

ON SPINOZA AND MAIMONIDES

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"I WISHED to show," wrote Karl Pearson, "that the study of Maimonides was traceable even in Spinoza's most finished exposition of his philosophy."¹ To the same effect wrote Dr. M. Joël in his *Zur Genesis der Lehre Spinozas*. "*Man weiss es heute, dass Spinoza nicht oberflächlich, sondern auf's genaueste vertraut war mit den Schriften des Maimonides. Man muss aber die Lektüre dieser Schriften nicht beschränken auf die Jugendzeit des Spinozas, so dass ihm etwa bloss Reminiscenzen in Kopfe hängen gelieben wären.*" Joël's monograph, which preceded Pearson's paper, was published in 1871, but the question of the probable influences of the Rabbi of Cordova on the excommunicated Jew of Amsterdam has not yet been resolved, if ever it will be. In 1924 Dr. Leon Roth, of the University of Manchester, published his engrossing study on Spinoza, Descartes, and Maimonides, in the Preface to which he says: "In the following study I have endeavoured to show that (1) in the relation to Descartes, Spinoza represents the radical opposition of monism to pluralism; and that (2) this same opposition, in a precisely similar context and with identical presuppositions and consequences, is to be found in a work which on other counts may be shown to have deeply influenced Spinoza, the *Guide for the Perplexed* of Maimonides." In concluding his study, Roth solves for himself the problem by equating the *Ethics* and the *Guide*. "Maimonides and Spinoza speak through-

¹ Pearson's essay can be found in *Mind*, volume VIII. He takes his stand with Joël and against Sorley. (The latter attacked Joël's position in an article in *Mind*, volume V.) But Pearson argues from a knowledge of the *Yad Hachazoko*, not of the *Moreh Nebuchim*. Yet what is said here applies to him no less than to the others; for though he quotes different expressions, they display no more cogency.

The reader might find it to his interest to contrast the present article with one by Benjamin Ginzburg on "Spinoza and the Jewish Tradition," *Menorah Journal*, February, 1927.

out with one voice," he says. "The monism of Spinoza is a direct derivative of the characteristic from which the monotheistic idea, in opposition to the current mythological pluralism, had assumed in the mind of Maimonides. The *Guide for the Perplexed*, therefore, is the key . . . to the growth of Spinoza's system in Spinoza's own mind, comprising as it does both his own positive philosophy and the grounds of its opposition to and rejection of Cartesianism. . .²

It is not within the province of this essay to consider the arguments advanced by either Joël or Roth in support of the position they take, to weigh them in the balance of reason and pass judgment on them. It must suffice if we say that whatever similarities and parallelisms they find between the two systems, are likenesses or agreement only of accident and language, but not of essence. The Pope speaks of God and the mystic speaks of God: do they speak of the same God? And yet they use much the same words in speaking of Him, each describing Him as perfect and good, loving and just and merciful. But is their reference to the same God? The sky looks blue, and so does water, yet sky is not water. Even so is it with Spinoza and Maimonides: to the God of neither can be ascribed human passions and qualities, but one God is Spinoza's and the other God is that of Maimonides.

The only heritage that Spinoza took from the Synagogue is the term God, and the term only. Spinoza emptied it of the meaning to which the thought and life of manifold centuries had made contribution and refilled it with an import all his own. It is from that act of genius that the remembrance of his name springs; and it is for that act that his name will be forgotten, but to be recalled again. In an age when men are torn between their thoughts and emotions, between, as Unamuno says, the nay-saying of their minds and the yea-saying of their hearts, between belief in the most extravagant catch-at-straws and the shallowest of materialisms, for men of such an age the gilded phrase of Spinoza's, *Deus sive Natura*, may have its allurements. "God is Nature" or "Nature is God," they are apt to

