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Prayer and Human Perfection

Introduction

An inquiry into the meaning of prayer in the works of a person like Maimonides whose thought has been deeply touched by the Spanish Aristotelian tradition and its ideals, must be conducted on two levels. Maimonides was seriously committed to the doctrine of the immutability of God. He embraced a religiously motivated limitation of supernaturalism out of admiration for the divine wisdom that he believed was to be found in the constancy of nature.[1] Yet, although prayer stands out from among other requirements of the religious law that governs the life of traditional Jewish communities by its apparent presumption of an interaction, a dialogue of some sort, between humanity and God—especially when prayer appears in the form of petition—Maimonides seems not to have recognized a philosophical problem of prayer. Could he have simply failed to address traditional questions of philosophers of religion concerning the coherence of the practice of prayer or did he understand prayer in such a way that eliminated the need to do so? In order to address this question we must first recognize that prayer, for Maimonides, is primarily a requirement of the Law and not simply a natural phenomenon of religious psychology. As such, prayer must be understood within his general theory of the meaning and the end of the Law, an important subject for the Aristotelian tradition. This study will give precedence to the latter type of inquiry, for its results may alter whatever precritical, intuitive, or habitual ideas we might have about prayer before we immerse ourselves in analysis of its specific form in a reli-

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gious tradition. The change in our conception of prayer may render certain traditional questions of the philosophy of religion superfluous, while it may make others of its questions ever more urgent.

An inquiry into the meaning of prayer within a general Maimonidean theory of the Law should be conducted in the context of two distinct questions: the meaning of the Law for the general public and its meaning for the accomplished individual. Much of Maimonides' writing on the Law addresses the first question and so do most commentators on his work. Maimonides generally presents the Law as a major instrument for the cultivation of a community that nurtures the love of God. The utility of specific precepts of the Law is assessed within the framework of this political ideal.[2] Since most individuals are not considered capable of the ethical-intellectual perfection that the love of God requires—Maimonides speaks of one virtuous man among ten thousand ignoramuses (*Guide*, "Introduction" p. 16)—a society achieves its end when it succeeds in cultivating the perfection of a few unique individuals, as historical circumstances allow.

The Law, according to Maimonides, is not a perfect educational instrument. Being, necessarily, general in nature, the Law cannot accommodate equally the needs of all individuals at all times. He acknowledges that due to its uniformity the Law will necessarily harm some individuals. He considers this a lesser harm than the dissolution of the Law in an endless diversification and particularization of its instructions.[3] When the idea of a law is justified in this way, it is necessary to show that when an individual happens to be harmed by the law, this is not the person in whom the end of the law is meant to be realized. If the Law were to conflict in some way with the accomplishment of its own end, it would render itself irrational. This would not be merely a case in which a good law might cause accidental harm, harm that a parallel mechanism of equity can mitigate on an incidental ad hoc basis, but an internal contradiction in the teleological structure of the law.[4] Since the end of the Law is achieved in the contemplative life of the philosopher whose understanding of the world and its relation to God lead him to the venerable

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unconditional love-of-God, the precepts of the Law must never be allowed to conflict or interfere with the contemplative life.

An obvious solution, which many religious traditions adopt, is the bifurcation of the religious life into two orders of ritual obligation: for the laity and for the specialist.[5] For various reasons the Rabbinic tradition resisted pressures in that direction and sought to maintain a uniform order of religious obligation.[6] As a major spokesperson for that tradition, Maimonides is called upon to explain what meaning the Law can have for the accomplished individual and how it accommodates the requirements of the contemplative life. Without such an account, Maimonides' attempt to provide a teleological theory of the Law will necessarily fail. As we try to glean his views on the issue, we must take into account whatever explicit Maimonidean statements we can find, and when they are lacking we have to ask what answers are suggested by what he does say, that can be supported by the general trend of his thought.

