

Omnipotence in the Shadow of Aristotle

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Throughout the medieval world, scholars from all three of the Abrahamic faiths turned their attention and efforts to reconcile the worldview of Aristotle with the beliefs and traditions of their own religions. Forced to reinterpret scripture and Aristotle alike in their quest for compatibility, Jewish and Muslim thinkers in particular worked diligently to design ways to make reason and faith coexist. Arguably one of the boldest and most original of these scholars was Levi ben Gerson, also known as Gersonides. Born in the late thirteenth century, Gersonides seemed willing to make whatever concessions and pay whatever prices necessary to make Judaism and philosophy weave together into one cohesive whole. No subject was too sacred for him to avoid, and Gersonides even reimagined God in the light of Aristotle's teachings. The personal deity of the Bible was transformed into a distant and somewhat impotent entity through his fearless pen. Yet all of his work would have been impossible had it not been for his Muslim predecessor, Ibn Rushd. Known in the West as Averroes, Ibn Rushd lived in eleventh-century Spain and worked both as translator and student of Aristotle until his death. Responsible for a number of authoritative translations and extensive commentaries of Aristotle's works from their original Greek into Arabic, Averroes opened the door for scholars such as Gersonides to access generations later. A brilliant philosopher in his own right, Averroes tackled almost an identical set of problems; contorting traditional Islam to fit within an Aristotelian mold, as Gersonides would centuries later with Judaism. Despite the differences in their religious origins, both

scholars had to face down the monumental challenge of equating the omnipotent and personal deity of their own faiths into the impersonal first mover of their Greek teacher.

This study aims to understand the differences and similarities between these two scholars when it comes to their issues and concerns about divine omnipotence. Many scholars have investigated Gersonides and Averroes, occasionally even comparing the two to each other. Yet to the best of my knowledge, there has been no single focus on how either thinker approached the issues of God's unlimited power, let alone one comparing such views to each other. Given the lack of any sort of real comparison between the ways in which Gersonides and Averroes approach God's might, it falls on us to investigate the matter. How did Gersonides and Averroes understand omnipotence, and how do their visions of this concept diverge from each other?

Both men approached the task of grappling with the power of God immensely influenced by Aristotle, and both belonged to religious traditions whose orthodoxies subscribed to the notion of God's omnipotence without hesitation. Both were forced to reconcile the radically different ideas at the heart of the Abrahamic faiths with the rational system constructed by Aristotle and his acolytes. Yet despite the sizeable similarities in the materials that both Averroes and Gersonides possessed in the start of their search to understand how an all-mighty God may exist, their conclusions in many ways are quite different. The marks of Aristotle can be felt throughout the thinking of both men, but how they incorporated the lessons of their Greek mentor into their religious works differs dramatically.

Such variations display themselves throughout a variety of elements spread across a number of subjects that both Gersonides and Averroes approached. As such, this essay will work to systematically approach and analyze a number of areas of concern. The methodologies that we will employ to investigate both scholars will, be for the most part, identical. That said, we will be

going substantially farther into depth regarding the Biblical passages that Gersonides employs to defend his ideas than with Averroes. Both scholars consistently base their ideas upon Scripture, but for our purposes Gersonides' use of the Bible is more necessary to explain his ideas than is Averroes' use of the Quran.

If this brief examination is successful, we will be able to discern how Gersonides and Averroes both express and limit omnipotence in their work. We will approach the matter topically, investigating a single issue first through the eyes of one of the two men and then switching to his counterpart. To properly form a basis from which we can advance into the meat of what Averroes and Gersonides wrote about omnipotence, we will start with short biographies of both of these remarkable scholars. We will pay particular focus to the situations that these thinkers lived in, and their relationship to the outside world; how was their work treated by their neighbors and colleagues and how did they respond? Upon establishing a foundational understanding of the subjects of our investigation, we will begin to dive into the heart of our concern. Our inquiry into how Gersonides and Averroes understood God will start with their notions of God's essence and attributes, looking at what the two scholars believed was central to the identity of the divine. With a glimpse at their notions of the attributes of God, we will start moving outside of God to the Creator's relationship to the world. Starting with issues of prophecy and omniscience, we will move to more concerns that are less focused on what God is and more upon what God does and is able to do through actions such as miracles. In essence, we will be moving outwards from God, beginning with issues that concern God almost exclusively and moving into how the God's interacts with God's creation. Throughout, we will investigate Gersonides and Averroes separately, comparing their notions with each other to provide additional clarity for challenging concepts and ideas.

With a basis in the theological ideas of Gersonides and Averroes surrounding the omnipotence of God, we can finally delve into the reasons for the substantial differences in their perspectives. Central to the radical divide between these two disciples of Aristotle are the socio-historical and environmental situations in which they found themselves. Our knowledge of Averroes' opinions is exclusively controlled by what he chose to record, and it soon becomes clear that the Muslim scholar did not originally intend on sharing his thoughts for posterity. Unexpected events pushed Averroes into being an advocate for Muslim philosophers against their adversaries who wished to deem them heretics. Writing only what he needed to include and primarily on the defensive, Averroes was in no condition to be revealing tremendously innovative theological ideas to the world. Gersonides, on the other hand, was anything but constrained by the terrors that drove his Muslim counterpart. Gersonides seemed more concerned with the possibility of altering how pious Jews may practice than with his own safety or wellbeing. This sense of security gave Gersonides the confidence he needed to openly espouse his most heterodox ideas for public consumption. While it is impossible to know what either thinker sincerely believed, the potential consequences of their heretical beliefs proved to be the determining force that helped shape the differences between Gersonides' and Averroes' writings on divine omnipotence.

Biographies: Gersonides

Born in 1288 in Bagnols, France, Levi ben Gerson is a figure about whom we have far from a complete knowledge (Samuelson 2). It is not certain what Gersonides, also known by the acronym Ralbag, did to earn his living, who his parents were, or how he died. It has been assumed by many that he was a physician due to the presence of some medical ideas in his texts, but this has never been confirmed. It is certain, however, that Gersonides spent the

entirety of his life in the region of Provence before he died in 1344 (Eisen *Providence* 1). Part of a vibrant Jewish community, Gersonides seemed to be comfortable both among his own people and in working with the Catholic Church in his bewildering variety of intellectual pursuits. Crucial to his ability to live and work alongside both of these religious communities were Gersonides' astonishing number of talents and pursuits. As Seymour Feldman perhaps puts it best in his introduction to Gersonides' magnum opus, *The Wars of the Lord*, "In his fifty-six years he produced an enormous corpus of scientific, philosophical, and Judaic writings that encompassed the whole domain of medieval learning." (Feldman *Wars* v1 8). Gersonides at least tried his hand at practically every intellectual field he could find. Aside from his general lack of talent as a poet, Gersonides proved himself to be everything from an exceptional astronomer to a gifted commentator on both the Bible and the Talmud. Such abilities led him to work for some of the most powerful individuals in the Church, even composing an astronomical treatise for Pope Clement VI (Feldman *Wars* v1 7).

Experienced in dealing with both the Church and the Jewish community of Provence, Gersonides seemed largely comfortable in almost every aspect of his world. Yet not everything that Gersonides engaged in was so warmly accepted by his Jewish or Christian contemporaries. An avid Aristotelian, Gersonides was witness to the firestorm of criticism that was heaped upon Maimonides after the great scholar's death. Drawn to many of the same teachings, Gersonides was fully aware that the Jewish community was anything but comfortable with the radical ideas that the fusion of Aristotelian thought and Judaism created (Eisen "Exodus" 14). His own ideas certainly were not any more appealing to traditionalists than were those of his esteemed predecessor. Despite the immense resentment that he was aware his work would receive, Gersonides was quite bold in what he was willing to record in

writing. Radical and heterodox ideas are spread throughout his commentaries on the Tanakh and the Torah in particular as well as imbedded in *The Wars of the Lord*. Gersonides pulls few punches as he lays out his particular theological and philosophical visions, putting everything into his writings with few measures in place to keep them out of the eyes of potential critics.

Biographies; Averroes

Over a century before the birth of Gersonides, Averroes would face a very different world in Muslim Spain. Like Gersonides, modern scholars only have a modest amount of information about Ibn Rushd's life. Born in 1126 CE in Cordoba and dying seventy-two years later in Morocco, to the best of our knowledge Averroes seems to have belonged to a family of esteemed lawyers. Both his grandfather and father served as respected *qadis*, or judges of Islamic law, in Cordoba and they naturally expected the young Averroes to follow in their footsteps, giving him the best education possible (Hourani *Harmony* 14). Precisely who the budding scholars were is unclear, but the effects of such tutelage were clear. Averroes mastered and wrote about a variety of subjects, including everything from medicine to theology and Greek philosophy (Hourani *Harmony* 14-16). This academic excellence earned Averroes great renown in Spain, eventually enabling him to live up to the high standards and hopes of his father by becoming a *qadi* of Cordoba in his own right at least as early as 1181 (Hourani *Harmony* 16). Adding to this exceptional series of credentials, Ibn Rushd managed to situate himself in the sultan's court as a sort of scholar in residence. His master had little qualms with the teaching of Aristotle and other ancient philosophers, often personally engaging in intellectual debates with his court thinkers himself.

Not everyone in Spain, let alone the entirety of the Muslim world, was as accepting of the influence of foreign thought like that of Aristotle. Many more traditional scholars and rulers alike despised the influx of Greek philosophy, and with good reason. The topics Islamic philosophers were delving into were radically different from the original principles of the faith, often directly contradicting core theological notions at the heart of Islam. Their railings against the blasphemous new form of knowledge circulating throughout Muslim lands did much to put Aristotle's new disciples on the defensive. Philosophers like Averroes interested in these Greek texts often studied them in secret, rarely daring to reveal the true nature of their intellectual pursuits. For example, upon his first introduction to Abu Ya'qub Yusuf, Averroes was almost immediately faced with the danger involved in his field of study. Brought into the sultan's court, he was soon given a question that would reveal his loyalties to his long-dead Greek teachers. As Averroes recounted in his autobiography, Abu Ya'qub asked him "...What is their opinion about the heavens?" –referring to the philosophers- "Are they eternal or created?" (Hourani *Harmony* 12). Ibn Rushd's response is telling; instead of revealing his honest opinion he panicked, disavowing everything that he knew about Aristotle and Greek thought. He was fully aware of what awaited him if he told the wrong person the material to which he had devoted a great portion of his studies.

This sort of double life as a pious and traditional Muslim as well as a philosopher would not last forever, though. Some eighty years earlier, a former philosopher by the name of al-Ghazali had published a devastating critique and expose of Greek philosophy from the inside. Having grown hostile to the Greek thought that he had previously studied, Ghazali turned his expertise into a weapon against his former field and unveiled what he knew to the public in his work *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. This stunning revealing of philosophical secrets,

presented in their least flattering light, pushed Muslim philosophers even deeper back into the shadows. By the time that Averroes had come of age as a scholar, no one had been willing or able to counter Ghazali's writings. Taking up the mantle, Averroes unleashed his own rebuttal against al Ghazali in his most famous work, *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* or *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* in Arabic. As George Hourani explains, "*Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* (c.1180) is a point by point philosophic retort to the charges of *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* [*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*]" (Hourani *Harmony* 5). It was to this struggle to defend philosophy that Averroes dedicated almost all of his philosophical writings, desperately trying to keep the wrath of the traditionalists from harming either him or his fellow philosophers.

Chapter 1: Who is the Aristotelian God?

Averroes:

Starting with Averroes' ideas about the nature of God and God's attributes, it soon becomes clear that the Muslim scholar is walking a very thin line between his faith and his philosophy. With Greek philosophy seemingly under siege by more orthodox Islamic authorities, Averroes was fully aware that every claim that he made about the nature of God would be under careful scrutiny. He could not afford to seem to have strayed too far from the Sunni orthodoxy that dominated Muslim Spain, but al-Ghazali's attacks on philosophy still needed to be refuted.

Averroes at first does not seem to move far from the orthodox standpoint when it comes to his vision of the divine. Like the majority of believers, he firmly held that God was an incorporeal being, an entity without physical form. In turn, he also seemed to cling to the traditional line by accepting the notion that even without a body God is capable of utilizing the senses available to humans. The Quran repeatedly turns to the use of imagery of God's sensory

perception, but to many disciples of Aristotle these passages are nothing more than metaphors.

The static Aristotelian God could never experience or possess such human senses, as these abilities do not fit within their strictly reasoned image of the divine. Averroes, however, seems to rebel against this perspective and instead sides with Muslim traditionalists, stating absolutely that God can exercise sensory powers.

Yet these capabilities are not derived from any sort of divine equivalent of human sensory organs; since God created human beings and their senses, then excluding these abilities from the Creator is illogical. For “[i]f the creature who is not a real agent (the human being) is capable of performing this sort of action... it is much more fitting that this should be necessarily the case with respect to the Real Agent” (Najjar 47-48). The imperfect creations of the infallible Creator, Averroes reasons, cannot have access to any beneficial characteristic that their designer does not possess in a superior form. Having enabled the means for humanity to see and hear, it is only logical that God possess these traits. Averroes does not stop here, however. He claims that “...it should be clear that He apprehends through all modes of apprehension” (Najjar 50). Human senses are anything but the frontier or the limit for the capacities of God’s ability to know information. Every possible means of cognizance is within God’s grasp, exercised at a level beyond mortal understanding.