² It is of interest to note that in a later essay, called "Jewish Thought in the Modern World," which appears in *The Legacy of Israel* (Oxford, 1927), Dr. Roth does not speak with so assured a temper. "The contention that Spinoza is a Jewish [sic] philosopher," he writes, "Jewish, that is, not only in origin but in inspiration, needs to be limited carefully. 'Spinozism,' it has been happily remarked [by Pollock], 'is not a system but a habit of mind.' Now it is this 'habit of mind,' not any specific system of doctrine, which divergent opinion in the modern world has found valuable in Spinoza, and it is this 'habit of mind,' again apart from any question of specific doctrine, which Spinoza derived from the Hebraic tradition."

say, and autosuggest themselves into a soundless peace. But there may arise a generation which will not know Couè, and which will not be satisfied with compromises that are substanceless and conciliations that can quiet only the tongue; men who will look upon themselves in no false mirror, who will know that they are constituted of irreconcilable elements. They will find no content in a fictional truce, and to them Spinoza's phrase will have a totally different purport. "Deus SIVE Natura," they will say. There is God and there is Nature, and the twain are not one. We shall render unto God what is God's and unto Nature what is its due. It was Goethe who said, "As a poet, I am a polytheist; as a naturalist, a pantheist; as a moral man, a deist; and in order to express my mind I need all these forms." He follows a misleading scent who would find God by way of science or philosophy. God can be known only in religion.

Maimonides was a pious man thinking the thoughts of a philosopher; Spinoza was a philosopher trying to feel pious. One presents the spectacle of a man rationalizing his beliefs; the other, of one trying to believe his thoughts. Maimonides starts with the belief in a transcendental God which he attempts to translate into logical propositions; Spinoza starts with logical propositions which he attempts to vitalize by referring them to—

"I don't know what you mean by *glory*," Alice said.

'When *I* use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose to mean—neither more nor less.'

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.'

'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master—that's all.'

Spinoza, too, like Jacob, strove with God, and it was God who won—but not the God of the Patriarchs or of Psalms, but the WORD. Spinoza thought he would vitalize the Universe by naming it God. It became his *Schlagwort*. "Metaphysics," William James has said, "has usually followed a very primitive kind of quest. You know how men have always hankered after unlawful magic and you know what a great part in magic *words* have always played. If you have his name or the formula of incantation that binds him, you can control the spirit, genie, afrite, or whatever the power may be. . . . So the universe has always appeared to the

natural mind as a kind of enigma of which the key must be sought in the shape of some illuminating or power-bringing word or name. That word names the universe's *principle*. 'God,' 'Matter,' 'Reason,' 'the Absolute,' 'Energy,' are so many solving names. You can rest when you have them. You are at the end of your metaphysical quest."

By naming the Universe God, Spinoza thought that he thereby resolves all riddles, answers all queries, makes life worth living by setting before man an object which he could love and joy in the loving. These had been the functions of God for his predecessors, and being faced by problems which had been theirs, too, he offered the same solution. . . . "Thinking is the attempt to satisfy a special impulse," said Bradley, "and the attempt implies an assumption about reality." Even before he became a metaphysician, Spinoza felt that *somehow* the Universe *must* be divine, that man must love something, and that "we cannot have too much of merriment"—and the only key to the solution is, God. And so we have "*Deus sive Natura* . . ." But have we, really? . . .

"Ah, love, let us be true
 To one another! for the world which seems
 To lie before us like a land of dreams,
 So various, so beautiful, so new,
 Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
 Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
 And we are here as on a darkling plain
 Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
 Where ignorant armies clash by night."

If the taint of a philosophical system is dependent upon the temperament of the interpreter, why should Arnold's reaction to the Spinozistic Universe be less valid than even Spinoza's own?

The basic assumption about the Universe for both Spinoza and Maimonides is that it is knowable. To repeat our quotation from Bradley, "Thinking is the attempt to satisfy a special impulse, and the attempt implies an assumption about reality." He who assumes the least and goes the farthest is the greatest philosopher.

But our philosophers did not agree in much else. They soon reached crossroads and parted company. To Spinoza, in order that the real be knowable, it must be simple, a unit, and, though infinite, yet all-inclusive. (Whatever that may mean, I know not.) But

Maimonides went beyond this: Nature to be knowable, must be one; but to be one, it must have been created by One. In other words, there is a Universe only if there is a God: the Universe is; therefore God is.

