

Leo Strauss's Reading of Spinoza and the Art of "be Alert to the Art of Writing"

By Ke Zhao *

Leo Strauss's way of reading of Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise got changed after his rediscovery of exotericism. As early as in the comment article on Hermann Cohen's analysis of Spinoza's Bible science, Strauss put forward that the Treatise should not be understood on the basis of our readers' own presupposes of Spinoza's personal motives. Later, in Spinoza's Critique of Religion (1930), Strauss indeed read the Treatise literally, trying to understand it on the basis of Spinoza's explicit statements. After the rediscovery of exotericism in 1930s, however, Strauss's way of reading got changed. Strauss became very alert to Spinoza's way of writing. Strauss found that Spinoza spoke with a view to the capacity of the vulgar and practiced exoteric writing. Some of Spinoza's explicit statements were addressed to the non-philosophic majority and were not Spinoza's true teachings. Based on this, Strauss regarded not all of Spinoza's explicit statements, but those most opposed to what Spinoza considered the vulgar view, as well as those with an implication of a heterodox character, as expressing Spinoza's true views. Strauss shows that "be alert to the art of writing" means two things. First, understand the author's explicit statements. And second, try to find whether there are teachings that are different from or even opposed to the explicit statements.

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Introduction

Hermeneutics is the art of interpretation. It has a long-standing history in the German intellectual tradition. Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer all have developed their own principles of hermeneutics. Leo Strauss, a German-born-and-educated American political philosopher, has also made his contribution to the advancement of hermeneutics with his rediscovery of exotericism and his unique thoughts on how to read old great books in western history. Strauss found that past philosophers

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most times didn't write like us today, trying to be straightforward and clear, without reservation. On the contrary, they tended to write exoterically, giving exoteric teachings, while using certain literary skills, such as abrupt changes of subject matter and contradictory speeches, to give esoteric ones (Strauss 1954, 1986, 1988). Strauss suggested that while reading old books, it would be better to understand the author as he understood himself. We'd better start from what the author said explicitly, and try to find out what he said between the lines.

Strauss's rediscovery of exotericism and views on hermeneutics developed from it caused a certain degree of concern in the middle of the 20th century. George H. Sabine (1953, p. 220) raised an objection to Strauss's mode of interpretation by proposing that "whether this provides a workable rule for historical interpretation or an invitation to perverse ingenuity is questionable". Sabine (1953, p. 220) said that "the limits of permissible or probable contradiction in an author are really very difficult to determine" and "a demand for historical exactness" doesn't necessarily mean "the prohibition of any sort of 'reading between the lines'". Hans-Georg Gadamer (2006, p. 375), though showed his appreciation of Strauss's thesis by admitting that Strauss's remark of presenting something in disguise "presents one of the most difficult hermeneutical problems", nevertheless disagreed absolutely with Strauss's philosophy of hermeneutics. Gadamer (2006, p. 531) claimed that "when Strauss argues that in order to understand better it is necessary first to understand an author as he understood himself, he underestimates the difficulties of understanding". At the end of 1960s, Quentin Skinner pointed out that Strauss's argument that contradictions in a book were supposed to be deliberately planted was untenable. "The difficulty with this defense (of the desirability of resolving antinomies)," Skinner (1969, p. 21) said, "is that it depends on two *a priori* assumptions which are not merely left unargued but are treated as 'facts'. First, ...to be original is to be subversive...Secondly,...thoughtless men are careless readers."

What seemed a little bit strange, however, was that Strauss's hermeneutical claims were kind of ignored by hermeneutics scholars in the following years. For example, in *Contemporary Hermeneutics* (Bleicher 1980), a book that gave an overview of the main strands of contemporary hermeneutical thought, what Strauss had said about interpretation were completely missing. More than a decade later, in *Understanding Hermeneutics* (Schmidt 2006), one of the books in *Understanding Movements in Modern Thought* series, Strauss's thesis was still not mentioned at all. Paul A. Cantor (1991, pp. 267–268) once pointed out, though Strauss "have fundamentally reopened the question of how texts from the past are to be understood", he was nevertheless "generally ignored by Anglo-American debates on interpretation". We can add that Strauss was ignored not only by Anglo-American hermeneutics scholarship, but also by continental one. Generally speaking, Strauss's hermeneutical thesis was discussed and studied by some so-called Straussian scholars during the years, but it never became one of the

topics of the hermeneutics circle.

