Strauss's Interpretation of Maimonides through the Lens of Alfarabi: Political Theology or Political Philosophy?

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I want to begin this lecture by thanking Giuseppe Nastasi (his co-organizers [Bissiato, Galli, Longoni, and Murrone], the Università di Pisa, and its allied universities in Firenze and Padova) for inviting me to give this lecture. It is an honor and a privilege to be asked by doctoral students to give my first lecture in Italy. As the dean of a graduate school and the director of the PhD program at the University of Dallas, the Institute of Philosophic Studies, I have special affection for education at this most advanced level. It is also encouraging to me at this time in my academic career to know that there is enough interest in Italy in Leo Strauss and the medieval authors on whom he lavished his greatest attention, Alfarabi and Maimonides, for me to be invited to give this lecture—as well as previously Cecilia Bonadeo Martini. Thank you! (I suspect that the intensity of interest in Strauss in Italy may be greater today per capita than it is in the U.S.)

Given the inclusion of "Political Theology" in the title of this lecture series and that the series concludes with lectures on Jacob Taubes and Carl Schmitt, I want to begin with a brief inquiry into how Strauss and Schmitt use the phrases "political philosophy" and "political theology," respectively. They use them as terms of distinction, which of course is not true for everyone who uses them. Heinrich Meier has captured this contrast in a very economical way in his account of Schmitt's recourse to Tertullian to explain the contrast. According to Tertullian, "*We are obliged to something not because it is good but because God commands it*." As Meier goes on to explain, Tertullian's emphasis on God's sovereignty hearkens back to the contrast in Plato's *Euthyphro*: Are things pious or just because the gods say they are, or do the gods themselves look to forms, ideas, or natures in making something pious or just?[1] If we recast this in terms of the opposition between political theology and political philosophy: one might say that political theology bows to divine authority or will as the source of all political order; however, political philosophy acquires insight into political things on the basis of nature. Notice that I

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[1] Heinrich Meier, *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt: Four Chapters on the Distinction between Political Theology and Political Philosophy*, trans. Marcus Brainard, expanded ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, 2011), 92-93, n70; *Die Lehre Carl Schmitts* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2009).

have not referred to the Platonic forms or ideas. I have chosen to avoid that not only because reference to them is too specific to Plato but also because I think that ultimately political philosophers are less confident in their characterization of the metaphysical ground of politics than is Schmitt, or other political theologians, in identifying the relevant gods or God.

A way to recast this opposition between appeal to divine will and nature is to consider the contrast between will and reason or intellect in characterizations of gods or God. By appealing to this other contrast with a very ancient history, I don't mean to open this discussion to modern and late modern conceptions of reason, which eventually turn away from nature and toward history. Rather, my primary focus today will remain firmly planted in premodern thought in which reason or intellect always remains tethered to nature.

In thinking about God, talk of His "will" and "intellect" come naturally to us, because we ourselves possess both faculties. Christianity especially tends to view God in light of the human because of the doctrine of the Incarnation. In other words, it makes plenty of sense in the Christian tradition to think of God as possessing both will and intellect because God in the person of the Son was in some (even if very loose) sense not only divine but also human. Yet talk of "will" immediately raises the specter of incompleteness or lack because of course the first expression of will broadly conceived is desire and its lack or needs. The Christian tradition has coped with this by claiming that God, though possessing a will, is of course in need of nothing. It is only through the superabundance of God's love that He concerns himself with every particular, not out of need. Leaving aside such ways of dealing with these issues, I believe that it's fair to say that the opposition between the God of intellect and the God of will was clearer and more cut and dried in the Islamic and Jewish traditions than in the Christian.

Maimonides, for example, presents two different portraits of God in his *Guide of the Perplexed*: the God of the negative theology presented in 1.52-62 and the God of the philosophers presented in 1.68-69. Similarly, as early as Alfarabi's *Enumeration of the Sciences*, there is evidence that he is

contending against the fideistic views of God, in which God's will is privileged, championed by the Ash'arite school of theology—and subsequently exemplified by the immensely influential Alghazali. Averroes in turn argued frequently and pointedly against Alghazali and the fideistic views of the Ash'arite *kalām*. Evidence abounds in the *Guide* that Maimonides shared this animus against Ash'arite fideism, despite the fact that many interpreters view him as attempting to synthesize the negative theological and philosophic views of God.

