

Moses Maimonides

OLIVER LEAMAN



MOSES MAIMONIDES

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It is the aim of this series to publish books and collections of essays in the general area of Jewish philosophy. A broad interpretation will be taken of what Jewish philosophy comprises, and the series will be interested in receiving proposals which involve a philosophical treatment of a Jewish thinker or topic, or which look at some aspect of Jewish cultural life from a philosophical perspective.

MEDIEVAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

An Introduction

Dan Cohn-Sherbok

FACING THE OTHER

The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas

Edited by Seán Hand

MOSES MAIMONIDES

OLIVER LEAMAN

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For Rosa, Imogen, and Perdita

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Preface

There are many books and articles which deal with aspects of Maimonides and his thought, and any author requires a good reason for adding to what already exists. In this book I argue that there is a need for a re-examination of the traditional interpretation of the philosophical thought of Moses Maimonides. That interpretation is based upon two principles, both of which are suspect. The first principle is that Maimonides set about a strategy of hiding his real opinions beneath a disguise of careful and conflicting language, which alerted his supporters to his genuine views while pacifying the suspicions of those incapable of understanding or appreciating his real message. It will come as no surprise to those who have come across some of my work in the area of medieval philosophy that I oppose this approach to Maimonides. Such a process of interpretation falls neatly within the orientalist mode of analysis, which continually looks for a hidden and more significant meaning beneath the text itself, based as it is upon a subtle rejection of the value of the text as a philosophical argument. On the contrary, I argue here that Maimonides presents powerful and intriguing arguments which deserve serious philosophical consideration, raising as they do issues concerning the appropriate analysis of language and the notion of a human point of view. It is a great shame that the extreme care which Maimonides took over his means of presentation has been distorted by the orientalists to represent a linguistic device to disguise his argument, whereas in reality he was trying to present the argument in as clear and terse a form as possible. One of the results of the influence of the traditional interpretation of Maimonides is the proliferation of extraordinarily

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'scholarly' articles on his work, with a text almost submerged under footnotes and respectful references to other commentators. Although there is interesting material in much of this work, it often succeeds in treating as a sideline the actual argument which Maimonides produces. In this book the emphasis throughout is upon the arguments themselves.

The second principle which will be challenged here is that Maimonides is a specifically Jewish thinker. The majority of the literature dealing with his thought tries to relate his philosophical and legal work, with the emphasis upon the reconciliation of Aristotelian philosophy and Jewish religious principles. This is an interesting topic, and was obviously of concern to Maimonides, but it is a great error to see his philosophical ambitions as being limited to this issue. Maimonides was Jewish, and a leader of his community both while alive and even today through his persisting thoughts as represented in his work. Judaism was the context within which he worked, but of far more importance when we come to his philosophy is the influence of the tradition of philosophy in the Islamic world. In this book he is treated as a member of the distinguished group of thinkers in the Islamic world who took on board the methodology of Aristotle and applied it to difficult conceptual issues in interesting and perceptive ways. The main focus is on his *Guide of the Perplexed* and some of the main philosophical concerns he has in that work. There is no attempt here at providing a comprehensive guide to Maimonides' philosophical thought, but something of the flavour of his approach to important philosophical issues. Philosophy is a pursuit with universal aspirations (hence the opposition by particular religious institutions) and it is misleading to think of Maimonides as a specifically *Jewish* philosopher. On the other hand, when we consider the breadth and depth of his work we are at the same time celebrating the richness of the cultural milieu which the Islamic world constituted at that period of history.

Many people and institutions have helped me with this book. Libraries in a variety of places have been of great assistance, as has my college library. The British Academy kindly assisted financially some of my work on Maimonides' use of the notion of imagination. A version of the chapter on imagination appears in *Religion* (1988) 18, pp. 69–80, and was presented as a paper at the University of Cambridge 850th Anniversary Maimonides Lecture Series in 1985. I have presented part of the book as papers on a number of

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occasions at the Universities of Exeter, Liverpool and Wales, and am grateful for the comments by participants. Dr Erwin Rosenthal has yet again proved to be immensely stimulating during the course of our discussions on Maimonides, and I am profoundly grateful to him. I have enjoyed and learnt a good deal from the discussions I have had with Peter Edwards on more general philosophical topics. My thanks go to them both. They are in no way responsible for any errors which exist in the text.

