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EIGHT

Humanity and its Destiny



Philosophical and Religious Background

ANOTHER TOPIC of common interest, both for some Greek philosophers and for believers in scriptural religions, was the question of humanity's ultimate felicity. It was assumed by adherents of both traditions that a person's mundane existence as a material entity was not the end of the matter. There had to be something more than a life of material pursuits and satisfaction. Quite early in Greek philosophy doctrines of the afterlife were developed, one of which was the notion of the immortality of the soul. This is a dominant motif in Plato. In several of his dialogues, most notably the *Phaedo*, he enunciated and argued for the doctrine that the human soul is immortal by virtue of its essential incorporeality and hence incorruptibility.¹ In some of his dialogues this core doctrine is associated with the ancillary ideas of the pre-existence of the soul and of the transmigration of souls.² In later Platonism, especially the philosophy of Plotinus, this basic idea is interpreted in terms of the doctrine of the ascent, or 'reversion', of the human soul to some higher entity, the World Soul, or even to the One, the ultimate reality.³ In this supernal state the soul enjoys an existence that is vastly different from and superior to what it had experienced in its embodied state.

Aristotle had problems with Plato's psychological theory, especially its sharp distinction between soul and body. He developed an alternative theory that asserted the unity of the soul with the body, wherein the soul is the form of the body. Plato's doctrine of immortality presupposes a doctrine of psychological dualism, according to which the soul and the body are radically distinct entities, and as such are essentially separable and have different destinies. Aristotle could not accept this dualism, given his scientific, and especially biological, interests. He eventually developed a psychological theory asserting the unity of the mind and the body, wherein the soul is the form of the body. Since the form is what makes a thing what it is, it is no more separable from

¹ Plato, *Phaedo*, 66a-67e, 79-81d.

² Ibid. 70c-77a; Plato, *The Republic*, 10.

³ Plotinus, *Enneads*, 1.6.7, 1.6.9, 6.7.34, 6.9.11.

the body than the shape of an orange is separable from the orange itself. In living things the soul, or form, is the principle of life for that thing. It would seem, then, that with the death of the body the soul perishes too.⁴ However, we now come to a puzzling feature of Aristotle's philosophy. In several passages in *On the Soul*, he intimates that there may be something in or of the human soul that survives the death of the body. Speaking of the intellectual activity of the human soul, Aristotle suggests: 'But in the case of the mind and the thinking faculty nothing is yet clear; it seems to be a distinct kind of soul, and it alone admits of being separated, as the immortal from the perishable.'⁵ Unfortunately, he deferred a detailed discussion of this theme to another time, which never arrived. These remarks do suggest, however, that if anything in humans is immortal, for Aristotle it is the part of the human soul that is capable of an activity that is unique to humanity: intellection. In short, if we are immortal, it is our intellect that survives.

Perhaps the most important of these 'intimations of immortality' in Aristotle is the notorious chapter 5 of Book 3 of *On the Soul*. This brief chapter may have been the most influential of Aristotle's texts, at least for the medieval philosophical treatment of human immortality. The chapter is concerned with the intellect, or thinking. Other animals have sensation and motion; some even have imagination. But humankind alone has the capacity to think. In this chapter Aristotle wants to know how this special activity takes place. He begins by applying one of his basic ideas in natural philosophy and metaphysics: the fundamental distinction between potentiality and actuality. Just as in the development of a plant or animal there is some matter that is potentially an oak tree or a butterfly and some active agents that actualize this potentiality such that an oak tree or a butterfly comes into being, something like this takes place in thinking. That is, in thinking there are two factors: one passive, or potential, the other active; that is, something that receives and something that makes or gives. Aristotle pictures the mind as a passive receptacle of information, capable of absorbing external data induced or stimulated by some agent that is productive of intellectual activity. He compares this agent to light: just as light is the catalytic agent that brings about the act of seeing, there is also a catalytic agent in the act of thinking.⁶

So far Aristotle is relatively clear. It is the remainder of this short chapter that is obscure, but despite this obscurity it is most important for our purposes. Aristotle goes on to describe the active factor of thinking in terms that

⁴ Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 2.1-2.

⁵ Ibid. 2.2.413b25-8; see also 1.4.408b18-30.

⁶ Ibid. 3.5.430a10-17.

imply its immortality: 'Mind in this sense [that is, as active] is separable, impassive . . . it is essentially an activity . . . When isolated it is its true self and nothing more, and this alone is immortal and everlasting . . . [Whereas] mind in the passive sense [*ho pathetikos nous*] is perishable.'⁷ Here Aristotle contrasts the imperishability of the catalytic agent productive of thought and the perishability of the passive aspect of the mind. That we have here a host of problems is not difficult to see. To begin with, are both the active and the passive factors in thinking internal to the mind, as some interpreters have claimed, basing their interpretation on Aristotle's opening remark: 'These distinct elements [that is, the active and passive aspects] must be present in the soul';⁸ or, as the latter half of the chapter suggests, is the active factor an external agent separate from the passive factor, just as light is separate from the eye, as other interpreters have argued? If the latter interpretation is followed, only this transcendent active element is everlasting; if the former, the active and everlasting factor is immanent, internal to the mind, suggesting that each human intellect possesses an inherent immortality. This chapter bequeathed to Aristotle's interpreters and followers a legacy of both considerable difficulty and importance.⁹

One such commentator was Alexander of Aphrodisias (*fl.* 180–210). Although his commentary on Aristotle's *On the Soul* is not extant, his own treatise of the same title is, as well as a supplementary essay on the soul commonly referred to as the *Mantissa*.¹⁰ One of Alexander's important contributions to the discussion was his formulation of a conceptual vocabulary for the various factors in cognition, only one of which—'the passive intellect'—was named by Aristotle. Alexander's nomenclature became the standard terminology used throughout late antiquity and the Middle Ages. In explaining the passive intellect Alexander provided equivalent terms that bring out more explicitly what Aristotle had in mind. As Aristotle himself suggested, this intellect is passive in the sense that it is literally 'in-formed', or shaped, by the cognitions that it takes on. In this sense it is like matter: just as a piece of wood can be shaped into a variety of forms, so the mind is capable of being formed by its cognitive content. Accordingly, Alexander calls the passive factor of the mind 'the material intellect' (*ho hulikos nous*).¹¹ Moreover, its

⁷ Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 3.5.430a17–25.

⁸ *Ibid.* 3.5.430a13.

⁹ R. D. Hicks gives an excellent discussion of these divergent interpretations in his edition of Aristotle's *De anima*, 498–510.

¹⁰ For a comprehensive treatment of Alexander of Aphrodisias' psychology and epistemology, see Moraux, *Alexandre d'Aphrodise*.

¹¹ Alexander of Aphrodisias, *De anima*, 81 (trans. Fotinus, 105).

passivity implies potentiality, its capacity to become in-formed, or cognitive; hence, it can be considered to be a 'potential intellect', or 'intellect in potentiality' (*ho dunamei nous*).¹² This capacity for cognition is, to use another Alexandrian expression, a 'disposition', or preparedness (*epitedeiototes*), to acquire knowledge, a notion that Aristotle referred to as a 'condition' (*hexis*), or habit.¹³ All these terms express the idea that at the first stage of the cognitive process the human intellect is just a capacity that is itself inchoate, or empty. In this sense, Aristotle suggested, the mind is initially a blank tablet.¹⁴

However, Aristotle insisted that the active factor is superior to the passive factor. Alexander supplies a name for this active factor: it is the 'Agent Intellect' (*ho poetikos nous*), which we encountered in our earlier discussions of prophecy and miracles.¹⁵ Alexander interpreted Aristotle's characterization of this intellect as 'separate, ever-active, and eternal' as referring to a transcendent active cause of cognition. Indeed, for Alexander this transcendent entity is identical with God, or the Supreme Intellect, mentioned by Aristotle in chapters 7 and 9 of Book 12 of his *Metaphysics*. This active agent is that which actualizes the potential, or material, intellect, to think and to become an intellect in act (*ho nous kat' energieian*).¹⁶ As this intellect becomes more active, it becomes 'the intellect as habit', or a settled condition of the mind.¹⁷ The more the human mind progresses in its intellectual journey its cognitive capital increases, eventually reaching the condition of the 'acquired intellect' (*ho nous epiktetos*), the fully mature mind.¹⁸ Without the Agent Intellect there is no cognition; yet if there were no capacity for knowledge human beings would not be 'rational animals'.