This situation got changed with the coming of *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics* (Malpas and Gander 2015). In this outstanding volume with references to the key philosophers, topics and themes of hermeneutics, Strauss's thinking on the art of interpretation was finally introduced and explained. In "Strauss: Hermeneutics or Esotericism?", Catherine H. Zuckert and Michael Zuckert (2015, pp. 127–136) put forward that there were three hermeneutical claims embedded in Strauss's interpretive practices: to fuse of philosophy and history, to understand a thinker as he understood himself, and be alert to "the art of writing". First, philosophy must be distinct from but fuse with history, for only via studies in the history, can we clarify the opinions constituting our cave and so philosophize. Second, the true goal of interpretation was to understand a thinker as he understood himself. For only this could be called authentic understanding. Last but not least, as past thinkers had different reasons to write esoterically, we should pay attention to their art of writing. According to Zuckerts (2015, p. 130), Strauss's first claim shared much with Gadamer's hermeneutics, and the second, with Skinner's.

Zuckerts's essay is an excellent guide for those who'd like to have a good knowledge of Strauss's hermeneutics. But to some extent, some may still wonder what "be alert to the art of writing" means. In what follows, I'll try to answer this question by taking the example of Strauss's own reading of Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise* respectively when he had no awareness of Spinoza's exoteric writing and when he was alert to Spinoza's exotericism. I'll begin with Strauss's critique of Hermann Cohen's analysis of Spinoza's Bible science in early 1920s, to have a look at Strauss's early standing on hermeneutic issues, and continue with Strauss's reading of the *Treatise* in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (1930), to see how Strauss interpreted the *Treatise* without ever noticing Spinoza's exotericism. Then, I'll turn to Strauss's explanatory essay "How to Study Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise* (1948) to see how he read the *Treatise* exoterically. With a study of Strauss's interpretation of Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise* before and after his rediscovery of exotericism, I hope to show that before the rediscovery of exotericism, Strauss read Spinoza literally, taking every word of Spinoza for serious. However, after the rediscovery of exotericism, Strauss, though still read Spinoza literally, didn't believe in every word of Spinoza any more. Strauss tried hard to find what may be hidden under Spinoza's explicit statements. The conclusion would be that, for Strauss, "be alert to the art of writing" means two things. First, understand the author's explicit statements. And, second, try to find whether there are teachings that are different from or even opposed to the explicit statements.

Strauss on Hermann Cohen's Analysis of Spinoza's Bible Science

In the first half of the 1920s, after getting doctor's degree under the guidance of Ernst Cassirer, Strauss began to work for the German Zionist movement as a freelance Zionist writer. During this period, Strauss wrote many short but enlightened essays such as "Response to Frankfurt's 'World of Principle'" (1923), "A Note on the Discussion on 'Zionism and Anti-Semitism'" (1923) and "The Zionism of Nordau" (1923), which directly related to Zionist movement, as well as "Sociological Historiography?" (1924), "On the Argument with European Science" (1924) and "Biblical History and Science" (1925), which shed theoretical and philosophical lights on Judaism. It could be seen from these writings that, unlike many other Jewish youths, Strauss was more interested in theoretical questions rather than practical ones. Strauss (2002, p. 8) cared not German Zionist settlements in Palestine, nor "the deteriorating political, social, and economic situation in German".