The God of Maimonides is not He whom the vulgar worship. What can *they* know about Him? Maimonides quotes the words of the cynical Preacher: "For God is in Heaven, and thou upon Earth; therefore let thy words be few." Being a rationalist, he attempts to give religion a rational content, and in so doing inadvertently empties it of its real burden, and leaves it without a sufficient *raison d'être*. "You must therefore consider the entire globe as one individual being. . . . This mode of considering the universe is, as will be explained, indispensable, that is to say," says the Rabbi, "it is very useful for demonstrating the unity of God; it also helps to elucidate the principle that He who is One has created only *one* being."

From His unity we must deduce His incorporeality, for "without incorporeality there is no unity, for a corporeal thing is in the first case not simple, but composed of matter and form [which Pearson, in another connection, translates as extension and thought, respectively, forgetting, seemingly, that Maimonides is an Aristotelian], and secondly, as it has extension it is also divisible."

But that God is one and incorporeal are the only things we can assert of Him and remain rational. As we shall see, we must not say even that He exists, unless analogically, and "we use 'one' in reference to God to express that there is nothing similar to Him, but we do not mean to say that an attribute of unity is added to His essence."

God is the Place of the Universe, but the Universe is not His place. It is in Him that everything lives, and moves, and has its being. He is the source of reality and as such transcends reality and is wholly-other than anything known or knowable. We can affirm nothing of Him except that, in some way, He is our Creator and of all we see. "All must be taught," holds Maimonides, "that there is no similarity in any way whatsoever between Him and His creatures; that His existence is not like the existence of His creatures, His life not like that of any living being, His wisdom not like the wisdom of the wisest of men; and that the difference between Him and His creatures is not merely quantitative, but absolute; I

mean to say that all must understand that our wisdom and His, and our power and His, do not differ quantitatively or qualitatively, or in a similar manner, for two things, of which one is the strong and the other weak, are necessarily similar, belong to the same class, and can be included in one definition. The same is the case with all other comparisons; they can only be made between two things belonging to the same class. Anything predicated of God is totally different from our attribute; no definition can comprehend both; therefore His existence and that of any other being totally differ from each other, and the term existence is applied to both homonymously."

Unlike the God of Spinoza, the God of Maimonides "has no positive attribute whatever. The negative attributes, however, are those which are necessary to direct the mind to the truths which we must believe concerning God; for, on the one hand, they do not imply any plurality, and on the other, they convey to man the highest possible knowledge of God; e. g., it has been established by proof that some being must exist besides those things which can be perceived by the senses or apprehended by the mind, when we say of this being that it exists, we mean that its non-existence is impossible."

It is difficult, if not impossible, to grasp Maimonides' meaning in these words. As has been already pointed out by both Gersonides and Grescas, he argues as though not—non-existent could possibly mean anything else than existent, or not-plural anything else but simple. Perhaps all he means is that we are to take our qualifications of God as we are to take the myth of the cave in Plato's *Republic*: only analogically, as imperfect approximations to the truth. But for the purposes of metaphor, why should positive assertions be less admissible than negative ones?

Yet, if we are unable to know anything of His attributes—not alone because "a boundary is undoubtedly set to the human mind which it cannot pass," but also because God *ex hypothesi* can have no attributes—we may, however, know Him by His actions. God is known by what He does, not by what He is. "This kind of attribute," says Maimonides, "is separate from the essences of the thing described, and, therefore, appropriate to be employed in describing the Creator, especially since we know that these different actions do not imply that different elements must be contained in the substance

of the agent, by which the different actions are produced. On the contrary, all the actions of God emanate from His essence, not from any extraneous thing superadded to His essence." Fire bleaches certain things and blackens others, melts and makes hard, boils and burns; and yet fire does not accomplish each of these acts by a different element or peculiar property, but only by its heat. As Saint Paul has it, "There are diversities of operations, but the same spirit."

