

The Piety of Socrates and Maimonides: Doing God's Work on Earth

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Socrates and Maimonides are paragons of piety. They devote their lives to divine service, notwithstanding their perception that an unbridgeable chasm separates the divine from the human. At great personal cost they take on God's tasks—that is, the tasks that God would do if only He weren't God. For Socrates, that work is to persuade people of the great value of their souls and consequently of the importance of justice and truth. For Maimonides, it is to encourage meticulous observance of Jewish law in its ritual and moral aspects, and to banish false and noxious views of God from the beliefs of even ordinary people. Neither Socrates nor Maimonides is content to foster only his own intellectual perfection—and therein lies their piety.

What might it mean for a human being to be pious if he does not hold a conventional conception of God—indeed, if he has no firm belief in God at all? The Socrates of Plato's dialogues is, for all his god-talk, no ordinary believer. And Maimonides, his protestations of orthodoxy notwithstanding, believes in a God who neither hears nor sees, neither rewards nor punishes, neither judges nor forgives. Yet, these two men are in their way paragons of piety. For each serves God by serving his fellow man.

Both Socrates and Maimonides devote themselves to the care of others, selflessly and at no small cost to themselves. Socrates, as he tells us in the *Apology* (31b), goes to each Athenian privately, “as a father or an older brother might do,” persuading him to care for virtue, all the while making himself so hated that he is indicted, convicted, and executed.¹ Maimonides, who longs to be with God, to meditate upon Him, to know Him, to love Him with the full force of his intellect, nevertheless composes voluminous works not for himself but for those

who need his guidance: “A man endowed with knowledge,” he says, “does not set anything down for himself in order to teach himself what he already knows” (*Guide of the Perplexed* 2.37: 375).²

It would seem that what motivates both Socrates and Maimonides to care for the souls of others at great personal cost is a kind of piety. For, on the one hand, helping others seems to go beyond the call of justice: what justice ostensibly requires of people is that they refrain from harming others (see *Ap.* 37b–c, 41d–e; *Crito* 49a–e; *Rep.* 1.335a–e).³ Yet, on the other hand, it would be difficult to think of a more fruitful way to serve God than by serving man. For if there is a God, what does He need? What could we human beings give Him that would be a fair exchange for all the bounties we enjoy? These are questions that occupy the last part of Plato’s *Euthyphro*. But is it Euthyphro the piety expert, the man who is privy to amazing stories about the gods, who can teach us how to serve them? Is it he who can say what kind of service (*hupēretikē*) to the gods holiness is? Is it he who can specify the work that men assist the gods in accomplishing on earth? Euthyphro is unable to name that work because it has no place in his narrowly self-centered conception of piety: the only work that is of concern to him is that of pleasing the gods in hopes of securing their favor. It is Socrates who can readily identify the work that is holiness, for this work is none other than the divine service that occupies him daily: the admonishment, examination, and exhortation of his fellow men to care for truth, justice, and the condition of their souls.

Maimonides is no different. He, too, labors for the whole of his life to help others come to embrace correct beliefs about God and to observe the Torah’s laws properly. He endures criticisms from all sides even as he persists in serving as advisor on matters of Jewish practice. Why? What is it that motivates these two men, and how is that motivation to be construed as a pious one?

I shall argue that what both Socrates and Maimonides realize is that there is no God who can do on earth the work that men can do. Who but men can encourage other men to live worthy lives? Who but men will see and hear, reward and punish, judge and forgive? If God has not “forsaken the earth” (*Ezek.* 9:9), it is only because there are hu-

man beings to do “in the earth” (Jer. 9:23) what God cannot do Himself. Whether there is no God or whether there is a self-contained and therefore unengaged God, His work must be done. In helping others, then, the pious man does not imitate God; on the contrary, the pious man extends God’s reach by becoming His outstretched arm.

Does Socrates believe in gods?

Two charges are brought against Socrates: (1) that he corrupts the young, and (2) that he is impious—specifically, that he does not believe in the gods of the city but in novel daimonic things (*Ap.* 24b9–c1). He can defend himself only indirectly against the second charge, since he cannot (without outright lying) affirm his belief in traditional Greek gods. His strategy takes two tacks. One tack, the more evident of the two, involves his provoking his accuser Meletus into exaggerating the first part of the impiety charge—that Socrates does not believe in the gods of the city—to one of full-blown atheism, and then to use the second part of the charge—that Socrates believes in novel daimonic things—to refute the newly inflated first part: if a daimon is a god or a child of a god, then how can Socrates believe in daimons yet not in gods? This first argument is largely *ad hominem*, exposing Meletus as someone who has given but scant thought to the grave charges he brings. It no doubt does little to convince the jurors that Socrates is innocent. It is the second tack, the more subtle one, that constitutes the positive case Socrates makes for his claim of innocence. This second tack is itself a dual one. It consists, first, of Socrates’ relentless citing throughout his trial (that is, throughout Plato’s fictionalized account of his trial in the *Apology*) of “the god”—the god at Delphi who is witness to his “wisdom;” the god whose mission he is carrying out; the god to whom he is so devoted that he lives in dire poverty; the god who stationed him, ordering him to philosophize and to examine himself and others; the god whom he obeys over the men of Athens; the god whom he serves and whose orders he follows; the god whose gift to Athens he is; the god who set him upon the city as a gadfly upon a horse; the god who ordered him through oracles and dreams to practice philosophy; the gods before whom the judges have sworn an oath; the god behind

the *daimonion*, Socrates' divine sign; the gods who are not without care for a good man's troubles; the god who alone knows whether it is better to live or die. To be sure, this rhetorical trope was devised to counteract the impression, seared into the Athenian consciousness by publicly staged caricature as well as by perniciously pervasive gossip, of Socrates as an impious man. At the same time, however, it presents Socrates' devotion to the god as inextricably interwoven with his devotion to his fellow man.

Second, Socrates points to his personal justice. Socrates is pious, not because he receives and obeys private communications from a supernatural source but because, even at the cost of his life, he does what is right. He will not be party to an illegal mass trial; he will not arrest Leon of Salamis and condemn him to death. Socrates will not even behave in court as other men do, begging and crying and parading his children before the jurors. His refusal to subvert justice in this way and to involve the jurors in such subversion is his proof that he believes in gods. But he believes, as he says, "as none of my accusers does" (*Ap.* 35d7). Socratic piety is far removed from its conventional counterpart.

The Socratic conception of piety has, then, two components. On the one hand, it requires that one be just or refuse to commit injustice. This is piety's necessary condition, its *sine qua non*. It is also its essentially negative aspect. It is because piety has this negative aspect that Socrates believes that those judges who would pervert justice by doling out favors to defendants whose emotional pleas they find gratifying cannot be pious, no matter how orthodox their views of the gods or how punctilious their ritual practice. On the other hand, however, piety goes beyond justice by requiring service to the god through helping others: this is its positive aspect. In the *Euthyphro*, where Socrates explicitly distinguishes piety from justice, Socrates encourages his interlocutor to think of piety in terms of the service human beings might render to the gods, the work with which they might promote the gods' agenda—on earth.

