" anything? (*SCR*, 214)

What Strauss appears to be pointing out is that the positive mind does not have uncertainty or doubt at all; the Biblical doubter is one who has presented prayer and supplication to Baal, after all. The doubter waits for the event; his disposition is altogether different from that of the positive mind. The believer or even the doubter will therefore eventually turn the argument concerning the alleged development of the positive mind against the enlightenment:

> Just as the assertion of miracles is called in question by the positive mind, positive critique of miracles is called in question by the mind that waits in faith or in doubt for the coming of the miracles. The weapon which the positive mind believes it has discovered in the fact that the assertion of miracles is relative to the prescientific stage of mankind, is taken away from the positive mind by the observation that this fact permits the opposite interpretation. Is the will to "establish," which needs only to have become victorious for experience of miracles to become impossible, itself something to be taken for granted? Does not man come to his most weighty and impelling insight when he is startled out of the composure of observation by which facts are "established," when he finds himself in the condition of excitation, in which alone miracles become perceptible at all? (*SCR*, 214)

critique of revelation undermined itself. Is the same true of Hobbes's critique? To answer this, Strauss now turns, in part C of the chapter (85 [339] and following), to Hobbes's critique of miracles.

The central argument of the believer concerning miracles is that everything that is, is miraculous. Given God's omnipotence, no distinction between supernatural works of God and natural occurrences is even possible; since God can and does do all that he wants, all "natural" occurrences are as incomprehensible as supernatural ones. In other words, there is no nature, and there is no such thing as "cause," properly speaking (that is, necessity). In Hobbes's effort to show that miracles are not knowable for believers, he grants this presupposition as a possibility, according to Strauss, making it the foundation of his science. To make his case, Hobbes "must, taking over the presupposition of his opponents, argue on the basis of belief in the omnipotence of God," and is thereby "compelled to deny the possibility of natural knowledge." Now Strauss argues that this clearly does not "correspond to Hobbes's real opinion," which is that natural knowledge is possible. This opinion Strauss calls "the genuine presupposition of his critique of miracles." Hobbes, he stresses, "had no reason for regarding natural science as impossible." Having made the "concession to his opponents" of an omnipotent God, however, and having had therefore skepticism "*at first* only imposed from the outside," Hobbes was led to a position in which the skepticism became "an integral element" of his thought. [32]

For to say that miracles are unknowable owing to the unknowability of an omnipotent God is a critique that "only leads to Calvin's teaching on miracles,"[33] that is, to a teaching which Strauss had presented in his *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* as one that is left unrefuted by Spinoza.[34] Hobbes, having arrived at this position, will move beyond it and thus beyond the failure of Spinoza. When he has first taken this step, however, Hobbes is "not conscious of this fundamental failure of his critique of religion" to answer the Calvinist teaching on miracles. In what appears to be a speculation on Strauss's part as to the path that Hobbes's thinking took, he tells us that Hobbes's initial apparent success brings him "into an apparently hopeless situation, of such a kind that he can believe that in being freed from it, he has once and for all put revealed religion behind him."[35]

[32] *HCR*, 90 [343–44].
[33] *HCR*, 91 [344].
[34] In response to a point made by Krüger in his review of *SCR*, Strauss here explains in a footnote that what he had presented as "Calvin's teaching on miracles" is only the "final, if necessary, outcome" of Calvin's argument, and that it is only "as to this result" that "Hobbes agrees with Calvin." (*HCR*, 90 [344–45], note 235)
[35] *HCR*, 91 [345].

In support of this claim, Strauss reviews the steps that he sees Hobbes as having taken. Hobbes wished to "attack revealed religion in general," and so placed himself "on the ground of belief in the omnipotence of God,"[36] adopting his "opponents' presupposition" that "everything which is has its ground in the incomprehensible works of God," and therefore, "there is *nothing* to comprehend." "In other words, in order to refute his opponents, he moves . . . to the complete abandonment of the idea of *nature* as a *comprehensible order*." But in doing so, "Hobbes makes questionable, *at the same time*, revealed religion and natural reason." This is the "hopeless situation" in which Hobbes found himself—presumably long before he wrote *Leviathan*. "How," Strauss asks, "can he liberate himself from this predicament, from this situation that seems completely hopeless?"[37]

Strauss then describes retreat into consciousness as the liberation, or at least the beginning of the liberation, from the situation.

> He liberates himself from this situation, and at the same time from the power that brought him into this situation, by withdrawing to a dimension that is removed from the grip of God (and of a God who is thus not in fact *omni*potent, or rather, who does not make full use of his omnipotence). This dimension is the world of *consciousness*, that is, a world that is as much of the material that is given to him as of principles freely created by him. God may dispose of nature as he wants; in the extreme case, he could even annihilate it, but insofar as *I* alone remain, my representations of nature remain, and with them the material and basis of science. This material takes the form of science in being developed according to principles that we ourselves create at will, which principles are thus to a higher degree in our power than are the representations (which remain even through the fictitious destruction of the world): even if nature is annihilated, the possibility of science would survive so long as *I* survive, and insofar as the material of science (the ideas given to us), as well as its form (the principles of knowledge created by us), are in our power. But the possibility of a genuine natural science has not yet been thereby vouched for. For the causes of natural things that are sought for by this science are neither perceptible, and therefore do not belong to the world of our ideas, nor are they created by us in the way in which the principles of knowledge are; they are, therefore, in no sense in our power, but are simply within God's power. Since nature, as created by an omnipotent God, is beyond our grasp, natural science is possible only in this way, that, starting from the ideas given to us in accord with the principles of knowledge that we ourselves create, we arrive at the *possible* causes of natural things in terms of these principles, without our ever being

[36] *HCR*, 91 [345].
[37] *HCR*, 91 [345].

able to know, or needing to know, whether the causes that we assume are possible are the real ones.[38]

Modern, phenomenalist-positivist science, which understands the principles of science as a construction of the mind, and understands the causes that it posits for phenomena as hypothetical, emerges owing to a concession to the unknowability of the world, a concession made in order to overcome the challenge to knowledge posed by the possible existence of the unfathomable will of an omnipotent God.

