

THE POLITICS OF DEVOTION: THE INFLUENCE OF
MAIMONIDES' *GUIDE OF THE PERPLEXED* ON
SPINOZA'S EARLY POLITICAL THOUGHT

Elizabeth Robinson

Abstract

This paper argues that the *Guide of the Perplexed* served as a primary source of inspiration for both the form and content of Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*. Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* is aimed at assuaging the religiously devout who fear that their inclination towards philosophy will lead them to impious conclusions. The Maimonidean influence on Spinoza can be seen in the structure and aim of the TTP. Spinoza intends the treatise to address a similar audience with a similar problem, but provides a distinct solution. This paper discusses the limitations of both of their solutions to the problem of reconciling faith and reason before presenting a unique solution to the problem based on Maimonides' distinction between arguments and demonstrations.

Keywords: Spinoza, Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, *Theological-Political Treatise*, prophecy.

Even a brief survey of the literature concerning the relationship between Spinoza and Maimonides may leave one astounded at the sheer quantity of differing opinions on the subject. If one takes the debate seriously, it seems that what we can know for certain is limited to the bare facts that Spinoza did read Maimonides and Maimonides never read Spinoza.¹ Leon Roth sites Maimonides' influence on Spinoza as a primary reason for Spinoza's rejection of Cartesianism, while Warren Zev Harvey presents convincing arguments for Maimonides' influence on almost every aspect of Spinoza's philosophy.² Harry Wolfson and Leo Strauss, on the other hand, feel that Roth overemphasizes the influence of Maimonides on Spinoza.

¹ Benedict Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise* chapter 1, paragraph 19 (unpublished translation by Edwin Curley), 14.

² See Leon Roth, *Spinoza, Descartes and Maimonides* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1924), and Warren Zev Harvey, "Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19 (1981): 151-172.

They speak instead of "Hebrew philosophic literature" as a whole, with Maimonides holding no particular weight outside of his participation within a larger genre.³ With such a rich debate already at play, what I hope to offer is not an additional viewpoint but an attempt at synthesizing various views into a cohesive explanatory whole.⁴

In this paper I intend to argue that the *Guide of the Perplexed* served as a primary source of inspiration for both the form and content of Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*. Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* is aimed at assuaging the religiously devout who fear that their inclination towards philosophy will lead them to impious conclusions. Maimonides' solution is to reassure his reader that one can be both religious and a philosopher because the teachings of philosophy (in this case, primarily Aristotle) are in accord with the teachings of Scripture. In order to meld the two seemingly contradictory views, Maimonides must, as Spinoza points out, do some violence to the Biblical text. What Spinoza fails to acknowledge is that Maimonides' view requires making some alterations to Aristotle as well.

However, the audience and goal for his text which Maimonides outlines are not unique to him. The Maimonidean influence on Spinoza can be seen in the structure and aim of the TTP. Spinoza intends the treatise to address a similar audience with a similar problem. The TTP is ostensibly written for the devout (in this case Dutch Calvinists) who fear that philosophical training will leave them unable to honestly consider themselves Christians. Additionally, Spinoza follows Maimonides view of the "middle path" of religious dogma. Spinoza and Maimonides both list a strikingly similar set of teachings which fall under the heading of "Scriptural religion" (i.e. the religious teachings one may derive from Scripture). These teachings are metaphysical or theological in nature (as opposed to ethical) and comprise teachings which can be accepted on Scriptural authority. However, after picking up Maimonides' theme Spinoza rejects Maimonides' solution in favour of one of his (Spinoza's) own. Spinoza argues that the religious person need not fear the findings of philosophy because their contradicting one another is impossible. Philosophy and religion do not speak on the same subjects. Ethics (or obedience) is

³ See Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, trans. E. M. Sinclair (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), and Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning, Volumes 1 and 2* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962). for their respective takes on the debate.

⁴ I have kept my discussion of the various positions intentionally short as several good discussions are extant in the literature. For summations of various aspects of the debate see for example Arthur Hyman, "Spinoza's Dogmas of Universal Faith in Light of their Medieval Jewish Background" In *Biblical and Other Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann, 183-5 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), and especially Harvey, "A Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean", 151-155.

the domain of religion, while all else is the domain of philosophy. Moreover, where the two do overlap, we find that the ethical teachings of religion are identical with those of philosophy.⁵ One need not fear that, by learning philosophy, one will lose one's religious faith, because faith consists only in the need to conduct oneself with loving-kindness and justice. Rather than attempt to reconcile religion and philosophy, Spinoza relegates religion to a region where it can do little philosophical harm (and much good). I will examine each of the points attributed to the two thinkers individually and then attempt to make some sense of their relationship to one another and the limitations to both of their respective solutions to the problem of reconciling faith and reason.