On both counts, Socrates qualifies as pious. There can be no doubt that he regards himself as just. When he says, for example, that he

never did injustice to anyone and therefore will not do it to himself (*Ap.* 37b), or that if he is brought before a court, “some base man will be my prosecutor—for no worthwhile person would prosecute a human being who does no injustice” (*Gorg.* 521d), it is his justness to which he refers. But he clearly also sees himself as going beyond the strict demands of justice. For when he talks about tending to the souls of others and fighting for the cause of justice (justice being, in his view, the sole guarantor of genuine human happiness), he almost invariably makes reference to his serving the gods.⁴

What sort of god does Socrates believe in? The god of whom Socrates speaks in the *Apology* is surely not simply one of the many gods whose existence Meletus suspects him of denying. Although this god is at first assimilated to the god of the oracle at Delphi, Apollo is never mentioned by name and, as the dialogue progresses, all association between Socrates’ god and a god of known identity dissolves. Socrates’ god sends him to Athens out of concern for Athenian souls; the task to which the god assigns Socrates is one of exhorting his fellow citizens to care for virtue and truth, disabusing them of their false conceit of wisdom, and encouraging them to engage in self-examination. Socrates’ god is, then, one who promotes—through Socrates—justice and philosophy. Moreover, if to obey the god is to practice philosophy, then to obey the god is to guide one’s conduct by one’s own reasoned determination of what is most just. A god who commands men to philosophize does not serve as an alternative or even as a supplement to human reason as a guide to moral decision-making; instead, such a god mandates that human reason is to be one’s guide.⁵ Insofar as Socrates’ god demands of men that they live philosophically, and insofar as the station at which the god places Socrates *is* philosophy, it follows that to do as the god demands is to think for oneself. One can reasonably say, then, that Socrates’ god renders himself superfluous.

What kind of God does Maimonides believe in?

Maimonides, nearly all agree, believes in an Arabic Aristotelian God.⁶ The agreement, however, ends there. For in the view of many Maimonidean scholars, Maimonides, at the same time that he embraces an

Aristotelian God, also acknowledges a God who created the world, who intervenes in the natural order by way of miracles, who bestows prophecy—or at least can on occasion withhold it (see *Guide* 2.32)—and whose providence extends to His human creatures.

My strong suspicion, however, is that Maimonides' God did not create the world (although He is the eternal cause of the eternal universe), does not perform miracles, does not bestow or withhold prophecy, and is not providential with respect to individual human beings. In other words, I suspect that Maimonides' views are identical with those he attributes to Aristotle in the *Guide*. Not surprisingly, Maimonides finds it necessary to conceal views that would strike many in the Jewish world as heretical—indeed, Maimonides labels as heretical several of the opinions he very likely secretly endorses⁷—but he provides enough hints to make it known that his true sympathies lie with Aristotle. The only significant difference—and it is certainly a most important one—between Maimonides' view and Aristotle's is that Maimonides regards the Aristotelian God as one supremely worthy of worship and devotion.

I begin with several methodological points. First, Maimonides makes it clear in the Introduction to the *Guide of the Perplexed* (11) that the Torah is not to be read literally except with respect to its precepts, the affirmative and negative directives that constitute the 613 biblical commandments. Second, Maimonides disparages arguments that are designed to ensure a desired conclusion; he regards as worthwhile only those arguments that proceed from the way things are observed to be—that is, not from how one might wish they are but from how they are. Third, Maimonides does not mean everything he says.

With regard to the first point, Maimonides sees the extra-legal material in the Torah as “parables.” The final metaphor he cites (Introduction: 11–12) to capture the relationship between the external or literal meaning of the text and its inner, deeper meaning is the one he quotes approvingly from Proverbs 11.25: “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver filigree.”⁸

Maimonides' praise of this final metaphor makes it appear as if he values highly the literal meaning of the text, which, as he goes on to

say, is as beautiful as silver. Moreover, his contention that the Torah's literal sense contains within itself something that "indicates to someone considering it what is to be found in its internal meaning" suggests that he ascribes to the Torah's literal sense not only intrinsic value (its beauty) but instrumental value as well: not only are the settings of silver filigree beautiful in their own right but they point beyond themselves to the golden apples within.

As Maimonides proceeds, however, he remarks that when one looks at the apple from afar or without devoting to it perfect attention, one thinks it is made of silver; only someone who has a sharp eye and who devotes to the apple his full attention sees what is inside the silver filigree, namely, an apple of gold. The clear implication of Maimonides' words is that the literal text actually deceives those who do not have keen vision, hiding the text's real meaning. We note, moreover, that the filigree is in fact of no help to anyone in discovering the golden apple within: the only way to see the golden apple is to disregard the filigree, to look not at it but through its apertures. How, then, can it be supposed that the Torah's literal text helps one to penetrate through to the Torah's truths?

If the literal meaning of the Torah's text is not after all useful for discerning the Torah's true meaning, why does Maimonides assign to it the value of silver? Does he not indicate thereby that the literal text has considerable intrinsic value, even if not quite the same value as the inner truth it conceals? Indeed, he does. The value the literal text has is, as he says, "political": it enhances human social and political associations and improves moral character (12). It is these political benefits that make the literal sense of the Torah beautiful in its own way, as beautiful as silver.⁹

With respect to truth, however, the silver casing has no real worth; only the golden apple is beautiful. Twice in the Introduction (6, 14), Maimonides says that it is not necessary to understand the meaning of the Torah's "parables," that is, of the Torah's literal stories and accounts; all that one need do is recognize that the parables *are* parables. Simply knowing that the literal accounts in the Torah are parables is, Maimonides says, like having a screen removed between the eye and a visible

thing. Because the literal meaning hinders the apprehension of truth, it is a screen to be removed. From the point of view of truth, it is not only useless but obstructive.¹⁰

The second methodological point, developed by Maimonides at considerable length in *Guide* 1.71, suggests that a position should not be adopted simply in order to avoid an awkward or even blasphemous truth. Maimonides berates those who “did not conform in their premises to the appearance of that which exists, but considered how being ought to be in order that it should furnish a proof for the correctness of a particular opinion, or at least should not refute it” (178). He also quotes approvingly the following statement by Themistius: “That which exists does not conform to the various opinions, but rather the correct opinions conform to that which exists” (179).

Third, Maimonides exercises great caution in determining what to say and what to suppress, apparently taking to heart the Sage Avtalyon’s admonition to his colleagues: “Sages, mind your words!” (Mishnah *Avot* 2005 [hereafter *Avot*] 1.3).¹¹ In his *Commentary to Sanhedrin 10* (see Maimonides 1981), Maimonides identifies the target of this warning as Antigonos Ish Sokho, who famously said: “Do not be like servants who serve the master for the sake of reward; rather be like servants who serve the master not for the sake of reward” (*Avot* 1.11). Maimonides exhibits here his sensitivity to the ill-advisedness of telling the masses things they are neither intellectually nor spiritually prepared to hear: could it not happen that, as a consequence of their being told that they should worship God not for the sake of reward, they would cease to worship God altogether?¹²

Maimonides emphasizes in his Introduction to the *Guide* that not every truth may be taught to everyone. He thus warns the reader that his text will proceed by “revealing and concealing” (6–7, 18): on occasion he will deliberately contradict himself (20); also, his views will not be understood correctly until all the statements he makes on a given topic (often only in what he calls “chapter headings”) are gathered together from all the scattered places where he discusses it (6). Moreover, it is clear that Maimonides espouses views to which he does not subscribe. These are views that he characterizes much later on in

the *Guide*, at 3.28, as necessary though not true.¹³

It seems safe to say, then, that Maimonides does not always mean what he says. For that reason one has to be inordinately cautious and patient before concluding that one has discerned Maimonides' position. Let us consider briefly two issues—creation and divine providence—where Maimonides denies vociferously that he shares the Aristotelian view, but where many have suspected that he is merely concealing his agreement with it. In both cases I shall have recourse to one or more of the methodological points just discussed.