The stage was set for these battles at least as early as Aristotle. Although he never states this clearly, the prime unmoved mover must ultimately be understood purely as an intellect. Of course, he or it is described as thought thinking itself or as intellect intellecting itself—in which the intellect, its activity, and the object of its intellecting are one. Although Aristotle uses metaphors from human love to capture the relation of at least the other unmoved movers and perhaps all other beings to the prime unmoved mover, and although when we think about thinking and the activity of the intellect, we cannot but think in some sense of loving the object of thought; Aristotle gives us little reason to believe that the prime unmoved mover is similarly moved to think of himself out of the lack that moves all the other beings. After all, the prime unmoved mover is purely actual. Although one might want to try to find some foreshadowing of the Christian notion of superabundant love in Aristotle, one thing is certain: this unmoved mover thinks only of itself. It seems to me that it cannot be properly characterized either by a love motivated by deficiency nor by a superabundant love for all other things as individuals. Indeed, Aristotle's emphasis on thought thinking itself has been so deeply absorbed by interpreters that they have tended to sever the prime unmoved mover from other beings, narrowing its role to nothing more than being the cause of the thinking of the subordinate unmoved movers, which ultimately of course is supposed to move the heavenly bodies.

At the start of this lecture series, you heard a lecture about *Laws* 10. I won't cover that same ground except to suggest that there are more than enough parallels between Plato's book 10 and

Aristotle's *Metaphysics* 12 to suggest that they are getting in these accounts at roughly the following sort of theology: as Aristotle puts it in *Metaphysics* 12.8 at the end, his account has ancient precedent. He claims to be arguing merely what Greeks, especially poets such as Hesiod, have always argued about the gods, so long as you remove the anthropomorphic part of that teaching. Ultimately, the highest being for both the Athenian Stranger and Aristotle is an intellect. Yet that is not the complete story either for Plato or Aristotle, though here I will focus on Plato. In *Laws* books 11 and 12, Plato's Athenian Stranger supplemented his account of the gods given in book 10. In the book 10 account, he points clearly to the philosophic view of providence, namely, that the divine concerns itself only with the universals or the species. But in books 11 and 12, he must complete the law, including especially the punishment of non-violent crimes. Consequently, the Athenian finds it necessary to add back in the Olympian cast to the gods that he omitted from book 10 and that Aristotle refuses in *Metaphysics* 12.8. My point here is not to highlight a supposedly important contrast between Plato and Aristotle. On the contrary, I believe they see the matter essentially the same way. As Aristotle says in *Meta.* 12.8, the poets added in the anthropomorphic element to bolster the laws. In other words, philosophers as philosophers are <u>in</u>capable of exhorting citizens to obey the laws; they must don the mask of poets if they are to do this. In contrast, Schmittian political theologians place such emphasis on this role or task of the divine that they must fall back to a fideistic God of pure will. Yet the question becomes whether a world in which such a God is sovereign is fit for human habitation.

Finally, I want to turn to Alfarabi and Maimonides, relying on the preparation we just received from Plato and Aristotle as model political philosophers in contrast to Schmitt. What evidence do I have that Alfarabi and Maimonides take the task played by Plato's Olympian gods in *Laws* 11 and 12 seriously? In other words, although we learn from *Laws* 10 the philosophic view of god as intellect that is generally providential, a true political philosopher cannot neglect wholly what is central to the political theologian—namely, God's will. The way this shows up in Alfarabi is in his argument contrasting

religion and philosophy in the *Book of Religion*. He begins that book with the following characterization of religion: "Religion is opinions and actions, determined and restricted with stipulations and prescribed for a community by their first ruler. . ." (§1, para. 1). By "determined" (*muqaddara*), Alfarabi means in effect "particularized." (And in Maimonides "particularization" is the effect of the divine used to signal that God is particularly not merely generally providential.) Returning for the moment to Alfarabi, he goes on to explain that the virtuous first ruler "determines the actions and opinions in the virtuous religion" either "by means of revelation" or "by means of the faculty he acquires from revelation and the Revealer" (§1, para. 4), that is, by means of prudence. (Elsewhere, he—as does Maimonides in *Guide* 2.37—indicates that less virtuous rulers, without reference to the universals known through political science, imagine determinate or particular base means and ends.)[2]