The fact that is perhaps best known about Maimonides is one that bears repeating at the commencement of any discussion concerning his writing. Maimonides admits that what he says is not always what he means. In the introduction of the *Guide*, Maimonides enumerates the various causes for contradictions that appear within written works. In explaining the seventh cause, he claims that "In speaking about very obscure matters it is necessary to conceal some parts and to disclose others."⁶ What he makes clear in the rest of the discussion of the seventh cause is that sometimes concealment requires asserting one thing at one point in the text and a different or contradictory thing later. The reader is to infer from this statement that just because Maimonides makes a particular claim in the *Guide*, this does not necessarily mean that it is, in fact, what he thinks.⁷

One should not conclude, however, that no statement in the *Guide* represents Maimonides' true opinion or that the book as a whole is incoherent. Additionally, one should not conclude that we can discern the true teaching of an esoteric writer by assuming that "every statement of an author which agrees with views vulgarly considered as sacred or authoritative must be dismissed as irrelevant, or at least it must be suspected even though it is never contradicted by him."⁸ The rationale for a reading of this nature seems to rest on the assumption that the primary motivation for hiding one's true opinion rests in its fundamental disagreement with commonly held views. However, as Steven B. Smith points out, "For Maimonides...the need for secrecy was only in part dictated by a need for safety and physical survival. Multilevel writing was a means of conveying certain religious ideas in an idiom that

⁵ The seeming contradiction introduced here will be addressed later on.

⁶ Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 18.

⁷ For further discussions of Maimonides' esotericism see Leo Strauss, "The Literary Character of the *Guide for the Perplexed*" in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: The Free Press, 1952) as well as Strauss' introduction to the Pines translation of Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*.

⁸ Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 177. Strauss presents this as Spinoza's guideline for reading esoteric texts.

readers could comprehend and, more precisely, a means of shielding those readers from some of the more disturbing implications of the truth."⁹ What Smith suggests is that Maimonides' decision to write esoterically may have been motivated by literary or aesthetic concerns or even concerns about the nature of his audience rather than worries about survival. The primary problem with assuming survival as the primary motivation for concealing one's true opinions is that it leads the reader to the oversimplified conclusion that the author's true opinion is whichever one fails to coincide with that of the vulgar. The possibility of the author agreeing at any turn with commonly held beliefs must be rejected.

For Maimonides, secrecy was not predicated on a desire to hide his (potentially) contentious or blasphemous views. Secrecy was for him a natural and necessary component of religious writing designed to protect those who were incapable of grasping certain truths, but to whom other truths were open and available. We do not consider writers of children's books dimwitted because they write in a simplistic manner. Nor should we consider Maimonides fearful for his life simply because he does not say what he means in a straight-forward manner. Maimonides recognized two kinds of occasions which called for concealment of his ideas. In some cases the conclusion of an argument or demonstration was accessible to the masses while the argument itself was not. If the conclusion of the argument is a belief necessary for salvation then the conclusion would be presented to all as an article of faith while the argument itself would be included but concealed. In situations where the conclusion was not necessary for salvation, the argument would be concealed and the conclusion, at times, not even given.

One of the least disputed aspects of the *Guide* is its intended audience. Maimonides writes, "My speech in the present Treatise is directed, as I have mentioned, to one who has philosophized and has knowledge of true sciences, but believes in the same time in the matters pertaining to the Law and is perplexed as to their meaning."¹⁰ As Leon Roth writes, "The 'perplexed' for whom Maimonides wrote the *Guide* are those men who, though desirous of retaining traditional belief, are yet puzzled by the apparently contrary teaching of science or philosophy. The *Guide* is the type (as it was in fact the model) of the scholastic contribution to thought, which, stripped of accidents of time and place, is the endeavour to effect a reconciliation between philosophy and religion, the science of rational thought and the art of revealed belief."¹¹

The audience and aim of the *Guide* are one in the sense that the audience entirely determines the aim. The treatise is written to those who seek knowledge of both religion and philosophy for the purpose of showing how the two can peacefully coexist. Roth outlines two possible methods for achieving a religion compatible

⁹ Steven B. Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (Hartford: Yale University Press, 1997), 39.

¹⁰ Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 10.

¹¹ Roth, *Spinoza, Descartes and Maimonides*, 66-67.

with reason.¹² The first way is to begin with philosophy, let reason guide you above all else, and then make religion, through the brute force of interpretation, fall into accord with reason's dictates. The second way is to hold religion as supreme and attempt to prove that whatever in reason disagrees with religion is in fact false. He claims that Maimonides chooses the first path. Roth sees Maimonides as a man equally devoted to both religion and philosophy, unwilling and unable to abandon either.