In *Guide* 2.25 Maimonides proclaims and defends his belief that the world was created (see also: 1.71, 2.6, 2.13, 3.10).¹⁴ There are, however, many reasons—two of which strike me as absolutely decisive—to doubt the sincerity of Maimonides' claim. First, Maimonides argues that, in the absence of a demonstration to the contrary, the words of the Torah are to be taken literally. Yet, as we have seen, Maimonides supposes that the Torah is not to be read literally except with respect to matters of law (Introduction: 11; also: 2.17: 298, 2.27: 333); much of the rest of it is, as he says, a parable.¹⁵ Indeed, he says explicitly that the creation story (which he calls “the Account of the Beginning”) is a parable (Introduction: 7, 9). Second—and here, too, only in the absence of a demonstration—he would have us prefer the creation view on the grounds that the Aristotelian eternity view threatens the very foundations of the Torah. Yet, as we have seen, Maimonides rails (in 1.71) against those who argue tendentiously, having their conclusion in hand before their argument begins.¹⁶ For Maimonides no view that is true threatens the foundations of the Torah. Since the Torah, too, is true, its deeper view necessarily concurs with philosophical truth: one has only to interpret the Torah correctly—that is, figuratively—in order to disclose that truth. Indeed, were it not for philosophical truth, one would hardly know how to begin to interpret Scripture correctly, how to discern its hidden truths. For the secrets of the Torah, its golden apples, are none other than the truths of philosophy, the truths that Aristotle (as Maimonides understood him) attained by the light of reason.

Which “foundation of the Torah” does an eternal universe threaten? It threatens the possibility of miracles. And what is so important about

miracles? That they sustain our hopes and fears (2.25: 328). Without creation there can be no miracles, and without miracles, there can be nothing to hope for or to fear. Maimonides believes, of course, that the philosopher, the superior human being, lives beyond hope and fear (see his *Code, Laws concerning Repentance*, 10.1, 10.3). He believes, too, that Abraham, in being prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac, acts out of love, “without hope of reward or fear of punishment, and [in the recognition] that love and fear of God is alone the right motivation for action” (*Guide* 3.24).¹⁷ It is only the masses who require hope and fear in order to conduct themselves properly—indeed Maimonides explicitly permits them to worship God out of hope and fear even though this is hardly ideal (*Code, Laws concerning Repentance*, 10.5)—and so it is only they who need miracles and only they who need creation. Creation is the silver filigree that conceals the golden apple of the universe’s eternity. It is silver because it sustains a belief that enhances the moral, social, and political life of ordinary people; but it is not gold—it is not true.¹⁸

If we turn to providence, here, too, we find Maimonides distancing himself from the Aristotelian position according to which divine providence keeps the world-order as it is, preserving both the permanent heavenly spheres and the permanent individuals in them, as well as the various species on earth, but playing no role in the lives of impermanent individuals within species—whether plant, animal, or human (*Guide* 3.17)—beyond ensuring that they have what they need to thrive. All else, according to Maimonides’ reading of Aristotle, is left to chance.

In this matter, too, there is reason to suspect that Maimonides is an Aristotelian. First, Maimonides credits Aristotle with following “what is manifest in the nature of that which exists” (3.17: 468) and, second, as Maimonides progresses from *Guide* 3.17 to 3.18 to 3.51, he moves increasingly further from the position he designates “our opinion,” or the opinion of the Torah, and increasingly closer to Aristotle’s.¹⁹ The Torah’s position emphasizes desert: God rewards goodness and punishes sin, so that when a human being—though not an animal or plant—prosperes or suffers harm it is because he or she has done right or done wrong. The clear implication of the Torah’s position is that

what sets human beings apart from plants and animals is free will, and for that reason divine providence in the form of reward and punishment devolves only on human beings. As the discussion continues, Maimonides preserves the connection between divine providence and desert, but subtly replaces free will with intellect as the distinguishing mark of human beings. What, however, has greater intelligence to do with desert, and hence with divine providence? One begins to suspect that desert has already fallen by the wayside, or will do so imminently. And indeed, by the time Maimonides gets to 3.51, divine providence has come to depend completely on the intellect or, more precisely, on the extent to which a human being's intellect is absorbed in God. Remarkably, when a human being ceases to be absorbed in God, even momentarily, he is, Maimonides says, subject to chance—anything might befall him (see 3.18: 476, and especially 3.51: 625–26).²⁰ But why is it that the person absorbed in God suffers no ill? Is it that God protects him? If God protects the man of superior intellect, why would He neglect the morally righteous? The answer is clear. All people, like all plants and animals, are, on the individual level, subject to chance. It is not as if God “looks after” anyone.²¹ But, the person who is absorbed in God is nevertheless invulnerable to the “bad” things that befall him, because he is oblivious to them. His intellect is “with God” and so he feels no pain; he suffers neither hunger nor thirst; he experiences no loss. It is not that things of that kind do not happen to him; it is that they do not affect him. He loses awareness of his body and so is not susceptible to the harms that afflict it. As soon as he becomes once again conscious of his body he is no less immune to pain and suffering than anyone else.²² Moses could go without food or water for forty days when he ascended Mt. Sinai to receive the tablets of the Law (*Guide* 3.51: 620)—but surely could not do so just before or after. It was his thorough absorption in God that made him not feel the bodily deprivations that he endured.²³

This view, let us note, is utterly Aristotelian. For one of the two features of the life of moral virtue that, according to Aristotle, disqualify it from being the very best life is that the morally virtuous are susceptible to misfortune.²⁴ But isn't everyone vulnerable to misfortune? For

Aristotle, the philosopher is not—and for that reason (among many others) the life of contemplation is the best and happiest life. He who lives the contemplative life is, Aristotle believes, immune to troubles, not because terrible things cannot happen to their bodies, but because they transcend their composite nature and live as though immortal (*EN* 10.6.8).²⁵ Of course, for both Aristotle and Maimonides the philosopher only intermittently reaches the heights of contemplation. He does not—cannot—absolutely transcend his human condition while alive. It is for that reason that Aristotle says that we should live in accordance with the divine element in us only “as much as possible” (*EN* 10.7.8), and Maimonides cites approvingly Elihu’s interpretation of Job’s situation, namely, that any divine providence that human beings enjoy is necessarily short-lived.²⁶ No human being is immune to harm because no human being transcends his humanness indefinitely.

Interestingly, as Socrates sees it, it is *moral* virtue that acts as a prophylactic against suffering. He asserts in the *Apology* (30c) that “no harm can come to a good man,” that is, to a man who is morally upright.²⁷ He believes that a man can will himself to identify with his soul. So long, then, as a man preserves his soul in pristine condition, all bad things that happen affect his body alone—not him. Aristotle, who believes that only intellect raises the human being to the level at which he transcends his body, mocks Socrates’ view, saying that no one could profess it save “for the sake of maintaining a paradox.”²⁸

Piety as Service

Piety, in Socrates’ own conception of it (*Ap.* 30a–b), is the service he provides to the god by examining others, showing them they are not wise, and exhorting them to virtue. In the absence of any firm conviction that such a being as the god exists²⁹—as we saw, Socrates’ god is the prop upon which he hangs his mission to philosophize—what does it mean to Socrates to “serve the god”?

