

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Spring 2018

Volume 44 Issue 3

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Alexander Green, *The Virtue Ethics of Levi Gersonides*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, vii + 195 pp., \$84.99 (cloth).

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Levi Gersonides (1288–1344) is not an obvious choice for a book in ethics. “Ethics” and “morality,” for example, do not appear in his *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry, let alone receive anything approaching substantial treatment. We should be especially grateful to Alexander Green, therefore, for his patient and carefully researched *The Virtue Ethics of Levi Gersonides*.

Green frames his study, originally a dissertation project directed by David Novak at the University of Toronto, with reference to the contemporary revival of philosophical “virtue ethics.” Quoting Alasdair MacIntyre on the need for adherents of the Jewish tradition to speak on behalf of the tradition of Jewish ethics, he proposes here a study of the distinctly Jewish Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics, a tradition that include Moses Maimonides (1138–1204), Gersonides, and Isaac ‘Arama (1420–1494). “This book,” he concludes, aims to “trace the first step in the development of a tradition of Jewish Aristotelian virtue ethics by asking how Gersonides challenged the Maimonidean model while still remaining within it” (x).

Maimonides sought to restructure the Jewish tradition in light of Aristotelian philosophical concepts, especially Aristotle’s model of the human soul and its powers and virtues. Gersonides appropriates much of Maimonides’s synthesis, but adds two new categories of individualistic virtues: the virtues of self-preservation and the virtues of altruism. These categories structure Green’s study, and the four core chapters (setting aside the introduction and conclusion) focus on the virtues of physical self-preservation, the virtues of

altruism, the skill necessary to negotiate conflicts between these virtues, and the political implications of all this for kings, priests, and prophets.

Green gathers the scattered bits and pieces of Gersonides's mature ethical thought from across his corpus, but most especially from his late biblical commentaries. Gersonides, Green argues, was convinced of the centrality of narrative, and therefore that "practical matters are more effectively discussed through examples of the lives and actions of individuals in a narrative form than in a scientific commentary or through the commandments of the law" (4). Stories appeal best to the moral imagination, offering models for imitation and expressing the variability and contingency of the moral life. "In fact, one can take Gersonides' reading a step further and intimate that, according to him, ethics should be presented in a narrative like the Hebrew Bible over reading a treatise such as the *Nicomachean Ethics* because its stories successfully present characters that exemplify in their actions the outcome of the cultivation of moral virtues" (5).

Whereas for Aristotle (and with certain qualifications Maimonides) the purpose of practical wisdom is moral virtue and *eudaimonia* in the fullest sense, for Gersonides "the goal of practical wisdom is no longer merely deliberation to attain different and sometimes conflicting ends, but a rising in priority of physical preservation from a basic prerequisite to *the* central goal of the practical intellect" (27). Because of this, physical self-preservation is a key motivation for human action, and a test of practical wisdom. In commenting on the story of the Tower of Babel, Gersonides says that the people built it thinking

it will protect them so that they will not go spread out throughout the world in search of suitable places to live and [go find] plants necessary for man because they will see this building from afar, because of its height, and it will protect them so they will not move a far distance away from it. Because of this, their efforts will be repaid in that everyone will be gathered in one place in the land. In addition, in building this city, it will always increase their numbers. And God already saw that gathering men in one place in the world is not fitting for the existence of the human species.... If the entire human species is in one place, they could all be lost if everything is destroyed in that one part of the world. This is why it is necessary for man to be spread out throughout the world, so that if there is a catastrophe in one part, the species will be preserved in the rest. (31–32)

The people built the tower for the sake of self-preservation, and God destroyed it because of His deeper understanding of self-preservation. Even more, those who successfully develop their practical reason exhibit three key materialistic virtues: endeavor, diligence, and cunning (33). As the names of these virtues might suggest, “one of Gersonides’ lessons for action is to use whatever means are necessary to achieve the desired result” (38).

This raises a question that Aristotle and Maimonides did not face: “Should one use whatever means are necessary to achieve success? Are there any limits?” (48). The most important limitation involves Gersonides’s second new category of virtues: the virtues of altruism and beneficence. Green argues that “Gersonides makes the God of the Hebrew Bible a *direct* model for imitation, where God’s different character traits and positive actions represent his various intellectual virtues that human beings must imitate. As a form of *imitatio dei*, God’s attributes and actions are outcomes of His essence and His relationship to the world” (72–73). The self-preserving virtues of endeavor, diligence, and cunning are balanced by the divine “altruistic attributes of loving kindness, grace, and beneficence” (73).