Strauss claims that "[t]his concept of natural science is the presupposition of Hobbes's thesis that miracles are, in principle, not knowable to natural reason."[39] As the footnotes here indicate, Strauss bases this claim on arguments made by Hobbes before and after *Leviathan*.[40] In one of these footnotes, he explains why the presupposition is not found in *Leviathan*:

Hobbes's explicit justification of this thesis does not allow for an immediate recognition of his real view (see above, n. 222). Cf., in this connection, the following paragraph.[41]

The "*explicit* justification of this thesis," which Strauss had already spelled out (on 85–87 [339–40]), is that Scripture tells us that miracles are knowable not to everyone but only to the elect. After stating that the hypothetical or (merely) possible causes of "natural events" can or do serve as the "explanation" of them and hence, too, of miracles, Strauss explains (in the subsequent paragraph) Hobbes's "civilizational" project. It is this project, he now indicates, that allows Hobbes the final road out of his difficulty, and is something that Hobbes does indeed indicate in *Leviathan*:

The science that enables man to explain nature enables him at the same time to explain "miracles." Experience shows that the less natural-scientific knowledge men have at their disposal, the more they are inclined to regard processes as miraculous. In this sense it is true that miracles are directed

[38] *HCR*, 91–2 [345–46].
[39] *HCR*, 93 [347].
[40] The notes to this paragraph (notes 236 and 237, with reference also ahead to note 238 and 283, and thence also back to note 265) quote sections of *De Corpore*, *De Homine*, *De Cive* and *Elements of Law*. *Elements of Law* was published in 1640, *De Cive* in 1642; *De Corpore* is begun in 1642, even if it is not published until 1665. *Leviathan* is published in 1651. *Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance* is published in 1656. *De Homine* is not published until 1657. Later, Strauss will make reference to Hobbes's objections to Descartes's *Meditations*. Those objections (and Descartes's replies), along with objections of and replies to six other prominent philosophers, were published in the first edition of the *Meditations*, published in Paris in 1641. (Hobbes's objections and Descartes's replies are the third set.)
[41] *HCR*, 93 [347], note 239.

only to the "elect": the "elect" are precisely those same poor in spirit who are without any scientific culture. Hence, one can expect that with the progressive cultivation of natural science, belief in miracles will lose more and more of its significance, ultimately disappearing entirely. For natural science is still in its beginnings, and gradually even the unwise multitude will be educated and thereby become mistrustful of reports of miracles that come from a dim past, that is, from an age in which there was no science. Modern science, which excludes the possibility of miracles so little that it rather has as its actual foundation a concession to that possibility, secures itself subsequently against that possibility by claiming, on the basis of the consciousness of progress that belongs to it, therefore on the basis of a historical reflection, that belief in miracles is relative to the prescientific stage of humanity.[42]

When Hobbes speaks in *Leviathan* (chapter 37) about miracles being knowable only to the elect, he is there indicating, according to Strauss, that the "elect" are those without any scientific culture, and that the more men are enlightened by the new science about possible causes of unusual phenomena, the less the multitude will believe claims of miracles, and the more the belief in them will seem to be something that belongs "to the prescientific stage of humanity."[43] The "securing" of science is thus achieved through an initial granting of the possibility that all things are miraculous, and the subsequent claim, "on the basis of the consciousness of progress that belongs to it," that belief in miracles belongs to a prescientific age. [44]

Now—with the exception of the argument concerning the granting of the unintelligibility of the world—Strauss had already, in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, made the argument concerning the awareness of the positive mind's progress as the most effective critique of religion—much more effective, indeed, than Spinoza's systematic critique—but had there shown it to be inadequate. (See above, notes 28 and 32). What he has now discovered, it seems, is that this awareness, and the civilizational project upon which it depends for its authentication, is, for Hobbes, the sole basis of the new science, and is the sole basis precisely because Hobbes, unlike Spinoza, has granted to the believer the possibility that the world is the unfathomable work of what he calls, in *Leviathan*, the "incomprehensible" God. And having granted this possibility, Hobbes grasps what Spinoza denies or obscures—the degree to which modern rationalism rests on the hope for progress of the human mind.

[42] *HCR*, 93–4 [347–48].
[43] *HCR*, 94 [349].
[44] *HCR*, 94 [349].

III.

The final part of *Hobbes' Critique of Religion* is a comparison and contrast of Hobbes and Descartes, whose response, in the *Meditations*, to the *Deus deceptor* argument appears so strikingly similar to the argument, which we summarized above, that Strauss has put together from works of Hobbes other than *Leviathan*. Strauss promises that the comparison of Hobbes with Descartes will allow us "to see the genuine basis of Hobbes' critique of religion," which is "by no means the new science as such."[45] What he seems to mean is the following. No modern scientific finding of material causes, nor any reflections on the right method of understanding causes, moved Hobbes to doubt the possibility of miracles. Rather, the new, modern science itself "is first arrived at by Hobbes through carrying out a response to the claim of miracles by proponents of revealed religion." This means that there was already, as the "basis" of the response to revealed religion, a "primary skepticism about miracles."[46] This skepticism is, then, the basis of the critique of religion. Strauss links this primary skepticism to the medieval critics of religion and hence to the ancients;[47] he presents this "primary skepticism," or what he also calls "the horizon within which" arguments against miracles "first become possible at all,"[48] as something earlier than modern science, pointing out that the evidence of this skepticism, that is, the thesis that knowledge of miracles is practically impossible, was already held by medieval critics of religion. The comparison and contrast with Descartes brings to the fore this "premodern basis of the critique of religion," and at the same time shows "what is surely the presupposition preceding the foundation of modern science,"[49] that is, it shows the characteristically modern presupposition that distinguishes Hobbes's critique of religion from the medieval and ancient one. Both of these tasks, then, are achieved by examining Hobbes's published (1642) response to Descartes's *Meditations*.