Alexander's interpretation of chapter 5 of Book 3 of *On the Soul* was most influential: with the exception of his identification of the Agent Intellect with God, it formed the psychological framework within which many medieval philosophers developed not only their epistemological ideas but their doctrines of immortality as well. Like his mentor, Alexander left the topic underdeveloped. If the material intellect is, as Aristotle himself stated, the perishable element in cognition, then immortality seems to be a fiction, a

¹² Alexander of Aphrodisias, *De anima*, 81, line 23 (trans. Fotinus, 105).

¹³ *Ibid.*, line 14 (trans. Fotinus, 110); Aristotle, *Categories*, 8.8b26–7.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 3.4.430a1–2.

¹⁵ Alexander of Aphrodisias, *De anima*, 88–9 (trans. Fotinus, 116–20).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 82, line 6 (trans. Fotinus, 105–6).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 85, lines 26–86, line 1 (trans. Fotinus, 111).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 82, lines 1–2 (trans. Fotinus, 105).

conclusion that the Muslim philosopher Al-Farabi appears to have reached.¹⁹ Or is there something in or about the human mind that is able to enjoy some kind of immortality by virtue of its cognitive achievements? In some passages Alexander suggests that the acquired intellect is immortal precisely because it is the mind fully in act. In this state it has been 'assimilated to', or has become similar to (*homoiosis*), the Agent Intellect. The eternity of the latter confers immortality upon the former, while the material substratum, the material intellect, perishes.²⁰

Nevertheless, Alexander's allusions to immortality leave the reader with several problems. For one thing, *what* is it that becomes immortal? Alexander suggests that it is the acquired intellect. But what is the acquired intellect when it is no longer embodied? Some modern interpreters have claimed that it is just the act of thinking, or the cognitive act, the thought, which, according to Aristotle and Alexander, is identical with its object, which in this case is the Agent Intellect.²¹ Assimilation is then union or identification. However, in this state of unification with the Agent Intellect there does not seem to be any basis for individuation. All the acquired intellects have become one in having the same object of knowledge and in being identified with it. Indeed, one commentator, Paul Moraux, has argued that Alexander has distorted Aristotle's own belief that it is the intellectual 'faculty', or the intellect itself, that becomes immortal.²² On this reading of Aristotle, the immortal intellect of each person would be numerically distinct. It is, however, at least questionable if Alexander's own interpretation of Aristotle allows for such a robust account of immortality. Nevertheless, we shall see that Alexander's account of immortality influenced medieval thinkers in the Muslim and Jewish traditions, and hence opened the door for Gersonides to enter the debate.

Before we turn to Gersonides, let us consider how immortality was understood within the classical Jewish tradition. After all, Gersonides as a philosopher was faithful to the Jewish tradition as he understood it. Yet here we enter territory replete with theological obstacles. For, if the Greek thinkers worked with a small number of ideas pertaining to immortality, classical

¹⁹ Al-Farabi, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, referred to in Averroes' *Long Commentary on Aristotle's De anima*, 433, 481, 485-6. Al-Farabi's commentary is no longer extant (Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes on Intellect*, ch. 3).

²⁰ Alexander of Aphrodisias, *De anima*, 89-90 (trans. Fotinus, 118-19); Reale, *A History of Ancient Philosophy*, vi. 32-3; Merlan, *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness*, 18-29.

²¹ Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes on Intellect*, 36-9.

²² Moraux, *Alexandre d'Aphrodise*, 94-108.

Jewish literature is overgrown with doctrines pertaining to the afterlife: the messianic era, the Day of Judgement, the resurrection of the dead, the world to come, to mention just a few. How are these notions to be distinguished, if at all? How are they related to each other? What does each of them involve? And to make things more complicated, especially for the medieval Jewish philosophers who were familiar with the theory of the immortality of the soul, the Bible seems to be silent on the matter. If anything, the Bible's conception of the 'happy life' seems to be earthly and materialistic: a prosperous farm and a large family. Moreover, according to the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, it is the body that is restored. How could the philosophical theory of the soul's immortality be integrated within these inherited religious beliefs? It is not surprising that someone eventually came along and undertook to provide some clarification of and system to all these ideas. Maimonides, as we would expect, was that person.

For the sake of simplicity and brevity, let us now introduce the term 'eschatology' as a general noun referring to all these ideas that have to do with the end of days.²³ Our aim here is to see whether or not these various ideas can be systematized into a coherent doctrine. That this is not just an academic exercise is proved by the fact that in one of the few expressions of theological interest found in the Mishnah it is eschatology that is singled out as a defining feature of the Jewish belief system: 'All Jews have a share in the world to come . . . But these have no share in the world to come: one who says that the resurrection of the dead is not taught in the Torah.'²⁴ At the outset two points need to be noted: first, the notion of the world to come is undefined and assumed to be understood; second, belief in the resurrection of the dead is also assumed to be a well-known Jewish dogma, and since it is a necessary condition for having a share in the world to come, it is distinct from the latter. This latter point was extremely important for Maimonides, as we shall now see.

In his commentary on this passage, Maimonides provides a treatise on Jewish eschatology. His main concern is to sort out the various eschatological beliefs found amongst Jews and to explain what they have to do with the world to come, which, as the Mishnah itself indicates, is the key idea. He begins by listing a number of eschatological doctrines all involving material, or corporeal, existence. Included in this group are the well-established ideas of the messianic era and the resurrection of the dead, doctrines that Maimonides himself regarded as definitive of Jewish belief. Yet these beliefs

²³ *Eschatos*: 'end', 'last'.

²⁴ Mishnah *San.* 10: 1.

are 'this-worldly': when they occur, they will take place in the world in which we live. Maimonides insists that nature will run its course, except in the case of the resurrection itself, which will of course be a miracle. Otherwise, nothing will occur that would constitute a real and permanent change in nature. Indeed, even those who are resurrected will eat and drink, and eventually die after a long second life. It is obvious then that, like the messianic age, the resurrection is literally a mundane affair.²⁵

In sharp contrast to these ideas Maimonides singles out the main concept in this context, the 'world to come'. This state has nothing to do with this world. It is literally 'the other world', one that has nothing in common with our material needs and interests. Indeed, our life in this other world is utterly incorporeal; it is a spiritual existence. It is the *telos* of what it is to be human. To support this claim Maimonides quotes a passage from BT *Berakhot* 17b: 'In the world to come there is no eating, drinking, washing, anointing or sexual intercourse; but the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads enjoying the radiance of the Divine Presence.' The first clause of this sentence makes it clear that those who attain the world to come no longer have a corporeal existence and that their pleasures will not be physical. The second clause explicitly states that they enjoy a spiritual delight that is everlasting. In explaining this last point Maimonides emphasizes that this delight is purely intellectual, that it consists in the knowledge of God, which is acquired after continuous and deep study, especially of metaphysics. The term 'crown' in this rabbinic passage connotes 'the immortality of the soul being in firm possession of the Idea which is God the creator'.²⁶ In short, the ultimate goal for humans is immortality of the soul, which consists in knowledge of God. In his *Treatise on Resurrection*, Maimonides is again explicit that the world to come is immortality of the soul, not the resurrection of the dead or the messianic era.²⁷ It is clear that in these texts Maimonides subscribes to the Platonic doctrines that distinguish sharply between soul and body and that assert the soul's ultimate destiny is separation from the body. This is a state that those who attain it can enjoy as soon as their souls are emancipated from their bodies.