Returning to the crux of the matter, what religion possesses that philosophy does not is particularization. That is, philosophy concerns itself with knowing the universals of political life, what Alfarabi refers to conspicuously and repeatedly in the *Enumeration of the Sciences* as "rules." It is these rules after all about which one can possess science. As he explains when characterizing virtuous kingly craft in the *Enumeration*, which presumably the virtuous first ruler of the *Book of Religion* possesses, that craft includes both "the faculty for universal rules" and "the faculty a human being acquires through lengthy involvement in civic deeds, carrying out actions with respect to individuals and persons in particular cities, and skill in them through experience and long observation" (*Enumeration* chap. 5, §1, para. 7). (If you hear hints of Plato's philosopher-king conceit in this account of virtuous kingly craft, that is not by accident.) In other words, though philosophy or science is concerned with the rules or universals of whatever it studies, political science is complemented by prudence in virtuous kingly craft.

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[2] See Alfarabi, *Political Regime*, Charles Butterworth trans., in *MPP* 2nd ed., (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2011), §§ 88-9; cf. Alfarabi, *Selected Aphorisms*, in Butterworth trans., in Political Writings of Alfarabi, "Selected Aphorisms" and Other Writings (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001), §§ 30-31.

In effect, Alfarabi accounts for how the particulars of political life are grasped by three means: revelation, prudence, or imagination. That imagination is disdained as the faculty of the non-virtuous rulers is clear. What the relation is between revelation and prudence is not something I can explain in the limited time I have here, except to say that in the *Book of Religion*, Alfarabi opened the door to prudence playing the role of particularization that would otherwise be played by revelation. Leaving that aside, I believe it is already apparent that prudence correlates with intellect while revelation correlates with will. In other words, while the political theologian would explain the particularity of a given religion by appeal to divine will; the political philosopher would ascribe that particularity to the prudence of the prophet. This helps explain why the central sections of Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* are not the sections on proving that God exists, is one, and incorporeal or even the sections on creation vs. eternity; rather, the central sections are on prophecy and providence, which according to Strauss are a part of Maimonides's political rather than his metaphysical teaching.[3]

Since I have already spoken to the question—where does Alfarabi address the issues highlighted in *Laws* 11 and 12?—I want to turn now to look more closely at how Maimonides makes good on Alfarabi's suggestion that religion particularizes and thereby complements the insights of philosophy, rather than arguing as a political theologian might that revelation and revelation alone gives us access to the true ground of politics. Maimonides brings the particulars of religion into line with philosophy's insights into the universals of political science through what Leo Strauss has called "enlightened *kalām*." In the "Literary Character of the *Guide for the Perplexed*" Strauss appeals to the treatment of *kalām* in Alfarabi's *Enumeration of the Sciences*. He argues that the traditional *kalām* described in *Enumeration* chap. 5 defends religion on the basis of the imagination, and Maimonides adopts a defense of Judaism that is "intelligent." Just what relation this intelligent *kalām* has to philosophy and political science in "Literary Character" is not immediately apparent. Ultimately, I will argue (as I have elsewhere) that this

[3] Strauss, "The Place of Providence."

intelligent *kalām* not only relies on the intellect but also is in harmony with philosophy and political science. To most readers of the *Guide*, this reading will come as a bit of a surprise, because as Maimonides explains in *Guide* 1.71 the traditional imaginative *kalām* holds that a key part of defending its religion is to defend it against philosophy. How can religion complement philosophy if, originally, they seemed to be at odds? If Maimonides really is a political philosopher, then we are likely to see that religion is made to fit with or complement philosophy. If he were a political theologian, we might expect to see him bend philosophy to fit revelation.