Among these earlier writings, one stood out as closely related to Strauss's concern for hermeneutical problems. It was a comment article on Hermann Cohen's analysis of Spinoza's Bible science. In this article, Strauss first criticized Cohen's objection to the title of Spinoza's work (*Theologico-Political Treatise*) that it failed to refer to philosophy which joined theology and politics. Strauss (2002, p. 140) made it clear that the reference was not necessary for "in the seventeenth century one could dispense with such a reference". Of course, Strauss explained more specifically why such kind of reference was unnecessary—why the joining of theology and politics was not arbitrary. According to Cohen, Spinoza's joining together of theology and politics without referring to philosophy was arbitrary and this arbitrariness could be explained by Spinoza's personal life experience. However, Strauss (2002, p. 141) said, using Theodor Mommsen's dictum, that "it is not permissible to refer to 'egotistical motives where motives 'in accord with duty' suffice for an explanation". Strauss (2002, p. 142) put forward that Spinoza's motive was to demonstrate "that not only can the freedom of philosophizing be granted without detriment to piety and peace within the state, but its abrogation necessarily entails the abrogation of piety and peace within the state", and due to this motive, Spinoza needed urgently to "connect political problem with the philological one" because "the freedom of inquiry was to be protected by two public powers, the secular and the spiritual". In other words, for the aim of his work was to secure the freedom of inquiry, Spinoza had to "make his argument concerning church and state simultaneously" (Strauss 2002, p. 142). So, according to Strauss, Spinoza's connection of his political theory with the critique of the Bible was sufficiently motivated, and this motive alone was enough to explain why Spinoza joined theology and politics while omitted philosophy. It was not

necessary, as well as not appropriate, to resort to Spinoza's personal life experience, no matter how perfect this kind of explanation may be.

After explaining why there was in Spinoza an "unnatural" connection between politics and theology (it was a political pamphlet which criticized the Bible), Strauss then raised objection to Cohen's argument that Spinoza's politicization of the Jewish religion was partly determined by the resentment that Spinoza accumulated over the years on account of the excommunication. Again, Strauss began with Spinoza's motive in accord with duty. Strauss (2002, p. 145) pointed out that what Spinoza aimed was "to fight against the damage to political life that arises from the coexistence of the two powers (the spiritual and the secular powers)". As the coexistence of these two powers was defended by those who found support in the history of the Jewish people, Strauss said, Spinoza finally needed to fight against the history of the Jewish people, or to say, the Jewish religion. In this sense, Strauss (2002, pp. 145–146) concluded that there was no need to "have recourse to the bathos of a thirst for revenge in order to explain this thoroughly clear and self-sustaining context", and in Spinoza's historical context, the "politicizing interpretation" of the Bible was "sufficiently motivated".

Strauss's third refutation concerned Cohen's critique that Spinoza equated the concept of religion absolutely with Scripture. Strauss (2002, p. 146) first gave the fact that in the 17th century, the universal religion, revelation, the Word of God, and faith were of equal value. After a brief introduction of the spiritual situation in Spinoza's time, Strauss further explained why Spinoza negated the cognitive value of Scripture. Strauss (2002, p. 146) first pointed out that for Spinoza, it was "self-evident and in accordance with his entire standpoint" to give precedence to "autonomous knowledge" over "the authority of Scripture". Therefore, Strauss claimed that Spinoza had to prove that reason was prior to Scripture, and in terms of science, it had nothing to do with the latter. Otherwise, reason was still dependent on Scripture and could not be prior to Scripture. In this way, Strauss (2002, p. 147) made the conclusion that in Spinoza's historical context, the identification of religion and Scripture, and thereby the denial of the cognitive value of religion, was adequately motivated.