Spinoza, on the other hand, viewed Maimonides as a rationalist who refused to acknowledge the fact that reason and revelation do not coincide. In reference to attempts by Maimonides and others to make the Biblical story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac compatible with a philosophical view of prophecy¹³, Spinoza claims, "But they talk nonsense, of course. For their only concern is to extort from Scripture Aristotelian rubbish and their own inventions. Nothing seems more ridiculous to me."¹⁴ Spinoza acknowledges Maimonides' deference to rationality, but views his attempts to combine Scripture and reason as futile. Had Maimonides been truly committed to taking both reason and the Bible at their word, he would have been forced to acknowledge their dissonance and abandon one or the other. However, in his desperation to save his faith, Maimonides destroys Scripture's true intent in the process.¹⁵

Both Roth's and Spinoza's views of Maimonides and his take on the relationship between reason and revelation require some textual support. There are numerous places within the *Guide* that attest to Maimonides' molding of Scripture to the dictates of reason.¹⁶ For the purposes of this paper, it will be helpful to look briefly at one example. As Charles Manekin points out, for Maimonides "the act of prophesying does not result from a discrete, personal communication addressed directly to the individual by the deity."¹⁷ Prophecy is, in a sense, always around us.¹⁸ The emanation from the Active Intellect is constantly overflowing. Prophecy is not an act of divine intervention in the life of a specific individual, nor does it require some special act in time on the part of the divine. Prophecy is, rather, like

¹² See *Ibid.*, 67.

¹³ A philosophical view of prophecy is any view which does not allow the prophet to usurp or overrule the teachings of reason.

¹⁴ Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 89-90.

¹⁶ Most of part 1 of the *Guide of the Perplexed* is in fact devoted to explanations of equivocal terms and their proper interpretations. In claiming these terms are equivocal, Maimonides opens the door to interpreting Scripture in a manner which allows it to coincide with the teaching of the philosophers. Most striking perhaps is Maimonides' interpretation of the Genesis account of the Fall of mankind. See Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 23-26.

¹⁷ Charles Manekin, *On Maimonides* (Belmont: Thomas Wadsworth, 2005), 57.

¹⁸ For Maimonides' explanation of prophecy and the qualifications of prophets see Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 367-378.

the Internet. The information is readily available to all, but only those who “log on” will be able to receive it. It is only those rendered worthy by the perfection of their rational and moral faculties that can access the divine emanation; “There is no obvious room in this model for individual acts of grace on particular occasions, but basically a continuing supply of grace which will be received by anyone who is an appropriate recipient.”¹⁹

In many instances, the plain sense of Scripture suggests that prophets received special dispensation from God directed towards them alone, and the knowledge that God grants to one prophet appears to be something different than the knowledge available to another. An example of this occurs in the first book of Samuel. Samuel, as a young boy, hears God speaking to him in such a way that he mistakes it for the voice of Eli. Eli the priest, on the other hand, hears nothing.²⁰ However, Maimonides claims that these passages must be interpreted in a way which suggests that the knowledge that the prophet accesses is something that would have been available to anyone else with a properly perfected nature. There is only one emanation and a person will simply adhere to and be able to access the portions of it which concern his own particular interests.²¹ Two prophets have been granted access to the same emanation no matter how divergent the form and content of their prophetic messages may be. If this is the case and God does not select whomever He wills to prophecy, why would His voice have been heard by the young boy Samuel who, at his age, could not have possessed the perfected rational faculty which Maimonides’ view of prophecy demands? Why was Eli, the prophet and priest, kept from hearing a message which was clearly directed towards him as it concerned the well-being of his sons?

The position that God endows whomever He wills with the prophetic gift regardless of their rational qualifications most closely resembles the plain sense of the Bible.²² In arguing for the need for rational perfection in order to prophesy, Maimonides is in effect arguing for a “looser”, more interpretive method of reading Scripture. The plain sense of the text is not always the most correct sense in which to take it. In accepting the position of the philosophers, Maimonides opens the door for a synthesis of revelation and reason. If only those who have perfected their rational faculties are capable of prophesying then whatever knowledge prophecy affords cannot be contrary to reason. Prophecy may provide information which reason cannot provide, but it cannot provide information which reason can refute. If this were not the case then there would be no need for human beings to achieve rational perfection before they prophesied.

¹⁹ Oliver Leaman, “Maimonides, the Imagination, and the Objectivity of Prophecy,” *Religion* 18 (1988): 71.

²⁰ See 1 Samuel 3:1-11

²¹ Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 371.

