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ARTIGOS

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Leo Strauss and the "Analogy of the Wise Man"

Leo Strauss e a "Analogia do Homem Sábio"

ABSTRACT:

Within scholarship on Leo Strauss and the theological-political problem, a significant interpretative approach suggests that the fundamental alternative between the ways of life symbolized by Athens and Jerusalem might be solved through argumentation. However, scholars differ regarding the type of argument capable of addressing this issue effectively. Among the proposed solutions, the "analogy of the wise man," presented within a framework of hypothetical natural theology, is particularly notable. This analogy, which envisions the wise man as a model for understanding God as the most perfect being, appears in Strauss's works, including *Reason and Revelation* (1948/2006), *Jerusalem and Athens* (1950/2022), and *The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy* (1954/1979). Furthermore, newly published material in *Leo Strauss on Plato's Euthyphro* (2023) provides fresh perspectives on this analogy. This article seeks to evaluate the significance, argumentative strength, and the dual implication of the analogy of the wise man.

Palavras-chave: Leo Strauss; Natural theology; Plato; Political philosophy; Revelation

RESUMO:

Na literatura sobre Leo Strauss e o problema teológico-político, uma corrente interpretativa sugere que essa alternativa fundamental entre os modos de vida, metaforicamente identificados com Atenas e Jerusalém, pode ser resolvida através da argumentação. No entanto, há divergências sobre qual tipo de argumento pode efetivamente abordar essa questão. Entre as soluções propostas, destaca-se o argumento da "analogia do homem sábio", introduzido em uma teologia natural hipotética. Essa analogia posiciona o homem sábio como um modelo para compreender Deus como um ser perfeito, e é discutida por Strauss em algumas ocasiões, notavelmente em *Reason and Revelation* (1948/2006), *Jerusalem and Athens* (1950/2022) e *The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy* (1954/1979). Além disso, materiais recentemente publicados no volume *Leo Strauss on Plato's Euthyphro* (2023) oferecem novas perspectivas sobre esse argumento. Este artigo tem como objetivo avaliar a importância, o poder argumentativo e uma implicação particular e dupla da analogia do homem sábio.

Keywords: Leo Strauss; Teologia natural; Platão; Filosofia política; Revelação

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INTRODUCTION

If the alternative between Jerusalem and Athens is indeed the fundamental problem for Leo Strauss (see Meier, 2006; Kerber, 2022; Altini, 2023), then any serious attempt to resolve this issue for either side warrants close examination. Among the various argumentative strategies supporting philosophy identified in the literature (Meier, 2006, p. 24ff.), one approach stands out for special attention: the "analogy of the wise man." This argument was introduced by Strauss in various writings and lectures from the 1940s to the 1950s (cf. Kerber, 2023, p. 157n28). Later, Strauss refined it further, renaming it as the "most fundamental theologumenon" in his detailed commentary on Lucretius' *De rerum natura* (cf. Strauss, 1995a, p. 96, 100, 120, 130-131, 133; Kerber, 2023, p. 157n29). One could even go so far as to argue that the "analogy of the wise man" is subtly embedded throughout Strauss's major works, often implied rather than explicitly articulated, woven into the intricate commentaries he crafted during his career (e.g., Strauss, 1978; Strauss, 1980; see Meier, 2006, p. 26-27; Meier, 2017, p. 60-64). However, the scope of this contribution is more focused: to examine the potential of the analogy as an argument by analyzing its treatment in four key sources where Strauss explicitly develops it[1].

The first source is a lecture titled *Reason and Revelation*, delivered in 1948 at the Hartford Theological Seminary, published posthumously by Heinrich Meier in 2006 (Strauss, 2006). The second consists of three lectures, originally given at Hillel House (Chicago) between October and November 1950 and published posthumously as *Jerusalem and Athens* by Laurenz Denker, Hannes Kerber, and David Kretz in 2022 (Denker, Kerber, Kretz, 2022)[2]. The third is Strauss's 1954 article, *The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy*, first published in Hebrew in *Iyyun* and later in the original English version in 1979 (Strauss, 1979), originating from a 1952 lecture series titled *Progress or Return?* (cf. Strauss, 1997, p. 87-136). Finally, the fourth source is Strauss's lecture *On Plato's Euthyphro*, delivered in 1952 and subsequently published in various editions, most recently in the eponymous volume edited by Hannes Kerber and Svetozar Minkov (Strauss, 2023). This volume includes not only the lecture but also unpublished notes and annotations, providing fresh insights into Strauss's interpretive perspectives.

The analysis will unfold in five sections. The first will examine how the analogy of the wise man is introduced as an argument within natural theology, a doctrine Strauss borrows from tradition but reinterprets distinctively. In the second section, I will reconstruct the analogy as presented in *Reason and Revelation*, *Jerusalem and Athens (1950)*,

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and *The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy*, highlighting Strauss's recurring objection that the argument's seeming success ultimately becomes self-refuting. In the third section, I will contend that this self-refutation is not inevitable and that the analogy is presented differently in *On Plato's Euthyphro*. In the fourth section, I will discuss how the choice between philosophy and traditional theology evolves into a choice between the primacy of intelligible necessity and the primacy of contingency. In the fifth and final section, I will outline a tentative conclusion, noting the dual implications of the analogy of the wise man.