Since we are primarily interested in the place of prayer in the contemplative life, there is one answer to our query that we must, in particular, reject from the outset. It is necessary to reject a suggestion that as a person advances in philosophical learning and develops an ability to contemplate eternal truths in which the divine wisdom is manifest, that person's performance of the obligations of daily life—be they religious or secular—can become evermore detached and disinterested. This suggestion might be based on the observation that long habituation makes possible a confidence that one acts as one should, while paying little or no attention to what one is doing.[7] The ritualization of the religious life, which may become an obstacle of rote and tedium to many in the community, may assist the contemplative in overcoming his or her obligations without suspending or rejecting them.[8] This model may apply to many precepts of the Law about which there is serious debate in Rabbinic literature whether or not their performance requires concentrated involvement and awareness (*kavvanah*, intention). It cannot, however, apply to prayer about which there is general agreement that it requires

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kavvanah (although it cannot be said that there is also agreement on the exact type of *kavvanah* that is mandatory). In his codification of the laws of prayer, Maimonides rules that the performance of prayer requires intention and cannot be disinterested.[9] This feature of prayer makes it therefore a unique vantage point from which to interpret his philosophy of the Law and his understanding of the relations between religious belief and practice.

Considerations previously mentioned suggest that no account of Maimonides' conception of prayer can be given in isolation from either his general theory of the Law or from his conception of the contemplative life. Prayer is a precept of the Law that aims at the highest human perfection,[10] and the contemplative life seems to be an embodiment of this perfection with which the practice of prayer may conflict. We shall turn therefore to examine Maimonides' notion of the highest human excellence, to see if the contemplation that it involves does indeed leave no room for a prayer of petition that is focused on the needs and aspirations of individual Jews as well as of the Jewish people as a whole. On the basis of the substantial contributions of recent scholarship to our understanding of Aristotelian ethical theory, we shall proceed to reconstruct Maimonides' conception of human perfection and argue that the Maimonidean parameters of the contemplative life create a unique need for a thoroughly ritualized prayer of petition.[11] The next chapter will show that such is indeed the Maimonidean conception of prayer and explain its meaning in the religious life of ordinary members of the community.

Prayer and the Problem of the Practical Life

Students of Maimonides learn early on to distinguish two types of perfection toward which a true religion must lead its adherents: corporeal and spiritual perfection. The former refers to a secure and well provided body-politic of virtuous citizens the end of which is to cultivate within its realm the highest human perfection possible. The latter identifies the ultimate end of human life that a well ordered society must promote.

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Exactly how Maimonides understands this ideal, and what it amounts to, remains a matter of scholarly debate and requires careful inquiry and analysis. Different determinations of the precise nature of the supreme end will affect our conception of the relation between the two perfections. My purpose throughout this work is to show that this relation determines, in turn, a perspective for understanding the meaning of prayer and its place in a religious life.

Nearly the entire body of religious law that Judaism knows as *Halakhah* belongs, according to Maimonides, to a very widely conceived "corporeal perfection" that includes a minimal set of beliefs that such perfection requires. These include the basic tenets of traditional monotheism. Other precepts require striving for the ultimate human perfection, a state described as "love of God" and related unequivocally to a knowledge of God for which philosophical learning is required.[12] The two perfections are therefore clearly ranked in the order of perfection: corporeal perfection is a means to the supreme end. The question in what sense exactly security, health, and virtue are means to the highest human excellence, is central to any understanding of Maimonides' philosophy of religion.[13] It is an important goal of this study to suggest an answer to this question.

All-important in this respect, I would like to suggest, is the question how the means are related to the end. Are they inherently part of the end or external to it? Health and a stable economy seem to be necessary but external means since, according to Maimonides, they merely remove obstacles to intellectual achievement and contribute nothing to it.[14] But what of moral virtue? Is it related to intellectual excellence as reading literature is to being well educated or as building a bridge is to reaching the far bank of a river? Are the means transcended when the end is achieved or do they constitute an essential part of the end?

In many places Maimonides explains that the intellectual love of God is purely contemplative, beyond all moral and ritual action, beyond even all moral dispositions. Nowhere is this view more explicit than in chapter 27 of part III of *The Guide of the Perplexed* where Maimonides claims:

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> It is clear that to this ultimate perfection there do not belong either actions or moral qualities and that it consists only of opinions toward which speculation has led and that investigation has rendered compulsory.