²² See Manekin, *On Maimonides*, 57, and also Oliver Leaman, “Maimonides, the Imagination,” 69.

The preceding discussion of prophecy should suffice to confirm the belief that Maimonides sought, at least in some cases, to conform revelation to reason. However, it does not address the issue of whether or not revelation must give way at any cost. If we can find an example of Maimonides forcing reason (in the guise of Aristotle's teachings) to succumb to the dictates of revelation, it would seem fair to assume that Maimonides, to some extent, accommodates each to the other. I propose Maimonides' discussion of the origin of the world as supporting this claim.

Chapters 13-22 of part two of the *Guide* present Maimonides' views on the origin of the world. Here Maimonides must choose whether to side with Aristotle in claiming that the world is eternal or with Scripture which claims that the world was created in time.²³ The issue is not one which can be easily settled by allowing for an unstated assumption or plausible interpretation since the two views directly contradict one another. Maimonides challenges the argument Aristotle makes concerning the eternity of the world because the argument rests on an assumption that the world's current state gives up information about its beginning. In other words, we cannot make claims regarding the origin of the world based on the attributes of the perfected state in which we currently find it. Maimonides, based on an analogy to the origin and development of a human child, makes the assertion that "a being's state of perfection and completion furnishes no indication of the state of that being preceding its perfection."²⁴ The beginning and end states of affairs are not always commensurate with one another. Since we have no firsthand knowledge of the beginning state (or lack thereof) of the world, we have no right to make claims about it.²⁵

One of the most important outcomes of this discussion is the distinction Maimonides makes between arguments and demonstrations. A demonstration is irrefutably true, while an argument leaves room for a counter-argument.²⁶ Insofar as Aristotle can provide demonstrations for his beliefs, we must concur with them. However, in instances where he can provide only arguments and especially when those arguments contradict the teachings of Scripture we need not accept them. Maimonides does not simply accept the teachings of others, even wise others, as true. "The opinion of the philosopher is itself subjected to close scrutiny before it is modified and adopted or rejected."²⁷ Ultimately, Maimonides concludes that in

²³ For support of my view that Maimonides does in fact reject Aristotle's teaching regarding the eternity of the world see Kenneth Seeskin, "Metaphysics and its Transcendence," in *Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, ed. Kenneth Seeskin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 82-104.

²⁴ Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 297-298.

²⁵ For more on Maimonides' view of the origin of the world see Kenneth Seeskin's excellent *Maimonides on the Origin of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

²⁶ Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 291.

²⁷ Roth, *Spinoza, Descartes and Maimonides*, 68.

cases such as this one, where neither of two competing opinions allow for a demonstration, we should side with the opinion that produces least harm to the faith.²⁸ One argument for the claim that this is Maimonides' true teaching is that such a statement is clearly not directed to the unphilosophical devout, who would never consider doubting the claims of Scripture nor need to worry over the claims of Aristotle. This section appears to be directed towards the *Guide's* true audience.

What we can conclude from this discussion is the seriousness with which Maimonides took both reason and Scripture. Despite Spinoza's claim that, "The first person among the Pharisees who frankly maintained that Scripture should be accommodated to reason was Maimonides,"²⁹ Maimonides was not simply pushing his religious beliefs aside. On the contrary, in his embrace of secular knowledge Maimonides has not abandoned his ties to faith. The need for a non-literal method of interpreting Scripture rests on his desire to reconcile the Bible with what reason compels him to believe. Perhaps Maimonides would have had an easier path if he had simply thrown out Scripture altogether and stated that reason alone is capable of leading us towards truth. However, abandoning his faith is not an action of which a devout man is capable. Maimonides therefore retains his faith while heeding the call of reason not simply because he is dogmatically devout, but because he thinks reason alone cannot teach us everything. Prophecy requires rational perfection, but it is not solely comprised of it. There is still an element of the divine. Our need for the divine is the same as our need for reason. Without it there is much that we cannot know.

If the entire *Theological-Political Treatise* is to be seen as a kind of response to the *Guide*, one might argue that the proper starting place is a proof that Maimonides had any influence on Spinoza at all. We have seen above that Spinoza explicitly mentions Maimonides more than once in the *TTP* which allows us to safely conclude that Spinoza had at least read the *Guide*. The passion evidenced in Spinoza's words concerning Maimonides suggests that the reading had at least some effect on Spinoza. Since there is already so much literature arguing in favour of Maimonides' influence on Spinoza, I will mention only a single point here concerning Maimonides political influence.³⁰

Harvey points out that though Hobbes is generally considered the primary source of political influence on Spinoza there are features of Spinoza's political thought (as presented in the *TTP*) that cannot be attributed to Thomas Hobbes.³¹ For example, Spinoza grants political importance to the distinction between

²⁸ Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 320.