TRADITIONAL AND HYPOTHETICAL NATURAL THEOLOGY

Strauss first introduces the analogy of the wise man in *Reason and Revelation*, presenting it as a key component of natural theology. Natural theology surfaces frequently in Strauss's 1930s essays on Thomas Hobbes and Moses Mendelssohn (Strauss, 1952 and Strauss, 2012), but it is more precisely defined in his 1944 lecture *How to Study Medieval Philosophy*. There, he defines it as "a philosophic discipline" or "the philosophic doctrine of God," distinct from "philosophy of religion, the analysis of the human attitude toward God" (Strauss, 1996, p. 331). In this defining statement, Strauss characterizes natural theology as inherently philosophical, and its designation as 'natural' distinguishes it from 'revealed' theology. The latter relies on divine revelation—knowledge from a supernatural source—while natural theology, also called philosophic or rational theology (cf. Strauss, 2013, pp. 420, 427), pursues knowledge of the nature of God using exclusively human means.

In *Reason and Revelation*, *Jerusalem and Athens (1950)*, and *The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy*, Strauss presents natural theology as essential for philosophy to establish its own validity against divine revelation. Since philosophy, in its original sense, is not merely a system but a way of life, it must be rationally justified in contrast to other ways of life, especially those posing radical alternatives. Philosophy, as originally conceived, is a life devoted to the pursuit of wisdom, understood as comprehensive knowledge of the whole (Strauss, 1965, p. 122: "Like every other philosopher, [Socrates] identified wisdom, or the goal of philosophy, with the science of all the beings"; Strauss, 1988, p. 11: "Philosophy, as a quest for wisdom, is quest for universal knowledge, for knowledge of the whole"). In contrast, the way of life metaphorically symbolized by Jerusalem is one of devoted obedience to divine guidance. As Strauss articulates in *Natural Right and History*, the fundamental choice for those seeking the best way to live lies between a life guided by human reason and one guided by divine revelation (cf.

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Strauss, 1965, p. 74).

Strauss holds that the choice for philosophy must be rationally motivated. A philosophical life grounded in faith or belief would be inherently self-contradictory, as it would lack rational justification (cf. Strauss, 1995a, p. 256: "being based on belief is fatal to any philosophy"). The issue arises because, if divine revelation exists, ultimate truth has already been disclosed, making the philosophical quest for knowledge redundant. Revelation would supply final answers to the fundamental questions that drive philosophical inquiry, and these answers, being of divine origin, would transcend human wisdom. This very possibility challenges philosophy's own legitimacy: for philosophy to establish itself as the right way of life, it must rationally dismiss the possibility of revelation altogether. It is insufficient to dismiss the possibility of divine revelation merely on the grounds that it would be profoundly uncertain; for "it is the very *boast* of revelation to be a miracle, hence most improbable and most uncertain" (Strauss, 2006, 176).

Strauss introduces natural theology cautiously, prefacing his argument with a strong reservation. He does not believe natural theology is fully possible in the modern era, as modern science has eroded its foundations. He seems to suggest that natural theology depends on a cosmology that modern science has rendered obsolete. Specifically, modern science has undermined classical teleology, thus compromising the basis for the classical doctrine of natural right (cf. Strauss, 1995b, p. 30-31; Strauss, 1965, p. 9-10). Strauss makes this point in multiple writings, including his 1946 review-essay of John Wild's *Plato's Theory of Man*: "[w]hatever may be the limitations of modern natural science, its obvious success has brought about a situation in which the possibility of natural theology has lost all the evidence it formerly possessed" (Strauss, 1946, p. 339). In a 1960 lecture on Maimonides, he stated that "Aristotle, as you know, is obsolete; he has been replaced by modern science. And that means that on this new basis no philosophic or natural theology is possible" (Strauss, 2013, p. 420). He refers elsewhere to "the victory of science over natural theology" (Strauss, 1983, p. 151). Although the relationship between natural right and classical or Aristotelian cosmology remains complex (cf. Strauss, 1965, p. 145-146 with Strauss, 1988, p. 38-39), Strauss frequently suggests that modern science has destroyed the foundations of classical cosmology, undermining traditional natural theology. Thus, he proposes a "hypothetical natural theology" (Strauss, 2006, 153)[3], which suspends the question of God's existence and investigates only his attributes—a model he deems adequate for philosophical purposes.

This shift is crucial, as traditional natural

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theology was tasked with proving God's existence, whether through Anselm's ontological argument or Aquinas's five ways. Interestingly, Strauss consistently maintains a skeptical stance on both disproving and proving God's existence. Regarding the impossibility of disproof, he writes in his 1962 *Preface to Spinoza's Critique of Religion*: "all assertions of orthodoxy rest on the irrefutable premise that the omnipotent God, whose will is unfathomable, whose ways are not our ways, who has decided to dwell in the thick darkness, may exist. […] The orthodox premise cannot be refuted by experience nor by recourse to the principle of contradiction" (Strauss, 1995a, p. 254). Concerning the limitations of traditional proofs, Strauss makes brief, almost casual dismissals. In *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, he notes that "there is no way which leads from 'the things of the world' to the Biblical God; the only proof which commands respect, although it is not a genuine proof, is the ontological proof" (Strauss, 1988, p. 148). Here, he dismisses both kinds of arguments by declaring them inadequate. In his 1957 lecture *On the Interpretation of Genesis*, he reiterates that "[e]xperience cannot show more than that the conclusion from the world, from its manifest order and from its manifest rhythm to an omnipotent creator is not valid" (Strauss, 1981, p. 7). Given the brevity of his statements, we can only infer that he likely aligns with classical critiques advanced by Enlightenment thinkers.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL ARGUMENT IN NATURAL THEOLOGY

