

Société Internationale pour l'Étude de la Philosophie Médiévale
RENCONTRES DE PHILOSOPHIE MÉDIÉVALE, 11

Intellect et imagination dans la Philosophie Médiévale
Intellect and Imagination in Medieval Philosophy
Intelecto e imaginação na Filosofia Medieval

*Actes du XI^e Congrès International de Philosophie Médiévale de la Société
Internationale pour l'Étude de la Philosophie Médiévale (S.I.E.P.M.)
Porto, du 26 au 31 août 2002*

édités par
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**Tiré à part
Offprint
Separata**

BREPOLS
2006

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**GERSONIDES'S APPROACH TO EMANATION AND
TRANSCENDENCE: EVIDENCE FROM THE THEORY
OF INTELLECTION**

Commenting on medieval Jewish philosophers' embrace of Aristotelian noetics, Aviezer Ravitzky points to an «an inherent problem» «concealed in the teachings of the Jewish Aristotelians such as Maimonides»¹. The problem is that divine transcendence is undermined by the union characteristic of Aristotelian *noesis*. If, as Aristotle argues in the *Metaphysics* and the *De Anima*, the knower and the known are one in knowing, the distinction between God and the objects of God's knowing is undermined. As is well known, Maimonides denies, in the *Guide of the Perplexed* I.52 and numerous other texts, that human beings can know God. Whatever conflicting evidence we wish to adduce from the *Guide* regarding God, nature, and human knowing, Maimonides's version of emanationist metaphysics underscores the ontological difference between the creator and creatures, and this same emanationist metaphysics differentiates the agent intellect, the source of the human acquired intellect, and the divine intellect. If concerns about union nevertheless arise with regard to Maimonides, whose Aristotelian noetic is joined with an emanationist cosmology, what about Gersonides, that most committed and thoroughgoing of medieval Jewish Aristotelians? In this paper, I consider Gersonides's use of the language of emanation with respect to the role of the agent intellect. Touching briefly on a few of Gersonides's statements about the relation of the agent intellect to God, I focus on the role of the agent intellect with respect human knowing and with respect to

¹ A. RAVITZKY, «On the Study of Medieval Jewish Philosophy,» *Archivio di filosofia* 61 (1993) 151-66.

sensible existents generally. As Gersonides formulates the issues, the familiar distinction between supra- and sub-lunar existence is undermined in favor of a single order. From this perspective, it is not surprising that Gersonides's views on knowledge of God have attracted some controversy.

In the *Wars of the Lord*² and other texts, Gersonides contends that the agent intellect is cause of existing things and their *nomos*. In the *Supercommentary on Averroes' Epitome of the De Anima*, speaking in the name of Aristotle, Gersonides writes that God, the First Cause, is the «law, order, and plan of the existents (*nimus ha-nimtzaot v'sidram v'yoshram*)»³. Nor is this sort of claim confined to a work of philosophical commentary carried out in the conceptual environment of Averroes. In the introductory to his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Gersonides cites the same Aristotelian claim that God is the «nomos of existent beings, their order and their equilibrium (*nimus ha-nimtzaot v'sidram v'yoshram*)» and argues that «he who knows the nomos of some of the existent beings apprehends God's essence to some extent (*b'ofen mah*)»⁴. This apprehension is union or conjunction. Glossing the verse, «Let him kiss me,» Gersonides writes: «He said *Let him kiss me* and not 'I will kiss him' because in truth God is the Actor in this matter [conjunction], for what we know is an emanation emanating upon us from God, through the intermediation (*b'emtza'ut*) of the Active Intellect»⁵. What is this intermediation, and what is the meaning of the language of degree or extent?

In answering these questions, I shall argue that Gersonides's thoroughgoing Aristotelianism brings him closer to a naturalistic immanence than might at first appear to be the case. While it is the case

2 Levi Ben Gershom (Gersonides), *Milhamot ha-Shem*, Riva di Trento 1560/Jerusalem 195?, Leipzig 1866; *The Wars of the Lord*, tr. S. FELDMAN, Philadelphia/New York, Jewish Publication Society/Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1984-1999, 3 vol.

3 References to Gersonides's *Supercommentary* are from J.S. MASHBAUM's partial edition, «Chapters 9-11 of Gersonides' Supercommentary on Averroes' Epitome of the De Anima: The Internal Senses,» Brandeis University doctoral dissertation 1981. The present passage is on pp. 162-3.

