

Quotations for  
“Strauss’s Interpretation of Maimonides through the Lens of Alfarabi:  
Political Theology or Political Philosophy?”

J. Parens—October 29, 2021

**Alfarabi** (ca. 870-950 CE), *Book of Religion*—“Religion is opinions and actions, determined and restricted with stipulations and prescribed for a community by their first ruler. . .” (§1, para. 1; Eng. trans. from Charles E. Butterworth ed. for Cornell University Press)

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.

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. (from § 5)

**Alfarabi, *Enumeration of the Sciences***—The virtuous first ruler of the *Book of Religion* possesses a craft which 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; Cornell UP), that is, once again, prudence.

**Alfarabi, *Attainment of Happiness*** (from sect. 53; Eng. trans. by Muhsin Mahdi, Cornell University Press): “It is said that this science existed among the Chaldeans, who are the people of al-‘Iraq, 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.”

**Maimonides** (1137-1204), *Guide of the Perplexed* (from 1.71; Eng. trans. by Shlomo Pines, University of Chicago Press): “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.”

**Leo Strauss** (1899-1973), *Natural Right and History* (University of Chicago Press, 1950, p. 120):  
“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.”

“Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*,” in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Free Press, 1952; University of Chicago Press, 1980; p. 114): Strauss’s Judah Halevi (ca. 1075-1141) 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.”

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, ‘categorical imperatives.’” The “moral man as such is the potential believer [in revelation]” (pp. 139-40).