These three refutations constituted the first part of Strauss's comment article. In this part, with an analysis of Spinoza's aim, Strauss claimed that Spinoza's critique of the Bible was not due to the so-called hatred towards Judaism as Cohen claimed. The seemingly arbitrary connection of politics with theology, the politicization of the Bible, and the denial of the cognitive value of religion all arose from Spinoza's striving for the liberation of philosophy and state from the Church, rather than from his selfish willing to take revenge on the Jewish community that had excommunicated him. It's not hard to see that Strauss's critique of Cohen's analysis was made possible by his particular way of interpretation different from Cohen's. Starting from Mommsen's principle that motives in accord with duty

come first and egotistical motives next, Strauss tried to understand Spinoza's work with what Spinoza said in the text as well as the historical context Spinoza was in. Unlike Cohen, Strauss didn't care about the personal motives of Spinoza. We can say that at this moment, Strauss's hermeneutical rule was just like Spinoza's fundamental exegetical rule that Scripture should be explained by Scripture alone and could not be understood if the interpreter brought his own subjective presupposes in. Strauss made it clear that the *Treatise* could be explained only on the basis of the *Treatise* alone.

Strauss's Reading of the *Treatise* in Late 1920s

Strauss's comment essay on Cohen's analysis of Spinoza's Bible science attracted the attention of Julius Guttmann, the then director of the Higher Institute for Jewish Studies. As a result, in 1925, Strauss was recommended a research fellowship in the Institute by Guttmann to have a further study of Spinoza there. Three years later, Strauss finished his research project with a report on Spinoza's critique of religion and his predecessors which was published two years later under the title of *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (1930).

Before telling Spinoza's critique of religion, Strauss first introduced the tradition of criticism of religion. He began with some thoughts on the relationship between religion and science. These two things were so different that they could not be not conflict with each other. The reason why there was scientific critique of religion was that science was considered to be an excellent tool to fight against religion. That's to say, science was only a means to an end and criticism of religion originated in other motives. Strauss gave the example of Epicurus's critique of religion. Strauss told us that Epicurus's critique of religion was originated in an original motive to eliminate fears of gods to secure the individual peace of mind. For Epicurus, science was not where his critique began. Strauss also gave the example of the critique of religion in the Age of Enlightenment. Strauss said that criticism of religion in the seventeenth century, though had its origins in Epicurean thinking, was nevertheless aimed at social peace. For perils arose from the cleavage of Europe on religious grounds, criticism of religion at this age must focus on the dangers religion brought to the society and set its target to achieve peace within society and between societies.

To let his readers know more concrete characters of the criticism of religion in the Age of Enlightenment, Strauss investigated Spinoza's precursors' critique of religion. Those whose criticism were referred to are Uriel da Costa, Isaac de La Peyrère and Thomas Hobbes. In terms of Da Costa's critique of religion, Strauss found that at first, it was just like that of Epicurus's. Da Costa concerned the tranquility of mind and criticized religion on the basis that it tormented men and

weighed them down. But with an awareness that present good, the most important thing, was easy to be destroyed by external social environment, Da Costa's concern shifted gradually to the social peace (Strauss 1985, p. 61). As for La Peyrère's critique of religion, Strauss focused mainly on La Peyrère's theory that there were men prior to Adam and on La Peyrère's interest in the re-establishment of the Jewish kingdom. Strauss found that La Peyrère constructed this theory with the help of the progress of modern science, especially anthropology and ethnology. Of course, Strauss (1985, p. 73) made it clear that, La Peyrère's critique was completed on the basis of a passage in Paul's "Epistle to the Romans" which let him cast doubt on the authority of the Old Testament Scripture. Indeed, this was the way how La Peyrère concealed his unbelief: by using the terminology used in orthodox dogmatics (Strauss 1985, p. 78). Strauss thought that La Peyrère's refrain from attacks on the accepted teachings of the Church was purely out of political considerations. At last, Strauss referred to Hobbes's critique of religion. Strauss (1985, p. 86) found that Hobbes's critique of religion was the complement and culmination of critique of religion for Hobbes explained religion in terms of human nature. With an analysis of Hobbes's work, Strauss implied that Hobbes's critique of religion included two aspects. First, religion sought after causes unmethodically. Second, religion created vanity, desire for status and reputation, and overestimation of one's own powers, which caused conflicts and wars. Of course, Strauss didn't forget to remind us that in his critique of religion, Hobbes was preoccupied with political considerations.