²⁹ Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 154.

³⁰ As mentioned earlier, Warren Zev Harvey's "Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean" presents a wonderful and convincing argument concerning Maimonides' influence on almost every aspect of Spinoza's philosophy.

³¹ Harvey, "Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean," 168-169.

philosophers and the common people. For Spinoza, all people are guided by natural right, but natural right leads the wise to follow reason and the “ignorant and weak-minded” to live by their appetites.³² When citizens contract with the state they are agreeing to put their appetites aside and live according to reason.³³ As Harvey points out, this “effectively means: the wise agree to continue to live according to the same principle by which they had lived all along, while the ignorant agree to renounce the principle by which they hitherto had lived.”³⁴ The law only has a restraining effect on those who are unwilling or incapable of living rationally of their own volition; the philosopher continues to rule him or herself. Maimonides also thought that the purpose of the law was to restrain those who would otherwise be entirely ruled by their passions, but this distinction between the rights given and maintained by the two “classes” entering the social contract is not found in Hobbes.³⁵

Taking for granted that Maimonides’ influence on Spinoza has been established, what our proof next requires is confirmation that Maimonides’ and Spinoza’s audience are indeed of similar nature. Spinoza addresses the issue of audience directly at the end of the preface. After a rather lengthy summary of the aims and goals of the treatise, Spinoza directly addresses his readers in a statement worth quoting here at length:

These, Philosophical reader, are the things I here give you to examine...And it is not my purpose to commend this treatise to others [those who are not philosophers], for there is no hope that it can please them in any way. I know how stubbornly the mind retains those prejudices it has embraced under the guise of piety. I know also that it is as impossible to remove superstition from the common people as it is fear...I do not ask the common people to read these things, nor anyone else who is tormented by the same affects as the common people. Indeed, I would prefer them to neglect this book entirely, rather than make trouble by interpreting it perversely, as is their custom with everything. They will do themselves no good, but will harm others who would philosophize more freely if they were not prevented by this one thought: that reason must be the handmaid of theology. For the latter, I trust that this work will be extremely useful.³⁶

Strauss places particular emphasis on the last two sentences, and claims that the *TTP* is not addressed to “actual philosophers” who would have no need for such a treatise, but to “potential philosophers.”³⁷ Strauss claims these are people who

³² Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 161.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Harvey, “Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean,” 168.

Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 310-312. For more on the role of philosophers in Maimonides’ politics see James Diamond. *Converts, Heretics and Lepers; Maimonides and the Outsider* (South Bend: Notre Dame Press 2007).

³⁶ Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 8-9.

³⁷ Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 162-163.

"believe in the authority of theology, i.e., of the Bible...to the potential philosophers among Christians."³⁸ While Maimonides' audience was Jewish and Spinoza's primarily Christian, the relevant factors remain the same. Both books are addressed to those who are held back from philosophizing by a fear that it contradicts revealed religion.

At the most fundamental level Spinoza agrees with Maimonides about the solution to the problem of reason and revelation. Spinoza claims that in his review of the Bible, "I found nothing in what Scripture expressly teaches which did not agree with the intellect, or which would contradict it."³⁹ One can be religious and a philosopher because there is nothing in religion that contradicts the teachings of philosophy. This is what Spinoza intends to prove in the *TTP*, that religious leaders should feel no need to limit or hinder the study of philosophy. The pursuit of reason will not and cannot lead a person away from divinely revealed truth.

It is here, however, that the similarities between Maimonides and Spinoza end. The audience and problem are the same, and the ultimate conclusion that reason and revelation can be reconciled remains. As a whole, though, the *TTP* contains an explicit rejection of the Maimonidean idea that the teachings of philosophy can be found hidden within the pages of holy Scripture.⁴⁰ What Spinoza proposes instead is a radical departure from the solution of Maimonides and one which anyone who takes revelation seriously will find difficult to swallow.

Earlier I discussed Roth's two suggestions for how reason and revelation can be reconciled (letting one serve as leader while the other is accommodated to it). Not satisfied with either of them, Spinoza suggests a third path. A religious person need not fear that reason will contradict divine revelation because the two sources do not speak on the same topics. To fear that the two will contradict is as absurd as fearing that one's cookbook and auto repair manual will contradict one another. There is no common ground on which they could disagree.