I wish to note only two things about this final section of the manuscript. First, it clarifies the source of Hobbes's adoption of the argument that the world may be the work of an incomprehensible God; while that argument is in agreement with what Calvin came finally to argue, Hobbes did not learn the argument from Calvin, but from Descartes. Strauss shows that Hobbes acknowledges the Cartesian necessity of beginning philosophy

[45] *HCR*, 94 [348].
[46] *HCR*, 95 [348–49].
[47] *HCR*, 95 [349] ("and antiquity"; "and classical").
[48] *HCR*, 95 [349].
[49] *HCR*, 95 [349].

with universal doubt, that is, that the "foundation of philosophy" is "the regression into consciousness, into the world of consciousness," begun with the "fiction of the annihilation of the world, with the retreat to the 'ideas.'"[50] Like Descartes, moreover, Hobbes makes this retreat in truth only on the basis of the possibility of a *Deus deceptor*. The founding of science by means of a retreat into consciousness is, Strauss suggests, something that Hobbes learns from Descartes.[51] Hobbes at the same time rejects Descartes's resolution of the *Deus deceptor* difficulty (found in parts 10 and 11 of Descartes's 6th Meditation); that is, he rejects Descartes's claim that we can know through rational theology that God is not a deceiver. Hobbes denies that the createdness of the world follows from the positing of the existence of God as a first cause and denies that God's truthfulness can be proven; God is, Hobbes argues, incomprehensible.[52]

This is so, Strauss stresses, even if "genuine natural science itself" operates on the basis of the existence of things, inquiring into their causes, or "does away with" the "fiction of the annihilation of the world."[53] For insofar as it deals with the causes of our sense perceptions—the causes of the "phenomena of nature" that are in our mind—natural science is dealing with things that are "not in our power and are accordingly not accessible to any absolutely certain knowledge." The causes are deduced *a posteriori* from "the principles of mechanics created by us ourselves."[54] That there are indeed things in themselves, however—that they exist—is for Hobbes "certain, indisputable, self-evident."[55] Unlike Descartes, Hobbes does not doubt that the world exists, but merely founds science on the fiction of its nonbeing or annihilation. Hobbes even presupposes, Strauss argues, that the corporeality of the things in themselves is "self-evident." What exists is known to be corporeal not through science but instead merely through the "refinement" of the prescientific view according to which bodies, as distinct from spirits, are beings that resist our force and are tangible or palpable. Science merely recognizes that spirits, too, if they

[50] *HCR*, 97 [351].
[51] *HCR*, 98 [352].
[52] *HCR*, 98–9 [352–3]. Following the argument of Tönnies, Strauss initially and tentatively (see note 263) makes the case that Hobbes is a more radical "phenomenalist" than Descartes: Hobbes in some places argues that only the objects of our mind's representations, and not the existence of corporeal things, can be known with any certainty. That is, for Hobbes, "body" appears to be only a "positing of consciousness, of thinking"; even body characterized by extension is a "mere name," or something that "appears to" (but may not in fact) exist. If this is so, then while Hobbes appears repeatedly to equate substance and body, that is, to be a "metaphysical materialist," in fact his materialism would be only "methodical," that is, it would be a materialism that leaves open the question of whether sensibly perceived bodies exist in themselves.
[53] *HCR*, 101 [354–5].
[54] *HCR*, 101 [355].
[55] *HCR*, 102 [356].

exist, have resistance and palpability.[56] Understanding being as resistance and palpability, Hobbes, unlike Descartes, holds the existence of things in themselves to be self-evident; we "experience the world in the resistance that it offers us,… as independent of our thoughts."[57] Not a full blown Cartesian retreat into consciousness, then, nor any denial that man is a rational animal, part of and bound up with the world, but instead an abstraction from the existence of the corporeal world, or a retreat into an independent consciousness "only in the context of considering the faculty of *knowledge*," characterizes Hobbes's phenomenalism.[58] Our consciousness, an accident of a living body, is itself subject to "the irresistibly greater power of the resistant world," of undoubtedly existing bodies.[59]

What all of this suggests is that Hobbes was, or was originally, a metaphysical materialist, as Strauss discerns through the extraction of various passages in *The Elements of Law* and *Leviathan*, including claims about the corporeality of God. Hobbes's "confidence" in this original metaphysical materialism "was shaken," however, according to Strauss, "above all by Descartes, and he was forced into 'phenomenalism.'"[60] Hobbes understands the *Deus deceptor* argument only as a pointed expression of "the possibility of a fully incomprehensible God," and merely a "symbolization of that possibility"[61] It is, in short, only the *comprehensibility* of the world, and not its existence, that is a genuine problem for Hobbes. Hence, in his assent to the *Deus deceptor* argument, "Hobbes confronts, not the possibility of a *Deus deceptor*, but the . . . much more threatening, and much *more credible* possibility that the world is the incomprehensible work of a simply incomprehensible God."[62]

Second, Strauss concludes by saying that "the retreat into consciousness is not the foundation of philosophy" for Hobbes (though it appears to be the "founding of science"). The reason is this: the retreat, as much as it may rescue a certain kind of science from the

[56] *HCR*, 102–03 [356–7].
[57] *HCR*, 104 [359].
[58] *HCR*, 105 [360].
[59] *HCR*, 106 [361].
[60] *HCR*, 107 [362]. Only in his confrontation with Descartes, Strauss points out, does Hobbes prove the existence of God by reasoning back from the "ideas" (in our minds) to their ultimate cause; in all other places he reasons from "observed corporeal effects to their ultimate cause," that is, God. Strauss takes this as decisive evidence that "materialism," not phenomenalism, is Hobbes's "original conviction" (*HCR*, 107 [362]).
[61] *HCR*, 108 [363]. Reckoning with the possibility of a God who actually wastes his time and energy, as it were, deceiving human beings is not something Hobbes considered worthwhile; for God (understood as body), he thought, treats men with "complete indifference." (*HCR*, 108 [363]) And as we have seen, the world's resistance vouches for its genuine existence rather than its simulation.
[62] *HCR*, 109 [365].

possible incomprehensibility of the world, "cannot help me in a positive way with an orientation in a world that is completely incomprehensible."[63] It cannot tell one whether that science should be practiced, since the "orientation" at issue is that of philosophic/scientific reasoning, on one hand, and faith in an omnipotent, incomprehensible God (the God of Calvin), on the other. How then does Hobbes secure himself against such a God, and thereby secure philosophy? Strauss has already provided an answer: the consciousness of progress over and against the prescientific mind. Next, in what happens to be the last section of the (incomplete) work, titled "The Basis of Hobbes's Critique of Religion,"[64] he shows what guidance Hobbes found or provided toward this orientation rather than the other. The guidance proves to be through "remembering art," but art understood in a new way, a way that emerges out of understanding the world as "resistance," or understanding man as the resistor.[65]

IV.

