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A Modern in Disguise? Leo Strauss on Marsilius of Padua

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Abstract: This article analyzes Leo Strauss's interpretation of the political thinker Marsilius of Padua advanced in the only piece that he wrote on the Italian author. At first glance, Strauss appears to characterize Marsilius as possessing an anticlerical temperament. Yet, upon deeper analysis, Strauss's account of Marsilius presents him as a more controversial figure. First, Strauss's analysis suggests that Marsilius's anticlericalism actually disguises an antitheological attitude, bringing him closer to Machiavelli. Second, Strauss claims that Marsilius has an unusual notion of contemplation and "lowers his sights" prior to Machiavelli. Reading between the lines, one can see that for Strauss, Marsilius ends up being the last classical philosopher while also setting the stage for Machiavelli's modernity in a disguised manner.

Leo Strauss did not write much on the Italian political thinker Marsilius of Padua. We have one piece that he published on Marsilius in *History of Political Philosophy* (henceforth *HPP*) in 1963. This same piece was republished without any major modifications in the edited collection *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* in 1968. The text is dense, difficult to follow, far from a smooth read, and as we will see, presents what a careful reader might describe as some intended contradictions. Strauss also makes a few references to Marsilius that are scattered across several texts dating from 1943 to the 1960s, a period throughout which Strauss's views on Jewish-Islamic philosophy and political philosophy evolved considerably.[1] One could say that few scholars

[1] Daniel Tanguay talks about a "Farabian turn" to describe Strauss's change of ideas on esotericism and political philosophy in Maimonides towards the end of the 1930s. See *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s*, ed. M. Yaffe and R. Ruderman (New York: Palgrave, 2014); D. Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007). In his discussion of Strauss's analysis of Jewish-Islamic philosophy, Joshua Parens underlines a development from pure theoretical philosophy in the mid-1940s to political philosophy in the period between the late 1940s until the 1960s. See J. Parens, *Leo Strauss and the Recovery of Medieval Political Philosophy* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2016), esp. 6 and 119–24.

have engaged with Strauss's analysis of Marsilius because he wrote so little about him. Indeed, there are only a few studies of Strauss's interpretation of Marsilius[2] and, beyond these, there is, strikingly, almost no mention of this topic among Straussian scholars.[3] Considering the many political philosophers about whom Leo Strauss wrote, one would not be exaggerating in saying that Marsilius of Padua is probably among those to whom scholars have devoted the least attention.

There is also a serious lack of engagement with Strauss's account within the broader scholarly literature on Marsilius.[4] There is an obvious imbalance between engagements with Strauss's works on Jewish and Islamic medieval philosophy and his works on Christian medieval philosophy.[5] One reason for this, of course, is that Strauss simply wrote much more on medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophers than he did on Christian ones. If one were to compare Strauss's lengthy work on Moses Maimonides with those on Thomas Aquinas or Marsilius of Padua, one might understand the complete absence of any reference to his work in studies on the Christian Middle Ages. One could conclude, then, that so little has been written about Strauss on Marsilius simply because Strauss did not write much about him. By contrast,

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[2] M. Merlo, "La catástrofe de la felicidad. Marsilio de Padua en la lección de Leo Strauss," *Res publica* 8 (2001): 71–92; S. Kaye, "Against a Straussian Interpretation of Marsilius of Padua's Poverty Thesis," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (1994): 269–79.

[3] Three notable exceptions of accounts informed by a Straussian perspective are S. Torraco, *Priests as Physicians of Souls in Marsilius of Padua's "Defensor Pacis"* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1992), with an interesting review of the book in J. Parens, "Theory and Practice in Medieval Aristotelianism," *Polity* 26, no. 2 (1993): 317–30; Michael P. Zuckert and Catherine H. Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). The Zuckerts' interpretation of Strauss's view of Marsilius is among the best analyses on this topic that I have found. As I will show, even if my interpretation partly agrees with theirs, it diverges in some important respects. A third exception is Harvey C. Mansfield, *Taming the Prince: The Ambivalence of Modern Executive Power* (New York: Free Press, 1989), esp. 100–134. Marsilius is seldom mentioned in one of the best reconstructions of Strauss's approach to medieval philosophy (Parens, *Leo Strauss and the Recovery of Medieval Political Philosophy*).

[4] Some scattered remarks on Strauss's views of nature and grace in Marsilius can be found in M. Sweeney, "The Spirituality of the Church," in *A Companion to Marsilius of Padua*, ed. C. Nederman and G. Moreno-Riano (Amsterdam: Brill, 2011), 185–86. Two rebuttals of Strauss's interpretation of Marsilius can be found in Kaye, "Against a Straussian Interpretation," and V. Syros, *Marsilius of Padua at the Intersection of Ancient and Medieval Traditions of Political Thought* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

[5] The opposition between Jewish-Islamic and Christian philosophy features prominently in Parens, *Leo Strauss and the Recovery of Medieval Political Philosophy,* 39–54. On Strauss's interpretation of Thomas Aquinas, see D. Kries, "On Leo Strauss's Understanding of the Natural Law Theory of Thomas Aquinas," *The Thomist* 57, no. 2 (1993): 215–32; from the same author, see *The Problem of Natural Law* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007). It is also useful to consult the entry on Thomas Aquinas written by Ernest L. Fortin, in *HPP*.

Strauss wrote on Jewish philosophers such as Abravanel and Halevi at least as much as he wrote on Marsilius of Padua. For this reason, one would be right to describe the gaps in the scholarly literature on Strauss's reading of Marsilius as one of the most neglected areas in the scholarly debates both on Strauss and on Marsilius of Padua.

To fill this gap, the present article offers a comprehensive analysis of Leo Strauss's reading of the Italian political thinker. It does not aim to determine whether Strauss read Marsilius correctly, but only to explain his reading. I maintain that the best way to understand Strauss's interpretation of Marsilius is to read it as one whose meaning and structure reflect Strauss's characterization of philosophical writing given in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*.[6] That Strauss writes between the lines in his piece on Marsilius is not surprising, as *HPP* was an anthology meant for students. As he says in *PAW*, philosophical writing is mainly aimed at educating "young men who might become philosophers."[7] Moreover, since Strauss suggests that Marsilius was an unbeliever, he was probably aware that writing between the lines would have been the best way to present an interpretation that would be accepted only with great reluctance by historicist scholars of medieval Christian philosophy.

In his piece on Marsilius, Strauss appears at first to credit Marsilius for being a believer who introduced the ideas of the *falasifa* into the Latin world and who was moved by anticlericalism. Yet, looking deeper, Strauss's account turns Marsilius into a much more controversial figure. Focusing on two crucial points of Marsilius's theory, that is, his political theology and his relationship to Machiavelli, I attempt to show that for Strauss, Marsilius ends up being, on one hand, the last classical philosopher and, on the other hand, a thinker who anticipates some important modern themes but who advances them partly in disguise.

