Maimonides on Perfecting Perfection

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This article addresses two critical questions concerning Maimonides's views on human perfection at the end of his *Guide of the Perplexed*.[1] The first is: For those who have reached the highest category of perfection—intellectual perfection, apprehension of the divine, the divine science[2]—what prescription does Maimonides offer for perfecting that perfection, for solidifying the bond between them and God?[3] I will argue: 1) that there is more than one method—that Maimonides indeed specifies two distinct methods—for stabilizing and intensifying the highest kind of

[1] Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* (trans. Shlomo Pines; 2 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), page references appear in parentheses in the text.

[2] There is simply no gainsaying the fact that the *Guide* suggests both that knowledge of the divine is possible—as the closing chapters of the *Guide* indicate—and that it is not. That even Moses may not—or cannot—see God's face, that is, know God's essence, but may know only his ways (1.54), strongly indicates that no human being can attain knowledge of the divine. See also 3.9:436–37 for a particularly strong statement of this position. Scholars continue to attempt either to reconcile the two opposing views or to privilege the one or the other. Howard Kreisel suggests a more fruitful approach in *Maimonides' Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law, and the Human Ideal* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999). Kreisel treats Maimonides's statements as context-dependent, with different aspects of his view variously highlighted and emphasized as his purposes dictate. Another, related, instance of this sort of internal contradiction is Maimonides's vehement denial, on the one hand, in Part 1 of the *Guide*, of any relation whatsoever between God and anything else, insofar as there is no commonality of any kind—not even existence itself—between God and any other existent, and insofar as there is no category that God shares in any way with any other existent (see esp. 1.52); and, on the other, Maimonides's several references in Part 3 to a "bond" between human beings and God which is intellect (3:51:620, 621; 3.52:629), and even of "union" with the divine via intellect (3.51:623–24; also 1.18:44; see also 1.1:22-23). I proceed henceforth on the assumption that apprehension of God is in some sense possible for human beings, and that human beings, even while embodied, have some relation to God via their intellects. The final chapters of the *Guide*, with which this essay is most directly concerned, tend to endorse these assumptions. For further discussion, see n. 48.

[3] Fervent worship by those who have incorrect beliefs concerning the divine can only compound their imperfection, since what they worship is essentially a figment of their imagination (3.51:620).

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perfection; 2) that the two methods yield two distinct ranks of perfect individuals; and 3) that Maimonides, in his attempt to perfect his own perfection, adopts the second method but achieves only the rank of those who employ the first.

The second question is: What is the significance and purpose of the *imitatio dei* with which the *Guide* concludes and which characterizes the life of perfected individuals who are "truly to be praised"? I will contend that *imitatio dei* represents not a fifth and higher category of perfection—the highest category of perfection remains the intellectual apprehension of the divine—but the meritorious response of some perfected individuals to having attained, in addition to apprehension of the divine, knowledge of God's providence and governance—in particular, knowledge of their limits. What perfected individuals understand is that God's providence and governance reach on their own no further than the species level, so that only human beings can extend divine governance to individuals—by exercising, with respect to them, loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment. For perfected individuals, however, these interpersonal interactions are not morally motivated. They constitute an enhanced form of worship impelled by a desire to serve God and, through this service, to draw still closer to him.

I. Intellectual Perfection

Human perfection resides for Maimonides in intellection of the divine.[4] The intellectual nature of love of God and closeness to God is a theme that pervades the *Guide*, all the way through to its final chapter, 3.54. In this closing chapter Maimonides enumerates four categories of perfection: 1) perfection of possessions, 2) bodily perfection, 3) moral perfection, and 4) intellectual perfection; and he pronounces intellectual perfection the highest by far: it is "the ultimate perfection" (635).[5] With respect to this fourth and highest perfection Maimonides says: "This ultimate perfection pertains to you alone"—that is, it is through this perfection that "man is man"—and, he continues,