The introduction of natural theology in *Reason and Revelation* is preceded by an overview of Spinoza's arguments against faith in revealed religion, which Strauss considers fundamentally fallacious. According to Strauss, it is not enough to question the demonstrability of revelation; the philosopher must demonstrate its impossibility. This task entails demonstrating the impossibility of miracles, as revelation is understood to be miraculous. Strauss's orientation here begins with the observation that "it is hard to deny for anyone that, if there is a God, he must be absolutely perfect." He assumes what Aristotle would call an *endoxon*—a widely shared opinion—about what anyone would consider in talking about God, whether or not God exists. This shared notion concerns his absolute perfection. Strauss continues by stating that the legitimate basis of natural theology, for it to be conceived as "[t]he purely philosophic doctrine of God," is "the analogy of the wise man," as only "the most perfect being as known from experience, the wise man," provides "the only clue regarding the most perfect being simply." From experience, one can form the notion of the most perfect being, whose actions would be nothing more

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than a perfected version of the wise man's behavior, consistently aligned with the patterns characteristic of his actions:

> a wise man would pity the fools rather than wax indignant about their criminal or monstrous actions; he would be kind to everyone, he would not care particularly for anyone except for his friends, i.e. those who are actually or potentially wise. Accordingly, God cannot be conceived to condemn men to eternal damnation. He cannot even be conceived as exercising individual providence. He cannot be conceived as loving men, i.e. beings who are infinitely inferior to him in wisdom (Strauss, 2006, p. 153-154).

In this passage, Strauss selects two typical behaviors of the wise man and translates them into the hypothetical god's course of action. In both cases, they concern his attitude toward other human beings, who are divided into two groups: other wise men and those inferior in wisdom, including fools and those who, although not wise, have the potential to become so. Only those who are actually or potentially wise ("his friends") receive his benevolent attentions. This succinct portrait of the wise man resembles the philosophical way of life Strauss presents in his essay of the same year on Xenophon's *Hiero*, *On Tyranny* (see Strauss, 2000). Through the analogy of the wise man, Strauss questions certain traditional attributes of the biblical God: the wrath of a God who acts as a severe judge of sinners and the love of a provident God who cares for his creatures (cf. Strauss, 1978, p. 188). Both attributes are radically denied. A god would not behave as a harsh judge, for a wise man would only feel pity for foolish humans. Likewise, he could not be viewed as a loving god, since, on the basis of the analogy, Strauss does not imply that he would take an interest in mere mortals.

Simply put, a god would not exercise any particular providence, as he would be uninterested in the fate of those inferior to him, regardless of their inclination toward wisdom. The denial of miracles, the first declared goal of this argument, must be understood through this denial of particular providence: a god uninterested in the fate of inferior beings would neither communicate with them (revelation) nor offer prodigious signs of his power (other miracles). Strauss, however, does not explicitly address this aspect.

Jerusalem and Athens (1950) and *The Mutual Influence of Philosophy and Theology* contain similar discussions, and it is reasonable to assume that Strauss used the 1950 lecture text in preparing some parts of the 1952 series *Progress or Return?*. Of particular relevance to this discussion are nearly identical passages with slight variations in wording, which must be considered. Here, I will follow *The Mutual Influence of Theology and Phi-*

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losophy and will point out in footnotes any interesting variations from *Jerusalem and Athens (1950)*.

In addressing the problem of excluding the possibility of revelation, Strauss presents two alternatives. Either we possess perfect knowledge of the whole and can thus systematically rule out the existence of an omnipotent God, or we can demonstrate that God's nature—i.e., his perfection—is incompatible with miracles. Since a complete philosophical system is unavailable, only the second approach remains viable, referred to as "human knowledge of the nature of God," or natural theology. Here, natural theology is not presented as a philosophical discipline or doctrine, as in *How to Study Medieval Philosophy*, but as "human knowledge" distinct from revealed knowledge (cf. Strauss, 2006, p. 142). Strauss states, "God is the most perfect being. This is what all men mean by God, regardless of whether He exists or not" (Strauss, 1979, p. 117)[4]. It is useful to stress the shift from *Reason and Revelation*'s cautious "it is hard to deny for anyone that" to a definitive "this is what all men mean by God." The 1954 article seems stronger and more authoritative, as demonstrated also by Strauss's reference to a sort of philosophical consensus on divine retribution. Before introducing natural theology (though likely already implying it), Strauss in fact recalls "the philosophers of the past" who "were absolutely certain that an all-wise God would not punish with eternal damnation, or with anything else, human beings who are seeking the truth or clarity" (Strauss, 1979, p. 113)[5]. In other words, "the philosophers" were convinced that an all-wise God would never condemn them to eternal damnation for philosophizing. Likewise, one might speculate that an all-wise God would not have sentenced Socrates to death, let alone eternal damnation (cf. Strauss, 2023, p. 80).