Chapters one through twelve of the *TTP* all lead towards the conclusion in chapter thirteen that religious devotion requires nothing more than ethical behavior. If Spinoza can show that the Bible itself asks nothing more of us than that we treat our neighbour with justice and loving-kindness, then there is nothing in religious teaching to hinder us from thinking what we will concerning all other matters. Spinoza's method for accomplishing this is very similar to the one he employs in the *Ethics*. He forms an increasingly complex argument built on a series of seemingly

³⁸ Ibid., 163. It is interesting to note that while Strauss is among those who contend most strongly for the lack of Maimonidean influence on Spinoza, he is also the one who most explicitly claims that their intended audiences share the same features. In fact, in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* he speaks of the timeless scope and reach of both books suggesting that the audience of both books is identical.

³⁹ Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 6.

⁴⁰ The passages from the *TTP* quoted above should stand as sufficient evidence for Spinoza's rejection of Maimonides' methods of Scriptural interpretation.

self-evident statements which eventually force the reader to conclude something which she would probably prefer not to conclude.

The first two chapters deal with the nature of prophecy and prophets. Spinoza emphasizes the role of imagination in prophecy.⁴¹ Revelation comes to prophets only in the form of images not in demonstrative proofs.⁴² What this means for Spinoza is that revelation cannot stem from the mind or rational faculty and thus prophets do not have access to information or proofs that other men are incapable of comprehending. Prophecy cannot by its nature contain rational proofs. The knowledge of the prophet is not superior to the knowledge of the philosopher, and one who seeks for knowledge in prophecy has gone "entirely astray."⁴³ This being the case, we are not bound to believe the opinions of the prophets hold more sway than those of ordinary people except in matters of revelation i.e. justice and lovingkindness towards one's neighbour.⁴⁴ "In all other things each person is free to believe as he pleases."⁴⁵

Chapters three through eleven of the *TTP* are concerned almost entirely with undermining claims of Scriptural authority in reference to matters which are not ethical in nature. Spinoza shows that the rituals and ceremonies instituted for the practice of religion among the Hebrews were of a political rather than a religious nature, that miracles cannot occur and would reveal to us nothing about the nature of God if they did and that the various books of the Old Testament contain many mistakes and errors not in original content but as a result of hand-copying and translation. Additionally we see that though many of the New Testament writers were apostles, it was not in their capacity as apostles that they wrote their books. The various arguments in chapters one through eleven are aimed at supporting the conclusion in chapter twelve that the phrase "Word of God" is said in many ways, and that we need not consider everything within Scripture as the "Word of God" in the strict sense of the term.⁴⁶

What we are left with, once the unreliable or inapplicable historical, narrative, opinion, ceremonial and miraculous aspects of the Bible have been removed, is a set of simple teachings that are all geared towards one particular end, namely, obedience. Spinoza concludes that given the lack of learning on the part of Biblical authors and the wide-ranging audience for whom the Bible is intended that "it follows that the doctrine of Scripture does not contain lofty speculations or philosophic matters, but only the simplest matters that anyone, however slow, can perceive."⁴⁷ Spinoza goes

⁴¹ Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 369.

⁴² Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 14-15.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 15-16, 22-24.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ For Spinoza, there is a sense in which the Bible taken as a whole can be called the Word of God, but he maintains that none of what is in the Bible qualifies as the "Word of God" in a literal sense of the phrase (Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 135).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 139.

on to claim that "we know that the purpose of Scripture was not to teach the sciences. For from this we can easily judge that it requires nothing from men but obedience and condemns only stubbornness, not ignorance."⁴⁸ The Bible is not a book of philosophical speculation, but a guide to right living whose central teaching is as easily accessible to the fool as it is to the wise man. The entire task of obedience consists only in the command to love one's neighbour.⁴⁹

Since we now see that revelation is concerned only with obedience we can also conclude that we are free from religious bonds in all other areas.

There is no connection or no relationship between faith, or Theology, and Philosophy. No one can now fail to see this, who knows the goal and foundation of these two faculties, which of course differ completely. For the goal of Philosophy is nothing but the truth, whereas the goal of Faith, as we have shown abundantly, is nothing but obedience and piety...Faith, therefore, grants everyone the greatest freedom to philosophize, so that without wickedness he can think whatever he wishes about anything; faith condemns as heretics and schismatics only those who teach opinions which encourage obstinacy, hatred, quarrels and anger; on the other hand, it considers faithful only those who, in proportion to the powers of their reason and their faculties, encourage Justice and Loving-kindness.⁵⁰

If religion condemns no beliefs about history, science or metaphysics as heretical, then the philosopher is free to think as reason guides him or her. Moreover, philosophers and all others are free to practice their religion in whatever way they see fit. Since true religion is nothing but justice and loving-kindness towards one's neighbour, then whatever religious practices further that aim can be considered pious.

