

## POLITICS AND PERFECTION: GERSONIDES VS. MAIMONIDES

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*Gersonides (1288–1344) is consistent in seeing the pure life of the mind as the highest end to which a human being can aspire. Maimonides (1138–1204) certainly presented the vita contemplativa as a crucially important goal but made room in his view of the perfected life for what we would call today statesmanship or politics. Gersonides' view is surprising because he refuses to follow the Platonists in their call for some sort of integration between the vita contemplativa and the vita activa, the Aristotelians who called for their separation, or ibn Bajja in his insistence that the philosopher withdraw from society.*

*Gersonides' singular view is delineated here by contrasting his positions on prophecy, the imitation of God, and especially the nature of the perfected life, with those of Maimonides. With respect to the latter, in particular, Gersonides held that the perfected life involved the study and teaching of the sciences. In teaching science one is actively imitating God. One seeks out students in order to imitate God (contra ibn Bajja); teaching those students is not the unintended consequence of one's own perfection (as with Maimonides) — it is the very point of that perfection.*

*It is suggested here that Gersonides' unusual position on the place of politics in the perfected life reflects the Christian culture which apparently framed his universe of political discourse and it is to that we should look in seeking to understand his unusual position.*

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Gersonides (1288–1344) is consistent in seeing the pure life of the mind as the highest end to which a human being can aspire.<sup>1</sup> Maimonides (1138–1204) certainly presented the *vita contemplativa* as a crucially important goal but made room in his view of the perfected life for what we would call today statesmanship or politics.<sup>2</sup> This essay compares Gersonides' pure intellectualism with Maimonides' modified intellectualism. Gersonides' view is surprising because it is so much at variance with the dominant strains of what may be called the political theology of medieval Jewish and Muslim Aristotelianism. Gersonides, it appears, was the *only* medieval Jew or Muslim who followed neither the Platonic path charted in Islam by Alfarabi and in Judaism by Maimonides, nor the position held by ibn Bajja. Nor was he decisively influenced by Aristotle's *Politics* as were so many of his Christian contemporaries.

Putting the matter crudely for the moment, the Platonists called for some sort of integration between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*, the Aristotelians called for their separation, while ibn Bajja called upon the philosopher to withdraw entirely from society. Gersonides, as we shall see, charted a fourth path. With respect to the question of the political component of the perfected life Gersonides was, as with so many other issues, emphatically his own man.

It fell to the lot of Leo Strauss to set the tone and direction for much of this century's scholarship on medieval Jewish and Muslim political thought. One of the clearest statements of his position is found in "How to Begin to Study Medieval Philosophy": "Religion is conceived by Muslims and Jews primarily as a law. Accordingly, religion enters the horizon of the philosophers primarily as a political fact. Therefore, the philosophic discipline dealing with religion is not philosophy of religion, but political philosophy or political science."<sup>3</sup>

Strauss points out that the political science in question is Platonic, and this divides the Muslim/Jewish world from the world of Christian scholasticism, "whereas the classic political science in the Western world was Aristotle's *Politics*, the classics of political science in the Islamic-Jewish world were the *Republic* and the *Laws*. In fact, Aristotle's *Politics* was unknown to the Islamic-Jewish world,<sup>4</sup> and the *Republic* and the *Laws* made their appearance in Christian Europe not before the fifteenth cen-

tury." Muslims and Jews, of course, considered their laws to be divine, laws "given by God to men by the intermediary of a prophet. The prophet is interpreted by Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Maimonides in terms of the Platonic philosopher-king; as the founder of the perfect political community."<sup>5</sup>

Ever since Augustine, and in radical contrast to the Muslim/Jewish approach, medieval Christianity had distinguished the city of God from the city of man, using the doctrine of the "two swords" to distinguish the spiritual from the temporal realms.<sup>6</sup> If Plato sought to define the ideal *Republic*, Alfarabi, the *Virtuous City*, and Maimonides the constitution of the best Jewish state (in the *Mishneh Torah*)<sup>7</sup> all in this world, medieval Christian thought tended to defer the actualization of the city of God to another dispensation. As Melamed put it,

Medieval Christianity had a natural tendency, like Aristotle in the *Politics*, to see the political sphere as separate and independent, engaged in enquiry into laws and temporal rule only. This was largely isolated from divine law and affairs of spiritual authority, which were deemed non-political and supra-political in essence. By contrast Judaism and Islam, as Strauss pointed out, laid distinct stress on the political quality of the revelation, which is divine law given through a prophet, who is also lawgiver and political leader.<sup>8</sup>

The notion of the philosopher/king/prophet<sup>9</sup> became a standard trope in post-Maimonidean medieval Jewish thought; in consequence, Maimonides and his followers saw political involvement or statesmanship as one of the requirements for the perfected life. Gersonides stands in stark contrast to this consensus.<sup>10</sup> He did not, however, stand alone. The Muslim philosopher ibn Bajja called for the withdrawal of the philosopher from society to the greatest extent possible. His "Governance of the Solitary" was taken as a model by Jewish thinkers such as Samuel ibn Tibbon, Moses Narboni, Joseph ibn Caspi, and others.<sup>11</sup> Ibn Bajja's position in the Islamic world, it should be noted, was so unusual that in his *Political Thought in Medieval Islam*, Erwin I.J. Rosenthal called his chapter on ibn Bajja, "Ibn Bajja: Individualist Deviation." Its impact on the Jewish world, as Melamed shows, however, was far from inconsequential and

some medievals wanted to read Maimonides in the light of ibn Bajja's doctrines. In his first comment on *Guide of the Perplexed* III.51, for example, Efodi says that the chapter deals with *hanhagat ha-mitboded* (i.e., the governance of the solitary individual), a clear reference to ibn Bajja's book of that name.<sup>12</sup> Gersonides, as we shall see, was no more a follower of ibn Bajja and his Jewish enthusiasts than he was of Maimonides.

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Leo Strauss, Shlomo Pines, and Lawrence Berman have repeatedly drawn attention to the important Platonic/Alfarabian elements in Maimonides' thinking, especially concerning the centrality of statesmanship or political involvement in the perfected life. This author has recently argued that they have collectively over-emphasized this aspect of Maimonides' thought, painting him as more the disciple of Alfarabi than as the disciple of Moses.<sup>13</sup> While thus differing from Strauss, Pines, and Berman on the weight Maimonides gave to the political element in the perfected life, there is no denying that to one extent or another it does play an important role for him.<sup>14</sup> This point is examined here, so as better to be able to compare Gersonides with Maimonides.

For our purposes, two related discussions of Maimonides' are crucial: the nature of prophecy and the nature of human perfection. Maimonides discusses the nature of prophecy in many places, including the introduction to his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, in his *Thirteen Principles of Faith*, in "Laws of the Foundations of the Torah," in his "Epistle to Yemen," and, most extensively, in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Part Two, chapters 32 through 48. We will concentrate on that discussion, since it represents Maimonides' most complete exposition of the subject. Given that Maimonides' ideas on prophecy are well-known, We will focus only on those issues which emphasize the political aspect of the perfected life and which illuminate the ways in which Gersonides differs from Maimonides.

Maimonides understands prophecy to be "a certain perfection in the nature of man" (II.32).<sup>15</sup> In Chapter 36 Maimonides makes clear what the nature of that perfection is:

Know that the true reality and quiddity of prophecy consists in its being an overflow overflowing from God, may He be cherished and honored, through the intermediation of the Active Intellect, toward the rational faculty in the first place and thereafter toward the imaginative faculty. This is the highest degree of man and the ultimate term of perfection that can exist for his species; and this state is the ultimate perfection for the imaginative faculty. This is something that cannot by any means exist in every man. And it is not something that can be attained solely through perfection in the speculative sciences and through the improvement of the moral habits, even if all of them have become as fine and good as can be. There still is needed in addition the highest possible degree of perfection of the imaginative faculty in respect of its original natural disposition (p. 369).

Prophecy, then, results from an emanation from God through the Active Intellect upon the human rational faculty; this emanation is "rich" enough not only to fructify the rational faculty, but continues "overflowing" on to the imaginative faculty. For a person to prophesy it is not enough that he or she have perfected morals and "perfection in the speculative sciences"; the aspirant to prophecy must also have "the highest possible degree of perfection of the imaginative faculty."