Once again, Alfarabi paved the way for Maimonides's approach. And both Alfarabi and Maimonides followed the lead of Plato and Aristotle. That model was adumbrated most clearly in *Metaphysics* 12.8, as I already mentioned, along the following lines: what Aristotle teaches about the gods is the same that has always been taught among the Greeks so long as you eliminate the anthropomorphic overlay. That is, it is the most ancient teaching—the teaching of nature. (This is philosophy's way of combatting the claim of the laws and religions of their given communities that their teachings are truest because oldest. The title to rule of the old or ancient is trumped by the eternality of nature.)[4] But didn't we see in our recourse to *Laws* 11 and 12 that the anthropomorphic overlay—that evidence of divine will—is precisely what's needed to convince citizens to obey the law? Is there some way to preserve fear of divine will while not undercutting the natural order? In Alfarabi and Maimonides, the initial and most obvious way to preserve evidence of divine will is to claim that the most ancient natural teaching was in the possession of our community first—in other words, our access to the truth is a demonstration of God's particular providence for our community. Alfarabi makes this argument in *Attainment of Happiness* §53: "It is said that this science existed among the Chaldeans, who are the people of al-ʿIraq, subsequently reaching the people of Egypt, from there transmitted to the Greeks, where it remained until it was transmitted to the Syrians and then to the Arabs." And

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[4] Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 91-92.

Maimonides makes this argument in *Guide* 1.71: “Know that the many sciences devoted to establishing the truth regarding these matters that have existed in our religious community have perished because of the length of time that has passed, because of our being dominated by the pagan nations, and because, as we have made clear, it is not permitted to divulge these matters to all people.” Maimonides goes on to make additional arguments about the prohibitions against inquiry into the secrets of Judaism—that is, the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot, which he equates with physics and metaphysics in the introduction to part 1 of the *Guide*—and suggests that we once had the secrets but have lost them due to the Exile or pagan domination. Both Alfarabi and Maimonides, emulate what Aristotle claims evidently with respect to poetry, while claiming that their respective communities acquired the most ancient knowledge, philosophy, before the pagans! In claiming that each of their communities had science or philosophy first, they’re not merely engaging in the kinds of sectarian and ethnic self-aggrandizement one sees everywhere in evidence in contemporary life; rather, they’re insinuating that the way divine particular providence (and will) manifests itself is in God’s grace in bestowing philosophy on their community, that is, in general providence! Rather than arguing as the political theologian might that *his* revelation bestows sovereignty, the political philosopher argues that the evidence of divine grace or particular providence is God’s (general providence or) care in providing access to the truths of nature or reason.

Here, I want to take a step back to bring out the relation between philosophy and religion or reason and revelation. Let us go back once more to Alfarabi’s *Book of Religion* to consider more carefully what he argues about that relation. In BR §5, Alfarabi writes:

> Thus, virtuous religion is similar to philosophy. Just as philosophy is partly theoretical and partly practical, so it is with religion. . . . The practical things in religion are those whose universals are in practical philosophy. That is because the practical things in religion are those universals made determinate by stipulations restricting them, and what is restricted by stipulations is more particular than what is pronounced unqualifiedly without stipulations. . . . Therefore, all virtuous laws are subordinate to the universals of practical philosophy. The theoretical opinions that are

> in religion have their demonstrative proofs in theoretical philosophy and are taken in religion without demonstrative proof.
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> Therefore, the two parts of which religion consists are subordinate to philosophy.

I don't believe that I'm the first to observe that what Alfarabi claims here is tantamount to saying that religion is the handmaiden of philosophy. Or to put it differently, Alfarabi clearly subordinates religion to philosophy. That Schmitt subordinates all human endeavor, including inquiry, but especially law to the divine will is clear. In other words, the contrast between Alfarabi as political philosopher and Schmitt as political theologian is clear. What is less clear is who else belongs to the class of political theologians, leaving aside blatant fideists like Schmitt.