Sensory matters are far from the end of the human abilities that God is able to access. Just as humans are able to speak, for example, then so must God though in an infinitely higher manner. Unlike the communication of mortals, however, divine speech requires an intermediary of some kind to reach humanity. Instead of relying upon verbal means, God reveals God’s intended message to the soul of a prophet or sends an angelic messenger to deliver the message (Najjar 48). It could be argued, however, that the processes of revelation employed by God do

not constitute true speech. Almost all human languages are based on sound and every one is founded on the use of words to express meaning. Averroes argues, however, that "...speech is nothing more than the speaker's performance of an act to convey to the addressed person the knowledge that is within him..." (Najjar 47). No words, let alone sounds, are needed under this definition for a means of communication to be considered "speech". To a believing Muslim, the Quran is definite evidence of divine communication with humanity, so Averroes has no need to contest the issue of whether God has reached out to man. And, more importantly, this form of connection falls under Ibn Rushd's understanding of speech; since God communicates then God clearly speaks. God's messages, however, are simply not transmitted through means exhibited by human beings. The divine is too powerful and too exalted to muddle around speaking to man, instead using more indirect ways to interact with and teach mortals.

This lofty image of God is something that Averroes scrupulously attempts to maintain even in somewhat more esoteric matters. The God of Averroes not only is superior to human beings as their creator, but is entirely perfect and almost entirely beyond real comprehension. God is beyond any defect or flaw (Najjar 60). All things exist because of God, and as such the universe could still exist even if many details were eliminated. Everything has causes that lead to their existence and development. Everything, that is, except God. In his masterwork *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*, Averroes claims off-handedly that "God's existence is necessary in reality" (Averroes *Incoherence* 67). God alone is what cannot not exist. For reality itself to come into being according to Averroes, God must be present. There is no other way.

Divine majesty extends beyond just the realm of the strictly philosophical, however. God's perfection encompasses not only capabilities but also ethical and moral implications. To Averroes, God's perfection even extends to mean that God does not create anything evil. Such a

concept comes directly from the Quran itself, and while Averroes adopts slightly unorthodox methods in interpreting these verses, he stays true to the contents themselves (Najjar 116). All of what God engages in is right, and the Quran proposes that what ails individuals often comes not from God but from humans. Anything and everything that God does is automatically good, “not because He Himself becomes perfect through that justice, but because the perfection which is in Himself necessitates that He act justly” (Najjar 119). Unlike human beings, God does not benefit from doing good; there is no judgment for God that rewards God. Instead, it is an inextricable part of God’s nature that God do what is good and right rather than what is wrong. Performing the correct and proper action for God is even more essential than breathing is for man. We can afford to hold our breath for a short time, but eventually we will need to take in more air to survive. In contrast, God’s justice can never be separated from God or suspended even for a moment. Every act made by the divine hand is by definition just.

Separating Averroes’ vision of God even farther from mere mortals is his understanding of what divine knowledge is. Knowledge to human beings, according to Averroes, is not even comparable to its heavenly counterpart. One of the largest intellectual issues that many Aristotelian philosophers faced, including both Gersonides and Averroes, was the question of whether God can possibly know particulars. Strictly speaking, the deity that Aristotle imagined had no knowledge of individual things and people on earth. Aristotle’s God could not know about an individual person, nor would his proposed divinity be concerned with mortal life. Despite his admiration for Aristotle, Averroes is not willing to take such a dangerous theological step. Islam is based on the notion that God is invested in human life, and to openly deny this idea is to tear at the heart of the faith that Ibn Rushd deeply cared for. Averroes claims that God is indeed able to know particulars, but this is because God created the universe; the creator must

inherently know how the creation operates (Hourani *Harmony* 55). Yet this knowledge is anything but similar to our own. Averroes claims that divine knowledge transcends such distinctions of particular and universal types of information. God can know who someone is and what he or she eats for breakfast just as easily as God can know natural laws (universal information). Our own limited minds have no hope of treating these two categories of knowledge identically, according to Averroes. As such, there is no point in trying to discuss how God can have any knowledge of particulars.

Gersonides;

In contrast to the relatively compromising approach adopted by Averroes when it comes to matching his Aristotelian ideas to his faith, Levi ben Gerson takes a far more radical approach. In almost every case, Gersonides tries to push his opinions to their logical conclusions regardless of how heretical they may seem to his readers. The starting point for both philosophers, however, is identical. Gersonides accepts without question the notion that the divine is incorporeal and thus without a physical body of any kind. With this starting point established, Gersonides almost immediately begins to unfold the radical implications of God's transcendent nature. To him, God cannot use any of the senses available to human beings and as such is incapable of perceiving the world in a similar way. If God does not have a body, then how could God possibly see or hear or taste? How could God feasibly be able to perceive reality in a manner even comparable to that of humans if the divine has none of the sensory organs that we utilize? As Seymour Feldman explains, "Because God is incorporeal, He does not have this apparatus; therefore, He does not know space-time particulars" (Feldman "Divine Omnipotence" 682). Without the means to perceive the world, Gersonides concludes that God is unable not only to use mortal senses but even to know precisely what they encounter. Though a man blind from birth can understand and

have knowledge of the objects outside of his own body due to his functioning senses, God does not have this capacity. Lacking any means of sensory apprehension, God is unable to have any knowledge of any single thing (Feldman “Divine Omnipotence” 683).

By claiming that God cannot know particulars, Gersonides in effect attacks the very heart of Jewish belief. If God cannot know individual humans, then how would it be possible for any part of the sacred history of the Jewish people to have occurred? Faced with these concerns, Gersonides still refuses to back down and continues his relentless drive towards logical consistency. Since God has no body and, even more importantly, cannot have knowledge of any individual thing or being, Gersonides logically concludes that God also cannot communicate with humanity. Regardless of how directly or repeatedly the Bible proclaims that God speaks or spoke, Gersonides outright denies this as a possibility (Eisen *Providence* 41). Divine speech is at best a symbol or a metaphor to provide the reader with some sort of philosophical message. Someone may imagine that he or she is contacted by the Creator and what he or she recites may be true, but at no point was there any direct communication with God.

Speech in the human sense is out of the question due to God’s incorporeal nature and lack of knowledge of particulars as particulars, but direct conversation or revelation of any kind is also impossible according to Gersonides for another critical reason. According to Aristotle and his disciples, Gersonides included, “change” is a sign of imperfection. Undergoing any shifts or transformations invariably proves that the subject is not complete. If God is perfect, then to many Aristotelians it is only natural to conclude that God experiences no change in any respect. God is engaged in a constant act of self-contemplation in which not even a thought shifts. “The activity of self-intellection,” as Eisen explains, “...is an entirely static one” (Eisen *Providence* 14). God never ceases to think about God’s self and this thinking process is and always will be identical to

what it has been. If this is the case, then there is no room in God's busy schedule of self-examination for something as mundane as conversation. Moreover, speech or contact with humans changes God in action and in knowledge, which is impossible due to God's perfection. God cannot hold a conversation, as to engage in a dialogue involves constant mental leaps and changes and "...God does not change His mind..." (Feldman *Wars* v2 84). The eternal state of God pondering God's self cannot be changed to something else, leaving humanity high and dry when it comes to receiving divine wisdom directly from the source.

This vision of an entirely unchanging, seemingly ignorant God is further compounded by yet another principle of Aristotelian logic applied to the Abrahamic faiths that Gersonides readily adopts. According to Gerson, God must be 'absolutely simple.' In essence, God cannot be divided in any way or possess internal division of any kind; every aspect that makes up what God is must be a single unit. This notion of God's internal unity is almost entirely identical to Maimonides' perspective on the same subject (Kellner 104). Both men see God's will, knowledge and power all as indivisible from each other, inseparably bound together in God's incomprehensible essence. What truly makes Gersonides' perception of the simplicity and unity of God unique are the implications that he realizes from these ideas. Or, more accurately, what he does not accept from this notion is exceptional. It is "Maimonides' extreme insistence on God's unity and absolute simplicity which led him to adopt his celebrated doctrine of negative attributes, the so-called *via negativa*" (Kellner 103). In claiming that God cannot be separated or divided in any way, Maimonides concludes that positive attributes cannot be ascribed to the divine. The human mind cannot fathom what God truly is in God's state of perfect unity, so the best that can be done to grasp at the divine is to attempt to describe God through what God is not. Gersonides, however, largely rejects the necessity to understand the deity through negative

descriptions. As Feldman explains in his introduction to the third book of *Wars of the Lord*, to Gersonides, “If there is no continuity between the way we talk about the world and the way we talk about God, then there is no point in talking about God” (Feldman *Wars* v2 79). Just declaring that God is ‘not foolish’ or ‘not evil’ is far from enough to get any sense at all of what God truly is. To have the faintest notion of God, Gersonides claims that stronger, more concrete terms must be used to describe a being possessed of an incomprehensible unity.

Such a vision of God’s oneness initially does not appear to contradict the biblical understanding of the divine, when viewed on its own. Combined with Gersonides’ notion of the unchanging nature of God, however, the image of what exactly the deity is proves to be wildly different. Instead of the dynamic and emotional God that dominates the Bible, filled with changing passions and more than willing to intervene in human lives, thus far the God of Gersonides seems to be unchanging and barely on the edges of comprehension. Yet Gersonides does seem to propose one matter in which human beings can better cling to the notion of divinity. In contrast to the thought of previous Jewish Aristotelian philosophers, Gersonides repeatedly claims that God’s knowledge is of a variety comparable to our own. Divine knowledge may not change according to Gerson, but it is of the same nature as its closest human equivalent, differing primarily in quantity rather than in quality. Our knowledge, as Kellner explains, is a mere shadow of God’s knowledge—comparable, but “...God’s knowledge is vastly more perfect than ours” (Kellner 115).

Chapter 2: Divine Omniscience and Human Free Will

Gersonides;

In a number of respects, Gersonides' vision of how omniscience operates is founded on many of the same assumptions and ideas as his Muslim counterpart Averroes. The foundational proof of God's knowledge of the world is based on God's role as creator. Yet Gersonides takes this model farther; God does not know the world directly even as its creator but instead God knows God's self. As Gersonides explains, because God is perfect "...God necessarily knows His essence according to His level of being, and since from His essence all other existent things hierarchically emanate, it follows that God... knows all the things that emanate from Him" (Feldman *Wars* v2 116). This rather complicated claim hinges on a handful of Aristotelian concepts, critical among them the notion of emanation. To Aristotle, God does not create the universe voluntarily but through a natural process of emanation. Over time, lesser entities, what Gersonides calls the Separate Intellects, begin to separate themselves from God. This chain of separation starts with those closest in perfection to the divine and decreases in purity with each new 'generation'. God is Aristotle's First Cause, the start of the great cosmic chain from which all of reality is brought into being.

Gersonides takes this notion of creation and modifies it for his own purposes. While he does not adopt the theory of emanation just as Aristotle formulated it, he is willing to use the idea to justify God's knowledge. According to Gersonides, "God is or embodies the whole plan and order of the universe" (Feldman *Wars* v3 21). Within God is the entirety of the laws that govern how the world functions; God possesses both the blueprints and instruction manual, so to speak, for reality. Not only does God have access to such guiding information, however, but "...God knows himself perfectly" (Feldman *Wars* v3 118). If everything emanates from this universal plan and God has perfect knowledge of this plan within God's self, then Gersonides concludes that God must know the contents of the universe. Everything that exists is still within

the pale of God's and only God's understanding. While some of God's more perfect creations (such as the Separate Intellects) possess complete knowledge of what occurs on earth, God alone comprehends every aspect of both the heavens and the mortal world. (Feldman *Wars* v3 24).

As neat as this whole system may seem at first, there is a critical flaw in the current construct before us. We have already explored the fact that Gersonides believed that God's knowledge could not change and as such God could not possess detailed knowledge of particulars. Simultaneously, God knows how the world operates due to God's impeccable self-knowledge and identity as the First Cause. How can these two truths (to Gersonides) be reconciled with each other? Gersonides' answer is a brilliant display of his ingenuity and creativity as a philosopher. God, according to Gersonides, does in fact know that particulars or contingent things exist, God simply does not know each individual thing. To put it bluntly, "God knows particulars but not as particulars" (Samuelson 48). In essence, this means that God knows about human beings, for example, but only in a general sense. God knows what people are like, how our bodies operate and even how we think and act. But God is not able to know individual humans. My life is something that Gersonides believes God cannot know, for if God could know about me as I lived my life God's knowledge would grow and change over time. This conclusion is unacceptable for Gersonides as a good Aristotelian. On the other hand, if God knew precisely what I would do over the course of my life, then choice and free will have been completely denied to me. Gersonides' answer is a middle ground between these two extremes, between knowing nothing about human life and knowing everything.