In chapter fourteen of the *TTP* Spinoza sets aside his radical rejection of Maimonides and picks up once again the Maimonidean thread. In chapter twenty-eight of part three of the *Guide* Maimonides lists a series of "correct opinions" concerning the nature of God and "necessary beliefs" that one must hold for the sake of following the law.⁵¹ The beliefs have a political use and as such can vary, but their ultimate end is the belief that God is angry at those who disobey and will punish them but is merciful towards those who obey.⁵² The opinions are in the existence, unity, knowledge (omniscience), power (omnipotence), will and eternity of God. Spinoza's list of "tenets of universal faith or the fundamental principles of the whole

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 140.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 148.

⁵¹ Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 512. For more on which beliefs Maimonides thought were necessary for salvation see Menachen Kellner. *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007) 233-238. For an interesting counterpoint to Kellner see David Novak. *The Theology of Nahmanides Systematically Presented* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992) 5, 36-40.

⁵² Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 12, 514.

of Scripture” is strikingly similar.⁵³ Spinoza lists God's existence, uniqueness, omnipresence, and omnipotence. While the lists may appear to differ slightly, as Arthur Hyman points out, the attributes of omniscience and will which Maimonides includes are hidden within Spinoza's discussions of omnipresence and omnipotence.⁵⁴ Spinoza's last few tenets are all concerned with the fact that God requires justice and loving-kindness from all people and grants salvation to those who are obedient and/or repentant.⁵⁵

It is in the last tenets that Spinoza begins to once again disagree with Maimonides. Spinoza lumps all of his tenets into one category. They all have a political function and are necessary for the production of obedience. What we believe about the nature of God produces not salvation, but the fear or reverence necessary to motivate good behavior. For Maimonides the "necessary beliefs" are designed to produce obedience, but the "correct opinions" are there so that "Scripture guarantees a part in the 'World-to-Come' (that is, immortality) to all believers."⁵⁶ Spinoza denies that human beings have any need for Scripture in producing happiness or gaining immortality, but he recognizes the Bible's "usefulness for the moral and political life of the majority of men."⁵⁷ Therefore, he places all of Maimonides' opinions and beliefs into the category of teachings which are simply morally necessary. If people believe in a powerful, knowing God that is capable of punishing or rewarding their actions, then they will follow the law. Scripture serves the entirely political function of motivating the good behavior of citizens.

Thus Spinoza solves the problem of reason and revelation. A religious person has nothing to fear from the study of philosophy because revelation does not cover philosophical matters. The picture seems neat and tidy until one takes a closer look at the second half of the *TTP*. Earlier in the discussion of Maimonides' influence on Spinoza we saw that Spinoza holds a political distinction between the wise and the vulgar that did not stem from Hobbes. When entering the social contract rational people are only contracting to continue doing what they were already doing before, that is, living by the dictates of reason. It would seem then that reason does provide an answer to the question of what constitutes ethical living. If philosophy speaks on ethical issues then philosophy and religion do in fact overlap and have the potential to disagree. If the findings of reason are not the same ones that revelation teaches, it seems that the religious person has every reason for fearing his or her own rationality.

The dilemma presented here is one which is easily resolved. The ethical teaching of religion is so basic and universal that one would be hard-pressed (certainly in

⁵³ Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 147.

⁵⁴ Hyman, "Spinoza's Dogmas of Universal Faith," 158.

⁵⁵ Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 147.

⁵⁶ Hyman, "Spinoza's Dogmas of Universal Faith," 189. See also Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 512-514.

⁵⁷ Hyman, "Spinoza's Dogmas of Universal Faith," 192.

Spinoza's day) to find a philosopher who would disagree with it. The religious philosopher can rest easy because philosophy will certainly not lead him to the conclusion that he *must* harm his neighbour and will hardly lead him to the conclusion that he should or can. Though the grounds of philosophy and religion do overlap, it is not in a way that is dangerous to the authority of either. Spinoza's commentators are unanimous in their claims that, for Spinoza, religion has only a moral or political function and it is reason alone that can lead to true happiness and the intellectual love of God.⁵⁸ Religion is accepted by Spinoza as a useful, and in some cases necessary, tool for compelling those who are unable to govern themselves by reason to peacefully coexist with one another.

Despite his rejection of the Maimonidean solution to the problem of reason and revelation, Spinoza's *TTP* owes a great debt to Maimonides. Spinoza's conception of prophecy, conception of universal religious dogmas and distinction between the political status of the philosopher and the vulgar seem to be a direct inheritance from the Medieval Jewish thinker. Even in his explicit and passionate rejection of Maimonides' solution to the reconciliation of reason and revelation, Spinoza demonstrates the profound effect that Maimonides' thought had on him. Spinoza's attempt to escape the Maimonidean inheritance only served to draw the two figures closer together.