The problem of synthesis or harmonization of reason and revelation lingers in the background here. Leaving aside the purist position of a Schmitt, who appeals to the strong fideism of Tertullian, what can we say about thinkers like Thomas Aquinas? Is his political thinking properly understood as political theology or political philosophy? How can we tell apart the more superficial concessions to divine will made by political philosophers from the deeper concessions of true political theologians?

With an eye to making the line between political philosopher and political theologian more precise, then, I would like to consider Aquinas as a test case because there are few thinkers who at first glance seem closer to Aristotle and even to Maimonides than Thomas. Indeed, Strauss himself seems to classify Thomas squarely in the camp of political philosophy when he writes the following in *Natural Right and History:* "The particular natural right doctrine which was originated by Socrates and developed by Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and Christian thinkers (especially Thomas Aquinas) may be called the classic natural right doctrine" (NRH, 120). As we will see shortly, the conclusion of the very same chapter raises doubts about how far such a teaching can "develop" without ceasing to be political philosophy.

Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi (and to a lesser extent Fr. Ernest Fortin), all students of Strauss, drew the same distinction between political philosophy and political theology as the one deployed by Strauss and Schmitt in the first edition of the classic anthology, *Medieval Political Philosophy: A*

Sourcebook. (Together with Joseph Macfarland, I am the co-editor of the second edition of the Sourcebook.) And they characterized Thomas's political teaching as "political theology" or as the "political teachings of a divine revelation," that is, as the "position that the highest political teaching is contained in that revelation of divine Law in which the theologian believes."[5] The editors also argue that even though Thomas comments on Aristotle's works as treating "political things as far as these are known to natural reason," Thomas adds to these arguments from reason the contrast between man's earthly and his supernatural end and subordinates the former to the latter. The primacy of the revealed end and the appeal to that which is supposed to transcend reason are decisive indicators that a thinker is a political theologian.[6]

Although he did not address the character of Thomas's teaching so directly as Lerner, Mahdi, and Fortin; Strauss addressed indirectly and delicately the contrast between political theology and political philosophy in medieval Christian thought and Thomas's place in relation to this distinction in one of his most "Jewish" writings, the one on Judah Halevi, "The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari.*" This chapter in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* is in Strauss's most "Jewish" book. This chapter is at least one of, if not, his most challenging writings. (One of his other most challenging writings is his introduction to Shlomo Pines's 1963 translation of the *Guide*.) In the opening pages of "Law of Reason," Strauss contrasts proponents of rational law (the Islamic and Jewish equivalent of natural law) with proponents of natural right—ranging Halevi, Saadya Gaon, and Thomas Aquinas, on the one hand, against Maimonides, Marsilius of Padua, and, of course, Aristotle, on the other. The "rational law" teaching made famous in Judaism by Saadya Gaon traces its roots back to the Mu'tazilite *kalām*, and Halevi's teaching is a modified or radicalized version of that *kalām*. Of course, Thomas's natural law teaching is too elaborate to treat here and now in any detail; however, it is clear that for Strauss's

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[5] See Lerner and Mahdi, *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963), 7 and 11.

[6] MPP 11.

purposes, Halevi and Thomas Aquinas are on the same page. Over the course of the "Law of Reason," Strauss's Halevi impugns philosophy decrying the fact that the philosopher treats "goodness of character and goodness of action [as] . . . no more than a means toward or a by-product of the life of contemplation."[7] In contrast, Strauss characterizes the position of Halevi as promoting a more profound teaching than the Mu'tazilite *kalām* because it rests on "simple faith." That Mu'tazilite school of theology was quite rationalistic—that is, used the tools of demonstrative and dialectical argument—if not properly rationalist—that is, depending on inquiry into nature on the basis of reason alone. Halevi clings even more closely to faith than they. Over the course of his complex interpretation of the *Kuzari*, Strauss brings out the heavy emphasis in Halevi's teaching on the striving for what he calls "morality proper." While the philosopher is willing to make do with mere "rules of 'prudence'" which allow of exceptions, Halevi's Jewish scholar strives for what Strauss describes as "morality proper" and as "genuine morality, 'categoric imperatives." The "moral man as such is the potential believer [in revelation]."[8]

The primary contrast between the political philosopher and the political theologian is that the former treats morality as a means and the latter as an end. This does not mean that political philosophers act immorally but that their motives are different from the strictly moral; their actions are more a consequence of their pursuit of philosophy than anything else. The way Socrates puts this in *Republic* 6 is that the philosopher's virtue of moderation derives from the fact that his desires aim primarily at wisdom rather than what Aristotle characterizes as the goods of fortune, which others chase after (Rep. 485d-486a).