God in this conception knows that humans have free will but does not know precisely what people will choose in each situation. As Gersonides describes, God "...knows... that these events are contingent, insofar as they fall within the domain of human choice, [and as such

knows them] truly as contingent” (Feldman *Wars* v2 118). Divine knowledge does not extend so far as to overwhelm human free will, but stops with God’s awareness that humans are able to choose. It is not predestined whether or not I may eat breakfast one morning, and it is my prerogative to determine what and how I go about the start of my day. Gersonides then argues that this system does not cause any change in God’s knowledge simply because this type of awareness is still just following the laws of the world God has always possessed knowledge of (Feldman *Wars* v2 122). Humans possessing free will is the intended product of natural laws, so there is no shift or change in what God knows. Everything on the divine side of the equation has remained perfectly stable while humanity is able to exercise its relative independence.

To the modern reader, Gersonides’ apparent solution to the contradiction of divine omniscience and free will is seemingly just the surrender of God’s complete knowledge. After all, a deity that is not able to know human actions seems to be lacking a vast amount of information about the universe. Plus, what help is a God that cannot know about our situations and provide us with aid? Even more problematic than just God’s inability to help is what now appears to be a total inability to bring about justice; how can the deity punish the wicked and reward the just if God cannot know particulars? Gersonides seems to preserve God by stripping God of the ability to assist and to influence life on earth. Gersonides himself, however, was far from unaware of this potential pitfall in his thinking. Like Aristotle, Gersonides is skeptical of the importance of transient information. Knowledge that is not eternal is something less than true knowledge. “For perfect knowledge of something is the knowledge of what that thing is in reality; when the thing is not apprehended as it is, this is error, not knowledge” (Feldman *Wars* v2 118). To Gersonides, only the theoretical represents reality honestly and as it truly is due to its unchanging nature (on paper at least). Knowing shifting details such as personal choice and

appearance is not knowledge at all but some lesser type of apprehension. Mortals are primarily left with this weaker, impure shadow of true knowledge while God knows everything in the truest way possible.

All of this discussion on what God, according to Gersonides, can and cannot know might be useless if there were no implication for human life. Gersonides has currently worked himself into a substantial dilemma; he has thoroughly discredited the concept that God can have knowledge of particulars as particulars, including people and even history, yet he continues to live as a believing and practicing Jew. How can a religion that is founded on prophecy survive in an environment in which the tremendous theological upheaval that Gersonides has unleashed is running rampant? The answer, it seems, is bound up with his understanding of how Gersonides understands the exercise of divine power.

God, according to Gersonides does not interact directly with the mortal world (Eisen “Exodus” 247). Nonetheless, “...prophetic communication can occur without any need for a personal God. The prophet taps into the emanations he receives from the Active Intellect in order to retrieve valuable information about future occurrences...” (Eisen *Providence* 17). The deity is not the source of prophecy according to Gersonides; instead information is provided by a celestial entity called the Active or Agent Intellect. This being has perfect knowledge of the earthly-or, as Gersonides calls it, the ‘sublunar’-world, but it too dedicates all of its time to the contemplation of God. The Active Intellect, according to Gersonides, constantly emits information out into the world and the prophets are individuals who are capable of receiving and interpreting this knowledge due to their level of intellectual perfection. There is an easier way to understand this concept, however, which Eisen and other scholars turn to. The Active Intellect can be seen as a radio transmitter that constantly broadcasts information to the world below

(Eisen *Providence* 18). It has no way of knowing who or what picks up that information, nor does it have any concern for such apparent trivialities. On the human side, every person is in a sense a radio receiver, but only the intellectually perfected prophets are properly tuned to accept the messages from the Active Intellect. Prophecy for Gersonides is a process that involves no interaction with the Creator and is in reality reception of details sent from a celestial body and their correct interpretation.

This type of prophecy is anything but a demonstration of the might or concern of God. Not only is God not involved in the proceedings, but prophecy is partially dependent on human beings for its success. The Active Intellect does not send out a bombardment of explicit references to the future; its emanations are endless broadcasts of general laws and rules. Like God, the Active Intellect knows only general and theoretical information, and that is what is released to humanity. As Eisen explains, “the content of prophetic visions is shaped to one degree or another by the prophet’s imagination, which embodies the general communications from the Active Intellect in concrete images” (Eisen *Providence* 47). Having received the theoretical and essential knowledge from the Active Intellect, the prophet’s imagination then takes hold and interprets the information to relate to his or her situation.

In the context of biblical prophecy, the example that Gersonides himself calls upon is a particular moment in the book of Jeremiah. When the prophet tells King Zedekiah that “... If you surrender to the officers of the king of Babylon, your life will be spared and this city will not be burned down,” he is acting on a combination of information supplied by the Active Intellect and his own imagination (*Jeremiah* 38:17). As the Active Intellect constantly broadcasts general ideas and laws, Jeremiah receives details regarding the nature of war, and quickly applies this new information to the political and military situation of Judah. In an instant, the generic details

from the heavens become relevant advice showing that there is no way Judah can emerge victorious in a war with Babylon. Without the human imagination translating the emanations from the Active Intellect, the entity's messages would be largely useless. Only with human cooperation is prophecy possible, and even worse the practical conclusions that are reached were never known by either God or the Active Intellect. Both celestial entities would know that this prophetic process was underway, but neither would know anything about the specifics.

The issue of prophecy brings up yet another critical point in Gersonides' thought, the issue of free will. We have already encountered Gersonides' effective denial of God's omniscience and how this leaves the field of free will open. Solving the threat posed by the all-knowing nature of God does not completely cover Gersonides' thoughts on free will. Since God cannot know individual human beings, it is only logical that their actions and choices are equally unknowable to the divine mind. Thus far, Gersonides has not reached particularly far when it comes to his understanding of free will. After all, proposing the idea that humans possess free will, even at the expense of divine knowledge, had been done long before Gersonides ever raised his pen. What is more startling is his notion that free will can actively defy prophecy. The future, at least for the Jews, is heavily dependent on divine providence (which will be covered in greater depth later in the essay), which works to ensure the optimal outcome for the people under it. Yet depending on the actions of the people, providence can be secured or weakened, and part of what prophecy predicts are the disasters that result after a loss of providence.

However, as perhaps the Book of Jonah makes most clear, people have the ability to repent and change their fates. When the people of Nineveh hear the doom that has been decreed for them by Jonah, they immediately turn in penance. Remarkably, "God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God renounced the punishment He had

planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out” (*Jonah* 3:10). Given the right prompting, the denizens of Nineveh are able to evade total destruction from on high. This is the power of free will; the capacity to choose enables humans to defy the most accurate prophets’ disastrous forecasts and select a choice that will ensure their wellbeing.

As potent as human free will may be, its actual implementation in the world as Gersonides believes is actually fairly rare. In addition to his fascination with Aristotelian philosophy, Gersonides was also a firm believer in the effectiveness of astrology. He was convinced that the movements of the planets and stars guided the destinies of everything on earth, from the smallest creature to the mightiest of human collectivities. For example, all individuals born under the same zodiacal configuration “have the same [general] attribute, as well as similar accidental features...” (Feldman *Wars* v2 51). People who happen to be born under the same astrological sign, for Gersonides, will naturally tend to be highly similar to each other. Yet his astrology goes farther; the movement of the stars not only influences the characteristics of those below them but dictates their future. Gersonides is a firm astral determinist, to use the language of Seymour Feldman (Feldman “Divine Omnipotence” 684). The patterns and movements of the heavenly bodies determine what fate has in store for people and attempt to distribute the maximum amount of goodness. The righteous can receive evil things and the wicked can obtain benefit through fate (this will be explained in greater detail shortly), but as a whole, the system works to optimize how much benefit humanity will have (Feldman *Wars* v2 181-182). The dictates of the cosmos are intended to help, but as human life proves all too well, that certainly does not translate into utopian conditions on the ground. Despite this, there is a way out of this potentially harmful cycle. God, as Gersonides explains, “...has given man an instrument whereby these evils can be avoided-reason. For man can avoid

these evils by right choice” (Feldman *Wars* v2 184). Free will, when used to make the correct decision, can push people out of the way of the harmful implications of the stars. Exercised wisely, human reason is enough to evade the damage done by astrologically determined fate and just accumulate the benefits. Such expert demonstrations of reason and choice, as Gersonides states and our own experience can attest to, however, are sadly few and far between.

Averroes:

Unlike Gersonides’ unusual and often radical positions on divine omniscience, Averroes takes a far more traditional approach to the dilemma of God’s knowledge. While his later Jewish counterpart insists on the comparability of divine and mortal knowledge, Averroes argues that with questions of whether God can know particulars, the proper opinion “is that He does not know particulars in the same way as men do” (Hourani *Harmony* 30). Averroes understands the divine as having complete and full knowledge of particulars, just that human beings cannot comprehend how this is accomplished. Such a position comes with substantial benefits, for Averroes effectively eliminates the need for him to answer the problematic question of whether God can or cannot know particulars. Averroes’ answer reaches a fairly orthodox conclusion even if it takes a slightly less traditional approach. To him, God clearly knows particulars but it is impossible for humans to understand how this process works. Since God’s knowledge is so very different from our own, there is no contradiction or logical fallacy here according to Averroes.

Not only does God’s knowledge not align with how humans understand and acquire information, but it extends far beyond our capabilities. Divine knowledge transcends the boundaries of what is particular and what is universal, further annihilating both contradiction and comparability. Human knowledge, for Averroes is barely even a shadow of its divine counterpart; the two in effect are nothing alike in almost any way. The limits posed on what we

are able to conceive simply do not apply to God. This sort of position is Averroes' attack not just on his ideological opponents in the Muslim philosophical and theological world but on the entire dialogue surrounding the issue of omniscience. His declaration of the incomprehensibility of the knowledge of God is Averroes' way of declaring the complete discussion to be a waste of time. "His Knowledge transcends qualification as 'universal' or 'particular'. Consequently there is no point in disputing this question" (Hourani *Harmony* 55). To him there is no purpose in continuing on with the conversation if there is no hope of understanding the mysteries of divine thought and knowledge. Save your time and energy for arguments that can be won, for omniscience should just be taken at face value.

There are some definite parallels with Gersonides' understanding of divine omniscience in Averroes' thought, however. One of the most clearly shared features is the Aristotelian notion that God's knowledge cannot change in any way. Both thinkers agree that the divine mind never experiences any change, but the means through which they reach this conclusion are reasonably distinct. To Averroes, God's knowledge serves as the source and cause of all beings and their knowledge. As such, "Just as no change occurs in an agent when his act comes into being... so no change occurs in the eternal Glorious Knowledge when the object of Its Knowledge results from It" (Hourani *Harmony* 74). The cause of all is not changed when it brings its creations into being. Divine knowledge acts and its products are acted upon; at no point does God's mind take on a passive role.

Another point which Averroes reaches a similar position to his Jewish counterpart - though by very different means- is his approach to free will. Like Gersonides, Averroes is committed to preserving human freedom, with both thinkers seeing it as necessary for respective religions to make sense. Yet, as we have already seen, Averroes refuses to compromise divine

omniscience. Simply claiming that God knows all while humans possess free will is not enough for a philosopher like Averroes, so more action must be taken. Instead of reducing divine omnipotence to preserve free will, Averroes seems to take the opposite strategy. He attempts to keep the idea of free will alive by stripping it of much of its challenge. Instead of meaning that humans can act without their actions having been predetermined, "...human actions are the product of those internal faculties which God has implanted in us *as well as* those external forces which allow for the realization of our deliberately chosen aims" (Najjar 11). Man is not a puppet controlled and manipulated by the will of God, but a creature that is directed both by internal motivations and outside influences. God "...has made the "secondary causes" in the world, the forces of nature which react on each other in a regular way, and it is through their operation that an act of ours becomes effective" (Hourani "Good" 25). Natural forces govern the world in which we live, constantly interacting with each other in regular and systematic ways. Through these often unseen machinations and movements of nature, the choices of man are almost perfectly determined. When I chose to eat my breakfast, I am acting not only upon the stimuli within myself, such as my hunger, but my actions are based on external forces. Biology determines the rate at which I digest food and what my tastes are. Economics details what I have available and social norms dictate what is acceptable. The time at which I eat and what I eat are informed by where I live and what culture I belong to, in addition to what I wish to consume. When external and internal factors interact to result in human behavior, "...then the actions imputed to us are performed through our will, together with the propitiousness of external forces, and that is what is referred to as God's decree" (Najjar 108). At no point in this process is God directly controlling human beings; it is only God's creations that influence what we do. To Averroes, pushing God farther out of the picture when it comes to free will is enough to preserve

human freedom. Just as long as the divine hand is not firmly stuck in the mortal pie, so to speak, then humans are able to make their own decisions.

Such a system, however, is anything but flawless. Many if not all of the external forces that interact with humanity and either push us towards certain choices or practically make them for us are very much under divine control. Averroes himself points out that "...the eternal causes occur in accordance with a definite pattern and a well-planned order, without the slightest deviation from what their Creator has decreed for them..." (Najjar 108). To argue that humans have free will because we are influenced by God's creations and not directly by the deity, in this circumstance, seems to be highly circular. If human freedom is secured by distance from the workings of God, we have barely moved away from God's reach at all by inserting perfectly controlled secondary causes that influence humanity. If these intermediary elements and causes follow the divine will without deviation, then it follows that humans will operate according to precisely what God had intended all along. Perfect obedience on the part of these external influences to the divine will should as such keep human behavior neatly regulated according to this same plan, bringing us back to the same dilemma we had at the start. In this system, God still runs every part of the show, just without directly determining how humans should behave.