Why this emphasis on the imaginative faculty (which is mentioned three times in the passage just quoted)? One of the reasons is that Maimonides construes the difference between veridical dreams and prophecy to be "only a difference in degree" (II.37, p. 370). This is a consequence of Maimonides' concern here to distinguish veridical dreams and prophecy, on the one hand, from Mosaic prophecy, on the other; by assimilating prophecy to other similar phenomena, Maimonides can draw the line between such phenomena and Mosaic prophecy that much more sharply.<sup>16</sup>

For our purposes, however, there is a more important reason for this emphasis. In II.37 Maimonides explains that the same divine emanation can stimulate three sorts of responses, each conditioned by the characteristics of the person who benefits from the emanation. Cases where the emanation reaches the rational faculty alone, and does not spill over, as it were, on to

the imaginative faculty, are "characteristic of the men of science engaged in speculation;" i.e., of philosophers (p. 374). If, on the other hand, "the overflow only reaches the imaginative faculty...this is characteristic of the class of those who govern cities, while being the legislators, the soothsayers, the augers, and the dreamers of veridical dreams" (p. 374). Prophets are those individuals who, thanks to the natural perfection of their constitutions, the perfection of their morals, and the perfection of their intellects, are such "that this overflow reaches both faculties — I mean both the rational and the imaginative" (p. 374).

The prophet, therefore, is not only a philosopher, but he or she must also be a statesman:

Now there is no doubt that whenever — in an individual of this description — his imaginative faculty, which is as perfect as possible, acts and receives from the intellect an overflow corresponding to his speculative perfection, this individual will apprehend divine and most extraordinary matters, will only see God and His angels, and will only be aware and achieve knowledge of matters that constitute true opinions and general directives for the well-being of men in relations with one another.<sup>17</sup>

What constitutes "the well-being of men in relations with one another"? In *Guide of the Perplexed* III.27 (p. 510), Maimonides seems to answer that question:

The Law [i.e., the Torah] as a whole aims at two things: the welfare of the soul and the welfare of the body....As for the welfare of the body, it comes about by improvement of their ways of living with one another. This is achieved through two things. One of them is the abolition of their wronging each other. This is tantamount to every individual among the people not being permitted to act according to his will and up to the limits of his power, but being forced to do that which is useful to the whole. The second thing consists in the acquisition by every human individual of moral qualities that are useful for life in society so that the affairs of the city may be ordered....[The welfare of the body] consists in the

governance of the city and the well-being of the states of all its people according to their capacity.

The concern of the prophet for "the well-being of men in relations with one another" is not then simply the concern of a religious leader for the spiritual health of his or her individual contemporaries (which can be achieved in isolation), but is, rather, the concern of a political leader for the well-being of his or her state.

Not every prophet, however, is concerned with the well-being of states or even of other individuals. Maimonides discusses such persons in II.37. "Sometimes the prophetic revelation that comes to a prophet," he says, "only renders him perfect and has no other effect. And sometimes the prophetic revelation that comes to him compels him to address a call to the people, teach them, and let his own perfection overflow toward them" (p. 375). This ought not to be construed as some sort of retreat from the Platonic/Alfarabian structure we have seen to this point, according to which the perfected life contains some component of statesmanship or politics. Individuals who benefit from the divine emanation but are not led to benefit others may indeed be called prophets since they benefit from the divine emanation; but their level of perfection is inferior to that of prophets who feel compelled to improve the states and societies in which they live. As Maimonides says, some individuals "achieve perfection to an extent that enables them to govern others, whereas others achieve perfection *only* in a measure that allows them to be governed by others, as we have explained" (p. 374; emphasis added).

Let us recall that in *Guide of the Perplexed* II.36 (p. 369), speaking of prophecy, Maimonides said, "This is the highest degree of man and the ultimate term of perfection that can exist for his species." The prophet, therefore, represents the ideal towards which humans ought to aspire and part and parcel of being any but the most inferior of prophets, as we have seen, involves statesmanship or political involvement.<sup>18</sup>

None of this should be at all surprising. Medieval Jewish political thought — one of the main architects of which was Maimonides — followed the Platonic tradition in seeing the ideal ruler as a philosopher-king and followed the Jewish tradi-

tion in both refusing to divorce political from spiritual leadership and in refusing to see the world as we know it as beyond repair. The religiously perfected individual (which for Maimonides meant the philosophically perfected individual) as such had to be concerned with the governance of state and society.

What *is* surprising is the way in which Gersonides virtually ignored this aspect of medieval Jewish (and Muslim) Aristotelianism, presenting a vision of human perfection in which politics and statesmanship plays literally no role whatsoever.

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Rabbi Levi ben Gershom had two philosophical masters: Maimonides and Averroes. Indeed, his philosophical *magnum opus*, *Wars of the Lord*, may be best understood as a work designed to correct the views of Maimonides (divine knowledge, creation) or interpret those views (human immortality, prophecy, providence). Rare are the places where Gersonides clearly rejects views held jointly by Maimonides and Averroes. The place of politics in the perfected life is one of those places.

Gersonides' ideas of human perfection are uncompromisingly intellectualist. We may profitably begin to examine them by noting that in his *Wars of the Lord* Gersonides clearly states that "the reward and punishment that occur to man insofar as he is man have to be good and evil that are [truly] human, not good and evil that are not human. Now human good consists of the acquisition of the felicity of the soul, for this good concerns man as man, and not the pursuit of good food and other sensual objects."<sup>19</sup>

Having learned that "human good consists of the acquisition of the felicity (*hazlahah*) of the soul," we must now ask in what that felicity consists. "God's intention [in creation]," Gersonides tells us in his commentary to the Torah, "was that man's striving be for nothing but the perfection of the human intellect." In light of this, Gersonides continues, "[God] commanded that man strive to acquire the apprehensions specific to the human intel-



lect, these being the intelligibilia through which he becomes everlasting."<sup>20</sup>

In a number of places, Gersonides calls knowledge "the fruit of all human endeavor" (*pri kol ha-adam*). Thus, in his commentary on the Torah (Venice, p. 115d, fifth *to'elet*) Gersonides writes that one ought not to give up striving after the acquisition of intelligibilia even after having acquired many of them, but, rather, one ought to direct "all of one's striving towards always continuing to learn, for this is the fruit of all human endeavor." Gersonides takes as paradigmatic here Moses' ceaseless desire to learn ever more "speculative apprehensions" (*hassagot iyyuniot*).<sup>21</sup>

Gersonides carries this idea over to his commentaries on Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. In comparing the three "Solomonic" books (Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, Song of Songs) in his introduction to his commentary on Ecclesiastes, Gersonides explains that in the first of his books Solomon collects commonly accepted ideas on ethics (*mefursemot*), while in the second (Proverbs) he examines them in detail, distinguishing the useful from the harmful.<sup>22</sup> "Since the choicest of the species of good is speculative perfection, it being their fruit, he then perfected the investigation concerning it in Song of Songs, according to what we think."<sup>23</sup> In his commentary to Song of Songs 8:12, with reference to metaphysical studies, Gersonides comments on the verse (*My vineyard which is mine is before me; Thou, O Solomon, shalt have the thousand; And these that keep the fruit thereof two hundred*) as follows:

She said that this vineyard is in front of her, and that she will endeavor that the *thousand pieces of silver* (8:11) become his — it being the fruit in what came above,<sup>24</sup> and that the *keepers* will endeavor to apprehend the discrete matters, the apprehension of which is related to them, till the intellect move from what was gathered to it by all the *keepers* to the apprehension of this one which was mentioned above, which is the fruit of the intellect and its end.<sup>25</sup> He expressed it with this number, i.e., *two hundred* to indicate that when that which all of the senses — of which there are only five, as has been established in *On the Soul*,<sup>26</sup> — apprehend for him is gathered together, there was gathered together from this that which is

potentially the fruit,<sup>27</sup> which is *a thousand pieces of silver* (8:11), for five times two hundred is one thousand.<sup>28</sup>