"Hobbes's fundamental critique of religion consists in his confrontation, carried out on the basis of this presupposition, with the possibility that the world is the work of a simply incomprehensible God and is therefore not only resistant and overpowering but also fully incomprehensible."[66] But "[a]s a consequence of this possibility, every orientation in

[63] *HCR*, 109 [364].
[64] *HCR*, 109–14 [364–9].
[65] *HCR*, 110, 112 [365, 367]. Strauss opens this final section by declaring that the basis of the critique of religion "is *not* 'phenomenalism'; the 'phenomenalist' thesis hardly appears in the writings of Hobbes devoted to a critique of religion; it is in any case of no significance for his critique of religion. The "presupposition that Hobbes steadily makes use of in his critique of religion is rather 'materialism,' the monism of substances." (*HCR*, 109 [364]) Strauss then argues, however, that "materialism" is also not the "basis," since materialism, as he had already argued, "is the product of the scientific elaboration of the pre-scientific idea of body." (*HCR*, 109–10 [364]) And that elaboration depends on "the articulation of being into resistant and non-resistant (into 'bodies' and 'spirits')." Materialism, to be sure, does away with this "articulation of being," by eliminating from being the nonresistant, or "spirits." (*HCR*, 110 [365]) Materialism cannot completely overcome, however, the presupposition of this articulation of being: the articulation into the resistant world, on one hand, and "we who assert ourselves against this world by acting on it," on the other, or into the two classes, "man and nature." (There is no resistance without man there to do it.) So, we can finally say, the presupposition of the critique of religion is the articulation of being as man and nature, which permits materialism to be established.
Yet "'phenomenalism' is also present in Hobbes's original presupposition" (*HCR*, 110 [365]), for the following reason. Being is articulated by him into man and nature, but one part of that articulation, "man," is understood as a being with images or representations of being inside himself, or as having an inner world into which he can retreat. This means that phenomenalism, just like materialism, has its "origin in" the "fundamental presupposition" that being is man and nature, or rather, that "*we men are in the power of a resistant world, but in such a way that we can withdraw from this world into our inner world*" (*HCR*, 110 [365], emphasis in original). Strauss is calling this now "Hobbes' fundamental presupposition."
[66] *HCR*, 110 [365].

the world becomes radically problematic. In what fact does Hobbes find protection against this threat, protection against the God of revelation?"[67] Hobbes orients himself, Strauss argues, not by the "fact of nature" but by the "fact of art," since "the works of art are comprehensible in principle." Withdrawal in defense against the possibility that the world is the work of an incomprehensible God is withdrawal to "the fact of art." And, Strauss now repeats, Hobbes's philosophy "is a philosophy of civilization: it wants to contribute to the securing and the advancement of civilization through knowledge of the conditions of civilization."[68] What characterizes civilization is that it has "at its disposal incomparably more and more highly developed arts" than does barbarism. So the "orientation" is "toward civilization, and therefore toward the arts," understood not as imitation of nature but as the means by which self-interested human beings repel or overcome nature.[69] Hobbes's "ultimate division of being" is, then, "what is by nature and what is by art," but "art" understood as the human capacity to bring about useful effects on the basis of reflection."[70]

The center of the critique of religion is the critique of miracles. The ultimate presupposition of the assertion of miracles is the belief that God can simply do anything, that the works of God are hence simply incomprehensible. Over and against the threat emanating from this belief to the original security of his orientation in the world, man finds his first protection in remembering that he understands that which he himself produces, i.e., in remembering art. When man has secured his orientation in the world by remembering art, he is in the position to take steps against the claim of belief that there are miracles.[71]

V.

When we turn to the discussion of Hobbes in *Natural Right and History*, we seem to find Strauss making a new argument: the skepticism about the knowability of the world, and the modern scientific solution to it, is now presented as arising out of a problem that attends any "materialist-mechanistic physics," rather than out of an acceptance of the possibility of an unknowable God who has created the universe and who makes impossible

[67] *HCR*, 110 [365].
[68] *HCR*, 110–11 [366].
[69] *HCR*, 111 [366]. Strauss not only includes consciousness of self interestedness ("sound common sense") and hence suspicion of alleged prophets, as part of Hobbes's understanding of "remembering art," but points out a certain agreement on this score between Hobbes, on one hand, and Socrates and the sophists, on the other (*HCR* 111–13 [367–8]).
[70] *HCR*, 111 [366].
[71] *HCR*, 112 [367].

any notion of "cause." There is reason to think, though, that this difference between the two accounts is less significant than it might seem.