Chapter 3: Theodicy

Gersonides:

It should be of little surprise to recognize that Gersonides also involved himself in attempting to explain the presence of evil in our world. As a religious thinker from one of the Abrahamic faiths and one invested in addressing serious theological questions, Gersonides was anything but an unlikely candidate for this work. Central to Gersonides' positions surrounding

his approach to theodicy is his Aristotelian interests. Like Aristotle and his successors, Gersonides believed that the ultimate source of evil is matter. Humanity, according to Gersonides, "...occupies a rank between that of the angels, or separate intellects, and that of the nonhuman animals" (Feldman "Divine Omnipotence" 684). Gersonides imagines the angels to be beings of pure mind, possessing no body or matter to interfere with their uninterrupted thought. Human beings certainly possess a similar reasoning capability, but with one very large catch. In contrast to the psychic hosts of heaven "unlike the intellect of the angels, the human intellect is embodied, and thus subject to all kinds of impediments and infirmities" (Feldman "Divine Omnipotence" 684). Our bodies are the massive dividing line between the sinfulness as well as freedom of humanity and the impeccable nature of the unchanging angels. Hunger and lust, anger and passion all derive from the body and warp our thinking into twisted versions of what they could be. Such interference with the rational human mind is to blame for all of our wicked behavior. Take away the flesh and the sin is stripped away with it. This position alone is anything but innovative, having been produced and accepted repeatedly for centuries prior to Gersonides' birth.

More intriguing, however, is how Gersonides attempts to explain the misfortune that often plagues the virtuous and the success that comes to the immoral. Eisen perhaps explains this phenomenon best, when he declares that for Gersonides "man is still subject to harmful chance events-which are unavoidable by-products of the divine plan" (Eisen *Providence* 16). As we have noted earlier, the universe is designed and established to maximize the amount of goodness that reaches humanity. That said, the perfect system that Gersonides claims we occupy is not able to eliminate all suffering. In fact, the universe as it is can only exist with suffering as part of the picture. Here, Gersonides' astral determinism rears its ugly head once again. Often in

Gersonides' vision, largely independent from the goodness of an individual, the movement of the stars can decree unpleasant fates for the virtuous and bounties for the wicked. One can live a moral life but still be faced with challenge after challenge, while a less scrupulous person may appear to live in luxury without any trouble at all. At least at first glance, simultaneously holding that the universe is perfect while believing that the movements of celestial bodies can cause harm to even the most blameless of individuals seems either like hypocrisy or poor logic. And if the order of the universe itself is in question, then it is not long before the justice of God is brought into question as well.

As with many of Gersonides' ideas, such an opinion is premature. One of the first defenses of Gersonides' theodicy is to turn to God's role in the wellbeing of humanity. The answer, as has already largely been revealed, is that "God cannot directly intervene in human events, nor can He spontaneously respond to human need" (Eisen *Providence* 15). Nothing that happens on earth is an act of will on the behalf of the divine. Every pain and sorrow, as well as every joy, is only distantly connected to the First Cause. Unlike the traditional image of a personal deity who is intimately involved in the concerns of our lives, Gersonides' God is completely unaware of the specific challenges that individuals encounter. God cannot intervene as God does not know whom to help or what to help with. God is at worst culpable of having been the source of a system which leads to agony, and at best God is completely blameless. Such a conclusion is not wrong, but there is much more to consider.

One answer to how the universe can possibly exist, let alone be seen as perfect, while suffering exists is to reexamine pain itself. Gersonides proposes that pain and misfortune actually serve as a critical tool for chastisement. Instead of simply being random products of the movements of the stars or the deliberate acts of a highly emotional deity, Gersonides argues that

in some cases misfortune is issued by the celestial system to keep individuals on the right track. When the righteous begin to stray from the ideal path of morality and intellectual development, Gersonides, in his examination of a verse in Leviticus, states that “God will chastise them with chastisement upon chastisement in order that they not become mired in those deficient opinions and will again acquire the perfection which they have abandoned” (Eisen *Providence* 133). In essence, the misfortune experienced by individuals can be seen as an instigation for them to reject the false path they have started to adopt and return to their older, better habits. A scholar who starts to gamble in excess and suddenly begins to suffer in some means, for example, would be an instance of the mechanisms of the universe attempting to push that individual away from his new vice. Suffering inflicted through seemingly random chance can in fact be an opportunity for repentance, and should not be seen as an evil. Quite the contrary, in fact, for Gersonides sees the very applications of such punishments as a type of reward (Kellner 36). Such misfortunes are really signs of divine favor, or more accurately, alignment with God’s designs for humanity. Their existence demonstrates not the absence of God or God’s lack of mercy but the perfection and justice of the universe.

Despite the highly personal language that Gersonides employs in his examination of these types of divine chastisements, one thing must be made clear: God is not directly involved in this system of punishments. At no point in this process is God able to know who is punished and why, as God cannot know particulars. Instead, God has a perfect knowledge of how this system of punishment and redirection operates as God completely understands the laws of the universe by knowing God’s self. According to Gersonides, not only are instances of pain and misfortune often instances of reward rather than an example of evil, but at no point is God aware or responsible for the generation and execution of these events.

Averroes;

On a core level, many of Averroes' approaches to theodicy are quite similar, if not nearly identical, to those of Gersonides. Like his Jewish counterpart, Averroes also blames the existence of evil upon matter. "As for [natural] evils" he writes, "such as decay, age, etc., their existence is due to the necessity of matter" (Hourani "Good" 21). Natural evils, the harmful phenomena over which humanity only has partial or limited control at best and none at worst, are the consequences of living in a world that is constructed from matter. Everything around us changes when exposed to the corrosive forces of time and additional physical factors, and this fluid nature of the material world ensures that humans will experience these so-called natural evils. An earthquake, for example, is generated through the movement of the earth's tectonic plates and at least at the moment there is nothing we can do against such violent events other than prepare and pray. Despite its scale and sheer destructive power, the earthquake is just as much a natural evil as freezing because of a frigid breeze.

Attributing natural evils to matter is all well and good, but it still does not absolve the responsibility for creating harm from God. To Averroes, all of the negative implications of living in a material world are unavoidable side effects of the nature of the universe. As he explains, "this existence [i.e., presumably the existence of earthly beings] is only possible on one of two conditions, either that these things to whose existence some evil is attached should not exist, or that that they should exist in this condition" (Hourani "Good" 21). Either the world and all its contents exist and exist through matter, or they do not. The latter option, rejecting the option of creation, may eliminate all possible evil but it also strips away any potential for good outside of God. The Creator tolerates the generation and survival of evil for the sake of the more abundant good (Hourani Good 27). To be able to consider the possibility of a world in which there is no

evil, we must necessarily be brought into a world filled with malevolence and harm; there is no alternative.

Beyond natural evil, there is still a world of wickedness that is not caused by the workings of the natural world but due to the corruptibility of the human mind and will. Men and women have proven themselves more than capable of committing terrible crimes against each other, and it does not look like there is any end in sight. How then can God possibly be absolved for how weak and immoral we consistently prove ourselves to be? To most modern readers, Averroes' answer will likely seem exceptionally weak. His is simply that "...providence does not extend to particulars but only to species. Therefore God has not decided to make this individual just and that unjust, but only to make a species among whom a certain number of unknown individuals would necessarily be just and a certain number unjust" (Hourani "Good" 26-27). Just as God does not know particulars as humans do, God similarly focuses on the level of the species rather than the individual. Instead of shaping each and every person to be righteous, God crafts humanity to be for the most part just. And, according to Averroes, even this apparent negligence is not due to any fault in God. The nature and predisposition of each person is largely distinct from those of everyone else, ensuring that different people respond in their own ways to the same stimulus (Najjar 117). The smell of roses, for example, may be perfectly pleasant to one person and completely nauseating to another. In this case, there has been no change whatsoever with the stimuli, and it is merely how human beings react to them that determines their results. In the case of theodicy, Averroes brings up this notion to justify what he sees as most sacred. When he is accused that some verses in the Quran lead men to evil, Averroes responds by saying that "it might happen that the people of evil character will find these verses misleading, just as it might happen that sick bodies find nutritious foods harmful" (Najjar 117). Neither God nor the

Quran are at fault for the way that particular people respond to the verses contained within the latter. One person may understand Scripture as teaching moral lessons while another may interpret the same verse as a justification for violence. In either case, the Quran can only be blamed for causing harm as the rose is for causing nausea.

Even appealing to the omnipotence of God is not enough, according to Averroes, to generate a world without wickedness and suffering. Though we will discuss this in far greater detail later, Averroes claims that it is obvious that “not all things are possible [for God], it is very evident, for it is not possible for the corruptible to be eternal... just as it is not possible for the angles of a triangle to equal four right angles” (Hourani “Good” 22). What Averroes argues and what Gersonides will also accept, is the notion that God is unable to do the inherently impossible. Omnipotence does not mean that even the absurd and unimaginable are options that God can create, but that God is capable of doing whatever is within the realm of possibility. Creating a world out of matter in which evil cannot exist is, unfortunately, is one of those inherent impossibilities that God is unable to effectuate.

Aside from the Platonic conclusion that evil is inseparable from matter, Averroes takes a different approach when it comes to addressing God’s relationship to evil in the world. To Averroes, God is not responsible for evil or even truly its creator. There are certainly evils in the world, and Averroes does not try to deny their existence, but he sees God as being disconnected from the harm they cause and leaves God perfect and blameless. Yet in a sort of odd but effective logical jump, it is in fact this very divine perfection that in part ensures that God is kept apart from anything less than good. According to Averroes, “the Almighty acts justly, not because He Himself becomes perfect through that justice, but because the perfection which is in Himself necessitates that He act justly” (Najjar 119). God’s intrinsic perfection prevents the deity

from acting in any way that may prove contrary to justice. Everything that God does is just, not because God tries to do good but because God simply cannot do otherwise. Indeed, God is entirely beyond error or defect in any way, rendering the possibility for even divine negligence impossible (Najjar 56).

This position serves a second, slightly more subtle, purpose for Averroes. One of his key theological adversaries, the school known as the Ash'arites, had fervently subscribed to one particular way to explain away the problems of theodicy. The good, according to the Ash'arites, is exactly whatever God wants and what God does. On the other side of the coin, "evil as a quality of persons consists of disobeying God's commands, and since God of course never does this, it follows that He is never evil" (Hourani "Good" 20). Through this single position, the Ash'arites single handedly addressed any questions or dilemmas regarding theodicy they may have had. Whatever God does is automatically right, and whatever God demands is and always will be perfectly just. To the Ash'arites, murder committed under human whims may be immoral, but if the act is commanded by God or an individual is directly destroyed by the divine then such actions are in reality good.

Averroes was diametrically opposed to this view and articulated his answer to theodicy in contrast to the Ash'arites. Against his theological foes, Averroes argues that what is good is intrinsically good. God's actions are not just because they are the products of the Creator, but because God will never do what is wrong. Indeed, for Averroes, the existence of objective values is seen as self-evident (Hourani "Good" 18). God's perfect righteousness has nothing to do with a tyranny of divinity but is based entirely in the inviolable nature of the deity.

Chapter 4: Miracles and Providence

Gersonides;

Perhaps there is no area in which the radical nature of Gersonides' ideas is more clearly demonstrated than in his understanding of miracles and providence. As an astronomer as well as a philosopher and an observant Jew, Gersonides firmly believed in the worth of the natural world. The value he attributed to the material universe contributes massively to his willingness to understand miracles and providence, and his approach to addressing the issues inherent in these ideas. Yet from the start, Gersonides proves to have a unique comprehension of what the world is as well as its origins and relationship to the divine. In contrast to the orthodoxy of both the majority of Jews and Muslims of his time, Gersonides "maintained that the world was created from eternal formless matter" (Shapiro 72). Instead of subscribing to the notion that God crafted the universe *ex nihilo*, or from nothing, Gersonides holds that some sort of preexisting material was the substance from which the deity constructed the world. According to this vision, in line with Platonic thought, Gersonides proposes that God has existed eternally alongside a soup of primordial matter (Feldman *Wars* v2 149). The act of creation in this sense is not pulling something out of nothing but a process of organization. God institutes order over the previously amorphous mass in order to shape what would become the world we inhabit.

Establishing divine ownership over the material world through creation is only the first phase of Gersonides' understanding of the world, however, and he takes this idea to justify his next leap of logic. As God formed the world and God is entirely good, Gersonides reaches the logical conclusion that the world in which we live is the best possible world. Imperfect though our lives might seem, "The universe as a whole may be just, even if that justice is not manifested in all its parts" (Kellner 44). The injustices that humans experience on a daily basis are the side effects of a creation that is designed as ideally as possible. To Gersonides, the universe

physically is as perfect as it will ever be and the laws of nature ensure that evil will exist just as long as the world does.

