

Progress or Return? Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization by Leo Strauss

The title of this lecture indicates that progress has become a problem – that it could seem as if progress has led us to the brink of an abyss, and it is therefore necessary to consider alternatives to it. For example, to stop where we are or else, if this should be impossible, to return. Return is the translation for the Hebrew word *t'shuvah*. *T'shuvah* has an ordinary and an emphatic meaning. Its emphatic meaning is rendered in English by “repentance.”

Repentance is return, meaning the return from the wrong way to the right one. This implies that we were once on the right way before we turned to the wrong way. Originally we were on the right way; deviation or sin or imperfection is not original. Man is originally at home in his father's house. He becomes a stranger through estrangement, through sinful estrangement. Repentance, return, is homecoming.

I remind you of a few verses from the first chapter of Isaiah. “How is the faithful city become a harlot. It was full of judgment, righteousness lodged in it. But now murderers. Therefore, saith the Lord ... I will restore thy judges as at first and thy councillors as at the beginning.

Afterwards thou shalt be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city.” Repentance is return; redemption is restoration. A perfect beginning – the faithful city – is followed by defection, decline, sin and this is followed by a perfect end. But the perfect end is the restoration of the perfect beginning. The faithful city at the beginning and at the end. At the beginning, men did not roam a forest left to themselves, unprotected and unguided. The beginning is the Garden of Eden. Perfection results in the beginning – in the beginning of time, the oldest time. Hence perfection is sought derivatively in the old time – in the father, the

father of fathers, the patriarchs. The patriarchs are the divine chariot which Ezekiel had seen in his vision. The great time – the classic time – is in the past. First the period of the desert; later the period of the temple. The life of the Jew is the life of recollection. It is at the same time a life of anticipation, of hope, but the hope for redemption is restoration – *restituto in integro*. Jeremiah 30: “Their children shall be as afore time.” Redemption consists in the return of the youngest, the most remote from the past, the most future ones, so to speak, to the pristine condition. The past is superior to the present. This thought is, then, perfectly compatible with hope for the future. But does the hope for redemption – the expectation of the Messiah – not assign a much higher place to the future than to the past, however venerable?

This is not unqualifiedly true. According to the most accepted view, the Messiah is inferior to Moses. The messianic age will witness the restoration of the full practice of the Torah, part of which was discontinued owing to the destruction of the Temple. Belief in the Torah was always the way in Judaism, whereas messianism frequently became dormant. For example, as I learn from Gershom Scholem, cabbalism prior to the sixteenth century concentrated upon the beginning; it was only with Isaac Luria that cabbalism began to concentrate upon the future – upon the end. Yet even here, the last age became as important as the first. It did not become more important. Furthermore (I quote Scholem), “by inclination and habit, Luria was decidedly conservative. This tendency is well expressed in persistent attempts to relate what he had to say to older authorities. For Luria, salvation means actually nothing but restitution, reintegration of the original whole or tikkun, to use the Hebrew term. For Luria, the appearance of the Messiah is nothing but the consummation of the continuous process of restoration. The path to the end of all things is also the path to the beginning.” Judaism is a concern with return, it is not a concern with progress. Return can easily be expressed in biblical Hebrew; progress cannot. Hebrew renderings of progress seem to be somehow artificial, not to say paradoxical. Even if it were true that messianism bespeaks the predominance of the concern with the future, or of living toward the future, this would not affect in any way the belief in the superiority of the past to the present. The fact that the present is nearer in time to the final redemption than is the past does not mean, of course, that the present is superior in piety or wisdom to the past, especially to the classic past. Today, the word t’shuvah has acquired a still more emphatic meaning. Today, t’shuvah sometimes means, not a return which takes place within Judaism, but a return to Judaism on the part of many Jews who, or whose fathers, had broken with Judaism as a whole. That abandonment of Judaism – that break with Judaism – did not understand itself, of course, as a defection or desertion, as leaving the right way; nor did it understand itself as a return to a truth which the Jewish tradition in its turn had deserted; nor even merely a turn to something superior. It understood itself as progress. It granted to the Jewish tradition, as it were, that Judaism is old, very old, whereas it itself had no past of which it could boast. But it regarded this very fact, the antiquity of Judaism, as a proof of its own superiority and of Judaism’s inadequacy. For it questioned the very premise underlying the notion of return, that premise being the perfect character of the beginning and of the olden times. It assumed that the beginning is most imperfect and that perfection can be found only in the end. So much so that the movement from the beginning toward the end is in principle a progress from radical imperfection toward perfection. From this point of view, age did not have any claim whatsoever to veneration. Antiquity rather deserved contempt or possibly contempt mitigated by pity.

Let us try to clarify this issue somewhat more fully by contrasting the life characterized by the idea of return with the life characterized by the idea of progress. When the prophets call their people to account, they do not limit themselves to accusing them of this or that particular crime or sin. They recognize the root of all particular crimes in the fact that the people have forsaken their God. They accuse their people of rebellion. Originally, in the past, they were faithful or loyal; now they are in a state of rebellion. In the future they will return, and God will restore them to their original place. The primary, original, initial, is loyalty; unfaithfulness, infidelity, is secondary. The very notion of unfaithfulness or infidelity presupposes that fidelity or loyalty is primary. The perfect character of the origin is a condition of sin – of the thought of sin. Man who understands himself in this way longs for the perfection of the origin, or of the classic past. He suffers from the present; he hopes for the future.

Progressive man, on the other hand, looks back to a most imperfect beginning. The beginning is barbarism, stupidity, rudeness, extreme scarcity. He does not feel that he has lost something of great, not to say infinite, importance; he has lost only his chains. He does not suffer from the recollection of the past. Looking back to the past, he is proud of his achievements; he is certain of the superiority of the present to the past. He is not satisfied with the present; he looks to future progress. But he does not merely hope or pray for a better future; he thinks that he can bring it about by his own effort. Seeking perfection in a future which is in no sense the beginning or the restoration of the beginning, he lives unqualifiedly toward the future. The life which understands itself as a life of loyalty or faithfulness appears to him as backward, as being under the spell of old prejudices. What the others call rebellion, he calls revolution or liberation. To the polarity faithfulness-rebellion, he opposes the polarity prejudice-freedom.

To repeat, the return to Judaism succeeds a break with Judaism which eventually, or from the beginning, understood itself as a progress beyond Judaism. That break was effected in a classic manner by a solitary Man – Spinoza. Spinoza denied the truth of Judaism – Judaism, which includes, of course, the Bible, is a set of prejudices and superstitious practices of the ancient tribes. Spinoza found in this mass of heterogeneous lore some elements of truth, but he did not consider this as peculiar to Judaism. He found the same elements of truth in paganism as well. Spinoza was excommunicated by the Jewish community in Amsterdam. He ceased to regard himself as a Jew. He has sometimes been accused of having been hostile to Judaism and to Jews. I do not find that he was more opposed to Judaism than to Christianity, for example, and I do not find that he was hostile to Jews. He acquired a strange, or perhaps not so strange, neutrality in regard to the secular conflict between Judaism and Christianity. Looking at the Jews and the Jewish fate from this neutral point of view, he even made some suggestions as to

the redemption of the Jews. One suggestion is almost explicit. After having asserted that the Jews have not been elected in any other sense than that in which the Canaanites too had been elected earlier, and that therefore the Jews have not been elected for eternity, he tries to show that their survival after the loss of the land can be explained in a perfectly natural manner. In this context, he makes the following remark: "If the foundations of their religion did not effeminate their minds, I would absolutely believe that they might again restore their state, under auspicious circumstances, considering the fact that human things are mutable." Which means the hope for divine redemption is altogether baseless. The sufferings of the exiles are altogether meaningless. There is no guarantee whatsoever that these sufferings will ever cease. But the first condition for entertaining any reasonable hope for the end of the exile is that the Jews should get rid of the foundations of their religion, that is to say, of the spirit of Judaism. For that spirit, Spinoza thought, is averse to warlike enterprise and to the energy of government. As far as I know, this is the earliest suggestion of a purely political solution to the Jewish problem. The substitution of a purely political solution for the miracle of redemption toward which men can contribute, if at all, only by a life of piety. It is the first inkling of unqualifiedly political Zionism. But Spinoza intimated still another solution. In his *Theologico-Political Treatise*, he sketches the outline of what he regarded as a decent society. That society, as described by him, can be characterized as a liberal democracy. Incidentally, Spinoza may be said to be the first philosopher who advocated liberal democracy. Spinoza still regarded it as necessary to underwrite liberal democracy with a public religion or a state religion. Now it is very remarkable that that religion, that state religion, which is emphatically not a religion of reason, is neither Christian nor Jewish. It is neutral in regard to the differences between Judaism and Christianity. Furthermore, Spinoza claims to have proved, on the basis of the Bible, that the Mosaic law was binding only for the period of the Jewish commonwealth. If one considers these two facts, first, that the state religion is neutral in regard to the differences between Judaism and Christianity, and second, that the Mosaic law is no longer binding, one is entitled to say that Spinoza laid the foundation for another purely political solution of the Jewish problem. In fact, for the alternative to political Zionism and the solution known as assimilationism.