Liverpool,
June 1988

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Introduction to the Second Edition

It is interesting to speculate on what a book on the philosophy of Moses Maimonides ought to include. He is such a multi-faceted character, with major contributions to thought completely outside of philosophy, and also a thinker who plays a crucial role within Judaism itself. At the time he was working, the role of philosophy itself was highly controversial, and his work was met with great hostility in much of the Jewish world. He had available to him a wide variety of philosophical traditions in which to work. Some of the issues with which he was concerned seem rather dated now, especially when they are part of the complex ontology of Neoplatonism, and we are certainly today far less excited about the apparent clash between Aristotelianism and monotheistic religion. There is also the problem, which has been raised to the status of a dogma by many interpreters of Maimonides, that he talks about hiding one's real views in the language one uses to prevent the unsympathetic from comprehending precisely what the argument is. All these factors seem to imply that the study of Maimonides is going to be an historical investigation into an interesting but archaic set of concepts and arguments.

There certainly are good reasons for examining Maimonides within the context of his times. However, there are even more reasons for emphasising how modern a thinker Maimonides is. After all, like most Jews who find themselves within a predominantly non-Jewish culture, he writes and thinks in the language and concepts of that culture, in his case Arabic. Like many Jews in our time, he was obliged to leave his country of origin and

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establish a new home in a variety of other countries in which he remained a member of a minority group. Finally, it is still the case that philosophy is a controversial topic from a religious point of view. After all, if one can through faith acquire the sorts of information about how to live and what to believe, what is the need for any other means of gaining information, such as philosophy? Judaism often regards philosophy as at best an unnecessary and at worst a discreditable activity. So the main issues which struck Maimonides as problematic, and in particular the clash between faith and reason, are no less problematic today. This perhaps accounts for the great interest which there continues to be in the thought of Maimonides. Like all great thinkers, he has his finger on issues of continuing relevance in both philosophy and religion, and we are led back to considering his arguments and conclusions.

Of course, Maimonides is such a prominent *Jewish* thinker that it is often difficult to give appropriate weight to his role as a thinker *tout court*. To a certain extent his style emphasises the predominance of the Jewish side of his work, since his references and examples generally are to the Torah and the Talmud, while the conceptual machinery which he employs philosophically is firmly within the tradition of Islamic philosophy of the Peripatetic tradition. We have to remember that Maimonides was operating within the period of what Harry Wolfson calls the "age of religious philosophy". This does not mean that all the philosophers were concerned all the time entirely with religious issues, but it does mean that even where philosophers were concerned with issues with no particular religious implications, they would tend to discuss them within the context of a particular faith. Philosophy during this period had a logical semantics, but a religious syntax. The situation today is very different, so that we can ask a Jewish philosopher such as Levinas to explain what links there are between his metaphysical views and his religious views, and not be surprised when we are told that the links are tenuous at best. It is possible today for there to be relative autonomy between religion and philosophy since there is a language of the latter which is independent of the former; this was not the case for Maimonides. This is not in any way to detract from his philosophical achievements, but merely puts within a context the shape which those achievements take.

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I realise that there are other interpreters of Maimonides who emphasise his religious views at the expense of his philosophical principles, but that is not the approach which is pursued in this book. Here pride of place is given to Maimonides as a philosopher, and not just as a religious philosopher or thinker, but as one of the major philosophers. He achieves such a rank through analysis of the level of his arguments. Those arguments are challenging and incisive, and invite thorough philosophical treatment.