4 Levi Ben Gershom (Gersonides), *Perush l'Shir ha-Shirim*, M. KELLNER, R. GAN (eds.), Bar Ilan University, 2001, p. 4; *Commentary on Song of Songs*, tr. M. KELLNER, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998 (Yale Judaica Series 28).

5 The present passage is on p. 24 of the translation.

that in some texts and contexts, Gersonides's idiom suggests hierarchical emanation and thus an ontological difference between the First Cause and its effects (e.g., *Wars* V.3.11), between the agent intellect and sublunar existents, or between more and less spiritual (*rukhanit*) faculties (e.g., *Commentary on Song of Songs*, Introduction), philosophical consistency requires otherwise, and countervailing evidence abounds in the texts. While Gersonides retains the language of emanation (*hashpa'a*, *shefa*), both in connection with cosmology and with cognition, the idea of emanation has undergone major revisions in his work. Simply put, the terminology remains, and even resonates with Maimonides's definition of emanation as non-material causal action⁶, but the hierarchical structure—the very architecture of emanation—has been displaced.

Gersonides writes in the wake of Averroes's critiques of emanation in the *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics* and the *Tahafut*, as well in the midst of the emerging new physics. In the complex astronomy of Part V of the *Wars of the Lord*, Gersonides rejects the idea of a descending series of emanations as the cause of the separate intellects, and holds instead that the First Cause directly causes all of the separate intellects. Gersonides differentiates the intellects according to their influences on the sublunar realm, which each separate intellect knows only partially. The separate intellects collectively emanate the agent intellect, which alone among the celestial intellects perfectly apprehends—indeed, is—the *nomos* (*nimus*) of the sublunar realm. For Gersonides, the intelligible forms in the agent intellect are the cause of sensible forms. On Gersonides's account, moreover, the agent intellect apprehends its causes to some degree⁷, and, generally, the series of effects leads back to some knowledge of the First Cause, of which it is possible to speak *per prius et posterius*. Gone, too, in Gersonides's discussion is the emanationist distinction between the souls of the spheres and their intellects.

The overall tenor in *Wars* V is thus of a simplification of the causal scheme and an analysis in terms of a single *nomos* (*nimus*). To the extent that there is a single *nomos* apprehended differently, questions of degree or hierarchy (*hadragah*) must be approached carefully, lest the unity or integrity of the order be compromised by extraneous ontological divisions. As it will turn out, Gersonides's view of essential causes and the relations

⁶ E.g., *Guide of the Perplexed* II.12.

⁷ *Wars* I.6; 5

of potency and act renders «degree» rather than «hierarchy» the fitting interpretation of *hadragah*.⁸ The key difference between the knowledge of the agent intellect and that of the human knower is one of relative perfection and unity. For the agent intellect, the order of existents is apprehended completely and in a unified manner, whereas human knowers apprehend the same order only partially and in a fragmentary partial fashion. But, insofar as it is not only the same order or pattern but a unified series of essential causes, the issue of intermediation qua ontological division, fades⁹.

The issue of intermediation crops up at another philosophically important, metaphysically difficult juncture. In the discussion of cognition in *Wars* I, Gersonides employs the idea of intermediaries to explain the relation of the imagination and the material intellect: «The form in the imaginative faculty does not move the material intellect; rather, the active intellect moves the material intellect through the means or intermediacy (*b'emtza'ut*) of the form in the imaginative faculty»¹⁰. In *Wars* V.3.4, Gersonides refers to the sense organs as the tools or instruments of the agent intellect in imparting knowing. But in what sense are the imaginative forms intermediaries? Gersonides observes in *Wars* I.10 «that it is possible for the imaginative forms to be intelligible because of their own nature and of what they have been endowed with by the agent intellect is evident»¹¹. That is, he holds that they are intrinsically intelligible.

In each case, I shall suggest, it is important to focus on Gersonides's articulation of relations of potency and act, which cannot be reduced to questions of ontological difference or division, and to resist the temptation to reify intermediaries.