There are three components to Socrates’ pious service: (1) humility (his awareness that he does not now know—and will never know—the most important things [*Ap.* 21b]); (2) his trust that there are, nevertheless, more important things than money, reputation, pleasure, and

family (*Ap.* 29d–e, 30b; *Crito* 48c)—the merely human things; and (3) his sense of what the god would want if there were a god, namely, that human beings be just and virtuous (*Ap.* 30a–b).

Socrates is alarmed by what he sees around him: the corruption in politics and the pervasive competitive spirit leading to the shameless embrace of injustice and a disdain for the just man as a fool. The wild popularity of the sophists and rhetoricians of his day convinces him that the time to “fight for justice” (*Ap.* 32a1) is now. And so, Socrates serves the god. Neglecting his own needs, incurring hatred as he goes, the prophetic figure Socrates ventures out into the marketplace to compel his fellow citizens to confront their ignoble ways. If there were a god, he would surely wish to cultivate justice and righteousness among men. But even if there were a god, the divine work would fall to human beings.

Maimonides, too, is keenly aware of the great need his people have for religious leadership. The time during which he lived was, on the one hand, one in which Jews suffered religious persecution and, on the other, one in which they were exposed to the influence of philosophy and science. Whereas Maimonides applauds the study of philosophy and science,³⁰ he fears that it might result in the abandonment by the educated of religious observance (*Guide*, Introduction: 5). And he was singularly unimpressed by the quality of the Jewish religious leadership of his time: he witnessed the unreflective acceptance by the leaders—no less than by the laity—of crude religious views, as well as their widespread trust in the efficacy of vain and foolish superstitious rites.

In the Introduction to his *Code* Maimonides articulates the source of his concern and his response to it as follows:

At this time inordinate sufferings befell us and the urgency of the moment pressed upon us all. The wisdom of our wise men and the intelligence of our intelligent men was hidden from us. . . . On these grounds, I, Moses the son of Maimon the Sephardi, put my trust in the Rock, may He be blessed, [and compiled] this work to serve as a compendium of the entire Oral Law. . . . I have entitled this work *Mishneh Torah* (“A Second Torah”), so that a person who reads the Written Torah first and then reads this work will know the entire Oral Law and will not find it necessary to read any other of the books in between.

And in his Introduction to the *Guide* (16) Maimonides justifies his writing a book that contains secrets of the Torah that one is not permitted to discuss openly or publicly by pointing to the exigency of the times. He quotes Ps. 119.126: “It is time to act for the Lord; they have made void Thy Torah.”

What motivates Maimonides to devote himself to the enlightenment of others? Like Socrates, Maimonides is aware of the desperate situation of his people. Yet, does the mere recognition of the wretched state of one’s people necessarily lead one to care for them? Maimonides, in seeking to address this question, provides in the *Guide* a remarkable and illuminating analysis of what it is that impels some men to go beyond concern for their own personal perfection to concern for the moral and intellectual perfection of others.

In his discussion of prophecy in *Guide* 2.37, Maimonides distinguishes three classes of men: (1) those in whom the divine intellectual overflow reaches only the rational faculty—these are men of speculation; (2) those in whom it reaches both the rational and the imaginative faculties—these are prophets; and (3) those in whom it reaches only the imaginative faculty—these are legislators, soothsayers, augurs, and dreamers of veridical dreams.

Maimonides further subdivides each of the first two classes. In each, the quantity of the divine overflow either may be such as to render the individual perfect but to have no further effect, or it may be such that the measure “overflows from rendering him perfect toward rendering others perfect” (375).

Note that it is not by quantity of divine overflow that prophets are distinguished from men of speculation. Among both prophets and men of speculation there are those who receive more than the amount of divine overflow needed for their own perfection and those who receive just enough. Even a prophet, then, need not be capable of bringing his prophecy to the people. According to Maimonides those men of speculation who do have the surfeit of overflow are “moved of necessity” or “compelled” “to compose works and to teach.” A prophet in this condition will “address a call to the people, teach them, and let his own perfection overflow toward them.”

One aspect of this Maimonidean account remains puzzling and unsatisfying: why should additional divine intellectual overflow motivate, compel, or create a desire in the one who experiences it to share it with others? To be sure, extra overflow would account for an individual's *ability* to do more than perfect himself, but why would he "of necessity" do so? A man might have far more money than he needs for his own sustenance, and so would surely be capable of helping others, but is there anything in the sheer fact of having more than one needs that moves someone to share his bounty? Interestingly, in *Guide* 2.11 Maimonides compares the overflow that flows from God onto the separate intellects and from them onto the Active Intellect to the way in which the overabundance of wealth that a very rich man has devolves on a second man and on a third:

It is as if you said, by way of example, that there is an individual who has wealth sufficing only for his own necessities, no residue being left over from it from which someone else might receive a benefit; and that there is another individual who has enough wealth for a residue to be left over from it for the enrichment of many people, so that this one may give a measure of it to another individual through which this second would also become rich, while a residue is left over from it that suffices for the enrichment of a third individual. (275)

In this analogy, although the man who possesses excess wealth has enough money for it to flow from him to a second and then on to a third, there is no implication that the first man will want to, be moved to, or, a fortiori, feel compelled to, share his wealth with the second and third. Indeed, Maimonides acknowledges in his *Code, Laws concerning Moral Conduct* 1.1, that there is "one type of individual who is so greedy that all the money in the world would not satisfy him. Of him it is said: 'For one who loves silver, no amount of silver will suffice' (Eccles. 5.9)."

Just as Maimonides surely recognizes that simply having more than one needs does not in itself create the desire to part with the surplus, he clearly must also see that men of speculation who write books and teach, and prophets who address a call to the people and seek to lead them to perfection, are moved by something other than surplus intel-

lect. What is true of God, namely, that His excess intellect simply spills over from Him down the chain of intellects to the Active Intellect, is not true of human beings who must purposefully choose to direct their excess intellect to others. Composing works and teaching and addressing a call and leading people to perfection does not just happen by itself.

What is it, then, that causes some men of speculation, but not others who are equally able, to compose written works? What is it that inspires some prophets but not others—even if they are equally perfect in intellect and imagination—to reach out to the people? If generosity of spirit is what induces one abundantly wealthy man to share his wealth while another hoards his, is it not piety that motivates one intellectually able man to *act* on his ability to perfect others while another does nothing? Individuals who act make the choice to expend the requisite effort to extend their own perfection to others. At times, their involvement with others even ends up costing them their lives. Although Maimonides says that it is “this divine overflow” that is responsible for “moving them and by no means letting them be quiet, even if they met with great misfortunes” (375), it is evident that this overflow alone could not so move them. The motivation to help others would have to come from within. Maimonides quotes Jer. 8.9, where Jeremiah confesses that after suffering reproach and derision all day, he made up his mind not to continue to speak in God’s name—but he could not stick to his resolve: “There is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I weary myself to hold it in, but cannot.” This burning fire is not intellectual overflow that of itself spills out of Jeremiah and onto others; it is, instead, a passion to serve God that Jeremiah discovers within himself and which he cannot quell. Socrates and Maimonides, too, though perhaps without Jeremiah’s burning passion, are not content to perfect themselves. They serve God by seeking to perfect their fellow men.