I present my case over four sections. The first section focuses on Strauss's treatment of Marsilius's political theology. The second section deals with Strauss's Marsilius viewed in the light of the distinction between Jewish-Islamic and Latin Averroism. The third section explores Strauss's interpretation of Marsilius's unusual defense of contemplation and of his relationship to Machiavelli. The fourth section presents a conclusion.

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[6] L. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013) (henceforth *PAW*).

[7] Straus, *PAW*, 36; but see also 24–25. Interestingly, Meier claims that Strauss also writes esoterically in his essay on Machiavelli in *HPP*. See H. Meier, *Political Philosophy and the Challenge of Revealed Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 108–13.

Strauss on Marsilius's Political Theology

As is well known, Strauss considers contradictions to be "a normal pedagogic device of the genuine philosophers."[8] Some contradictions that can only be spotted by a "careful" reader can be found in Strauss's analysis of Marsilius's political theology. Strauss begins his essay on Marsilius by distinguishing him from Thomas Aquinas. As he explains, "Marsilius, whose chief work is entitled *Defender of the Peace* (1324), was a Christian Aristotelian. But both his Christianity and his Aristotelianism differ profoundly from the beliefs of the most celebrated Christian Aristotelian, Thomas Aquinas. Marsilius lives as it were in another world than Thomas."[9] For Strauss, the separation between Marsilius and Thomas Aquinas can be traced to their differing "beliefs" on Aristotelianism and Christianity. But how are Marsilius's "beliefs" different from Thomas's? And why does Strauss claim that Marsilius lives "as it were" in another world than Thomas?

To answer this question, let us turn to Marsilius's political theology. Strauss's analysis of Marsilius's political theology starts from a particular puzzle. He starts by denying that he will deal with Marsilius's political theology and that he will focus only on his political philosophy. In his own words, "we cannot go into Marsilius's doctrine of the Church… for this doctrine belongs to political theology rather than to political philosophy."[10] Yet he follows this claim by doing the exact opposite, namely, by providing a relatively extensive discussion of Marsilius's doctrine of the church, which is essential to political theology.[11] Seven pages into the essay, Strauss even admits

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[8] L. Strauss, "Farabi's *Plato*," in *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume* (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1945), 369.

[9] L. Strauss, "Marsilius of Padua," in *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. L. Strauss and J. Cropsey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 276. Henceforth "MP." As the pagination of *History of Political Philosophy* changes from edition to edition, I will draw on the first edition of this work.

[10] Strauss, "MP," 276.

[11] One possible objection to this, which would soften the contradiction between Strauss's explicit statement and his actual treatment of the problem, would be to say that here political theology means "doing what a theologian might do," i.e., "comparing Marsilius's arguments from the New Testament on the nature of the church with the New Testament sources on which they are allegedly based" (Zuckert and Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy*, 173). Accordingly, the Zuckerts argue that "Strauss does not 'go into' Marsilius's political theology, if by 'go into' we take him to mean to examine the validity of the claims made within the political theology." However, I think that this is a robust definition of political theology that we do not necessarily need to assume in this context. When Strauss says here that he will not deal with political theology, he implies that he will not deal with Marsilius's arguments on the church, which are particularly concentrated in the second part of the *Defender of Peace*. This is manifestly what he does, though, in the pages subsequent to this statement. Here he presents a detailed summary of Marsilius's arguments on the church. Hence, he contradicts himself.

indirectly that this is what he is doing. After the rather lengthy discussion of Marsilius's doctrine of the church, he says: "let us return to the confines of political philosophy and consider Marsilius' doctrine of the human legislator somewhat more closely."[12]

Strauss also writes that Marsilius proposes and, at the same time, withdraws his endorsement of the theory of popular sovereignty. This is another important puzzle from the first part of Strauss's text. However, unlike the first, it is not a contradiction in Strauss's thought but, according to Strauss's own interpretation, one within Marsilius's. In his own words, "the characteristic of the *Defender of the Peace* viewed as a treatise of political philosophy is that it very emphatically sets forth and literally at the same time retracts the doctrine of popular sovereignty."[13] Strauss explains this contradiction by relating it to Marsilius's anticlericalism, which could be defined as the latter's aim of opposing the pope's (and the clergy's) exercise of power over secular rulers.[14] Indeed, he describes Marsilius's whole body of citizens as "merely the philosophic or rational counterpart of the body of the faithful," which is necessary for providing Marsilius's anticlericalism "with the broadest possible basis."[15] In Strauss's words:

> Both reason and revelation speak against the rule of priests. The fundamental self-contradiction which is characteristic of the *Defender* is the conscious outcome of a conscious strategy. Both the explanation and its implication are defensible, yet they do not account for certain features of Marsilius' populist teaching or for the essential character of strategies like the one justly ascribed to Marsilius. They fail to account for the latter because it is not sufficient to conceive of Marsilius as a perhaps skillful but rather unscrupulous politician or advocate.[16]

Reading this passage we cannot help but suspect that something escapes Strauss's declared belief that Marsilius's ambiguous populist attitude is only due to anticlericalism. Indeed, Strauss writes that even if both the explanation and the implication of Marsilius's conscious strategy (that is, his supposed anticlericalism) are defensible, the fundamental contradiction

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[12] Strauss, "MP," 282.

[13] Ibid., 284.

[14] Ibid., 278: "The essential function of the priests in any divine law is to teach the salutary doctrine concerning the afterlife or, more generally, to teach the divine law in which their society happens to believe." This passage comes before Strauss's claim that Marsilius turns Alfarabi's concept of the sect into a fundamental part of his political science.

[15] Ibid., 285.

[16] Ibid.

of the *Defender* (that is, Marsilius's confusing endorsement and immediate withdrawal of popular sovereignty) remains that it cannot be simply accounted for by his anticlerical views. What else is there in Marsilius, then, beyond anticlericalism?

Strauss adds that Marsilius endorses two more kinds of political regimes. He finds evidence that Marsilius adamantly endorses elective monarchy[17] and aristocracy as being the most natural kinds of regimes.[18] This confuses the reader as to what Marsilius's attitude towards the most natural regime actually is. In Strauss's view, on one hand, Marsilius endorses and then withdraws the theory of popular sovereignty, which appears to be (at least partly) the result of a conscious anticlerical strategy. On the other hand, according to Strauss, Marsilius endorses elective monarchy and aristocracy and never appears to withdraw support for these two regimes.[19] It seems to be clear that anticlericalism cannot explain why Marsilius endorses all three of these regimes at different points. Indeed, the only regime partly incompatible with priestly rulership is the populist.[20] However, Strauss says, first, that Marsilius presents it and then withdraws it and, second, that Marsilius does this only partly for anticlerical reasons. Moreover, for Marsilius, the other two regimes are clearly compatible with the rule of the priests. Thus Marsilius's endorsement of elective monarchy and aristocracy as the most natural regimes ends up partly undermining his anticlerical views. How can this puzzle be solved?

