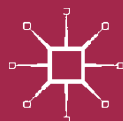


ALEXANDER GREEN

# The Virtue Ethics of Levi Gersonides



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Gersonides' Ethics: The To'alot Be-middot in Ralbag's Biblical  
Commentaries. PhD Diss., Yeshiva University, 2006*

## PREFACE

Over the last fifty years, Western ethical and political thought has received a barrage of criticism for their dependence on universal moral laws and have henceforth undergone a major shift by focusing on individual and cultural difference. Charles Taylor characterizes this transformation as a shift from a politics of universal dignity to a politics of difference.<sup>1</sup>

While the politics of universal dignity claims it stood for equal rights for all citizens, critics argue that underlying it lay a claim to a preference of certain rights over other rights. For example, the American Declaration of Independence famously began with the statement that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,” but those rights were not equally applied to all citizens at the time of the founding of the USA. Concurrently, universalistic ethics has also faced an equally strong criticism from religious traditionalists who argue that universalism is imposing militarist secularism on the values of religious communities and have responded by making a case for their positions in the public sphere. Universalistic ethics and politics guided by rational principles have been strongly criticized since rationality has been presented as being violent, oppressive, falsifying and homogenizing. As a result, a counter movement to modern universalistic ethics arose, calling itself “virtue ethics,” focused on diversity and difference, by reconstructing an ethics of character (*ethos*) out of elements of Aristotle’s ethics of

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virtue (*arete*) in his *Nicomachean Ethics* and its reception throughout the history of Western thought, which highlights the multiplicity of different ways of organizing the virtues in different cultures, religious traditions and epochs.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most prominent and influential virtue ethicists to reconstruct a virtue ethics for contemporary multicultural society is Alasdair MacIntyre. For MacIntyre, virtues develop as practices within a particular community and become known as a “tradition” as it develops its own form of rationality in dialogue with other competing traditions. MacIntyre builds a model of virtue as a form of practice that unifies a social group. He defines a practice as a coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity in which one achieves the internal goods of activity.<sup>3</sup> MacIntyre argues that every tradition has certain common virtues that must serve as a common dominator for that tradition to survive, such as truthfulness, justice and courage.<sup>4</sup> Beyond that, there are too many different lists of virtues in order to have a consistent history, as different traditions prioritize different sets of virtues. MacIntyre lists a wide range of ethical thinkers and works in order to demonstrate this point: Homer, Sophocles, Aristotle, the New Testament, medieval thinkers (within Judaism, Christianity and Islam), Benjamin Franklin and Jane Austen.<sup>5</sup> The wide historical and cultural diversity of this list is reflected in their very different priorities of virtues: Homer prioritizes physical strength; the New Testament that of faith, hope and love; Benjamin Franklin that of cleanliness, silence and industry; and Jane Austen that of constancy and amiability.<sup>6</sup>

As such, the virtues of a community develop into a historical tradition through developing a tradition-based form of rationality. Every tradition is constantly seeking to determine the errors and resolve contradictions in its current configuration and strengthen itself by repairing these problems. This is attempted by seeking out other traditions that may have more efficient mechanisms and resources to diagnose these faults and adapting their solutions to one’s own tradition. This at times requires translating the contentions of one’s rivals into one’s own language.<sup>7</sup> Thus, progress represents a limited advance from one’s predecessors. As MacIntyre explains,<sup>8</sup>

[the] past is never something to be merely discarded, but rather that the present is intelligible only as a commentary upon and response to the past in which the past, if necessary and if possible, is corrected and transcended,

yet corrected and transcended in a way that leaves the present open to being in turn corrected and transcended by yet some more adequate future point of view.<sup>9</sup>

This is why MacIntyre refers to tradition-based rationality as both a tradition-constituted enquiry and a tradition-constitutive enquiry, the first representing the values of the past that have shaped the tradition and the latter the freedom of members of that tradition to reevaluate those claims.<sup>10</sup> MacIntyre argues that a tradition of virtues and tradition-based rationality balances diversity and commonality better than the two alternative modern paradigms: the model of the ninth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which attempts to reduce all ethics to a single comprehensive rational model striving for universal enlightenment, and Nietzsche's genealogical model in his *Genealogy of Morals* that works to undermine or subvert any consensus or truth, while secretly relying on it.<sup>11</sup>

This new form of virtue ethics is not simply the individual's development of certain virtues and perfection of the self within one political society (*polis*) as Aristotle presents it in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but a dialog across history between competing practices and definitions of the virtues that allows for internal debate and conflict, while still rooted in a shared language of virtue. Similarly, one goal of MacIntyre's project is that "once the diversity of traditions has been properly characterized, a better explanation of the diversity of standpoints is available than either the Enlightenment or its heirs can provide."<sup>12</sup> In this sense, MacIntyre advocates virtue as the unifying basis for how a diversity of competing ethical models between different cultures can coexist and conflict simultaneously.