In Spinoza's liberal democracy, Jews do not have to become baptized in order to acquire full citizen rights. It is sufficient if they accept the extremely latitudinarian state religion and they may then forget about the Mosaic law. In this neutral atmosphere, the sufferings of the exiles could be expected to wither away. Spinoza has merely intimated the two classical alternatives which followed from the radical break with Judaism. The practical consequences were fully

developed in the course of the nineteenth century. But when they were exposed to the test of practice, they led into certain difficulties.

On the premise of assimilationism, Jewish suffering – suffering for Judaism – becomes meaningless. That suffering is merely the residue of a benighted past, a residue which will cease in proportion as mankind makes further progress. But the results were somewhat disappointing. The decrease of the power of Christianity did not bring about the expected decrease of anti-Jewish feeling. Even where legal equality of the Jews became a fact, it contrasted all the more strongly with the social inequality which continued. In a number of countries, legal inequality and the cruder forms of social inequality gave way to subtler forms of social inequality, but the social inequality did not for this reason become less of a hardship. On the contrary, sensitivity increased with social ascent. Our ancestors had been immune to hatred and contempt because it merely proved to them the election of Israel. The uprooted assimilated Jew had nothing to oppose to hatred and contempt except his naked self. Full social equality proved to require the complete disappearance of the Jews as Jews – a proposition which is impracticable, if for no other reason, than at least for the perfectly sufficient one of simple self-respect. Why should we, who have a heroic past behind and within us, which is not second to that of any other group anywhere on earth, deny or forget that past? That past which is all the more heroic, one could say, since its chief characters are not the glitter and trappings of martial glory and of cultural splendor, although it does not lack even these. Assimilation proved to require inner enslavement as the price of external freedom. Or, to put it somewhat differently, assimilationism seemed to land the Jews into the bog of Philistinism, of shallow satisfaction with the most unsatisfactory present. A most inglorious end for a people which had been led out of the house of bondage into the desert with careful avoidance of the land of the Philistines, although, to quote, “and it came to pass when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God led them not through the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near.” It is always near. Once progress was indeed achieved, hatred of the Jews could no longer present itself among educated or half-educated people as hatred of the Jews. It had to disguise itself as anti-Semitism, a term invented by some bashful German or French pedant of the nineteenth century. It is certainly a most improper term. The shock administered by the continued existence of social inequality and by the emergence of anti-Semitism, especially in Germany and France, proved to be a fair warning for what was going to happen in Germany, especially between 1933 to 1945.

Those European Jews who realized that assimilation was no solution to the Jewish problem and looked out for another purely human or political solution turned to political Zionism. But

political Zionism led to difficulties of its own. The basic idea underlying purely political Zionism was not Zionist at all. It could have been satisfied by a Jewish state anywhere on earth. Political Zionism was already a concession to the Jewish tradition. Those who were seeking a solution of the Jewish problem other than the disappearance of the Jews had to accept not only the territory hallowed by Jewish tradition but its language, Hebrew, as well. They were forced to accept, furthermore, Jewish culture. Cultural Zionism became a very powerful rival of political Zionism. But the heritage to which cultural Zionism had recourse rebelled against being interpreted in terms of culture or civilization, meaning, as an autonomous product of the genius of the Jewish people. That culture or civilization had its core in the Torah, and the Torah presents itself as given by God, not created by Israel. Thus the attempts to solve the Jewish problem by purely human means ended in failure. The knot which was not tied by man could not be untied by man. I do not believe that the American experience forces us to qualify these statements. It is very far from me to minimize the difference between a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, and the nations of the old world, which certainly were not conceived in liberty. I share the hope in America and the faith in America, but I am compelled to add that that faith and that hope cannot be of the same character as that faith and that hope which a Jew has in regard to Judaism and which the Christian has in regard to Christianity. No one claims that the faith in America and the hope for America is based on explicit divine promises.

The attempt to solve the Jewish problem has failed because of the overwhelming power of the past. The experience of that power by a generation which had become forgetful of that power is part of what is sometimes called the discovery of history. The discovery was made in the nineteenth century. As a discovery, it consisted in the realization of something which was not realized previously: that the acceptance of the past or the return to the Jewish tradition is something radically different from a mere continuation of that tradition. It is quite true that Jewish life in the past was almost always more than a continuation of a tradition. Very great changes within that tradition have taken place in the course of the centuries. But it is also true that the change which we are witnessing today and which all of us are participating in is, in one way or the other, qualitatively different from all previous changes within Judaism.

Let me try to clarify that difference. Those who today return to Judaism do not assert that, say, Spinoza was altogether wrong. They accept at least the principle of that biblical criticism which was regarded as the major offense of Spinoza. Generally speaking, those who today return to Judaism admit that modern rationalism, to use this vague term, had a number of important insights which cannot be thrown overboard and which were alien to the Jewish

tradition. Therefore, they modify the Jewish tradition consciously. You only have to contrast that with the procedure of Maimonides in the twelfth century, who when introducing Aristotelian philosophy into Judaism, had to assume that he was merely recovering Israel's own lost inheritance. These present-day Jews who return to the tradition try to do in the element of reflection what traditionally was done unconsciously or naively. Their attitude is historical rather than traditional. They study the thought of the past as thought of the past and therefore as not necessarily binding on the present generation as it stands. But still what they are doing is meant to be a return – that is to say, the acceptance of something which was equally accepted by the Jewish tradition. Thus the question arises as to the relative importance of these two elements: the new element and the unchanged element, the new element being the fact that present-day Judaism is forced to be what has been called “post-critical.” Are we wiser than our ancestors in the decisive respect or only in a subordinate respect? In the first case, we still would have to claim that we have made decisive progress. But if the insights implied in the “post-critical” character of present-day Judaism are only of a subordinate character, the movement which we are witnessing can justly claim to be a return. Now this movement of return would not have had the effect which it had, but for the fact that not only among Jews but throughout the Western world more generally, progress has become a matter of doubt. The term “progress” in its full and emphatic meaning has practically disappeared from serious literature. People speak less and less of “progress” and more and more of “change.” They no longer claim to know that we are moving in the right direction. Not progress, but the ‘belief’ in progress or the ‘idea’ of progress as a social or historical phenomenon, is a major theme for the present-day student of society. A generation or so ago, the most famous study on this subject was entitled *The Idea of Progress*. Its opposite number in present-day literature is entitled *The Belief in Progress*. The substitution of belief for idea is in itself worthy of note. Now to understand the crisis of the belief in progress, we must first clarify the content of that belief.