Theologically questionable though this may seem, this idea has a powerful implication for the miraculous. For if the world is perfect, then “miracles can not cause permanent change in nature. He argues, in effect, that if miracles could bring about permanent change it would mean that God’s creation is in need of improvement” (Kellner 91-92). What is perfect has no need for change, let alone anything that can better it and, for Gersonides, the universe is no exception. Miracles may arise in his worldview as a result of providence (more on this shortly), but they cannot cause a lasting change to the natural order. The parting of the Red Sea serves as an excellent example; the body of water is forced to split through the immense power of the divine, but this shift does not last long. Once the Israelites have passed through, the waters crash back into their natural state, drowning the Egyptian chariot corps in the process. With its goal accomplished, the change a miracle generates is reverted to bring nature back to its original state of perfection.

There are more limitations on the power of miracles than just their long-term effects, however. Miracles can cover and affect almost anything in our world, but they cannot make an impact on anything that transcends what Gersonides sees as the earthly realm. As Eisen explains, “Gersonides is careful to point out that only the laws of nature are affected by miracles but not the rules of logic or mathematics” (Eisen *Providence* 26). For example, a miracle could manipulate and change how water interacts with the force of gravity, enabling the Red Sea to be split apart and formed into walls. Natural laws are changed temporarily by the miracle, making the supernatural event a possibility for a short time. In contrast, no matter the circumstances, Gersonides refuses to accept the idea that a miracle can touch mathematics; adding two and two

together is something that not even the supernatural can touch. In addition, Gersonides includes yet another limit on just what miracles are capable of influencing. Contrary to the way that moderns understand the heavens, Gersonides proclaims that everything outside of the ‘sublunar realm’ is off limits to miracles (Eisen “Exodus” 114-115). For Gersonides, the heavenly bodies are not just glimmering lights in the sky or even massive objects that are incredibly distant from the earth, but living and thinking beings that work to ensure universal order. These entities, known as the Separate Intellects, are treated like angels and are excluded from the dominion of the miraculous.

This conclusion may seem innocuous at first, but it comes with a startling challenge to Jewish orthodoxy. Arguably one of the more famous miracles detailed in the Bible is God stopping the passage of the sun through the sky in the Book of Joshua so that the Israelites may emerge victorious from a vicious battle with the Amalekites. Within Gersonides’ understanding of miracles, however, this once straightforward tale becomes more interesting. As miracles cannot impact the celestial bodies, “the miracle in Joshua 10 did not in anyway involve a cessation of the sun’s rotation” (Eisen “Exodus” 115). God did not and, according to Gersonides, could not do anything to stop the movement of the sun regardless of what was going on below. The explanation for the Biblical miracle that Gersonides provides is much more humble; instead of stopping the sun, the miracle involved is an optical illusion that made it appear that the sun had frozen in the sky. When the biblical text declares, “Thus the sun halted in midheaven, and did not press on to set, for a whole day; for the Lord fought for Israel,” Gersonides takes this seemingly straightforward account of a miracle to be deceptive (*Joshua* 10:12). There is no halting the sun’s path through the sky despite the literal words of the text, and it is merely the appearance of the event that is conveyed. As unusual as this interpretation may be to some, the

end result in both interpretations is the same, however: the Israelites are supernaturally endowed with the additional light that they need to wreak vengeance upon their enemies.

With these substantial limitations in place around what miracles can and cannot do, precisely what miracles are capable of is not entirely clear. Moreover, exactly what miracles are in a theological system where God does not have any knowledge or concern for individuals is anything but obvious. Traditionally, miracles are deliberate acts of will on the behalf of the divine, the most visible form of heavenly intervention in our world. Such events shatter the boundaries of what we believe to be possible, pushing aside or just outright suspending natural laws to accomplish their aim. According to Gersonides, almost none of this typical way to comprehend miracles is accurate. Instead of being the intentional handiwork of God, Gersonides claims that miracles are not independent of the natural order, but part of it. Such events are in reality the results of powerful laws that are only occasionally activated to impact earthly life (Eisen "Exodus" 111). Just like the laws of gravity and thermodynamics, Gersonides puts forth what can be called "laws of miracles". What were once incidents of the divine rupturing the boundaries of the natural to aid God's chosen have become part of the picture. If the correct circumstances arise, miracles are generated without God having *any* knowledge or interaction with such events. As God has perfect knowledge of the essence of all that exists and thus of natural laws, Gersonides' God knows what miracles are and that they occur. The deity just cannot know when they arise, what they do and precisely why they appear.

Considering how cautious Gersonides' approach to the preservation of natural laws is, it should perhaps come as no surprise that this careful approach is carried over into how he imagines miracles to function. As these supernatural phenomena are governed by a series of laws just like more traditional natural phenomena, miracles operate along certain guidelines instead of

randomly warping the processes of the world. Gersonides turns to one particular biblical miracle to provide an example for his theory. In the Book of Exodus, Moses' brother Aaron throws down his staff before Pharaoh and the humble piece of wood almost instantly transforms itself into a serpent. Just like the Book of Joshua and the pausing of the sun, the text explicitly states that "Aaron cast down his rod in the presence of Pharaoh and his courtiers, and it turned into a serpent" (*Exodus* 7:10). Such an act is blatantly supernatural and seems to violate everything we know about the natural world.

That is, however, if we understand such an event in a normal timeframe. Gersonides explains that "the turning of a stick into a snake can be accomplished by natural processes over an extraordinary long period of time... The miracle is thus in its being generated [i.e., the snake] without intermediary steps" (Eisen "Exodus" 112-113). Given the right amount of time, the material that makes up the wooden staff can decay and can be absorbed by a different organism. Eventually, as life form after life form is devoured and its component parts are assimilated into its hosts, the initial material that made up the staff could hypothetically become part of a snake.

What Gersonides is saying with this particular miracle is that natural laws had not been broken outright but accelerated to the point where processes that would take a substantial amount of time happen in mere moments. Miracles subvert and manipulate nature but ultimately all of them to Gersonides leave nature intact. They may skip the thousands of intermediary steps needed to reach a particular conclusion, or they may escalate the typical order of the world in a different way. Anything more than this, however, is impossible. Miracles must use channels established for more typical natural phenomena in all circumstances (Eisen "Exodus" 113). Such a requirement seems to place tremendous restrictions on what the miraculous is capable of accomplishing. Unlike the typical way that divine intervention in the mortal world is imagined,

Gersonides' miracles are not violent acts that rip open the fabric of possibility and reduce the laws of nature to irrelevance. Instead, they themselves are extensions of the natural processes they appear to upend. In one move, Gersonides has taken what appeared to be the archetypical symbol for supernatural might and incorporated it into the natural world. Miracles manipulate the stable rules that govern the world in which we live, though these changes themselves are a result of these same laws. Gersonides does not eliminate miracles, he naturalizes them to the extent that what is supernatural can be included in our understanding of nature.

With an idea of what miracles themselves are and what they can accomplish, the only remaining question for Gersonides' interpretation of divine intervention in the mortal realm is *why*. Why do miracles occur when they do and what purpose do they serve? To answer this question, we must turn to the complex manner in which Gersonides understands providence. According to Gersonides, providence takes two main forms in our world. The first of these primary varieties is what can be called general providence. This is essentially a sort of limited protection provided to all human beings by God's creation- indeed, all living things in the sublunar world- working to ensure that for the most part people are shielded from harm (Eisen *Providence* 19). General providence is in a sense little more than divinely ordained good fortune that encompasses every living thing regardless of who they are and what they have done.

However, general providence is not uniformly distributed throughout life in our realm. According to Gersonides, humans have a disproportionately large share in this supernatural protection from potential harm. Instead of being an impartial process general providence provides shielding in an almost hierarchical relationship, with the more important beings receiving more shelter than the less significant. "The human species receives the greatest degree of protection from general providence because of its rank and nobility" (Eisen *Providence* 15).

Being the only species on earth endowed with reason, Gersonides assigns humans the highest place in the totem pole of earthly life. Such standing ensures that even the most depraved and wicked person is endowed with benefits that will always be greater than anything less rational. This type of providence works reasonably well most of the time, but it is far from enough to protect everyone under it from the pains that are the result of the natural order of the world. Sometimes the alignment of the stars will be such that even general providence cannot prevent harm of one variety or another from befalling an individual.

As almost anyone can attest, there are plenty of incidents in which general providence is not sufficient protection to shield someone from the unsavory fate that the machinations of the cosmos have arranged. Even in situations like this, there is often an additional line of defense that separates the approaching misfortune from its victim: individual providence. What Gersonides labels individual providence operates in almost a perfectly opposite manner from its general counterpart. As its name implies, individual providence is focused entirely on the protection, not of a species, but of a select people. Not only can a single person be a recipient of individual providence but entire nations with the proper merit may also benefit from this phenomenon. “For just as the providence determined by the constellations is exerted on men in two ways—either individually... or generally, i.e. the heavenly determinations concerning the whole nation or state” (Feldman *Wars* v2 200). One man or woman may benefit from the good fortune provided by individual providence, and such luck may also be granted to entire countries provided these communities are up to the standard. Individual providence is not just thrown around randomly or given to all; this variety of providence cannot be taken for granted. Individual providence, “unlike general providence, operates only in select individuals who have achieved some degree of intellectual perfection. The more perfect a man’s intellect, the more

able he is to avoid incoming danger” (Eisen *Providence* 16). This variety of providence is something that must be earned, and even then only through mental rigor. Being in superb physical shape or even being impeccably moral will contribute absolutely nothing to acquire this additional armor against fate. The situation for nations is slightly different, however. As it is impossible for the state itself to develop its minds, Gersonides looks to the abundance of merit among the country’s citizens to shelter the whole. The brilliance of the few is enough to shield their less fortunate fellows from the harm that would otherwise befall them.

Of course, by saying that individuals must perfect their minds Gersonides is not merely demanding that his readers strive to think harder. Philosophy and the acquisition of knowledge of the true nature of the world are, for Gersonides, the only ways to envelop oneself in the additional protection offered by providence. What is more developed is thus “more noble and closer to the perfection of the Agent Intellect [and] receives the divine providence to a greater degree and is given by God the proper means for its preservation” (Feldman *Wars* v2 174). With the increased value of intellectual growth, providence operates with ever increasing force until the person in question ceases to perfect himself or herself.

Not only is this powerful boon provided only to individuals who have met the requisite level of mental sophistication, but its very presence is dependent on the behavior of the beneficiary. Individual providence for both single persons and entire peoples is contingent on their good behavior. Acting in line with what an intellectually developed individual would do—which for Gersonides, includes impeccable morality and scrupulous observance of Jewish law—ensures the continued protection of providence. If either the person or the nation goes astray, however, then a very different situation arises. For those just starting to move away from the correct path, providence will work to push them back into line. Those who are wavering despite

their protection may begin to receive what may be called ‘providential suffering.’ In essence, this phenomenon consists mostly of misfortunes that befall those under individual providence when they begin to go astray to show them their error (Eisen *Providence* 9). Ideally, the pains and suffering that are being inflicted would remind those in question to return to their previous ways of righteousness and mental growth by showing them the folly of their current behavior. If they still do not get the message, these punishments can continue to escalate, becoming increasingly harmful and devastating.

Providential suffering, however, has its limits. These ills when inflicted upon a single person will always be less than lethal, “[f]or when an evil comes upon a good man for the purpose of chastisement, it is not possible that the man die as a result of it; for if this were possible, it would not be legitimate to say this was providence” (Feldman *Wars* v2 202). Quite simply, if the purpose of providential suffering is to teach and remind, killing the student, so to speak, accomplishes nothing. Instead of learning and returning to righteousness, he or she is rendered incapable of correcting his or her mistakes. Countries and nations, on the other hand, are not quite as lucky. Not only are they equally susceptible to providential suffering, but as a result of these harsh lessons, it is quite likely that citizens may die. The state itself will survive, but its population may be decimated and its economy left in shambles by the harsh work of providence.

Yet if the state or person in question still does not get the message, there is one last punishment that can be unleashed upon them. When their sins have reached a certain point, all of the protection provided to them through individual providence will be revoked. Having rejected every attempt to push the providentially shielded back towards the correct path, they are no longer worthy of anything even resembling attention from the divine. As Gersonides explains,

after a person has stubbornly stuck to a particular misdeed, “providence will depart from him, since he is no longer deserving of it. The same is true for the providence operative upon the whole nation...” (Feldman *Wars* v2 201). In the case of the state and the person, the ultimate punishment in this world, for Gersonides, is the removal of the protective and guiding force that once shielded the righteous. With individual providence stripped away, all that is left to protect the formerly upright is general providence. Almost certainly, this idea has seemed absurd to readers from Gersonides’ own lifetime even up to the present. God, according to this model, does not do anything to bring justice to the wicked any more than just leave them to chance. And, as Menachem Kellner quickly points out, “The material punishment of the wicked consists in their being left to their fate. This fate, however, might be good, not evil” (Kellner 36)! Instead of leaving the depraved to suffer in this world, Gersonides’ God might abandon them to a life of prosperity and pleasure. And, as we have already noted, the universe is as good as it can be and it is designed to distribute the maximum amount of good; evil individuals have a fairly good shot at ending up with at least a decent life without individual providence.