> Therefore, you ought to desire to achieve this thing, which will remain permanently with you, and not weary and trouble yourself for the sake of others, O you who neglect your own soul so that its whiteness has turned into blackness through the corporeal faculties having gained dominion over it. (635–36)

Knowledge of God is, then, tout court, the highest category of perfection a human being can reach. In the famous parable of the palace in 3.51, intellectual achievement—the correctness or incorrectness of the metaphysical beliefs one holds and the depth of understanding with which one holds them—determines

[4] See, e.g., 3.8, 3.27, 3.51, 3.54; also 1.34, 3.28; *Mishneh Torah*, *Laws concerning the Foundations of the Torah*, 3:8–13.

[5] In 3.27, welfare of the soul (i.e., holding correct opinions) takes precedence over welfare of the body (i.e., moral and political virtue). For the superiority of theoretical to practical wisdom see, too, Maimonides's brilliant analysis in 1.2 of the saga of Adam and Eve and their eating of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

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proximity to the "ruler" who is the stand-in for God. Neither observance of the Torah's commandments nor even moral excellence is relevant.[6]

The centrality of knowledge is highlighted also in 1.54:123–24, where, in interpreting Moses's request of God, "Make known to me now Thy ways, that I may know Thee" (Exod 33:13), Maimonides explains that the next set of words in the verse, "that I may find grace in Thy sight," indicates

> that he who *knows* God finds grace in His sight and not he who merely fasts and prays, but everyone who has knowledge of Him. Accordingly, those who know Him are those who are favored by Him and permitted to come near Him, whereas those who do not know Him are objects of His wrath and are kept away from Him. [italics added]

Even the prophets, Maimonides declares, value only one perfection: "knowledge of Him, may He be exalted, which is the true science" (3.54:636). Although Maimonides in 3.54 cites the prophet Jeremiah, who goes on to identify knowledge of God with knowledge of his loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness (637), we observe that Maimonides himself, in citing Jer 9:22–23, initially stops midway through verse 23, at precisely the point where, he notes, Jeremiah might have stopped but did not. Maimonides indeed aborts the Jeremiah quotation at "that he understandeth and knoweth Me."[7] Moreover, Maimonides observes that Jeremiah, in ranking the three acquisitions for which people are to be praised,[8] reflects not his own view but "the opinion of the multitude." For it is the multitude that assigns riches to the highest rank, might to the second, and wisdom to the lowest—where wisdom, *ḥoḵmah*, is taken to mean specifically the moral virtues on account of which an individual is held in high esteem by the multitude. Maimonides reminds us that, even for the prophets, the true *ḥoḵmah*, the end toward which morality is a mere means, is "the apprehension of Him" (636).

II. Two Techniques

In 3.51 Maimonides turns his attention to "those who set their thought to work after having attained perfection in the divine science" (620), that is, to those who have reached the fourth and highest category of perfection and wish to secure and

[6] In his *Mishneh Torah, Laws concerning the Foundations of the Torah* 4.13, Maimonides quotes the Talmud (*b. Sukkah* 28a), where it is said that the Account of the Chariot (which Maimonides equates with metaphysics) is "the great thing," and the discussions of the Sages Abaye and Rava, "the lesser thing." According to Maimonides, the matter of the forbidden and permitted, which occupies the debates between Abaye and Rava, is to precede the deeper and more important topics of metaphysics, the secrets of the Torah. The oral tradition, Maimonides maintains, contains the truths of metaphysics, but these truths were not written down for fear that they would become corrupted and would give rise to confusion (see *Guide* 1.71:175–76).

[7] Maimonides's analysis of Jer 9:22–23 will be considered in Section V.

[8] I read יתהלל (*yithallel*) as a passive, in the sense of "be praised for," rather than as a reflexive meaning "glory in." See Prov 31:30: היא תתהלל, where the woman of valor is one who is to be praised for her virtue, not one who glories in or prides herself on it.