Strauss quickly establishes that while Hobbes was indebted to the tradition of political philosophy for the view that political philosophy or political science is possible or necessary, and that Hobbes sided with the apparently "idealistic" tradition of political philosophy that public-spiritedly sought the "simply just social order," Hobbes attempted to combine this "political idealism with a materialistic and atheistic view of the whole."[72] The novel result is that his political science can be characterized as "political atheism."[73] It is by way of justifying this claim that Strauss turns to his account of Hobbes's natural philosophy, telling us that we must keep that philosophy in mind when trying to understand Hobbes's political philosophy.[74] Hobbes's "natural philosophy is as atheistic as Epicurean physics," he states; it represents an attempt to combine that "materialist-mechanistic" physics with a "Platonic physics" that is "mathematical."[75] And this synthesis, this mathematical physics, is one that Strauss represents as occurring through "the abandonment of the plane on which 'Platonism' and 'Epicureanism' had carried on their secular struggle."[76] What Strauss appears to mean by this is the struggle between materialistic atheism, on one hand, and those that would claim there are incorporeal substances (ideas), on the other (idealism). He later speaks of this as the "secular conflict between materialism and spiritualism."[77] "Platonism," in other words, means the positing of an incorporeal mind[78] which for Hobbes was "out of the question."

Before addressing the manner in which Hobbes conceived of the new physics, however, Strauss first turns to the problem to which the new physics was a solution: the problem of "skepticism," over and against the "actualization of wisdom." "Skeptical philosophy" had always been accompanied by dogmatic philosophy, he argues, "as by its shadow" and was to be eradicated by Hobbes by "doing justice to the truth embodied in skepticism." This was to be achieved by first giving "free reign to skepticism," and erecting a new ediface on the "foundation of extreme skepticism."[79] In a note to this argument, which pithily summarizes the section on Descartes from *Hobbes' Critique of Religion*, Strauss invites us to "[c]ompare Hobbes's agreement with the thesis of Descartes's first

[72] *NRH*, 167, 170.
[73] *NRH*, 169.
[74] *NRH*, 169b.
[75] *NRH*, 170.
[76] *NRH*, 170.
[77] *NRH*, 174t.
[78] Compare *NRH* 172.
[79] *NRH*, 171,

Meditation." The skepticism to which Strauss is referring here is, then, explicitly tied to the Cartesian argument of the *Deus deceptor*, even though the problem is now being called the shadow of "skeptical philosophy." Strauss has also dropped the entire argument showing disagreement between Hobbes and Descartes.

He then offers the reason—in Hobbes's mind—for the persistence of the skepticism that Hobbes set out to end. That reason is that the "predominant philosophic tradition" was one of "teleological physics."[80] and "the difficulty with which every" such physics "is beset." Strauss doesn't state what that difficulty is, but it seems safe to assume that he has in mind the lack of evidence concerning a naturally ordered whole. Still, this difficulty for a teleological physics does not itself give rise to skepticism; to the contrary, it opens the way to a "mechanistic physics," one which had "never been given a fair chance to show its virtues" owing to "social pressures of various kinds."[81] Skepticism arises out of, is "engendered by," that materialist-mechanistic physics that Hobbes wished now to make victorious. Strauss explains Hobbes's understanding of that skepticism as follows: Hobbes had "learned from Plato or Aristotle that if the universe has the character ascribed to it by the Democritean-Epicurean physics, it excludes the possibility of any physics, of any science, or, in other words, that consistent materialism necessarily culminates in skepticism."[82] Skepticism arises out of the difficulty attending all materialist-mechanistic physics, namely, that by understanding the mind as enslaved to the flux of mechanistic causation, materialists in fact make the world unintelligible. In *Hobbes' Critique of Religion* the problem of the intelligibility of the world had been presented as arising from the need to grant the premise of revelation according to which the world is the work of a mysterious, omnipotent, willing God. Here, however, the problem of the intelligibility of the world is presented as arising out of a mechanistic physics and as something that Hobbes has "learned" from Plato and Aristotle.[83]

But does this change represent a substantial or only a rhetorical difference? And if the former, what, precisely, is its significance? It may help to note that in the Aristotle chapter of *The City and Man*, where we receive Strauss's final presentation of the *Deus deceptor* argument, he indicates that the problem for philosophy that attends a mechanistic physics is the same problem as that of a willful, omnipotent God.

[80] *NRH*, 172.
[81] *NRH*, 172.
[82] *NRH*, 172.
[83] *NRH*, 172.

We must reckon with the possibility that the world is the work of an evil demon bent on deceiving us about himself, the world, and ourselves by means of the faculties with which he has supplied us or, which amounts to the same thing, that the world is the work of a blind necessity which is utterly indifferent as to whether it and its product ever becomes known.[84]

While this formulation raises what appears to be a new concern—that is, of whether the fundamental cause that has produced the world cares or is instead indifferent to "whether it and its product ever becomes known"—it also conflates, as "amounting to the same thing," the problem for philosophy posed by the *Deus deceptor* and by mechanistic or blind necessity, that is, the problem of the knowability of the world.[85] In other words, the important challenge posed to philosophy by the Biblical God of revelation seems to represent only a version—if one that is both more public and may have had other effects on the moderns' solution—of the problem already recognized by Plato and Aristotle.[86] Not

[84] *The City and Man*, 43. The quoted passage is part of an extended argument concerning Aristotle's principle that there exists a life affording man a happiness that is according to nature. The moderns' attack on Aristotle's principle does not rest, according to Strauss, on their rejection of final causes. It instead begins in thoughtful agreement with a conclusion that Aristotle himself suggests when he declares that our nature is enslaved in many ways, *viz*., that nature is a harsh step-mother, or that "the true mother of man is not nature." (42) Modern thought alone draws from this common conclusion "the consequent resolve to liberate man from that enslavement by his own sustained effort." This new resolve shows itself in the "demand for the 'conquest' of nature: nature is understood and treated as an enemy who must be subjugated" by a humble and charitable science "devoted to the relief of man's estate," a science that provides means to achieve the natural end of "comfortable self-preservation." (42) While the modern resolve to liberate man from nature appears, to the moderns themselves, to be less naïve than Aristotle's position, it might be better understood as a failure of resignation, a disappointed hope in the existence of a caring God and a consequent, confused sense of a "right to rebel," (41), in order to do for humanity what such a God would have done. On the Platonic-Aristotelean disposition toward our "enslavement" to nature, or our being "playthings of the gods," see also below, note 103.