Yet Maimonides does not absolve a philosopher who achieves this end from the totality of the ritual cycle of the religious life. Not even from the requirement to participate in a petitionary prayer which seems to conflict with all that the philosophic life stands for.

We shall be concerned here primarily with the prayer known as the *amidah*. It is the paradigmatic prayer of the Jewish tradition. The unqualified Hebrew word "tefilah " (prayer) denotes this particular form of prayer. The *amidah* is recited in silence, though preferably in the community of at least ten adult males (age thirteen and above). It is structured as a series of benedictions (berakhot), three of praise, thirteen of petition, and three of thanksgiving.[15] The *amidah* is recited in this form thrice daily (except for the Sabbath and the Festivals), morning, noon (or afternoon), and evening.

The daily structure of this ritual coincides with the rhythms of an active life that conforms to the natural cycle of the rising of the sun on a new day of activity and the onset of darkness that terminates it. This structure, however, may compel an accomplished philosopher to break out of solitary study that need not necessarily respect the changing of the hours and out of hard-earned absorption in contemplation of eternal truth, as well as to become involved in the worldly concerns of petitionary prayer. The tension between contemplation and prayer, in this context, is a clash between incompatible forms of life. If, as Maimonides claims, religious observances are means to prepare body and soul for the supreme end, then the end of the intellectual love of God requires that the means be transcended lest they draw the soul down from its lofty perch and confine it to the bustle and chaos of worldly existence. The place of prayer in the teleological structure of the Law leads us then to the following question: If the highest end of a religious community is to produce an excellent human being, a person capable of the uninterrupted solitude of

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an intellectual love of God, why should that detachment be disturbed by involvement in temporal affairs? A holy man resides in solitude on his mountain top (cave, or study), a living symbol of the virtue of his nurturing community. Legislating generally and universally to two distinct orders of religious obligation would not violate the strictures (of *Guide*, 3.34) against exceptions. Why then does the Law not differentiate between types of religious obligation? Can Maimonides' Aristotelianism explain what reason such an accomplished person as described by his philosophical-religious ideal can have to participate in prayer or in any of the other commandments?

By addressing the problem of the meaning of prayer, not in the abstract but in its place in the scheme of the precepts of the Law (*mitzvot*) as represented in the writings of Maimonides, and according to its particular content, we suggest that the question of prayer be seen as an embodiment and a crystallization of the general problem, in the philosophy of Maimonides as in Aristotle's, of the place of praxis in a contemplative ideal. Prayer can play this role because it is a spiritual practical precept that brings together petitionary interests in the destiny of the community and a requirement that one's mind be attentive to what one is doing while reciting the prayer—a requirement of intention (*kavvanah*). A problem of prayer, as presented here, is succinctly expressed in the Talmud:

> Raba saw R. Hamnuna prolonging his prayers. Said he: They forsake eternal life and occupy themselves with temporal life. (BT *Shabbath* 10a)

It may be suggested that the ritual structure of the religious life, prayer included, provides a fall-back position for the philosopher who cannot sustain a contemplative state indefinitely. At some point alien thoughts will intervene, desires or physical needs will make themselves felt, and the contemplative will fall not to a profane existence but to a ritual structure that manifests holiness and sustains future attempts at transcendence.[16] A solution like this misses the

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heart of the matter. We truly come to terms with the problem only when we ask what place prayer has in the contemplative ideal itself. To do so we must account for the surprising Maimonidean suggestion that has taxed the theoretical imagination of the best interpreters, that the contemplative ideal results in moral perfection.[17] If the contemplative ideal is somehow practically oriented, then perhaps the concerns of prayer, and with it those of the other precepts, are not so inimical to philosophical interests.[18] Oliver Leaman has recently argued that only on the basis of the heritage of Aristotle will we be able to understand Maimonides' view of the relation between the practical and the theoretical life.[19] I will devote the next section to examine Leaman's argument. This examination will show both where he points us in the right direction and where we must disagree with his analysis. Leaman's book, *Moses Maimonides*, is particularly deserving of attention because in a previous work he took decisive steps toward a refutation of a pervasive theory that Maimonides considered ethics to be essentially nonrational, and when ethics is nonrational it can have no part in a contemplative life.[20]