Maimonides singles out for special recognition four men who devote their lives to others. In 3.51 he describes the uniqueness of Moses and of the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The first distinguishing characteristic of these men is that they have their intellects constantly

in God's presence even as they conduct, "with their limbs only," their worldly pursuits (624).³¹ But the second mark that sets these four men apart is that

in all these actions their end was to come near to Him, may He be exalted; and how near! For the end of their efforts during their life was to bring into being a religious community that would know and worship God . . . to spread the doctrine of the unity of the Name in the world and to guide people to love Him, may He be exalted. (624)³²

The implication of Maimonides' words is that the closeness to God that these men attained prompted them to direct their divine overflow toward others, to bring others to the perfection they enjoyed. Although Maimonides does not call their activity *hasidut*, the Hebrew term he uses for "piety" (even in those of his works composed in Arabic), he does call it "pure worship of great import." And what he describes by this expression is the very practice to which Socrates alludes, as we have seen, in defending himself against the charge of impiety.

It is in this passage that Maimonides calls attention to the purity of his own divine worship. For, rather strikingly, he uses his discussion of Moses and the Patriarchs as an opportunity to reflect upon his own situation. He laments not that the guidance that would lead one to the attainment of the rank achieved by these men eludes all others, but rather that it eludes, as he puts it, "someone like myself" (624).³³ The highest rank that one may aspire to attain through training, he says, is the rank that is one step below that of Moses and the Patriarchs. It is, then, only to this second rank that Maimonides thinks "someone like myself" might aspire.

It is evident that Maimonides means to reveal in this context one aspect of his self-understanding. For if his aim were only to differentiate the level of closeness to God attained by Moses, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob from that attainable by other men, a general statement would have sufficed; he need not have said, "someone like myself." He mentions himself because he wishes to convey to his readers that although he is not able to achieve the rank of these four men—the rank at which one is able to tend to worldly affairs "with one's limbs only"—he is nevertheless in the same business as they. Maimonides may not be able,

as Moses and the Patriarchs are, to concentrate his thoughts exclusively on God regardless of what he is doing, instead being able to do so only when he is at leisure. But in those rare and precious moments when he is at leisure, the way in which he worships God, attaches himself to God, and basks in God's presence is by composing books—for others.

Imitatio dei

Toward the close of the *Guide*, at the end of its final chapter, 3.54, Maimonides proclaims that once an individual has achieved the apprehension of God and knowledge of “His providence extending over His creatures as manifested in the act of bringing them into being and in their governance as it is,” he “will always have in view loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment, through assimilation to His actions, may He be exalted” (638). Is it true, however, that when men exercise loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment, they are in fact assimilating their actions to God's? Or are they acting instead as God cannot? Indeed, once an individual apprehends God and understands God's governance “as it is,” will he not recognize not only that God governs as no man can, but also that men govern as God cannot?

Not only in 3.54 but in 1.54 as well, Maimonides appears to encourage men to act as God does:

For the utmost virtue of man is to become like unto Him, may He be exalted, as far as he is able; which means that we should make our actions like unto His, as the Sages made clear when interpreting the verse, ‘Ye shall be holy’ (Lev. 19:2). They said: ‘As He is gracious, so be you also gracious; as He is merciful, so be you also merciful.’

(*Sifre* on Deut. 1969, 10.12; also *BT Shabbat* 133b)

Yet, in closing this chapter, Maimonides states its purpose as follows: “The purpose of all this is to show that the attributes ascribed to Him are attributes of His actions, and that they do not mean that He possesses qualities.” (Guide I.54)

If the purpose of Maimonides' discussion of divine attributes is to teach that God has no attributes—that He is not loving or kind or compassionate or just—what could it possibly mean for us to “make our actions like unto His”? We, after all, do have attributes, attributes

that shape and give character to our actions. We act, then, not as God does but as only men do—our actions reflect our attributes. It may well be that a human ruler or judge should be dispassionate in his rulings (126), but being dispassionate is not at all like not being subject to passion.

If we consider the matter of God's governance, we see that Maimonides locates God's kindness in that He provides for the survival and flourishing of embryos, and His graciousness in His act of bringing beings into existence and governing them though they have no claim upon Him to existence or governance. Yet, we are cautioned that the only sense in which God's actions are kind, merciful, and gracious, is that actions of the same sort, were we to perform them, would have that character (124). It follows, then, that when we act kindly, mercifully, or graciously we are not imitating God at all, for we, unlike God, do actually exercise kindness, mercy, or graciousness in performing our actions.

In this chapter Maimonides furthermore urges the governor-prophet to

acquire similarity to these attributes, so that these actions may proceed from him according to a determined measure and according to the deserts of the people who are affected by them and not merely because of his following a passion [but] in accordance with what is fitting.
(126)

How can we, in reading this passage, fail to be reminded that in 3.18 and 3.51 Maimonides acknowledges that most of us, most of the time, are governed by chance, such that for as long as we are not concentrating our thoughts wholly on God, the righteous are no less vulnerable to harm than the wicked? If we are expected to treat people in accordance with their deserts, we are, once again, being asked to do what God does not do.

In the final analysis, what it means to know God's governance is to know that human governance cannot be like it at all. At 3.23: 496–97, Maimonides says:

But the notion of His providence is not the same as the notion of our providence; nor is the notion of His governance of the things created

by Him the same as the notion of our governance of that which we govern. The two notions are not comprised in one definition, contrary to what is thought by all who are confused, and there is nothing in common between the two except in name alone. In the same way, our act does not resemble His act; and the two are not comprised in one and the same definition. Just as natural acts differ from those of craftsmanship, so do the divine governance of, the divine providence for, and the divine purpose with regard to, those natural matters differ from our human governance, providence for, and purpose with regard to, the things we govern, we provide for, and purpose.

This passage leaves no doubt that in our actions, in our governance, in our purposes, we in no way imitate God. And the difference is that whereas our actions are the actions of “craftsmen”—that is, they are designed and deliberate—God’s actions are not crafted; they simply proceed from Him. We can act as we believe God would act were He not God but man; but we cannot act as God does in fact act.

Since God’s overflow simply emanates from Him to others, since God does not “craft” His actions, since He has no attributes and His actions have only the attributes they would have if they were human actions, it is impossible for human beings to act upon others and upon the world as God does. *Imitatio dei* in political governance and social relations is not only not possible; it also reveals an utter failure to apprehend God and to understand the way in which He governs.

To be sure, Maimonides nevertheless does not suppose that “the Lord hath forsaken the earth” (Ezek. 9.19); he believes instead that “the earth is the Lord’s” (Ex. 9.29).³⁴ But, as Maimonides explains, the sense in which the earth is the Lord’s is that “His providence also extends over the earth in the way that corresponds to what the latter is, just as His providence extends over the heavens in the way that corresponds to what they are” (3.54: 637). God’s providence over the earth is, then, *unlike* His providence over the heavens, for the nature of earth and heavens is not the same. God’s providence over the heavens is direct; the heavens require no more than that God be. God’s providence over the earth, however, is indirect, because the earth contains men who require the special attentions that only other men can provide. When Jeremiah says that what a man should glory in is “that he understands

and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercise loving-kindness, justice, and righteousness in the earth,” what he means is that

it is My purpose that there should come *from you* loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment in the earth in the way we have explained with regard to the thirteen attributes: namely, that the purpose should be assimilation to them and that this should be *our* way of life.