Enough for an introduction of Strauss's consideration of the historical context Spinoza was in. Let's then have a look at how Strauss analyzed Spinoza's critique of religion. It's easy to see that, for this aim, Strauss first paid attention to the question of how the analysis should be carried out. In the *Treatise*, Spinoza expressly attacked two camps regarding revealed religion, the skeptics who demanded the subordination of reason to the Scripture and the dogmatics who sought to make of the Scripture the handmaid of reason. While attacking the orthodoxy, what Spinoza targeted at was Christian orthodoxy, in particular the Calvinism. While criticizing dogmatism, what Spinoza targeted at was Maimonides, the founder of dogmatism. For Spinoza's critique of religion was completed in this order, namely, critique of orthodoxy, of Maimonides, and of Calvin, Strauss decided that his analysis should also be carried out in this order. It can be seen that in the following chapters, namely, in chapter 5, 6, and 7, Strauss gave an exhaustive explanation of Spinoza's critique of orthodoxy, of Maimonides, and of Calvin. As the structure was established, the next question Strauss concerned was what kind of way of interpretation he should use. In the comment article on Cohen's analysis of Spinoza's Bible science, Strauss had claimed that an interpreter should not understand an author by referring to the author's egotistical motives where motives in accord with duty suffice for an explanation. Indeed, here, Strauss

chose without any doubt to start from Spinoza's purposes clearly stated in the text rather than from his own subjective presupposes of Spinoza's personal motives on the basis of Spinoza's life experience. Strauss focused on Spinoza's own words and read the text literally. For example, while dealing with Spinoza's critique of orthodoxy, Strauss set out from Spinoza's own statement of the aims he had in mind in writing the *Treatise*. And when it came to Spinoza's critique of Maimonides, Strauss at first place analyzed Spinoza's own view of the divergences between himself and Maimonides.

Let's take a look at how Strauss tried to understand Spinoza's critique of Maimonides. After an analysis of Spinoza's own statement of the disputes between himself and Maimonides, Strauss then explored the contrast of Spinoza and Maimonides regarding the central theological assumption, the conception of man, and the attitude towards Jewish life. Strauss (1985, p. 156) found, for example, that Spinoza thought revelation "was not actual because it was not possible", while Maimonides just justified revelation. With knowledge of the disputes between Spinoza and Maimonides, Strauss then turned to Spinoza's critique of Maimonides. As usual, Strauss began with Spinoza's own words, concentrating on how Spinoza said no to Maimonides' views on divine law, prophecy, and miracles, etc. By focusing on Spinoza's statement, Strauss (1985, p. 176) found that Spinoza's critique of Maimonides was carried out on four different planes of argument. At first place, Spinoza denied Maimonides's idea that reason and revelation could be reconciled. Spinoza claimed that the elements which Maimonides treated as united in Mosaic law were in fact in contradiction, and most importantly, philosophy and theology could never be united because the former was a matter for the wise minority and the latter, for the unwise majority. Then, Spinoza raised objection to Maimonides's conception of revelation. Spinoza's mind was armed with modern science. He despised Maimonides' allegorical interpretation of Scripture. Thirdly and fourthly, Spinoza completed his critique also on the basis of history and philosophy. Spinoza criticized the revealed character of the Torah and even further denied the possibility of revelation.

So much for how Strauss interpreted Spinoza at this moment. Generally speaking, Strauss fit his deeds to his words. Strauss's hermeneutical rule displayed in this book was the same as that Strauss claimed in his comment article on Cohen's analysis of the *Treatise*. On the one hand, Strauss resorted to the historical context Spinoza was in. On the other, Strauss adhered to Theodor Mommsen's principle and read the text literally, trying to read the *Treatise* as it presented itself without taking his own convictions into it.

Strauss on How to Read Spinoza's *Treatise* in 1940s

Spinoza's Critique of Religion was originally published in German in 1930. The English version didn't come until in 1962. In the long autobiographical preface to this version, Strauss (1985, p. 31) said that when he was young, he understood Spinoza too literally because he did not read him literally enough. Then, what does a literally-enough reading look like? Let's turn to Strauss's essay "How to Study Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*" (1948).