Although Maimonides is clear in these texts, in the *Guide* he is more evasive. In contrast to his full discussions of creation, divine attributes, prophecy, and providence, Maimonides is miserly on the immortality of the soul, confining himself to a few undeveloped hints. Since what he does say is

²⁵ Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishnah*, San. 10; id., *Treatise on Resurrection*, 219–22; Gillman, *The Death of Death*, ch. 6.

²⁶ Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishnah*, San. 10: 1 (trans. Twersky, 412).

²⁷ Maimonides, *Treatise on Resurrection*, 220.

relevant for our understanding of Gersonides' own theory of immortality, it is important that we try to tease out from these scattered remarks their philosophical underpinnings and implications. In the *Guide*, Maimonides is still faithful to the spiritual conception of immortality. If anything, he is more insistent on its intellectual character. In these few passages what is said to be immortal is no longer the whole soul, but only the intellectual part of it. In the concluding chapter of the *Guide*, Maimonides discusses four types of perfection, the last of which is 'the true human perfection', intellectual perfection: 'The fourth species is the true human perfection; it consists in the acquisition of the rational virtues . . . which teach true opinions concerning the divine things. This is in true reality the ultimate end; this is what gives the individual true perfection . . . and it gives him *permanent endurance*; through it man is man.'²⁸ The human soul is a complex entity, consisting of several disparate parts, or functions, some of which are intimately connected to the body, such as motion or sense perception. All those psychological phenomena are rooted in or deriving from the body and perish along with it. The only thing that remains is the intellect; for it is the intellect, or rational part of the soul, that truly constitutes human nature. Here Maimonides echoes Aristotle's remark that if anything about humanity survives bodily decomposition it would be the intellect.

So far Maimonides has put forth a fairly consistent account of human immortality based upon philosophical doctrines originally developed by Plato and Aristotle and expanded upon by later Greek and Muslim philosophers. However, there are two passages in the *Guide* that are troublesome. In commenting upon a midrashic text that mentions 'the souls of the righteous' as being 'in heaven', Maimonides attempts to explain this phrase as follows:

For the *souls* that remain after death are not the *soul* that comes into being in man at the time he is generated. For that which comes into being at the time a man is generated is merely a faculty consisting in preparedness, whereas the thing that after death is separate from matter is the thing that has become actual . . . What is separate is . . . one thing only.²⁹

Maimonides also refers to a doctrine that he attributes to the 'later philosophers', among whom he mentions in particular the Muslim philosopher Ibn Bajja (d. 1139):

²⁸ Maimonides, *Guide*, iii. 54 (trans. Pines, 635); Aristotle, *On the Soul*, I.3.407b2–6, I.4.408b19–20, I.4.408b29–30.

²⁹ Maimonides, *Guide*, i. 70 (trans. Pines, 173–4).

Now you know that regarding the things separate from matter—I mean those that are neither bodies nor forces in bodies, but intellects—there can be no thought of multiplicity of any mode whatever . . . Consequently all are one in number, as Abu Bakr Ibn al-Sa'igh [Ibn Bajja] and others who were drawn into speaking of these obscure matters have made clear.³⁰

These passages have led some of Maimonides' medieval and modern commentators to claim that he himself subscribed to this view of immortality. Indeed, in his note to the latter passage, the modern translator of the *Guide* into English, Shlomo Pines, comments: 'Ibn Bajja's doctrine of the Unity of the Intellect accordingly seems to be accepted by Maimonides.' Pines' inference has been accepted by some commentators, although it is challenged by others.³¹ For the present we can ignore this particular debate; what is important for us is that this view will be discussed and eventually rejected by Gersonides.

Gersonides' Theory of the Intellect

Right at the very beginning of Book I of *Wars*, Gersonides makes explicit his philosophical orientation and programme. Although the title of this book is 'Immortality of the Soul', it is immediately clear that Gersonides' focus is on something more specific:

Since the intellect is the most fitting of all the parts of the soul for immortality—the other parts are obviously perishable together with the corruption of the body . . . it is necessary that we inquire into the essence of the human intellect before we investigate whether it is immortal or not, and whether if it is immortal, in what way it is immortal.³²

This passage resonates with Aristotelian and Alexandrian overtones. Nevertheless, unlike his predecessor, Maimonides, whom he does not mention at all in this discussion, Gersonides provides a virtual history of the problem from Aristotle to Averroes. As he makes clear, the primary theme here will be the nature of the human, or material, intellect: what its nature is, how it functions, and whether and in what way it becomes immortal.

After a detailed and critical exposition of the views and arguments of some of the Greek and Muslim commentators on Aristotle, Gersonides reaches his

³⁰ Maimonides, *Guide*, i. 74, seventh method (trans. Pines, 221).

³¹ Ivory accepts Pines' interpretation in his 'Conjunction in and of Maimonides and Averroes'. Altmann attempts to salvage a more individualist account of immortality in 'Maimonides on the Intellect', 85–91.

³² *Wars*, I.1 (i. 109).

own conclusions about the human, or material, intellect. Concerning the ontological status of the material intellect Gersonides insists that it is not a substance, an entity essentially capable of independent existence, as the Platonists and Themistius, a fourth-century commentator on Aristotle, had claimed.³³ Nor is it a mere accidental property of the body, as some had argued.³⁴ It is, as Alexander maintained, a disposition, or capacity, for cognition, a potentiality, which needs some active agent to stimulate its activity. Dispositions, however, have no independent existence; they need to inhere, or belong, to some subject, or substratum. For Gersonides, as it was for Alexander, this ontological support for the disposition is the body or some part of the body, most likely the imagination. When under certain conditions this disposition is actualized, that is, when it is actually knowing, it is then an intellect 'in act'. So far Gersonides is faithful to Aristotle's cognitive psychology, as it was interpreted by Alexander.³⁵

As a human being advances in the acquisition of knowledge the intellect is progressively 'substantialized', in the sense that its cognitions have endowed it with more than just potential existence. Its knowledge has made it an 'actual intellect'. In its most complete, or perfect, state this intellect is, as Alexander had affirmed, the 'acquired intellect'. However, it is important to realize that for Gersonides both material intellects and acquired intellects are individuated; they are *of* particular human beings. Nevertheless, whereas the material intellects are individuated by material factors, such as particular sensations and imaginations, the acquired intellects are individuated by their respective intellectual contents. Although the human intellect is at the outset a disposition of a corporeal substance, a person, it progressively becomes dematerialized as it increases its intellectual achievements. Let us see how this comes about.

For the Aristotelian philosopher, all knowledge is ultimately based upon sensation. The mind is a kind of cognitive sponge that absorbs data from external sources. At first these data consist of sensory images of particular objects. But for the Aristotelian such images qua particulars do not constitute knowledge, since genuine knowledge consists in universal truths.³⁶

³³ *Wars*, I.1 (i. 110, 112–19, 123–9). Like his knowledge of Alexander of Aphrodisias, Gersonides' acquaintance with the ideas of Themistius' psychology derives from Averroes. On Themistius, see Hamelin, *La Théorie de l'intellect*, 38–43.