[85] Strauss's conflating of the two appears to follow the argument of the last four paragraphs of Descartes's First Meditation, where Descartes presents as alternative to creation by an omnipotent God "fate or chance or a continuous chain of events, or by some other means." "Fate" seems to mean mechanistic determinism, and "a continuous chain of events," especially if one guided by nothing but chance, would also suggest mechanism. In his 1959 lectures on Nietzsche's Zarathustra (p. 9 of the transcript) Strauss had stated that Descartes did not believe in the possibility of a *Deus deceptor*, but was describing the problem of the knowability of a world caused by mechanistic-material causes. See also the long quotation from a course Strauss taught at the New School in 1941, "Political Philosophy in the Age of Reason," given in footnote 4 of the "Translators' Preface" to *HCR*, ix-x.

[86] Strauss's claim that these "amount to the same thing" is puzzling in that the unknowabilty is in each case quite different. The difficulty in the case of a materialist-mechanistic physics is that its own account of causation is self-defeating. If all human thinking is understood to be caused by a chain of blind material causes, this very understanding is caused by such a chain, in the person who makes it. No mind would be moved to agree with the arguments of such a person by the principle of non-contradiction or rules of logic, but would instead be moved strictly by material causes. The doctrine itself would be the product of a series of blind material causes, rather than a doctrine that could be true or could convince another. The difficulty in the case of an omnipotent creative god, on the other hand, is that there are no causes at all; all that is comes to be out of nothing, and an oak tree may very well turn instantly into a jellyfish.

Strauss's understanding of Hobbes, but instead his understanding of Descartes, has undergone a change. Strauss now reads Descartes's theological arguments as exoteric, and reads the *Deus deceptor* argument as having for its genuine intention the posing of the problem of the intelligibility of a world ruled by mechanistic-materialistic causation.

Still, it was indeed historically Biblical revelation that had posed the problem for Hobbes and Descartes, and in *Natural Right and History*, Strauss considerably mutes this fact. To be sure, he is not altogether silent about it: the discussion in *Natural Right and History* of the turn to the new physics is begun, after all, as an explanation of the claim that Hobbes's politics is "political atheism."[87] And its description of the mind's activity in consciously constructing the world as an act of our "arbitrary will" or as "creation in the strict sense"[88] sounds much closer to the activity of the Biblical God than had even the description of that activity given in *Hobbes' Critique of Religion*. Finally, the account in *Natural Right and History* all but concludes with the striking statement that "the building of the City of Man on the ruins of the City of God rests on an unfounded hope."[89] Precisely as indications or suggestions, however, these are considerably less forcefully presented than was the thesis in *Hobbes' Critique of Religion*. What, if anything, beyond the changed understanding of Descartes, is the cause and significance of this change?

An explanation begins to suggest itself in the way in which Strauss describes, in *Natural Right and History*, the relation between Hobbes, on one hand, and Plato and Aristotle, on the other. He appears intent on framing the argument on Hobbes's physics in such a way as to draw our attention to what Hobbes "learned" and "did not learn" from Plato and Aristotle.[90] To consider only the first instance of these: Strauss claims (in a

---

There is this relation, however, between the two doctrines: the unintelligibility resulting from the materialist-mechanistic physics—that is, from the claim that mechanistic determinism is the universal and sole cause of change in the universe—must if true undermine the trust we have in our minds to discover the truth. It is this that drives Protagoras to declare that what any and all Athenians believe, is, or more generally, that "[each] man is the measure of all things," so that those who believe themselves to have had a revelation of gods overturning necessities are as correct— their statements about the world just as true—as Protagoras's materialism.

[87] *NRH*, 169.

[88] *NRH*, 173.

[89] *NRH*, 175.

[90] The first statement appears on 169–70 of *NRH*:

> [Hobbes's] natural philosophy is of the type classically represented by Democritean-Epicurean physics. Yet he regarded, not Epicurus or Democritus, but Plato, as "The best of the ancient philosophers." What he learned from Plato's natural philosophy was not that the universe cannot be understood if it is not ruled by divine intelligence. Whatever may have been Hobbes's private thoughts, his natural philosophy is as atheistic as Epicurean physics. What he learned from Plato's natural philosophy was that mathematics is "the mother of all natural science."

The next two appear on 172:

perhaps deliberately clumsy sentence, or at least one with three negatives in it) that what Hobbes "learned from Plato's natural philosophy was not that the universe cannot be understood if it is not ruled by a divine intelligence." Since Plato's dialogues may well lead readers, and indeed did lead many Platonists, to the conclusion to which Hobbes was not led, we might wonder why Hobbes did not learn it from Plato. And given Hobbes's published doubt of Aristotle's own belief in the Aristotelian doctrine of incorporeal or separate substances,[91] it could well be that Hobbes did not accept the doctrine of a divine, ruling intelligence as Plato's serious teaching. Strauss, from whom more than anyone we might expect such a hypothesis, appears to immediately rule it out: Hobbes failed to learn this, he implies, because "[w]hatever may have been Hobbes's private thoughts, his natural philosophy is as atheistic as Epicurean physics."[92] Given his atheism, Hobbes considered an incorporeal mind to be "out of the question," as Strauss says a little later on the same page. In other words, Hobbes was simply closed to this as a possibility—not as a serious possibility for Plato but rather in itself.

With the stress Strauss puts on what Hobbes learned and did not learn from Plato and Aristotle, however, we are led to wonder whether there were not other aspects of their natural philosophy that Hobbes overlooked or too readily dismissed, and to which Strauss is inviting our attention. That there were indeed such aspects and that they were even behind the Socratic turn to dialectics, that is, to the founding of political philosophy and hence of the "tradition" of political philosophy that Hobbes took for granted or overlooked,[93] is made clear in Strauss's much more frank discussion of the matter found in the remarkable final chapter of *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*.[94] There he states in the following way

> For he had learned from Plato or Aristotle that if the universe has the character ascribed to it by Democritean-Epicurean physics, it excludes the possibility of any physics, of any science, or, in other words, that consistent materialism necessarily culminates in skepticism. . . . On the other hand, what he had learned from Plato and Aristotle made him realize somehow that the corporeal mind, composed of very smooth and round particles with which Epicurus remained satisfied, was an inadequate solution.