Gersonides's theory of knowing has been the object of much recent scholarly consideration and debate. Commentators such as Seymour Feldman¹²,

8 Restrictions of space do not permit me to discuss the complex issue of teleology in Gersonides.

9 On this issue, see the remarks of S. PINES, «Note sur la métaphysique et sur la physique de Gersonide», in G. DAHAN (ed.), *Gersonide en son temps*, Louvain-Paris, E. Peeters, 1991, pp. 179-83.

10 *Wars* I.10; Feldman vol. 1, p. 206.

11 S. FELDMAN vol. 1, p. 204.

12 S. FELDMAN, «Gersonides on the Possibility of Conjunction», *AJS Review* 3(1978) 99-120 and «Platonic Themes in Gersonides's Doctrine of the Active Intellect,» in L.E. GOODMAN (ed.) *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, Albany, SUNY Press, 1992, pp. 255-77.

Alfred Ivry¹³, Herbert Davidson¹⁴, and Menachem Kellner¹⁵, have written extensively on Gersonides's psychology and epistemology. Feldman views Gersonides's various discussions as conflicted but tending ultimately toward a Platonizing position; Ivry, Davidson and Kellner, though they disagree in various ways, concur on Gersonides's basic proximity to Averroes and so stress the sensible origin of human knowing. For Feldman, in any case, what Gersonides calls conjunction is merely epistemic, and the human knower knows the intelligible forms (*muskalot*) of sublunar existents. On Feldman's reading, these forms are known due to the action of the agent intellect, but differ from the forms in the soul of the agent intellect. Conjunction turns out to be a partial union with a transcendent entity, one different in kind from even the acquired human intellect. Davidson structures his discussion in terms of the relation of sub- and supralunar existents. He characterizes Gersonides's approach to cognition as marked by internal tensions concerning emanationist and abstractive accounts, and cites texts that support each position. Kellner views the tension between emanationist and abstractive noetics as apparent rather than real, attributing it to the disparate texts and contexts in which Gersonides articulates his views. Kellner argues persuasively that the agent intellect enables the material intellect to apprehend the intelligible forms of things from sensible experiences presented via imaginative forms. His reading undermines the more Platonistic conception of the agent intellect as emanating «ready-made» forms and thus transforming human material intellect into acquired intellect; instead, sensible cognition is a preparation for receiving emanated forms, and only a properly prepared material intellect can acquire intelligibles. As Kellner notes, a particularly decisive mark of Gersonides's Aristotelianism is his insistence that, after the death of the body, no knowledge can be acquired; there is no knowing except via sensible experience, imagination, and memory¹⁶.

¹³ A.L. IVRY, «Gersonides and Averroes on the Intellect: the Evidence of the Supercommentary on the De Anima», in G. DAHAN (ed.), *Gersonide en son temps*, Louvain-Paris, E. Peeters, 1991, pp. 235-51.

¹⁴ H.A. DAVIDSON, «Gersonides on the Material and Active Intellects», in G. FREUDENTHAL (ed.), *Studies on Gersonides, A Fourteenth Century Jewish Philosopher-Scientist*, Leiden, Brill, 1992, pp. 195-265.

¹⁵ M. KELLNER, «Gersonides on the Role of the Active Intellect in Human Cognition», *HUC Annual* 65 (1994) 233-59.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 257-58.

In sum, Kellner effectively discredits Platonizing readings and successfully harmonizes some of the tensions detected by Davidson. His exploration of emanation vis à vis cognition is, however, largely limited to its epistemological significance, with the result that not much is said concerning the relation of the agent intellect and the sublunar realm. The tendency to divide existents according to the sphere of the moon has recently been challenged by Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, who emphasizes the ontological role of the Agent Intellect with respect to the existence of sensible existents¹⁷. For Dobbs-Weinstein, the role of the Agent Intellect as a cause of existence entails that the difference between the Agent Intellect and the sublunar realm is one of manner or extent, not ontological kind. On this reading, the epistemological role of the agent intellect follows from its ontological role, such that being is prior to knowing, and Gersonides's discussions exhibit the familiar pattern of the inverse orders of knowing and being. In *Wars* I.11, Gersonides writes that

The essential cause of the existence of the acquired intellect is the intelligible order in the agent intellect, as has been explained. Moreover, even if we were to admit that the corporeal cognitions are the causes of the existence of these objects of knowledge in the material intellect, they are the causes of knowledge [only], not of the existence of the intelligible order pertaining to them. Indeed, the reverse is true; the existence of the intelligible order pertaining to them is the cause of their existence¹⁸.