³⁴ This view appears in some Kalam literature. See Sa'adiah Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, treatise 6, ch. 1, first theory (trans. Rosenblatt, 236).

³⁵ *Wars*, I.2 (i. 111–15), I.5 (i. 144–5).

³⁶ Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, I.24.86a3–10, 2.19.100b17.

Accordingly, our fund of particular sense data has to be transformed into something having universal validity. To accomplish this we have to strip away all the idiosyncratic features of the sense data that particularize them and form a common idea, or concept (*tsiyur*). This process is one of *abstraction*.³⁷ Since, in Aristotle's philosophy, the principle of individuation, or particularity, is matter—for the material features of a thing are what makes that thing a particular item and differentiate it from other items of the same type—abstraction, or conceptualization, requires that we dematerialize in thought the sensory images that we have of the sense object. For example, I have many visual, auditory, or olfactory images of individual dogs. These images are all particular, individuated by the material features of the various dogs that I have perceived. From these diverse images I can disregard what individuates each of these dogs and construct a concept of what it is to be a dog in general, or the form, or essence, of dog. In this activity the linguistic environment plays an important role. When I hear others referring to the dogs that I see or hear by the same term 'dog', even though these are different from each other, or if I hear that the term 'dog' is used to refer to dogs that I have not perceived, my concept is reinforced and made to conform to the conceptual and linguistic system in which I live. These concepts are the building blocks of my cognitive scheme and serve to enable me to form judgements and hypotheses (*imut*). The epistemic direction here is from the particular to the universal, from the material individuating factors of a thing to its general form.

But how do we know that our concepts and judgements are true, that they adequately represent the world? Aristotle and his disciples were not overly worried by this question. Aristotle's 'epistemological faith' rests upon a metaphysical belief that natural phenomena fall into groups, or types, whose individual specimens exhibit a common form, or essence. For all the different dogs we encounter there is just one dog-form, or essence. Our concept of 'dog' has to conform to this essence if it is to be usable, not only in zoology but also in our everyday life. This assumption of natural kinds, or types, is the guiding principle of Aristotle's biological classification system of genera and species.³⁸ In short, an adequate concept and the

³⁷ Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 1.18.81b3-7; Gersonides, *Commentary on the Five Scrolls*, S. of S., 102 (*Commentary on the Song of Songs*, trans. Kellner, 38); see also Kellner, 'Gersonides on the Role of the Active Intellect in Human Cognition'; Davidson, 'Gersonides on the Material and Active Intellects'.

³⁸ Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*, 1.1.639a16-b4, 1.1.641a15-17; id., *History of Animals*, 1.1.486a15-25, 1.1.487a10-13; see also Furth, *Substance and Form*, 51-4, 70-5; Gotthelf and Lennox (eds.), *Philosophical Issues*, especially Lennox, 'Kinds, Forms of Kinds'.

judgements based upon it must conform to the formal structure of the natural world.

At this point one may want to object: 'Isn't this talk of forms and types a regression back to Plato, whose theory of the forms Aristotle spent a lot of energy refuting?' Yes and no. Yes, in so far as it is assumed here that there is an objective order that exemplifies genuine natural types and that this order can be known. In this sense there are forms; but they are 'in things'. No, if by these forms we mean the incorporeal forms of Plato's ontology that have independent existence yet are somehow 'present in and participated in' by sensible particulars. It is this Platonic thesis that Aristotle rejected. But Aristotle's victory over Plato was partial and short-lived. Gradually elements of Plato's theory infiltrated some of the doctrines of the later ancient Greek philosophers, as well as many of the theories of medieval thinkers. The later Platonists wondered, as Plato himself occasionally did, whether or not the forms have location. Some of them postulated that they do: they are located in a transcendent intellect. For some this intellect is God, or the divine mind; for others it is some supernal being subordinate to God.³⁹ Accordingly, if our concepts are adequate, they reflect or represent some form immanent in the natural world, but whose ultimate origin is transcendent. Human knowledge is, then, an activity in which we come to know the formal nature of our world through sense perception by means of abstraction; yet this structure has its foundation in some transcendent being. Aristotle's empiricism is now linked to Plato's doctrine of the divine craftsman who creates the world according to the forms.⁴⁰

Since the medieval philosophers had limited first-hand knowledge of Plato's works, they understood this epistemological-metaphysical idea in Aristotelian terms, and again the doctrine of the Agent Intellect makes its appearance, albeit in Platonic garb. Whereas Aristotle and Alexander's Agent Intellect is primarily an efficient cause of or catalyst for human cognitive activity, for some of the medieval philosophers, it is also the locus and immediate efficient cause of the formal structure of reality. In Gersonides' language it is 'the law, order, and rightness' of the sublunar world: 'Since it is clear from the nature of the material intellect that it has potentially the knowledge of the *plan and order* of the sublunary world, it is necessary that this order be known in some sense actually by the Agent Intellect.'⁴¹

³⁹ Seneca, *Moral Epistles*, 65.7; Philo, *On the Creation of the World*, 16-17, 24-9; id., *Allegorical Interpretation*, 3.96; Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 138, 158-61.

⁴⁰ Plato, *Timaeus*, 28c-29c, 30c-31a; Wars, 1.6 (i. 146). ⁴¹ Wars, 1.6 (i. 151-2).

In explaining this idea Gersonides used the following metaphor: the Agent Intellect is like a human artisan who makes an object according to some plan in his mind. However, as is often the case, the plan in the mind of the creator is more perfect than the plan as realized in the physical object. In the case of the Agent Intellect this is always true, as Plato had maintained. The superiority of the plan in the Agent Intellect relative to the embodied plan in the world and the conceived plan in our minds lies in its unitary character. For unlike the human intellect, whose cognitive achievements are cumulative, unsystematic, and incomplete, the Agent Intellect knows the entire natural order as a coherent and unified system of laws. In this sense it is analogous to Philo's Logos or Plotinus' Nous.⁴²

The Agent Intellect is also the immediate cause of the natural world being what it is; it is, to use a common medieval term, 'the giver of forms' (*donor formarum, noten hatsurot*).⁴³ The 'map of the world' that we draw represents, if it is accurate, the contents of the Agent Intellect that have been translated into physical form in nature. The Agent Intellect is, then, not only an efficient cause of human cognition; it is also the efficient agent of the way the world is, the immediate cause of its formal structure:

The agent responsible for the existence of the things in the sublunar world is the Agent Intellect, whose existence has been proven in *On the Soul* . . . [Also], it has been shown in chapter 16 of the *Book of Animals* that there is an agent at work in the [generation of] plants and animals and that this agent is an intellect. Aristotle calls it 'the soul that emanates from the heavenly bodies', which, he says, is a divine power, and an intellect. Many of the modern philosophers have called it 'the Agent Intellect'.⁴⁴

Again the analogy of the artisan is at work here: the Agent Intellect is the supreme architect and builder of the sublunar world. It brings about an ordered and structured world because it itself manifests and represents this order. Now in the physical world the forms, according to which the world is fashioned, are embodied in material objects; in the Agent Intellect, however, they are abstracted from matter. In the former the forms are 'materialized', and hence appear along with idiosyncratic properties; in the latter they exist 'pure and neat', utterly universal and unified. To the extent that our concepts

⁴² Feldman, 'Platonic Themes in Gersonides' Doctrine of the Agent Intellect'.

⁴³ *Wars*, 5.3.1 (iii. 81-2); H. Goldstein, 'Dator Formarum'.