But MacIntyre recognizes that his project is inherently a Christian one and that there exists an independent Jewish tradition of virtue ethics.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, MacIntyre points to the dangers of a Christianity that does not recognize its roots in Judaism as a rival and competing tradition. He argues that "Christians need badly to listen to Jews. The attempt to speak for them, even on behalf of that unfortunate fiction, the so-called Judeo-Christian tradition, is always deplorable."<sup>14</sup> Therefore, he sees the need for Jewish ethics to serve as a rival tradition to Christian ethics to help Christians return to their ethical core and to correct deficiencies. At the same time, he admits that this must be done by adherents of the Jewish tradition from within their own tradition and not imposed from the outside, suggesting why he himself cannot carry out the project.<sup>15</sup>



Where does one look to find competing traditions of Jewish virtue ethics? The most influential works have been mainly Neoplatonic and/or Kabbalistic. Neoplatonic virtue ethics such as Ibn Gabirol's *Improvement of the Moral Qualities* and Bahya ibn Paquda's *Duties of the Heart* entail an ascetic journey of the soul away from this world toward God. Kabbalistic virtue ethics, such as Moses Cordovero's *Palm Tree of Deborah* and Moses Hayyim Luzzato's *Path of the Just*, advocate imitating and influencing the inner workings of the divine.<sup>16</sup> But there is also a distinctly Jewish Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics that can be studied independent of the purely Neoplatonic and Kabbalistic works. This includes Moses Maimonides' (1138–1204, Spain/Egypt) *Eight Chapters* and *Laws of Character Traits*, Levi Gersonides' (1288–1344, Provence) biblical commentaries and Isaac 'Arama's biblical commentary *Binding of Isaac* (1420–1494, Spain/Italy).<sup>17</sup>

The nature of such an Aristotelian Jewish tradition of virtue ethics must contain multiple authors focused on answering certain basic questions about the nature of reality: How is God involved in the world, and how precisely do humans imitate that in virtuous action? What are the limits of intellectual contemplation, and what is the ethical outcome of reaching that limit? What are the goods that human beings strive for? What are different categories of virtues, and what is the relationship between them (e.g., physical, moral, intellectual, theological)? What role does luck play in ethics, and how is it compatible with the divine rule of the universe? Are there moral conflicts and how are they resolved? How is the cultivation of ethical virtues related to the development of political society, and which one takes priority in ordering human life? This book begins by examining MacIntyre's description of the nature of traditions of virtue in order 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.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## NOTES

1. Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition" in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).
2. Daniel Statman, "Introduction to Virtue Ethics" in *Virtue Ethics: A Critical Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 1–41 and Martha Nussbaum, "Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?" *The Journal of Ethics* 3, no. 3 (1999), 163–201. Scholars have debated whether virtue ethics exists as a singular philosophic movement with a cohesive foundation that unifies many different thinkers or is only a rubric to group critiques of different strands of modern ethics. While all these thinkers prioritize the cultivation of character, as Martha Nussbaum has pointed out, many thinkers in the past, who have been categorized as deontological or utilitarian thinkers, such as Immanuel Kant and Jeremy Bentham, have in fact their own theory of the virtues which works alongside their deontological model.
3. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 187.
4. *Ibid.*, 192.
5. *Ibid.*, 181.
6. *Ibid.*, 180–187.

7. Ibid., 166.
8. Stern, "MacIntyre and Historicism," in *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the World of Alasdair MacIntyre*, eds. John Horton and Susan Mendus (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 150, 151, 153.
9. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 146.
10. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988) and Christopher Lutz, *Tradition in the Ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Oxford: Lexington Book, 2004), 33
11. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991). Specifically at p. 55 he says that "the intelligibility of genealogy requires beliefs and allegiances of a kind precluded by the genealogical stance."
12. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 9.
13. Alan Mittleman argues that his new book on Jewish ethics is an attempt to reconstruct Jewish ethics along the lines of MacIntyre's described project in *A Short History of Ethics*. See Alan Mittleman, *A Short History of Jewish Ethics: Conduct and Character in the Context of Covenant* (West Sussex, 2012), 1–3.
14. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 10–11.
15. In reviewing Lenn Goodman's book *On Justice*, he comments that  
 Nothing is more important for our common culture than genuine dialogue between the different and often rival moral and religious traditions that contribute to it. Goodman's *On Justice* is a remarkable statement of what we all have to learn from the Jewish tradition of thought and practice. It is a book for moral philosophers, but it is also a book for everyone with moral concerns. (Alasdair MacIntyre, Review of Lenn Goodman, *On Justice: An Essay in Jewish Philosophy* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991] on the back cover of the book)
16. Mittleman, *A Short History*, 100–106 and 131–155 and Joseph Dan, *Jewish Mysticism and Jewish Ethics* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986).
17. Here I am only dealing with the first two and I hope to write on 'Arama the latter in a future work. The ethics of Isaac 'Arama has been studied, but not analyzed in a larger comparative framework with regard to the nature of virtue ethics. See Bernard Septimus,

