

Maimonides on Free Will

I speak today about a medieval author whose neglected work is not without interest even today. He is the Jewish philosopher and theologian, Moshe ben Maimon (1135-1204) known in the West as Maimonides. His two great works are the Mishneh Torah (14 volumes), a codification of Jewish law, considered to be Maimonides' magnum opus, and the better known philosophical work, Guide to the Perplexed. It is the latter that I will draw upon principally, though I will say something about the Mishneh Torah. His medical treatises constitute an important chapter in the history of medicine but are beyond the scope of this presentation. The Mishneh Torah consolidated and codified an array of Jewish halakhah rules and norms and set them in a unified and accessible structure without the usual back and forth discussion of opinions, major and minor, that characterize the halakhah of the period. Maimonides sought to reinterpret Judaism, in the words of one commentator "as a religion suitable to the sensibilities of philosophical religiosity and to create a unified and accessible halakhah that would be accepted by all Jewish communities wherever they may be." No mean feat, he reminds the reader, given that "by its very nature, the Jewish tradition contains a streak of stubborn resistance to the setting of shared, binding, principles of belief." (footnote: Moshe Halbertal, Maimonides: Life and Thought. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. p. 365. Translated from the Hebrew by Joel Linsider, this work provides an excellent introduction to the Mishneh Tora and the Guide to the Perplexed and is drawn upon in the following presentation.)

Maimonides, a native of Cordoba, Spain, belonged to the school of Aristotle and his Muslim interpreters, notably al Farabi, Avicenna and Averroes. In all of his writings, philosophical as well as halakhic, Maimonides took science and philosophy, which he often refers to simply as “wisdom” as the medium for attaining the heights of religious experience, namely, the love and awe of God.

Before I examine some key elements of his teaching, I must say something about these great philosophers and the world they inhabited. Medieval Europe did not inherit Greek philosophy directly from Greece, but indirectly through the channel of Syrian, Persian and Arabic scholars, scientists and philosophers. Avicenna was one of them. Born in Persia in 980, he was the personal physician to more than one sovereign, but importantly he was also a philosopher and theologian. Those of you who have difficulty studying philosophy, take heart. Listen to this, by his own admission Avicenna read Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* forty times without understanding it. Eventually he learned the text by heart and only then did its meaning come to him. An event, it is said, which he celebrated by distributing lavish gifts to the poor. Averroes, another great Islamic Aristotelian, was born in Cordoba in 1126, less than a decade before Maimonides who was also born in Cordoba. Eventually known in Aristotelian circles as “the Commentator,” Averroes was to leave his name perpetuated by an influential form of Renaissance philosophy known as “Latin Averroism.” Although Averroes and Maimonides may have been tutored by some of the same masters, their interpretations of Aristotle differ significantly. St. Thomas was to call Averroes the corrupter of Aristotle.

It may not be out of place to note that a contemporary of the two Cordoba giants is Abelard at Paris, undoubtedly the greatest logician of his day. Paris had the logical works of Aristotle, but

not his important philosophical works such as the *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, and the *De Anima*. And then there was Heloise, in the words of Etienne Gilson, “That wild little French woman who as a girl of seventeen knew, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew.” Gilson added, “ Before anyone can claim to have found a formula defining the Middle Ages, he must first find a definition of Heloise.” Some of you may have visited the magnificent tomb of Heloise and Abelard in the Pere Lachaise Cemetery in Paris.

Maimonides was born into an Orthodox Jewish family and studied with his father and other masters in Cordoba. Before he reach the age of thirteen, his peaceful world was suddenly disturbed by the ravages of war and persecution when the political culture of Cordoba came under the dominance of the Almohads. As a result the Jewish community, like the Christian, was faced with the choice between converting to Islam or leaving the city. The Maimon family temporized by practicing Judaism within the privacy of their home while disguising their ways in public. This double life proved irksome and the family eventually fled in 1159 to Fez, Morocco, which turned out not to be much better, forcing the family to move again when in 1165 Rabbi Judah ibn Shoshan with whom Moses was studying, was arrested as a practicing Jew and executed. Moses himself was denounced as reverting to Judaism after having embraced Islam. The penalty for reversion under the Almohads was death but Moses managed to vindicated himself.