Leaman's Analysis

Leaman's chapter on "Morality, Law, and Explanation" addresses both the question of the value of prayer and of the value of practical virtues in the contemplative life. His answers, which are both tantalizing and disappointing as they point us in the right direction yet somehow fail to get there, deserve our close attention. Leaman is quite certain that for Maimonides there could be no contemplative value to prayer, although prayer could serve both the general public ("the masses" in Maimonidean terms) at all times and the philosopher in noncontemplative moments. Leaman is quite confident that the philosopher's preferred mode of worship is one of "contemplation and awe, and a complete absence of the anthropomorphic implications which are intimately bound up with rituals such as prayer" (Leaman, 140). His proof text is an intriguing, yet ambiguous,

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Maimonidean statement that compared the inappropriateness of a criticism of sacrifices in biblical times with criticism of prayer in his own time:

> At that time this would have been similar to the appearance of a prophet in these times who, calling upon the people to worship God, would say: 'God has given you a Law commanding you not to pray to Him, not to fast, and not to cry out to Him in misfortune. Your worship should consist solely in meditation without any works at all.'[21] (*Guide*, 3.32:526)

According to Leaman, the prophet's words, which are unacceptable to his contemporaries' religious sensibilities and to the level of their spiritual development, represent Maimonides' own beliefs concerning the value of prayer and contemplation. Strictly speaking, prayer is a concession to the inability of the community to envision a totally spiritual worship.

Remarkably, Leaman sees no other problem of prayer than the problem of anthropomorphism; the assumption that like us God is given to affectivity and change. In this Leaman reflects the general assumption of philosophers of religion that prayer implies belief in changeability of the divine will in response to petition. I suggest, in contradistinction, that this assumption is more at home with a dialogic conception of prayer expressing desires and needs, than with a ritual conception of prayer primarily expressing obedience to the law. It is best to postpone discussion of the problem of anthropomorphism until we are better able to characterize Maimonides' conception of prayer and to identify its ontological implications.

Leaman seems altogether unaware of the tension between the contemplative ideal and the thoroughly this-worldly content of Rabbinic prayer. Indeed, in defending the religious utility of prayer Leaman said:

> A practice like prayer which is frequently performed may help in turning our minds into religious as opposed to

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> ordinary concerns. . . . The more time one spends in prayer the less time one will be thinking about mundane matters. (Leaman, 141-142)

Can this be said of a prayer that is unabashedly focused on such mundane concerns as the healing of the sick, rainfall, plentiful harvest, and the reinstitution of the Davidic monarchy and becomes more "spiritual" in requesting forgiveness for sins and in praising God for the resurrection of the dead?[22] From the perspective of the laborer in the fields and the businesswoman in her shop who are absorbed in pressing daily concerns, prayer most probably turns the mind toward God; it is probably not so from the perspective of the detached philosopher, whose mind adheres to a most adequate conception of God, whether in a contemplative state of being or out of it. The Maimonidean philosopher may be able to think away the anthropomorphic implications of prayer by interpreting them figuratively—as he or she has been taught to do in interpreting Scripture, but unlike Kabbalists of later times, he or she may not overcome the worldliness of Rabbinic prayer by reinterpreting its content.[23]

Although Leaman does not recognize that prayer embodies the problem of the spiritual interest in the practical life, his remarks on the latter are instructive. Leaman directs us to inquire why Maimonides, who so clearly accepts the distinction between an ideal contemplative life of theoretical excellence and a second-best political life of practical excellence—a distinction that is commonly ascribed to Aristotle—seems to reverse himself at the end of *The Guide of the Perplexed* and to link theoretical excellence with moral action. Leaman tries to show that Maimonides was able to overcome the Aristotelian dichotomy between these alternative forms of the best life for a human being. Leaman's arguments, I believe, are ultimately unsuccessful, but they point out the way in which we must proceed to complete the task. Throughout the remainder of this chapter we shall strive to bring this task to completion, and in so doing we shall take a major step toward a transformation of the perspective from which to evaluate the meaning of prayer for a Maimonidean philosopher.