The highest level of human endeavor, then, is "the fruit of the intellect and its end." The endeavor referred to here is the study of metaphysics.<sup>29</sup>

Gersonides' purely intellectualist orientation towards the nature of the perfected life comes out very clearly in his commentary to Song of Songs, in his doctrine of immortality, and in his analysis of prophecy. Let us look first at the commentary to Song of Songs. The commentary itself is preceded by a lengthy introduction, the bulk of which is given over to a discussion of various epistemological issues. This discussion is made necessary by the fact that Gersonides here defines the ultimate felicity of human beings as "cognizing and knowing God so far as [man] is able," and the purpose of Song of Songs as making known the way to achieve such felicity. Song of Songs, it will turn out, is an attempt both to describe the stages of human cognition and to guide the individual seeking ultimate felicity by its achievement.<sup>30</sup>

The narratives and commandments of the Torah generally hint at such information, but there is only one text in the whole Bible which deals exclusively with it: Song of Songs. Since, unlike the rest of the Bible, Song of Songs is meant to guide only selected individuals to their felicity, its surface meaning (an erotic love song) was not made useful to the masses. This, apparently, is Gersonides' solution to the problem of how a text like Song of Songs, with its outward meaning of frank carnality, came to be included in the Bible.

Having brought us this far, Gersonides now shows how the structure of Song of Songs reflects its intent. The main topics dealt with in the book are the following: (a) the overcoming of those impediments to cognition (and thus to felicity) related to moral behavior; (b) the overcoming of those impediments caused by failure to distinguish between truth and falsity; (c) the need to engage in speculation according to the proper order; (d) the division of the sciences (mathematics, physics, metaphysics) and how nature reflects that division; (e) characteristics of these types of sciences.

The overall structure of the book now clear, Gersonides provides us with a detailed table of contents. When the intent of its author is properly understood, Song of Songs is seen to fall into the following sections:

1. Introductory material concerning the book, its name, its author, his position, the book's form of exposition, its subject matter, and its purpose; refutations of those objections which throw doubt upon the possibility of achieving felicity (1:1-8).
2. The necessity of overcoming impediments relating to moral imperfection (1:9-2:7).
3. The necessity of overcoming impediments relating to imagination and opinion so that one can distinguish truth from falsehood (2:8-2:17).
4. The study of mathematics (3:1-4:7).
5. The study of physics in the proper fashion (4:8-8:4).
6. The study of metaphysics (8:5-8:14).

As presented thus by Gersonides, the ultimate end of human beings *qua* human beings is the study of the sciences, most especially metaphysics. Moral perfection and the study of mathematics are preparations for the study of the sciences, the latter being the proper object of human activity. Indeed, in his introduction to Song of Songs, Gersonides says that the "prophets and those who speak by virtue of the holy spirit"<sup>31</sup> never ceased from guiding men to perfection, either to the first perfection, or to the final perfection, or to both. This [will be accomplished] when what is understood by the multitudes from the words of the Prophets guides one to moral perfection and what is understood by the elite guides [one] to conceptual perfection."<sup>32</sup>

The "public" teaching of the Torah guides one to moral perfection; its esoteric teachings guide the initiate to intellectual perfection. But the moral perfection taught publicly by the Torah is crucial for achieving intellectual (i.e., truly human) perfection, as Gersonides makes clear in the commentary to Song of Songs 1:9:

With respect to this it is clear concerning the hylic intellect that it cannot possibly go to the place of its desire if the man had not previously decorated himself with praiseworthy moral qualities and divested himself of the *filthy garments*,<sup>33</sup>

i.e., inferior morality. This has been made clear, and the Prophets and those who speak by virtue of the holy spirit have made reference to this, the Sages have made reference to this, and the philosophers have made reference to this as well. Abu Hammad already said in his book about intentions, making an allegory about this matter, that the intellect is similar to a mirror; just as a dirty, unpolished mirror will not receive the impression of things seen, but will receive them when its dirt is removed and it is polished, so the intellect will not apprehend things if it is not cleansed first of the filth of inferior moral qualities and if their dirt is not removed from it.<sup>34</sup> This is the intention of his words, even if he did not phrase them in this fashion.

The propaedeutic nature of ethical behavior is thus made perfectly clear: one must be good, not for its own sake alone, or in order thereby to imitate God, or to fulfill God's commands, but ultimately in order to make it possible to achieve one's fullest realization as a human being: the apprehension of intelligibles.<sup>35</sup>

Gersonides' highly intellectualist orientation to the question of human perfection is made clear in his discussion of human immortality, the reward (actually, the consequence) of having achieved perfection. That part of the human being which survives death is the acquired intellect. Gersonides defines the acquired intellect succinctly as "the intelligibles that accrue from abstracting material forms from their matter."<sup>36</sup> The acquired intellect, in other words, is really nothing other than a collection of ideas. Gersonides devotes *Wars of the Lord* I.11 to a proof that "the acquired intellect is everlasting." Gersonides there adds to our information concerning the nature of the acquired intellect, maintaining that "it is clear that the acquired intellect is the perfection of the material intellect brought about by the Active Intellect," and that "the acquired intellect is itself the order obtaining in the sublunar world that is inherent in the Active Intellect."<sup>37</sup> It is not just any ideas, then, that constitute the acquired intellect, but just those ideas found in a systematic fashion in the "mind" of the Active Intellect.<sup>38</sup> Nowhere in his various discussions of the acquired intellect does Gersonides retreat from his position that one acquires an intellect, and

thereby "earns" immortality, through the perfection of the intellect *alone*.<sup>39</sup>

Our point becomes very clear in Gersonides' discussion of prophecy. *Wars of the Lord II* is devoted to the subject. The issue has been widely treated in the scholarly literature on Gersonides and there is no need here to present a detailed account of Gersonides' theory of prophecy.<sup>40</sup> Rather, we will pick out those details which illuminate the heavily intellectualist cast of his thought and which stand in contrast to elements of Maimonides' doctrine, as discussed above.

Gersonides sees prophecy in the first instance as a species of precognition and treats of it in connection with other types of precognition, namely divination and veridical dreams. Indeed, the entire thrust of Gersonides' discussion of prophecy in *Wars of the Lord II* is to distinguish it from divination and veridical dreams. Thus, he opens his discussion as follows: "Let us begin by stating that the knowledge man possesses concerning future events through dreams, divination, or prophecy cannot be by chance, for what occurs by chance occurs both infrequently and only in a few things."<sup>41</sup>

The information conveyed by prophecy (and by divination and veridical dreams as well) "occurs rarely, if at all, with respect to necessary matters."<sup>42</sup> In other words, prophecy rarely conveys information about what we would today call scientific matters and what Gersonides would have called speculative (*iyyuni*) matters, i.e., the domains of physics and metaphysics. "Rather," he continues,

for the most part it concerns possible states of affairs among individual men to the extent that they do in fact occur. Indeed, we used the phrase, "that they occur among individual men" because it is evident from experience that dreams, divination, and prophecy communicate information only about *human* circumstances and chance events. When we do have [such] knowledge of things other than human affairs, this knowledge is related to a particular man.

The standard domain of prophecy, then, is matters of interest to individual human beings.

After determining the type of information usually conveyed in dreams, divination, and prophecy (future events of interest to particular individuals) and the agent which conveys the information to the dreamer, diviner, or prophet (which agent turns out to be the Active Intellect, as Gersonides proves to his satisfaction in *Wars of the Lord* II.3), Gersonides devotes a short chapter (II.5) to the "determination of the purpose of this communication." "We maintain," he says,

that the purpose of such information is the provision for and preservation [of the human species]. For, since man has the freedom to pursue the good and avoid the evil that is pre-established for him by the pattern that has been ordered by heavenly bodies, and since he has little knowledge of the good and evil that can befall him, this type of communication is given him in order that he [can] avoid the evil that he [now] knows has been set for him or [he can] pursue the good that has been set for him by means that will realize this good. In this way good will be increased.