What is progress? Now progress, in the emphatic sense, presupposes that there is something which is simply good, or the end, as the goal of progress. Progress is change in the direction of the end. But this is only the necessary, not the sufficient, condition of the idea of progress. A sign of this is the notion of the Golden Age which also presupposes a notion of the simply good but that simply good, that end, is here located in the beginning. The end of man, the simply good, must be understood in a specific manner if it is to become the basis of the idea of progress. I suggest that the end of man must be understood primarily as perfection of the understanding in such a manner that the perfection of the understanding is somehow akin to the arts and crafts. It has always been controversial whether man's beginning was perfect or

imperfect, but both parties to the controversy admitted that the arts and the crafts and certainly their perfection do not belong to man's beginning. Therefore, to decide the question, regardless of the perfection or imperfection of man's beginning, depends upon how the question of the value of the arts and crafts is decided. At any rate, the idea of progress presupposes that there is the simply good life and that the beginning of life is radically imperfect. Accordingly, we find in Greek science or philosophy a full consciousness of progress: in the first place, of progress achieved and its inevitable concomitant, looking down on the inferiority or the weakness of the ancients; and as regards future progress, Aristotle himself noted: "In the art of medicine, there is no limit to the pursuit of health, and in the other arts there is no limit to the pursuit of their several ends. For they aim at accomplishing their ends to the uttermost." The possibility of infinite progress, at least in certain respects, is here stated. Yet the idea of progress is different from the Greek conception of progress. What is the relative importance of fulfillment, on the one hand, and future progress on the other? The most elaborate statements on progress seemed to occur in Lucretius and Seneca., where the possibility of infinite progress in the sciences and arts is clearly stated. Yet Lucretius was an Epicurean, and Seneca was a Stoic, which means they both presupposed that the fundamental issue has been settled already, either by Epicurus or by the Stoa. No future progress then in the decisive respect is envisioned. Generally speaking, it seems that in classical thought the decisive questions were thought to have been answered as far as they can be answered. The only exception of which I know is Plato, who held that the fulfillment proper, namely full wisdom, is not possible but only quest for wisdom, which in Greek means philosophy. He also insisted that there are no assignable limits to that quest for wisdom, and therefore it follows from Plato's notion that indefinite progress is possible in principle.

Hitherto I have spoken of intellectual progress. What about social progress? Are they parallel? The idea that they are necessarily parallel or that intellectual progress is accompanied in principle by social progress was known to the classics. We find there the idea that the art of legislation, which is the overarching social art, progresses like any other art. Yet Aristotle, who reports this doctrine, questions this solution, and he notes the radical difference between laws and arts or intellectual pursuits. More generally stated, or more simply stated, he notes the radical difference between the requirements of social life and the requirements of intellectual life. The paramount requirement of society is stability, as distinguished from progress. If I summarize this point, in the classical conception of progress, it is clearly admitted that infinite intellectual progress in secondary matters is theoretically possible. But we must add immediately, there is no practical possibility for that, for according to the one school, the

visible universe is of finite duration; it has come into being and will perish again. And, according to the other view, which held that the visible universe is eternal, they asserted, especially Aristotle, that there are periodic cataclysms which will destroy all earlier civilization. Hence, eternal recurrence of the same progressive process, followed by decay and destruction.

Now what is lacking in the classical conception as compared to the modern? I see two points. First, there is lacking the notion of a guaranteed parallelism between intellectual and social progress, and secondly, there is no necessary end of the progressive process through telluric or cosmic catastrophes. As to the first point – the guaranteed parallelism between social and intellectual progress – in the classical statements about progress the emphasis is upon intellectual progress rather than on social progress. The basic idea can be stated as follows: science or philosophy is the preserve of a small minority, of those who have good natures, as they called it, who are gifted, as we say. Their progress, the progress of this tiny minority, does not necessarily affect society at large – far from it. It was this thought which was radically challenged in the seventeenth century, the beginning of modern philosophy and with the introduction of the crucial notion of the idea of method. Method brings about the levelling of the natural differences of the mind, and methods can be learned in principle by everyone. Only discovery remains the preserve of the few. But the acquisition of the results of the discovery and especially of the discovery of methods, is open to all. And there was a very simple proof: mathematical problems which formerly could not be solved by the greatest mathematical geniuses are now solved by high-school boys; the level of intelligence – that was the conclusion – has enormously been raised; and since this is possible, there is a necessary parallelism between intellectual and social progress.

As for the second point – the guarantee of an infinite future on earth not interrupted by telluric catastrophes – we find this thought fully developed in the eighteenth century. The human race had a beginning but no end, and it began about seven thousand years ago – you see that man did not accept the biblical chronology. Hence, since mankind is only seven thousand years old, it is still in its infancy. An infinite future is open, and look what we have achieved in this short span – compared with infinity – of seven thousand years. The decisive point is then this: there is a beginning and no end. Obviously the argument presupposes a beginning; otherwise you cannot figure out this infinite progress. The origin of this idea – a beginning but no end – could perhaps be found in Plato's dialogue *Timaeus*, if one takes that literally. Yet Plato certainly admitted regular telluric catastrophes. The source, I think, has to be found in a certain interpretation of the Bible, which we find, for example, in Maimonides, where you have the

beginning – the creation – and no end, and cataclysms are excluded, not by natural necessity, but by the covenant of God with Noah. Yet precisely on the basis of the Bible, the beginning cannot be imperfect. Moreover, such additional important notions as the power of sin and of the need for greater redemption counter the effect of the notion of progress necessarily. Then again, in the Bible the core of the process from the beginning to the end is not progress. There is a classic past, whether we seek it at Mount Sinai or in the patriarchs or wherever else. Furthermore, and quite obviously, the core of the process as presented in the Bible is not intellectual-scientific development. The availability of infinite time for infinite progress appears, then, to be guaranteed by a document of revelation which condemns the other crucial elements of the idea of progress. Progress in the full and emphatic sense of the term is a hybrid notion.

This difficulty explains why the idea of progress underwent a radical modification in the nineteenth century. I quote one specimen: “Truth cannot longer be found in a collection of fixed dogmatic propositions but only in the process of knowing, which process ascends from the lower to ever higher stages. All those stages are only perishable phases in the endless development from the lower to the higher. There is no final absolute truth and no final absolute stage of the development. Nothing is imperishable except the uninterrupted process of the coming and perishing, of the endless ascent from the lower to the higher. We do not have to consider here the question as to whether this view agrees with the present state of natural science, for at present natural science predicts a possible end to the existence of the earth and a certain end to the inhabitability of the earth. Natural science therefore assumes today that human history consists not only of an ascending, but also of a descending process. However, this may be, we are certainly still rather remote from the point where decline begins to set in. “That statement was made by Friedrich Engels, the friend and co-worker of Karl Marx. Here we see infinite progress proper is abandoned, but the grave consequences of that are evaded by a wholly incomprehensible and unjustifiable “never mind.” This more recent form of the belief in progress is based on the decision just to forget about the end, to forget about eternity.

The contemporary crisis of Western civilization may be said to be identical with the climactic crisis of the idea of progress in the full and emphatic sense of the term. I repeat, that idea consists of the following elements: the development of human thought as a whole is a progressive development, certainly the emergence of modern thought since the seventeenth century marks an unqualified progress beyond all earlier thought. There is a fundamental and necessary parallelism between intellectual and social progress. There are no assignable limits to intellectual and social progress. Infinite intellectual and social progress is actually possible.

Once mankind has reached a certain stage of development, there exists a solid floor beneath which man can no longer sink. All these points have become questionable, I believe, to all of us. To mention only one point, perhaps the most massive one, the idea of progress was bound up with the notion of the conquest of nature, of man making himself the master and owner of nature for the purpose of relieving man's estate. The means for that goal was a new science. We all know of the enormous successes of the new science and of the technology which is based on it, and we all can witness the enormous increase of man's power. Modern man is a giant in comparison to earlier man. But we have also to note that there is no corresponding increase in wisdom and goodness. Modern man is a giant of whom we do not know whether he is better or worse than earlier man. More than that, this development of modern science culminated in the view that man is not able to distinguish in a responsible manner between good and evil – the famous value judgment. Nothing can be said responsibly about the right use of that immense power. Modern man is a blind giant. The doubt of progress led to a crisis of Western civilization as a whole, because in the course of the nineteenth century, the old distinction between good and bad, or good and evil, had been progressively replaced by the distinction between progressive and reactionary. No simple, inflexible, eternal distinction between good and bad could give assurance to those who had learned to take their bearings only by the distinction between progressive and reactionary, as soon as these people had become doubtful of progress.