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The Challenge of the End of The Guide

The end of *The Guide* poses one of the most difficult problems in the interpretation of Maimonides.[24] It is an exegetical task, which calls for considerable philosophical ingenuity, to explain how it was possible for the person who maintained that:

> To this ultimate perfection there do not belong either actions or moral qualities . . . (*Guide*, 3.27)

to conclude at the very end of his book that:

> It is clear that the perfection of man that may truly be gloried in is the one acquired by him who has achieved, in a manner corresponding to his capacity, apprehension of Him, may He be exalted, and who knows His providence extending over His creatures as manifested in the act of bringing them into being and in their governance as it is. **The way of life of such an individual, after he has achieved this apprehension, will always have in view loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment, through assimilation to His actions, may he be exalted, just as we have explained many times in this Treatise.** (my emphasis)

One of our central claims in this chapter is that this concluding statement of *The Guide* should be understood as purporting to have solved the problem, which Aristotle identified in the Nicomachean Ethics, of the relation between a life devoted primarily to contemplation and a life of practical excellence.[25] I see this as a claim to have achieved a total synthesis of the two Aristotelian conceptions of the best life for human beings, and I will explain how Maimonides thought he had achieved this feat. My argument suggests that this is a significant step beyond Maimonides' important but less ambitious contribution to Aristotelian ethical theory (evident throughout his writings as well as in these very chapters), in linking together systematically the two supreme Aristotelian excellences by

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making the ethical a means to the intellectual, thereby rendering the structure of ethical reasoning rationally complete with all possible choices subsumed under an ultimate end.[26] What is troubling in Maimonides' further step toward a unification of two rival Aristotelian conceptions of the good life, is that it seems to go beyond what is possible in an Aristotelian conception of virtue.

The crucial step that leads us beyond legitimate Aristotelian bounds is the apparent assertion that intellectual excellence is morally transformative. Maimonides tells us here that whoever achieves philosophical knowledge becomes a good person, a person whose conduct reflects the virtues of loving kindness, righteousness, and judgment. The question to which we must seek an answer is how a purely intellectual state can bring about such a transformation of character?[27] The end of *The Guide* is indeed not the first time that Maimonides seems to adopt the paradoxical Socratic doctrine that identifies virtue with knowledge, but nowhere does he explain how it is possible to bypass the meticulous fine-tuning of the emotions that his Aristotelian conception of virtue requires both for the formation of a character capable of discerning the particulars that are involved in moral choice and for being motivated to act accordingly.[28] If philosophical knowledge of God is presented as morally transformative and as the necessary means to true practical virtue, should we conclude that moral excellence is superior to theoretical excellence?

How seriously should we take the final bold statements of *The Guide* and how heavily should they weigh against evidence to the contrary? Recalling that Maimonides admonishes us never to forget that *The Guide* is an esoteric text with deliberate contradictions, we might ask whether, at the end, Maimonides could simply be feigning traditional piety after having performed a systematic revaluation of traditional Jewish values throughout the book?[29] Such a conclusion will only be justified if no coherent account can be given of the sudden ethical transformation of the contemplative ideal. The following pages will argue that such an account is possible. The argument will be that the conclusion of *The Guide*

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reflects Maimonides' impressive—but under-appreciated—success at unifying Aristotle's ethics into a single synthetic conception of the best life. The argument will show that it is impossible to appreciate Maimonides' contribution without first fully recognizing the Aristotelian challenge to show that the contemplative ideal encompasses both the practical discernment and the motivation (conatus) that are necessary for virtuous action.

Leaman goes part of the way toward recognizing that intellectual perfection for Maimonides **must be** practical. Observing that Maimonides disallows perfected intellects from concerning themselves with moral questions yet also claims that the most perfected (Moses and the prophets) teach law and morality, Leaman explained:

> To get away from this apparent dilemma we have to perform a conceptual reorientation which is not achieved by most of Maimonides' commentators, and reject the dichotomy posed by the intellectual perfection v. moral perfection slogan [sic!]. . . . We need to examine the possibility that intellectual and moral perfections might go together in particular instances of human activity, since this is clearly the model of ultimate perfection which Maimonides envisages. (Leaman, 150)