Prophecy, it turns out, is a species of providence, designed to enable the prophet to escape evils to which he or she would otherwise fall prey, or to maximize the goods available to him or to her.<sup>43</sup> In other words, prophecy (as well as dreams and divination, of course) exists primarily for the good of the prophet.

In *Wars of the Lord* II.6 Gersonides raises a number of questions concerning his theory of dreams, divination, and prophecy, the fourth and fifth of which are of particular interest in this context:

Fourth, how is it possible for this communication to be so specific that [it is] more [concerned with] the man to whom the communication is given, with the people with whom he grew up, with his family, his nation and his enemies, rather than with other people?...Fifth, how can a man receive knowledge concerning the affairs of other men if this knowledge is supposed to be concerned with the provision and preservation [of these people]? It would be [more] proper for this knowledge to be conveyed to the person who would receive

from it the intended benefit, for the sake of which this knowledge exists.<sup>44</sup>

The assumption behind these two questions is that the pre-cognitive knowledge afforded through dreams, divination, and prophecy is intended to benefit the dreamer, diviner, or prophet. This point is confirmed in Gersonides' answers to these objections: "The fourth objection is also easy to solve. This knowledge is generally concerned with the people [within the acquaintance of the recipient], for it is only about them that the recipient thinks."<sup>45</sup> The dreamer, diviner, or prophet receives information from the Active Intellect about the futures of persons for whom he or she has strong personal concern; the prophet may benefit others, but that benefit is basically an extension or overflow of the benefit which the prophecy endows upon the prophet himself or herself.

This point is made clear in Gersonides' answer to the fifth objection: "Someone who has reached this level has a strong natural desire to inform others of what he has learned about their affairs....For it is the nature of a perfection, which is possessed by such a man, that when he has reached the point that he can disseminate his knowledge to others, he has a desire to so transmit it."<sup>46</sup> The prophet receives information about persons close to him or her; to the extent that their well-being is of concern to the prophet, he or she will obviously seek to be of assistance to them. But even were this not the case, once one has reached the level of prophecy, one has an inner need to share the knowledge one has acquired with others. Once again, prophecy serves the needs of the prophet more than the needs of others.

Two further aspects of Gersonides' theory need to be discussed; the first has to do with the distinction between prophets and diviners, while the second involves the distinction between prophets and *hakhamim*, masters of physics and metaphysics, whom we shall call philosophers.<sup>47</sup>

In distinguishing prophecy from dreams and divination, Gersonides reminds us that "it is well known that prophecy requires the perfection of the intellect."<sup>48</sup> Building on this point, Gersonides continues:



Now prophecy differs from divination and dreams in several ways. First, prophecy is a perfection that is attained after study....No such thing obtains in divination or dreams. Second, a condition for prophecy is wisdom, which is obvious from the very nature of prophecy. But this is not true for divination or dreams....Third, everything that a prophet transmits is true....However, in divination and dreams there are many falsehoods, as the senses testify. Fourth, when a prophet conveys this knowledge, he guides the man or nation to whom he transmitted this information toward human perfection, such as when the prophet tells the man to depart from his evil ways and return to God and the man does in fact depart from his evil path. Indeed, most of the information transmitted to man [through prophecy] is for his perfection. This is not the case with divination or dreams.<sup>49</sup>

From this passage we learn a number of facts important for our purposes here. In the first place, we learn that a prophet must be a *hakham*. This, of course, is no surprise, it being a staple of Jewish Aristotelianism and a central element in Maimonides' doctrine of prophecy.<sup>50</sup> It is also a point which Gersonides had already made explicit in the Introduction to *Wars of the Lord*. "A prophet," he says there, "is necessarily a philosopher" (*hakham*).<sup>51</sup>

Second, Gersonides here tells us that the purpose of the prophet is to guide others towards human perfection. As was made clear above, human perfection for Gersonides is intellectual perfection. Adopting a distinction quoted above from Maimonides (*Guide of the Perplexed*, III.27), we may say that for Gersonides the prophet aims exclusively at the welfare of the soul, basically ignoring the welfare of the body (which, for Maimonides at least, meant primarily the establishment and nurturing of just states and societies).

One ought to not think that Gersonides' comments about the role of the prophet in causing humans to abandon their "evil ways," thereby returning to God, in any way lessen the intellectualist cast of his prophetology. In the first place, we saw above how for Gersonides moral behavior is prized as a means towards intellectual perfection. To the extent that the prophet inveighs against injustice and seeks to correct evil behavior, he or she does this so as to bring people to be able to adopt a correct



(philosophical) understanding of God and nature. In the second place, Gersonides himself makes the point clearly in his commentary on the Torah, there claiming that the term *zaddik* ("righteous individual") is applied to one whose morals are perfected and is applied to one who has achieved intellectual perfection.<sup>52</sup> Departing from evil ways and returning to God for Gersonides means not only behaving morally, but also achieving intellectual perfection.

Gersonides' purely intellectualist approach to prophecy is made clear in the eighth and last chapter of the second Treatise of the *Wars of the Lord* in which he discusses the gradations to be found among prophets, diviners, and dreamers. With respect to prophets, he says that "whoever is more perfect in intellect and in whom the isolation [of this faculty] is more complete attains a more perfect degree of prophecy."<sup>53</sup> Prophets are thus distinguished one from the other by their intellectual abilities. He continues, further emphasizing the intellectual character, not only of the prophet, but also of prophecy: "Someone who is concerned only with intellectual perfection will give information that concerns this perfection and the things that are conducive to its attainment insofar as they lead to this end."

The diviner, however, is distinguished from the prophet, not by being less intellectually oriented, but by being perfected in another direction altogether: "The most perfect diviner, [on the other hand], is someone whose imaginative faculty is more prepared to isolate itself from the other faculties and has in addition an [imaginative] capacity that is constitutionally perfect."<sup>54</sup> Like prophets, diviners are of different degrees; the better a diviner's imaginative faculty, and the more easily he or she can isolate it from other faculties of the soul, the better diviner will he or she be.

We emphasize this last point because of its importance in comparing Gersonides and Maimonides. For the latter, as we have seen, the prophet combines *both* perfection of the intellect *and* perfection of the imagination. For Maimonides, the prophet shares imaginative perfection with the political leader; it is precisely that perfection which Gersonides here dramatically de-emphasizes with respect to the prophet. Once again, the prophet's intellectualism is emphasized: he or she is *not* meant to be a political leader.

Our discussion has brought us to one last question which must be raised about Gersonides' teachings concerning prophecy. If the prophet is really nothing other than a species of philosopher, in what way is prophecy distinguished from philosophical wisdom, and how is the prophet superior to the philosopher? This is an issue which seems to have exercised Gersonides to some extent, and he returns to it time and again, perhaps because, unlike Maimonides, he has no easy answer to the question.

The issue comes up for the first time in the Introduction to the *Wars of the Lord*. Defending himself against the claim that "investigating the question of the eternity or the creation of the world," betrays "arrogance and rashness," Gersonides argues *inter alia* against the assumption that "only a prophet can attain the truth on this matter," since, it is alleged, "what a prophet obtains through prophecy is inaccessible to a philosopher who uses only reason." Gersonides disposes of this objection by noting, as we have seen already, that "a prophet is necessarily a philosopher." Thus,

some of the things that are known by him are peculiar to him as a prophet, e.g., most of the things he predicts that will occur at a particular time; other things he knows simply because he is a philosopher, i.e., the things that are known by him about the secrets of the world.<sup>55</sup> The difference between a prophet and a philosopher, however, lies merely in the [relative] ease with which the prophet obtains [his knowledge]. For the knowledge of the prophet is generally greater than the knowledge of a philosopher who is not a prophet.