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stabilize their intellectual connection with God.[9] His concern is with individuals whose intention is

> to set their thought to work on God alone *after* they have achieved knowledge of Him. . . . This is the worship peculiar to those who have apprehended the true realities; the more they think of Him and of being with Him, the more their worship increases. . . . This kind of worship ought only to be engaged in *after* intellectual conception has been achieved. (620) [italics added]

The purpose of this worship, Maimonides says, is to "strengthen the bond between you and Him—that is, the intellect" (620).

In the discussion that follows, two sets of techniques are identified as means of perfecting the perfection that is apprehension of God, two methods by which those who have already achieved knowledge of him strengthen their bond with the God they now know. The first set of practices, those Maimonides initially recommends, includes: emptying one's mind of everything else while reciting the *Šema'*; keeping one's thought free of distraction while reflecting on Torah passages which one is either reading oneself or listening to when they are read aloud by another; occupying one's thought with worldly things only while one is engaged with worldly things; performing the commandments enjoined by the Torah without thinking about anything else while performing them; and, when alone and awake in bed—in those few precious moments—thinking of nothing other than "that intellectual worship consisting in nearness to God and being in His presence" (622–23).[10] The ends of nearness to God and being in his presence are attainable by "those of the men of knowledge who have rendered their souls worthy of it by training of this kind" (623).

As the chapter continues, however, Maimonides turns to a second group of individuals, those who "through their apprehension of the true realities and their joy in what they have apprehended, achieve a state in which they talk with people and are occupied with their bodily necessities while their intellects are wholly turned toward God" (623).[11] These exceptional human beings are identified as

[9] 3.51 indeed begins with Maimonides's explicit assertion that he means in this chapter to explain "the worship as practiced by one who has apprehended the true realities peculiar only to Him *after* he has obtained an apprehension of what He is" (618) [italics added]. Josef Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides' "Guide"* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013) 315, in order to avoid the implication that human beings attain such apprehension, reads "after" as "when," and in his subsequent discussion places "after" within scare quotes. Yet, Maimonides repeatedly and consistently uses the preposition "after."

[10] It would appear that the purpose of observance of *miṣvot* for those who have attained apprehension differs from its purpose for those who have not. For the latter the purpose is two-fold: welfare of the body and welfare of the soul (3.27:310–11).

[11] The members of this second group are distinct from those of the first: "And there may be a human individual . . ." (636). Their achievement is thus not the next stage in the spiritual journey of the members of the first group. For the contrary view, see Barry S. Kogan, "What Can We Know and When Can We Know It? Maimonides on the Active Intelligence and Human Cognition," in *Moses Maimonides and His Time* (ed. Eric L. Ormsby; Washington, DC: Catholic University of

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Moses, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, whose intellects are united with God through apprehending him and loving him.[12] The method, however, by which these men reach their heightened state of perfection, that is, the form of worship in which they engage following apprehension—a form Maimonides calls "pure worship of great import" (624)—is not the same as the set of practices Maimonides has just listed. Indeed, what these four men of the second group do, the method or technique they employ for drawing near to God, is one of "spread[ing] the doctrine of the unity of the Name in the world" and "guid[ing] people to love Him." It is through their guidance of others, through their efforts to promote and disseminate the love of God,[13] that they cause or "necessitate" (*awjaba*)[14] the "permanent state of extreme perfection" that they ultimately enjoy. It is not the other way around. To quote the text:

> The fact that these four were in a permanent state of extreme perfection in the eyes of God, and that His providence watched over them continually even while they were engaged in increasing their fortune . . . was necessarily *brought about by* the circumstance that in all these actions their end was to come near to Him, may He be exalted; and how near! (624) [italics added]

America Press, 1989) 121–37; and David Hartman, *Maimonides: Torah and Philosophic Quest* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1976). For Hartman, there is a single process that begins with an individual's undertaking the *miṣvot*-centered training practices Maimonides outlines, and culminates in a state in which this person's "activities go forward automatically, and his inner consciousness is engaged with that which is lofty" (351).