Strauss then turns to the "human roots"[6] of the philosophers' argument for the incompatibility of "divine perfection" with miracles:

> Fundamentally, the philosophic argument in natural theology is based on an analogy from human perfection. God is the most perfect being. But perfection we know empirically in the form of human perfection, and human perfection is taken to be represented by the wise man, or by the highest human approximation to the wise man. For example, just as the wise man does not inflict infinite punishment on erring human beings, God, still more perfect, would do it even less. A wise man does not do silly or purposeless things; but to use the miracle of verbal inspiration, for example, in order to tell a prophet the name of a pagan king who is going to rule centuries later, would be silly […] (Strauss, 1979, p. 117).

Several noteworthy elements emerge in these passage. First, Strauss highlights the philo-

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sophical argument within natural theology, something he did not do in *Reason and Revelation* or *Jerusalem and Athens (1950)*. He seems to suggest that natural theology is not strictly a philosophical argument but rather a discipline, a doctrine, or some knowledge that contains a philosophical argument within its broader framework. This might imply that natural theology, as a doctrine, could include non-philosophical elements (e.g., statements implying that a god can love inferior beings; cf. Strauss in Denker, Kerber, Kretz, 2022, p. 170; cf. Kerber, 2023, p. 154). The second aspect involves Strauss's use of examples to highlight what would not constitute a godly behavior based on generally accepted empirical knowledge of the wise man's actions. In the 1950 lecture, the 1954 article, and *Reason and Revelation*, Strauss uses this analogy to deny that a god would act as a severe judge of "erring human beings." Just as a wise man would not punish an ignorant person for mistakes, an all-wise God would not condemn highly imperfect and ignorant human beings to eternal damnation. A shift occurs here, however, compared to *Reason and Revelation*: Strauss no longer merely asserts that a god would not love inferior beings or provide particular providence. Instead, he refers directly to miracles and prophecy, explaining that it would be "silly" to reveal the name of a pagan king, as happens for example in the book of Isaiah with Cyrus. While one might argue that such a revelation could be deemed trivial, one wonders if this criterion is distinct from that used in *Reason and Revelation*. In one case, the god does not care for inferior beings, while in the other, he refrains from "silly" or purposeless acts. This shift raises the question of whether, under the latter criterion, a wise god might still be interested in erring human beings, offering them commandments or laws for peaceful coexistence.

In any case, these difficulties are addressed by a more fundamental objection related to the wisdom of the god analogized to the wise man. Just as a wise man may appear incomprehensible to non-philosophers (as in the case of Socrates), so might a perfectly wise god's ways seem inscrutable to humans: "A God who is infinitely superior to man in wisdom, may be said to be inscrutable: He is mysterious. […] a mysterious God may well be the God of revelation" (Strauss, 2006, p. 154). In *The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy*, Strauss links a god's unfathomable behavior to his nature, or perfection: "God's perfection implies that He is incomprehensible. God's ways may seem to be foolish to man; this does not mean that they are foolish" (Strauss, 1979, p. 117). The analogy of the wise man thus appears inadequate to counter the challenge posed by revealed religion and may even bolster the plausibility of the biblical alternative.

In the three sources considered here,

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Strauss eventually presents Spinoza's approach to resolving the question, which involves rejecting the legitimacy of analogical knowledge of the nature of God. Instead, Spinoza chose to build a philosophical system starting from clear and evident premises (i.e., his definition of substance). He thereby achieved a (not always) clear and evident system of nature, or account of the whole. However, clear and evident premises are not necessarily true or adequate, nor do they necessarily lead to a true and adequate system—particularly if they exclude from the outset phenomena that are neither clear nor evident, such as some most fundamental religious experiences, thus begging the question. Strauss, therefore, dismisses Spinoza's attempt—that is, the modern scientific 'positive' criticism of revelation—as fundamentally flawed. As he notes in the 1962 *Preface*, the clear and evident account of the whole proposed by Spinoza, i.e., by modern science, "remains fundamentally hypothetical. As a consequence, its cognitive status is not different from that of the orthodox account" (Strauss, 1995a, p. 255). This leaves the philosophical position seemingly trapped in an impasse, a situation that ultimately condemns it as merely another form of belief.

THE ANALOGY OF THE WISE MAN IN EUTHYPHRO'S THEOLOGY

In his 1952 lecture *On Plato's Euthyphro*, Strauss develops a distinct version of the philosophical argument based on the analogy of the wise man. Natural theology is not explicitly mentioned here; in fact, in the volume edited by Kerber and Minkov, the term appears only once, in *Strauss's Notebook on Plato's «Euthyphro» and «Crito»* (cfr. Strauss, 2023, p. 30). The context is quite different: whereas in previous sources, Strauss's starting point was the comparison between philosophy and revelation or theology, the lecture on Plato's dialogue on piety takes a different approach, though not entirely unrelated in theme. Strauss's primary aim here is to understand the literary form of the dialogue—its dramatic action and narrative context—and only after careful analysis of these elements does he turn to what Plato seeks to communicate about the problem of piety.