⁴⁴ *Wars*, 1.6 (i. 152). Gersonides' reference to Aristotle is actually to his *Generation of Animals*, 2.3.736b28-9. In the medieval canon of Aristotle's writings this treatise was part of a comprehensive zoological work known as *The Book of Animals*.

are a true map of the world they also represent the formal order of our world as it is present in the Agent Intellect. Human knowledge is, then, the product of the activity of the Agent Intellect upon our intellect, whose cognitive base is our empirical experience of the natural world.⁴⁵

Gersonides' theory of the intellect is thus a blend of Platonic and Aristotelian elements. It adopts Plato's ideas of form and of the divine craftsman who creates the physical world according to a plan, but fits these ideas into an Aristotelian framework involving the Agent Intellect. We have here a synthesis of Plato's *Timaeus* and Aristotle's *On the Soul*. But before I move on to consider how Gersonides develops his doctrine of intellectual immortality, I must note that his theory of the intellect needs to be supplemented by bringing God into the story. Remember that the 'law and order' of the sublunar world ensconced in the Agent Intellect is precisely just that: it is the plan for the world in which we humans live. It is not the plan of the whole universe. The Agent Intellect is not the ultimate reality or cause of the entire universe: God is. It is God who has created both the physical and the spiritual worlds, the world of bodies and the world of separate intellects, including the Agent Intellect. The latter, as we have seen, is the 'giver of forms' for our world. It has no influence or efficacy over the heavenly bodies. The 'plan and order' of the whole universe is, however, in God's mind. It is according to this plan that the entire universe has been created by God. We have here an ascending hierarchy of orders: the formal order of the physical world as apprehended and understood in our minds; the order itself as it is embodied in nature; this order as represented in the Agent Intellect; and finally, the law of the whole universe in God.⁴⁶ As the summit and zenith of this 'ladder of being' God knows everything, that is, all the laws governing the entire universe; at the lowest position in this scale we know only fragments of this order. Nevertheless, this partial knowledge will turn out to be sufficient for attaining human perfection, as we shall see.

The Immortality of the Intellect

What does my knowing mathematics, physics, or metaphysics have to do with my having a share in the world to come? Indeed, what is it about knowledge that confers immortality? And is this knowledge both necessary and sufficient for my enjoying this share of immortality? In answering these questions we need to see how Gersonides connects the doctrine of immortality with his

⁴⁵ Feldman, 'Platonic Themes in Gersonides' Doctrine of the Agent Intellect', 255-78.

⁴⁶ *Wars*, 5.3.5 (iii. 137); Touati, *La Pensée philosophique de Gersonide*, 349-52.

general theory of cognition. To do this we first have to recall Aristotle's principle that, in the act of knowing, the cognitive act and the object of knowledge become one. Some of the medieval thinkers, such as Al-Farabi, introduced a third element to this relationship, the intellect itself: 'Thus the meaning [of] it is "thinking in actuality," "intellect in actuality," and "intelligible in actuality" is one and the same meaning.'⁴⁷ Maimonides quotes this formula as a well-known principle of Aristotelian epistemology: 'Thus, in us too, the intellectually cognizing subject, the intellect and the intellectually cognized object are one and the same thing wherever we have an intellect in actu.'⁴⁸ In the very act of thought, then, there is, to use Altmann's felicitous phrase, a 'trinity of *intellectus*', the numerical identity of the knower, the intellect, and the object known.⁴⁹ Gersonides too focuses upon the identity of the thinker and the object of thought in the act of thinking. However, whereas for Alexander of Aphrodisias and others the object of thought with which the intellect is identified is the Agent Intellect, for Gersonides it is the abstracted concept, or intelligible form, or the proposition constituted by these concepts that is the proper object of thought.

For Gersonides the key idea in this context is the 'general nature' (*hateva hakolel*). The knowledge we acquire through the mechanisms of sense perception and abstraction are ultimately based upon the existence of generic and species natures, which in turn exist in pristine form in the Agent Intellect. Although this nature as an embodied, or material, form does perish along with the death of the particular that instantiates it, the form as represented in the Agent Intellect is everlasting and immutable. Moreover, and most important, in so far as we have accumulated knowledge of these general natures, our knowledge, or our acquired intellects, partake, to use a Platonic expression, of the original stable and permanent character of these natures: 'Knowledge is conserved and indestructible; for it is of a perpetual thing that is not destructible, i.e., it is of common natures.'⁵⁰ Since in the act of knowing the intellect becomes one with the object of knowledge, the material intellect in its mature actualization, that is the acquired intellect, has become one with its cognitions and shares their stability and perpetuity.

Gersonides expresses this idea nicely in his interpretation of Genesis 25: 8, which in reporting the death of Abraham says: 'and he was gathered to his peoples'. Gersonides comments on this passage as follows:

⁴⁷ Al-Farabi, *Letter Concerning the Intellect* (trans. Hyman, 216).

⁴⁸ Maimonides, *Guide*, i. 68 (trans. Pines, 165-6).

⁴⁹ Altmann, 'Maimonides on the Intellect', 74.

⁵⁰ Gersonides, *Commentary on the Five Scrolls*, Eccles., 30d (my translation).

It is possible to interpret this passage as [meaning] that he was gathered to the objects of knowledge that he acquired during his lifetime . . . After death the intellect is gathered to these cognitions . . . Scripture calls these cognitions 'peoples' because they are the general order [*hasidur hakolel*] that exists in each and every species, which the object of knowledge designates.⁵¹

Since the term 'people' connotes generality or commonality, the 'gathering of Abraham's soul' to his peoples means for Gersonides the identification of Abraham's intellect with the universal truths that he acquired while his intellect was embodied. In Abraham's being gathered to his peoples, these truths have been shorn of all particularity: their sensory-imaginative roots and origins have been nullified in the process of abstraction. In this sense the object of knowledge to which the intellect has been gathered is a universal, an immutable element in the 'law, order, and rightness' of the sublunar world contained in the Agent Intellect: 'Accordingly, it is evident that the acquired intellect itself is the order obtaining in the sublunar world that is inherent in the Agent Intellect.'⁵² Thus the 'intellect that remains' is the sum total of one's knowledge, one's intellectual capital, accumulated through the pursuit of intellectual perfection, our true happiness.⁵³

This set of universal cognitions can be said to be immaterial in so far as with their loss of particularity they have also lost all their materiality, which is the cause and source of corruption and decay. An apple rots because of the decomposition of its matter, not the destruction of its essence, or nature. The latter is a constant, an immutable component of the overall order in nature, which is a physical replica of the incorporeal plan in the Agent Intellect. Accordingly, Gersonides concludes with the following syllogism: 'The acquired intellect is immaterial, and an immaterial substance does not have the conditions requisite for corruption; and whatever lacks these conditions is incorruptible.'⁵⁴ The intellect has achieved immortality in so far as it has literally *become* its knowledge, whose perpetuity is grounded in the immutable plan in the Agent Intellect. Plato's doctrine of the immortality of the soul by virtue of its inherent incorporeality has been transformed by Gersonides into a theory of the immortality of the intellect, wherein the intellect acquires immateriality, and hence immortality. Immortality is thus not something that is inherited at birth but an achievement earned through intellectual effort and accomplishment.

Herein lies Gersonides' response to Alexander and Maimonides' apparent denial of individual immortality. Each acquired intellect is individuated by

⁵¹ CT, Gen., 'Hayei sarah', 33a (i. 158).

⁵² Wars, I.II (ii. 213).

⁵³ CT, Gen., 'Bereshit', 14a-c (i. 51-2).