One possible answer can be found in Marsilius's original position on natural law as a source of the legitimacy of human laws, as Strauss understands that position. In his conception of the political community, as Strauss's interpretation suggests, Marsilius strips the two main assumptions of political theories based on Christian revelation of any value. He denies the notion that natural law can help ground the content of human law and claims that only a human legislator can decide whether certain actions, even those forbidden

[17] In his words, "it can therefore be assumed that his preference for elective monarchy over hereditary monarchy belongs to his final or serious political teaching" (ibid.).

[18] As he explains, "That aristocracy as distinguished from kingship is possible only under the most favorable conditions, and hence very rarely, in no way contradicts the fact that it is the most natural regime" (ibid., 286).

[19] Ibid., 285. After asserting Marsilius's preference for elective over hereditary monarchy, Strauss immediately adds that Marsilius "certainly never contradicts this preference as he contradicts the doctrine of popular sovereignty."

[20] Ibid. The New Testament "gives some support to the view that decisions in such matters rest with the whole body of the faithful as distinguished from the priests alone."

by divine law, should lead to enforceable condemnations.[21] Here, drawing on Marsilius's innovative position within the Christian world, Strauss is simply repeating a position of his own that he hinted at towards the beginning of his essay when he said that Marsilius lived in a completely different world than Thomas owing to their different views on Aristotelianism and Christianity. As Strauss explained in *Natural Right and History*, Marsilius follows the Averroist interpretation that natural right "depends on human institution and convention"[22] and rejects Thomas Aquinas's idea that the principles of natural right are "universally valid and immutable."[23] In his essay on Marsilius, Strauss repeats the claim that Marsilius follows Averroes's position and so reinstates the position of the *falasifa* on the Aristotelian teaching on natural law: "within the confines of political philosophy, Marsilius' tacit opposition to Thomas Aquinas shows itself most obviously in his teaching regarding natural law or natural right. Marsilius denies that there is a natural law properly so called."[24] For Strauss, by denying natural law, Marsilius manages to leave all human political laws without an extrapolitical deontological standard to assess their justice, which, as is required by Thomas in Strauss's interpretation,[25] is rooted in revelation. Therefore, Marsilius's human laws can be established without this basis.

This leads one to suspect that Strauss takes Marsilius to endorse each of the three Aristotelian regimes (monarchy, aristocracy, and populist) at different points for the following reason: since Marsilius's rejection of natural law leads him to found all regimes on human reason alone, and not on revelation, all of these regimes must be better than the only regime founded on revelation, that is, the rule of the priests. When Strauss claims that Marsilius is a Christian Aristotelian who lives in a different world than Aquinas, he means

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[21] Marsilius's original interpretation of the relation between natural and human laws is widely acknowledged in the scholarly literature. See Annabel Brett, "Political Right(s) and Human Freedom in Marsilius of Padua," in *Transformations in Medieval and Early-Modern Rights Discourse*, ed. Virpi Mäkinen and Petter Korkman (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 107; Joseph Canning, "Law, Sovereignty and Corporation Theory, 1300–1450," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought c. 350–c. 1450*, ed. J. H. Burns (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 461; Roberto Lambertini, "Marsilius and the Poverty Controversy in Dictio II," in *A Companion to Marsilius of Padua*, ed. Gerson Moreno-Riaño and Cary J. Nederman (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 244–45.

[22] L. Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 158 (henceforth *NRH*). A proximity between Marsilius and the Averroist point of view is also accepted in the scholarly literature. See Brett, "Political Right(s) and Human Freedom," 101.

[23] Strauss, *NRH*, 157.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., 163–64; *PAW*, 95–98; and Strauss, "On Natural Law," in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), esp. 143.

that Marsilius's political theory is motivated by a justification that goes far beyond Marsilius's anticlericalism and expresses a hostile attitude towards revelation. Strauss indirectly admits this when he says that for Marsilius, "revelation is not simply above reason but against reason."[26]

There are some additional reasons to suspect that, for Strauss, Marsilius's anticlericalism is actually a form of antitheologism, that is, that Strauss turns Marsilius into an unbeliever. First, the word "antitheological" appears only twice in the massive history of political philosophy that he and Joseph Cropsey edited (a volume of more than nine hundred pages) and these two occurrences appear in the chapter on Marsilius[27] (not even in the chapters on Machiavelli authored by Strauss, which would be the most obvious candidates for this).

Second, Strauss plays a numerological game in the passage in which he poses the question whether Marsilius was a believer.[28] He does not directly tackle the question. Indeed, according to his view, Marsilius does not take a clear stance on whether Aristotelian thought is true because such a doctrine clearly "contradicts the most fundamental and the most manifest doctrines of the Bible."[29] It is up to the reader, then, to guess "whether Marsilius was a believer or an unbeliever until he considers Marsilius' discussion, presented in the thirty-eighth chapter of the *Defender* (II 19)."[30] As readers, we can surmise Strauss's interpretation of Marsilius's true commitment to faith by observing that there is no chapter in the *Defensor Pacis* called chapter 38 and that this is, rather, Strauss's denomination.

The title of chapter 19 of the second *dictio* of the *Defender of Peace* is "On a certain preliminary to determining the authority and primacy just-mentioned, viz. what spoken or written truth we must believe and confess of

[26] Strauss, "MP," 289. Note that Strauss explicitly contradicts this statement on 278 where he says that for Marsilius "Christian revelation does not contradict this demonstrated teaching, since revelation is indeed above reason but not against reason." Here, however, Strauss simply summarizes Marsilius's argument as to why he will use Aristotle to ground his anticlerical views.

[27] Strauss, "MP," 285, 294. In the second instance, the word refers to Machiavelli. The fact that Strauss never refers to Machiavelli as antitheological in the chapter devoted to this author and only in the chapter on Marsilius could be a further sign of his intention to consider Marsilius an antitheological thinker.

[28] The Zuckerts agree. Referring to Strauss, they say that "it is difficult to believe that he thought Marsilius was a believer" (*Leo Strauss and the Problem*, 177).

[29] Strauss, "MP," 292.

[30] Ibid.

necessity of eternal salvation."[31] In this chapter, Marsilius's discussion of why it is necessary believe in the authority of holy scripture is based entirely on the principle of the authority of faith and does not involve any argument based on human reason. However, this chapter, in which Marsilius presents the foundation of his belief in the scriptures, corresponds in its numbering to the number of chapters (19) that make up the first part of *The Defender of Peace*, in which Marsilius aims to present his arguments only according to human reason. Recall that in the introduction of *The Defender of Peace*, Marsilius explains that his work is divided into three parts (*dictiones*): the first pertains to the central topic of human reason, the second to the authority of the holy scriptures and the doctors of the church, and the third summarizes parts 1 and 2. Marsilius explains that in the first *dictio*, he will demonstrate his argument according to "sure methods" of human intellect, whereas in the second *dictio*, he will demonstrate his arguments according to the "testimonies of the truth founded upon eternity,"[32] by alluding to the holy scriptures and the church fathers. In the first part, Marsilius appeals only to human reason and cites Aristotle along with other philosophical texts more often than in the second *dictio*.