(3.54: 637; emphasis added)³⁵

If God has not forsaken the earth it is because He has human agents who can do “in the earth” (Jer. 9.23) what He cannot. The thirteen divine attributes are not God’s;³⁶ they are attributed to Him in order to motivate human beings to incorporate them into their interpersonal relations.³⁷

None of this is to say that *imitatio dei* has no place in Maimonides’ thinking. On the contrary, it is one of many forms that divine worship takes. Among these various forms are, first, prayer, ritual observance, and the cultivation of moral habits. These, however, Maimonides tells us, are but preparatory for the highest form of worship which is the attachment of our thoughts exclusively to God to the extent of our ability. Of course, in order that the object of our love be God (and not something that is merely a figment of our imagination), we must come to know Him—that is, we must attain intellectual apprehension of Him. It is this that Maimonides calls “love of God” (3.51: 621).³⁸

For Maimonides, to know God is to know (through demonstration) what He is not—that He is unlike anything we can experience or conceive and hence that He certainly has no attributes.³⁹ There is, however, one exception to this rule. For one positive thing we know about God is that His activity is intellection (though here, too, we must be cautious: His intellection is certainly not like ours [1.1: 23]). Since intellect is the “bond” between God and human beings (3.51: 620, 621; 3.52: 629; see also 1.1: 23), since it is because of our intellect that we are said to be created “in God’s image” (Gen. 1.27; *Guide* 1.1: 23), it follows that it is in activating our intellects and in striving for intellectual perfection that we imitate God, that we practice *imitatio dei*. For it is in doing something that God Himself does—albeit in a very different way—that one imitates God. But insofar as in interacting with

individual human beings in fairness and kindness we do something that God Himself does not do in any way at all, we cannot be said to be practicing *imitatio dei* when we act within the political or social or moral context.⁴⁰

Beyond moral conduct, beyond ritual practice, and beyond even knowledge of God and the *imitatio dei* that is intellection, there is the highest form of divine worship: the total immersion of one's intellect in God. Those who achieved this to the greatest extent—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses—also sought to improve the condition of others.⁴¹ Their “pure worship of great import” is what we have been calling “piety.” It is not, nor is it characterized as, *imitatio dei*.

Conclusion

Although Socrates and Maimonides hold unconventional religious beliefs, each is convinced that he has a divine mission. For Socrates it is to persuade people of the value of justice and truth. For Maimonides it is to encourage meticulous observance of Jewish law in its ritual and moral aspects (that is, to promote the welfare of the body) and to banish false and noxious views of God as much as possible (that is, to promote the welfare of the soul). The devotion of both these men to their fellow men, their willingness, at great personal sacrifice, to work to improve the condition of those less perfect than themselves, is an expression of their devotion to god. It constitutes, in a word, their piety. For they assist God by taking on the tasks that He would perform if only He could.

End Notes

1. Quotations of passages in Plato's *Apology* and *Crito* are from West and West 1984, on occasion modified slightly. All other translations of passages in works of Plato and Aristotle are my own and based on the Oxford (Plato 1900–07) and Loeb (Aristotle 1926) editions.
2. In a letter to his student Joseph, written slightly later, in the 1190's, Maimonides, after having been stung by criticism of his legal *Code*, tells Joseph that he wrote that work primarily for himself. But that remains most unlikely. See Maimonides, *Epistulae* (1946, 50–52).

All quotations from the *Guide of the Perplexed* (hereafter abbreviated *Guide*) are from the translation by S. Pines (1963), slightly modified on occasion. References are to book, chapter, and page numbers of this translation. Translations of passages from Maimonides' *Code* as well as from rabbinic texts are my own. References in this essay to the *Code* are to the work he calls the *Mishneh Torah* (Maimonides 2000).

3. In biblical Hebrew the word for charity (*zedaqah*) and the word for justice (*zedeq*) are nearly the same. That is because God—though not men—may demand both equally, insofar as all property is ultimately God's. Thus, when the Torah requires, as *zedaqah*, that a poor man's pledge be returned to him at sunset so that he be able to cover himself with his garment when he sleeps (Deut. 24.13), the Torah goes beyond what mere human justice (*zedeq*) demands. The returning of the cloak is, however, required by a kind of justice, *zedaqah*: the cloak's rightful owner, God, demands the cloak's return on behalf of the poor man who needs it. Maimonides (*Guide* 3.52: 631) defines charity as "justice unto the rational soul": "For when you walk in the way of the moral virtues, you do justice unto your rational soul, giving her the due that is her right."
4. A view that had great currency in Socrates' day was that justice is a matter of helping friends and harming enemies. This is implicitly Crito's view in the *Crito* (it is the view that both motivates him to plan Socrates' jailbreak and makes him feel troubled by Socrates' acquiescence in his plight), and explicitly Polemarchus's view in *Rep.* 1. In responding to both of these interlocutors Socrates makes a point of characterizing justice as a matter of not harming anyone. Yet he conspicuously avoids including in his characterization of justice any reference to helping others, whether friend or foe. Justice is at its core impartial: it does not differentiate friend from foe. Piety, however, that is, Socrates' service to his fellow men, permits him to favor those closest to him ("but more so for my fellow-citizens, inasmuch as you are closer to me in kin"—*Ap.* 30a), though, as he says in the very same passage, he will converse with "whomever I happen to meet—younger or older, foreigner or fellow-citizen." Even in *Rep.* 7, where philosophers, whose clear preference is not to rule, are persuaded to rule by considerations of justice, justice is framed as repaying a debt to those who nurtured them (see 520a–e). The implication of this way of framing the obligation is that justice requires that one play fair, that one return good for good. The consideration of "helping others" forms no part of the argument from justice.
5. And so, Socrates says at *Crito* 46b: "I, not only now but always, am such as to obey nothing else of what is mine but the argument that appears best to me upon reasoning."
6. Maimonides' Aristotle is filtered through the prism of his Greek and Arabic commentators—Alexander of Aphrodisias, Themistius, al-Farabi, ibn Bajja,

Avicenna, and Averroes—and emerges both neoplatonized and otherwise modified.

7. One such heretical view is the denial of the (bodily) resurrection of the dead. See n. 12, below.
8. Although there are three other metaphors discussed before this one, the discussion culminates with this final and decisive one. The others, it can be shown, build progressively toward this one.
9. The difference in value between the literal text and the text's true meaning is not quantitative, but qualitative. See Maimonides' discussion in *Guide* 1.59 of the parable of the king who has millions of gold coins but is praised for having millions of silver ones. Maimonides explains that the error involved in saying that the king has millions of silver coins when what he has is millions of gold coins is not the same as the one involved in saying that he has 100 gold coins when he has millions. The first of these instances of underestimating the king's wealth is qualitative; the second, quantitative. Note the metaphorical use here, too, of silver and gold to convey qualitative difference.
10. Although Maimonides justifies the Torah's use of corporeal language to describe God on the grounds that the masses cannot be persuaded of the existence of anything incorporeal, he nevertheless also blames the literal text for actually causing people to believe in divine corporeality and attributes (*Guide* 1.31: 67; 1.51: 114; 1.53: 119).
11. This mishnaic tractate is commonly known in English as *Ethics of the Fathers*.
12. Maimonides experienced first hand the danger of not concealing certain views sufficiently well from the masses. He was, it seems, less than convincing in his perfunctory statement in support of the doctrine of bodily resurrection in his *Commentary to Sanhedrin 10* (Maimonides 1981) and in his even less expansive remark in his *Code (Laws concerning Repentance 3.6)*, and people suspected (rightly, in my view) that he did not really believe in bodily resurrection but only in the immortality of the intellect. The Jews of Yemen may have suffered a deterioration of their faith as a result of their suspicions, and Maimonides felt compelled to set the record straight, so to speak, by composing the "Essay on Resurrection" (Maimonides 1985, 211–45).
13. The idea, for example, that God becomes violently angry with those who disobey Him is one that Maimonides regards as necessary—but as literally false.
14. At *Guide* 2.13: 252, Maimonides says of creation that it is "a basis of the Torah of Moses our Master, peace be on him. And it is second to the basis that is the belief in the unity [of God]."
15. Only when Maimonides is at his most defensive—that is, in his "Essay on

