When I first suggested my topic for this roundtable talk it is more that than a polished paper, as will be quickly apparent it was greeted with guffaws, or at least the email equivalent. Ha, someone wrote, you Straussians: Now you'll show the master to have been a Jesuit! Another was reminded of the old saw about the University of Chicago, from a day when ethnic comment was less actionable: That it was a Baptist school where Jewish professors taught Protestant boys Catholic theology. Now were it possible for a Straussian believably to deny that he meant anything esoteric, it is hard to imagine a more plausible situation for disclaimer.

Strauss quite obviously never became Catholic; so far was he from conversion to Christianity that, when someone entitled a talk he had promised "Why We Remain Jews, he immediately objected to the implication in that title that he could become anything else. There was nothing catholic about his style, which stressed "fundamental alternatives rather than universal imperatives, which divided rather than united, which proffered "either/or" rather than "both/and," which recalled what he apparently like to quote from a classic adage about Aristotle, "Solet Aristoteles quaerere pugnam'; Aristotle has a habit of seeking a fight' a phrase not prominent in Thomas Aquinas's account of Aristotle, for example, and probably an attitude that helped win Strauss and his students so many "Nietzschean friends (i.e., enemies).
Moreover, Strauss defined philosophy as a way of life or a quest, not a system much less a doctrine; one cannot imagine from him a *Summa Philosophica*. Although he spoke respectfully of morality, he did not develop or even endorse an ethics based on natural law. And does one need to add that the whole notion of esotericism seems at odds with a faith that insists that one can, indeed must, bear witness to the truth and live openly in its light?

Notwithstanding all of this, however, it seems to me that there is in Strauss a certain respect for Catholic teaching and a constant recourse to categories or distinctions that are intelligible to Catholic thought, indeed that Strauss helped to save or recover for Catholic thought. That means on the one hand that it would be profitable, maybe even imperative, for Catholics to study Strauss, not least to understand Catholic intellectual history, to recognize contemporary challenges to Catholic thinking, and perhaps to learn ways to respond. It also means, I think, that Straussians would do well to reflect on Strauss's rapprochement with Catholic intellectuals in his own time, considering whether this was only a temporary measure of prudence or whether it reflected a deeper, more permanent harmony of principle. I mean these few remarks, which I will present as five points, as a sort of prospectus for that inquiry.

First, Strauss's distinction between reason and revelation seems to me to correspond to Catholic teaching, as presented, for example, in the first question of the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas. What one knows by reason one knows through the senses and through reflection upon sense knowledge, together with one's experience of living as a human being and so with common sense. This knowledge is available in principle to every human being, though of course in practice most people possess it in a halting or very limited form. Revealed knowledge, by contrast, is given by God to some particular person by miraculous means, outside
the ordinary course of nature. On these matters of definition, Strauss and the Catholics are, as best I can tell, in perfect agreement. In contrast, I think, to Eric Voegelin, for whom reason is a form of revelation of the divine ground. Strauss and the Catholics would agree as well that reason can know something of its own limits: the whole is not simply or fully intelligible to human reason alone. Where Strauss and the Catholics part company concerns the relation of theology and philosophy, the ways of knowing and even, for Strauss, ways of life that follow the light of revelation on the one hand and the light of reason on the other. For Strauss, these ways are mutually incompatible, and the breach is not one that can be repaired through counseling: Philosophy and theology cannot refute one another, nor can they be synthesized except by subordinating the one to the other. Theology, being dependent for its first principles on revelation that was experienced by particular people at a peculiar time and place, cannot not command assent from those who were not witnesses nor inclined to believe witnesses' reports; besides, there are many who claim God has spoken to them, and their reports are contradictory and some of them, frankly, absurd. However, philosophy, Strauss writes, cannot refute the possibility of revelation; it can neither disprove that God might exist nor that, existing, he could communicate miraculously. The difference between the philosophic life and the religious life, though it derives from different ways of knowing, seems to depend on different fundamental attitudes toward the limits of human knowledge: the philosopher proudly seeks to know and finds happiness in coming to know, the religious humbly obey revealed commands and trust in God's promise. Although Strauss writes that no one can coherently live both lives fully, he does not deny that the two types share a sort of common good. Philosophy can only remain the way of life as a quest to know that Strauss defines it as being if it approaches knowledge but cannot gain total science; its inability to refute revelation is sure evidence that it has such limits, as
others have pointed out. Meanwhile, religion needs philosophy both to sort out the spurious from the authentic in revelation and to apply its insights in ordinary life and to speak to the uninitiated. By "mutual incompatibility, Strauss means in the soul of the person; in the world among different men of different types, compromise is possible because the mutual dependence is real.