Though what I have said thus far in the paper has been relatively uncontroversial, I would like, in this final section to promote a radical departure from my previous conservative statements. I mentioned earlier the two possibilities that Leon Roth lists for solving the conflict between reason and revelation. I also suggested that Spinoza introduces a third possible approach, namely, that of marking off separate territories for reason and religion. I would like here to introduce yet another possibility for solving the fundamental problem which both the *Guide* and the *TTP* address.

The accounts presented by Maimonides and Spinoza respectively as to how one can reconcile reason and revelation both have unsatisfactory elements. Spinoza's account requires denying the existence of any revelatory nature exclusive to Scripture. Revelation ultimately consists only in adapting one's teaching to the needs of the masses. The ideal prophet is not one with special access to God, but one with keen insight into the political needs of the people he or she governs. To the devotedly religious, Maimonides' account is more appealing. It accepts divine content within religion and the total reconciliation of the teachings of reason and of revelation is, admittedly, an appealing idea. However, it is an idea that hardly seems probable. Maimonides makes a valiant effort to show that Scripture and reason do not conflict, but the idea that all of faith and all of philosophy are fully

⁵⁸ See Hyman, Strauss, Smith or Wolfson just to name a few.

compatible is preposterous. In over two thousand years of trying we have been unable to come up with a demonstration for even the most basic of religious tenets, the existence of God. An appealing but unviable solution does nothing to solve a problem.

Perhaps it is the case that being both a devoutly religious person and a person devoted to following, without hesitation, the claims and dictates of reason requires living with a kind of irresolvable cognitive dissonance. The claims of reason and the claims of religion do in fact contradict one another. This is not to say that one cannot be both a religious and a rational person. This is to say that doing so is to embark on a journey which will require extreme mental fortitude and the utmost vigilance. To be rational and religious means to contradict oneself at every turn, to embrace opposites, to merge both sides of a true dialectic.

If there is a hope of relief for the person who stands at the crossroads of reason and revelation refusing to abandon either path, I think it must lie in the kind of solution that Kant proposes in "The Only Possible Argument for the Existence of God" and again in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. One must maintain that there is no inconsistency in claiming two seemingly incompatible explanations as holding true of one thing or event. The Lisbon earthquake was both the natural result of tectonic plate movement and the wrath of the Almighty poured out on an unrepentant people. The world is eternal and also created in time. Human mental functioning can be accounted for in purely mechanistic terms, and human beings have immaterial, immortal souls.

An argument for the possibility of this dualistic approach to human consideration comes, oddly enough, from Maimonides. Reason and revelation do directly contradict each other, but, according to Maimonides, only in peripheral matters. On the issues at the heart of each, the existence of God, the nature of man, the order of the universe etc., neither side is capable of a demonstration. One must ultimately choose rather than deduce one's beliefs. As mentioned above, in his response to Aristotle's arguments concerning the eternal nature of the world, Maimonides claims that where philosophy cannot provide a demonstration then we are free to side with revelation. However if both sides provide convincing arguments, there seems to be no reason to deny truth to either side. If neither side can demonstratively prove anything then one can embrace opposing views without embracing true contradiction. Reason and revelation create cognitive dissonance rather than true contradiction. Perhaps this is the hidden teaching of Maimonides.

Bibliography

- Harvey, Warren Zev. "Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean." *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 19 (1981): 151-172.
- Hyman, Arthur. "Spinoza's Dogmas of Universal Faith in Light of Their Medieval Jewish Background." In *Biblical and Other Studies*, edited by Alexander Altmann, 183-195. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963.
- Leaman, Oliver. "Maimonides, the Imagination, and the Objectivity of Prophecy." *Religion* 18 (1988): 69-80.
- Maimonides, Moses. *Guide of the Perplexed*. Translated by Shlomo Pines. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.
- Manekin, Charles. *On Maimonides*. Belmont: Thomas Wadsworth Publishing, 2005.
- Roth, Leon. *Spinoza, Descartes and Maimonides*. New York: Russell and Russell, 1924.
- Seeskin, Kenneth. "Metaphysics and its Transcendence." In *Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, edited by Kenneth Seeskin, 82-102. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Smith, Steven B. *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity*. Hartford: Yale University Press, 1997.
- Spinoza, Benedict. *Theological-Political Treatise*. Translated by Edwin Curley. Publication pending.
- Strauss, Leo. *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. Chicago: The Free Press, 1952.
- . *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. Translated by E. M. Sinclair. New York: Schocken Books, 1965.
- Wolfson, Harry Austryn. *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning, Volumes 1 and 2*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962.