

*Essay on Transcendental Philosophy*

By Salomon Maimon. Translated by Nick Midgley, Henry Somers-Hall, Alistair Welchman and Merten Reglitz. Introduction by Nick Midgley. Continuum. Pp. lxvii+282. ISBN: 1441113843. Pbk: \$24.95 (£16.99)/Hbk: \$90.00 (£50.00).

Salomon Maimon's *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy* is an unusual work, one that challenges our philosophical preconceptions. On first glance, it is willfully shambolic, if not obscure, and its contents can certainly not be summarized adequately in a review. In fact, upon its original publication in 1790, none of the philosophers asked (Beck, Reinhold and Schmid) consented to review it; instead, Maimon was sent the following, "Three speculative thinkers of our time have refused to review your work, estimating that they did not have the power to penetrate profoundly enough the meaning of its inquiries."<sup>1</sup> Their precedent remains tempting!

Yet, Maimon's *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy* must be reviewed, for there can be no doubt that it is a text of the utmost importance in the development of German Idealism. Moreover, its significance lies not only in its insights into (and disagreements with) Kant's philosophy, but—even more so—with the manner in which it puts into question how "good" philosophy should be written. With this new English language edition of the *Essay*, we are now able to appreciate Fichte's appraisal:

I firmly believe, and I am ready to prove, that [Maimon] has turned upside down the Kantian philosophy as it has been generally understood.... He has accomplished all of this without anyone noticing, whilst everyone looks down on him. I think that the centuries to come will mock us bitterly for this.<sup>2</sup>

## I.

Yet, Fichte's criticisms *still* ring true today: "He has accomplished all of this without anyone noticing, whilst everyone looks down on him." Until now, Maimon was the last major figure of German Idealism lacking a substantial translation into English. Indeed, it is now over twenty years since Beiser derided the state of ignorance surrounding Maimon: "To study Fichte, Schelling or Hegel without having read Maimon's *Versuch* is like studying Kant without having read Hume's *Treatise*."<sup>3</sup> It is thus with a sigh of relief—

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<sup>1</sup> "Response of the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* to Maimon, 1790", quoted in S.J. Wolff, *Maimoniana* (Berlin: Hahn, 1813), 78.

<sup>2</sup> Fichte, "Letter to Reinhold, 1795", quoted in Midgley, "Introduction" to Maimon, *Essay*, xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 286.

as well as applause—that we must greet this translation. Now one of the last remaining obstacles to the English appreciation of German Idealism as well as of the history of Jewish philosophy has been removed.

And this additional phrase (“as well as of the history of Jewish philosophy”) is crucial, because Maimon was the single-most significant Jewish philosopher of German Idealism. And so the belated appearance of the *Essay* should also give us pause, for it raises a number of questions concerning why Maimon is only now receiving the attention he deserves. There are two aspects to this neglect: first, the neglect Maimon suffered at the hands of his contemporaries; second, the neglect he continues to suffer today.

In 1790s Germany, the failure to appreciate Maimon’s worth (Fichte excepted) was undoubtedly due to a prevalent anti-Semitism. On first reading Maimon’s *Essay* in 1789, Kant wrote a letter to Herz praising Maimon’s achievements:

Just a glance at it was enough to make me recognize its excellence, and not only that none of my opponents had understood me and the principle question as well as Mr Maimon, but also that only a few people possess such an acute mind for such profound investigations.<sup>4</sup>

This justly celebrated letter—reprinted as an Appendix to this new translation—applauds Maimon’s *Essay*. However, five years later, Kant penned a very different letter:

As regards Maimon with his ‘improvement’ of the critical philosophy (a thing Jews like to do to make themselves self-important at the expense of others) I have never really understood what he intended.<sup>5</sup>

This passage has received less attention; however, it illustrates perfectly Fichte’s refrain: “He has accomplished all of this without anyone noticing, whilst everyone looks down on him.” Indeed, in light of the well-documented “metaphysical anti-Semitism” that informs Kant’s thought, we should perhaps not be surprised to find him minimizing Maimon’s “improvements” in this manner.<sup>6</sup> Such anti-Semitism is representative of Maimon’s fate in the 1790s. His wandering lifestyle, lack of education in “recognized” universities, as well as his personal eccentricities, all contributed to his marginalization as a “typical Jew”.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Kant, “Letter to Herz, 26/05/1789” in Maimon, *Essay*, 230-1.

<sup>5</sup> Kant, “Letter to Reinhold, 28/03/1794”, quoted in Gideon Freudenthal, “A Philosopher Between Two Cultures” in Freudenthal ed, *Salomon Maimon: Rational Dogmatist, Empirical Skeptic* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2003), 11.

<sup>6</sup> See further Michael Mack, *German Idealism and the Jew: The Inner Anti-Semitism of Philosophy and German Jewish Responses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), especially Chapter One.

<sup>7</sup> See Freudenthal, “Between Two Cultures”, 2-4.