Unfortunately, in calling for a conceptual reorientation Leaman does not appreciate the seriousness of the Aristotelian dichotomy of intellectual versus practical excellence that Maimonides must overcome. Indeed, he even seems to suggest that the dichotomy is imposed on the Aristotelians by external exegetical interests (ibid.). Consequently, Leaman offers as solution a suggestive model that involves great difficulties:

> The perfected person concentrates upon the nature of God, and as a result performs morally virtuous actions. This is hardly surprising, since the only knowledge we can have of God's nature is through his actions, and in so far as these exhibit grace, love and providence the perfected intellect will seek to imitate these. (Leaman, 151-152)

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Leaman seems not to notice that his model fails to meet Aristotle's criticism of Plato's theory of The Good. He does not take into account the observation that pure intellectual knowledge can be motivationally inert. Furthermore, Leaman does not explain why an intellect would not find complete satisfaction in contemplating the divine perfection? If it should for some reason be moved to act (perhaps by Platonic coercion), what makes it capable of acting? Is theoretical knowledge of The Good sufficient for human goodness? These are classical Aristotelian questions, but all that Leaman offers as an answer is the mysterious and unsatisfying claim that:

> One cannot observe the moral organization of the world and remain aloof from it. The sort of knowledge that one acquires through intellectual inquiry is not dispassionate and objective, in the sense that one can make use of it or not. Human beings have to realize that they are part of a moral order which makes claims on them. . . . [T]hey are nonetheless compelled to try to obey the moral law as far as they can, and in a large part their intellectual knowledge will relate to this obligation on them to replicate (albeit on a smaller scale) the ethical properties which characterize the divine influence on creation. (Leaman, 154)

How can we know that people who understand the world—who know the wisdom that determines that it be as it is, that from God's point of view everything is *very good*—will be motivated to act upon it? Do we have any reason to believe that according to Maimonides objective scientific inquiry can reveal a natural moral order? Although Leaman has no answers to such fundamental questions, I believe his basic insights are sound and point us in the right direction. The problem of the value of the practical virtues in the contemplative life, according to Maimonides, can only be solved by confronting these problems directly in their proper philosophical setting. It is to this setting that we must now turn our attention.

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Plato's Question

When Plato sought to determine what form of social organization best approximated the ideal of justice and described an utopian city-state that is ruled by a philosopher-king, he set the stage and outlined the parameters for the debate on the issues with which we are concerned here. Plato sought to fuse together, in the character of one person, the excellences of the practical life personified by the great statesmen and the excellences of the theoretical life that the philosopher represents. Arguing that excellence in practical matters, supreme among which is ruling a city, results from knowledge—not merely correct opinion—of what is best overall, Plato concluded that a philosopher is the person most qualified to be king.

Having argued in this manner, Plato recognizes a major difficulty. In *Republic* 519d(ff.) he points out that having struggled to release himself or herself from the cave of illusion in which the vast majority of humanity spends its life, and having ascended with enormous effort to enjoy the bright light of unimpeded intuition of truth, the philosopher could have no reason to take an interest in the irrational affairs of the teeming humanity underneath. A city that knows what is best for it—unlike Athens that condemned Socrates to death for philosophizing—would have to coerce an unwilling philosopher to be its king. It is remarkable that Plato sees this compulsion as an act of injustice against the philosopher, for it requires that the philosopher exchange an excellent life for an inferior one.

> Do you mean to say [Glaucon asks] that we must do them this wrong (*adikein*—commit injustice) and compel them to live an inferior life when the better is in their power?

Only a city whose Laws cultivate the philosophic life can justify this imposition, and the philosopher will agree to take turns in government not because it is good for him or her to do so but because the philosopher is indebted to the Laws and their request is just.

The primacy of the theoretical life shines through the utopian ideal of the philosopher-king. Plato makes it perfectly

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clear that persons who achieved their theoretical excellence by themselves, and are not indebted to their city and its Laws for it, would be doing injustice to themselves if they were to descend to the cave. Justice for Plato, as well as for Maimonides, is not primarily a virtue of political institutions.[30] Although he compares the two and models one on the other, Plato distinguishes between justice in the well- ordered city and justice in the well-ordered soul. With regard to individual justice Plato writes:

> But the truth of the matter . . . justice is . . . not in regard to doing one's own business externally, but with regard to that which is within and in the true sense concerns one's self, and the things of one's self. (*Republic*, 433d)

Likewise in *The Guide* 3.53—before ascribing the divine virtues of loving kindness, judgment, and righteousness (according to Jeremiah) to the accomplished philosopher (in 3.54)—Maimonides distinguishes between two senses of justice, one concerned with social relations (*tzedek*, justice) and the other (*tzedakah*, righteousness) with the health of one's soul. With regard to the latter he says:

> 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.