This turbulent background did not prevent Moses at age 16 to compose a treatise on logic. The works to which we now attend were written in Egypt where the family finally settled. But one further note. For the early part of his life, Maimonides was sustained by the family fortune. In 1177, tragedy befell when his younger brother David went down with the family’s assets on a

trading mission in the Indian Ocean. Maimonides who would not take compensation as a rabbi was obliged to establish a medical practice to support his family which now included the brother's widow and child. Maimonides became renowned as a physician and the oath he created for anyone who was about to practice medicine is still used as an option to the more famous Hippocratic Oath. (Footnote: The Oath begins, "The eternal providence has appointed me to watch over the life and health of Thy creatures. May the love of my art actuate me at all time; may neither avarice nor miserliness, nor thirst for glory or for great reputation engage my mind; for the enemies of truth and philanthropy could easily deceive me and make me forgetful of my lofty aim of doing good to Thy children.")

Maimonides took fifteen years to write the Guide for the Perplexed. Its central thesis can be briefly stated: when science and philosophy conflict with Jewish tradition, the tradition itself is to be reinterpreted or reconciled with the truths of natural reason. The interpretation of Judaism that Maimonides offers is not meant solely to reconcile belief grounded in the Torah with the findings of philosophy and science, but to show that philosophy plays a central role in constructing the religious outlook itself. Knowledge independent of the tradition is also necessary for an understanding of the tradition. Without science and philosophy we cannot tell whether a particular term or account in the Torah is to be taken literally or not. Furthermore, the pursuit of wisdom is a substantive part of the religious person's inner journey, vital to the redemption of his soul, especially in his moving from fear of God to love of God. The study of philosophy thus becomes for Maimonides a religious duty for "To know, love and fear God" is man's highest duty, something that cannot be attained without the aid of wisdom. In fact in the early chapters of the Mishneh Torah God is described in the metaphysical terms of essence and

existence, not in descriptive personal or historical terms.

Whereas the Mishneh Torah is directed to a wide audience, elite and common folk alike, the Guide for the Perplexed is intended for a narrower group, people who have been educated to be faithful to the traditions of Judaism but who have also internalized the philosophical view of the world. In fact, the Guide conceals its deepest meaning from the reader who has not been initiated into philosophy. The perplexed, as defined by Maimonides, are confronted with two sources of authority, the Torah and wisdom. They are faced with what some might call an “existential crisis,” a choice between religious faith and philosophical certainty. The Guide deliberately leaves open to multiple readings, that is differing interpretations of the Torah, depending on what the reader brings to the text. Four readings are possible. A skeptical reading, for one, sees philosophy as a critical tool, leading to the conclusion that no positive knowledge of God can be conveyed through language, thus, in effect, preserving God’s pristine unity and transcendence, albeit in silence. A mystical reading looks upon philosophy as a process that clears the way to direct illumination, to a meta-linguistic, meta-rational, experience of God. Mystical experience takes place after one’s consciousness is emptied of all positive content, especially through the negation of language. The mystical reading, unlike the skeptical, believes in a direct cognition, albeit non-linguistic illumination of God. A third reading, the conservative reading holds that the Guide’s greatest achievement lies in showing that the eternal pre-existence of the world, as Aristotle would have it, cannot be proven. The perplexed person thus can adhere to the philosophical way without challenging the foundations of Judaism, which necessarily entails the ascription of will to God, for it is divine will that is exercised through creation ex nihilo, a cardinal tenet of the Hebrew Bible. A fourth reading, the

philosophical reading, by contrast, maintains that the Guide provides a systematic interpretation of Judaism's fundamental concepts on the basis of wisdom and on the acknowledged reality of an eternal, preexisting world. These multiple ways of uncovering the hidden meaning of the Torah makes it possible for the perplexed person to internalize the tradition of Greco-Arab philosophy without weakening his tie to Israel's Torah. It is important to keep in mind that for Maimonides there is no such thing as religious experience. All cognition or true belief arises from human intellect, sense perception, opinion or tradition.

Commentators, in keeping with Maimonides, acknowledge that there is no one way to understand the Jewish tradition.