“Isaac Arama and *the Ethics*,” in *Jews and Conversos as the Time of the Expulsion*, eds. Yom Tov Assis and Yosef Kaplan (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Centre for Jewish History, 1999), 1–24; Sarah Heller-Wilensky, *The Philosophy of Isaac Arama in the Framework of Philonic Philosophy* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1956); and Baruch Frydman-Kohl, *Faith, Felicity and Fidelity in the Thought of Yisḥaq Arama*. DHL Dissertation, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2004.

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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

## WORKS OF GERSONIDES CITED

<i>Comm Deut</i>	<i>Perush 'al ha-Torah (Commentary on the Pentateuch)</i> , vol. v: Deuteronomy, ed. Jacob Leib Levi. Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 2000.
<i>Comm Early Proph I</i>	<i>Perush 'al ha-Neviim (Commentary on Joshua, Judges and Samuel)</i> , ed. Jacob Leib Levi. Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 2008.
<i>Comm Early Proph II</i>	<i>Perush 'al ha-Neviim (Commentary on Kings, Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah)</i> , ed. Jacob Leib Levi. Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 2008.
<i>Comm Exod</i>	<i>Perush 'al ha-Torah (Commentary on the Pentateuch)</i> , vol. ii–iii, eds. Baruch Brenner and Eli Fraiman. Maale Adumim: Maalot, 1999–2000.
<i>Comm Gen</i>	<i>Perush 'al ha-Torah (Commentary on the Pentateuch)</i> , vol. i, eds. Baruch Brenner and Eli Fraiman. Maale Adumim: Maalot, 1992.
<i>Comm Leviticus</i>	<i>Perush 'al ha-Torah (Commentary on the Pentateuch)</i> , vol. iv–v, eds. Baruch Brenner and Eli Fraiman. Maale Adumim: Maalot, 2002, 2005.
<i>Comm Megillot</i>	<i>Perush 'al ha-Megillot (Commentary on the Five Scrolls)</i> , ed. Jacob Leib Levi. Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 2003.
<i>Comm Numbers</i>	<i>Perush 'al ha-Torah (Commentary on the Pentateuch)</i> , vol. vi, eds. Baruch Brenner and Eli Fraiman. Maale Adumim: Maalot, 2008.

<i>Comm Proverbs</i>	<i>Perush 'al Mishlei (Commentary on Proverbs)</i> , ed. Jacob Leib Levi. Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 2015.
<i>Comm Song of Songs</i>	<i>Commentary on Song of Songs</i> , trans. Menachem Kellner. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.
<i>DH</i>	David Horwitz's translation of Gersonides' ethical lessons in David Horwitz, <i>Gersonides' Ethics: The To'alot be-Middot in Rabbag's Biblical Commentaries</i> . PhD Diss., Yeshiva University, 2006: 408–464.
<i>Supercomm De Anima</i>	<i>Supercommentary on Averroes' Commentary on De Anima</i> , ed. and trans. Stephen Jesse Mashbaum. In Stephen Jesse Mashbaum, <i>Chapters 9–12 of Gersonides' Super-commentary on Averroes' Epitome of the De Anima: The Internal Senses</i> . PhD Diss., Brandeis University, 1981: 1–184.
<i>Supercomm De Animalibus</i>	<i>Supercommentary on Averroes' Commentary on De Animalibus</i> , ed. Ahuva Gaziel. In Ahuva Gaziel, <i>The Biology of Levi Ben Gershom (Gersonides)</i> . PhD Diss., Bar-Ilan University, 2008: 91–266.
<i>Wars</i>	<i>Wars of the Lord</i> , trans. Seymour Feldman. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1984.

## OTHER WORKS CITED

<i>BT</i>	Babylonian Talmud, ed. Isidore Epstein. London: Soncino Press, 1961.
<i>DA</i>	Aristotle, <i>De Anima</i> , trans. Robert Drew Hicks. New York: Barnes and Nobles Library, 2006.
<i>EC</i>	Moses Maimonides, “Eight Chapters,” in <i>Ethical Writings of Maimonides</i> , eds. Raymond L. Weiss and Charles E. Buttersworth. New York: New York University Press, 1975: 59–104.
<i>Guide</i>	Moses Maimonides, <i>The Guide of the Perplexed</i> , trans. Shlomo Pines. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.
<i>Kuzari</i>	Judah Halevi, <i>The Kuzari</i> , trans. Henry Slonimsky. New York: Schocken Books, 1974.
<i>LC</i>	Moses Maimonides, “Laws Concerning Character Traits,” in <i>Ethical Writings of Maimonides</i> , eds. Raymond L. Weiss and Charles E. Buttersworth. New York: New York University Press, 1975: 28–58.



