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Thesis: Moses Maimonides

Doctor, merchant, religious leader, and master of philosophy as well as logic and the technical details of many of the sciences of his day, the twelfth-century Jewish thinker Moses Maimonides was in a prime position to synthesize the discordant philosophical and scientific writings of antiquity with each other and to provide an overarching religious world-picture which could make the new synthesis ethically, politically, and religiously coherent with lived twelfth-century life. The sharpness of his insights and the coherency of his vision had as much to do with his ability to step away from detailed data- and concept-analysis once he had made rhetorically clear that he thought a solution to a technical problem was not soon coming as it did with the detailed analyses that made his principled abstention from a debate convincing. In this way he navigates the quintessentially medieval doctrine of the uniquely perfect philosophical school in the far past (in this case, Moses’s and the Israelites’; Bakan: Maimonides on Prophecy, introduction) alongside the relentlessly critical attitude of late scholastic and early modern commentators to Aristotle who cannot help but point out that the disjunction between Aristotelian and Ptolemaic models leaves for the time being irresolvable aporiae that jeopardizes any general insight won from Aristotle’s natural philosophical methodology (Seeskin: Maimonides on the Origins of the World, chapters 2 & 3).

But if, as Hermann Cohen pointed out, the Maimonidean disjunction between a God of infinite and simple cognition and a human cognition that works by referent and analogy anticipates the Kantian critical turn and his doctrine of the autonomy of reason, it is important also to stress and to overstress the central difference in approaches to nature between
Maimonides and the early moderns whom he inspired: while Kant, Newton, and Spinoza (to give two major philosopher-scientists of the later period as well as scientifically-minded Maimonidean) were also interested in a far-reaching synthesis of natural, ethical, and philosophical contexts, the latter thinkers were participating in a long philosophico-scientific tradition that had been integrating different scientific and natural data through the integrative power of the thinking subject and his pure intuition of nature and the infinite (Cohen: Religion of Reason; Guéroult: Spinoza: Dieu, introduction). Without the new astronomical tables and heliocentric concepts introduced by Copernicus and Kepler that led to a crisis in Aristotelian place-based motion, without the autonomous Cartesian method of doing natural philosophy that opened the doors to the synthesis of widely discordant empirical data by mapping it onto a thinking subject’s (res cogitans) conception of extended matter (res extensa), Maimonides’s naturalist synthesis instead sought for ever-smoother integrations between the logical and metaphysical equipment supplied by Neoplatonist texts which deduced an elaborate hierarchy of differently-graded metaphysical principles, and the natural concepts of the Aristotelian and Ptolemaic world-models which described the earth as at the center of several celestial spheres. It was thus man’s immutable place under unbreakable spheres that provided the ultimate limit on knowledge that Kant provided in his two-source epistemology.

This paper will examine more closely two sites of methodological differences between Maimonides and the early moderns: their approach to logic and the philosophical justifications provided specific sciences. The goal is to broaden our understanding of the possible contours what has come to be known as the critical turn in metaphysics, the exchange of God for the concept as the central object of study which is overrepresented as the invention of Immanuel Kant (Adorno; Kant’s ‘Critique of Pure Reason,’ 3). Maimonides too arrives at something of a
critical metaphysics which brackets ‘ultimate questions,’ but ultimate questions for Maimonides relate to God’s providence, not God’s existence. This major difference with the tenor of the critical turn received through Kant makes a study of Maimonides relevant to anyone interested in the contemporary revival in metaphysical and theological questions within a new metaphysical framework.

*Maimonides and Logic*

Perhaps the sharpest division can be made between Maimonides and the early moderns on the issue of logic. The tendency throughout the early modern period, to Kant’s “Amphiboly of the Concepts of Reflection,” is to more finely articulate the truth-preserving procedures available to logic by better articulating the representations being described, their kinds and interrelations, etc. Any of the results delivered by Aristotle’s category logic, for Kant, can only be fully understood if each of the constituent parts of the logic is first articulated in transcendentental terms, both because of reason’s internal demands for maximum coherency and simplicity and because of the possibility that, without that coherency and simplicity, nonequivalent representations will be confused and that we will reason from a proper logic to ungrounded metaphysical principles.

Like Kant, Maimonides in his *Treatise on the Art of Logic* is interested in clearing up basic confusions that result from a poor grasp of technical logical terms, but, unlike Kant, Maimonides seeks out “not to indulge in details of meaning, lest the discourse become too long,” but to teach “technical terms in most of their meanings” (Maimonides: *Treatise on the Art of Logic*, introduction). Unlike Kant, Maimonides is not chiefly interested in new plateaus of philosophical knowledge, but in a clarifying systematization that can explain intellectual labor to the non-intellectual. Maimonides’s focus is thus not to produce the most rigorous separation of properly unrelated concepts, but to explain logic as a branch of (Arabic) grammar, or to explain
the *logos* as possibly the rational faculty or the intuited idea or its expression in language (Chapters 13 and 14). Also, whereas Kant’s synthesis clarified different roles of the transcendental subject in order to bracket ungrounded logical leaps or the use of vague intuitions, Maimonides depends on a holistic Aristotelian framework which explains logic by appealing to the place of the animal that uses it in the natural order (Chapter 14). These two motivators for Maimonides’s treatment of logic give him a Wittgensteinian’s eye for the common-sense nuances of a verbal utterance with an Aristotelian’s tendency to default to natural philosophy to work out foundational issues. Perhaps nowhere in the short work does Maimonides more link himself to Aristotelians against the Kantian approach to logic than when he defines logic as an ‘art,’ an art being “a homonym, being applied to every theoretical science and also to mechanical workmanship,” or, just down the page, when he defines philosophy as “sometimes signifying demonstration, and sometimes the sciences.” The only bridge between the two halves of each of these definitions can be the human subject, reasoning in action—an abstract unity which Kant would be at pains to accept without qualification.