But “pure altruism” is exemplified by God alone. All of His creatures must balance the demands of altruism with the demands of self-preservation. Green addresses the delicate balance between justice and the practical wisdom of the individual by developing Gersonides’s understanding of individual deliberation between competing goods, most especially the private goods of self-preservation, the public goods of society (including goods of self-preservation and goods of other-regarding beneficence), and the goods commanded by the divine law. (It is hard to see how self-preservation and altruism track this threefold division of goods in Green’s analysis; at least loosely speaking, private goods and some public goods involve self-preservation, whereas some public goods and some [perhaps all?] divinely commanded goods involve altruism.)

In Gersonides’ model of deliberation and choice, there are three conflicting goods: human physical needs such as family and property; peace and the cessation of conflict; and obeying God’s commands. However, as Gersonides argues, choosing between these three alternatives is not a tragic dilemma with no rational method of deciding. Gersonides does not envision choice in moral conflicts in this light, but suggests that one can resolve such moral conflicts based on a hierarchy of goods. All three goals are important, but when in conflict, certain goods take priority over others depending on which two are in conflict. Human physical needs such as family and property take priority over God’s commands, since the need for physical preservation is

a prerequisite for fulfilling those commands. Peace takes priority over the physical desire for property, since although property is a necessary basis for physical preservation, it is not the ultimate end; in fact, peace allows for contemplation more effectively if one has the opportunity for it. Yet, when God's commandments and the pursuit of peace come into conflict, there are times when one must follow God's ordinances and other times when one must pursue peace. One must note that these are not strict rules, but are a set of guidelines and recommendations for how to deliberate and choose between competing goods in the majority of cases. (104–5)

For example, “Joseph’s brothers fabricated a story about how their father commanded them to report to Joseph after his death, in order to forgive them for their sins. Gersonides states that in this case it is ‘appropriate for man to endeavor to achieve peace as far as possible’ and that it is ‘inappropriate that the desire to stay far away from lies be able to thwart the noble goal of peace’” (113).

All of this has immense political implications. Whereas the philosopher-king is the ideal leader for Maimonides, according to Gersonides the philosopher-king Moses was a failure (his slowness of speech, for example, indicated the impossibility of combining the isolation and focus of divine contemplation with the political activity of the other powers of his soul and led to serious failures in leadership). Indeed, “the ethical repercussions are such that the ethics and virtues of self-preservation are not directly related to the altruistic virtues that lead one to contemplation and imitate [*sic*] the divine nature. This separation...has political ramifications as well, magnifying this distinction on a collective scale, as the practical realm is managed by kings and the theoretical realm is in the hands of priests” (132).

Like Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, Gersonides responded to an earlier tendency towards ethical unity by emphasizing the divisions between kinds of goods, the consequent divisions in our soul that respond to these different types of goods, and the necessarily divided political powers responsible for each respective type of good. Green suggests that Gersonides, like his Christian counterparts, foreshadows modern politics and thus offers us a distinctive and still-vital Jewish voice “that continues to nurture as well as to challenge thinkers of all stripes to the present day” (167).

This is surely true, but the drive for theoretical unity expressed by Plato and Aristotle, Maimonides and Aquinas, and Alasdair MacIntyre today might not require us to ignore the real divisions between goods, or even to

combine the role of philosopher (or priest) with king. When Gersonides's contemporary Nachmanides (1194–1270) argues that Abraham sinned greatly in urging Sarah to identify as his sister in Egypt (whereas Gersonides praises Abraham's "diligence"), or that Abraham and Sarah also sinned greatly in their treatment of Hagar (whereas Gersonides praises Abraham's pursuit of peace), how are we to decide between them (162–63)?

I fear that Gersonides's position leaves us without a rational criterion to decide between the demands of self-preservation and the demands of altruism, despite Green's arguments to the contrary. As Henry Sidgwick concluded with obvious melancholy at the end of the nineteenth century (and at the end of five hundred pages of reflection) when he found himself unable theoretically to unify egoism and altruism: "Practical reason would still impel us decisively to the performance of duty in the more ordinary cases in which what is recognized as duty is in harmony with self-interest properly understood. But in the rarer cases of a recognized conflict between self-interest and duty, practical reason, being divided against itself, would cease to be a motive on either side; the conflict would have to be decided by the comparative preponderance of one or other of two groups of non-rational impulses" (*The Methods of Ethics*, book 4, chap. 6, §5).

But this objection in no way diminishes Green's achievement in *The Virtue Ethics of Levi Gersonides*. Indeed, it is thanks to his work that we can now begin to situate Gersonides in the larger debate over the tension (real or imagined) between egoism and altruism in recent moral philosophy, a debate that Green is well aware of (see, e.g., 63–66) and that I for one hope he continues to address.