What, however, of the repeated neglect of Maimon in recent histories of philosophy? While there has, of course, been a long tradition of scholarship on Maimon, it too remains marginalized, outside “mainstream” histories of philosophy. One possible reason for this exclusion is the pervasive blindness in philosophy to forms of discourse foreign to Western modernity. There are modes of philosophizing anchored in the Jewish tradition (for example), which were alien to mainstream German Idealism, and which—in consequence—have been implicitly discriminated against in subsequent accounts of the period. Take, for example, the following assessment of Maimon by Thielke:

Unfortunately, like many of Maimon’s views, the tantalizing hints we find about space and time are often not developed in a rigorous, or even particularly satisfying way.... [This] demands that a fair amount of reconstruction and conjecture about what is truly meant by often obscure claims must be developed.<sup>8</sup>

What is significant here are the ideals of philosophical rigor Thielke assumes and then cites as proof of Maimon’s “inadequacies.” Clarity is opposed to obscurity and explicitness to hints.

Yet, these assumptions need interrogating, and this is precisely what Maimon’s *Essay* forces the reader to do. More specifically, Maimon initiates this interrogation from the point of view of a practice of *commentary*. He forces the reader to ask: to what extent does the tradition of commentary eschew our assumptions about writing philosophy? Does commentary aspire towards another ideal of philosophizing, and therefore falsify the presuppositions many historians of philosophy repeatedly make?

The significance of Maimon’s textual practice has been underlined in a remarkable recent article by Gideon Freudenthal. He writes,

The difficulties in understanding Maimon’s philosophy are due to its unique inter-cultural character... Maimon philosophized in the form of commentaries, as was common in pre-modern philosophy, and... reading these commentaries requires special hermeneutic techniques, usually unfamiliar to modern readers.<sup>9</sup>

As a result of his education in the Talmud as well as his affection for Maimonides, Maimon chooses to write commentary. Yet, as Freudenthal continues, “In modern philosophical cultures,” and we might add even in contemporary histories of philosophy, “writing commentaries and writing systematic philosophy have been understood as mutually exclusive

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Thielke, “Intuition and Diversity: Kant and Maimon on Space and Time” in Freudenthal ed, *Salmon Maimon*, 92. This passage is merely illustrative of certain general philosophical prejudices; the very fact that Thielke engages with Maimon’s *Essay* demonstrates the extent to which he simultaneously overcomes these prejudices.

<sup>9</sup> Freudenthal, “Between Two Cultures”, 2. Midgley also draws on this article in his Introduction (xxi).

alternatives.”<sup>10</sup> The differences between the two philosophical styles are crucial: commentary subordinates itself to a canonical text, instead of attempting to begin free of all tradition; it focuses on specific passages and textual idiosyncrasies, rather than making grand universal claims. While in Fichte and Schelling’s work novelty, systematicity, and clarity are stressed at the expense of any engagement with other texts, Maimon never departs from the concrete. He never differentiates between exposition and innovation. The *Essay* is testament to this.

Moreover, commentary requires much more from the reader than systems do: one must link together the *ad locum* engagements of the commentator into a coherent whole. In contrast, a degree of intellectual indolence has hindered historians of philosophy from fully comprehending Maimon’s work. We recall the three reviewers who felt “they did not have the power to penetrate profoundly enough the meaning of its inquiries.” Systems clearly and explicitly state their position and argue for it; commentary is a subtler method.

The prejudices of contemporary history of philosophy ultimately predispose it against Maimon’s philosophical practice. It is significant in this regard that before publishing the *Essay*—and perhaps even in response to Kant’s letter to Herz—Maimon added supplements to his commentary, including, most notably, a “Short Overview of the Whole Work,” in which he resorts to systematic claims, stating explicitly his disagreements with Kant. We thus see performed in the *Essay* itself the mainstream’s distrust of the commentary. In 1790, Maimon bowed before the very same pressure which even now distorts the reception of his work—the pressure to renounce commentary in favor of system.

## II.

The above could be read as an argument for the impossibility of reviewing Maimon’s *Essay* and certainly for the impossibility of giving anything like a satisfactory overview of the ten chapters and four supplements which comprise it. However, in what follows I wish to gesture towards the major “themes” of this work—although even this undertaking is undermined by Maimon’s textual practice.

Maimon’s use of commentary gives him an unparalleled opportunity to engage extensively with the text of the first *Critique*. In practice, the result is an intense *testing* of transcendental idealism *against the philosophical tradition*. On every page, Maimon is intent on asking questions of Kant: are his criticisms fair to those whom he criticizes? Do his solutions require supplementing with past insights? What alternatives does Kant forget? It is important to note here (as Midgley helpfully does<sup>11</sup>) the difference between

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<sup>10</sup> Freudenthal, “Between Two Cultures”, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Midgley, “Introduction”, xxiii-xxiv.

Maimon's position and a reduction of the first *Critique* to the philosophical tradition. The latter was the standpoint of Eberhard. The very fact that Kant at first responded positively to Maimon's work but with vitriol to Eberhard's attests to Maimon's subtler intent.

There are two major tests performed by Maimon, corresponding to the two Kantian questions, *quid juris?* (with what right is experience objective?) and *quid facti?* (is it in fact objective?).