[91] See *Leviathan*, ch. 46, section 18, end.

[92] *NRH*, 170t.

[93] *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 136, with *NRH*, 167t. On the Heideggerian intent of Strauss' use of "taking for granted" or "neglect" (*versäumt*) of the tradition of political philosophy, here used with respect to Hobbes, see the very illuminating remarks of Heinrich Meier in *GS* 3, xviii–xix (*HCR*, 11–12) and in *Leo Strauss And The Theologico-Political Problem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 62n10.

[94] For a very helpful explication of this important chapter, see Devin Stauffer, "Reopening the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns: Leo Strauss's Critique of Hobbes's 'New Political Science." *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 101, No. 2 (May, 2007), 223–33. See also Timothy Burns, "Ancient and Modern Political Rationalism in the Thought of Leo Strauss," in *Gladly To Learn, Gladly To Teach: Essays on Religion and Political Philosophy in Honor of Ernest L. Fortin, A.A.,* Michael P. Foley and Douglas Kries, editors (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002), 145–62.

the problem with a mechanistic physics that drove Socrates to found political philosophy as dialectics:

> Anaxagoras and others had tried to understand the things and processes in the world by their causes, by tracing them back to other things and processes in the world. However, this procedure affords no possibility of true understanding. [The accompanying note 3 here refers us to *Phaedo*, 97b ff., where Socrates says that he no longer thinks it possible to know if "2" is by division or by addition, or how anything is.] Against this explanation of nature by the physiologists there is not only the objection that it is an insufficient explanation or no explanation at all; physics of the type of the Anaxagorean, 'Epimethean' physics, which as such takes—whether expressly and intentionally or implicitly and unintentionally is of no importance—not the ordering power of reason, but disorder and irrationality as the principle of nature, necessarily leads to the destruction of all certain and independent standards, to finding everything in man's world very well as it is, and to subjection to 'what the Athenians *believe*.' Confronted with this absurd conclusion, Plato does not without further ado oppose to materialist-mechanistic physics a spiritualist-telelological physics [the accompanying note 4 is to *Phaedo*, 99 c-e], but keeps to what can be understood without any far-fetched 'tragic' apparatus, to what the 'Athenians' *say*.[95]

As Strauss goes on to argue in the same place, Hobbes misunderstood this Socratic turn to speeches.

In chapter four of *Natural Right and History*, Strauss likewise presents Socrates as both founding political philosophy and as having never ceased his investigation into the nature of the beings. The passage I have just quoted from *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* helps us notice that in the section of *Natural Right and History* immediately preceding the account of the Socratic founding of political philosophy—that is, the conclusion of chapter three—Strauss had likewise referred to the Protagorean "Epimethean" doctrine:

> Epimetheus, the being in whom thought follows production, represents nature in the sense of materialism, according to which thought comes later than thoughtless bodies and their thoughtless motions. The subterraneous work of the gods is work without light, without understanding, and has therefore fundamentally the same meaning as the work of Epimetheus. Art is represented by Prometheus, by Prometheus' theft, by his rebellion against the will of the gods above.[96]

[95] *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, 142–43.
[96] *NRH*, 117

Protagoras, whom Plato presents as ascribing to the Epimethean doctrine, is therefore unable to do away with the possibility that what is held about the gods by pious human beings is true. The Epimethean, materialist doctrine of an unintelligible world and hence of the possibility that what religious believers say concerning revelations of gods' actions and intentions could be true, holds precisely the difficulty to which the Socratic turn to political philosophy had been addressed. Hobbes's founding of the new, modern phenomenalist physics, and of its necessary task of enlightenment or civilizing the world,[97] was undertaken in ignorance[98] of this fact. Strauss's own rediscovery of the original purpose of the Socratic turn rectifies this situation, and hence opens up the possibility of grounding the philosophic or rational life in a way that does not suffer from the difficulty to which the Hobbesian grounding (the progress of consciousness) has been shown to suffer.

Strauss's intention in framing the argument of the Hobbes section of *Natural Right and History* in such a way as to draw our thoughts to what Hobbes learned and did not learn from Plato and Aristotle has to be understood in light of the intention of the work as a whole. From the first chapter, that intention appears to be, at its deepest level, to address the argument raised by Heidegger against the very possibility of philosophy. The fullest reason for the change that we have traced might therefore best be sought in the digression in *Natural Right and History* (175b–176t) that appears in the Hobbes section that we have been examining. That digression concludes with the first reference to Heidegger's thesis about *Dasein* to be made since chapter one. Strauss leads up to it as follows. After the statement concerning Hobbes's "unfounded hope" to build the City of Man on the ruins of the City of God, Strauss speaks of how we, looking back on this attempt, find it difficult to know how Hobbes could have been so hopeful about the overcoming of human misery by means of the conquest of nature. The deepest reason for Hobbes's hope-filled error, and hence of the whole modern atheistic project, Strauss argues, is that the "experience, as well as the legitimate anticipation, of unheard of progress within the sphere which is subject to human control must have made him insensitive to 'the eternal silence of those infinite spaces, or to the crackings of the *moenia mundi*.'"[99] That is, Strauss reminds us that the pre-modern materialists, the Epicureans, were atheists of an apolitical sort not because they had

[97] "This implies that the whole scheme suggested by Hobbes requires for its operation the weakening or, rather, the elimination of the fear of invisible powers. It requires such a radical change of orientation as can be brought about only by the disenchantment of the world, by the diffusion of scientific knowledge, or by popular enlightenment. Hobbes's is the first doctrine that necessarily and unmistakably point to a thoroughly 'enlightened,' i.e., a-religious or atheistic society as the solution of the social or political problem." *NRH*, 198.

[98] See *NRH* 172t: "as matters stood."