It is this inner-related righteousness then that is characteristic of Maimonidean virtue. Even as this righteousness has important social consequences, it should lead the aspiring philosopher away from external concerns unless these can be shown to perfect the well-being of his rational soul that strives relentlessly to contemplate the divine out of unconditional love. This conception of individual justice supports the view that a life of practical excellence has no intrinsic value for the contemplative.

Aristotle, teaching philosophy in Athens with no right to participate in government or to vote in the assembly, clearly shared these ideals. He advocated a life of theoretical contem-

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plation as the best life for man and a life of practical excellence as a second-best alternative. His ethical theory, as we shall soon see, served to widen the gap between theory and practice by casting serious doubt on the sufficiency of theory for practical excellence. The philosopher, according to him, is not uniquely qualified to rule. Aristotle thus adds to the problem of motivating the contemplative to become involved in practical concerns, the further problem of the likely inability of the contemplative to perform well in such practical affairs. This is likely to be the case because the excellence of *theoria* is concerned with apprehension of necessary, universal, and unchanging truth, while the excellence of practical wisdom (phronesis) requires a finely tuned capacity, both perceptual and emotional, to judge particulars.

Objects of Contemplation

Much attention has been paid in recent decades to Aristotle's moral theory and its conceptions of virtue and happiness.[31] They are studied as promising alternatives to dominant Kantian and utilitarian modes of moral reasoning. These studies will enable us, I believe, to overcome some deep-rooted neo-Kantian misrepresentations of Aristotelian ethics that have adversely affected the interpretation of Maimonides. Some, but not enough, attention has been devoted to Aristotle's conception of the contemplative life, which is the more troubling aspect of his ethical theory in the eyes of modern moral philosophers, some of whom may wish he had never written about it. Without an understanding of what kind of life the vita contemplativa is, and why it might be considered a good life for a human being, it is impossible to assess the possible relations between contemplative and practical concerns. Some important work has nevertheless been done recently in this area, which sheds interesting light on the attempt of Maimonides to overcome the Aristotelian bifurcation of the good life.

Identification of the object of contemplation is of vital importance. Classroom examples of mathematical proofs as paradigmatic objects of contemplation have rendered the idea

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of *theoria* virtually inscrutable and invite the criticism that "many people find intellectual inquiry more enjoyable than contemplating the truths reached through such inquiry; their search is undertaken for the sake of knowing the truth, but the process of inquiry is more attractive to them than the activity of bringing to mind the truths they uncover" (Kraut, 356).[32] We can easily understand contemplation of a mathematical truth as an isolated act but not as a way of living one's life. Let us consider briefly two alternative objects of contemplation: God and practical wisdom (the object of ethical inquiry).

Seeking, in Book XII of the *Metaphysics*, a principle of activity that is eternally actual, taking no part in potentiality and change—an unmoved mover whose perfect unchanging activity makes possible all inferior actualizations of potentialities—Aristotle suggests a notion of God as an eternal unchanging act of a self-contemplating thought.[33] In envisioning the divine life as the constancy of a state that some of us can achieve for short durations, Aristotle sheds some light on his ideal of the contemplative life. Human action becomes most divine when it imitates the infinity of a self-reflective thought whose object is solely its own act of thinking. This state, which Aristotle considers a most perfect happiness, can be likened in many ways to what students of mysticism call a state of pure consciousness. If the contemplative life is devoted to the cultivation of such states, it becomes easier to understand how it can be suggested as a distinct way of life and more difficult to see how it could be **intrinsically** related to practical excellence.