Maimonides’s approach to logic is conditioned by Maimonides’ own attempts to synthesize Platonic teleological and Aristotelian analogical logics and metaphysics, a syncretic project which occupied many of the Islamic thinkers such as Avicenna and Averroes whom Maimonides engaged closely with (Kraemer, “Moses Maimonides: an Intellectual Portrait”). First, it will be helpful to outline how Plato’s and Aristotle’s methods differ. Plato’s philosophical method, expounded in the *Phaedo*, is to move from a moment of cognition to a ‘hypothesis’ (lit., something ‘standing-under’), a principle necessary to explain the moment of cognition but not immanent to it. This process can be repeated until one reaches a self-supporting *unhypothetical* principle which explains itself and needs no further principle. On Plato’s
construal of philosophy, then, to philosophize is to talk about metaphysical objects which are independent of our sensory evidence for them and which determine the objects that we see. We might call such a logic *teleological*, because it moves from object of sensation to its greater determinant.

Aristotle’s three main philosophical innovations--formalizing a category logic, resolving the *aporiae* left by the Eleatics in the philosophy of nature, and grafting Plato’s value-theory onto the human species--by contrast, all demand *analogical* logics. In comparison with the teleological logic given above, analogical logics work by reasoning from sensibles, to the groups of sensibles of which they’re a part, back to the sensibles themselves. In this way, for instance, qualities are expressed as the properties of substances, time is expressed as an accident of motion, and the good human is that human which can function well, ie, reason. Aristotle’s analogical logic retain the normative thrust of Platonic teleological logic without the jump from sensible to necessary hypotheses. For example, Aristotle’s ethics, by appealing to the form of a man intuitable from natural philosophy, was both more relevant to humans that Plato’s ethical project and grounded in a more ontologically parsimonious approach. By contrast, Aristotle was at a disadvantage on the metaphysical plane, where Plato’s approach was more suited to reduce several ontological objects to a single one intuited as the *unhypothesis*, equated with God or with the One.

The tendency in Maimonides’s time, as alluded to above, was to graft the emanationist ontology of imperial-era Platonists onto the description of the celestial spheres provided by Ptolemy, and to harmonize this with the description of the universe by Aristotle. Also as stated above, Maimonides was too invested in the details of these sciences to paint over the difficulties in harmonizing them. The contradiction between any metaphysical interpretation of the
eccentricities demanded by Ptolemy and the perfect circles hypothesized by Aristotle suggested to Maimonides that the world-picture provided by the Greeks might be radically unsatisfactory. As Kenneth Seeskin points out in *Maimonides on the Origin of the World*, it is at this point that Maimonides begins to mount his defence of the possibility of creation *ex nihilo*, premised on the idea that, given that the universe exhibits uncognizable irregularities in the present moment, that there is no good reason to exclude *a priori* uncognizable irregularities in universe’s past, possibly including its creation.

What I want to suggest here is that Maimonides’s thinking-through of the three possibilities of the universe’s formation by God--the Platonic model which hypothesizes multiple succeeding universes, the Aristotelian model which hypothesizes a single eternal universe, and the suggestion that though the universe had a beginning, it will not have an ending--are modelled on the different logical registers outlined above. If Maimonides mainly had logical register in mind when he was thinking through Plato’s and Aristotle’s cosmologies in the opening to part two of *The Guide of the Perplexed*, it would help to explain why he attributes a cosmological claim to Plato not found in the dialogues; where Maimonides writes about multiple succeeding universes, he’s really thinking through a certain conception of the relationship between universe and ultimate cause, such that the ultimate cause is radically independent of the universe. It would also help to contextualize his strong association between Aristotle and the claim of the eternity of the universe--a Aristotelian thesis, to be sure, but not obviously the central Aristotelian thesis. The centrality granted this thesis could be better explained if Maimonides thinks about Aristotelianism as a method of explanation that relates parts to wholes, then it makes sense that his Aristotelian universe would exhibit, at the most basic level, an immanent participation in the absolute good; after all, if one reasons about the world by intuiting from part to whole, then there
can be nowhere else to go after the explanatory chain reaches the ultimate whole. (Maimonides might have learned how to reason about the exact contours of the order of the cosmos from Book I of Aristotle’s *Physics*, where Aristotle reasons from happenstance events and the nature of reason to exact facts about the contours of the rationability of the cosmos.) Once we keep in mind that causal explanation and the operation of Providence are indissolubly linked for philosophers working in Maimonides’s milieu, we see that an Aristotelian cosmos without infinite duration would be, for Maimonides, a contradiction in terms.