The second point I want to raise about Strauss and Catholicism concerns the role of metaphysics. Strauss praises philosophy and the philosophic life, but his studies of course focused on political philosophy, a point much noted by those in philosophy departments who readily dismiss his work. What did he think, for example, about metaphysics? The first thing to note is that it will not do to say it was a matter of no concern to him; he routinely spoke of philosophy as seeking knowledge of the whole, or knowledge of nature, of the things that always are. It would have been strange if, having spoken and written in this way, he had given the question of the whole or of nature and of eternal things no further thought, indeed it would indicate a lack of seriousness on his part on his own terms; it is notable enough that he wrote so little about metaphysics. What is certainly true is that he distinguished what a man writes or rather publishes from what he has thought through; for example, he insists on referring to Machiavelli as a philosopher, something no one else to my knowledge not influenced by Strauss ever does, and to hold his thinking about politics up to scrutiny for what it does or often does not say about metaphysical issues. To my knowledge, Strauss makes metaphysics a theme only in the context of interpreting the views of other authors; he notes explicitly the rejection of metaphysics by the moderns examining the matter in great and sometimes even excruciating detail in his studies of Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke while commenting, too, on Heidegger's insistence that the metaphysical question of being again be raised, even if addressed
in novel terms. In a passage perhaps as explicit as any in his writings on the topic & in a lecture published only after his death & he says:

> If I discount the neo-Thomists, where do I find today the philosopher who dares to say that he is in possession of the true metaphysic and the true ethics, which reveal to us in a rational, universally valid way the nature of being and the character of the good life? Naturally we can sit at the feet of the great philosophers of old, of Plato and of Aristotle. But who can dare to say that Plato's doctrine of ideas as he intimated it, or Aristotle's doctrine of the *nous* that does nothing but think itself and is essentially related to the eternal visible universe, is the true teaching? Are those like myself who are inclined to sit at the feet of the old philosophers not exposed to the danger of the weak-kneed eclecticism which will not withstand a single blow on the part of those who are competent enough to remind them of the singleness of purpose and of inspiration that characterizes every thinker who deserves to be called great?1 [1]

While it is obvious enough that Strauss does not in this passage endorse the neo-Thomists & indeed, the effect of going on as he does is to discount them & it is remarkable that he does not simply dismiss classical metaphysics, which he obviously studied and knew. Indeed, despite his adage that in doing history of philosophy one should try to understand an author as he understood himself, he seems often to deny philosophers such as Hobbes and Locke the honor, for they dismiss metaphysics as a serious concern and he insists on holding them to account for

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it, precisely in relation to the classics. He famously wrote in the preface to *Natural Right and History* that today "people were forced to accept a fundamental, typically modern dualism of a nonteleological natural science and a teleological science of man, [2] a fundamental dilemma caused by the victory of modern natural science. [2] He does not endorse this dualism nor refute it, only adds that "the present lectures cannot deal with this problem, and he elsewhere makes clear enough that he does not think the "victory of modern science decisive, since its character is chiefly technological. What he does say in his own name, several times, is that "Man cannot be understood in his own light but only in the light of either the subhuman or the superhuman. [3] Again, this does not seem to me to be a statement that a good Catholic cannot endorse.

My third point would be to mention Strauss's most explicit treatment of Thomism, in the chapter on "Classic Natural Right in *Natural Right and History*. Here Strauss distinguishes quite clearly natural right as it was understood by Plato and Aristotle from natural law as it is presented in Aquinas. In ethical terms, the difference between natural right and natural law is indicated by this: To natural right, "there is a universally valid hierarchy of ends, but there are no universally valid rules of action, as natural law seems to hold. [4] Of the definiteness and universality of natural law in contrast to the flexibility and latitude for statesmanship in natural right, Strauss writes, "it is reasonable to assume that these profound changes were due to the