That morality is more than a means for the natural law teaching of Thomas Aquinas is readily apparent. Despite the reference to "nature" in "natural law," Thomas's natural law—much like Schmitt's

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[7] Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952, 1988), 114.
[8] Strauss, *Persecution* 139-40.

approach to obedience to God's command—does not permit exception with respect to the need to obey the commandments, that is, not to violate the Second Table of the Decalogue. Evidence of that is given in Thomas's characterization of who is permitted to kill. Only God is so permitted because all men are in infinite debt to him. (Thus, Thomas explains away the exceptions in the more political parts of the Bible.)[9] Even though for Thomas morality is not the highest end of man, it is in important respects the highest end man can achieve in this life. After all, the true object of theoretical inquiry, knowledge of God's essence, is clearly beyond human ken in this life. It is for that reason that happiness cannot really be achieved here below. As Lerner and Mahdi (and Fortin) implied, Aquinas's privileging of man's supernatural end frames his teaching so fully that it makes it a political theology.

Although the differences between natural right and medieval natural law are subtle enough that many assume that, from Strauss's point of view, they are essentially the same, Strauss's "Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*" makes it clear that these positions differ in profound and substantive ways. In contrast, this disjunction between natural right and natural law is treated much more subtly in *Natural Right and History.* At the end of a long chapter in which Thomas appears at the end of the "develop[ment]" of the "classic natural right doctrine," Strauss hints that certain drawbacks in Thomas's teaching fostered the rebellion against them mounted by Machiavelli. Indeed, the first appearance Machiavelli makes in NRH is as the one who "denies natural right" (162). Ironically, it was not the bearers of revealed law in the Islamic and Jewish traditions that elicited the kind of reaction against the constraints of law we find in Machiavelli; rather, it was Thomas's revival of law in Christianity with his emphasis on categorical interpretations of commandments such as the one against killing that elicited a renewed defense of "prudence." Although the modern natural law teaching was an attempt to revive the large role for prudence evident in ancient natural right, Machiavelli's understanding of prudence was sufficiently different from premodern understandings and was attended by other features of modernity such as its

[9] *Summa theologiae* 1-2, q. 94, a. 5, 2nd reply, regarding 1 Samuel 2.6.

penchant for unsettling laws and mores that Machiavelli's response to premodern Christian political theology would one day give rise to history as a substitute for nature as moral standard. Our consideration of this hard case, Thomas Aquinas, has revealed just how difficult it can be to say what is and what is not an example of political theology.

Lest we lose track of our original charge, to shed some light on Strauss's interpretation of Maimonides through the lens of Alfarabi, I want to return here to highlight some of our primary observations about political philosophy in the mold of Alfarabi and Maimonides. Although it is readily apparent that Alfarabi views religion or theology as the handmaiden of philosophy, it is easy to assume that Maimonides places theology in a leading role. After all, claiming as Maimonides does that the Account of the Beginning is physics or natural science and the Account of the Chariot is metaphysics or divine science has led many to conclude that the *Guide* is a work of Jewish philosophy. And that, like Thomas, Maimonides views his political teaching as deriving from the revealed view. But the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot, though they are the highest subjects of the *Guide*, are not the central subject matter of the *Guide*. Rather the center of the *Guide* is the true science of the Law. And the true science of the Law serves to defend both Judaism and philosophy. This intelligent *kalam* employs arguments about the highest matters to defend the Law and philosophy. Those two tasks, the defense of Law and philosophy, are the very heart of political philosophy. Political theology looks to revelation to ground its political teaching. The political philosopher employs theological arguments in support of the philosophic view that the legislator's prudence is the proper starting point of the Law—not divine fiat.