The causal sequence implied by Aristotle’s analogous logic, against Plato’s teleological logic, seems to imply a closer link between the establishment of this universe and the operations of God. Maimonides is interested in leveraging Aristotelian analogy against Platonic teleology in order to develop a thicker idea of Providence, but he’s also interested in playing the two off of each other to create room for his Jewish third way through creation. But the essential Maimonidean move is to accept none of these positions, because a hasty assumption of any of them would be ungrounded. Maimonides’s own approach to logic is inclusive, tending to link any truth-preserving method humans employ under a broad umbrella that includes grammar and arts. In a striking contrast to Kant, Maimonides’s problem is that he cannot commit to simply one model of the relationship of God to world; although creation provides some clues, it has hitherto left us mostly in the dark.

*Maimonides and Three ‘Sciences:’ theology and ethics*

The remainder of this essay will treat three relatively independent aspects of Maimonides’s thought to show how the tension between analogical and teleological reasoning plays out in more specific aspects of his thought.
Although Maimonides’s Aristotelianism has been the more frequent object of attention and scholarship, God’s radical and uncognizable simplicity—the foundational block of Maimonides’s theology and philosophy of religion—aligns him more closely with Platonic than with Aristotelian thinkers. The theme of the true simplicity of God is introduced early and often in *The Guide to the Perplexed*, and at each point Maimonides uses it to transform deep religious intuitions into a rubric for further and humble study of God. In Part One, which treats of terms in the Torah with multiple meanings, Maimonides quickly asserts that the simplicity and non-corporeality of God is an object of belief so basic that it must be accepted by everyone in a community on pain of death. To link God’s simplicity and His non-corporeality—a common-sense equivocation to any philosopher of the time—is to leverage powerful contemporary Jewish intuitions about idolatry (not to mention intuitions about the complete power of the God on High) into the first plank of a rigorous theology.

By maintaining this admonishment, implicitly and explicitly, Maimonides in Part One trains his reader to think through the Torah as a text about a God for whom corporeal concepts will miss the mark. In Part Two, he shifts his register, now not attacking idolatry *in toto* but a specific philosophical method called *mutakallimun* which sought to prove the creation of the world by describing the nature of objects’ dependence on God. The shift in register accompanies the reader’s increasing readiness not just to combat base idolatry, but to think through more-finely refined forms of God-denying. For Maimonides, the central mistake made by philosophers of the *mutakallimun* is that they confuse the imaginable with the possible. Just because we can imagine God’s creation of a corporeal object does not guarantee that such a creation actually passed.
The major point of Maimonides’s debate with mutakallimun revolves around a point so simple that its importance might be missed: just as we learned in Part One that God’s simplicity transcends our everyday language of reference, we learn in Part Two that this failure of reference means we cannot subsume God and a corporeal thing under a single judgment. To reject idolatry is also to deny any proposition that links God and our cosmos in a determinant way. While God’s simplicity grounds our judgments, it must be taken as an item of faith, because it itself, properly speaking, cannot be the subject or predicate of any judgment.

God, then, for Maimonides, is only visible through His effects: a world which seems to be ordered for a larger plan, in which we can often err and still find what we seek and in which there’s very often enough. But because, as we learned above, we can’t use reason to transcend our cosmic ignorance of God’s ultimate designs, we can instantiate something like that benevolent simplicity through ethical living. Maimonides’s rejection of radical asceticism in favor of a moderate life is well-known, but its structural similarity to Maimonides’s rejection of idolaters and mutakallimun is much more rarely pointed out despite their common root: Maimonides’s intuition that the path to God that we imagine often leaves us unprepared for what He actually demands of us. The radical ascetic, like the idolater, substitutes their imagined pre-conception of God for the proper if less-travelled path. They also sow social unease by confusing people on what God expects of them.

The path to God, for Maimonides, is not through self-abnegation but through allowing the proper functioning of the human intellect--the only other non-corporeal thing to which we have direct access (Menachem Keller, “Maimonides and Spiritual Life.”) This helps explain why Maimonides thought that the holy man must under no circumstances allow himself to be angered, although he may pantomime it to inspire obedience to God on the part of his peers.
Anger, a sense of the deep importance of other finite creatures, separates us from God on two parts: it substitutes our attention directed at God for attention aimed at material things; and it closes off the only meaningful path we have to God, viz., a recreation of noncorporeal benevolence towards corporeal things.

In this relationship to the world, the only fit relationship to the world for us, the tension between analogical and teleological reasoning seems to subside at least for the God-imitating human subject; whether we consider the benevolent reasoning subject in-itself or for-another seems not to make a constitutive difference. If, when confronted with the world, we’re at a loss to put together its goal-orientedness and its deep tendency to remain how it is, we can at least make these two concepts overlap for us by living a holy life.
Bibliography