When Strauss refers to II 19 as the 38th chapter of the *Defender*, he seems to be playing a numerological game according to which the number of chapters that he links to the ground of human reason in Marsilius's theory corresponds to the chapter number of the second part of the *Defender* in which Marsilius discusses the foundation of his belief in revealed holy scripture. In so doing, Strauss urges the reader to interpret chapter 19 of the second part of the *Defender* in fully rational and, one could say, nontheological terms, exactly as Marsilius did in the first part of the *Defender*. It seems that, for Strauss, Marsilius clarifies his previously unclear response as to why we have to adhere to the authority of the holy scriptures through the symbolic function of the number 19, which corresponds to the number of chapters in the first part of *The Defender of Peace* where Marsilius solely draws on the authority of human reason.[33]

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[31] Marsilius of Padua, *The Defender of the Peace*, ed. A. Brett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 360.

[32] Ibid., 9.

[33] Confirming their idea that Strauss would not consider Marsilius a believer, the Zuckerts discovered another numerological game in Strauss's text, namely, in its later reprint in Strauss's *Liberalism Ancient and Modern*: "Strauss changed the paragraphing of the Marsilius essay in reprinting it in *Liberalism*: in that version it has two sections of twelve and thirteen paragraphs respectively, or a total of twenty-five paragraphs, signaling perhaps Strauss's second thought that Marsilius was even closer to Machiavelli than he had originally believed" (*Leo Strauss and the Problem*, 169). Numerological

Having spotted Strauss's characterization of Marsilius as an unbeliever, we have to try to determine what type of unbeliever Strauss thinks Marsilius actually is. For Strauss, Machiavelli is the thinker who makes antitheological "passion" or "ire" public par excellence. However, there is no sign of "ire" and "passion" in Marsilius's antitheological attitude because he is a hidden unbeliever. But then why did Marsilius disguise his antitheological views with anticlericalism?

Marsilius and Latin Averroism

There is yet further evidence of Strauss's understanding of Marsilius's anticlericalism as a form of antitheologism, although it is rather ambiguous. Strauss includes Marsilius among the Latin Averroists, a specific stream of Averroists that developed in the Christian world and had a much more radical view than the *falasifa* or the Jewish-Islamic Averroists about how the relationship between reason and revelation should be approached publicly.[34] In his text on Marsilius, Strauss never explicitly identifies Marsilius as a Latin Averroist, the "school of Christian scholasticism which was most deeply influenced by Islamic philosophy."[35] Elsewhere, Strauss explains that "the Latin Averroists gave a most literal interpretation of extremely heretical teachings"[36] and were famous for their "doctrine of the double truth, for its assertion that a thesis may be true in philosophy but false in theology and vice versa."[37] Latin Averroists were students of philosophy who were openly and publicly vocal about their fascination with truths that believers would abhor. These philosophers drew on Aristotle, the authority par excellence for all philosophers in their day, to assert claims that were controversial from the perspective of revelation. It is important to show the profound difference between the understanding of reason and faith held by the Latin Averroists and the *falasifa*, on one hand,

games are an important component of Strauss's hermeneutic approach. See, e.g., L. Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958), 100–101 (henceforth *TM*). On the importance of numerological games in Strauss, see N. Benhegar, "Reading 'What Is Political Philosophy?,'" in *Leo Strauss's Defense of the Philosophic Life: Reading "What Is Political Philosophy?,"* ed. R. Major (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

[34] "Latin Averroism" has been one of the most disputed categories in studies on medieval philosophy and especially in medieval political philosophy. For a good overview of this debate see A. Mulieri, "Against Classical Republicanism: The Averroist Foundations of Marsilius of Padua's Political Thought," *History of Political Thought* 40, no. 2 (2019): 218–45.

[35] L. Strauss, "How to Study Medieval Philosophy," *Interpretation* 23, no. 3 (1996): 319–38, esp. 335–36. In the volume coedited with Cropsey, the phrase "Latin Averroist" appears only once, in the chapter on Thomas Aquinas (*History of Political Philosophy*, 271).

[36] Strauss, *PAW*, 15.

[37] Strauss, "How to Study Medieval Philosophy," 335.

and that held by those whom Strauss refers to in his book on Maimonides as ancient Averroists, on the other.[38] In *PAW*, Strauss explicitly contrasts Alfarabi's account with that of the Latin Averroists, saying that Alfarabi simply did the opposite of the Latin Averroists: "he gave an extremely un-literal interpretation of a most tolerable teaching."[39] Alfarabi never overtly and publicly presents heretical truths that would clash too harshly with the divine truths of revelation; he thus never affirms, as the Latin Averroists do, that one should believe revelation while insinuating otherwise. In this respect, the Islamic philosopher is a precursor of Moses Maimonides.[40] Strauss knew that ecclesiastical condemnations were leveled against Latin Averroists such as Boethius of Dacia and Siger of Brabant because of doctrines such as the eternity of the world, the belief in philosophy as the highest form of human perfection, and the idea of monopsychism. For Strauss, borrowing the classical neo-Thomist image of Latin Averroists as staunch nonbelievers,[41] Latin Averroists publicly and openly articulated a concept of reason that explicitly clashed with revelation by endorsing truths that were impossible to reconcile with the latter. In this way, by rationally endorsing some Aristotelian ideas that clashed with the truths of Christian revelation, they anticipated what Machiavelli and the Enlightenment would turn into an established truth. The Latin Averroists' more outspokenly hostile attitude towards revelation also encompasses a public critique of morality, making them more difficult to fit within Strauss's understanding of classical and modern thinkers. Of course, this is also relevant for understanding Strauss's image of Marsilius.

In *NRH*, Strauss explicitly includes Marsilius among the Latin Averroists. In a discussion about the distinction between the Thomist and the Averroist interpretations of natural right, Strauss writes:

> There exists an alternative medieval interpretation of Aristotle's doctrine, namely, the Averroistic view or, more adequately stated, the view characteristic of the *falasifa* (i.e., of the Islamic Aristotelians) as well as of the Jewish Aristotelians. This view was set forth within the Christian world by Marsilius of Padua and presumably by other

[38] See L. Strauss, *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 141n25: "One might with a certain right describe Christian Averroism as the forerunner of the modern conception of the state . . ., but the original Averroism's conception of the state is ancient throughout."

[39] Strauss, *PAW*, 14.