To grasp the revised formulation of this argument in the context of a Platonic dialogue, it is useful to consider the originality of Strauss's approach to the text. His interpretation differs from all previous ones in that it takes Euthyphro's initial, formally inadequate definition seriously (Kerber, 2023). To Socrates's question "What is piety?" Euthyphro does not respond with a definition but

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with an example, suggesting that piety is precisely what he himself is doing. Euthyphro is demonstrating piety by suing his father, an act that mirrors Zeus, who punished his father, Kronos. In fact, Euthyphro regards Zeus as the most just of the gods. Without realizing it, Euthyphro is radical, effecting a shift in the concept of piety itself. Traditionally, piety meant doing what the gods commanded; for Euthyphro, piety implicitly consists in doing what the gods themselves do. Piety, therefore, comes to mean imitating the gods, not simply obeying them.

Beneath Euthyphro's partially unconscious and ultimately incoherent heterodoxy, Strauss identifies the same philosophical argument found within natural theology. It is, in fact, the movement of thought enabled by the analogy of the wise man that facilitates this heterodox shift from obedience to imitation:

> we divine that the gods are superhuman beings, and therefore that the highest human type gives us an inkling of what the gods might be. But the highest human type is the wise man. The analogy of the wise man will therefore be the best clue at our disposal in regard to the gods. Now the wise man loves more the people who do what he does than those people who merely do what he tells them to do, and who do not do what he does. Accordingly, we may then be inclined to think, considering that we understand by gods superhuman beings, that the gods do not rule at all by telling people what they should do, or by issuing commands (Strauss, 2023, p. 86).

Up to this point, Strauss is effectively reiterating ideas he previously expressed in *Reason and Revelation*, *Jerusalem and Athens (1950)*, and *The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy*. The starting point of the argument remains consistent, although articulated with varied terminology. In this context, Strauss's use of the verb "divine" can be seen as both an ironic reference to Euthyphro's supposed abilities in divination and a reflection of its more straightforward, "natural" meaning, which Strauss employs in other contexts (cf. Strauss, 1965, p. 51, 100, 124, 130, 149). Even more intriguing, however, is Strauss's examination of the wise man's behavior, which underpins the analogy. Strauss observes that a wise man tends to have greater affection for certain individuals over others, implying that although he may care less for those who simply obey his orders, he still holds some level of affection for them.

He loves more those who imitate his own behavior—that is, those who pursue the same way of life. Based on this analogy, Strauss envisions a god who would not rule through commands, raising the question of whether a god would rule at all. A potential answer can be found in *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, where Strauss discusses the view of "Aristotelians who knew the Bible." According

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to these philosophers, "[t]he Aristotelian God cannot be called just; he does not rule by commanding but only by being the end; his rule consists in knowing, in his knowing himself" (Strauss, 1978, p. 208; cf. Strauss, 1995a, p. 8). This analogy denies that a god could act as a sovereign or a legislator, thereby rejecting fundamental attributes of the biblical God. A wise god, rather than issuing laws or commandments, would "rule only by being the end" (cf. the distinction between the ruler and the wise man in Strauss, 2000, p. 89-90).

To this point, the argument's structure is consistent with previous analyses. Strauss introduces the analogy of the wise man as a starting point for contemplating the hypothetical behavior or nature of a god. Beginning with a wise man's significant behaviors or attitudes, he excludes the possibility that a god would act in ways typically attributed to the biblical God. However, this time he strengthens his argument considerably. Instead of arguing that a wise man's superiority over the many reopens the door to the incomprehensibility of an all-wise god, Strauss links the wisdom of an all-wise god to an unchangeable necessity preceding him, suggesting that wisdom excludes omnipotence—and thus excludes miracles, and consequently, revelation. To understand this crucial move, it is necessary to retrace Strauss's interpretation of the relevant portion of the dialogue, specifically the full articulation of the "theology" implicit in Euthyphro's first, formally incorrect definition.

In choosing Zeus as a model, Euthyphro selects the god he considers the justest, indicating that he uses a binding criterion, justice, to orient himself among the many gods. This suggests that Zeus is judged and chosen on the basis of a standard that takes precedence over him. Justice, as a criterion, precedes Zeus and is, in fact, more important than Zeus himself. But if this is the case, why not refer directly to justice itself, to the idea of justice, bypassing the imitation of a god? Strauss shows that Euthyphro's position renders the gods superfluous. Strauss believes that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for Euthyphro to return to the conventional understanding of piety, as the gods become either unnecessary (if a criterion of justice is admitted) or a source of endless conflict (if such a criterion is denied). Without an intelligible necessity taking precedence over the gods, an agreement among them, based on true knowledge, would be impossible. Lacking such shared true knowledge, the gods would be guided only by blind desire, leading to chaos. Though Euthyphro cannot fully realize his own implied argument, Strauss makes it clear that the path forward brings necessarily to Socratic philosophy, which transcends traditional piety and the gods.

Strauss then takes a critical step by applying this argument to monotheism. This represents

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a potential development of the analogical argument not previously explored in other sources. One of the significant difficulties Euthyphro faced was the presence of multiple gods with conflicting claims and behaviors, which led him to seek a consistent standard. This pursuit, as we have seen, has destructive implications for the traditional view of piety and paves the way toward the philosophical life. But what if there were only one God?