The substitution of the distinction between progressive and reactionary for the distinction between good and bad is another aspect of the discovery of history, to which I referred before. The discovery of history, to state this very simply, is identical with the substitution of the past or the future for the eternal – the substitution of the temporal for the eternal. Now to understand this crisis of Western civilization, one cannot leave it at understanding the problematic character of the idea of progress, for the idea of progress is only a part, or an aspect, of a larger whole, of what we shall not hesitate to call modernity. What is modernity? A hard question which cannot be discussed in detail here. However, I would like to offer one or two somewhat rambling considerations. First, one might remember the decisive steps which led up to the contemporary crisis of Western civilization, and to those who are familiar with these things I must apologize for the superficiality of what is now offered in brief; but I think it is important to recall these things nevertheless. Therefore, regard this as a stenogram, not as an analysis.

Western civilization has two roots: The Bible and Greek philosophy. Let us begin by looking at the first of these elements, the Bible, the biblical element. Modern rationalism rejected

biblical theology and replaced it by such things as deism, pantheism, atheism. But in this process, biblical morality was in a way preserved. Goodness was still believed to consist in something like justice, benevolence, love, or charity; and modern rationalism has generated a tendency to believe that this biblical morality is better preserved if it is divorced from biblical theology. Now this was, of course, more visible in the nineteenth century than it is today; it is no longer so visible today because one crucial event happened around 1870-1880: the appearance of Nietzsche. Nietzsche's criticism can be reduced to one proposition: modern man has been trying to preserve biblical morality while abandoning biblical faith. That is impossible. If the biblical faith goes, biblical morality must go too, and a radically different morality must be accepted. The word which Nietzsche used is "the will to power." Nietzsche meant it in a very subtle and noble manner, yet the crude and ignoble way in which it was later understood is not altogether independent of the radical change of orientation he suggested.

As for the other major component of Western civilization, the classical element, that is the idea of philosophy or science, that too began to change. In the seventeenth century, a new philosophy and a new science began to emerge. They made the same claims as all earlier philosophy and science had done, but the result of this seventeenth century revolution produced something which had never existed before – the emergence of Science with a capital "S." Originally the attempt had been to replace traditional philosophy and science by a new philosophy and a new science; but in the course of a few generations it appeared that only a part of the new philosophy and science was successful and, indeed, amazingly successful. No one could question these developments, e.g. Newton. But only a part of the new science or philosophy was successful, and then the great distinction between philosophy and science, which we are all familiar with, came into being. Science is the successful part of modern philosophy or science, and philosophy is the unsuccessful part – the rump. Science is therefore higher in dignity than philosophy. The consequence, which you know, is the depreciation of all knowledge which is not scientific in this peculiar sense. Science becomes the authority for philosophy in a way perfectly comparable to the way in which theology was the authority for philosophy in the middle ages. Science is the perfection of man's natural understanding of the world. But then, certain things took place in the nineteenth century, e.g., the discovery of non-Euclidean geometry and its use in physics, which made it clear that science cannot be described adequately as the perfection of man's natural understanding of the world, but rather as a radical modification of man's natural understanding of the world. In other words, science is based on certain fundamental hypotheses which, being hypotheses, are not absolutely necessary and which always remain hypothetical. The consequence was again drawn most

clearly by Nietzsche: science is only one interpretation of the world among many. It has certain advantages, but that of course does not give it any ultimately superior cognitive status. The last consequence stated by some men in our age is as you know: modern science is in no way superior to Greek science, as little as modern poetry is superior to Greek poetry. In other words, even science with its enormous prestige—a prestige higher than any other power in the modern world — is also a kind of giant with feet of clay, if you consider its foundations. As a consequence of this chain of scientific development the notion of a rational morality, the heritage of Greek philosophy, has, to repeat myself, lost its standing completely; all choices are, it is argued, ultimately non-rational or irrational.

II

The immediate cause of the decline of the belief in progress can perhaps be stated as follows: the idea of progress in the modern sense implies that once man has reached a certain level, intellectual and social or moral, there exists a firm level of being below which he cannot sink. This contention, however, is empirically refuted by the incredible barbarization which we have been so unfortunate as to witness in our century. We can say that the idea of progress, in the full and emphatic sense of the term, is based on wholly unwarranted hopes. You can see this even in many critics of the idea of progress. One of the most famous critics of the idea of progress, prior to the First World War, was the Frenchman, Georges Sorel, who wrote a book, *The Delusions of Progress*. But strangely, Sorel declared that the decline of the Western world was impossible because of the vitality of the Western tradition. I think that we have all now become sufficiently sober to admit that whatever may be wrong in Spengler — and there are many things wrong in Spengler — that the very title, in the English translation especially, of the work is soberer, more reasonable, than these hopes which lasted so long.

This barbarization which we have witnessed and which we continue to witness is not altogether accidental. The intention of the modern development was, of course, to bring about a higher civilization, a civilization which would surpass all earlier civilizations. Yet the effect of the modern development was different. What has taken place in the modern period has been a gradual corrosion and destruction of the heritage of Western civilization. The soul of the modern development, one may say, is a peculiar “realism,” the notion that moral principles and the appeal to moral principles — preaching, sermonizing — is ineffectual and therefore that one has to seek a substitute for moral principles which would be much more efficacious than ineffectual preaching. Such substitutes were found, for example, in institutions or in economics, and perhaps the most important substitute is what was called “the historical

process,” meaning that the historical process is, in a way, a much more important guarantee for the actualization of the good life than what the individual could or would do through his own efforts. This change shows itself, as already noted, in the change of general language, namely, in the substitution of the distinction between progressive and reactionary for the distinction between good and bad. The implication being that we have to choose and to do what is conducive to progress, what is in agreement with the historical trends, and it is indecent or immoral to be squeamish in such adaptations. Once it became clear, however, that historical trends are absolutely ambiguous and therefore cannot serve as a standard or, in other words, that to jump on the bandwagon or the wave of the future is not more reasonable than to resist those trends, no standard whatever was left. The facts, understood as historical processes, indeed do not teach us anything regarding values, and the consequence of the abandonment of moral principle proper was that value judgments have no objective support whatsoever. To spell this out with the necessary clarity – although one knows this from the study of the social sciences – the values of barbarism and cannibalism are as defensible as those of civilization.

I have spoken of modernity as of something definite and hence, knowable. An analysis of this phenomenon is out of the question here, as goes without saying. Instead I would like briefly to enumerate those characteristic elements of modernity which are particularly striking, at least to me. But I must make one observation in order to protect myself against gross misunderstanding. Modern phenomenon is not characterized by the fact that it is located, say, between 1600 and 1952, because premodern traditions of course survived and survive. And more than that, throughout the modern period, there has been a constant movement against this modern trend. From the very beginning – one phenomenon which is very well known, perhaps unduly well-known – is the quarrel between the ancients and moderns at the end of the seventeenth century, which in its most well-known form was concerned with the relatively unimportant question of whether the French drama of the seventeenth century was really comparable to the classical drama. The real quarrel between the ancients and moderns did not concern the drama, of course, but concerned modern science and philosophy. But there was a resistance to that from the very beginning: the greatest man in English letters who represented this is Swift; but then you have it again very strongly in German classicism in the second half of the eighteenth century; and then indeed in the nineteenth century this movement, this counter-movement, was completely pushed to the wall as a great intellectual movement. But in a way, of course, the tradition still persisted. So having made clear that by modernity I do not mean something which is simply chronological, let me now indicate what I think are the most striking elements of modernity in a purely enumerative fashion without attempting an analysis.