Resurrection” (see note 12, above), where he fends off the suspicion that he does not believe in the resurrection of the dead—does he say that he adheres to the Torah’s literal sense unless it is utterly impossible to do so (as in the case of the corporeality of God). As he explains, once having admitted creation, he no longer has grounds for rejecting any miracle, including bodily resurrection (1985, 228). It is noteworthy, however, that, even when thus in apologetic mode, Maimonides admits the importance to him of interpreting the text in conformity with reason and the natural: “I try to reconcile the Law and reason, and wherever possible consider all things as of the natural order. Only when something is explicitly identified as a miracle, and reinterpretation of it cannot be accommodated, only then do I feel forced to grant that this is a miracle” (223). Maimonides was roundly criticized by a number of eminent medieval Jewish biblical exegetes for the liberties he took with the text. Alarmed by Maimonides’ radically allegorical approach, Abarbanel was moved to exclaim: “In truth, it is infidelity and a grave sin to contradict the plain sense of the [biblical] verses; if this is what we do to them this leprosy will spread to all verses and result in interpretations that contradict their [i.e. the verses]’ true intent” (commentary on Hos. 1, in *Mikraot Gedolot Orim Gedolim* 1992–99). Nahmanides chastised Maimonides for allowing his philosophical beliefs to supersede the actual meaning of the Torah: “These things contradict the text. It is forbidden to listen to them—and certainly to believe them” (commentary on Gen. 18. 1, in Nahmanides 2004).

16. Maimonides’ target is the Kalam thinkers, whether Muslim or Jewish.
17. Fear of God is unrelated to fear of punishment. As Maimonides defines fear of God in the *Code, Laws concerning the Foundations of the Torah* 2.2, it is man’s shrinking back in recognition “that he is but a small, lowly, dark creature who, with his inferior and meager mind, stands before Him who is perfect in His knowledge.” The notion of fear of God is perhaps best captured in King David’s utterance: “When I consider Thy Heavens, the work of Thy fingers. . . . What is man that Thou art mindful of him?” (Ps. 8.4, 5). (Maimonides, in his *Book of Commandments*, lists fearing God as fourth among the 248 affirmative precepts. It derives from Deut. 6.13 and 10.20: “The Lord, thy God, shalt thou fear.” The entire list is included at the beginning of Maimonides 2000.)
18. At the end of *Guide* 2.25 Maimonides poses the following questions that he claims are more difficult to answer on the assumption that the world is eternal than on the assumption that it is created: why did God bestow prophetic revelation on one man rather than on another; why did He give the Torah to one particular nation and not to all; why did He choose to legislate at one particular time rather than at another; why did he entrust a particular prophet with one miracle rather than another; what was God’s aim in setting forth the Torah; and why did He not implant the observance of the commandments

in human nature. Maimonides states that on the creation assumption one can simply dispose of these questions by saying: “God wanted it this way” or “This is what God’s wisdom required.” But on the eternity assumption one must have recourse to “unseemly answers in which there would be combined the giving the lie to, and the annulment of, all the external meanings of the Law with regard to which no intellectual man has any doubt that they are to be taken in their external meanings” (329–30). Maimonides, as we have seen, is not methodologically disposed to interpret the Torah as literally as possible. Moreover, it is likely that at least to some of the questions on this list he would find the eternity assumption more congenial. For example, to the question, why did God choose a particular prophet rather than another, there is no reason why Maimonides could not easily answer: “because prophecy devolves upon one who has perfected himself morally, spiritually, and intellectually.” To the question, why did God not implant in human nature the observance of the commandments, his answer would surely be that free will is itself a feature of human nature.

19. It is striking that Maimonides in *Guide* 3.17 seeks to lend credibility to the Torah’s view by contrasting it with the far less plausible views of Epicurus, the Ashariyya, and the Mutazila. But he throws his readers off the scent by listing Aristotle’s view among those more absurd than that of the Torah—indeed, he places it second, right after Epicurus’s.
20. Despite Maimonides’ explicit statements that individual human beings, no matter how righteous, are subject to chance when not intellectually absorbed in God, he nevertheless writes that it is forbidden to believe that anything that happens occurs by chance. See *Code, Laws concerning Fast Days* 1.3; also *Guide* 3.36. Maimonides fears that unless people trace their troubles to their actions, they will have no incentive to mend their ways.
21. We note a parallel in Aristotle, who in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 1926; hereafter *EN*) tempers his radical claim that philosophers are happiest because they are most like the gods (10.8.7), by saying, rather improbably, in 10.8.13, that the philosopher is happiest because he is most beloved by the gods—as if gods who are self-sufficient and whose activity and virtue are purely intellectual (10.8.7) might prefer some men to others.
22. One’s very consciousness of suffering is a sign that one is no longer “with God.”
23. Another way of understanding divine providence is as follows: once a human being comes to value only his intellectual attachment to God, the things of the body are no longer of consequence. This I take to be Maimonides’ interpretation of the Book of Job. Job’s misery abated once he gained understanding. Until then he “had imagined that the things thought to be happiness, such

as health, wealth, and children, are the ultimate goal” (3.23: 493). Maimonides notes that although Job is described as morally virtuous and righteous in action, he is not said to be wise or intelligent. “For if he had been wise, his situation would not have been obscure to him” (3.22: 487).

24. The other is that one can possess moral virtue while asleep or without ever exercising it. See *EN* 1.5.6.
25. A fairly widespread, but in my view mistaken, interpretation of the difference between Aristotle’s and Maimonides’ stance on the matter of chance is the following by D. Frank: “Maimonides believes that the prophet, paradigmatic in both character and intellectual attainment, is insulated from contingency, a view seemingly opposed to the ineliminability of luck in the Aristotelian moral scheme” (2003, 144).
26. In the *Guide*, at 3.23: 495, Maimonides interprets Elihu’s innovation as the view that an angel intercedes for a man who is deathly ill, but “this does not continue always, there being no intercession that goes on forever, for it only takes place two or three times.”
27. See also *Gorg.* 470e, where Socrates declares that, as he sees it, a person’s happiness depends exclusively on “how he stands with respect to education and justice. . . . For I assert that the noble and good man and woman are happy; the unjust and base, wretched.”
28. Aristotle does not name Socrates as the target of his mockery, and not all scholars agree that it is Socrates whom Aristotle has in mind—some think he has the Cynics in view. I do not think it likely, however, that he intends anyone other than Socrates. Note that he proceeds next to discuss Plato’s views. See *EN* 1.5.6.
 One might wonder if Aristotle’s (Maimonides’) position is not itself absurd. Can any human being be utterly invulnerable to pain? Although surely extreme, the Aristotelian-Maimonidean view may not be wholly at odds with ordinary experience. People who are thoroughly absorbed in any activity or task lose awareness of their bodies and of their bodies’ needs while they are absorbed. They forget to eat or drink; they can go without sleep; and they delay the execution of other bodily functions. Why, then, could not a man absorbed in God or in the eternal verities of the universe be oblivious to bodily and emotional pain?
29. Socrates’ awareness of his own ignorance with respect to “the most important things” surely extends to the existence and nature of the gods.
30. In his *Code, Laws concerning the Foundations of the Torah* 4.13, Maimonides quotes the Talmud (*Sukkah* 28a, in *Babylonian Talmud* 1966 [hereafter *BT*]), where it is said that the Account of the Chariot (which Maimonides equates