This essay opened with the question why we need to read the *Treatise* again. According to Strauss, why we need to open an old book was a question we must first clarify before any historical investigation. Strauss's answer seemed to be quite simple. He said that Spinoza's *Treatise* was "the classic document of the 'rationalist' or 'secularist' attack on the belief in revelation" and the issue discussed in it was still alive" (Strauss, 1948, p. 142). If the need to open the *Treatise* is to see Spinoza's opinion of the philosophy-Vs.-revelation issue, then we need to look at Spinoza's opinion itself. Only in this way can we get what Spinoza himself has said. Indeed, with a brief statement of the reason why read the *Treatise* again, Strauss (1948, p. 143) claimed that "we shall therefore listen to Spinoza as attentively as we can...shall make every effort to understand what he says exactly as he means it...For if we fail to do so, we are likely to substitute our folly for this wisdom". We can partly see from this paragraph that Strauss's claim that we should understand a thinker as he understood himself is not nonsense. It is based on the fact that the intention to read a classic book is to get the wisdom in it. As the aim is to get the wisdom in it, we of course need to listen to the author carefully, instead of carelessly. If we can learn something from past thinkers, then it presupposes that we are not necessarily wise than the past thinkers. This aligns well with Strauss's denial of progressivism that we moderns are wiser than the ancients.

Then comes the question of how to read the *Treatise*. In terms of this issue, Strauss (1948, p. 143) made it clear that the true understanding of the words or thoughts of another man was necessarily based on "an exact interpretation of his explicit statements". But what does "exactness" mean? Obviously, it has different meanings in difference situations. Sometimes, to be exact means to care every word of an author. But if an author discusses something casually, it's certainly not wise to be careful of his/her every word. Thus, Strauss (1948, p. 144) suggested that one must therefore first know the author's habits of writing. At this moment, Strauss (1948, p. 144) further claimed that as people wrote as they read, we could acquire some previous knowledge of an author's habits of writing by studying his habits of reading. Inspired by this, Strauss began to investigate how Spinoza read the Bible. It's well known that in the *Treatise*, Spinoza has spent a whole chapter

(chap. 7) to discuss the interpretation of Scripture. According to Spinoza, the Scripture can only be understood by itself and its history for it is composed not of intellect and reason, but of affects and emotions. It's not hard to see that this hermeneutical principle, however, cannot be directly used while interpreting the *Treatise*, because the *Treatise* is not a masterpiece of affects and emotions, just like the Scripture. We can see that Strauss then turned to Spinoza's hermeneutical principle of interpreting intelligible books. Strauss (1948, p. 150) found that for Spinoza, intelligible books were those like Euclid's book that told certain knowledge and while interpreting them, and it was not even necessary "to know in what language they were originally composed". So, Strauss found that unfortunately, he could not borrow Spinoza's hermeneutical rule here neither, for The *Treatise* was not totally an intelligible book. In this dilemma, Strauss (1948, p. 151) concluded that Spinoza's rules of reading were "of little or no use for the understanding of books that are neither hieroglyphic nor as easy of access as a modern manual of Euclidean geometry".

As Spinoza's book was kind of between a hieroglyphic and an intelligible book, some suggested that history might help greatly. About this view, Strauss was doubtful. Strauss began his refutation with a description of Spinoza's belief that his philosophy was *the* true account of the whole. Strauss (1948, p. 152) said that Spinoza, who had read many very difficult books, was contempt for that thought of the past. As for political philosophy in particular, he "flatly declares that all political philosophy prior to his own is useless". In view of Spinoza's injunction that his teaching was *the* true teaching, Strauss (1948, p. 154) thought that it was better for us to "open our minds and take seriously the possibility that he was right", for only in this way could we understand him. If we rejected his belief, we'd never be able to understand him. Here, it was not hard to see what Strauss meant. If Spinoza dictated that his teaching was *the* true teaching, then it was not appropriate for us to treat it as historically true. If Spinoza's teaching should not be treated as the expression of a particular era, then it was not necessary to consider when, where or under which situation it was formed. Indeed, Strauss (1948, p. 159) made it clear that "Spinoza did not consider relevant for the understanding of his books: information regarding his life, character and interests, the occasion and time of the composition of his books, their addressees, the fate of his teaching and... his sources." "Such extraneous knowledge," Strauss (1948, p. 159) said, "can never be permitted to supply the clue to his teaching except after it has been proved beyond any reasonable doubt that it is impossible to make head and tail of his teaching as he presented it."¹