The first characteristic feature of modern thought as modern thought, one can say, is its anthropocentric character. Although apparently contradicted by the fact that modern science with its Copernicanism is much more radically anti-anthropocentric than earlier thought, a closer study shows that this is not true. When I speak of the anthropocentric character of modern thought, I contrast it with the theocentric character of biblical and medieval thought and the cosmocentric character of classical thought. You see this most clearly if you look at modern philosophy, modern philosophy which, while it does not have the general authority which modern science has, is nevertheless a kind of conscience or consciousness of modern science. One has only to look at the titles of the most famous books of modern philosophy to see that philosophy is, or tends to become, analysis of the human mind. You could also see this same trait easily, but that would be too laborious, by looking at what philosophic disciplines emerged in modern times that were unknown to earlier philosophy – all parts of the philosophy of man or of the human mind. The underlying idea, which shows itself not in all places clearly but in some places very clearly, is that all truths or all meaning, all order, all beauty, originate in the thinking subject, in human thought, in man. Some famous formulations: “We know only what we make” – Hobbes. “Understanding prescribes its nature its laws” – Kant. “I have discovered a spontaneity little known previously of the monads of the thoughts” – Leibnitz. To give you a very simple popular example, certain human pursuits which were formerly called imitative arts are now called creative arts. One must not forget that even the atheistic, materialistic thinkers of classical antiquity took it for granted that man is subject to something higher than himself, e.g., the whole cosmic order, and that man is not the origin of all meaning.

Connected with this anthropocentric character is a radical change of moral orientation, which we see with particular clarity in the fact of the emergence of the concept of rights in the precise form in which it was developed in modern social thought. Generally speaking, premodern thought put the emphasis on duty, and rights, as far as they were mentioned at all, were understood only as derivative from duties and subservient to the fulfillment of duties. In modern times, we find the tendency, again not always expressed with the greatest clarity but definitely traceable, to assign the primary place to rights and to regard the duties as secondary if, of course, very important. This is connected with another fact that in the crucial period of the seventeenth century, where the change becomes most visible, it is understood that the basic right coincides with a passion. The passions are in a way emancipated, because in the traditional notion, the passion is subordinate to the action, and the action means virtue. The change which we can observe throughout the seventeenth century in all the most famous revolutionary thinkers is that virtue itself is now understood as a passion. In other words, a

notion that virtue is a controlling, refraining, regulating, ordering attitude towards passion – think of the image in Plato's *Phaedrus*, the horses and the charioteer – is given up when virtue itself is understood as a passion. This leads to another change which becomes manifest only at a somewhat later age, namely, that freedom gradually takes the place of virtue; so that in much present-day thought you find that – of course, freedom is not the same as license, that goes without saying – but that the distinction between freedom and license takes on a different meaning, a radically different meaning. The good life does not consist, as it did according to the earlier notion, in compliance with a pattern antedating the human will, but consists primarily in originating the pattern itself. The good life does not consist of both a "what" and a "how," but only of a "how." To state it somewhat differently, and again repeating that I am only enumerating, man has no nature to speak of. He makes himself what he is; man's very humanity is acquired. That is granted, I think, in many quarters; that is what is absolutely stable are certain so-called biological characteristics and perhaps some very elementary psychological characteristics, the character of perception, etc. But all interesting things are not modelled on a pattern antedating human action but are a product of human activity itself. Man's very humanity is acquired.

And this leads me to the third point, which became fully clear only in the nineteenth century, and which is already a kind of corrective of this radical emancipation of man from the superhuman. It became ever more clear that man's freedom is inseparable from a radical dependence. Yet this dependence was understood as itself a product of human freedom, and the name for that is history. The so-called discovery of history consists in the realization, or in the alleged realization, that man's freedom is radically limited by his earlier use of his freedom, and not by his nature or by the whole order of nature or creation. This element is, I think, increasing in importance. So much so that today one tends to say that the specific character of modern thought is "history," a notion which is in this form, of course, wholly alien to classical thought or to any premodern thought or biblical thought as well, naturally. If I had the time I would try to show that precisely in this so-called historicization of modern thought the problem of modernity becomes most visible from a technical point of view, and a technical point of view has a peculiarly convincing character, at least to a certain type of person. So I leave it at that.

The crisis of modernity on which we have been reflecting leads to the suggestion that we should return. But return to what? Obviously, to Western civilization in its premodern integrity, to the principles of Western civilization. Yet there is a difficulty here, because Western civilization consists of two elements, has two roots, which are in radical dis

agreement with each other. We may call these elements, as I have done elsewhere, Jerusalem and Athens or, to speak in non-metaphorical language, the Bible and Greek philosophy. This radical disagreement today is frequently played down, and this playing down has a certain superficial justification, for the whole history of the West presents itself at first glance as an attempt to harmonize or to synthesize the Bible and Greek philosophy. But a closer study shows that what happened and has been happening in the West for many centuries, is not a harmonization but an attempt at harmonization. These attempts at harmonization were doomed to failure for the following reason: each of these two roots of the Western world sets forth one thing as the one thing needful, and the one thing needful proclaimed by the Bible is incompatible, as it is understood by the Bible, with the one thing needful proclaimed by Greek philosophy, as it is understood by Greek philosophy. To put it very simply and therefore somewhat crudely, the one thing needful according to Greek philosophy is the life of autonomous understanding. The one thing needful as spoken by the Bible is the life of obedient love. The harmonizations and synthesizations are possible because Greek philosophy can use obedient love in a subservient function and the Bible can use philosophy as a handmaid; but what is so used in each case rebels against such use, and therefore the conflict is really a radical one. Yet this very disagreement presupposes some agreement. In fact, every disagreement we may say, presupposes some agreement, because people must disagree about something and must agree as to the importance of that something. But in this case the agreement is deeper than this purely formal one.

Now what then is the area of agreement between Greek philosophy and the Bible? Negatively we can say, and one could easily enlarge on this position, that there is a perfect agreement between the Bible and Greek philosophy in opposition to those elements of modernity which were described above. They are rejected explicitly or implicitly by both the Bible and Greek philosophy. But this agreement is, of course, only an implicit one, and we should rather look at the agreement as it appeared directly in the text. One can say, and it is not misleading to say so, that the Bible and Greek philosophy agree in regard to what we may call, and we do call in fact, morality. They agree, if I may say so, regarding the importance of morality, regarding the content of morality, and regarding its ultimate insufficiency. They differ as regards that “x” which supplements or completes morality, or, which is only another way of putting it, they disagree as regards the basis of morality.

I will give you first a brief statement, a reminder rather, of the agreement. Now some people assert that there is a radical and unqualified opposition between biblical morality and philosophic morality. If one heard certain people speak, one would believe that the Greek

philosophers did nothing but preach pederasty, whereas Moses did nothing but curb pederasty. Now these people must have limited themselves to a most perfunctory reading of a part of Plato's Banquet or of the beginning of the Channides, but they cannot have read the only work in which Plato set forth specific prescriptions for human society, namely, Plato's Laws; and what Plato's Laws say about this subject agrees fully with what Moses says. Those theologians who identified the second table of the Decalogue as the Christians call it with the natural law of Greek philosophy, were well-advised. It is as obvious to Aristotle as it is to Moses that murder, theft, adultery, etc., are unqualifiedly bad. Greek philosophy and the Bible agree as to this, that the proper framework of morality is the patriarchal family, which is, or tends to be, monogamous, and which forms the cell of a society in which the free adult males, and especially the old ones, predominate. Whatever the Bible and philosophy may tell us about the nobility of certain women, in principle both insist upon the superiority of the male sex. The Bible traces Adam's Fall to Eve's temptation. Plato traces the fall of the best social order to the covetousness of a woman. Consisting of free men, the society praised by the Bible and Greek philosophy refuses to worship any human being. I do not have to quote the Bible for I read it in a Greek author who says: "You worship no human being as your Lord, but only the gods," and he expresses an almost biblical abhorrence of human beings who claim divine honors. Bible and Greek philosophy agree in assigning the highest place among the virtues, not to courage or manliness, but to justice. And by justice both understand primarily, obedience to the law. The law that requires man's full obedience is in both cases not merely civil, penal, and constitutional law, but moral and religious law as well. It is, in biblical language, the guidance, the Torah, for the whole life of man. In the words of the Bible, "It is your life," or "It is the tree of life for those who cling to it"; and in the words of Plato, "The law effects the blessedness of those who obey it." Its comprehensiveness can be expressed, as Aristotle does it, by saying, "What the law does not command, it forbids"; and substantially that is the biblical view as well, as is shown by such commandments as "Thou shall eat and be full and be fruitful and multiply." Obedience to a law of this kind is more than ordinary obedience; it is humility. No wonder that the greatest prophet of the Bible as well as the most law abiding among the Greeks are praised for their humility. Law and justice, thus understood, are divine law and divine justice. The rule of law is fundamentally the rule of God, theocracy. Man's obedience and disobedience to the law is the object of divine retribution. What Plato says in the tenth book of the Laws about man's inability to escape from divine retribution is almost literally identical with certain verses of Amos and the Hundred-and-thirty-ninth Psalm. In this context, one may even mention, and without apology I think, the kinship between the mono theism of the Bible and the monotheism toward which Greek philosophy is tending, and the kinship between the first