[40] This thesis pervades Parens, *Leo Strauss and the Recovery of Medieval Political Philosophy*; see, e.g., 22.

[41] See, e.g., E. Gilson, *Dante et la philosophie* (Paris: Vrin, 1939).

> Christian and Latin Averroists. According to Averroes, Aristotle understands by natural right "legal natural right." Or, as Marsilius puts it, natural right is only quasi-natural.[42]

The word "other" in this passage provides little reason to doubt whether Strauss considers Marsilius to be a Latin Averroist.[43] Marsilius presented the best-known endorsement of the Averroist interpretation of natural law beyond other Christian and Latin Averroists.

In "The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*," Strauss defines the Averroist interpretation of natural law—namely, that there is no natural law—as the natural law of the philosophers. In the final part of this essay, Strauss reports the philosopher's view in the *Kuzari* according to which "a man who has become a philosopher, may adhere in his deeds and speeches to a religion to which he does not adhere in his thoughts." Strauss's comment on this passage is telling: "it is this view, I say, which is underlying the exotericism of the philosophers."[44] One characteristic of the philosopher's holding unpleasant and dangerous truths is that the philosopher is an unbeliever. However, this is just a fraction of the danger and unpleasantness that philosophy poses for the city. Strauss introduces the notion of the philosophers' view of natural law, which he identifies a few lines earlier as the idea that "the Natural Law is not obligatory and does not command, or presuppose, an inner attachment to society."[45] The implications of this view for society are rather extreme. If we follow philosophers too far and recognize that natural law is not obligatory and has no relevance for society, we discover "the fundamental weakness of the philosophic position and the deepest reason why philosophy is so enormously dangerous." Philosophy is dangerous because of the idea that "natural morality," or "morality not based on Divine revelation, . . . is, strictly speaking, no morality at all. It is hardly distinguishable from the morality essential to the preservation of a gang of robbers."[46] Both the Jewish-Islamic and the Latin Averroists share this idea of natural right and the critique of revelation and morality.

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[42] Strauss, *NRH*, 158–59.

[43] Further confirmation that Strauss considers Marsilius to be a Latin Averroist can be found in Strauss's reinstatement of the same exact Averroist position on natural right in his piece on Marsilius, saying that the latter presupposes that "reason is indeed capable of discerning what is honorable, what is just and what is of advantage to society. But such insights are not as such laws. Besides, they are not accessible to all men and hence not admitted by all nations; for this reason they cannot be called natural" (Strauss, "MP," 293).

[44] Strauss, "The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*," in *PAW*, 139.

[45] Ibid., 140.

[46] Ibid.

However, since we know from *PAW* that Latin Averroists are mainly characterized by their public teaching of heretical truths that challenge revelation, we might reasonably think that Strauss believes Latin Averroists to be unbelievers who are more outspoken than the *falasifa* about their attitudes towards revelation as well as their critiques of morality in the Averroist interpretation of natural law. Thus, the difference between Jewish-Islamic and Latin Averroists is not of a theoretical nature, but mainly related to their different political attitudes towards revealed revelation and morality. As stated above, this attitude is reflected in the difference between the moderation of the Jewish-Islamic philosophers and the immoderation of the Latin Averroists, placing the latter in closer proximity to Machiavelli. Marsilius is suspended between these two different attitudes. On one hand, like the Jewish-Islamic philosophers, he is just a "cautious" hidden unbeliever. On the other hand, Strauss's claim that he is a Latin Averroist requires some explanation as it suggests that Marsilius's rejection of revelation and critique of morality have a public or political dimension that cannot be ascribed to any Jewish-Islamic Averroist. This ambiguity reflects Strauss's analysis of Machiavelli.

In his *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Strauss clearly takes Machiavelli to be the legitimate heir of Averroists, and even if it might seem unclear to what kind of Averroists Strauss relates Machiavelli, he gives us some indications that he believes Machiavelli appreciated the Latin Averroists's public critiques of morality and revelation much more than any previous thinker did, especially compared to the *falasifa*.

Strauss starts by arguing that "it is not misleading to count Machiavelli among 'the wise of the world,'" where the phrase "wise of the world" is put between inverted commas. After stating that the beliefs of "the wise of the world" reject "the myths of the pagans" and "revelation" and "the characteristic teachings of revelation," Strauss writes that they are the *falasifa* or the "Averroists."[47] Two things must be highlighted in this sentence. First, Strauss keeps the word *Averroists* between inverted commas whereas in other passages of *TM*, he uses this same word without any commas. Second, Strauss does not say that "the wise of the world" are both the *falasifa* and the "Averroists" but, by using the adversative conjunction "or" and not "and," he claims that "the wise of the world" can be either one of them, opening the way to thinking that a different set of ideas must be ascribed to each of these two.

[47] Strauss, *TM*, 175.

Later, Strauss mentions Savonarola's reference to the "contemporary 'wordly wise'" who account for Machiavelli's position on the eternity of the world. The "wordly wise" are not *falasifa* because they are "contemporary" to Savonarola and Machiavelli, and Maimonides and Alfarabi were obviously not contemporaries of the Florentine. However, Strauss suggests that the views of the "contemporary 'worldly wise'" are the same as those of the "Averroists." They argue that "God is the final and not the efficient cause of this world," that "faith is nothing but opinion," that "there is no immortality of individual souls," that "Biblical prophecies" are "things for women" and that "there is only one soul in all men."[48]

Strauss draws a parallel between the spread of Averroist ideas in Machiavelli's time and the spread of Marxism in the present age. Initially, he uses the word *Averroism* without commas, claiming that "the fundamental tenets of Averroism were as well known to intelligent men of Machiavelli's age as the fundamental tenets of, say, Marxism are in the present age."[49] This is to say that the fundamental ideas of the *falasifa* were widespread in Machiavelli's context. However, as is evident from the subsequent sentence, for Strauss, we must also turn to the "Averroists" (between commas) if we want to complete Machiavelli's intimations on religion. To account for this oscillation between *falasifa* and "Averroists" in *TM*, one could suggest that when Strauss refers to *Averroists* (in inverted commas) he is referring to the Latin Averroists, and that when he refers to *Averroist* (without commas) he is referring to the *falasifa* or the Jewish-Islamic Averroists. The *falasifa* and the Latin Averroists share the same theoretical positions, which is why it is so hard to distinguish their respective influence on Machiavelli's thought. However, their difference is, as Strauss says in *PAW*, in their different public attitudes towards the rejection of revelation and critique of morality.

Machiavelli's relationship to both the Averroists and the "Averroists" is complex. Like the Averroists or the *falasifa*, Machiavelli is an unbeliever. Like the Latin Averroists, or Strauss's "Averroists," but unlike any *falasifa*, or Strauss's Averroists, Machiavelli openly and publicly states his opposition to revelation and morality. The temperament that Strauss ascribes to the "Averroists," with their public critique of religion and morality, anticipates Machiavelli as a thinker who pursues the attitude of the Latin Averroists.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid., 202–3.