Oliver Leaman
Liverpool, January 1997

Abbreviations

- A* *Averroes and his Philosophy*, O. Leaman (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988).
- GP* *The Guide of the Perplexed*, translated and with an introduction and notes by S. Pines (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1963). References are in this order – book, chapter; page number.
- I* *An Introduction to Medieval Islamic Philosophy*, O. Leaman (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985).
- Int* ‘Translator’s Introduction’, S. Pines, in *GP* lvii–cxxxiv.
- TT* *Tahāfut al-tahāfut*, ed. M. Bouyges (Bibliotheca Arabica Scholasticorum, Série Arabe, 3; Imprimerie Catholique, Beirut, 1930); page-references are to this edition and all translations are from Averroes’ *Tahāfut al-tahāfut* (*The Incoherence of the Incoherence*) trans. and int. S. Van Den Bergh (2 vols; Luzac, London, 1954; repr. 1969 and 1978) and incorporating the *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*), al-Ghazali.

Translations are taken from the works referred to in the text, with occasional modifications.

The cultural background

It is the thesis of this book that Moses Maimonides falls squarely within the tradition of philosophy as it developed in the Islamic world during the period labelled medieval in the West. This sort of philosophy is frequently called Islamic philosophy, since it grew and flourished in the Islamic cultural world, but many of its protagonists were not Muslims. Jews and Christians were on occasion enthusiastic participants in the leading philosophical disputes of the time. It is not surprising that this should be the case, since this sort of philosophy is based upon the universalism of Greek thought represented at the highest level by Plato and Aristotle. They dealt with ideas and arguments which clearly originated within the Greek cultural milieu, yet equally clearly possess a far wider relevance and interest. Many of their works came to be translated into Arabic, often via Syriac, in 'Abbāsīd Bagdad, along with a great mass of lesser material by commentators seeking to explain the arguments of the main Greek philosophers, and in particular Aristotle. The development of Greek thought in the Islamic world was also mediated through the neo-Platonic interpretations of Plotinus and Proclus. Greek philosophy in the Islamic world, suggestively translated by the term *falsafa* to emphasize its Greek origins, was frequently the object of controversy and persecution. It seemed to some to contravene the main principles of religion and to import a whole corpus of techniques and terminology which stood in opposition to the traditional Islamic sciences of grammar, law, theology and literature. On occasion *falsafa* was opposed by xenophobic influences in the Islamic world, suspicious of foreign influence and

dubious about the need for any assistance from an ultimately non-Muslim source for conceptual problems which might arise.

Despite these problems, many outstanding thinkers arose within the Islamic world, ranging from Fārābī, Avicenna (ibn Sīnā) and Ghazālī in the East to ibn Ṭufayl, ibn Bājja and ibn Rushd in the West. There is no space here to describe the work of these thinkers directly, although it will emerge indirectly in our account of Maimonides (and for more detail on these thinkers see *I* and *A passim*). What made the thought of these philosophers so compelling to a large number of intellectuals at that time? It was the great strength of conceptual thought which they represented, and the apparently impregnable conclusions which they drew on issues of such significance as the origin of the world, the nature of human happiness, the life to come, the nature of God and the ordinary world. Many of these conclusions ran counter to the way in which Islam represented basic religious truths. The philosophers (*falāsifa*) did not conclude from this contrast that philosophy was superior to religion, or that the latter must be revised to take account of the discoveries made by the former. They tended to argue that religion presents in a simple and unsophisticated form the same sort of truth presented by philosophy, which only a few thinkers are of appropriate stature to appreciate.

There has been a great deal of argument as to whether they were really sincere in their adherence to religion, or only mouthing platitudes to save themselves from the ire of the political and religious authorities. They took to heart the tragic end of Socrates, who openly appeared to contradict the practices and beliefs of religion in Greece, and who suffered the ultimate penalty as a result of expressing himself so clearly and publicly. Such a response might seem timorous and unworthy, and it can be represented in a more favourable light by suggesting that the *falāsifa* were concerned that ordinary believers would find their faith challenged by an unsuccessful attempt at understanding the difficult conceptual points which the philosophers made about their common religion. Socrates could take a rather contemptuous attitude towards ordinary Athenians, but the *falāsifa* could not adopt a similar posture with respect to the ordinary but pious Muslims in their community. As Muslims themselves they appreciated the links which existed between their sophisticated analysis of Islam and the simple faith of their co-religionists. The *falāsifa* were obliged out of more than just self-

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interest, then, to preserve the simple faith of the community while initiating debate on conceptual issues among those capable of understanding and benefitting from that debate.