⁵⁴ Wars, I.II (i. 213).

its own intellectual contents: what Abraham knows is not identical with what Isaac knows. The intellect of Einstein is not identical with the intellect of Bohr. Even though these intellects are all immaterial, they can be individuated by the specificity of their intellectual content. The differences can be qualitative or quantitative. To be sure, here matter is no longer the principle of individuation, as it is in material substances; the principle of individuation is formal: the cognitions of the forms of things achieved by each intellect. Just as the separate intellects governing the heavenly bodies are individuated by what they know of their corresponding bodies,⁵⁵ so each acquired intellect knows what it has individually understood of 'the law, order, rightness' of the sublunar world. In both instances the intellect is individuated by what it knows.⁵⁶

It should be noted, however, that this achievement is static and terminal: upon becoming immortal the acquired intellect cannot increase its intellectual capital. Since it no longer has the sensory and imaginative apparatus to receive additional sensory inputs from which it can abstract concepts, it can no longer acquire information about the physical world. It must remain content with what it already knows.⁵⁷ Gersonides agrees with Maimonides in construing immortality as an achievement gained through intellectual perfection, yet he disagrees with him in insisting upon its individual character. But if the acquired intellect qua immortal is unable to increase its knowledge, what advantage does immortality confer upon it? The answer is that it is now able to contemplate its intellectual achievements without any hindrances supervening upon it from the body. It can now understand simultaneously what it has formally known in the step-by-step manner by which this knowledge was accumulated during the corporeal career of this intellect: 'All the knowledge that we have acquired in life will be continuously contemplated and all the things in our minds will be apprehended simultaneously, since after death the obstacle that prevents this [kind of cognition], i.e., matter, will have disappeared.'⁵⁸ For Gersonides, continuous and simultaneous understanding implies, or at least makes possible, a systematic grasp of the whole body of knowledge that one has acquired. It is for this reason that the wise do not fear death: they anticipate a more perfect and unimpeded comprehension of their knowledge.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Wars, 5.3.8 (iii. 156-63).

⁵⁶ Ibid. 1.13 (i. 224); CT, Num., 'Naso', 182a (iv. 21); see Rudavsky, 'The Jewish Tradition', 82; Manekin, 'Conservative Tendencies in Gersonides' Religious Philosophy', 306-10.

⁵⁷ Wars, 1.13 (i. 225); CT, Num., 'Hukat', 194a (iv. 109).

⁵⁸ Wars, 1.13 (i. 224).

⁵⁹ CT, Lev., 'Aḥarei mot', 158a (iii. 275).

In *Berakhot 17a*, quoted by Maimonides as support for his understanding of immortality, there is the notion that the immortals enjoy their state of immortality. They reflect upon their intellectual achievement and take pleasure in it. Gersonides agrees: 'Each man who has attained this perfection enjoys the happiness resulting from his knowledge after death . . . This pleasure is not comparable to the other pleasures and has no relation to them at all.'⁶⁰ But to enjoy or to take pleasure in something is to be aware of the object or source of the pleasure. This implies that the acquired intellect is conscious not only of its intellectual achievement but also of its immortality. Moreover, in contrast to our consciousness of our present experiences, for the most part induced by or mediated through the body, the self-consciousness experienced by the immortal acquired intellect is completely detached from and independent of the body. It does not suffer from interruptions or distractions. It is 'pure'.

Gersonides' Critique of Immortality as Conjunction with the Agent Intellect

As we noted in our discussion of Alexander, some medieval philosophers, especially in the Muslim world, developed his idea of intellectual immortality as some kind of cognitive relation with the Agent Intellect into a theory wherein Alexander's notion of 'assimilation', or 'likening', to the Agent Intellect was now interpreted as 'conjunction' or 'unification'. Immortality is construed as an intimate attachment to the Agent Intellect achieved by the acquired intellect at its most perfect stage of cognitive development resulting in union. Although the terms 'conjunction' and 'unification' have different connotations—the latter is stronger than the former—in many of the thinkers espousing this doctrine they are used interchangeably, and this is how Gersonides understands the theory.⁶¹ He treats the tradition from Alexander to Averroes as advocating a view of immortality that implies union and hence identity with the Agent Intellect. Nevertheless, as we shall see, there are some relevant differences amongst the advocates of this doctrine, and Gersonides will focus especially upon the dissimilarities between Averroes and Alexander.

Following Gersonides' own procedure I shall first consider his exposition and critique of Averroes' position, which, Gersonides says, 'has been thought to be the most adequate explanation of the material intellect'.⁶² However, I

⁶⁰ Wars, 1.13 (i. 224-5).

⁶¹ Altmann, 'Ibn Bajja on Man's Ultimate Felicity', 53, 63-4, 78-9.

⁶² Wars, 1.4 (i. 130).

need to note that, in his discussion of Averroes' theory, Gersonides makes no reference to Averroes' *Long Commentary on Aristotle's On the Soul*, which was translated into Hebrew only after Gersonides' death.⁶³ Gersonides' analysis, then, relies upon Averroes' *Epitome of Aristotle's On the Soul* and the *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's On the Soul* and several short treatises composed by Averroes dealing with conjunction. The chronological and conceptual relations between the long and middle commentaries are currently topics of scholarly debate.⁶⁴ However, I shall not enter into that discussion, since the focus here is on how Gersonides understood Averroes and those philosophers discussed by the Cordoban 'Commentator'.

Gersonides' debate with Averroes assumes that Averroes accepted Themistius' thesis that the material intellect is a separable, and hence incorruptible, substance, not a mere disposition, as Alexander had claimed. Moreover, Averroes had explicitly concluded from this thesis that the material intellect is really the Agent Intellect embodied in different humans; or conversely, the Agent Intellect is 'accidentally' the material intellect and differentiated in humans only by the particular sensory images acquired by individual perceivers. Ultimately, there is only *one* intellect, which in its receiving, or passive and potential, aspect can be regarded as the material intellect, but which in its active aspect is the Agent Intellect. In this sense the material intellect is a composite of the disposition, according to Alexander, and the separable substance, the Agent Intellect, according to Themistius and Averroes. Alfred Ivry aptly expresses this point as follows: "It is clear that Averroes . . . believes that the different phases of intellection are all essentially part of the universal agent intellect, which despite its name, is responsible for both the creating and receiving of intelligible [that is, the objects of knowledge]."⁶⁵ The dispositional dimension of knowing is inherent in the sense data accumulated in the imagination; these data are transformed into knowledge through the activity of the Agent Intellect that is 'attached' to us. The human intellect is 'material' in the sense that it, like matter in its physical character as the recipient of form, is the potential repository of knowledge if and when it is activated by the Agent Intellect.

⁶³ Averroes' *Long Commentary on Aristotle's De anima* was translated into Hebrew after Gersonides' death, probably in the fifteenth century (see Steinschneider, *Hebraeische Uebersetzungen*, §73; Ivry, 'Gersonides and Averroes on the Intellect', 240).

⁶⁴ Ivry, introduction to Averroes, *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's De anima*, pp. xiii-xxix; id., 'Averroes' Three Commentaries on *De Anima*'; Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes on Intellect*, 282-99.

⁶⁵ Ivry, 'Averroes on Intellect and Conjunction', 78.