In his book on Machiavelli, Strauss describes no sign of Alfarabi's or Maimonides's "moderation" in the views of the "contemporary 'worldly wise.'"

In this sense, Strauss's inclusion of Marsilius among the Latin Averroists suggests something similar to what we just observed in the relationship between Latin Averroism and Machiavelli. Strauss takes the Paduan to be sympathetic to the Latin Averroists' public and outspoken opposition to the truths of revelation and critique of morality, which will find a clear and obvious advocate in Machiavelli. However, Strauss does not explicitly identify Marsilius as a Latin Averroist in his essay on Marsilius, a point for which we will have to give some explanation towards the end of this essay. Moreover, if, according to Strauss, Marsilius is a hidden unbeliever, this would bring the Paduan much more in line with the Jewish-Islamic Averroists than with the Latin Averroists. Indeed, we have shown above that Strauss appears to think of Marsilius as a hidden unbeliever, as most *falasifa* or Jewish-Islamic Averroists had done before him. Why then would he identify Marsilius with the precursors of Machiavelli, the Latin Averroists?[50] To answer this question, we have to provide a much more in-depth analysis of Marsilius's unusual view of contemplation and of his relation with Machiavelli.

Marsilius's Unusual Defense of Contemplation

Towards the end of his essay, Strauss claims that "Marsilius says much less than Aristotle even in his *Politics* about the highest end which is natural to man" and then immediately adds that "for the reasons indicated above he lowered his sights."[51] The interpretation of this sentence is crucial for assessing Marsilius's complex position between classical and modern philosophy and, eventually, Marsilius's relationship to Machiavelli, whom Strauss elsewhere defines as the founder of political modernity.

As we saw, at first glance, Strauss's words at the end of his piece seem unequivocal in stressing the difference between Marsilius and Machiavelli, as for Strauss, the latter is the modern thinker who truly breaks with classical

[50] Strauss's claim at the end of the Marsilius essay that the difference between Machiavelli and classical tradition lies in the former's break with Aristotle's claim about the supremacy of contemplation can be nuanced if we relate them to other passages of *TM* (32, 221–22) and *What Is Political Philosophy*. In these passages, Strauss argues that Machiavelli's language is much closer to that of Aristotelianism than one would expect. For example, talking about Machiavelli's political teaching, Strauss claims that "the theoretical and cosmological basis of his political teaching was a kind of decayed Aristotelianism" (*What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* [Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1959], 47).

[51] Strauss, "MP," 293.

thought. As he says: "When anti-theological passion induced a thinker to take the extreme step of questioning the supremacy of contemplation, political philosophy broke with the classical tradition, and especially with Aristotle, and took on an entirely new character. The thinker in question was Machiavelli."[52] Here, Strauss links Machiavelli's modernity to the latter's questioning of the supremacy of contemplative life, which he bases on anti-theological "passion." It would appear that these elements are the reason why Machiavelli is the first modern philosopher and, conversely, why Marsilius does not qualify as modern.

However, after taking a deeper look, as with the case of Latin Averroism, we see that the similarities between Marsilius and Machiavelli are much stronger than their differences. Strauss's two claims, namely, that Marsilius provides scarcely any account of the highest end of man, that is, contemplation, and that Marsilius lowers his sights, lead one to suspect a certain proximity between Marsilius and Machiavelli.

By claiming that Marsilius says very little about the highest natural end of man, Strauss grasps an important aspect of the Paduan's thought. Indeed, in his *Defender of Peace*, Marsilius openly praises Aristotle's account of the highest natural end of man, that is, the pursuit of theoretical life, in II 30, 4.[53] However, he remains staunchly silent about the meaning of this praise, making it difficult if not impossible to understand why contemplative life is the highest form of human perfection for Marsilius. One way to make sense of this passage of *Defender* is to claim that, when he praises first philosophy as the highest form of human perfection, Marsilius might actually mean something different from what most classical thinkers mean, that is, he might mean that first philosophy is actually the philosophy of politics,[54] which is the task that he sets for his analysis in *Defender*.

Strauss's analysis of Marsilius reflects the latter's explanation of his unique praise of contemplation in *Defender*. Strauss's chapter reflects this particularly in his treatment of the complex relationship between Marsilius and Aristotle, one of the most controversial topics in Marsilian studies.[55] In

[52] Ibid., 294.

[53] Marsilius, *Defender of the Peace*, 537.

[54] This is the thesis of Mulieri, "Against Classical Republicanism," which also provides a comprehensive analysis of the meaning of this passage in Marsilius's theory of political thought in *The Defender*.

[55] In his interpretation of Marsilius, Torraco claims that Marsilius "brings philosophy down from the heavens into the city," and eventually transubstantiates "the priestly character into the *habitus* of the first philosopher" (*Priests as Physicians of Souls*, 240 and 255). For Torraco, since Marsilius talks

addition to his claim that Marsilius does not say much on the highest natural end of man following Aristotle, Strauss makes two more claims.

First, from Marsilius's embrace of the Averroist idea of natural law, Strauss deduces that Marsilius denies the existence of "first principles of practical reason." As Strauss remarks, the status of such principles is obscure in Aristotle's *Ethics* and Marsilius seems to follow the way in which Averroes and Dante solved this obscurity instead, that is, by identifying these principles with natural science or theoretical reason. The fact that the first principles of practical reason can be supplied by theoretical reason or natural science puts Marsilius's ideas in close proximity to those of the *falasifa* and, especially, of Alfarabi and Maimonides. As Parens convincingly explains, for the latter two thinkers, the difference between theoretical and practical sciences is not as clear-cut as it is for Thomas Aquinas or other Christian Aristotelians. The rejection of the Aristotelian distinction between theoretical and practical philosophy and the adoption of a Platonic position lead both Alfarabi and Maimonides to blur the distinction between political and religious spheres.[56] Once again, Marsilius's adherence to the *falasifa*'s blurred distinction between theoretical and practical sciences makes his position between classical and modern political philosophy hard to determine because it hardly fits with his main purpose of separating religion and politics as much as possible to reject the papal theory of the plenitude of power.

However, Strauss adds a second claim about the relationship between Marsilius and Aristotle that, unlike the first, places the former at odds with the *falasifa* and seems to prepare the ground for interpreting Marsilius as closer to Machiavelli. For Strauss, even if Marsilius agrees with Aristotle's deduction of the necessity of moral virtues from the purpose of civil society and "the necessity of that purpose from the end or ends of man,"[57] in his *Politics*, the Paduan does not take prudence and moral virtues to be "choiceworthy for their own sake," as Aristotle does in the *Ethics* for educative and practical reasons. In other words, for Marsilius the justification of moral virtues and prudence, the two crucial components of a just and stable

even less than Aristotle did about the principles of theoretical reason, he employs esoteric writing apparently in order to refer to philosophy and reason as a way of showing a convergence between common morality and the perfection of the mind. Regardless of whether this interpretation fully grasps Marsilius's intent (which I very much doubt), my impression is that this is not what Strauss thinks about Marsilius.