> if there is only one god, there is no difficulty in thinking that piety consists in imitating God. One must know that god is good or just or wise, i.e., that God complies with the rules of justice. If that rule were subject to God, or dependent on God, or made by God, if it could be changed by God, it could no longer serve as a standard. God must be thought to be subject to a necessity, an intelligible necessity, which He did not make. If we deny this, if we assume that God is above intelligible necessity, or not bound by intelligible necessity, He cannot know in the strict sense, for knowledge is knowledge of the intelligible and unalterable necessity. In that case, God's actions would be altogether arbitrary. Nothing would be impossible to Him. For example, He could create other gods, and the many gods, who of course cannot have knowledge, would fight (Strauss, 2023, p. 90).

Monotheism does not, in fact, resolve the problem, despite Strauss's almost conciliatory opening. Even if the challenge posed by multiple gods were to vanish, "we must know" that the single god acts according to the "rules of justice" for us to want to imitate him—in other words, that the one god is "good, just, or wise." This implies that even in monotheism, a criterion of choice remains essential (presumably, we would not emulate a god displaying "childishness" or "indifference to learning," as noted by Strauss, 1980, p. 33). Furthermore, this standard must be independent of the god's will; if a god could alter such a standard, it would be subject to his power, and therefore could not provide the objective foundation necessary to justify imitation. For this reason, omnipotence[7] becomes a problematic attribute: if the god were omnipotent—able to create or alter what should be an "intelligible and unalterable necessity"—then this standard would lose "the binding power peculiar to the known" (Strauss, 1995a, p. 254).

Strauss seems to present a choice between two forms of theology: one in which a god is bound by intelligible necessity and capable of true knowledge, and another in which a god is free from all necessity, lacking true knowledge, and acting arbitrarily. The former, as we have seen, leads to abandoning the imitation of gods in favor of pursuing knowledge of the ideas (i.e., the philosophical life), ultimately dismantling both traditional and heterodox conceptions of piety. The latter, however, suggests that if the god's blind will

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is supreme, we are left facing inescapable arbitrariness and absurdity.

INTELLIGIBLE NECESSITY OR ABSURDITY, *TERTIUM NON DATUR*

The last lengthy quote from *On Plato's Euthyphro* provides the necessary elements to reformulate the alternative between philosophy and traditional theology. The outcome, however, seems fatal for traditional theology, as it is either transcended in the philosophical life or driven to absurd, untenable conclusions. This result comes at a considerable theoretical cost, as Strauss introduces a concept fundamental to his critique of the opposing view: intelligible necessity. This notion poses a challenge to the interpreter because Strauss is not typically a thinker engaged in ontological or metaphysical categories. He does not concentrate on the more technical analyses commonly found in the works of many other authors (cf. Rosen, 2003, p. 121). He rather adopts a historical-exegetical approach (as in the case of his typical commentaries) or a natural-philosophical one (here, I mean "natural" as explained by Ghibellini, 2024. This approach can be recognized for example in the analogy of the wise man, where Strauss operates on the level of generally accepted opinions, cross-examining them through a Socratic, dialectical method). For this reason, his use of the concept of intelligible necessity is particularly intriguing. Is this an idea he explored and then discarded? Or is it a crucial element he subtly embeds within his often extremely dense arguments?

To avoid over-interpreting Strauss's words, I attempt here a brief reconstruction of the concept of intelligible necessity, drawing from new materials in the volume *On Plato's Euthyphro*, where Strauss expands on the issue. These unpublished notes, personal and fragmented, offer only brief sketches of his thoughts. Often, the 1952 lecture's formulations are more comprehensive, though sometimes restrained. Nonetheless, many passages merit close examination. Here, for brevity, I will consider just two that are particularly useful for advancing the argument.

The first is from what the editors identify as *Strauss's Draft for His First Lecture on the Euthyphro (1950)*, where he begins with Euthyphro's inability to return to an "orthodox" position. Strauss briefly outlines the progression from traditional piety to Euthyphro's "theology," and beyond. He takes traditional piety to mean "obeying and worshiping the gods according to custom without questioning why," justified by the gods' "superior power" (Strauss, 2023, p. 117-118). The critical point is that the gods' power cannot be separate from wisdom; otherwise, they could be manipulated by human beings "through sacrifices and prayers." The key move here is the recognition

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that wisdom must be attributed to the gods—a point Strauss makes using their popular attribute, power. Once wisdom is established as central, however, the structure of traditional theology quickly unravels, as demonstrated by the rapid sequence of Strauss's arguments:

> The gods must be wise if they are to be powerful. But if they are wise, they will wish to be imitated rather than to be worshipped. And: if they are wise, they are wise by knowledge, i.e., knowledge of the ideas—and hence the highest beings are, not the gods, but the ideas.
>
> The vulgar view is untenable, it is absurd. Yet it is not an arbitrary invention: it is a necessary consequence of the denial of the ideas. Ultimately, there exists only this alternative: doctrine of ideas or absurdities of mythology.
>
> Why? Let us assume the highest beings are, not ideas, but persons—not universals, but individuals—or even one individual—an individual bearing a name (a Thou)—but a being bears a name in order to be distinguished from other individuals of the same class→ polytheism.
>
> The being in question will not be subject to higher norm—their rule of action will be their arbitrary will—they would not be guided by knowledge—they will be ignorant—they would fight—they would be unjust, intemperate, etc.
>
> Occam: primacy of will and yet monotheism—God could command murder—his absolute freedom—(but if he is absolutely free, he could create other gods→ polytheism → fight—or: commit suicide and decree that atheistic universe will last forever—)
>
> either: primacy of intelligible necessity ruling the universe or absurdity (Strauss, 2023, p. 118).