<i>Metaphysics</i>	Aristotle, <i>Metaphysics</i> , trans. Hippocrates G. Apostle. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966.
<i>MT</i>	Moses Maimonides, <i>Mishneh Torah</i> . Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1956–1968.
<i>NE</i>	<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> , trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.
<i>Politics</i>	<i>Politics</i> , trans. Carnes Lord. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
<i>Republic</i>	Plato, <i>Republic</i> , trans. Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books, 1991.

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## Introduction

### GERSONIDES' DIALOGUE WITH MAIMONIDES ON ETHICS

One of the projects of Moses Maimonides in his philosophic and legal writings was to restructure the Jewish tradition around the core concepts of Aristotelian virtue ethics.<sup>1</sup> He does so in his two large works on ethics: *Eight Chapters*, an introduction to his commentary on the tractate *Avot* in the Mishnah, and *Laws of Character Traits*, a summary and reinterpretation of the ethics of the Jewish tradition in the first book, the *Book of Knowledge*, of his restatement of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*.<sup>2</sup>

There are certain elements that make it distinctly Aristotelian. First, Maimonides adopts the Aristotelian model of the human soul (*psyche*) as the form (or “lifeforce”) giving function and organization to the physical matter of the human body.<sup>3</sup> The soul as the form of the body’s matter is neither completely separate nor completely unified with its matter. This model can be differentiated from modern materialism, which envisions the soul as purely physical, or modern dualism which draws no connection between the soul and the body, the soul thus being non-physical. In contrast, the Aristotelian soul has five parts: nutritive, sentient, imaginative, appetitive and rational. The nutritive part includes activities such as physical nutrition, reproduction and growth; the sentient part is the collecting of sensory data using the five senses; the imaginative part stores and reorganizes sensory data; the appetitive part is the source of the emotions and desires; and the rational part is concerned with obtaining knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Second, proper human action results from a perfection of certain

character traits, which are rooted in the appetitive part of the soul that deals with emotions or temperaments, but can be influenced by reason.<sup>5</sup> This appears to be the explanation for why Maimonides refers to the emotions or temperaments as *de'ot* in the *Mishneh Torah*, since it has the dual meaning of “character trait” and “knowledge.”<sup>6</sup> Third, the different emotions of the soul mimic the larger structure of nature in that they can be seen as a spectrum with two extremes, and the perfected way is the mean.<sup>7</sup> For example, courage is the mean between being too fearful and being too rash, or moderation is the mean between taking too much pleasure for oneself and taking not enough pleasure for oneself. The mean is not a static middle position, but differs depending on when one ought, cases in which one ought, toward right people, reasons for the sake of which one ought and the manner one ought.<sup>8</sup> Though, Maimonides interestingly does not highlight the role of practical wisdom in deliberating the variability of the mean. Fourth, moral virtues, for Aristotle, are political virtues as they are controlled by a specific law; however, for Maimonides they are cultivated in a more perfect way by a divine law.<sup>9</sup> Fifth and last, the highest goal of human life and of the divine law is the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and for any practical end. Aristotle describes the contemplative life as the highest, most continuous, most self-sufficient and most loved for its own sake, and knowing that God is the first existent is the first commandment in Maimonides’ legal code and the highest human endeavor, represented through the metaphor of the Sultan’s palace.<sup>10</sup>

This book will focus on where Gersonides differs from Maimonides on ethics. Gersonides continues these elements and the focus on the mean as the basis for ethics, but also adds two new categories of individualistic virtues, virtues of self-preservation and virtues of altruism, which transcend the political nature of moral virtues. The virtues of self-preservation arise as a response to “luck” as an unavoidable feature affecting everything in nature. For Maimonides, the ability to avoid the effects of luck is tied to one’s intellectual perfection. He says that “providence watches over an individual endowed with perfect apprehension.”<sup>11</sup> Contrastingly, Gersonides demonstrates that in order to deal with the seemingly capricious element of luck, human beings must focus on virtues in imitation of the nature of animal biology such as endeavor (*hishtadlut*), diligence (*harışut*) and cunning (*hithakmut*) in crafting stratagems (*taḥbulot*) aiming at physical self-preservation. This also affects certain of Gersonides’ reasons for the commandments as he gives them reasons which are more explicitly connected to self-preservation than in earlier rabbinic