[12] On the uniqueness of Moses's prophecy, see Kalman Bland, "Moses and the Law according to Maimonides," in *Mystics, Philosophers, and Politicians: Essays in Jewish Intellectual History in Honor of Alexander Altmann* (ed. Jehuda Reinharz and Daniel Swetchinski; Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 1982) 49–66. Bland does not raise the question of why the patriarchs are presented in 3.51 as Moses's equals. Miriam Galston argues persuasively, however, in "Maimonides: Philosopher-King v. Prophet," *Israel Oriental Studies* 8 (1978) 204–18, at 214, that Moses is "the sole instance of legislative prophecy and always will be." See, too, Alvin J. Reines, "Maimonides' Concept of Mosaic Prophecy," *HUCA* 40–41 (1969–70) 325–61, at 331: "Moses apprehended prophecy through the Active Intellect and the human intellect alone; he did not make use of the imagination which the other prophets all found it necessary to employ."

[13] Love comes in two types: the love that is apprehension and the love that is worship. This second kind of love comes after apprehension (3.51:627). It is captured in the following two rabbinic passages: 1) "Another explanation of, 'And thou shalt love the Lord thy God' (Deut 6:5): cause Him to be beloved by human beings, even as your father Abraham did" (*Sifre* on Deut 6:5); and 2) "'And thou shalt love the Lord thy God' means that: because of you the name of Heaven will become beloved" (*b. Yoma* 86a). Maimonides quotes the former of these rabbinic dicta in his treatment of the commandment to love God (the third commandment in his enumeration of the 248 affirmative commandments in his *Book of Commandments*). As Maimonides understands the love of God in this verse, it is not a command to love God but rather a command to make God beloved.

[14] Pines, *Guide*, 634, as seen in the quoted passage, makes the construction passive: the present state of extreme perfection of these four men "was necessarily brought about by" their directing all their actions to the end of coming near to God. The construction is actually active: their directing all their actions to the end of coming near to God "necessitated" their perfect state. See Maimonides, מורה נבוכים (*Guide of the Perplexed*) (trans. Michael Schwarz; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2002) 662: חייב.

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As the text continues, it becomes clear that these four men pursue their final end—"their end . . . to come near to Him"—by directing their efforts toward the achievement of a proximate end, namely, "the end . . . to bring into being a religious community that would know and worship God . . . to spread the doctrine of the unity of the Name in the world and to guide people to love him, may He be exalted" (624). And it is because of these efforts ("Therefore") that their unique rank "befitted them." Motivated by their end of drawing nearer to God, they expend efforts to create a community of God-loving people (this constitutes their "pure worship of great import" [624]); as a result of these efforts they achieve their goal: they draw so near to God ("and how near!" [624]) that they alone are able to conduct their daily affairs "with their limbs only."

For Maimonides, both sets of those who attain perfection and continue afterwards to "set their thought to work" and "turn wholly toward God" qualify as prophets (620). It does not appear, however, that "prophet" in this context denotes one whose divine overflow continues its flow from the intellect onto the imagination (2.36); rather, it seems to indicate one who yearns for closeness to God, a closeness that surpasses basic intellectual apprehension. Nevertheless, the way in which Maimonides amplifies "setting their thought to work" and "turning wholly toward God" (620) makes this post-apprehension orientation appear as drily intellectual as the mastery of the "divine science" itself. Maimonides explains that those who have attained perfection in the divine science will now "direct all the acts of their intellect toward an examination of the beings with a view to drawing from them proof with regard to Him, so as to know His governance of them in whatever way it is possible" (620). Although the fervor and passion of the perfected individual's yearning for closeness to God—albeit a closeness that remains always essentially intellectual—comes to the fore almost immediately, as Maimonides notes the "great joy" Moses experienced when "he was there with the Lord" (Exod 34:28) (620), and persists throughout the rest of 3.51, it remains the case that the first thing Maimonides sees fit to say about perfected individuals post-apprehension is that that to which they turn their attention in their desire to come near to God is the drawing of proof regarding his governance. In Section V, I offer a suggestion as to why, for Maimonides, knowledge of divine governance is the step that follows apprehension of the divine science but precedes engagement in practices that constitute *imitatio dei*.