chapter of Genesis and Plato's *Timaeus*. But the Bible and Greek philosophy agree not merely regarding the place which they assign to justice, the connection between justice and law, the character of law, and divine retribution. They also agree regarding the problem of justice, the difficulty created by the misery of the just and the prospering of the wicked. One cannot read Plato's description in the second book of the *Republic* of the perfectly just man who suffers what would be the just fate of the most unjust man without being reminded of Isaiah's description of him who has done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth, yet who was oppressed and afflicted and brought as a lamb to the slaughter. And just as Plato's *Republic* ends with restoring all kinds of prosperity to the just, the book of Job ends with the restoration to the just Job of everything he had temporarily lost.

Now in the course of these extremely summary remarks, I have tacitly replaced morality by justice, understanding by justice obedience to the divine law. This notion, the divine law, it seems to me is the common ground between the Bible and Greek philosophy. And here I use a term which is certainly easily translatable into Greek as well as into biblical Hebrew. But I must be more precise. The common ground between the Bible and Greek philosophy is the problem of divine law. They solve that problem in a diametrically opposed manner.

Before I speak of the root of their difference, I would like to illustrate the fundamental antagonism between the bible and philosophy by enumerating some of its consequences. I have indicated the place of justice in both Bible and Greek philosophy. We may take Aristotle's *Ethics* as the most perfect or certainly the most accessible presentation of philosophic ethics. Now Aristotle's *Ethics* has two foci, not one: one is justice, the other, however, is magnanimity or noble pride. Both justice and magnanimity comprise all other virtues, as Aristotle says, but in different ways. Justice comprises all other virtues in so far as the actions flowing from them relate to other men; magnanimity, however, comprises all other virtues in so far as they enhance the man himself. Now there is a close kinship between Aristotle's justice and biblical justice, but Aristotle's magnanimity, which means a man's habitual claiming for himself great honors while he deserves these honors, is alien to the Bible. Biblical humility excludes magnanimity in the Greek sense. There is a close relation between the magnanimous man and the perfect gentleman. There occur a few, very few, gentlemen and ladies in the Bible – I hope that this remark is not understood as a criticism of the Bible. There is Saul, who disobeys a divine command and by so doing does the noble thing – he spared his brother, King Agag, and destroys only what is vile and refuse. For this he was rejected by God and Agag was hewn to pieces by the prophet Samuel before the Lord. Instead of Saul, God elected David, who did a lot of things a gentleman would not do, who was one of the greatest sinners, but at the same

time one of the greatest repenters, who ever lived. There is a gentleman Jonathan who was too noble to compete with his friend David for kingship in Israel. There is a lady Michal, the wife of David, who saw David leaping and dancing before the Lord, and she despised him in her heart and ridiculed him for having shamelessly compromised his royal dignity by leaping and dancing before the riffraff, but she was punished by God with sterility. I need not dwell on the obvious connection between the biblical rejection of the concept of a “gentleman” and the biblical insistence on man’s duties to the poor. The Greek philosophers were very far from being vulgar worshippers of wealth—must I say so? – Socrates lived in thousand-fold poverty, as he himself says, and he failed to see why a horse can be good without having money whereas man cannot. But they held that as far as the general run of man is concerned, virtue presupposes a reasonable economic underpinning. The Bible, on the other hand, uses poor and pious or just as synonymous terms. Compared with the Bible, Greek philosophy is heart less in this as well as in other respects. Magnanimity presupposes a man’s conviction of his own worth. It presupposes that man is capable of being virtuous, thanks to his own efforts. If this condition is fulfilled, consciousness of one’s shortcomings or failings or sins is something which is below the good man. Again I quote Aristotle, [the] “Sense of shame,” which is such consciousness of human failing, “befits young men who cannot yet be fully virtuous, but not men of mature age who are free not to do the wrong thing in the first place.” Or to quote the remark made by one twentieth century gentleman about another, “Disgrace was impossible because of his character and behavior.” The Greek philosophers differed as to whether man can become fully virtuous, but if some deny this possibility, as Socrates does, he merely replaces his self-satisfaction, the self admiration of the virtuous man, by the self-satisfaction or self-admiration of him who steadily progresses in virtue. He does not imply, as far as the happy few are concerned, that they should be contrite, repentent, or express a sense of guilt. Man’s guilt was indeed the guiding theme to tragedy. Hence Plato rejects tragedy from his best city. (I do not say that is the whole story; that is only a part of the story as you see from the fact that tragedy is replaced by songs praising the virtuous. And according to Aristotle, the tragic hero is necessarily an average man, not a man of the highest order.) However, it should be noted that tragedy is composed and performed for the benefit of the multitude. Its function is to arouse the passions of fear and pity while at the same time purging them.

Now fear and pity are precisely the passions which are necessarily connected with the feeling of guilt. When I become guilty, when I become aware of my being guilty, I have at once the feeling of pity toward him whom I have hurt or ruined and the feeling of fear of him who avenges my crime. Humanly speaking, the unity of fear and pity combined with the

phenomenon of guilt might seem to be the root of religion. God, the king or the judge, is the object of fear; and God, the father of all men, makes all men brothers, and thus hallows pity. According to Aristotle, without these feelings which have to be purged by tragedy, the better type of man is liberated from all morbidity and thus can turn whole heartedly to noble action. Greek philosophy has frequently been blamed for the absence from it of that ruthless examination of one's intentions which is the consequence of the biblical demand for purity of the heart. "Know thyself" means for the Greeks, know what it means to be a human being, know what is the place of man in the universe, examine your opinions and prejudices, rather than "Search your heart." This philosophic lack of depth, as it is called, can consistently be maintained only if God is assumed not to be concerned with man's goodness or if man's goodness is assumed to be entirely his own affair. The Bible and Greek philosophy agree indeed as regards the importance of morality or justice and as to the insufficiency of morality, but they disagree as to what completes morality. According to the Greek philosophers, as already noted, it is understanding or contemplation. Now this necessarily tends to weaken the majesty of the moral demands, whereas humility, a sense of guilt, repentance, and faith in divine mercy, which complete morality according to the Bible, necessarily strengthen the majesty of the moral demands. A sign of this is the fact that contemplation is essentially a trans- or asocial possibility, whereas obedience and faith are essentially related to the community of the faithful. To quote the Jewish medieval thinker, Yehuda Halevi, "The wisdom of the Greeks has most beautiful blossoms, but no fruits," with 'fruits' here meaning actions. That asocial perfection which is contemplation normally presupposes a political community, the city, which accordingly is considered by the philosophers as fundamentally good, and the same is true of the arts, without whose services, and even model, political life and philosophic life are not possible. According to the Bible, however, the first founder of a city was the first murderer, and his descendents were the first inventors of the arts. Not the city, not civilization, but the desert, is the place in which the biblical God reveals himself. Not the farmer Cain, but the shepherd Abel, finds favor in the eyes of the biblical God.