The prophet is thus distinguished from the philosopher in two ways: he or she can predict the future,<sup>56</sup> and he or she is generally a better philosopher. With respect to knowledge, and putting the issue in modern terms, the prophet is quantitatively, not qualitatively, superior to the philosopher who has not achieved prophecy. Gersonides hastens to emphasize this very point, taking issue with a position enunciated by Maimonides in *Guide of the Perplexed* II.38, to the effect that prophets, unlike philosophers, know some propositions intuitively:

Therefore prophecy is joined with wisdom [but] not [in the sense] that what is to a philosopher a derived cognition is to the prophet a primary cognition, as some people have maintained. If this were the case, the knowledge of the philosopher would be more perfect, since he knows the thing by means of its causes, whereas the prophet does not. But this is absurd. It is possible that there are things that a philosopher who is not a prophet cannot apprehend, but which can be known by a philosopher who is [also] a prophet, insofar as he is a philosopher.<sup>57</sup>

Gersonides rejects the idea that the prophet knows intuitively things the philosopher must learn; this, on the Aristotelian grounds that true knowledge of a thing is knowledge of the thing *with its causes*;<sup>58</sup> intuitive knowledge is thus inferior to learned knowledge. If the prophet is superior to the philosopher (something assumed here by Gersonides), it cannot be because the former knows intuitively while the latter does not. That is not to affirm, Gersonides adds, that philosophers know everything that prophets know; they do not, but that is because prophets are better philosophers than non-prophetic philosophers, not because they have some special insight or intuition.

This being the case, it might be asked, why would anyone want to be a prophet? The job-description of prophets as found in the Bible is hardly attractive — very few prophets, it would seem, die peacefully in bed! Gersonides would not understand this question at all. He certainly agreed with Aristotle that “all men by nature desire to know;”<sup>59</sup> and, as we have seen, was convinced that once a person “knows,” he or she will naturally seek to share that knowledge. Prophecy per se is not *sought*; it is the natural outcome of the human urge to perfect oneself.

Gersonides returns to the question of prophet and philosopher in *Wars of the Lord* II.4, a chapter devoted to “an examination of the possibility of [prophetic] communication about theoretical matters.” In other words, do prophets as such receive philosophical instruction? After repeating the claims made in his Introduction that true knowledge of a thing is knowledge of it with its causes, and again rejecting the view that the prophet has intuitive *knowledge* qualitatively different from philosophical knowledge, Gersonides affirms (in part on the basis of his

own experience) that "when the Prophets (may they rest in peace) received some knowledge through prophecy, the causes of this knowledge were also transmitted."<sup>60</sup> This happens, Gersonides explains, when someone has been intellectually occupied with a particular problem, working at it with diligence while awake; they may then apprehend the answer in prophetic dream or trance. It is this ability which truly distinguishes the prophet from the philosopher, but it is not a qualitative difference between the two: the prophet is a "super-philosopher," not a "supra-philosopher."

There are two other ways in which Gersonides emphasizes the qualitative likeness of prophet and philosopher while preserving their quantitative unlikeness: prophets can err on theoretical matters,<sup>61</sup> and philosophers can, rarely, bring about miracles. The fact that prophets can err on theoretical matters (as, according to Gersonides, Ezekiel did)<sup>62</sup> proves that with respect to such matters they are not qualitatively superior to philosophers. The point is further emphasized by Gersonides' claim that non-prophetic philosophers can bring about miracles. Gersonides devotes *Wars of the Lord* VI.ii.11 (pp. 453-454) to this issue, there commenting that miracles are a form of providence vouchsafed to the very highly perfected.<sup>63</sup> There can be cases, he says, of highly perfected philosophers, on the verge of prophecy, as it were, having miracles worked on their behalf. But this phenomenon is very rare: after all, how often will a person be perfected enough to have miracles worked on his or her behalf, but not be perfected enough to achieve prophecy?

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There are other ways in which Gersonides' disinterest in politics and emphasis on the intellect as the sole route to perfection find expression in his writings; we will mention some of them here, briefly. Gersonides' views on the imitation of God give clear expression to his intellectualist position on the perfect life. Once again, comparing his views to those of Maimonides will be illuminating. As noted above, this writer differs from Strauss, Pines, and Berman, all of whom maintain, in one way or another, that for Maimonides the perfected life is the life of the

statesman and that one imitates God most fully by founding (as in the case of Moses) or sustaining (as in the case of other prophets) virtuous states. But it is well-nigh impossible to deny that the imitation of God involves some degree or other of political involvement. The clearest expression of this is found in the very last sentences of the *Guide*:

It is clear that the perfection of man that may be truly gloried in [a reference to Jeremiah 9:22-23] is the one acquired by him who has achieved, in a measure corresponding to his capacity, apprehension of Him, may He be exalted, and who knows His providence extending over His creatures as manifested in the act of bringing them into being and their governance as it is. The way of life of such an individual, after he has achieved this apprehension, will always have in view *loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment*, through assimilation to His actions, may He be exalted.<sup>64</sup>

The perfected individual apprehends God to the greatest extent possible; understands the nature of God's governance over created beings; then seeks to practice "*loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment*, through assimilation" to God's actions. God governs the universe and part of our imitation of God must take the form of governance to the extent possible to us.

Gersonides' views on the imitation of God are very different. Having written a separate study of that subject, this writer will here only summarize the results.<sup>65</sup> The key text is found in the Introduction to *Wars of the Lord*: "Moreover, it is not proper for someone to withhold what he has learned in philosophy from someone else. This would be utterly disgraceful. Indeed, just as this entire universe emanated from God for no particular advantage to Him, so it is proper for someone who has achieved some perfection to try to impart it to someone else. In this way he is imitating God as best he can."<sup>66</sup>

One imitates God, then, by teaching philosophy to others after having learned it oneself. Analysis of this and further Gersonidean texts<sup>67</sup> leads to the conclusion that Gersonides maintains that one imitates God by teaching science. To translate Gersonides' point into modern idiom we may say that one fulfills the *halakhic* obligation of *imitatio Dei*, not through the

study of Torah in the narrow sense, not through the fulfillment of the commandments, not through metaphysical speculation, nor even through pure scientific research; rather, one imitates God by leading advanced seminars on the cutting edge of contemporary scientific inquiry. That Gersonides devoted the lion's share of his energies to pure scientific study is known;<sup>68</sup> given his views on the imitation of God, it is not surprising.<sup>69</sup>

There is a further point here to be made; it is of crucial importance in this context, further helping to distinguish Gersonides from Maimonides, on the one hand, and from ibn Bajja, on the other. For Maimonides, superior beings perfect inferior beings, but not by design or intention — the perfection of inferiors is a natural by-product of their emanative activity. Maimonides explicitly rejects the idea "that all that has been made has been made for it [i.e., the human species] alone so that even the heavenly spheres only revolve in order to be useful to it and to bring into existence that which is necessary for it.... It should not be believed that all the beings exist for the sake of the existence of man. On the contrary, all the other beings too have been intended for their own sakes and not for the sake of something else."<sup>70</sup>

Maimonides makes a similar point in another passage: "Know that in the case of every being that causes a certain good thing to overflow from it according to this order or rank, the existence, the purpose, and the end of the being conferring the benefits, do not consist in conferring the benefits on the recipient."<sup>71</sup> Superior beings do perfect inferior beings; but this is not the reason for the existence of the superior beings, their purpose, or their end. From the point of view of the superior beings, the benefit conferred on inferior beings is an unintended consequence of their activity.<sup>72</sup>

Gersonides, on the other hand, explicitly maintains that the heavenly bodies exist for the sake of sublunar entities.<sup>73</sup> In effect, God created the heavenly bodies so that they would perfect us. In teaching science, one is not simply allowing one's excellence to overflow onto one's inferiors; rather, one is actively imitating God. One seeks out students in order to imitate God (*contra* ibn Bajja); teaching those students is not the unintended consequence of one's own perfection (as with Maimonides) — it is the very point of that perfection.

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There is another indirect expression of Gersonides' disinterest in politics that ought to be noted here. In the Introduction to his commentary on Ecclesiastes (p. 25a) Gersonides notes that political philosophy (*ha-filosofiah ha-medinit*) investigates good and evil;<sup>74</sup> as philosophers have noted, "this subject is not susceptible of perfect verification; rather, commonly accepted principles (*hakdamot mefursemot*) are clarified in it; it is of the nature of these principles that one finds contradictions among them." A bit further on in his discussion, Gersonides asks (in the name of Solomon) whether "the good" is "the pleasant or the useful" and concludes that the latter is the proper definition of the good.<sup>75</sup>

A number of points of interest to us arise from this text. Gersonides defines political philosophy in terms of ethics. This should be contrasted with Maimonides' discussion in his *Art of Logic*, Chapter 14, where ethics is subsumed under political philosophy. Second, ethics itself is defined as the science of determining the useful or practical on the basis of commonly held opinions. For a person convinced that the apprehension of necessary truths is the only key to human perfection and thus immortality, this places ethics (and thus political philosophy) relatively low on the hierarchy of subjects to which one ought to devote time and attention.