Maimon confronts the Kantian solution to the question *quid juris?* with Leibnizian metaphysics. Is, Maimon asks, Kant fair to the possibilities inherent in the "dogmatic" tradition? At the heart of Maimon's interrogation is the dualism Kant establishes between sensibility and understanding in opposition to the rationalist (and also empiricist) conflation of the two. For Maimon, such a dualism is a decisive hindrance to the demonstration of the objectivity of experience. It ultimately impedes Kant from demonstrating that the categories of the understanding apply legitimately to intuition, since an unbridgeable gulf opens up between the two.

Instead, Maimon counters, only an answer that employs the Leibnizian account of the relation between sensibility and understanding can solve the Transcendental Deduction and so show with what right the categories apply to intuition. Maimon argues that they apply only if there is some degree of homogeneity between them; this homogeneity is possible only on the assumption that intuition is in some way a product of understanding. Maimon writes,

How can the understanding subject something (the given object) to its power (to its rules) that is not in its power? In the Kantian system, namely where sensibility and understanding are two totally different sources of our cognition, this question is insoluble, as I have shown; on the other hand in the Leibnizian-Wolffian system, both flow from one and the same cognitive source ... and so the question is easily resolved.<sup>12</sup>

It is here Maimon deploys the idea of an infinite intellect (an idea crucial to the shift from subjective to absolute idealism in the 1790s) in which the ultimate convergence of intuition and concept is manifest. While finite minds *unconsciously* produce sensations they then synthesize, for the infinite intellect intuition and the synthesis of the understanding are one.

On the other hand, Maimon confronts Kant's answer (or lack of one) to the question *quid facti?* with Humean skepticism. Does the Kantian notion of "experience," Maimon asks, suffer from a *petitio principii* by which necessity and universality are presupposed? Kant resorts to an unjustifiable assumption that we have something called "experience," defined as the *universal and necessary* connection of representations. He thus assumes that the categories

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<sup>12</sup> Maimon, *Essay*, 37-8.

are in fact used in experiencing the world. However, Maimon insists it is impossible for Kant (or any human) to know whether this is the case. Maimon's question is: does Kant take Hume seriously enough? And again this is asked not with the purpose of overturning the Copernican Revolution, but of strengthening it through a more thorough engagement with the Humean challenge.

### III.

However, to claim Maimon's work is of interest merely owing to its engagement with tradition would be to underplay its significance. The *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy* also possesses much that is *novel*.

Foremost in this regard is Maimon's realization of the potential of the critical philosophy to do away with traditional philosophical frameworks, like correspondence and the subject/object relation. Kant, according to Maimon, inaugurated (often unconsciously) a new paradigm for truth. Hence, one task of the *Essay* is to develop consistently the more radical aspects of the first *Critique*. This involves describing a theory of knowledge *wholly immanent to consciousness*—that is, without reference to an external object. It is this aspect of Maimon's work—immediately taken up by Fichte—which was most influential on later philosophical thought. Knowledge is not true because of its correspondence to anything external to consciousness, but because of the *synthesis* it undergoes.

Another innovation of the *Essay* is its deployment of mathematics. More than any other German Idealist, Maimon was *au fait* with the complexities of mathematics. He countenances the possibility of non-Euclidean geometries and (very unusually for philosophers of his day) prefers algebra to geometry. However, most important is Maimon's insistence on the philosophical significance of the differential. In so insisting, he became a "bright star ... in the esoteric history of differential philosophy," as Deleuze famously claims in *Difference and Repetition*.<sup>13</sup>

### IV.

The previous two sections merely scratch the surface; however, this new English edition of Maimon's *Essay* is both accessible and helpful enough to aid any reader to plunge more deeply into its intricacies.

This is the most comprehensive edition of the *Essay* that could be hoped for. Not only is the *Essay* itself and all of its additional supplements translated in full, four further Appendices are added, including the full text of Kant's

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<sup>13</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Athlone, 1994), 170.

famous letter to Herz. Midgley's Introduction provides biographical details as well as a brave (if not foolhardy!) attempt to summarize the contents of the *Essay* and rationalize its structure. There is a technical glossary and a full (if not exhaustive) bibliography of secondary literature. Even the translators' notes—always a tricky balance between leaving the reader bewildered and being intrusive—succeed: they are frequent but not patronizing. One slight qualm is that the Introduction fails to sketch Maimon's considerable influence on subsequent thought.

The translation itself is both readable and precise. As the translators themselves remark, since the appearance of the Cambridge edition of Kant's works, terminology has been standardized considerably. Yet, translating a new philosopher—even a new text—always brings its own difficulties, and the translators smooth over such difficulties, while justifying their solutions sufficiently. In fact, the only problems the translators have left somewhat unresolved relate to Maimon's own knowledge of the German language: his first language was Yiddish and he only learnt German at the age of 15, so it is not surprising that the translators remain unsure whether his use of *sich vorstellen*, for example, is idiomatic (“to imagine”) or more literal (“to represent to oneself”).<sup>14</sup>

The translators have thus done everything in their power to give the reader the opportunity to appreciate Maimon's work and so to start to make good Fichte's prediction that future generations might at last realize the value of the *Essay*.

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<sup>14</sup> See Maimon, *Essay*, 141.