with metaphysics) is “the great thing,” and the discussions of the Sages Abaye and Rava, “the lesser thing.” According to Maimonides, the matter of what is forbidden and permitted, which occupies the debates between Abaye and Rava, is to precede the deeper and more important topics of metaphysics, the secrets of the Torah. Maimonides regards the oral tradition as containing the truths of metaphysics. They were not written down, he says, for fear that they would become corrupted and would give rise to confusion. (See *Guide* 1.71: 175–76.) At *Guide* 3.51: 618–19, Maimonides contends that those who get closest to God are those who have knowledge of Him. Those who devote their lives to the study of the practical law and who accept unreflectively the true principles of faith are two levels behind. Those who study mathematics and logic are at level 4; those who study physics are at level 5; only those who master metaphysics (“the divine science”) are at level 6, and have entered the “inner chamber” of the king’s residence.

31. Cf. *Code, Laws concerning Character Traits* 3.3, where it is said of one who serves the Lord that he does so continuously—even as he engages in business, in sexual intercourse, and in sleep—but it is not said of him that his thoughts are occupied with God throughout these activities. The claim is instead that he is seeking through them to perfect his body and fulfill its needs so that he can devote himself fully to God.
32. Maimonides twice mentions the *efforts* of these men. The divine overflow did not in their case produce of itself the religious community these men strove to bring into existence, nor was their achievement automatic or effortless.
33. Pines (*Guide* 3.51: 634, n. 32) points out that the Arabic here is ambiguous, and may signify either that Maimonides could not aspire to be guided toward achieving the rank of Moses and the Patriarchs, or that he could not aspire to guide others with a view to their achieving this rank. I favor (as Pines does) the first reading. As I understand Maimonides, the point he seeks to make is that although he cannot achieve the rank of these four men, he *can*, like them, take steps to bring a religious community into being.
34. The view that “the Lord hath forsaken the earth” is ascribed by Maimonides to Aristotle in the discussion of divine providence in *Guide* 3.17: 466. Maimonides, as we noted earlier, seeks to distance himself from the Aristotelian view even though it is closest to his own. Although Aristotle would surely not have said that God provides for the earth through His human agents, there is every reason to think that he would not spurn the idea that it is men’s task to govern the earth justly and fairly (insofar as God does not).
35. Cf. *Code, Laws concerning Character Traits* 1.6–7. Although Maimonides, when he speaks in this passage of the obligation to acquire the proper moral qualities and actions, indeed uses the term *lehiddamot*, “to imitate” or “to

resemble,” he does not expressly say that we are to imitate *God*. What he actually says is the following: “Even as He is *called* gracious, so you *be* gracious; even as He is *called* merciful, so you *be* merciful. . . . Thus did the prophets *call* the deity by all such characterizations—long-suffering, abounding in kindness, righteous and upright, honest, mighty, powerful, etc.—in order to make known that these are good and proper paths, and that a person is obligated to conduct himself in accordance with them and to resemble [them] to the best of his ability. . . . And since these terms by which the Creator is *called* are the middle path in which we are obligated to go, this path is *called* God’s path. . .” (emphasis added). The clear implication of this text is that the way we are supposed to be is not as God is but as He is called. As we have seen, the original rabbinic dictum upon which Maimonides’ text is based—but from which it quite consciously diverges—reads: “As He *is* gracious, so be you gracious; as He *is* merciful, so be you merciful” (*BT Shabbat* 133b). (Note: Where I have “them” in brackets, traditional versions of Maimonides’ *Code* have “Him.” But “Him” does not appear in the Bodleian manuscript containing Maimonides’ autograph.)

36. The thirteen divine attributes derive from Ex. 34.6–7.
37. H. Arendt (2005, 239 and nn. 76 and 77) recounts that Jesus took the Scribes and Pharisees to task for their belief that it is not men but God who has the power to forgive—and that men’s power to forgive derives from God. Jesus’ view was that it is men who must forgive—forgiveness, he believed, is a human power—and divine forgiveness will follow. In my view, it is for Maimonides because God cannot forgive that human beings must forgive. In doing God’s forgiving for Him, we do His work on earth. (I owe the reference to Arendt to Alan Udoff.)
38. Maimonides distinguishes between, on the one hand, the correct apprehension of God, which is love, and, on the other, the “turning wholly to God” (3.51: 620) that follows apprehension. He cites 1 Chron. 28.9, where David says to his son, Solomon, “And thou, Solomon my son, know thou the God of thy father and serve Him.” As Maimonides interprets this verse, to know God is to attain the correct (as opposed to an imagined) conception of God, but to serve Him, which follows knowing Him, is “total devotion to Him and the employment of intellectual thought in constantly serving Him.” The love that is knowledge differs from the constant love and devotion that is service. It is this second kind of love that is captured in the following two rabbinic passages: (1) “Another explanation of, ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God’ (Deut. 6:5): Cause Him to be beloved by human beings, even as your father Abraham did” (*Sifre* on Deut. 6:5); (2) “‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God’ means that because of you the name of Heaven will become beloved” (*BT Yoma* 86a). Maimonides quotes the former of these rabbinic dicta in his treatment of the

commandment to love God (the third in his enumeration of the 248 affirmative commandments in his *Book of Commandments*).

39. There are several important scholars who maintain that Maimonides was skeptical with respect to knowledge of God, and that he was therefore tentative about such matters as creation and providence. In my view, however, although Maimonides surely thought that we can have no positive knowledge of God's nature or essence, he strongly suggests that we can know what God is not. (According to *Guide* 1.59: 139, with each additional thing that we are able to negate with respect to God, we become more perfect in our knowledge of Him.) We can know, for example, *by demonstration*, that God has no body and is not subject to motion and change or to emotions and passions. Although Maimonides says that we do not know *how* God knows (*Code, Laws concerning Repentance* 5.5), we nevertheless do know that He cannot have knowledge of what changes. Both creation, which would require that God be subject to change, and divine providence for individual human beings, which would require that God have knowledge of things that change, are thus precluded.
40. H. Davidson (2005, 365, 540) insists that Maimonides means to salvage for God some measure of "personality." It would seem, however, that what Maimonides is most at pains to avoid is the ascription to God of anything like "personality."
41. In his later years, S. Pines came to believe that Maimonides ranks the political life above the intellectual (see, e.g., Pines 1979, 100). W. Harvey, however, who is convinced that for Maimonides intellectual excellence is the supreme perfection, maintains, against Pines, that the political life is a by-product of the achievement of intellectual perfection (Harvey 1980, 198–212). In my view, whereas it is true of God that governance is a by-product of intellection, it is not true of man that caring for others is a by-product of intellectual perfection. Only the truly pious feel an obligation to serve God by governing others. Unlike Plato's philosopher-kings who have to be compelled to rule, the truly pious seek to improve the spiritual and intellectual condition of others as a form of divine worship. Whereas those who have tasted "incorporeal immortality" no longer crave the *pleasures* of earthly life (Introduction to *Commentary to Sanhedrin* 10), some nevertheless do, according to Maimonides, make the deliberate choice to serve God on earth.

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