This view is borne out by a glance at Gersonides' *to'aliyot*, the lessons or "advantages" which he derives from biblical texts. Whereas he devotes considerable ingenuity in deriving philosophical teachings from the text, and in connecting specific *halakhot* to biblical verses, his comments on ethics and politics in this context fall under the heading of "good advice." The *to'aliyot* pertaining to ethics and politics which Gersonides derives from the biblical text are by and large obvious, and often seem fairly cynical. He certainly did not devote to them the kind of attention and insight which he brings to bear on those texts which can be milked for *to'aliyot* concerning philosophical doctrines (*de'ot* as he calls them).



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Maimonides had followed the view of Plato as developed by Alfarabi, and saw an overlap, if not full identity, between the perfected individual, the philosopher, the prophet, the religious leader, and the political leader. The perfected life contains some element of communal leadership or governance. Gersonides, in his definition of the perfected life, in his understanding of the nature of prophecy, and in his approach to *imitatio Dei*, radically divides the philosopher from the statesman, and excludes political involvement from his description of the perfected life. Why?

The question is legitimate; it cannot be answered, as so many Jewish questions are, with another one: Why not? This is so for the following reasons:

1) Gersonides, as noted above, had two philosophical masters: Maimonides and Averroes. The latter's political philosophy falls into the same Platonic/Alfarabian mode as Maimonides'. This is a well-known matter and can be illustrated here simply. In a text which Touati claims was known to Gersonides,<sup>76</sup> and which certainly could have been known to him,<sup>77</sup> Averroes writes, "Hence these names are, as it were, synonymous — i.e., 'philosopher,' 'king,' 'Lawgiver'; and so also is 'Imam,' since *imam* in Arabic means one who is followed...as to whether it should be made a condition that he be a prophet, why there is room here for penetrating investigation."<sup>78</sup> This passage reflects a well-known Alfarabian text<sup>79</sup> and gives clear expression to the fact that Averroes adopted the same Platonic mode of political discourse as did Alfarabi and Maimonides. Cases where Gersonides diverges from both Maimonides and Averroes demand explanation.

2) Were Gersonides familiar with Aristotle's *Politics* then it could be urged that he simply adopted it as his basic text for political philosophy in place of the *Republic*. The facts of the situation, however, are as follows: while medieval Jews and Muslims knew of the existence of the *Politics* it was surmised to have been lost; as such it was never translated into Arabic or Hebrew. It reached Latin Christianity through the translation (directly from the Greek) of William of Moerbeke (c. 1260) but had almost no influence whatsoever on subsequent Jewish thought.<sup>80</sup> To the best of our knowledge, Gersonides gives no



evidence whatsoever of even being aware of the existence of the *Politics*.

Why, then, did not Gersonides follow in the footsteps of all of his Jewish predecessors, contemporaries, and successors in the Maimonidean stream in adopting some variant of the Platonic approach to the question of the place of political involvement in the perfected life?<sup>81</sup> There seem to be two probable answers to this question: the influence of contemporary Christian thought, or the influence of having lived in a Christian environment.

The question of whether or not Gersonides knew Latin divides scholars; similarly, the extent to which he was influenced by Latin thought is a subject of controversy;<sup>82</sup> but it is known that he collaborated on astrological and astronomical researches with Christians and there seems to be no reason to reject out of hand the idea that he conducted discussions with them on philosophical matters.<sup>83</sup> This being so, perhaps he was influenced by contemporary Christians in his political philosophy?<sup>84</sup> This strikes us as unlikely for the simple reason that were Gersonides consciously adopting a position at variance with that of Maimonides and Averroes he would have said so. Gersonides made every effort to get clear on where he agreed and disagreed with his philosophical interlocutors and had he become convinced of the superiority of a position based on the teachings of contemporary Christians (those, it would seem, whom he calls *mit'ahrim*),<sup>85</sup> there is every reason to expect that he would have come right out and said it.

Since he nowhere makes explicit reference to any disagreement with the Maimonidean Alfarabians on the issue of the place of politics in the perfected life, it seems likely that Gersonides did not frame his position in opposition to theirs. In other words, Gersonides adopted a position at variance with that of Averroes and Maimonides without being consciously aware of what he was doing.

What could bring a thinker as perspicacious and self-conscious as Gersonides to adopt a radically new position without being aware of it? The most likely answer to that, it would seem, is the influence of the life he lived. This does not mean his own personal inclinations, although such matters ought not be excluded altogether.<sup>86</sup> Gersonides lived in, and was apparently

very much aware of, a Christian culture which, at least in principle, sharply divided the temporal from the spiritual realms. In political terms, at least, it was that culture which framed Gersonides' universe of discourse and it is to that culture, perhaps, that we should look in seeking to understand his unusual position on the place (or lack thereof) of politics in the perfected life.<sup>87</sup>

## Notes

1. For a comprehensive account of Gersonides' life and thought, see Charles Touati, *La pensée philosophique et théologique de Gersonide* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1973). For an annotated bibliography of works by and about Gersonides, see Menachem Kellner, "Bibliographia Gersonideana: An Annotated List of Writings by and about R. Levi ben Gershom," in Gad Freudenthal, ed., *Studies on Gersonides: A Fourteenth-Century Jewish Philosopher-Scientist* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), pp. 367-414.
2. For a discussion of Maimonides' views on this subject, see Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides on Human Perfection* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990). I should emphasize that the view of Maimonides presented in this essay is, like every presentation of Maimonides, emphatically an interpretation of his thought. Some interpreters (such as Leo Strauss, Shlomo Pines, and Lawrence Berman) would argue that I understate the political element in Maimonides' view of human perfection while yet others (such as Hermann Cohen, Julius Guttmann, and Steven Schwarzschild) would insist that I overstate politics at the expense of morality. Yet other interpreters (such as Isaac Husik and, it would appear, H.A. Wolfson) would maintain that I overemphasize matters of practical perfection (politics or morality) at the expense of intellectual perfection. For details, and a defense of the interpretation of Maimonides assumed here, see *Maimonides on Human Perfection*.
3. See Thomas L. Pangle, ed., *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss — Essays and Lectures by Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 223.
4. Shlomo Pines has shown this claim to be somewhat exaggerated, but Pines' findings do not undermine the basic correctness of Strauss' generalization. See Shlomo Pines, "Aristotle's *Politics* in Arabic Philosophy," *Israel Oriental Studies* 5 (1975):150-160.

5. For another important statement of Strauss' position, see his *Philosophy and Law*, trans. Fred Baumann (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987), pp. 53-55 and 100-105. See further Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi, eds., *Medieval Political Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), pp. 15-18, and, more recently, Amos Funkenstein, "Gersonides' Biblical Commentary: Science, History, and Providence," Gad Freudenthal, ed., *Studies on Gersonides: A Fourteenth Century Jewish Philosopher Scientist* (Leiden: Brill, 1922), pp. 305-315. For a valuable survey of the literature, and important new insights, see Avraham Melamed, "Aristotle's *Politics* in Medieval and Renaissance Jewish Thought," *Pe'amim* 51 (1992):27-69 (Hebrew); see also Melamed's "Isaac Abravanel and Aristotle's *Politics*: A Drama of Errors," *JPSR* 5:3-4 (Fall 1993):55-75 and his forthcoming *Philosopher-King in Medieval and Renaissance Jewish Thought* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, in print). I am very grateful to Dr. Melamed for his kindness in sharing a copy of this important work with me before its publication. My discussion in these paragraphs is indebted to him.
6. Here is a typical expression of the idea from Aquinas:
 

The ministry of this kingdom is entrusted not to the rulers of this earth but to priests, so that temporal affairs may remain distinct from those spiritual: and, in particular, it is delegated to the High Priest, the successor of Peter and Vicar of Christ, the Roman Pontiff: to whom all kings in Christendom should be subject, as to the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. For those who are concerned with the subordinate ends of life must be subject to him who is concerned with the supreme end and be directed by his command.