III. Two Ranks of Perfected Human Beings

Although the first method—the practices Maimonides outlines for drawing ever nearer to God, practices culminating in concentration on the divine during precious stolen moments of solitude—is effective in strengthening the bond between perfected human beings and God ("you can do so" [621]), and thus is capable of producing individuals of a rather extraordinary rank, it is nevertheless the second method, the one that neither requires nor recommends seclusion and solitude,

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that is responsible for the emergence of the patriarchs and Moses.[15] To sharpen the distinction, we may contrast the case of Solomon with that of Moses and the patriarchs. David encourages his son Solomon to: 1) endeavor to apprehend God, and 2) endeavor to worship him after apprehension. But, with respect to the latter Maimonides adds: "Mostly this is achieved in solitude and isolation. Hence every excellent man stays frequently in solitude and does not meet anyone unless it is necessary" (621). Solomon is thus enjoined by his father to become a perfected person of the first group, whose members can concentrate exclusively on God only when they withdraw from the world, those "excellent men" who "begrudge the times in which they are turned away from Him by other occupations" (621–22). By contrast, perfected individuals of the second group can concentrate exclusively on God no matter what worldly pursuits they are engaged in and so have no need for seclusion. Those in this latter group are noted for their experience of joy and their rejoicing (623, 625, 627);[16] and they, unlike those in the first group, are constantly in God's presence and not only intermittently so. By devoting themselves to creating a community of believers for the sake of drawing near to God and by exerting themselves out of love for him, they bring about for themselves an unprecedented and unparalleled closeness to God, a state in which they perform all their worldly actions "with their limbs only" (624).[17]

Both groups must make an extra effort (3.51:618) to catapult themselves out of the state of merely having entered the inner part of the dwelling, as outlined in the parable of the palace, and into a state in which they are in the presence of the ruler.[18] The extra effort of the first group consists in the practices outlined by Maimonides, those having to do with the *Šema'*, prayer, Torah reading, the performance of *miṣvot*,[19] the attention to worldly occupations in circumscribed times, and, finally,

[15] An anonymous referee astutely notes that the practices that constitute the first method were unavailable to the patriarchs and Moses. The important point, however, is that these four men eschewed the seclusion that was available to them. It does not then appear that Maimonides is drawing a merely historical distinction.

[16] The joy experienced by the second group approaches the intense pleasure that accompanies the separation of soul from body, represented by God's kiss of death in the case of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam (3.51:627–28).

[17] Note the reversal from those who pray and fulfill commandments "with their limbs only" while their thoughts are directed to worldly things (3.51:622), to those who engage in worldly things "with their limbs only" while their thoughts are directed exclusively to God (3.51:624).

[18] Maimonides twice mentions the efforts of the second group specifically: "For the end of their *efforts* during their life was to bring into being a religious community that would know and worship God. . . . Thus it has become clear to you that the end of all their *efforts* was to spread the doctrine of the unity of the Name in the world and to guide people to love Him, may He be exalted" (3.54:624) [italics added]. The divine overflow does not, then, produce of itself the religious community these four men strove to bring into existence, nor was their achievement automatic or effortless.

[19] Training by performance of commandments is mentioned, too, in 3.52 (630).

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the securing of moments of withdrawal and solitude for concentration on God. The extra effort of the second group, however, consists in spreading the doctrine of God's unity and guiding people to love him; they engage in "pure worship of great import" (624).[20]

IV. Maimonides's Method and Rank

According to Maimonides, then, the fostering of the love of God in others is itself a means to the attainment of the higher rank within the highest category of perfection. This higher rank—not a higher category of perfection but a higher level within that highest category—is permanent immersion in God and unwavering union with him, the level achieved, Maimonides says, by Moses and the patriarchs. It is also, he says, a level that will forever elude people like him.