It is in the context of his discussion of human perfection that Maimonides illustrates his doctrine of free will. He begins by noting that man alone among the creatures is granted free will. What distinguishes him from the brute is the ability to use his will to subject his desires and lusts to law and models of proper conduct. The practice of virtue is important not only for its own sake but because makes the intellectual life possible. The road to human perfection is attained when will is in conformity to right reason. Fulfillment of the Commandments is a means, not an end. Put another way, intellectual acumen is possible only within the context of a well ordered life. And here Maimonides draws a bit on Avicenna who observed that man, as a social animal cannot have a satisfactory life except within a political community. Such is elusive given the inability of average men to create by their own unaided efforts a political society that would be viable due to the fact that people left to their own devices find it impossible to agree on a common law valid for all. Everyone thinks that the things that accord with his own interests are right and that things that are unfavorable are wrong. Consequently men are

hostile to one another. Only a prophet, that is, a man endowed with certain faculties not found in the run of people, can create a social bond between them and thus preserve the community from calamities and self destruction, leading them to submit to a law binding on all. (Shlomo Pines, translators introduction to *The Guide to the Perplexed*, p. xcix)

Maimonides, in keeping with his religious tradition, finds the end of life in the next world. Rather than being a reward for observing the commandments, the world to come is a life devoted to the apprehension of the intelligibles for which this world is a preparation. Life in the world to come is thus a pure and refined continuation of the mind. From an Aristotelian point of view, human potential is fulfilled through apprehending to the full extent one's intelligence truth about the world and God. According to Aristotle, in death, after one subtracts that which man has in common with plants (nutrition and growth) and with non-human animals (sensation) what remains is the distinctly human quality of intelligence. What remains of a person after death is the knowledge he has acquired in this life. The immortality of the human soul from that point of view is no miracle; it simply follows causally from a certain way of life. Given that human life attains its ultimate perfection through knowledge, all other human activity is subservient to this higher purpose. Because man is a material creature, he needs a well ordered society that can provide him with the necessities required for the pursuit of a life of the mind. Thus Maimonides can say that the observance of the Commandments, requiring or prohibiting various actions, are not the purpose of religion, they rather are the means by which man is to fulfill his purpose as a knowing creature

Having addressed the problem of "creation in time," "life after death," and the "nature of morality" Maimonides was forced to address the problem of "free will." His is not the

contemporary problem of “psychological determinism” or “genetic determinism,” though the latter may be more ideology than science. He readily acknowledged the role of social pressures on individual action. It is natural, he believed, to be influenced in sentiment and conduct by neighbors and associates, and by the observed customs of one’s fellow citizens. The problem he faced in the Guide was how to reconcile human freedom with God’s foreknowledge. If God knows from all eternity that you are going to run that Jaguar into a ditch, what freedom do you have. Seemingly your fate is sealed. But for Maimonides this is not a real problem. By definition, God exists outside of time. His knowledge does not interfere in the causal order ordained by the act of creation. Misfortune befalls the just and unjust alike. God does not intervene to free the just from poverty, illness or travail. Although Aristotle held that the world is eternal, this is derivative Aristotelian teaching, that enables Maimonides is to understand divine providence.

Aristotle taught that the world has structure and order but that structure does not determine the existence of each and every individual; rather, it is expressed in the maintenance of each species overall. Accordingly the continuation of the animal species and humankind as a whole is insured, but each individual is subject to random chance within the process of destruction and formation that governs their material natures. In Aristotle’s view, providence does not connote God’s wilful involvement in a person’s life or even in the history of a species or nation. Maimonides adopts Aristotle’s position; providence pertains to the species, not to individuals. Man is given the instruments of thought and movement that allows him to survive. In that sense, life is providential. It is not God’s intervention from without; it is the wisdom that adheres in the causal order, that if mastered makes existence and its preservation possible.

Maimonides acknowledges that there are other schools of thought on the subject. The Ash'arites, for example, hold that providence is an ongoing volitional action on the part of God who controls all events in the universe. To Maimonides this position undermines the *raison d'être* of the Commandments. How can men be directed to observe the Torah's Commandments, if they are unable to observe them or transgress to the contrary.

Perhaps I should have mentioned it in the beginning, Leo Strauss in his preface to Schlomo Pines translation of the Guide warns the reader, "This is not a philosophical book written by a philosopher for philosophers - but a Jewish book written by a Jew for Jews." Strauss will also say that the Guide contains a public teaching and a secret teaching. "The public teaching is addressed to every Jew, including the vulgar; the secret teaching is addressed to the elite. The secret teaching is of no use to the vulgar and the elite does not need the Guide for being appraised of the public teaching (xvii). One may beg to differ. It may have been intended as such, but in my judgment it is more than that, given its time- transcending value, a characteristic that makes the Guide a part of the Western literary canon. In appropriating Aristotle's metaphysics, Maimonides exemplifies the perennial value of the Stagirite as one grapples with problems that will not go away in spite of the empiricism that dominates contemporary intellectual discourse, i.e. the relation of faith and reason, creation, morality and law, teleology in nature, and human nature and its perfection, to name only a few.

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