In us, Gersonides holds, the existence of particular sensibles is responsible for the origination of knowledge, but knowing is possible in virtue of the always-existing intelligible order in the agent intellect. Gersonides's argument always returns to this eternal order and its causal role. Since the agent intellect is an essential cause of the existence of material things, and since, as he reminds us in *Wars* I.11, essential causes act concurrently with their effects, the agent intellect and its effects are tightly and intrinsically related. Indeed, if the cause were to cease, the effect would disappear. The agent intellect is thus not the epistemic object of the human knower's knowing, but rather the ontological condition of knowing, i.e., the ontological condition of the existence of the human intellect, whose

17 I. DOBBS-WEINSTEIN, «Gersonides's Radically Modern Understanding of the Agent Intellect», in S.F. BROWN (ed.), *Meeting of the Minds*, Tournhout, Brepols, 1998, pp. 191-213 (Rencontres de Philosophie Médiévale 7).

18 *Wars* I.11, S. FELDMAN vol. 1, p. 214, translation modified.

actuality is its ideas—and an intellect whose actuality is, to borrow Spinoza's way of emphasizing the impossibility of a self-subsistent, individual mind distinct from its ideas, nothing else.

These ideas arise from experiences of sensible things. Gersonides writes that the acquired intellect, i.e., the human intellect in act, is «itself the order obtaining in these things that is in the soul of the agent intellect (*hu hasiddur asher haya l'elu hadevarim b'nefesh hasekhel hapoel*)»¹⁹. Gersonides's claim that the order is in the material things and in the agent intellect underlines the connection between the sublunar realm and the agent intellect; the intelligible (*muskal*) in the agent intellect is what is perceived or obtained (*musag*) in the material intellect. Indeed, if we were to venture an interpretation of this passage in terms of a distinction between sub- and supra-lunar existence, the single order of intelligibility would undermine the distinction. Rather than looking for such a distinction, it is more helpful to recognize that the movement from material to acquired intellect is a movement from potency to act, i.e., a movement of contraries. What exactly is the difference between the sub and supra-lunar realms? The agent intellect is the actual cause, i.e., the infinite ontological condition of the potencies of observable natural entities, which vary by degree (*hadragah*). As such, it is also the source of their perfection. The material and acquired intellect are partial expressions of the unlimited actuality of the agent intellect. Thus Gersonides writes in the *De Anima Supercommentary* that the intelligibles in existing things constitute an intellect «even if we do not think it»²⁰.

This answer is clarified considerably by looking at the second supposed case of intermediation, that pertaining to the imaginative forms, material intellect, and agent intellect. After an elaborate and critical review of the theories of Alexander, Themistius and Averroes, Gersonides concludes that the material intellect is a disposition (*hakhanah*) whose subject is the body via the imaginative and sensitive faculties of the soul but which is nonetheless distinct from or unmixed with those faculties. But what, we may ask, is the relationship of the material intellect to the imaginative forms? Gersonides rejects an illuminationist account of knowing, and he also rejects the idea that the agent intellect somehow acts

¹⁹ *Wars* I.11; S. FELDMAN vol. 1, p. 213.

²⁰ MASHBAUM, p. 161. See DOBBS-WEINSTEIN's invaluable discussion of this passage in «Gersonides's Radically Modern Understanding of the Agent Intellect».

on the imaginative forms, transforming them into intelligibles. As he puts the point in *Wars* I.10, the acquisition of intelligibles involves no substantial or essential change in the imaginative forms²¹. The agent intellect operates, he contends, solely on the material intellect. Yet Gersonides also argues in the *Supercommentary* that the imaginative forms (*ha-tzurot ha-dimionyyot*) are a «potential intellect,» for, abstracted from matter, imaginative forms «become (*ihyyu*) intellect»²². Thus it might seem that the material intellect stands, in Kellner's phrase, «at a sort of midpoint in the process,» having received sensible forms from the imagination (the preparation for knowing proper) and at the same time receiving the agent intellect's emanation of forms²³. But such a midpoint is mysterious, even for a disposition, especially since it disappears upon the acquisition of intelligibles, i.e., the acquired intellect.