[56] On this see Parens, *Leo Strauss and the Recovery of Medieval Political Philosophy*, 11: "Medieval Islamic philosophy and medieval Jewish philosophy are, for the most part, Platonic in character."

[57] Strauss, "MP," 293.

society for any Jewish or Islamic philosopher, exclusively derives from the material necessities of political life, which are components, if considered in themselves, of the lives of nonphilosophers.

Strauss's account of the *status* of contemplation or philosophical life in Marsilius reflects the latter's lack of clarity on the content of the principles of contemplation. For Strauss, the Paduan's position implies that there must be some universal rules of conduct that men of speculation should follow in order to become perfect men of speculation. However, immediately after stating this, Strauss claims that these rules are not, strictly speaking, universal because only a minority of men are capable of achieving contemplative life "by nature."[58] In Strauss's piece, which closely parallels Marsilius's silence on these very same topics in his *Defender*, we do not find any explanation about Marsilius's account of the "nature" of these men and the content of their contemplation. The actual meaning of "universal" rules of contemplation remains unclear, given that it is impossible to find in Marsilius a "thick" definition of philosophy as the science of beings or as Alfarabi's Platonic path, which includes that of the *Timaeus*.[59] For Strauss, however, one activity remains truly universal in Marsilius, namely, the perfection of the body. The perfection of the body, which is arguably the primary aim of nonphilosophers, is a different kind of perfection from that of the metaphysician, which is the aim of philosophical life.[60] Strauss's claim that only the perfection of the body has a clear universal status in Marsilius makes the Paduan's ideas different from those of Jewish and Islamic philosophers, for which only the life of contemplation has a clearly universal status, and closer to Machiavelli who, as we saw, also lowers his sights.

"Lowering Sights"

Strauss uses the phrase "lower sights" twice in his essay on Marsilius. The second use of the phrase can be found towards the end of the essay when, as we saw above, he compares Marsilius to Aristotle. We saw that, for Strauss, Marsilius's silence about the highest natural end of man, what we described as Marsilius's unusual notion of contemplation, leads him to "lower the sights." The first employment of the phrase can be found in the middle of the essay, where Strauss explains that Marsilius "apparently" lowers his sights because

[58] Ibid.

[59] Strauss, *PAW*, 16: "the science and the art of *Timaeus*."

[60] Strauss, "MP," 293.

he wants to preserve peace and cure the commonwealth from the disease of the plenitude of power. Interestingly, Strauss never says that peace is "the highest good" or "the only political good"[61] for Marsilius. In other words, peace is not the ideal harmony of the common good of classical thought, but simply a contingent goal that should help men prevent anarchy in the political community. This relates to Strauss's claim that Marsilius does not attach (and even denies) any importance to the question of the best regime, which is essential in classical philosophy. Marsilius is solely interested in showing that "any regime is better than anarchy."[62]

As the Zuckerts have already noted,[63] the phrase "lowering sights" is a prerogative that Strauss ascribes to Machiavelli. In "Three Waves of Modernity," Strauss credits Machiavelli with having rejected the whole philosophical and theological tradition prior to him and clearing the way to openly praise the life of the vulgar. As he says, for Machiavelli, "one must start from how men do live; one must lower one's sights."[64] Strauss repeats this concept in *What Is Political Philosophy?*, where he writes that "Machiavelli consciously lowers the standards of social action."[65]

What does Strauss mean by crediting Marsilius for having lowered his sights before Machiavelli? For Strauss, one of the main results of Machiavelli's critique of the imaginary republics of philosophers was that for the Florentine, philosophy "remains on the whole within the limits set by the city qua closed to philosophy." Machiavelli accepted the ends of the demos "as beyond appeal" and therefore sought "for the best means conducive to those ends." Enlightened self-interest, self-preservation, and an entirely novel idea of hedonism that, breaking with classical hedonism, mainly pursues acquisitiveness and competition are the "goods" of the vulgar that Machiavelli's philosophy aims to propagate.[66] Machiavelli praises these features openly and publicly. Even if the Paduan does not proceed to praise these features as overtly as Machiavelli, the unusual status of contemplation and the defense of the perfection of the body that Strauss ascribes to the Paduan set the

[61] Ibid., 279.

[62] Ibid., 280.

[63] Zuckert and Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problem*, 170.

[64] L. Strauss, "The Three Waves of Modernity," in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, ed. H. Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 86.

[65] Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 41.

[66] On this matter see P. Rahe, "In the Shadow of Lucretius: The Epicurean Foundations of Machiavelli's Political Thought," *History of Political Thought* 28, no. 1 (2007): 30–55.

grounds, even before Machiavelli, for the "cave" to become "the substance" of Marsilius's philosophical teaching.[67]

Marsilius still remains a classical philosopher because he does not make his rejection of revelation and critique of morality as overt as those of Machiavelli. However, the positions that Strauss ascribes to Marsilius and that we have seen in the previous paragraph place Marsilius in an uneasy position between the classics and the moderns. Marsilius's unusual defense of contemplation, his idea that prudence and moral virtues are not "choiceworthy for their own sake" but dependent on political life, his unambiguous attitude towards the universalism of the perfection of the body, create the conditions for a critique of morality that is much more open than the one that we can find in any previous classical philosopher. To this we have to add that, for Strauss, the fact that Marsilius lowers his sights finds a fertile basis in the "thinner" ethical requirements of Christian divine law vis-à-vis Islam and Judaism. Strauss emphasizes that Marsilius's positive assessment of human reason and its political counterpart, the human legislator, against revelation leads to the legitimation of several actions that are clearly in contrast to Christian teaching. Since revelation is against reason, Marsilius regards the New Testament Law as "especially difficult to fulfill." This is why the Paduan is so lenient in permitting forms of conduct that are clearly at odds with Christian teaching in the political community. For example, Strauss remarks that, despite his praise of the evangelical idea of perfection based on poverty, the Paduan thinks very highly of wealth and honor because, like Aristotle, he considers them to be essential for the exercise of moral virtue.[68] Strauss also stresses the Paduan's conviction that even if drunkenness is forbidden by Christian divine law, human law neither authorizes coercion in this world against "drunkards" nor allows human legislators to use coercion to correct the sins against divine law.[69] Quite tellingly, at the end of the essay, Strauss says that Marsilius's view of the commonwealth echoes the claim put forward in Plato's *Republic* that the city of the pigs is the true city.[70] In *The City and Man*, Strauss claims that Aristotle refused a view of the city most likely proposed by a sophist. According to this view, the political community foreshadowed

[67] See Strauss, *TM*, 296, where he suggests that the cave, which he earlier suggested was a symbol of the city par excellence, becomes "the substance" of Machiavelli's philosophical teaching.