In this Maimonides would be quite correct if he had also said that we could know God as well as we know the nature of fire. If we did not know that it was the *same* fire which both melts and hardens, would it be unreasonable for us to believe that each of these operations was performed by a different fire, or that it was from different elements in the flame that the different effects followed? Maimonides posits the unknowability of God, like the Godhead of Meister Eckhart, and then says, "His works give evidence of His existence, and show *what must be assumed* concerning Him, that is to say, what must be attributed to Him either affirmatively or negatively." Can we justifiably assume anything about the cause if our knowledge is limited solely to the effect? Unless we *know* that God produces everything, why can we not say that the thunder comes from Thor, that rain is sent by Frey, and that our garden flowers are cared for by Freya and the Elves? From diversity of operations we may infer a diversity of spirits, or a diversity in spirit; unless, of course, we *know* that they all and singularly issue from one ultimate and simple cause. But to Maimonides the existence of God is never more than an assumption from which the unity of Nature incorrigibly follows. However, since God is unknowable, and "since the existence of a relation between God and man, or between Him and other things, has been denied"—what is He that we should be mindful of Him? If God exists, then Nature is one; but perhaps all the host of Olympus or of Asgard exist, and Nature is not simple. It is a rather dangerous business to make one assumption in order to establish another assumption.

The Universe is knowable and all its ways are reasonable. It is on this assumption, to them a postulate, that both Spinoza and Maimonides construct their respective cosmologies. So far do they agree; but Maimonides went farther: he would bind even the Infinite Wisdom—which, by hypothesis, can have *nothing* in com-

mon with what we call our wisdom,—he would subject even the Omniscient to our so-called Laws of Reason to what we at present look upon as Eternal Verities. “We do not call a person weak,” he says, “because he cannot move a thousand hundredweights, and we do not say that God is imperfect because He cannot transform Himself into a body, or cannot create another being like Himself, or make a square whose diagonal should be equal to one of its sides . . . there are things which are impossible, whose existence cannot be admitted, and whose creation is excluded from the power of God.” Even God cannot contradict the Laws of Reason, yet it is blasphemy to assert that His reason resembles man’s!

In Spinoza the law of thought becomes the law of reality; in Maimonides the law of thought becomes not only the law of Nature, but of God, too—though he would be the last to admit it. To view God *sub specie hominis*, he would say, is the greatest of sins.

The answer to the problems our philosophers raise can best be given in the words of Maimonides himself: “The infinite cannot be comprehended or circumscribed.” Spinoza has as one of his first definitions that the Real is infinite and consists of infinite attributes; but too soon did he forget this and constructed a universe of which thought and extension alone are attributes. In a universe which is infinite and includes infinite possibilities, what avails it to us if we know but one or two of them? Are we made blessed by the possession of such piece-meal knowledge? Can the sound of two notes soothe our ears when we know that an entire and endless symphony is being played, on a cithern and Aeolian harp, viol and psaltery, dulcimer and Pandean pipes? Fire bleaches and blackens, that we know and nothing else. But some day it may burn us, and what then?

Ultimately was it not the Law of Contradiction that both Spinoza and Maimonides worshipped, though the former raised an altar to Substance and the latter to the *Primum Mobile*? Neither called his god by his right name; their religious natures made it ineffable.

“And they shall say unto me, What is His name? What shall I say unto them?” . . . Why, say, the Law of Contradiction. . . “But, behold, they will not believe me, for they will say, The Lord hath not appeared unto thee.”

Creation names Him, say Spinoza and Maimonides; especially the mind of man. “Before the Universe was created, says the

Talmud, "there was only the Almighty and His name." None but the "little gnostics," of whom Santayana speaks, can undertake to call Him by His *nomen proprium*; and the rest of us still believe that "the infinite cannot be comprehended or circumscribed," that Life and its Setting overflow the articulate. God is not an hypothesis, but a conjecture, and only in a mystical moment does it fulfill itself.

It were time that we, too, like the Romans of yore, raise an altar to the Unknown God—but not in the spirit of Rabbi Moses ben Maimon.