



Discourses on Strauss
Revelation and Reason in Leo Strauss and his Critical Study
of Niccolò Machiavelli

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Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the
Department of Politics
University of Adelaide
July 2002

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Abstract

The importance of the revelation-reason question in the works of Leo Strauss is central to an understanding of his thought. This central question poses two fundamental alternatives—religion and philosophy—for understanding the good life. This thesis will seek to demonstrate that the elucidation of these alternatives and their shared opposition to modernity are key themes in Strauss's oeuvre, particularly in his critical study of Niccolò Machiavelli's teaching.

Part One offers a close reading of Strauss's idea of history and his conception of the revelation-reason question. Chapter One shows why he thought it critically important to undertake the study of the history of political philosophy. Chapter Two, which examines how Strauss considered revelation and reason as fundamentally different worldviews, refutes arguments that his position on the authority and truth of religion was basically atheistic.

Parts Two and Three explore Strauss's critical study of Machiavelli's teaching. Exploring Strauss's thesis that Machiavelli is neither Christian nor pagan, Part Two examines Machiavelli's teaching on the nature and efficacy of religion. Chapter Three focuses on his critique of Christianity, while Chapter Four focuses on Strauss's response to Machiavelli's critique of religion in general. Chapters Five to Seven explicate Strauss's thesis that Machiavelli's teaching on morality and politics is a revolt against not only Biblical religion but also classical political philosophy as found in Plato and Aristotle. Strauss's effort here is to demonstrate that Machiavelli based his notions of goodness, virtue and governance in the "effectual truth" of all things, in the empirical realm, not in the abstract realm of eternal verities.

The close examination of Strauss's critical study of Machiavelli's teaching in Parts Two and Three shows that Strauss identified his work as a commentary on classical political philosophy. Nonetheless, as a critical engagement with the precepts of Biblical religion, it was a contribution to philosophical tradition. Strauss's open, if not precarious, stance with respect to these two traditions is fundamental to understanding his critique of modernity. Strauss maintains that the "crisis of our time" is the apogee of a modernity that has its point of origin in Machiavelli's rejection of biblical and classical morality as a guide to the efficacy of political virtue.