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influence of the belief in biblical revelation, noting immediately that this calls into question whether natural law really is philosophically knowable as it claims to be. Here then, at the heart of the question of ethics, is the distinction between the philosophical and the religious life again; natural right, as Strauss presents it, takes intellectual perfection as man's highest end, which, Strauss writes, "does not require moral virtue," while natural law, insisting on a twofold perfection, intellectual and moral, "creates a presumption in favor of divine law, which completes or perfects natural law.\[5\] Here I think the Catholic is going to raise two objections: first, as to whether Strauss correctly characterizes the natural right position he attributes to Plato and Aristotle, and second, whether he is fair to Aquinas in suggesting that he claims for natural law more than can be naturally known. Having described my remarks as more a prospectus than a paper, I will not pretend to adequately treat these issues here. In support of the Catholic position on Plato and Aristotle, I would point to the close connection in both Plato's *Apology of Socrates* and his *Republic* between philosophic thought and moral action, even though the former is differently described in the two works, while Aristotle's *Ethics*, which does indeed distinguish intellectual from moral virtue, nevertheless remains ambiguous on the question of which kind of virtue most brings man happiness, the philosophical life being best, but also, in its extreme perfection, "too high for man.\[6\] As for whether Thomas nods, it seems to me a genuine question of what one makes of human limits and imperfection: If unassisted human reason cannot know the whole and so the whole good on its own, is it folly to seek a supplemental wisdom? If Thomas creates a presumption in favor of divine law, does Strauss create a presumption against it? All this said, there is more agreement here than it might seem,

for both Strauss and Thomas agree on the goodness of the philosophic and the moral life and mean, not the same, but something similar by these terms. There is difference on the question of conscience and so on the ultimate value and universality of moral action, but in one sense this is a difference limited to how one acts in the circumstances of extreme necessity. Even then, that "nothing bad can happen to a good man" is not a maxim first expressed in the Gospel, but in Plato's *Apology*.

The fourth point in my prospectus is hermeneutical and so is perhaps the most difficult to unfold sufficiently in a paragraph: here I just want to make it sound plausible without tilting too quickly for or against. That concerns the question whether Strauss attributes to Christianity the origin of modernity and so silently applies his critique of modernity also to its Christian origin. At one level, at least when considering *Natural Right and History*, this would seem mistaken: For all the criticism of Aquinas, he nevertheless is included as representative of classic natural right, while the modern begins with a rejection, *inter alia*, of the Christian. Still, Strauss does write that Christianity, in contrast to Judaism and Islam, embraced philosophy in such a way as to subordinate it to religious authority; he implies that Christian universalism undermines political authority, that is, the authority of the polis or closed society and so weakens the value of statesmanship; enlightenment, egalitarianism, and progressivism, with their encouragement of political transformation, might all be said to have Christian roots; *Natural Right and History* ends by saying that "the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns concerns eventually, and perhaps even from the beginning, the status of 'individuality,'" but it was precisely Hegel, at whose historicism this charge was partly aimed, who traced concern for individuality to

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Christianity. Moreover, especially in *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Strauss writes as though Christianity introduced something genuinely new into the world: not the redemption of man, to be sure, but the techniques of propaganda and so the discovery that thoughts or ideas can not only observe but remake the course of human development. It is true that Aquinas, for example, recognizes that change in law may be legitimate not only in response to changing circumstances but also to genuine progress in human thought, while Strauss's inclination—though not always that of his students—is to restore the Aristotelian presumption against moral improvement or change. If Strauss's emphasis on the distinction of ancients and moderns, not to say his general preference for the ancients, might seem to belittle the contribution of Catholic philosophy, I think that Catholics might profitably find in that distinction a bracing tonic against the contemporary historicism that some Catholic scholarship, overlooking the distinction between development of doctrine within the Church and literary evolution outside it, overly admires. A presumption for Aristotle, after all, is where Aquinas starts. On the whole Strauss seems to say that what is bad about modernity comes about rather through the critics of the Christians than through the Christians, but he does seem to leave a nagging doubt as to whether Christianity did not summon its critics forth.

Fifth and finally, if the last two points have seemed to distance Strauss from Catholics, they seem to share much in their orientation to political life, that is, to share a respect for being politic, for moderating political ambition and tethering men together in political community. Strauss may be less vulnerable than Catholics to temptations toward universal structures of rights and government, but Catholics are allowed ample room to differ on temporal affairs and today are urged to respect the principle of subsidiarity, which permits differences among self-governing communities and encourages self-government. Straussian might be more vulnerable
than Catholics to make exceptions in times of crisis that in fact do not remain exceptional but rather undercut basic law. Still, these are, in practice, usually differences only in nuance. In *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Strauss wrote, "The problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things." It is not characteristic of Strauss to suppose that all problems have solutions, or even that any human problem has better than a political solution; the philosophic life lives upon such problems, Strauss holds, and as noted before he seems to teach that we can confidently know that such problems cannot be philosophically solved. Still, precisely if this is the case, then we can be confident that a political solution—a compromise, so to speak, between Catholics and philosophers—will not be replaced by a scientific transformation of the human condition. At least until the end of time, I see no reason why either Catholics or Straussianists should find such an arrangement either necessary or impossible. That it is tentative and fragile only means it is political, as both Straussianists and Catholics understand that term.

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