See A.P. D'Entreves, ed., *Selected Political Writings [of Aquinas]* (Oxford, 1951), pp. 75-77.
7. On this, see Joel Kraemer, "Alfarabi's *Opinions of the Virtuous City* and Maimonides' *Foundations of the Law*," in J. Blau, et al., eds., *Studia Orientalia, Memoriae D.H. Baneth Dedicata* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1979), pp. 107-153.
8. Melamed, *Philosopher-King*, ch. 1. See further, E.I.J. Rosenthal, *Political Thought in Medieval Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 14: "In Islam the ruler combines political with spiritual authority; in Christianity the functions are divided between the emperor and the pope; in Judaism authority rests with the rabbis until the Messianic kingdom is established."
9. Paralleling Alfarabi's well-known and oft-quoted affirmation that "the meaning of the Imam, of the philosopher, and of the lawgiver is identical." See Alfarabi's "Attainment of Happi-

- ness," in Lerner and Mahdi, *Medieval Political Philosophy* (above, note 5), p. 47.
10. Lerner and Mahdi (above, note 5, pp. 16-17) maintain that Jewish thinkers influenced by Latin Christians base themselves on Aristotle's *Politics*, not on Plato's *Republic*; Melamed, "Aristotle's *Politics*," (above, note 5), convincingly refutes their contention. While Gersonides does, as we shall see, stand outside of the Muslim/Jewish philosophical mainstream on this issue, it is not because of his preference for the *Politics* over the *Republic*. I shall revert to this below.
  11. For details, see Melamed, *Philosopher-King*, ch. 3, section 3.
  12. Further on this see (Harry) Zvi Blumberg, "Alfarabi, ibn Bajja, and Maimonides on the Governance of the Solitary Individual, Sources and Influences," *Sinai* 78 (1976):135-145 (Hebrew).
  13. This is one of the main points of *Maimonides on Human Perfection* (above, note 2).
  14. Important support for this contention may be found in Ya'akov (Gerald) Blidstein, *Ekronot Medini'im be-Mishnat ha-Rambam* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1983).
  15. In the translation of Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 361. Subsequent citations from the *Guide* will be taken from this translation.
  16. Gersonides, on the other hand, is more concerned to distinguish prophecy from veridical dreams and divination (and, generally, less concerned to distinguish Mosaic prophecy from "normal" prophecy); see below and also, M. Kellner, "Maimonides and Gersonides on Mosaic Prophecy," *Speculum* 52 (1977):62-79.
  17. II.36, p. 372.
  18. We have focused here on one small aspect of a large and complex issue in Maimonides; for a fuller statement of the issues involved, and an argument to the effect that over and above moral and intellectual perfection and statesmanship the truly perfected life for Maimonides involves a particular kind of obedience to *halakhah* (Jewish law), see Kellner, *Maimonides on Human Perfection* (above, note 2).
  19. This passage is found in *Wars of the Lord* IV.6 (Leipzig, 1866, p. 170); Seymour Feldman, *Levi ben Gershom (Gersonides), The Wars of the Lord*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1984 and 1987), vol. 2, p. 182. I have here taken the liberty of slightly altering Feldman's translation and will do so below as well, without necessarily taking note of the fact. Compare further in the same chapter, p. 177 (Feldman, p. 192). For the source of the

expression here, "man as man," see Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, III.51, p. 635.

20. I quote from Gersonides' *Commentary on the Torah* (Venice, 1547), p. 15c. The commentary on Genesis was recently published by Mossad ha-Rav Kook (Jerusalem, 1992); the text is on p. 61 of that edition. Compare further Gersonides on Proverbs 18:9 and 19:5. Gersonides is here referring to his doctrine, proved in *Wars of the Lord*, Treatise I, that human beings achieve immortality through the acquisition of intelligibilia.
21. Compare further, *Commentary to the Torah*, Venice, p. 134c.
22. On Gersonides' understanding of these three books, see Seymour Feldman, "The Wisdom of Solomon: A Gersonidean Interpretation," G. Dahan, ed., *Gersonide en son temps* (Louvain: Peeters, 1991), pp. 61-80.
23. *Perush al Hamesh Megillot* (Koenigsberg, 1860), p. 25d.
24. I.e., in 8:11.
25. I.e., knowledge of God is the ultimate end.
26. See Aristotle, *On the Soul*, III.1, 424b21ff.
27. Since, in the final analysis, everything we know derives in one way or another from sense experience.
28. All translations from Gersonides' commentary on Song of Songs are my own.
29. Gersonides has interesting things to say about the relationship of the study of physics to the study of metaphysics, on which, see my forthcoming "Gersonides on the Song of Songs and the Nature of Science," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*. Further on the intellectualist nature of human perfection, see *Wars of the Lord* II.2 (Leipzig, p. 95; Feldman, vol. 1, p. 33) where Gersonides explains "that man is by far the most noble of the terrestrial substances," since "he has in common with the divine substances the use of reason;" and VI.i.15, p. 358, where it is maintained that man naturally strives to achieve wisdom, "which is his perfection and felicity."
30. On Gersonides' commentary on Song of Songs, see my "Gersonides' Commentary on Song of Songs: For Whom was it Written, and Why?," G. Dahan, ed., *Gersonide en son temps* (Louvain: Peeters, 1991), pp. 81-107.
31. I.e., the authors of the Sacred Writings (*Ketuvim*) which latter, of course, include Song of Songs.
32. Literally: "perfection of the intelligibles." Gersonides makes a similar distinction in his commentary on Deut. 6:4 (p. 211d).

*Hear, O Israel*, he says, refers to hearing, believing, and understanding. (Perfected) individuals *understand*, the multitude *believes*.

33. See Zechariah 3:3.
34. For the source of this parable in the writings of al-Ghazzali, texts in Arabic and in English translation, and extensive discussion, see Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Studies in Al-Ghazzali* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), pp. 312-320.
35. This point about the nature of ethical perfection is repeated often in Gersonides' writings. Compare the commentary to Song of Songs 1:12, 1:17, 2:10; *Wars of the Lord* IV.6 (p. 177; Feldman, vol. 2, p. 193); the commentary on Proverbs 1:2, 1:7, the second *to'elet* to 1:1-19, 12:1, and 15:32; and the commentary to Ecclesiastes, pp. 25c and 26a.
36. This definition is found in Gersonides' supercommentary to Averroes' *Epitome of the De Anima*; see Jesse Stephen Mashbaum, "Chapters 9-12 of Gersonides' Supercommentary on Averroes' Epitome of the De Anima: The Internal Senses," (Ph.D. Diss., Brandeis University, 1981), p. 150.
37. Leipzig, p. 82; Feldman, vol. 1, pp. 212-213.
38. For Gersonides' doctrine of the intellect, see Touati (above, note 1), pp. 394-442; Herbert A. Davidson, "Gersonides on the Material and Active Intellects," in Gad Freudenthal, ed., *Studies on Gersonides — A Fourteenth-Century Jewish Philosopher-Scientist* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), pp. 195-265; Seymour Feldman, "Platonic Themes in Gersonides' Doctrine of the Active Intellect," in Lenn Evan Goodman, ed., *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 255-277; Seymour Feldman, "Gersonides on the Possibility of Conjunction with the Agent Intellect," *AJS Review* 3 (1978):99-120; Helen Tunik Goldstein, "Dator Formarum: Ibn Rushd, Levi ben Gerson, and Moses b. Joshua of Narbonne," in I. Faruqi and A. Nasseef, eds., *Essays in Islamic and Comparative Studies* (Washington: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1982), pp. 107-121; Alfred Ivry, "Gersonides and Averroes on the Intellect: The Evidence of the Supercommentary on the *De anima*," in G. Dahan, ed., *Gersonide en son temps* (Louvain: Peeters, 1991), pp. 235-251; and Susanne Moebuss, *Die Intellektlehre des Levi ben Gerson in ihrer Beziehung zur christlichen Scholastik* (Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang, 1991).
39. Maimonides, it should be emphasized, holds a similar view (at least publicly); but unlike Gersonides he insists that the truly perfected individual will not "selfishly" devote herself or himself only to the perfection of the intellect, but will also "return to

the cave" in order to provide political leadership for the less perfected. Gersonides, too, will call upon the perfected individual to do more than simply perfect his or her intellect; but this extra effort demanded by Gersonides, as we shall see, has nothing to do with political leadership.