The passage just discussed is significant because, while it merely summarizes the argument previously reconstructed from the 1952 lecture, it distinctly illustrates Strauss's intent to apply concepts derived from Plato's dialogue to monotheism as well. For instance, consider the use of "Thou" to refer to the person of God, likely drawing from Martin Buber's work. Additionally, Strauss mentions William of Ockham, whose position is traditionally associated with voluntarism and fits within the alternative that Strauss critiques as leading to total arbitrariness and absurdity. This critique is underscored by the implications of God's total freedom presented at the end of the quote, a theme echoed in a comparably bold passage found in the *Notebook* (cf. Strauss, 2023, p. 35-36).

While these annotations demonstrate Strauss's commitment to exposing the absurdities that arise from the primacy of God's absolute freedom, another passage—from his *Outline for a Lecture on the Euthyphro*—examines the alternative: the theme of intelligible necessity. In this *Outline*, Strauss divides the lecture into broad points, with

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the eighth point posed as an underlined question: "Why is it necessary to assert the primacy of the ideas?". This question, striking at the heart of the philosophical issue, reframes the theological dichotomy as "Primacy of the ideas = primacy of necessity—vs. primacy of contingency." Strauss clarifies that necessity must be "intelligible," since "blind necessity is indistinguishable from contingency" (Strauss, 2023, p. 127), a distinction central to his critique.

After reformulating the opposition as "intelligible necessity versus contingency," Strauss begins by addressing the position he intends to refute: the primacy of contingency, poetically represented in Hesiod's work:

> Primacy of contingency: everything has come into being out of nothing and through nothing (Hesiod).
>
> At the beginning, there was nothing—nothing was—nothing can be. But: nothing cannot be—nothing cannot have been → everything must have come into being out of something and/or through something.

By refuting the primacy of contingency, Strauss argues that it equates to claiming that things come into being "out of nothing and through nothing," which he finds incoherent, as "nothing ever comes into being out of nothing" (Strauss, 1995a, p. 86). His phrasing suggests moreover that even discussing "nothing" grants it a kind of latent potency, setting up his subsequent argument. Against Hesiod's view, Strauss juxtaposes Parmenides':

> There might be nothing. I can think there is nothing—I can think nothing, and I can think Being—both equally but: I cannot think nothing—to think means to think something—nothing is impossible → Something or Being is necessary: the Being which I think and which, apparently, I merely think, is—and it is necessarily. By a miracle which no one has ever fathomed, man is capable to <grasp> reach the outer rims of everything possible, the whole—to grasp the absolute necessity which holds the whole in its iron grip. (Strauss, 2023, p. 127-128).

In the context of an argument that seeks to exclude the possibility of miracles, Strauss ironically discusses an "unfathomable miracle." Here, he sketches the Parmenidean stance that the necessity of being is unavoidable. The *Outline* then transitions to Strauss's take on Plato's critique, which, acknowledging the necessity of being, shows how being must be articulated into the constituent parts of the whole—an insight Strauss reiterates in *Natural Right and History* (cf. Strauss, 1965, p. 122-124). What matters most here is that the claim of contingency—that things arise from nothingness without cause—is ultimately unsustainable.

One might contend that all things came in-

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to existence from nothing *through* God or the gods (cf. Strauss, 1995a, p. 86-87). However, based on Strauss's radical alternative, if God or the gods are not subject to any necessity, then their actions would be completely arbitrary, thereby reaffirming the primacy of contingency in this scenario as well. Conversely, if God or the gods operate on the basis of a necessity that binds or precedes them, then the primacy of necessity would be reinforced along with all its consequences. Strauss's main argument seeks to demonstrate that any viewpoint denying the primacy of necessity—regardless of how it is framed—results in implications that are extremely difficult for supporters of the traditional perspective to accept.

THE ANALOGY OF THE WISE MAN AND ITS TWOFOLD IMPLICATION

Now, it is appropriate to take stock of what has been reconstructed thus far and to point out a deeper layer within the analogy of the wise man. The argument developed from this analogy possesses the character of an *elenchos*. It begins not just from a widely held opinion—one that "is hard to deny for anyone"—but from an opinion that must be assumed as the starting point of the interlocutor the philosopher intends to refute—"what all men mean by God." If anyone who speaks of God means a perfect being, they cannot help but attribute wisdom to him. Once this is recognized, the philosophical argument can be developed in its full consequentiality, leading to the radical divergence between the "primacy of contingency" and the "primacy of necessity." According to Strauss, the primacy of contingency—or God's absolute freedom—ultimately results in absurd scenarios that those who support traditional or orthodox positions would hardly wish to admit or accept as their own. Once the argument reaches this critical juncture, the burden of proof seems to rest entirely on the shoulders of theologians. Any openness on their part toward an intelligible necessity would merely validate the philosophical stance. In fact, theologians must acknowledge that they either blindly support the total arbitrariness of God's actions (cf. Strauss, 2023, p. 55, 57, 58) or are adopting a criterion to which the divinity itself is subject.