The force of the moral demand is weakened in Greek philosophy because in Greek philosophy this demand is not backed up by divine promises. According to Plato, for example, evil will never cease on earth, whereas according to the Bible the end of days will bring perfect redemption. Hence the philosopher lives in a state above fear and trembling as well as above hope, and the beginning of his wisdom is not as in the Bible the fear of God, but rather the sense of wonder; whereas biblical man lives in fear and trembling as well as in hope. This leads to a peculiar serenity in the philosopher which I would like to illustrate here by only one

example which I think is not wholly accidental. The prophet Nathan seriously and ruthlessly rebukes King David for having committed one murder and one act of adultery. I contrast that with the way in which a Greek poet-philosopher playfully and elegantly tries to convince a Greek tyrant who has committed an untold number of murders and other crimes, that he would derive greater pleasure if he would have been more reason able. Now let me leave it with these examples, which naturally are to a certain extent arbitrary, but I think not misleading. I think I can illustrate the difference also as follows by two characteristic events or accounts. Contrast the account of the Akedah – the binding of Isaac – in the story of Abraham. There the crucial point is that Abraham obeys an unintelligible command, the command being unintelligible because he has been promised that his name would be called through Isaac and in the descendants of Isaac, and now he is asked to slaughter that son. Yet, Abraham obeys the command unhesitatingly. The only analogy in Greek philosophy of which I can think would be the example of Socrates who is, or believes at least that he has been, commanded by Apollo to something, and yet the action consists not in unhesitating obedience, but in examining an unintelligible saying of Apollo.

Now after these illustrations, what is the difference? These principles were clarified, particularly in the medieval discussion, in the hey-day of theological discussion; Maimonides especially, in the *Guide for the Perplexed*, is probably the greatest analyst of this fundamental difference. The issue as he stated it was as follows: philosophy teaches the eternity of the world, and the Bible teaches the creation out of nothing. This conflict must be rightly understood, because Maimonides is primarily thinking of Aristotle, who taught the eternity of the visible universe. But if you enlarge that and apply it not only to this cosmos, to this visible universe in which we live now, but to any cosmos or chaos which might ever exist, certainly Greek philosophy teaches the eternity of cosmos or chaos; whereas the Bible teaches creation, implying creation out of nothing. The root of the matter, however, is that only the Bible teaches divine omnipotence, and the thought of divine omnipotence is absolutely incompatible with Greek philosophy in any form. And I think one can even trace that back to the very beginnings of Greek literature – though technically much beyond philosophy – to the passage in the *Odyssey*, where Hermes shows Odysseus a certain herb which he could use for protecting himself and his fellows against Circe. Now in this context, the gods can do everything, the gods are omnipotent one can say, but it is very interesting what this concept means in this context. Why are the gods omnipotent? Because they know the natures of all things, which means, of course, they are not omnipotent. They know the natures of things which are wholly independent of them and through that knowledge they are capable of using

all things properly. In all Greek thought, we find in one form or the other an impersonal necessity higher than any personal being; whereas in the Bible the first cause is, as people say now, a person. This is connected with the fact that the concern of God with man is absolutely, if we may say so, essential to the biblical God; whereas that concern is, to put it very mildly, a problem for every Greek philosopher. Stated somewhat differently, what is now called religious experience is underlined in the Bible and is understood by the Bible as genuine experience; whereas from the point of view of the Greek philosophers, this religious experience is a questionable Interpretation – I take the example of Plato – a questionable interpretation of experiences of the soul as an all-pervasive principle.

We must try as far as it is possible to understand this antagonism. It can well be questioned whether what I am going to say can in truth be called an attempt at understanding, and so you can take it as a kind of illustration from the point of view of, say, social science. In order to clarify this antagonism, it is proposed that we go back to the common stratum between Bible and Greek philosophy, to the most elementary stratum, a stratum which is common, or can be assumed to be common, to all men. How can we find that? I think it is easier to start from philosophy for the simple reason that the question which I raise here is a scientific or philosophic question. We have to move in the element of conceptual thought, as it is called, and that is of course the element of Greek philosophy. With a view to this fact, I would like to state the issue more precisely. What distinguishes the Bible from Greek philosophy is the fact that Greek philosophy is based on this premise: that there is such a thing as nature, or natures – a notion which has no equivalent in biblical thought. It should be noted that there is no Hebrew-biblical term for nature, the Hebrew word being derived very indirectly from a Greek word which is an equivalent of nature in Greek, *charakter*, *teva* in Hebrew. So the issue from this point of view would be this: we have to go back behind that discovery or invention of nature. We have to try to discern what we may call the pre-philosophical equivalent of nature, and by starting from that, perhaps we can arrive at a purely historical understanding of the antagonism we are analyzing. Let me add, parenthetically, another point. Philosophy is the quest for principles, meaning – and let us be quite literal – for the beginnings, for the first things. This is, of course, something common to philosophy and myth, and I would suggest for the time being that philosophy, as distinguished from myth, comes into being when the quest for the beginnings is understood in the light of the idea of nature.

Now what is the pre-philosophic equivalent of nature? I think we can find the answer to this question in such notions as ‘custom’ or ‘ways’. This answer occurred to me, very simply, as a result of reading Maimonides, who knew the true roots of which I speak very well indeed. In

the beginning of his great legal work, the Mishneh Torah, in the first section, the “Hilchot Yesodei ha-Torah”, “Laws Regarding the Foundations of the Torah”, Chapter Four, he speaks of the four elements. Before he introduces the term nature, he speaks first of the custom or way – the custom of fire, and the way of earth, and somewhat later refers to the nature of water. And this insight goes, I think, to the root of the problem. The rubrics ‘custom’ or ‘way’ are biblical notions and are, of course, also to be found in Greek sources. Moreover, I would assume, until the contrary has been proven, that these ideas are really universal ones. People in all times and places have observed that things behave in a regular manner; that they have customs of behaving and ways of behaving. Take, for example, a biblical expression, *derech nashim*, the way of women, menstruation, or in Greek an expression such as *boskaematon dikei*, the custom of beasts, meaning the same as the nature of beasts. Or again, in biblical Hebrew, the word *mishpat* means the custom or the law of a thing as reflected in its regular behavior. In this context it is clear that no distinction is made between the custom of dogs and the custom of the Philistines, for example: a Philistine regularly behaves in his way and the dog regularly behaves in his way. You can also take lions and Hebrews, if you think I employ only poor examples. So things have regular behavior, customs or ways. I have also learnt from a Hindu student that the Hindu term *dharma*, which is usually translated as “religion”, means custom or way, and can refer to such things as the custom or way of iron, of trees, and of what not. And since the custom or way of human beings is, of course, the Hindu religion, it means derivatively, if most importantly, what is according to religion.

If we now assume that this idea of the ‘way’ is really the pre-philosophical equivalent of nature, we have immediately to add this very obvious observation: that there is one way, among the many ways, which is particularly important, and that is the way of the group to which one belongs: “our way”. Now our way is, of course, the right way. And why is it right? The answer: because it is old and because it is one’s own, or to use the beautiful expression of Edmund Burke, because it is “home-bred and prescriptive.” We can bring it altogether under the term “ancestral.” Hence the original notion is that the ancestral is identical with the good. The good is necessarily ancestral which implies, since man was always a thinking being, that the ancestors were superior. If this were not the case in what sense would the ancestral be good? The ancestors are superior, and therefore the ancestors must be understood, if this notion is fully thought through, as gods or sons of gods, or pupils of gods. In other words, it is necessary to consider the ‘right way’ as the divine law, *theos nomos*. Whether this conclusion is always reached is, of course, uninteresting to us, because we admit the possibility that sometimes people do not think with sufficient penetration; but in those places where they did

they arrived at this understanding.

Unfortunately, the divine law, the theos nomos, to use the Greek image, leads to two fundamental alternatives: one is the character of Greek philosophy; the other is the character of the Bible. Now why is this problematic? The answer is all too familiar, i.e., the variety of divine laws. We find everywhere such orders claiming to be divine, and these orders are not only different from each other – that would not technically be a difficulty, because different gods could have assigned different codes to different tribes – but they contradict each other. In every code of this kind, there are some elements which claim to be universal. For example, one only has to read Herodotus to get very beautiful examples of conflicting claims: one tribe burned the dead and the other buried them. Now the alternative burial custom was not only looked upon as a different folk – more, a different cultural pattern, but as an abomination. So we may say that different laws contradict each other, and they contradict each other especially regarding what they say about the first things, because no early code, written or unwritten, is thinkable without a preamble which explains the obligations involved and which provides an account of the first things. Given this variety and this contradictory character of the various allegedly divine codes, it becomes necessary to transcend this whole dimension, to find one's bearings independently of the ancestral, or to realize that the ancestral and the good are two fundamentally different things despite occasional coincidences between them.