The rather awkward position in which the *falāsifa* found themselves vis-à-vis their local communities led them to express themselves very carefully. They did not want readers to concentrate upon those aspects of their work which seem to embody heretical or challenging doctrines if those readers were unable to understand how such doctrines are really acceptable from a religious point of view. There is no doubt that the *falāsifa* thought long and hard about how they were going to present their views, and they were concerned to portray themselves as perfectly ordinary believers with orthodox views. It is worth mentioning at this stage that there is a tradition in Islam of *taqiya*, of dissimulation of one's real view under a veil of orthodoxy to prevent the authorities from persecuting one's genuine heterodox opinions. This was particularly prevalent among Shi'ite minorities ruled by Sunni governments, and it gave rise to a well-developed tradition of esoteric (*bāṭin*) as opposed to exoteric (*ẓāhir*) writing. When one understands the tradition one is able to understand the points which the writer is really making, whereas the more naïve reader will fail to grasp these points (fortunately for the writer) and will be satisfied with the views which the writer appears to present as his own. Much of the work which has taken place on *falsafa* has assumed that much philosophical writing within this genre falls within the esoteric tradition, and to understand it one must always be alert to the constraints under which the author worked and the sort of audience which he hoped to attract as compared with the sort of audience which he hoped to placate.

I have in the past criticized the implications which the interpreters of *falsafa* have drawn from the existence of an esoteric tradition in Islam. I have argued that this approach places far too much emphasis upon the style in which the *falāsifa* wrote and not nearly enough emphasis upon their actual arguments (*I*, pp. 182–201). It leads to the analysis of philosophical works as being on a par with literary works, to an over-concentration upon minor aspects of the style as opposed to major details of the argument. It refuses to acknowledge the philosophical interest which lies within so much Islamic philosophy, and treats it as something else, something less demanding. The reason why this standard approach to Islamic philosophy is so prevalent is not difficult to discover. Most

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scholars in the field are primarily linguists and historians, not philosophers, and they find it much more attractive to deal with texts in terms of their linguistic and historical context as compared with their philosophical implications. Along with this goes the very different way in which Islamic philosophy is treated as compared, for example, with English philosophy or phenomenological philosophy. Islamic philosophy, in the way in which the term is used here, is the philosophy which arose in the Islamic world during the Middle Ages, just as English philosophy is the philosophy which takes place in England and phenomenology the philosophy which continues the work of Husserl and Heidegger. Modern, medieval and ancient philosophy is treated as philosophy in its own right, with a history, interesting arguments, and major figures in their own right. Islamic philosophy, though, has fallen foul of the orientalist obsession with refusing to acknowledge that people in the Islamic world actually say what they mean when they talk and write. The orientalist turn in the interpretation of Islamic philosophy has led to the development of a pseudo-subject, a literary analysis whereby one can arrive at some glimmerings of the personal opinions of the authors beneath the covering of their writings.

One might think that if any case can be made out for treating philosophy as an esoteric kind of writing, it could be made out for the sort of philosophy produced by Maimonides. Not only might it be thought that his radical questioning would set him outside his community, but the political conditions in which much of Jewry existed made dissimulation and conversion vital if existence was to be preserved. Moses ben Maimon was born between 1135 and 1138 in Córdoba, where his father was a rabbi and judge in the Jewish community. The Jewish community in Spain was well established, and on the whole thoroughly integrated into Andalusian culture. During Muslim rule there were long periods during which both Jews and Christians were tolerated and allowed to rise to high positions in the state. In cultural terms there is no doubt that the Jewish community became enthusiastic Arabic speakers and writers, and studied in depth many of the leading works produced in the Islamic scholarly world. It was quite possible for someone to remain faithful to his own religious traditions and yet at the same time try to assimilate the exciting discoveries in medicine, mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, and political thought which appeared in Arabic and largely through the work of Muslim intellec-