¹Of course, Strauss adds, there is a need for extraneous information when a text is not intelligible to us. Strauss gives the example that an interpreter could not understand the terminology in Spinoza's book. Under this situation, Strauss says, the interpreter has to "learn the rudiments of a language which was familiar to Spinoza's contemporaries...follow the signposts erected by Spinoza himself

Then, how did Strauss himself read the *Treatise*? We can see that Strauss at first place concerned to whom the *Treatise* was addressed. Based on Spinoza's explicit statement that it was the contrast between Christian belief and Christian practice that induced him to write that work, Strauss (1948, pp. 161–162) found that it was addressed to a specific group of men—not philosophers in general, but Christian potential philosophers in particular. If the work was for the philosophic readers, not for the vulgar, then its fundamental teaching must had not been written large on every page. Based on this clue, Strauss (1948, p. 169) noticed that the theological part of the *Treatise* “opens and concludes with the implicit assertion that revelation or prophecy as certain knowledge of truths which surpass the capacity of human reason is possible.” However, at the same time, Strauss (1948, p. 169) saw that, there were also such kind of passages in which “the possibility of any supra-rational knowledge is simply denied”. Faced with Spinoza's self-contradiction, Strauss (1948, p. 170) finally made the judgment that Spinoza didn't admit the possibility of any supra-rational teachings, for Spinoza declared that “man has no access whatever to truth except through sense-perception and reasoning” and the teachings “above reason” were in truth “dreams or mere fictions” and “by far below reason”. But, why this declaration of Spinoza could be taken as the valid evidence to judge whether Spinoza believed the possibility of supra-rational knowledge or not? Was there a general rule to decide which of two contradictory statements expressed Spinoza's true view? Strauss disclosed it by explaining how Spinoza solved the contradictions in the Bible. As Jesus and Paul both had contradictory statements, one of which was addressed to the common people and the other to the wise, Strauss said that Spinoza dismissed all of those which he considered the vulgar view as mere accommodations to the common people. For Strauss, Spinoza's way of interpretation was exactly the rule he was looking for. Strauss (1948, p. 177) concluded that “if an author who admits...that he speaks ‘after the manner of man’, makes contradictory statements on a subject, the statement contradicting the vulgar view has to be considered as his serious view.”

According to Strauss, this rule was presupposed by Spinoza's principle of writing. Spinoza believed that he had better “adapt the expression of his thought to the generally accepted opinions by professing...these very opinions, even though he considers them untrue or absurd” (Strauss 1948, pp. 177–178).” For Spinoza, it was justified to “speak with a view to the capacity of the vulgar” and to accommodate himself to the particular prejudices of particular groups or individuals, for philosophers were in danger of being suspected by the multitude and they needed to be cautious. Spinoza hid his unorthodox views behind “more or less

and the indications which Spinoza left accidentally in his writings”. In a word, the interpreter must “start from Spinoza's explicit statements” and pay attention to “that branch of the philosophic tradition that Spinoza himself considered most important” (p. 161).

transparent accommodations to the generally accepted opinions”, giving them a Biblical appearance (Strauss 1948, pp. 179–181). Sometimes, he expressed common views as well as those against them. Sometimes, he just expressed common views, keeping silent about his own ones or only giving implications. In a word, his views might well be expressed by the statements that occurred least frequently or only once, or might even not be spoken out at all. As Spinoza spoke with a view to the capacity of the vulgar, while stated his own views in places “least exposed to the curiosity of the superficial readers”, Strauss (1948, p. 186) showed that it was necessary to regard “the statement and implications most opposed to what Spinoza considered the vulgar view” as expressing his serious view. Strauss (1948, p. 186) went further by saying that “even a necessary implication of a heterodox character” had to “take precedence over a contradictory statement that is never explicitly contradicted by Spinoza”.