At that point, they would have no choice but to "surrender" and convert to the philosophical life. The fact that this conversion entails a human cost that is in many cases unsustainable (for some it is a "spiritual hell," cf. Strauss, 1988b, 109) perhaps justifies Strauss's restraint in fully articulating this argumentation.

Based on the reconstruction provided, we can identify a less apparent aspect of Strauss's argument: the analogy of the wise man operates simultaneously on two interdependent levels. This

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dual movement becomes clear when we refer to a particular passage already quoted from *Strauss's Outline for a Lecture on the Euthyphro*: "The gods must be wise if they are to be powerful. But if they are wise, they will wish to be imitated rather than worshipped. And: if they are wise, they are wise by knowledge, i.e., knowledge of the ideas" (Strauss, 2023, p. 118). In the dialectical argument that begins with the *endoxon* related to the gods as powerful superhuman beings, it becomes evident that recognizing the attribute of wisdom is the crucial step. On the basis of this attribute, which underpins the very power of the gods, Strauss draws two implications that, while closely linked, are worth keeping distinct. On one hand, if a god is wise, he wishes to be imitated rather than obeyed. On the other hand, if a god is wise, he has to possess knowledge—specifically, knowledge of something that is and cannot be otherwise; in other words, knowledge of something necessary: an intelligible necessity. Moreover, if a god is defined by perfect wisdom, then imitating him entails conforming to his way of life, thus transcending imitation itself and turning directly to the object of true knowledge, or the pursuit of wisdom. In short, it means leading the philosophical life.

Through the first movement, Strauss's Socratic *elenchos* dismantles traditional piety and the theologies that depict God as a wrathful judge, a loving and providential creator, or a magnanimous ruler. Through the second movement, Strauss demonstrates the "necessity of necessity," thus securing what appears to be the bare minimum for granting the possibility of true knowledge. However, it remains crucial to note that since we are dealing with an *elenchos*—an argument that dismantles the opposing position by exposing its contradictions—Strauss is not establishing a positive doctrine here. The analogy of the wise man intends just to clear the field of the most radical objections to the philosophical life. Wayne Ambler is therefore correct to assert that the Platonic doctrine of ideas is not necessary for justifying the philosophical life (cf. Ambler, 2023, p. 182-183); in this context the "primacy of the ideas" should be understood as an implication of the *elenchos* derived from what supporters of traditional theology explicitly say or cannot help but mean.

Whether this *elenchos* represents Strauss's final word on the issue, however, remains uncertain. On one hand, it would be necessary to conduct a thorough rereading of his mature works in light of this argument to determine its subtle presence, as previously mentioned. On the other hand, and perhaps more significantly, we need to examine whether this argument genuinely addresses the position of Jerusalem. The central question that arises from this overview pertains to the Biblical concept of faith as interpreted by Strauss: Does it accurately represent the true self-understanding

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of Jerusalem, or is it compromised by a philosophical framework that distorts Strauss's depiction of the most rigorous alternative to the philosophical life, ultimately reducing it to a straw man? Exploring this issue will be a vital focus for future research in the area of Strauss studies.

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NOTES

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[2] To avoid confusion with the later and more widely known text *Jerusalem and Athens*, first published in 1967 and subsequently included in the posthumous volume edited by Joseph Cropsey, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Strauss, 1983), I will refer to the three 1950 lectures as *Jerusalem and Athens (1950)* in this text.

[3]This specific formulation appears exclusively in *Reason and Revelation* and is only alluded to in *Jerusalem and Athens (1950)*, where Strauss merely observes that "the concept of god as [the] most perfect being is a hypothetical concept" (Strauss in Denker, Kerber, Kretz, 2022, p. 170).

[4]The wording of the 1950 lecture is slightly different: "God is the most perfect being. This is what all men mean by God, regardless of whether he exists or not, which still needs proof. So, in this respect then the concept of god as [the] most perfect being is a hypothetical concept" (Strauss in Denker, Kerber, Kretz 2022, 170).

[5]It is noteworthy that in the 1950 lecture, Strauss refines his phrasing, opting for "could not punish" instead of "would not punish." This shift emphasizes a denial of possibility rather than a mere expression of inclination (Strauss in Denker, Kerber, Kretz, 2022, p. 163).

[6]In the 1950 lectures, Strauss does not explicitly refer to "human roots," yet he conveys a similar idea, perhaps with a touch of irony, when he states: "the arguments of natural theology – taken from natural theology against divine revelation – were based on the analogy from human perfection. Now, *the philosophers, of course, assume they are the most perfect human being* and therefore they understood god in analogy to the wise man" (Strauss in Denker, Kerber, Kretz, 2022, p. 170, emphasis mine).

[7]Cf. Strauss in Denker, Kerber, Kretz, 2022, p. 148: "the characteristic teaching of the Bible is divine omnipotence, because creation out of nothing is simply another expression for divine omnipotence. The biblical god is not subject to an *ananke*, a necessity, or a realm of ideas. He is absolutely the highest being."

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