Where Kellner emphasizes that the material intellect is a disposition or capacity, and thus de-substantializes our idea of the material intellect, Dobbs-Weinstein goes one step further, treating «material intellect» as a name for a way of looking at the intrinsic, constitutive intelligibility of sensible things²⁴. When Gersonides denies substantial or essential change, it is thus because no such change is needed. There are, on this strongly Averroian reading, two aspects of any sensible entity, the intelligible form, which is known intellectually as an infinite, i.e., unlimited, concept or pattern, and the material particularities, which are grasped through the senses as the finite, determining features of a singular existing thing. Thus, we can consider a thing in its unlimited intelligibility or in its concrete determination, but there is only a single existing thing.

In the *De Anima Supercommentary*, Gersonides writes that

If you understand what we have been aiming for here, you will be rid of all those doubts which forced Plato to posit universal forms existing outside the soul. In general, based on our theory, they have an intelligible existence in the soul of the

21 *Wars* I.10, S. FELDMAN 205.

22 MASHBAUM, p.139. Compare also the text from *Wars* II.6, given below in note 27.

23 KELLNER, «Gersonides on the Role of the Active Intellect in Human Cognition», p. 248.

24 For a divergent reading, see A. IVRY, op. cit., p. 246: «While for Averroes the disposition of the imaginative faculty to 'receive' intelligible forms is indicative of the underlying related intelligibility of all being, for Gersonides this disposition establishes the independence and individuation of a person's intellect».

active intellect, not a sensible existence; for their sensible existence occurs in the individuals which exist outside the soul²⁵.

There is, in other words, only one existence, with two conceptually distinguishable aspects. Conceptual knowledge (*tziur*) involves a pattern that can be present in infinitely many individuals. Judgment or verification (*imut, ha'amatah*) pertains to the present existence of this or that material particular, and is thus a compound of intellect and sense, for only the senses are in contact with the concrete, determinate features of singular existing things²⁶. Any intelligible idea or pattern (*muskal*) is present in and exhibited by or as indefinitely many singular existents. In *Wars* I.6, Gersonides explains that the intelligible form is the definition, which is present in any of the infinite individuals of a genus: «The definition is the very order that is in the mind of the Agent Intellect according to which the genus is generated. This order is exhibited in some sense in each and every individual instance of that genus»²⁷. In *Wars* I.10, he makes the same point in a slightly different way: «The object of knowledge of the material intellect is the individual, not as a definite individual, but as any individual whatsoever, and this thing exists actually outside the mind, i.e., it is the individual thing»²⁸. As *Wars* I.12 makes clear, the Agent Intellect contains—indeed, as an intellect, is and apprehends—this order perfectly; human apprehension varies by degrees, never achieving completion.

Gersonides's remarks in the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* echo the views expressed in the *De Anima Supercommentary*. In a way, they go further, stressing the intrinsic intelligibility of imaginative forms:

You ought to know that the intelligible form is also potentially in those forms which are in these faculties [sc. senses, memory, imagination], even if the potentiality is more distant. For example, after the intellect abstracts the material attributes—by virtue of which this apprehended thing was distinctively particular—from the imaginative form, that form becomes universal; that is, it is the universal common to

²⁵ MASHBAUM, p. 165.

²⁶ For background, see H.A. WOLFSON, «The Terms *Tasawwur* and *Tasdiq* in Arabic Philosophy and Their Greek, Latin, and Hebrew Equivalents», in H.A. WOLFSON, *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1973, vol. 1, pp. 250-314.

²⁷ S. FELDMAN, vol. 1, p. 163.

²⁸ S. FELDMAN, vol. 1, p. 186. For discussion, see Ch. MANEKIN, «Logic and its Applications in the Philosophy of Gersonides», in DAHAN, op. cit., pp. 133-49.

the infinite individuals of that species. In this manner one may solve the problem which prompted the ancients to posit form and numbers or to deny the possibility of knowledge, as was made clear in the *Metaphysics*²⁹.