[99] *NRH*, 175b.

never thought of combining mathematics and physics, but rather because, unlike Hobbes, they allowed nothing to obscure from them the ultimate futility of all human endeavors, nor to obscure the lack of significance of human things. As Strauss next argues, moreover, the hopes Hobbes and his contemporaries kindled for overcoming human misery through human "construction" have not been extinguished by the "long series of disappointments that subsequent generations experienced."[100] The persistence of these hopes has relied, Strauss argues, on repetitions of Hobbes's obscuring of the vision of the cracking of nature's walls, and on a corresponding false estimate of the significance of human life. The first instance of such post-Hobbesian obscuring, Strauss argues, is "the unplanned workings of 'History,'" which had the effect of "enhancing the status of man and of his 'world' by making him oblivious of the whole or of eternity."[101] As this statement implies, what Strauss means by awareness of the whole or of eternity—at least in part—is an (Epicurean) awareness of the cracking of the walls of the world, that is, the ultimate destruction of what is.[102] This awareness was, moreover, as he points out a little later, also part of the Socratic or "idealistic" tradition prior to Hobbes.[103] Strauss then concludes this brief digression by

[100] *NRH*, 175b.
[101] *NRH*, 175b–176t.
[102] The footnote to this sentence brings out the point still more clearly. It contains quotations from Engels and from J. J. Bachofen: Here is a translation of the Engels quotation: "Nothing exists (in the eyes of dialectical philosophy) other than the unbroken process of becoming and passing away, the endless ascent from the lower to the higher. . . . We need not here expatiate upon the question of whether this way of looking at things agrees with the current state of natural science, which talks of an end of the world; its habitability . . . and also (tells us that) the human story is not only an ascending but also confers a descending." And the Bachofen quote: "The East pays homage to the natural position, which the West replaced with the historical . . . . One might be tempted to recognize in this subordination of the divine into the human the idea of having the final stage a waste, from a former exalted standpoint. . . . And yet this fall/retreat contains the seeds of a very important step forward. For we have to regard every such liberation of our mind from the crippling shackles of a cosmic-physical view of life as . . . If an Etruscan believes in the mortality of his race, the Roman pleases himself looking forward to the eternity of his State, which he is no longer capable of doubting."
[103] See *NRH*, 177: "No Scipionic dream illuminated by a true vision of the whole reminds his readers of the ultimate futility of all that men can do." Not only in the Epicurean tradition, then, but likewise in what Strauss has been calling the "idealistic" tradition of political philosophy, one find a "vision of the whole" as one of man's ultimate destruction. On this point, and the resigned moderation that results from such a vision of the whole, see also "The Problem of Socrates," Second Lecture, in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, Thomas Pangle, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 133, where Strauss addresses the "false estimate of human things" as a "fundamental and primary error." See also the subsequent discussion of spiritedness in the Fourth Lecture (167). Finally, consider the following statement from "The Three Waves of Modernity," in *Political Philosophy, Six essays*, edited by Hilail Gilden (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975): "Man has a place within the whole: man's power is limited; man cannot overcome the limitations of his nature. Our nature is enslaved in many ways (Aristotle) or we are the playthings of the gods (Plato). This limitation shows itself in particular in the ineluctable power of chance. The good life is the life according to nature, which means to stay within certain limits; virtue is essentially moderation. There is no difference in this respect between classical political philosophy and classical hedonism which is unpolitical: not the maximum of pleasures but the purest pleasures are desirable; happiness depends decisively on the limitation

referring to a doctrine of Heidegger as another manifestation of the hopeful, post-Hobbesian obscuring of the whole, that is, of its ultimate destruction:

> In its final stage the typically modern limitation expresses itself in the suggestion that the highest principle, which, as such, has no relation to any possible cause or causes of the whole, is the mysterious ground of "History" and, being wedded to man and to man alone, is so far from being eternal that it is coeval with human history.[104]

Dasein, by this account, is an expression of the turning away from eternity and hence entails an artificial "enhancing the status of man and his 'world.'" Despite the fact that Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, speaks much about death and being towards death, the atheism of Heidegger, Strauss had concluded, is an atheism achieved by the turning *away* from the ultimate decay of all things.[105] It carries within it the forgetting of eternity that had been begun by Hobbes. Strauss's new account of Hobbes's founding of modern science is designed to highlight, therefore, the manner in which Hobbes, unlike the classical political philosophers, turned away from the eventual destruction of the world and how this was continued in various forms right through to Heidegger, who had himself undertaken a certain return to the ancients. The immediately preceding chapter, on classic natural right, shows the ancient approach to the problem that Hobbes confronted, an approach that begins with a concern for justice as our primary stance or orientation in the world. That Strauss already speaks, at the time he was composing *Hobbes' Critique of Religion*, of writing a book on natural right, suggests that had he completed the manuscript of *Hobbes' Critique of Religion*, its conclusion would have moved in the direction of the argument that we find in *Natural Right and History*.

---

of our desires." (84–5) The Plato statement can be found at *Laws* 709a1–3; Compare *Laws* 644d7–e4 and 803c4–5.

[104] *NRH*, 176t.

[105] Consider in this light the very helpful observations of Christopher Bruell, "Death in the Perspective of Philosophy," lecture delivered at the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung, Munich, July 17, 2003, 12–16: Heidegger calls not those who might be capable of it but rather "one and all" from the flight away from death, from absorption in the every day; he is a "prophet of doom," but one who also holds out the promise of a *Daseinsganzheit*, that is, of achieving a wholeness of being or *fully* existing in and through the proper stance toward death, and who also concedes no legitimacy to our natural if un-fulfillable concern with immortality, to the point of tracing the belief in a prospect or image of an unending time and of the wish to bring time to an halt, to the outlook of "decadent Being." And his account of death as "individualizing" us misses what genuinely does so, and hence holds out the promise of a "'Being-together'" in a fated struggle with others as some kind of authentic being. And, most importantly, while Heidegger distinguishes empirical certainty of death from apodictic, theoretical certainty of it, he shows little interest in attempting to acquire such apodictic, theoretical certainty of it.