General and individual providence are both explicitly mentioned by Gersonides in his writings, particularly in *Wars of the Lord*. Yet according to Robert Eisen there is an additional and critical providential phenomenon that Gersonides writes about yet never names. According to Eisen, “General providence can be inherited... by acquiring the material wealth that ancestors had earned through providence. Individual providence can also be inherited, in that providence can be directly transferred from a righteous person to his descendants” (Eisen *Providence* 36). Not only do general and individual providence provide for those under their care in their lifetimes, that same protection can be applied to their offspring and legacy. Providence is not just a simple, and for human purposes largely irrelevant, species-spanning type of protection or a

hyper-selective shield for individuals. Once someone is able to develop his or her mind to a certain extent, the providence allotted to him or her is transferred and shared with those close to them. At first glance, this idea seems bizarre and weak at best. However, “Gersonides reasons that providence protects these people because the righteous person will obviously be gladdened by the good fortunes of those about whom he cares and saddened by their misfortunes” (Eisen *Providence* 35). Inherited providence, as Eisen calls this phenomenon, in a sense is not concerned at all with the quality of people receiving this sort of hand-me-down providence. All that matters is that helping those connected to the righteous would benefit them in some sort of way.

To complete our rudimentary investigation of providence according to Gersonides, we must turn to how this powerful force is sourced. At least at the level of where it is derived and how it is executed, Gersonides views providence as functioning in a manner identical to that of prophecy. Providence, like prophecy, is constantly emanated from the Active Intellect to potential human receptors on earth whose ability to receive this divine protection is dependent on their intellectual perfection (Eisen *Providence* 18). To return to the radio analogy, general providence is broadcast on a frequency that all receivers are tuned into, but only those that have been properly aligned may be able to catch individual providence. More careful attunement to this ‘signal’, or gradual refinement of the intellect, enables a greater degree of protection.

This system not only neatly fits along the same lines as Gersonides’ vision for prophecy, but it also addresses what may be his most dangerous theological concern; the personification of the divine. Without a system behind it, providence screams that there is a deity personally aware of and invested in the wellbeing of individual humans. This is completely contrary to Gersonides’ philosophy, and could not be allowed. As a result, he argues that providence

“operates in the same impersonal manner as all other actions performed by the Active Intellect. The Active Intellect makes available at all times the full range of emanations that control processes in the natural order” (Eisen *Providence* 18). Just like the case with the generalized information that is broadcast to everyone and received by the prophets, providence is constantly released to every human being by the Active Intellect without any sense of personal connection. The Active Intellect is at no point aware of any precise individuals who are receiving its emanations of any quality. It knows that it releases both general information and providential shielding, but it has no ability to grasp the particulars of these realities. Providence, like prophecy, becomes a naturalized and almost mechanical process, controlled by a combination of natural laws and human intellectual development.

After this extensive diversion into Gersonides’ understanding of the mechanics of providence, we may finally return to the discussion of his views on miracles. Instead of proposing that miracles are displays of God’s volition and care for the world, Gersonides returns to the ideas he established surrounding providence and prophecy. For him, “miracles function in the same manner as other forms of providence. That is, they are the result of impersonal laws that become activated on behalf of an individual who has achieved intellectual perfection” (Eisen *Providence* 24). Just like providence, miracles are the result of the Active Intellect’s completely impersonal processes. And just like providence, while the Active Intellect and -by extension God- knows that miracles occur, neither are aware of who or what is receiving them and in what form they appear. Indeed, “The only difference between miracles and other forms of providence is that miracles are controlled by a special order of laws in the divine mind that are rarely implemented but are capable of producing unusual events in the sublunary realm” (Eisen *Providence* 24). Miracles are subject to the same laws as more typical phenomena that govern

the natural world, only occurring in rare cases. As we noted above, Eisen recognizes that providence comprises instances of cosmic laws coming into effect in response to the needs of an individual. And as miracles work in an identical manner to providence, it becomes clear that miracles themselves also respond to particular humans and the situations in which they find themselves.

All of this fits within Gersonides' model, but what individuals would have the merit that enables them to deserve something as extraordinary as a miracle? Who is so intellectually developed that the natural world will be temporarily shifted for their sake? The answer, it seems, is actually contained within the Bible itself. Every miracle in the Tanakh, Gersonides notices, occurs in connection to a prophet (Kellner 84). Whenever such a phenomenon shows itself, there is always some sort of figure with a potent link to the divine relatively close by. Considering Gersonides' understanding of prophecy and the intellectual perfection necessary to receive communications from the Active Intellect, this should not be too much of a surprise. Anyone who is capable of interpreting celestial messages is already a prime example, according to Gersonides, of intellectual sophistication and thus possesses an incredible amount of individual providence. And, if these men and women are so protected, why can't the greatest of these individuals have their providence manifest itself in more dramatic ways?

All of these forces are necessarily brought together in Gersonides' approach to Jewish history. The Bible is ripe with images and descriptions of a personal deity intervening to save and to punish the Israelites, and to justify his philosophy Gersonides needed to explain each and every one of these instances in the light of his thought. For such a mammoth task, Gersonides does an admirable job interpreting Scripture to suit his needs. And, as Eisen interprets

Gersonides' writings, the Ralbag paints sacred history as an intricate dance of human free will and the power of providence.

Through the brilliance and merit of the patriarchs, the Israelites are given the ever-enduring protection they will need to survive their centuries of struggle. "In Gersonides' view, providence inherited from the Patriarchs expresses itself precisely by attempting to bestow upon the Israelites the initiative to earn providence by themselves" (Eisen *Providence* 52). Abraham and his offspring reached such an immense level of intellectual perfection that the providence inherited from them is enough to shield an entire people for hundreds of years. The protection inherited from Abraham helps to give the Israelites a safer start in the world, providing them with the opportunity to learn and grow. With this protection during the nation's infancy, the Israelites would have the ability to cultivate merit of their own and in time acquire individual providence to protect themselves. One critical result of the intellectual perfection of this budding people is the conquest of the land of Canaan. As Eisen explains, "It is therefore a combination of Patriarchal merit and the merit earned by the Israelites themselves that makes it possible for them to claim the land of Canaan as their inheritance" (Eisen *Providence* 52). Jump started by the virtue of their semi-mythic forefathers, the Israelites had an opportunity to gain the shielding from the incidents of fate that otherwise would have befallen them.

The profound gift of patriarchal providence is responsible for far more than just enabling the acquisition of the land of Canaan. This inherited providence, according to Eisen, is kept as a sort of fail-safe plan for the Israelites, lasting throughout history and only activating to save them from complete annihilation. Individual providence for the people is acquired and lost repeatedly throughout Jewish history, but all throughout, their inherited providence remains intact. Usually inactive, in times of crisis the inherited virtue of the Patriarchs is called into service. "Gersonides

suggests that inherited providence redeems the Israelites only at the point when they are threatened with complete destruction” (Eisen *Providence* 59). In cases where the fates decreed by the movements of the stars should by all means destroy Israel, Abraham’s providence intervenes to hold off the worst of these cataclysms. Having lost their individual providence, what the Israelites and the Jews have inherited stands as their last and only line of defense against oblivion.

Gersonides’ theory of providence and miracles stretches from the earliest portions of the Tanakh all the way to the apocalypse. And perhaps fittingly, it is at his addressing of the end of days that we are able to see all the components of Gersonides’s philosophy assembled together. Keeping with his roots in Aristotelian thought, Gersonides understands the world to come to be almost identical to our current reality in many respects. As Kellner notes, “The messianic world will not be different in nature from the world as we know it now...” (Kellner 74). No lions and lambs will be lying down together in this vision of the messianic age, and the harshness of the natural world will continue unabated. Indeed, the world to come can be seen as a natural continuation of the course of history (Eisen *Providence* 155). Yet the end of time is not without radical transformations of its own, even though natural law will not be overturned.

Gersonides, perhaps somewhat unexpectedly considering his consistent urge to rationalize anything within Judaism that he deems to be illogical, preserves the notion of a human messiah. A distinct individual will arrive to usher in the world to come, a new age where “the Jews will again be sovereign in their own homeland” (Eisen *Providence* 155). Like his predecessor Maimonides, Gersonides accepts the biblical prophecy that the end times will bring the people of Israel back to their own lands and return them to power. He does make sure, however, to tie the notion of a personal savior of the Jewish people back into his philosophical

thought. The messiah does not arrive without reason, just appearing at a certain time because he had been foretold. Instead, the very arrival of this deliverer is the product of the collective providence of the people of Israel (Kellner 74). When the Jewish people manage to perfect their minds to such an extent that they have accumulated a truly astronomical amount of providence, they will be sent a savior.

This in itself is not tremendously surprising; the return to the land of Israel can be explained through entirely natural processes and does not involve anything that so far has been shown to be problematic. It is here, however, where Gersonides begins to veer drastically from the views and opinions of his predecessors and peers. In a tremendously unorthodox move, Gersonides claims “that the messiah will equal, and even surpass, Moses’ level of prophecy” (Shapiro 89). To many traditionalists, Moses is unquestionably the most potent prophet that the people of Israel will ever find, as he was capable of both receiving and transmitting the Torah. Moreover, the words of the Torah itself point towards the incomparability of Moses. In the final lines of the book of Deuteronomy, the text explicitly states that “Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses” (*Deuteronomy* 34:10). According to the text that Gersonides saw as the most pristine prophetic revelation to the people of Israel, Moses was never to be surpassed by anyone in his nation.

However, Gersonides was not a man to be foiled by what seems to be clear cut and unshakeable when it comes to what is understood as rational. Deuteronomy states that no prophet like Moses would arise in Israel, but it says nothing about a prophet equal to or greater than him rising out of somewhere else. Gersonides picks up on this loophole and exploits it to the fullest. In his commentary on the book of Deuteronomy, Gersonides writes that “it is clear that another prophet like him [Moses] will arise to prophesy *to Israel and the other nations*... For, were such

not the case, the mention of “in Israel”... would be a superfluous conditional statement. This prophet who will prophesy to Israel and the other nations is the King Messiah” (Kellner 64). Gersonides grabs hold of a single phrase, and manages to utilize this simple fragment of a sentence to challenge traditional Jewish orthodoxy surrounding the messiah. If every word of Scripture is critical and cannot be taken for granted, then surely the qualification about the locations from which prophets like Moses may and may not arise is important. And, keeping with his tendency to follow what he considered logical to its furthest extent, Gersonides concludes that a messiah at least equal to Moses in stature will arise outside of Israel.

Instead of being just a national savior, the messiah is a global figure from a different nation who outmatches Moses in every way. As Kellner explains, the messiah’s “prophecy will be directed to the whole world, not only to the people of Israel... the miracles he will work will be visible over broad areas and to many people... the changes introduced by these miracles will be of long duration” (Kellner 76). Instead of delivering a people, the messiah addresses the entirety of humanity and his abilities correspond to his planet-wide responsibilities. Miracles that occur for him will last longer and have greater implications than anything ever seen before, leaving Moses looking outright weak in comparison.

With such a figure of unprecedented power, it is of no surprise that Gersonides is willing to ascribe some incredible miracles to the messiah. Out of all of these supernatural acts, easily the most spectacular of them all is the resurrection of the dead. Considering what we know about Gersonides, the inclusion of this incredible act is at the very least bizarre. There are no natural laws (to my knowledge) that can be manipulated into bringing back billions of people to life, and from Gersonides’ own words the acceleration and alteration of such rules is precisely what constitutes the miraculous. Metaphors about the rebirth of the land after the chill of winter may

be used to try to justify resurrection, but critically in Gersonides' theological system this does not constitute a scientific answer to the problem. We can imagine the resurrection, but not through any natural process no matter how it is contorted. "In other words, Gersonides nowhere explains how resurrection will occur..." (Kellner 97). Logic does not seem to support the inclusion of resurrection in his understanding of the world, and for Gersonides such an irrational inclusion seems out of place.

Yet, if this breach in Gersonides' fairly consistent reasoning is removed from the equation, the resurrection of the dead is still capable of being smoothly included into his philosophical vision. We have already seen how miracles themselves are effectively the manifestations of a prophet's providence intervening for his or her own sake, and even in the case of the resurrection this is still the case. As Gersonides himself writes, "resurrection of the dead, being one of the greatest miracles, is clearly brought about by individual providence, intended, as you might say, to cause all men at that time to acquire perfect faith in God" (Kellner 78). Returning the deceased to life is an event of such profound scale and indisputable power that in response to one man or woman's providence the entire world will accept God. Such a world-shaking event will certainly not be the result of a normal individual. A miracle of such an unprecedented size and scale requires a prophet of a similar caliber, and fortunately Gersonides supplies us with just such a prophet. Only the messiah, who dwarfs Moses in his intellectual and prophetic credentials, is capable of bearing the providence necessary to bring such an event about.

Averroes:

After our lengthy exploration of Gersonides' understanding of how miracles and providence operate, we can finally turn our attention back to Averroes. For better or for worse, it

seems that Ibn Rushd has left behind a far less thorough vision of the supernatural than his Jewish counterpart. Indeed, the very notion of something beyond the bounds of the natural world seems to put Averroes on edge. Unlike Gersonides, who works diligently to try to weave the miraculous into a cohesive philosophical system, Averroes has no such hope that a compromise can be made between the ordinary and the extraordinary. He realizes that in a very profound way, miracles are extremely dangerous to the way that humans are able to see the world. The more we delve into and start to understand the physical world through science, the more it becomes clear that the world is governed by uniform and unchanging laws. The rotation of the spheres according to medieval astronomers, for example, always operates in the same way in every situation. It is through this constant behavior that humans are able to grasp the rules that govern the reality in which we live.