40. See, for example, Touati (above, note 1), pp. 366-375; M. Kellner, "Maimonides and Gersonides on Mosaic Prophecy," *Speculum* 52 (1977):62-79; H. Kreisel, "Veridical Dreams and Prophecy in the Philosophy of Gersonides," *Da'at* 22 (1989):73-84 (Hebrew); and David Silverman, "Dreams, Divination, and Prophecy: Gersonides on the Problem of Precognition," *The Samuel Friedland Lectures: 1967-1974* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1974), pp. 99-120.
41. *Wars of the Lord* II.1 (Leipzig, p. 92; Feldman, vol. 2, p. 27).
42. *Wars of the Lord* II.2 (Leipzig, p. 93; Feldman, p. 30).
43. On Gersonides on providence, see M. Kellner, "Gersonides, Providence, and the Rabbinic Tradition," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42 (1974):673-685.
44. Leipzig, p. 105; Feldman, p. 50.
45. Leipzig, p. 107; Feldman, p. 54.
46. Leipzig, pp. 107-108; Feldman, pp. 54-55.
47. Were it not for its anachronistic connotations, "scientists" would probably be a more accurate translation.
48. *Wars of the Lord* II.6, Leipzig, p. 111; Feldman, p. 59.
49. Leipzig, pp. 111-112; Feldman, pp. 59-60.
50. On this, see H. Kreisel, "Prophet and Philosopher in the Teaching of Maimonides and His School," *Eshel Beersheva* 3 (1986):149-169 (Hebrew).
51. Leipzig, p. 4; Feldman, vol. 1, p. 94.
52. Venice, p. 18d; Jerusalem, p. 80.
53. Leipzig, p. 119; Feldman, p. 72.
54. Leipzig, p. 119; Feldman, p. 73.
55. I.e., the "secrets" of physics and metaphysics.
56. For the astrological basis of the ability of the prophet (and diviner and dreamer) to predict the future (without destroying contingency), see *Wars of the Lord* II.2.
57. Leipzig, p. 4; Feldman, vol. 1, pp. 94-95.
58. See, for example, *Physics* ii.3, 124b17.

59. The first sentence of the *Metaphysics*; see *Wars of the Lord* VI.i.5, pp. 356 and 358; commentary to Song of Songs 1:3; commentary to Proverbs 1:21, 2:17-3:3, first *to'elet*, and the commentary to Ecclesiastes, p. 34c.
60. Leipzig, p. 103; Feldman, vol. 2, p. 45.
61. I owe this point to H. Kreisel, "Theories of Prophecy in Medieval Jewish Philosophy," Ph.D. Dissertation, Brandeis University, 1981, p. 226. Kreisel, in turn, derives it from Charles Touati, "La probleme de l'inerrance prophetique dans la theologie juive du moyen age," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 175 (1968):169-197; this essay was recently reprinted in Touati, *Prophetes, Talmudistes, Philosophes* (Paris: Cerf, 1990), pp. 257-271.
62. See the Commentary on the Torah (Venice, 1547), p. 24d (Jerusalem, 1992), p. 115, and the Commentary on Job 39:30; compare Touati (above, note 1), pp. 459-466.
63. On Gersonides' doctrine concerning miracles, see M. Kellner, "Gersonides on Miracles, the Messiah, and Resurrection," *Da'at* 4 (1980):5-34.
64. III.54, p. 638.
65. See my "Gersonides on *Imitatio Dei* and the Dissemination of Scientific Knowledge," forthcoming in the *Jewish Quarterly Review*.
66. Leipzig, pp. 5-6; Feldman, vol. 1, p. 97.
67. In the article cited above in note 65.
68. See p. 64 in Gad Freudenthal, "Human Felicity and Astronomy: Gersonides' Revolt Against Ptolemy," *Da'at* 22 (1989):55-72 (Hebrew).
69. It is here that Gersonides' divergence from ibn Bajja finds clear expression: the philosophically perfected individual may not be called to fill a Maimonidean role in the leadership of state and society, but he or she is certainly not meant to withdraw from that society either!
70. *Guide* III.13, pp. 451-452.
71. II.11, p. 275.
72. On this, see the excursus to Warren Zev Harvey, "Political Philosophy and Halakhah in Maimonides," *Iyyun* 29 (1980):198-212 (Hebrew). Harvey has recently reiterated the point in "Maimonides on Human Perfection, Awe, and Politics," in Ira Robinson, ed., *The Thought of Moses Maimonides* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), pp. 16-25.



73. Gersonides devotes *Wars of the Lord* V.ii.3 (Leipzig, pp. 194-197) to proving this proposition. My thinking here was stimulated by comments made by Gad Freudenthal in "Maimonides' Stance on Astrology in Context: Cosmology, Physics, Medicine, and Providence," in Fred Rosner and Samuel Kottke, eds., *Moses Maimonides: Physician, Scientist, and Philosopher* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1993), pp. 77-90; my thanks to Dr. Freudenthal for his kindness in sharing his article with me prior to its publication.
74. Compare Gersonides' commentary to Proverbs 23:12 for the same claim.
75. On the trichotomy good / pleasant / useful, see Avraham Melamed, "The Development of the Motif of Love of the Pleasant, the Useful, and the Good in Albo, Allemano, Judah Abravanel, and Moscato," in M. Dorman and Z. Levy, eds., *Philosphiat ha-Ahavah shel Yehudah Abravanel* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz ha-Meuchad, 1985), pp. 57-72.
76. See Touati (above, note 1), pp. 40 and 364; I am not convinced that Prof. Touati is correct here.
77. It was translated into Hebrew by Samuel of Marseilles in 1320-22.
78. *Averroes on Plato's "Republic,"* translated by Ralph Lerner (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 72.
79. Cited above in note 9.
80. For details on all this, see Melamed, "Aristotle's *Politics*..." (above, note 5).
81. That Gersonides rejects ibn Bajja's position is less surprising since it is rejected by both Maimonides and Averroes.
82. See Shlomo Pines, "Appendix: Problems in the Teachings of Gersonides," appended to "On Certain Subjects Included in the Book *Ezer ha-Dat*..." in *Mehkarim be-Kabbalah...Mugashim Le-Yeshaiyah Tishby* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1986), pp. 447-457.
83. On Gersonides' work with Christians, see Bernard R. Goldstein and David Pingree, "Levi ben Gerson's Prognostication for the Conjunction of 1345," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 80, part 6 (1990).
84. Or, more accurately, in his disinterest in Platonic political philosophy.
85. See, for example, his commentary to Song of Songs 1:2 where he seems to be referring to an argument of Ockham's.
86. Warren Zev Harvey suggests that Gersonides' critical attitude towards political power (as expressed in his commentary on Deuteronomy 17:14-20) is connected to his *personal* attraction to

the life of contemplation and his conviction that the *vita contemplativa* is its own end and our greatest happiness. See Warren Zev Harvey, "The Philosopher and Politics: Gersonides and Crescas," Leo Landman, ed., *Scholars and Scholarship: The Interaction Between Judaism and Other Cultures* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1990), pp. 53-65. Harvey's analysis strengthens the claims being put forward here about Gersonides' negative attitude towards politics; his explanation for that attitude complements rather than contradicts the interpretation offered here. I cannot accept it fully, however, since it fails to take into account Gersonides' approach to *imitatio Dei* as discussed above; contemplation is not enough — one must also share the fruits of one's studies with appropriate students.

87. I would like to thank Drs. Abraham Melamed and Howard Kreisel for their many helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.