[68] Strauss, "MP," 289.

[69] Ibid. Strauss says that Christian law "does not forbid the human legislator to prohibit drunkenness under penalties in this world."

[70] Socrates makes this suggestion in the *Republic*, claiming that in the city of the pigs there is no need for untrue stories. See L. Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 98.

a modern idea of political society where citizens simply exchange goods and services without any concern for its members' moral character. Strauss writes that the view of an amoral and economic society refused by Aristotle was reminiscent of Socrates's description of the city of the pigs in the *Republic*, that is, "a society which is sufficient for satisfying the natural wants of the body, *i.e.* of the naturally private."[71] If Marsilius's view of the commonwealth is reminiscent of the city of the pigs, then clearly for Strauss, Marsilius's doctrine of the commonwealth is exclusively concerned with the perfection of the body, leaving aside Plato's concern with the philosophical utopia of the ideal city. This anticipates what Strauss ascribes to Machiavelli's achievements as a modern philosopher.

Similar reasoning can be found in Strauss's convoluted comparison between Marsilius's view of human law and Maimonides's ideas on human and divine law. In the footnote following Strauss's claim that Marsilius's view of the human law echoes Maimonides's reflections on human and divine law, Strauss refers to the *Guide of the Perplexed* III 27. In that chapter, Maimonides claims that the Law includes both the welfare of the body and the welfare of the soul. However, he clearly connects the importance of the laws that pertain to wrongdoings and human interactions in the political community exclusively with the welfare of the body. Strauss explains that Marsilius easily gets rid of any concern with the perfection of the soul because the Paduan combines Maimonides's idea of human law, which reflects the perfection of the body, and Aquinas's idea of divine law, which though grounded in the perfection of the soul, has less immediate relevance for the earthly world than it does for Maimonides. This is because, as Strauss asserts, in Aquinas, divine law, far from being rational, retains a supernatural character. Strauss suggests that, thanks to this move, Marsilius manages to dismiss altogether the relevance of revelation in his presentation of human society. In Strauss's view, for the Paduan, the only proper law is "the human law which is directed toward the well-being of the body," within the confines of political philosophy. In other words, Strauss seems to maintain that Marsilius adopts a purely non-theological perspective and presents an image of human society that clashes with Christian revelation. Not surprisingly, Strauss concludes this passage by saying that the original combination between Maimonides and Aquinas observable in Marsilius was driven by anticlericalism only "to some extent." We can speculate that to understand the full extent of Marsilius's motivations

[71] Ibid., 32.

behind his view, anticlericalism is not sufficient, and that we should consider the antitheological implications of Marsilius's view of human society.

But if Marsilius's notion of contemplation is emptied of its classical connotation, why does the Paduan, unlike Machiavelli, still openly praise contemplative life? For Strauss, Machiavelli presents a philosophy that lowers its sights and is aimed at celebrating the vulgar life of the city in its antiphilosophical characteristics. However his praise of power, self-preservation, and acquisitiveness should not lead one to deny the "philosophical" dimension of Machiavelli's achievements.[72] Evaluating the consequences of Machiavelli's actions, Strauss says that "the domination of necessity remains the indispensable condition of every great achievement and in particular of his own: the transition or the jump from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom will be the inglorious death of the very possibility of human excellence."[73] Philosophy's status is obfuscated in Machiavelli's teaching because given his "narrow view of the nature of man," the greatness of his achievements is diminished and, as a result, Machiavelli is unable to "give a clear account of his own doing."[74]

A similar case can be made for Marsilius. The clear universal status of the life of the body and the unusual status of the philosophical life that Strauss ascribes to Marsilius should not lead us to lose sight of Marsilius's task as a philosopher. To say that Marsilius presents an unusual defense of contemplation and lowers sights prior to Machiavelli does not mean that he does not philosophize at all. The point is that among the main purposes of his philosophizing, one already finds *in essence* the Machiavellian attempt to criticize morality overtly and publicly, more than any previous classical author, especially the Jewish-Islamic Averroists, had done before. Marsilius characterizes himself as a philosopher because he presents himself "as a strict follower of Aristotle," "the divine philosopher" or "the pagan sage."[75] For him, however, philosophizing consists of a reflection on the main activity of the lives of nonphilosophers and is much less concerned with the traditional themes of speculative philosophy than was Alfarabi or Maimonides.[76] This also allows us to make sense of Strauss's claim that Marsilius is a Latin Averroist. Like

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[72] On this see Meier, *Political Philosophy and the Challenge of Revealed Religion,* 36–43.

[73] See Strauss, *TM*, 298.

[74] See ibid., 294.

[75] Ibid., 277.

[76] On this matter, see Strauss's essay "The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*," in *PAW*, 95–141.

the Latin Averroists, Marsilius's attitude towards the truths of philosophy is much more immoderate than that of Jewish-Islamic Averroists, but less so when compared to that of Machiavelli because it has not yet been turned into the new comprehensive philosophical agenda that we find in the Florentine. This is why, even if, exactly like the Machiavellian philosopher, Marsilius ends up providing an unclear idea as to how his own status as a philosopher can be accounted for, the Paduan is still caught between the classics and the moderns.

Conclusion

For Strauss, Marsilius's position lies somewhere in between the classical philosophers, especially the *falasifa*, and Machiavelli, but it leans more towards the latter. The Straussian interpretation of the Paduan does not openly suggest, as Machiavelli and his successors do, that "a stupendous contraction of the horizon" is a "wondrous enlargement of the horizon."[77] Strauss's claim that Marsilius lowers his sights even before Machiavelli must always be assessed in light of Marsilius's cautious rejection of revelation. We could frame this by sayindg that, at first glance, Marsilius's teaching is akin to the message of Jewish-Islamic philosophers because it seems to share their moderation with respect to any public opposition to the teaching of revelation. This might also be the reason why, in his piece on Marsilius, Strauss does not explicitly label Marsilius a Latin Averroist. However, upon deeper scrutiny, Marsilius's message is, as Strauss says in *NRH*, far more similar to that of the Latin Averroists and anticipates Machiavelli's modernity. Indeed, with his unusual defense of contemplation and praise of habits that are in contrast with the teaching of Christian revelation, Marsilius already sets the ground for a greater open and public critique of morality than can be seen in any previous classical thinker. However, he does not turn the latter's challenge to the tradition into a comprehensive normative agenda or some form of propaganda, as Machiavelli would later do. In other words, Machiavelli says openly what Marsilius only implied. Marsilius paves the way to modernity, which finds its most important representative in Machiavelli, but he only does so in a disguised manner.

[77] Strauss, *TM*, 295.