Miracles, on the other hand, threaten the stability of this system. By their very nature, miracles are largely unpredictable events that warp the world and the laws that rule it for the sake of man. They point towards a flexibility and anarchistic nature of reality that deeply unsettles Averroes. “For Ibn Rushd, to admit the possibility of change, even on a theoretical level, destroys the certainty of scientific knowledge” (Yazicioglu 92). By threatening to shatter the way that we understand the possible, by appearing as as radical and untamed change, miracles annihilate certainty. How can we know that the natural world will behave as we expect if a miracle can occur and change everything? The very possibility that a miracle may strike transforms the world from something we can trust not to shift under our feet, into a shaky reality at the mercy of the miraculous. And, “If one were to read miracle stories as temporary interruptions of the natural order, then scientific knowledge based on this order would not be certain and the distinction between certainty and conjecture would collapse” (Yazicioglu 92). If

the laws of nature can change, as they do if miracles are understood literally, then all science is little more than accurate guesswork.

To preserve the sanctity of science, Averroes unsurprisingly shies away from the miraculous. Knowing how deadly miracles may be to the fragile edifice of science, Averroes carefully avoids spending too much time discussing particular cases of these supernatural events. Even miracles that are detailed in the Quran are off limits for Averroes, and “Ibn Rushd refrains from explicitly addressing miracle stories at length: he believes that it is better for the... philosophers, not to discuss this matter” (Yazicioglu 93). If talking about these supernatural phenomena is so dangerous, then engaging with them should be avoided if at all possible. To discuss the miraculous is to get involved in a philosophical discussion that Averroes warns that we are woefully unprepared to engage in. To him, the human mind is incapable of comprehending these divine mysteries, and at best philosophers will walk away from studying miracles completely confounded (Yazicioglu 94). This firm conviction that miracles are beyond the pale of what the human mind can comprehend is completely opposed to Gersonides’ approach to miracles. Instead of trying to explain miracles and leave the door open to miracles outside of the semi-mythic past, Averroes denies the validity of the question and proceeds to shut down the possibility of miracles in our own time.

As stern as Averroes’ warnings against miracles may be, the dangers of the miraculous go beyond baffling those who inquire into them and even beyond the disruption of science. Belief and acceptance of miracles, at least outside of the Quran, is capable of ripping apart our very faith in the world itself. For example, if I live myself firmly entrenched in the belief that miracles can and do occur at seemingly random intervals, can I really trust the world I live in? As Isra Yazicioglu asks, “how can one go about one’s daily business trusting that the usual

course of nature will continue” (Yazicioglu 95)? At any moment, the world in which I am familiar can be thrown into chaos as its normative laws are suspended by the infinite that looms outside of the universe. To live with this expectation is to live either in constant fear or in a delusional state of hope, and Averroes understands that neither of these are productive or healthy for human life. In effect, we must live our lives firmly believing that miracles are impossible. Anything less ensures that we are unable to function and live properly in the material world in which we dwell.

Averroes does not stop at merely declaring that miracles should not be discussed and their possibility considered, however. In a fairly radical move, Averroes denies one of the core functions of the miraculous: to serve as critical and irrefutable proof of prophecy. Revelation in his eyes must be able to prove itself in the eyes of its adherents without the disruption of natural law. God, according to Averroes, “did not call anyone or any nation to believe in his message or in what he brought forth by offering in support of his message any miraculous deeds, such as turning one particular object into something else” (Najjar 96). On no occasion was the case of Scripture proven against a people, at least in Averroes’ eyes, solely on the merit of a miracle. Believing in the power and holiness of a text just because of what might be seen as magic seems crass and absurd to Averroes. With such a strong distrust of miracles, it should be of no surprise that independent of any other evidence, Averroes is not willing to see miracles as a sign of anything. “By itself this characteristic [miracle working] is not evidence [of prophethood]” (Najjar 100). In a situation where he was presented with someone displaying supernatural abilities and claiming to be a prophet, Averroes would dismiss the man as a quack without any evidence to support his claims. Only if the man or woman in question managed to bring him a

substantial amount of evidence aside from his or her powers, would Averroes be willing to give them the benefit of the doubt.

Real prophecy and revelation, for Averroes, comes from a far less flashy source. Instead of emanating from disruptions of natural laws, Averroes tells his readers that prophecy can be proven in three ways, all of which rely on knowledge. He tells his readers that prophecy is valid “from [the prophets] who forewarn of the things that have not come to pass yet... from the actions they commanded... from the kinds of cognition they exhorted to, which do not resemble the cognition and actions that are learned from instruction” (Najjar 100). It is the commandments and predictions issued by a prophet and the means through which he or she accesses and learns these truths that form the most authentic way to judge a prophet according to Averroes. A figure claiming to be a prophet without this kind of knowledge is either a charlatan or a sorcerer. Someone who meets these characteristics, however, has no real need of the miraculous to prove his or her authenticity. Supernatural knowledge and direction are sufficient to classify these individuals as true prophets. That said, they do not need to serve as the only proof of a prophet’s validity. If miraculous knowledge is accompanied by miracles of the more obvious, nature-defying variety, Averroes would classify the second type of divine intervention as just additional evidence. “The miraculous, both in knowledge and action, is the only definite proof of the attribute of prophethood, but the miraculous in other actions is merely a warrant and a strong proof thereof” (Najjar 100). These extra miracles are appreciated, but they serve as the icing on the cake rather than the proverbial cake itself.

There is one major exception to Averroes’ perspective on miracles, and in this area he stays far closer to Sunni orthodoxy than he does with his earlier positions on the supernatural. When it comes to the Quran, Averroes is adamant in calling the Scripture itself a miracle. And

unlike every other instance of the miraculous, the Quran itself proves the authenticity of Muhammad's message. Ibn Rushd states without any confusion, "that the Qur'an's proof of his prophethood... is not similar to the turning of a stick into a serpent" (Najjar 104). Unlike the miracles that Moses works to try (unsuccessfully) to persuade Pharaoh to release the Israelites from slavery, the supernatural character of the Quran is of an entirely different category. Generating snakes from dead wood falls under the umbrella of wonderworking, and as we have already seen, Averroes has little love for acts that defy the natural order.

In contrast, the Quran is a text whose beauty has astounded even its staunchest opponents according to Islamic tradition. Its words hold power and significance, not the fact that Muhammad performed any particular miracles to try to convince the peoples of Mecca and Medina to accept the authenticity of his revelation. "As for the Qur'an" Averroes writes, "its proof of this attribute [of prophethood] is similar to the proof of healing with respect to medicine" (Najjar 104). The Quran itself is direct and irrefutable proof of both the validity of Muhammad's prophecy and the authenticity of the text itself. Just as it is highly difficult to question whether a treatment administered by a doctor is the reason why someone is able to recover from an illness, so too does Averroes see it as self-evident that the Quran proves itself and Muhammad's prophetic career. Other miracles of other prophets may help to authenticate their messages, but independent of any other types of evidence these miracles prove nothing. In the case of the Quran, the opposite is true; the Quran alone is able to validate itself and by extension the prophecy of the man who received it. Any miracles and visions that Muhammad received in addition to the Quran are just additional proofs on top of what Averroes sees as an open-shut case.

To the best of my knowledge, there is only one other case where Averroes is forced to address the miraculous in a way other than his natural inclination to ignore them. The resurrection of the dead proves to be a question that he cannot avoid and, like Gersonides, cannot properly answer. Denial of the resurrection would be heretical, but Averroes has no evidence other than religious teachings to vouch for or against this astonishing miracle. With his back against the wall, Ibn Rushd accepts this eschatological principle, though not without exerting his own influence upon it. To him, the literal interpretation of the Quran which details the literal resurrection of the original bodies of the deceased cannot be accepted. As Ibrahim Najjar explains, for Averroes “It is absurd... that the same body which has disintegrated at death and turned to dust... can be resurrected unchanged after death” (Najjar 14). Averroes is unable to imagine a world in which the physical forms of the resurrected will be identical to the bodies that they inhabited in their mortal lives. It is not as though the corpses of the long deceased have remained untouched in the earth, preserved as if in amber. The matter that composes their forms has long since moved on and become part of a variety of different entities; will God collect every atom of every deceased person’s form and reassemble them on the day of judgement? With this in mind, Averroes concludes that “it is impossible for the likes of all these bodies to exist in actuality because they are made of the same matter” (Najjar 126). As the matter that compromises each and every living thing is inevitably recycled after death, it is impossible to recover the material that would be needed to bring back every deceased human being at one time. To rebuild the dead, the living would need to be deconstructed at an atomic level to supply the needed materials for the bodies of the deceased. Such a situation is unacceptable to Averroes, and as such he denies one traditional way of understanding the return of the dead to the world of

the living. At least, the deceased will not return in the way and with the materials in which they appeared in life.

To preserve the idea of the resurrection while keeping it safe from the impossibilities that are posed by the notion of returning the deceased to life in the same forms in which they lived, Averroes turns to one of three schools of thought. Though he does not explicitly endorse or embrace their ideas, let alone even name the school in question, it seems clear that Averroes is at least sympathetic to their arguments. This “third group believes that [resurrection] is corporeal, but that the corporeality that exists in the afterlife differs from corporeality in this life” (Najjar 126). In essence, this school of thought argues that the deceased will indeed be resurrected at the end of days, but in bodies that are not the same as those they inhabited in life. If there is no expectation that precisely the bodies that the dead utilized in their earthly lives will be brought back, then there is no concern with what material composes them. As such, “It is more reasonable to assume that the resurrected body is analogous to, rather than identical with, the terrestrial body” (Najjar 14). With such a solution, the logical issues inherent in the more orthodox understanding of resurrection are dealt with. As long as the souls of the dead are embodied in a form akin to their previous bodies, then to Averroes the crisis has been dealt with.

Even with his apparent support for this clever solution to the problems of the resurrection of the dead, Averroes is still not confident about what to expect or believe for this prophesized miracle. At the end of the day, Averroes is not willing to claim that the school of thought that acknowledges the resurrection but in different bodies is correct, even if he thinks their perspective is the most reasonable. His conclusion to the issue of the resurrection is very different, and by no means concludes the discussion. Instead of picking a side, Ibn Rushd effectively throws his hands in the air in surrender. “The truth of the matter” he writes, “is that

the obligation incumbent on each person is to take the position to which his speculation leads him to” (Najjar 126). Without having a perspective which he feels comfortable throwing his support behind, Averroes hands the option of choice back to the individual believer. If the faithful are moved to believe that indeed, the dead will be brought back but in the bodies of their five-year-old selves, then that is enough for Averroes.

There is, however, a limit to what Ibn Rushd considers acceptable. All beliefs about the resurrection are valid, “provided that speculation does not destroy the original principle; namely, the denial of the existence [of life after death] altogether” (Najjar 126). The true purpose and the most essential aspect of the resurrection is knowing that the human soul is able to survive post mortem, and any conclusions reached from the discussion of the resurrection must acknowledge this. If someone read the debate over what form the resurrection would take and concluded that there was no afterlife, then his or her opinion, for Averroes, would be invalid. What can be known about the resurrection is that there is something beyond the bounds of this life, and while we cannot know what that is, we must live knowing that it is the case. Even our proposed believer who concludes the dead will return as children acknowledges this fact, and as such meets Averroes’ extremely lenient standards when it comes to belief in the resurrection.

With Averroes’ relative antagonism towards the miraculous well established, it is time that we turn to the world that he so anxiously has worked to protect from the supernatural. Yet when it comes to theological notions concerning the world, once again Averroes is unfortunately tight lipped. He leaves some indication of his own views, but carefully and without too much detail. Even from these meager pickings, some information can be gleaned.

Like Gersonides, Averroes holds a notably positive view of the material world. All that exists in the world, according to Averroes, is structured to be of maximum benefit to human

beings. And keeping with Ibn Rushd's convictions about the inviolability of the sciences, he is equally certain that the universe is not only good, but highly structured. As Najjar explains, "everything in the world is ordered according to a fixed causal pattern which is conducive to serving the universal goal of existence and well-being of mankind" (Najjar 7-8). There is a distinct order to reality based in the clear pattern of cause and effect, which serves to shelter and protect humanity. All that is in our world is caused by some other element or action, which in turn has its own roots in a different material or event. Creation is a vast chain of causes and effects; one thing causes another which then leads to a second action and the cycle continues.