There is, too, the basic question of how to find one's bearings in the cosmos. The Greek answer fundamentally is this: we have to discover the first things on the basis of inquiry, that everyone knows. We can note two implications of what inquiry means here: in the first place, seeing with one's own eyes as distinguished from hearsay, to observe for oneself; and secondly, the notion of inquiry presupposes the realization of the fundamental difference between human production and the production of things which are not man-made, so that no conclusion from human production to the production of non-man-made things is possible except if it is first established by demonstration that the visible universe has been made by thinking beings. This implication, I think, is decisive: it was on the basis of the principles of Greek philosophy that what later became known as demonstrations of the existence of God or gods came into being. This is absolutely necessary, and that is true not only in Aristotle, but in Plato as well, as you see, for example, from the tenth book of the Laws. An ascent from sense perception and reasoning on sense data, an ascent indeed guided, according to Plato and Aristotle, by certain notions, leads upwards and everything depends on the solidity of the ascending process, on the demonstration. Because the quest for the beginning, for the first things, becomes now philosophic or scientific analysis of the cosmos, the place of the divine

law in the traditional sense of the term, where it is a code traced to a personal God, is replaced by a natural order which may even be called, as it was later to be called, a natural law – or at any rate, to use a wider term, a natural morality. So the divine law, in the real and strict sense of the term, is only the starting point, the absolutely essential starting point, for Greek philosophy, but it is abandoned in the process. And if it is accepted by Greek philosophy, it is accepted only politically, meaning, for the education of the many, and not as something which stands independently.

To understand the biblical notion in the sense of understanding to which I refer, one can say this: The Bible, biblical thought, clings to this notion that there is one particular divine law; but it contends that this particular divine law is the only one which is truly divine law. All these other codes are, in their claim to divine origin, fraudulent. They are figments of man. Since, however, one code is accepted, then no possibility of independent questioning arises and is meant to arise. Now what then is it that distinguishes the biblical solution from the mythical solution? I think it is this: that the author or authors of the Bible were aware of the problem of the variety of the divine law. In other words, they realized, and I am now speaking not as a theologian but as an historian, they realized what are the absolutely necessary conditions if one particular law should be the divine law. How has one to conceive of the whole if one particular, and therefore contingent, law of one particular contingent tribe is to be the divine law? The answer is: it must be a personal God; the first cause must be God; He must be omnipotent, not controlled and not controllable. But to be knowable means to be controllable, and therefore, He must not be knowable in the strict sense of the term. Thus in the language of later thought, of already Graecified thought, God's essence is not knowable; as the Bible says, one cannot see God's face. But this is not radical enough, and the divine name given in Exodus, which literally translated means, "I shall be what I shall be," is the most radical formulation of that. It is just the opposite of the Greek notion of essence, where it means the being is what it is and was and will be.... But here the core, one could say, is inaccessible, it is absolutely free: God is what he shall be. It is a free God, unpredictable. Why then can man trust Him? Answer: only because of the covenant. God has freely bound himself, but all trust depends on trust in God's word, in God's promise; there is no necessary and therefore intelligible relation; and, needless to say, this covenant is not a free covenant, freely entered into by originally independent partners; it is a covenant which, according to the Bible, God commanded man to perform.

To complete this extremely sketchy picture by a few points, I would like to say this. There is no doubt that the Greek philosophers of the classical period did not know the Bible, and it is, I

think, generally admitted that the authors of the Bible did not know the Greek philosophers. But the extraordinary fact is that if one studies both the Greek philosophers and the Bible a little more carefully, one sees that in both sources of Western thought the alternative was, if I may say so, divine. Even in Aristotle you will find passages where he speaks of certain very crude notions in Greece which pointed fundamentally to what we know in the Bible in a more developed form, e.g., the notion that maybe it is bad to devote oneself to the philosophical rebellion against God.

By way of comparison now consider the perfect agreement as to the decisive biblical message between the first account of creation and the second account of creation, the second account of creation which culminates in the story of the Fall. It is the same notion which underlies the account of the first chapter of the depreciation of heaven and the prohibition against the eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Because the knowledge of good and evil means, of course, not one special branch of knowledge, as is shown by the fact that in God's knowing of the created things, they always end, "And He saw that it was good." The completed thing, the complete knowledge of the completed thing, is knowledge of the good, the notion being that the desire for, striving for, knowledge is forbidden. Man is not meant to be a theoretical, a knowing, a contemplating being; man is meant to live in childlike obedience. Needless to say, this notion was modified in various ways in the later tradition, but it seems to me that the fundamental thought was preserved, if we disregard some marginal developments.

What then is the principle underlying the seemingly changed attitude of later times? I think we can understand this from the Bible itself. You recall that the story of the Fall is followed by the account of Cain and later on by the genealogy of Cain, where the city and the arts are assigned to this undesirable branch of mankind; and yet later on we find that there is a very different attitude toward the city and arts: think of the holy city of Jerusalem, and of the arts which Bezalel used in adorning the Temple, etc. I think we find the clearest discussion of this issue later on, in the discussion of kingship, of the institution of human kingship in Israel, in the first book of Samuel, where we see what the general trend of the biblical solution is.

Fundamentally, the institution of human kingship is bad – it is a kind of rebellion against God, as is the polis and the arts and knowledge. But then it becomes possible by divine dispensation that these things, which originate in human rebellion, become dedicated to the service of God, and thus become holy. And I think that this is the biblical solution to the problem of human knowledge: human knowledge if it is dedicated to the service of God, and only then, can be good, and perhaps, in that sense, it is even necessary. But without that dedication it is a rebellion. Man was given understanding in order to understand God's commands. He could not

be freely obedient if he did not have understanding. But at the same time this very fact allows man to emancipate the understanding from the service, from the subservient function for which it was meant, and this emancipation is the origin of philosophy or science from the biblical point of view. And so the antagonism between them. Even if you take later versions as your model, e.g., so-called Jewish medieval philosophy, you will still find that this difficulty is very noticeable.

However, this may be, it seems to me that this antagonism must be considered by us in action. That is to say: it seems to me that the core, the nerve of Western intellectual history, Western spiritual history, one could almost say, is the conflict between the biblical and the philosophic notions of the good life. This was a conflict which showed itself primarily, of course, in arguments – arguments advanced by theologians on behalf of the biblical point of view, and by philosophers on behalf of the philosophic point of view. There are many reasons why this is important but I would like to emphasize only one: it seems to me that this unresolved conflict is the secret of the vitality of Western civilization. The recognition of two conflicting roots of Western civilization is, at first a very disconcerting observation. Yet this realization has also something reassuring and comforting about it. The very life of Western civilization is the life between two codes, a fundamental tension. There is therefore no reason inherent in the Western civilization itself, in its fundamental constitution, why it should give up life. But this comforting thought is justified only if we live that life, if we live that conflict. No one can be both a philosopher and a theologian nor, for that matter, some possibility which transcends the conflict between philosophy and theology, or pretends to be a synthesis of both. But every one of us can be and ought to be either one or the other, the philosopher open to the challenge of theology or the theologian open to the challenge of philosophy.

Modern Judaism, 1962, Vol. 1, pp. 17-45

This lecture represents an edited version of two of three public lectures Professor Strauss delivered at the Hillel House, University of Chicago, on November 5 and 12, 1952. The third lecture has been published in its entirety in *The Independent Journal of Philosophy* (Vienna, 1979).

Defender of the truth, the good, and the beautiful. An admirer of perennial philosophy. An advocate of natural law and liberty. [View more posts](#)