The Agent Intellect is, then, both the form and the efficient cause of the material intellect's becoming an actual intellect: 'It is clear, from the nature of this intellect [the Agent Intellect]—which, in one respect, is form for us and, in another, is the agent for the intelligible—that it is separable and neither generable nor corruptible.'⁶⁶ In this passage Averroes implies that the material intellect, by virtue of its ontological identity with the Agent Intellect, is a separable substance, and thus immortal. In its 'accidental' embodiment in individual intellects, the Agent Intellect is literally temporarily located in and differentiated according to the sensory collections of each human mind. But with the death of the human body, the accumulation of sensory images also disappears, and there is no longer any principle of individuation that differentiates one human mind from another; that is, the Agent Intellect absorbs into itself all the material intellects such that the latter all become one in the Agent Intellect. The Agent Intellect's non-essential immanent career as a knower of mundane objects and their forms is now over, and its inherent transcendent character as a self-knower has now been restored or revealed.⁶⁷ The unicity of the Agent Intellect, a thesis admitted by all the participants in this debate, is now 'inherited' by the material intellect as it returns to its source. We can now speak of the 'unicity of the material intellect', a thesis that was deemed so dangerous that it was condemned by the bishop of Paris in 1277 and provoked Thomas Aquinas to write his polemical treatise *On There Being Only One Intellect*.⁶⁸ The Aristotelian analysis of human cognition has become the basis for a 'rational mysticism' that makes Aristotle a forerunner of Plotinus.⁶⁹

Averroes makes no effort to conceal or gloss over the fairly obvious corollary to his monopsychism: in the union of all human intellects in the Agent Intellect there is no longer any differentiation. In short, there is no individual immortality. On this major question the two great Cordoban Aristotelian philosophers—Averroes and Maimonides—appear to agree.⁷⁰ This conclusion leads Gersonides to confront Averroes head-on and results in a detailed refutation of the latter's doctrine. His critique of Averroes comprises several arguments that can be divided into three groups, or categories: theological (or religious), epistemological, and metaphysical. It should be noted,

⁶⁶ Averroes, *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's De anima*, 116.

⁶⁷ Ivry, 'Averroes on Intellect and Conjunction', 83; id., 'Gersonides and Averroes on the Intellect', 248-9.

⁶⁸ Tempier, *Condemnation of 219 Propositions*, proposition 117.

⁶⁹ Merlan, *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness*, 98-113.

⁷⁰ Ivry, 'Conjunction in and of Maimonides and Averroes'.

however, that the theological arguments are not appeals to religious texts; they are, on the contrary, philosophical arguments defending the traditional theological belief in individual immortality, which, as we have seen, is itself formulated by Gersonides within the framework of Aristotelian psychology.

Suppose there is just one intellect for all humans and that immortality is purchased at the price of obliterating all individuality. After all, if immortality is the human perfection *par excellence*, what does it matter if we all acquire

it after corporeal death and without distinction? To Gersonides it matters a great deal. He mounts a barrage of *reductio ad absurdum* arguments showing that Averroes' theory is false. It is agreed by all that the pursuit of wisdom is an essential component in the good life, which is supposed to warrant immortality. But if immortality automatically accrues to every material intellect without distinction upon death, what point is there in engaging in the long and arduous enterprise of living the good life? On Averroes' view, 'learning in the theoretical sciences whose goal is not action would be pointless. For if they have no effect on human perfection, i.e., immortality of the intellect, it is clear that they have no utility at all.'⁷¹ Gersonides believes that the human intellect, especially its theoretical, or speculative, capacity, is not a fortuitous accident of human nature. We have it because it has a goal or function, which if not realized results in the frustration of a natural end. Moreover, we have a natural desire to acquire knowledge, as Aristotle insists in the opening paragraph of his *Metaphysics*.⁷² If this desire has no point, then a natural human capacity and disposition has no terminus or goal. This violates Aristotle's dictum that nature does not do anything in vain.⁷³ Accordingly, the pursuit of wisdom would be otiose if 'the unification with the Agent Intellect . . . be achieved upon death, by any man, be he fool or sage'.⁷⁴ The contemplative life, glorified by Aristotle, Averroes, and Maimonides, would have no essential connection with human perfection as immortality, if it is achieved by anyone just by dying.

If someone is unconvinced by this teleological defence of a theological belief in individual immortality and claims that there is no essential connection between the pursuit of wisdom and immortality, the former being worthy in itself regardless of any of its possible consequences,⁷⁵ Gersonides now introduces several metaphysical arguments that undermine the Averroist

⁷¹ *Wars*, I.4 (i. 130).

⁷² Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I.1.980a20.

⁷³ Aristotle, *Physics*, 2.7.198b4-5; *Parts of Animals*, I.1.641b12; Gersonides, *Commentary on the Five Scrolls*, S. of S., 6b-c (*Commentary on the Song of Songs*, trans. Kellner, 20).

⁷⁴ *Wars*, I.4 (i. 131).

⁷⁵ As suggested by Ivry in 'Gersonides and Averroes on the Intellect', 247-51.

doctrine. As we have already seen, for the Aristotelian the human intellect needs to be stimulated and assisted in its actualization and maturation. Now if the material intellect and the Agent Intellect are really one, as Averroes maintains, then one and the same entity is both the actualizer and that which is actualized, which violates Aristotle's principle that nothing can actualize itself. According to the medieval Aristotelians we come to know a scientific law through the agency of the Agent Intellect, which itself knows this law and either transmits it to us or aids us in abstracting it from data. However, if the material intellect and Agent Intellect are really just the same thing, then one and the same thing would be both knowing this law and not knowing it at the same time. This is, Gersonides claims, clearly absurd.⁷⁶

Moreover, if two things are really identical, then if one has the property F, the other should have it too. Now, if the material intellect and Agent Intellect are one entity, their properties should be identical. But they are not. Indeed, their very definitions are radically different. The material intellect is defined in terms of its potentiality for knowledge and by the domain of its cognitive activity, namely the natural world; the Agent Intellect is defined as intrinsically actual and as primarily a self-knower: 'But if we were to claim that the two are identical, then two things of different natures would be numerically identical, which is absolutely absurd. For it is impossible for them to be one in species [that is, by definition]; all the more so is it impossible for them to be numerically identical.'⁷⁷ The Themistian-Averroist attempt to bring the Agent Intellect 'down to earth' or to elevate the material intellect to the incorporeal world of the separate intellects results in a metaphysical morass. A thing is what it is and not another thing. A thing whose nature is to know the world outside itself is one thing; something whose nature is to know itself is quite a different thing.⁷⁸

Indeed, there is a gap in Averroes' doctrine of the materialization of the Agent Intellect. How does that which is intrinsically incorporeal and transcendent become embodied and immanent? If we say that it transforms itself into the latter condition by some self-induced change, it thereby loses its status as an immutable, incorporeal substance. If we claim that it is transformed by some other agent, what or who is this external agent that has the power to change that which is essentially incorporeal and transcendent into something that is corporeal and immanent? And how would it accomplish this extraordinary, if not miraculous, deed?⁷⁹

⁷⁶ *Wars*, I.4 (i. 132).

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* I.4 (i. 133-4).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* I.4 (i. 134, 137).