With such a causal system, eventually an inevitable question will arise: if all that exists is the result of something else, then where does this pattern start? Two immediate solutions present themselves. The first answer is that there has to be a start to this chain, an entity or event without a cause of its own that brings the entire system into being. For the second, the universe has always existed and will continue to do so, forming what is in essence a chain that stretches back infinitely through time and extends endlessly into the future. Averroes, unsurprisingly, stands with the first of these two options and unequivocally declares God to be the First Cause. Yet God's role goes beyond merely establishing the unending chain of all that is, for in reality as God created the universe the deity also preserves it. According to Averroes, "all the other causes that He made to be subservient are not active except metaphorically; since they owe their existence to Him and it is He who caused them to exist as causes. He is indeed the one who preserves them in existence as efficacious causes" (Najjar 111). Not only did the deity kick off the great chain of cause and effects that comprises the universe, but it is only through the power of God that this system stays in place. Without God holding the chain together, so to speak, the entirety of reality would quickly unravel. "Indeed were it not for the divine preservation these [causes and effects]

would not exist for a given period of time; that is, they would not exist for the shortest period of time that can be apprehended as time” (Najjar 111). Disconnected from the divine, matter is nothing more than a flash of existence that almost instantly dissolves back into the nothingness whence it came. God must constantly ensure that this system does not instantly implode, and as such Averroes claims that God is really the only true acting force in the universe. If everything that exists is completely dependent upon the deity to keep its corporeal forms, then it is the eternal action of the divine that is really running everything that happens in the world. If the chain of existence ultimately winds back to God, and its links are held together by God, it is only appropriate to subordinate their significance in the universe to that of their preserver.

Averroes’ understanding of the relationship between the divine and the world, however, becomes substantially less clear after this point. He seems to dance back and forth between opinions, trying as hard as possible not to have to answer any more questions regarding the world and its creation. On one hand, in one work Averroes seems to throw his support behind the notion that the created universe is effectively eternal and indestructible, for “the eternal creation is certainly more appropriate where the actions of the Omnipotent Creator are concerned, since it is inconceivable that an interval or lapse of time should intervene between His willing and His action” (Najjar 9). If God created the universe, then why over time would God suddenly decide to let the world be annihilated or perform the deed in person? However, in *On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy*, Averroes works to obscure this very idea. In effect, he tries to reduce the question of whether or not the world was generated in time and is thus eternal, to mere semantics. Philosophers and theologians alike, he claims, have remarkably similar positions on the status of the world if the language issue is cleared up. “Thus the doctrines about the world are not so very far apart from each other that some of them should be called irreligious and others

not” (Hourani *Harmony* 56). Instead of siding with one side of the theological and philosophical debate, Averroes tries to end the discussion altogether by claiming that both sides are saying roughly the same thing.

This is not the only instance where Averroes does his best to shut down the debate surrounding the issues of creation. In contrast to some of his other comments, he effectively claims that creation itself is something that cannot be comprehended by anyone. “To tell anyone...that the religious creed, regarding the world,” writes Averroes, “is [to tell them] something the learned cannot comprehend, let alone the ordinary people” (Najjar 89). The creation of the world is, like the status of miracles, something that is fundamentally beyond the human capacity to understand. The inconceivable amount of might needed to generate the world and to sustain it transcends what we are capable of imagining, leaving us at best with a partial understanding of the universe’s origins. A handful of scholars might be able to grasp some of the less complex aspects of the world’s birth, according to Averroes, but as mortals we have is no possibility of comprehending the whole.

Chapter 5: Sources of Divergence;

While our examination of how these two medieval philosophers have approached and understood the issues surrounding divine omnipotence may have been cursory, we have finally reached a point at which we can fully appreciate their substantial differences. Particularly in regard to subjects such as miracles, Gersonides seems to be substantially more willing to entertain the most outlandish conclusions compared to his Muslim predecessor. Though there are occasions where Averroes cuts deeply against the grain of the Sunni orthodoxy of Islamic Spain, for the most part it seems that he largely stays on the defensive. This is, of course, no accident.

As noted near the very start of our investigation, the crucial motivation behind Averroes' decision to record his philosophical ideas was that of protecting both himself and his fellow philosophers. Al Ghazali's damning accusations from nearly a century earlier still needed to be answered, and the wrath of the traditionalists opposed to Greek thought needed to be calmed. If no one else was willing or able to respond to al Ghazali in kind, then Averroes saw it as his responsibility to counter the earlier scholar's arguments. Even this defensive action, however, was not without risks and concerns. Averroes was loath to reveal more about philosophy than necessary to the public, but to defend his discipline he necessarily needed to unveil some of his secrets. As George Hourani notes, Averroes tellingly wrote that "If it were not for the publicity given to the matter and to these questions which we have discussed, we should not have permitted ourselves to write a word on the subject" (Hourani *Harmony* 3). Had Ghazali not thrown the first punch, so to speak, Averroes would have happily never put pen to paper to write down many of his philosophical views. Responding to Ghazali was a necessity and one that was worth the risks of exposing more philosophy to the masses. Averroes knew that his writings could easily insult the sensibilities of the common faithful, tempt them to anger, or even lead them astray from their legitimate but mistaken understandings of the world, but he did not see himself as having another choice.

Averroes' fears about the dangers present in al Ghazali's accusations and the fury of the majority were very much rightly founded. Philosophers were under the real threat of condemnation for unbelief, or *kufir*, in Arabic. And an accusation of this variety was not something that could merely be shrugged off as slander. "Such a condemnation would carry very serious penalties for philosophers: not merely the destruction of their books and a ban on their teaching, but exclusion from the Muslim community and loss of legal protection of person and

property” (Hourani *Harmony* 29). Heresy and unbelief were potent charges to be leveled against Muslim philosophers, with potential consequences that could completely upend everything that seemed stable in life. The traditional establishment had teeth, and to Averroes it was clear that it was bearing its fangs. Without swift action, either his own life or that of another philosopher might very well end up in pieces. As such, Averroes moved to try to counter this trend, undermining both the accusations of al Ghazali and the general accusation of unbelief against the philosophers (Hourani *Harmony* 30).

With the need to disarm the threat posed by al Ghazali’s arguments against the philosophers, Averroes was fully aware that every word he wrote could be potentially disastrous for his wellbeing. He was walking along a tight rope, a thin line between saying too much or too little. All of Averroes’ efforts would be for naught if he were unwilling to address fully the gauntlet he had decided to accept. Were he not to succeed in refuting al Ghazali, then the situation for philosophers would not have changed at all. On the other hand, saying too much about philosophy and revealing his true opinions in a clear form put him in even greater danger of being declared a heretic. Keeping the realities of this difficult situation in mind, we can begin to understand just what type of perilous situation Ibn Rushd had placed himself and why he reacted as he did. If certain discussions did not need to be covered or discussed in a great amount of detail, then at least in a handful of cases, Averroes was willing to basically ignore them. Particularly when it comes to issues of the miraculous and the generation of the world, Averroes proves to be highly dismissive of the argument in its entirety. As we have already seen, he argues that such topics are beyond human comprehension and that there is no point in even going over those points in depth. Such a response, when seen outside of the context of Averroes’ life in Islamic Spain, might appear to be a sign of an intellectual roadblock, but when understood in the

light of history a much more honest picture is made available. While Averroes could have sincerely believed that subjects like miracles and creation were beyond the faculties of the human mind, they can also be seen as attempts to cover up details and information that could have harmed his reputation. Averroes could have possibly held more detailed opinions on these matters, opinions that many traditionalists would have viewed as heretical. Unfortunately, we do not possess any way of determining the sincerity with which Averroes held his ideas. We cannot know whether fear silenced Ibn Rushd from sharing all of his ideas with posterity, or if he felt willing to risk revealing what he truly believed about the universe and its creator.

Ultimately, Averroes' worst fears about his philosophical beliefs did indeed come to pass. Towards the end of his life, Averroes personally faced the wrath of the traditionalists within his city state of Cordova. As Ibrahim Najjar notes, "in 1195, yielding to public pressure, the Caliph ordered the books of Averroes to be burnt, on an undefined charge of irreligion or heresy, and the teaching of philosophy and the sciences were [sic] banned... In the same year Averroes was exiled to Lucena" (Najjar 1). Only three years before his death, Averroes was cast out of his homeland as his carefully written works were burned; for a scholar, there is likely little that can be more traumatizing- his life's work literally going up in smoke in the streets he had known since he was a child, and banished for a crime of which he sincerely believed he was innocent. Despite this public humiliation, however, Averroes' reputation in Cordova was quickly restored and he was allowed to return to the city of his birth (Najjar 1). Averroes personally experienced and intimately knew the danger in his field of study, yet he pursued them anyway. He paid for his intellectual interests, though, in a far less costly manner than many philosophers might have.

In almost total contrast to the caution which Averroes demonstrated in his philosophical writings, Gersonides proved to be far less concerned about the damage that his writings could

cause. Perhaps because of his remarkably close ties to the heart of the Catholic Church and the relative lack of power of the Jewish community in comparison, Gersonides did not seem to have or express any fear of excommunication for his ideas. At the very start of *The Wars of the Lord*, Gersonides boldly declares that “without doubt some people will reject our ideas... However, we are not concerned with these people; for it is sufficient for them to believe, not to know” (Feldman *Wars* v1 94). Such words speak volumes about Gersonides’ thoughts and approach to his inevitable enemies. Instead of fearing the members of the Jewish community who would label him as a heretic and attempt to dismember his ideas, Gersonides effectively writes them off without too much concern. Yet there is a second type of confidence that Gersonides displays with this one sentiment: not only is he seemingly unafraid of whatever the Jewish community can try to do to him, but Gersonides also appears unfazed by the prospect of revealing philosophy to the masses. This precise fear was very much part of Averroes’ mindset, and it at least in part prompted him to try to conceal his ideas from public consumption. Gersonides, on the other hand, largely puts all of his ideas on the table.

Indeed, Gersonides’ writings themselves are intended to be relatively accessible. According to Feldman, “Gersonides does not intend to write an *esoteric* treatise, containing all sorts of enigmatic allusions, parables, or intended ambiguities. The aim of a philosophical treatise is, he says, clarification, not perplexity” (Feldman *Wars* v1 60). According to this mindset, there is no point in teaching if your pupils are unable to comprehend the lessons you transmit. The role of the philosopher to him was fundamentally based on the transmission of knowledge; acquiring knowledge and merely hoarding it was a fruitless and highly selfish endeavor. As Eisen notes, “Gersonides sees the imparting of wisdom as the highest expression of the *imitatio Dei* principle. Just as God created the universe for no benefit to himself, so the

philosopher should teach his wisdom to others for no benefit” (Eisen “Exodus” 82). Letting individuals have access to his works was a far greater priority to Gersonides than was closing off his potentially heretical secrets from the outside world. At least initially, only individuals who were prepared to handle such weighty matters, the intellectual elite, would be able to crack open Gersonides’ teachings. To a philosopher like Averroes, this select group would be the only population that had any right to access philosophical teachings. Only this small group of highly educated men was the portion of the community prepared to handle the complex and potentially dangerous teachings put forward by philosophy.

Gersonides, on the other hand, takes a far more lenient approach. While he too is concerned about revealing philosophy to the more ignorant aspects of the populace, “Gersonides softens his approach by suggesting that philosophy can indeed be taught to the uninitiated if there is proper guidance” (Eisen “Exodus” 80). Acknowledging that anyone has the capability to learn philosophy provided he has the right teacher is a colossal difference from the nigh-paranoid perspective of Averroes. In most cases, Gersonides would most likely agree to withhold philosophical instruction from the unlettered, but his mere acceptance of the possibility speaks volumes about the relative freedom in which he felt that he lived. Gersonides’ willingness to share his philosophical teachings is demonstrated in more than just his opinions, however. The very structure of *The Wars of the Lord* reflects his willingness to share his ideas and thoughts with others. Knowing that some of his ideas would be substantially more difficult for traditionalists to swallow, Gersonides organized his work to take advantage of the differing levels of complexity. He put the easier, more orthodox proofs and theories first and “Gersonides specifies that he intends to place the more controversial material at the end of his treatise, for by that time his audience will have unwittingly loosened its attachment to its inaccurate views”

(Eisen "Exodus" 84). If everything were to go according to plan, Gersonides' readers would already at least begin to question the orthodoxy in which they believed by the time they reached the most unusual of his ideas. Such individuals would ideally already be convinced of the accuracy of Gersonides' ideas or at least be sympathetic to them, giving them the flexibility to read through his final most heretical of notions.

Such a willingness to reveal his philosophy to the world and the optimism to believe that he could convert traditionalists to his line of thinking is miles away from Averroes' approach to philosophy. While Averroes had to be prompted by a challenge to the wellbeing and safety of Islamic philosophers at large, Gersonides felt comfortable enough to share his ideas on his own. As Averroes works to invalidate particular conversations and questions that he is forced to address, Gersonides seems to revel in delving into the very depths of such issues. With his life on the line, Averroes often remains within a safe distance of Sunni orthodoxy when he speaks about the nature of God and God's capabilities. Gersonides, on the other hand, is reckless in comparison and is willing to accept whatever he sees as the most rational solution to a problem, no matter how uncomfortable that conclusion may be. To be sure, Gersonides was not unconcerned with the potentially problematic nature of his ideas and thought. Despite this, he possessed a substantially greater confidence in his ability to safely reveal it than his Muslim counterpart. Looking at the material with which these two medieval philosophers were working and the questions they faced, both Averroes and Gersonides came to the issues surrounding divine omnipotence similarly to each other. Yet the degree to which these two men were willing to push the boundaries of what was considered orthodox differed wildly. If we are to understand the differences with which Averroes and Gersonides saw the power of God, we must look at the worlds in which they lived with similar scrutiny to the words they wrote.

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