Compared to the *Supercommentary*, this text on the Song of Songs is noticeably more hierarchical in its formulations of the potency-act relation; specifically, the materiality of imaginative forms renders them «more distant» from intelligible forms, and this might be thought to strain the thesis of intrinsic intelligibility. But we also find the following passage somewhat later in the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*:

*Perfection of the intellect comes from the active intellect by way of those imaginative forms which the imagination emanates upon it, and this is perfected—i.e., the presentation to the intellect by the imagination of what it [i.e., the intellect] needs from the senses in each subject of study—when it [i.e., the imagination] so wonderfully desires to be subservient to the hylic [material] intellect that it places all of its activities in the service of the intellect as far as it can [Emphasis added]*³⁰.

Thinking hierarchically, we would say that the agent intellect emanates «down» and the imagination emanates «up». This occurs when the imagination coincides with the material intellect, such that the faculties «match»³¹. Clearly, here, Gersonides is using «emanate» as a term for non-corporeal causality, and it applies irrespective of distinction between the sensibly-based imaginative forms and the unmixed material intellect. Thus it seems that *hashpa'a* has been stripped of its hierarchical dimension, and that these texts point to the intrinsic connection of intelligibility and sensibility. In contrast to intellect, the imaginative forms, while more abstract or «spiritual» than sensations, nevertheless retain the connection to corporeality, but this is no obstacle to *hashpa'a*. Thus the text which at first appears to propose cognitive hierarchy in fact undermines it. Gersonides's treatment is equally explicit about the equalization of the faculties, which present the same pattern: «When the imagination of the recipient is perfectly prepared to represent what has been transmitted of the cognition to the material intellect, it will represent the very same pattern received by the intellect». Similarly, this chapter

29 *Perush*, p. 57/ *Commentary*, p. 6.

30 *Perush*, p. 66/ *Commentary*, p. 13.

31 S. FELDMAN, *Wars*, vol. 2, pp. 56-57.

also refers to the «separation (*hitbodedut*) of the intellect or imagination».

Looking at Gersonides's discussions in terms of one entity with two cognitively separable aspects solves the mystery of the material intellect by advising us that «material intellect» and «acquired intellect» are best thought of as ways of experiencing the intrinsic intelligibility of things, and as ratios or degrees of potency and act, not things. Contra Kellner and Davidson, it is not so much that Gersonides declines or fails to explain the inner workings of abstraction and actualization, but rather that there is no mystery at all. This is principally because there is no essential transformation to explain. Material and acquired intellect refer to the intelligible aspect of a thing. Imaginative forms, as a rule, preserve the link to material particulars; perfected, they are intellect, for they present the same pattern as is received in the intellect. Such perfection is not substantial or essential change. Thus intelligibility, which pertains to any individual whatsoever, and sensibility or corporeality, which determines and particularizes this individual, are one in existence but conceptually different.

In the end, thinking about Gersonides's position this way raises several critical issues. First, it highlights the need for rethinking materiality outside the familiar post-Cartesian paradigms of passivity and substantial difference; for Gersonides, matter is a principle of determination, not a separate substance. Second, the double-aspect view raises the critically important question of how to interpret such central terms as «immortal», «eternal», «separate», and the like. While in a post-Cartesian world it is easy to take such terminology as pointing to a real distinction, an ontological break or difference to be traversed in some manner—in short, to transcendent reality that is different in kind from what obtains in the world known via physics—such a reading is neither self-evident nor necessary³². For Gersonides, the essential causal relation between the agent intellect and existing things makes this sort of separation impossible. Instead, Gersonides leaves us with an account of

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³² For a comparative perspective, see H.S. LANG's discussion of the medieval Christian transformation of Aristotle in *Aristotle's Physics and Its Medieval Varieties*, Albany, SUNY Press, 1992. Clearly, one of the major issues is the shift from cyclical to linear time and thus to a mechanical, rather than concurrent, model of efficient causation.

how one and the same existing thing may be considered with respect to the unlimited agent intellect or with respect to concrete material determinations. Ontologically speaking, the «immortal», «eternal», and «separate» exist not in some special realm, but as an intrinsic aspect of the moral, temporal and mixed. In arguing that the pattern in the agent intellect is the *nimus* of existing singular things, Gersonides establishes an intrinsic relation between the agent intellect and material singulars and vacates the usual division between sub- and supra-lunar existence. This ontological state of affairs is the ground of his discussions of cognition. Emanation, it seems, has been dramatically transformed³³.

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³³ I wish to thank I. Dobbs-Weinstein, W. Ze'ev Harvey and R. Schutzman for discussions related to the preparation of this paper.