It's not hard to see that by being alert to Spinoza's art of writing, Strauss found something new in Spinoza. Let's take a brief look at Strauss's different interpretation of Spinoza's attitude towards Maimonides. We remember that in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (1930), Strauss said that Spinoza's critique of Maimonides was carried out on four different planes of argument. But, here, we can find that Strauss (1948, p. 181) said that Spinoza “did not indicate what he owed to Maimonides”, and when saying that “Moses believed, or at least wished to teach, that God is zealous or angry”, he “merely makes explicit what Maimonides had implied when intimating that the belief in God's anger is required...for the good ordering of civil society”. Strauss didn't say too much about Spinoza's treatment of Maimonides, but he did show that Spinoza actually didn't object Maimonides' ideas, but just made them simplified.

Now, we can understand why Strauss in the preface said that when he was young, he understood Spinoza too literally because he did not read him literally enough. When he read Spinoza's *Treatise* in the 1920s, he read it quite literally, taking every word of Spinoza for serious. But when he read it again in the 1940s, he didn't believe in the every word of Spinoza any more. He first tried hard to understand Spinoza's explicit statements. He read them so literally that he found that there were contradictions in them. Then he discovered that those that were close to the common views were addressed to the common people (for Spinoza had to accommodate himself to the multitude) and could not be regarded as expressing Spinoza's serious views. Only those that were far away or even opposed to the common views could. With an awareness of Spinoza's exotericism, Strauss finally found that there were esoteric teachings hidden behind Spinoza's explicit statements.

Conclusion

This paper doesn't aim to have a thorough investigation of Leo Strauss's hermeneutics, but aims only to explore what “be alert to the art of writing” means in

Strauss's sense by taking the example of Strauss's study of Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise* respectively before and after his rediscovery of exotericism. We can see that at the very beginning, Strauss adopted Theodor Mommsen's principle that motives in accord with duty come first and egotistical motives next, claiming that there was no need to resort to Spinoza's personal motives to understand the *Treatise* which could be explained on the basis of itself alone. Later, Strauss still practiced Mommsen's principle and tried to understand Spinoza with Spinoza's own statements, rather than with presupposes of Spinoza's personal motives on the basis of his life experience. To have a better understanding of Spinoza's statements, Strauss sometimes also resorted to the historical context Spinoza was in. But after the rediscovery of exotericism, Strauss became very alert to Spinoza's way of writing. Strauss found that Spinoza spoke with a view to the capacity of the vulgar. Some of Spinoza's explicit statements were addressed to the non-philosophic majority and were not Spinoza's true teachings, but only Spinoza's accommodations to the multitude. Based on this, Strauss, though still tried to understand Spinoza on the basis of Spinoza's own statements (the understanding of which might needed historical knowledge), didn't understand Spinoza on the basis of Spinoza's all statements any more. He believed only in those most opposed to what Spinoza considered the vulgar view as well as those with an implication of a heterodox character. Strauss (1948, p. 196) made such kind of discoveries as "he (Spinoza) asserts that there cannot be any contradictions between the insight of the understanding and teaching of the Bible...and we know that he did not believe in the truth of the Biblical teaching". From Strauss's encounter with exotericism, we can finally find that "be alert to the art of writing" in general means two things. First, understand the author's explicit statements. Then, try to find whether there are teachings that are different from or even opposed to the explicit statements. It's noteworthy that for Strauss, "be alert to the art of writing" means first of all to have an exact interpretation of an author's explicit statements, rather than to take great pains to find his esoteric teachings.

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