Assuming a conception of the contemplative life as a contemplation of God, A. W. H. Adkins argues that we truly confront the issue of an intrinsic relation between theory and praxis when we inquire "whether an Aristotelian *theoretikos*, while actually engaged in *theoria*, can be offered any sufficing reason for interrupting his contemplation in order to perform a moral or political action."[34] Considering Aristotle's various statements on the issue, Adkins concludes that "It seems impossible to furnish an adequate reason why an Aristotelian *theoretikos* should willingly interrupt his *theoria* in order to perform any moral or political action" (p. 300). The best

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human excellence is that of the intellect, the most excellent human part, and although the life of the intellect does not exhaust the fullness of human life, no reason can be found in Aristotle for choosing to actualize an inferior excellence when it is possible to actualize a better one.[35]

With the Unmoved Mover as the object of contemplation, the problem of the intrinsic value of the practical becomes insurmountable. Being a thought that thinks its own thinking-activity, the object of contemplation has no content, let alone a practical content. Being as complete and self-sufficient as any human activity can be, contemplation creates no motivation for any activity beyond itself.[36] Matters are altered if practical wisdom (*phronesis*) can itself be a primary object of contemplation, as suggested by Amélie Rorty and by Oliver Leaman. Rorty argues that "*theoria* completes and perfects the practical life" and that "there is nothing about the practical life which prevents it from being contemplative, and even enhanced by being contemplated."[37] Likewise, Leaman claims that the rational analysis of a given moral system is a demonstrative rather than a dialectical intellectual activity. He concludes therefore that the "Reasons for the Commandments" (which Maimonides discussed at some length in Part III of *The Guide*), are proper objects of contemplation (Leaman, 158).[38] If Leaman and Rorty are right then contemplation can be practical in its content, but it still remains to be seen whether the moral life is the most choice worthy object of contemplation and whether contemplating it can affect praxis.

It is noteworthy that both Rorty and Leaman are able to argue for a contemplative completion of practical excellence only by downgrading the rational stature of practical wisdom (*phronesis*). Rorty suggests, hesitantly, that "even when the *phronimos* can give a perspicacious account of the merits of a course of action, he need not necessarily have a reflective theoretical understanding of the connection between his virtues and the *energeiai* that constitute a well-lived life" (p. 385).[39] This idea is troubling in more than one way. Most importantly, it suggests that virtue has more to do with good habits of perception and emotional response than with an articulated conception of the good life.[40] The relation between knowledge

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and virtue in Aristotle is thus pushed to the opposite extreme of their Socratic identification.

Furthermore, it becomes difficult to see how contemplation will improve the situation. How will the *phronimos* come to recognize the rational structure of the good life if not by proceeding to higher levels of decision making (commanding a whole army or ruling a city)? And if a man is incapable of performing the duties of these offices he shows himself to be lacking not in *theoria* but in *phronesis*. If the cause of this deficiency is improper knowledge of human nature then *episteme*, not *theoria*, will enhance his practical life. If contemplation of the general structure of the human good can be contemplated (not learned!), it is by the true *phronimos* who already knows it. It is he who will be aided by such contemplation in maintaining the objectivity of a person who must consider a multitude of interests and render a wise decision. Pericles may benefit from contemplating the good of Athens, but why should Aristotle cease his contemplation to advise Alexander?

Leaman's comments are strikingly similar. He argues (p. 153) that when Maimonides criticizes a view of the moral life as the ultimate human perfection "he has in mind the following of moral laws without solid understanding of why those laws are valid, and what role they have to play in the development of human understanding. One can adhere to laws merely through tradition, or through habit and inclination." Such obedience to a law is certainly an unlikely image of human perfection, but it is also a pale imitation of the practical perfection that Maimonides deems a necessary preparation for the intellectual love of God. Chapters 4 and 5 of Maimonides' introduction to his commentary to Tractate *Avot* of the Mishna, provide strong proof that it is a reflective virtue that prepares the way for, and participates in, a single-minded pursuit of the knowledge of God. Furthermore, if philosophical understanding and contemplation are to enhance mindless rote performance of legal duties and to make it into genuine moral excellence, it is unclear how they can bring about a transformation of character that requires painstaking habituation.

We begin to approach a genuine solution to the practicality of contemplation with Leaman's other claim that the

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