Moreover, how does something that is essentially one become accidentally many? Here we are confronted with a serious problem raised by Plato in his dialogue *Parmenides*. If a unique, simple, separate, and incorporeal form is present in and participated in by many corporeal particulars, how can these essential properties of the form be preserved intact?⁸⁰ Averroes, Gersonides argues, has the same problem. According to Aristotle's philosophy, matter is the principle of individuation, as we have seen. If the immanence, or presence, of the Agent Intellect in a plurality of minds is effected by its being particularized by the sensory forms that each such mind has accumulated, then the Agent Intellect has ceased to be a separate intellect. It has been divided up into a plurality of material intellects, losing its original and inherent status as a separate, incorporeal intellect. What was initially one has now become many; what was intrinsically incorporeal and simple has now become corporeal and divisible. This is unacceptable.⁸¹

Now let us consider some of the epistemological difficulties that beset Averroes' doctrine. If two individuals A and B have the same intellect, then what A knows B should know. Obviously this is not always the case.⁸² Averroes would reply that the requisite sensory information is available to A but not to B, and it is in this sense that we can say that their respective intellects differ.⁸³ But, Gersonides would retort, why can we not say that the sensory data that enable A to know some empirical fact are sufficient for B's knowing this same fact, even though B lacks these data? 'For when it is assumed that this intellect requires the senses in what it knows, it is evident that what is sensed by one man alone would be sufficient for [the presence] of the conception of what is sensed in *all* men. But this is absurd.'⁸⁴ In this counter-argument Gersonides believes that if A and B have the same material intellect, the relevant sensory data for knowing some proposition need not be present in both A and B. Their common intellect would use just one set of sense data to affirm the truth of the proposition in question. If A possesses the required sensory information and asserts the truth of that proposition, then B, having the same intellect, should also affirm that proposition. Since affirmation, or judgement, is one of the activities of the intellect, once the common intellect has affirmed the truth of a proposition on the basis of empirical data, everyone would make the same judgement. This is of course not the case.

⁸⁰ Plato, *Parmenides*, 130a-135c.

⁸¹ *Wars*, I.4 (i. 138).

⁸² *Ibid.* I.4 (i. 138, 141).

⁸³ Averroes, *Long Commentary on Aristotle's De anima*, 329, 333-4.

⁸⁴ *Wars*, I.4 (i. 138).

Moreover, what about instances where either A and B have the same sense data or where sensory information is irrelevant, as in mathematics, yet they make different judgements? In the first case, looking at a figure, A says that it is a duck; B, looking at the same figure, says that it is a rabbit. Each knows what ducks and rabbits are like; but one and the same figure leads to different judgements, despite A and B having the same intellect. In mathematics, where sensory information plays no significant role, different mathematicians may infer different conclusions from the same set of premises. If they have the same intellect, this should not be possible. In sum, Averroes' attempt to salvage his unicity of the material intellect thesis while at the same time acknowledging individual differences in cognition fails. It proves either too much or too little.

Having disposed of Averroes' doctrine of the intellect and its corollary of non-individual immortality, Gersonides now returns to the alternative version of conjunction, suggested by Alexander and advocated by several of his medieval followers, such as Ibn Bajja and perhaps Maimonides: assimilation with, or attachment to, the Agent Intellect. Here, let us remember, we are not talking about an original ontological identity between the material intellect and the Agent Intellect, as in the case of Averroes, but about a supervenient and/or acquired epistemic relation between an intellect and the object of its knowledge.⁸⁵ The assimilation or conjunction is a state that is 'earned' by the human intellect by virtue of its cognitive efforts and achievements. This is the significance of the term 'acquired' in the concept of the acquired intellect. In the ideal case this epistemological relation results in union with the Agent Intellect, which is sufficient to confer immortality upon the human intellect. The fundamental assumption of this theory is the Aristotelian epistemological principle that, in knowing, the knower and the object of knowledge become identical. Accordingly, if the knower has acquired complete knowledge of the eternal Agent Intellect, then it has achieved the desired conjunction or union, which confers immortality. Expressed in spatial terms, the relation can be considered as cognitive congruence: the mental contents of the human knower are congruent with the contents of the Agent Intellect. Now in the medieval context we have to ignore Alexander's unique identification of the Agent Intellect with God and consider the Agent Intellect alone as the relevant object of knowledge. To achieve immortality then is for our intellects to become congruent with the contents of the Agent Intellect.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Merlan, *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness*, 18-29.

⁸⁶ Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes on Intellect*, 34-9; Reale, *A History of Ancient Philosophy*, iv. 28-33.

Despite his adherence to Alexander's psychology, and in particular to the latter's understanding of the material intellect as a disposition, Gersonides rejects his concept of intellectual immortality as conjunction with the Agent Intellect. As we have already noted, the cognitive apparatus and procedures of the human intellect differ considerably from those of the Agent Intellect, resulting in a kind of cognitive dissonance or distance that prevents complete conjunction. In the first place, the human intellect requires sensory inputs as the bases for its knowledge, and thus needs a body; the Agent Intellect dispenses with such requirements. Indeed, it does not acquire knowledge; it possesses it *ab initio*. Secondly, the human intellect acquires its knowledge cumulatively over time, often intermittently, and occasionally falling into error. In the Agent Intellect the objects of knowledge are simultaneously and perfectly present. Thirdly, we often accumulate knowledge haphazardly, not realizing or pursuing the systematic relationships between different cognitions or ideas. The Agent Intellect's knowledge is a unified system, the complete 'law, order, and rightness' of the sublunar world.⁸⁷

Finally, in addition to the differences in the modes of cognition, the human intellect and the Agent Intellect can never be cognitively congruent. No matter how great or how accurate our knowledge is it can never be as complete as the knowledge in the Agent Intellect. What we know is just a subset of the cognitive content inherent in the Agent Intellect. Even the most prominent physicist or economist is just that: he or she has attained excellence in these fields only, whereas the Agent Intellect represents the whole body of laws governing our world. All of these differences make conjunction or union with the Agent Intellect impossible for us: 'It is impossible for man to apprehend completely the Agent Intellect . . . In this some of the recent philosophers have erred, thinking that man could apprehend completely the Agent Intellect and become numerically one with it, and that herein lies human happiness . . . and immortality.'⁸⁸ Cognitive disparity between the human intellect and its ultimate cognitive goal is therefore an ineluctable and permanent fact of the human condition.

In one of the few places in Book I of *Wars* where Gersonides cites biblical or rabbinic material, he discusses a debate between two sages concerning the world to come. According to Gersonides' own understanding of the debate, Rabbi Judah bar Simon interpreted the biblical passage 'And God saw that the light was good' (Gen. 1: 4), as referring to the intellectual illumination of the separate intellects which is reserved only for God, according to the

⁸⁷ *Wars*, I.6 (i. 147-8, 151).

⁸⁸ *CT*, Exod., 'Shemot', 56b, eighth lesson (ii. 19).

statement 'The light dwells with him' (Dan. 2: 22). Other sages, however, interpreted the passage from Genesis as implying that the light is given to the righteous of the world, according to the passage 'Light is sown for the righteous' (Ps. 97: 11). Gersonides reads this rabbinic *midrash* as anticipating his debate with Alexander. He sides with Rabbi Judah bar Simon in denying that humans can attain complete cognitive congruence with the Agent Intellect. Nevertheless, he agrees with the other sages in allowing for a more limited form of epistemic conjunction with the Agent Intellect that enables us to acquire knowledge and become immortal by virtue of this knowledge.⁸⁹

In concluding Book I of *Wars* Gersonides reverts to the mishnaic formula 'All Israel has a portion in the world to come' and interprets it in the light of his own philosophical understanding of immortality. How can we say that someone who has not studied and mastered philosophy and the sciences has achieved immortality? Gersonides' rigorous construal of immortality as intellectual perfection would seem to rule out most Israelites. However, let us not despair; as Gersonides is quick to point out, the Torah is a rich source of information concerning the truths that will perfect us. Some will understand these truths more than others; yet in so far as all Israelites believe that God has created the world and that he is provident, to take just two fundamental theoretical truths, they have acquired some at least of the truths requisite for intellectual perfection, and thus immortality. As we shall see in the following chapter, Gersonides believed that the Torah is an extremely valuable guide in leading us to our ultimate destiny and happiness.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ *Wars*, I.12 (i. 222).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* I.13 (i. 225).