What Maimonides says so poignantly about himself is, in Pines's translation: "This rank is not a rank that, with a view to the attainment of which, someone like myself may aspire for guidance" (624). Although Pines, followed by Schwarz, recognizes two possible meanings of this ambiguous sentence—either 1) "Someone like myself cannot aspire to be guided with a view to achieving this rank" or 2) "Someone like myself cannot aspire to guide others with a view to their achieving this rank" (624, n. 32)[21]—I think a third possibility is likely the correct one, namely, 3) "Someone like myself cannot aspire to guide others with a view to *my* achieving this rank." Since Maimonides is one who guides and not one who is guided, the first reading, reading 1, seems improbable. Reading 2 is problematic as well, for the contrast Maimonides draws is surely between the rank that the patriarchs and Moses achieve and the rank that a person like himself can achieve. Would it not be odd for him to be contrasting the rank of those he guides with the rank achieved by the patriarchs and Moses who do the guiding? If we therefore adopt the reading I propose, reading 3, then what Maimonides is lamenting is that, despite the fact that he, too, like Moses and the patriarchs, guides others, seeking to bring them to the recognition of the truth about God and to the love of him, he cannot aspire to that to which Moses and the patriarchs could aspire, namely, to guiding others with a view to attaining for themselves the end of drawing so near to God that they are permanently and uninterruptedly in his presence and under his providence.[22] Although Maimonides adopts their method—that of "guiding people to love

[20] David may not lag far behind Moses and the patriarchs. The level of closeness to God that Maimonides attributes to him is one in which "I do not empty my thought of Him" (3.51:622). Yet, insofar as Maimonides cites this verse (Ps 16:8) to make the point that those who are excellent regret the time they spend in non-God-related occupations, perhaps Maimonides is commending David for not deliberately emptying his mind of thoughts of God, rather than implying that David's mind is in fact never occupied with worldly thoughts.

[21] Schwarz, *Guide*, 622, n. 66: 1) דרגה זאת אינה דרגה שאיש כמוני יבקש להדריך אל השגתה; and 2) דרגה זאת אינה דרגה שאיש כמוני יבקש להיות מודרך אליה.

[22] See 1.34 where Maimonides recognizes the obstacles that hinder the successful instruction of others.

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God"—he does not attain their success. And so he continues: "But one may aspire to attain that rank which was mentioned before this one through the training that we described." In other words, although Maimonides pursues the guidance track in seeking to draw closer to God, nevertheless, the highest rank he (and others like him) can aspire to is that of those on the *miṣvot* track.[23]

That Maimonides guides others is beyond doubt. First, of course, is the obvious fact that he names his book *Guide of the Perplexed*. Beyond that, the Epistle to R. Joseph with which the *Guide* opens states Maimonides's intention to offer guidance to R. Joseph in the study of texts. 3.51 begins with the *guidance* it will provide to those who have attained apprehension of God (618) and concludes with the following remark: "This *guidance* is sufficient in view of the purpose of this treatise" (628) [italics added]. In addition, in the middle of 3.51, at 3.51:622, Maimonides says: "From here on I will begin to give you *guidance* with regard to the form of this training so that you should achieve this great end" [italics added]. It is furthermore a plain fact that Maimonides devotes much of his time and energy to composing voluminous works, not for himself but for those who need his guidance: "A man endowed with knowledge," he says in 2.37, "does not set anything down for himself in order to teach himself what he already knows" (375).[24]

Maimonides indeed labored intensively for the whole of his life to help others come to embrace correct beliefs about God and to observe the Torah's laws properly. Even if in the *Guide* his main target is R. Joseph and others of his caliber, other works Maimonides wrote were aimed at a broader audience. Moreover, he ministered to his community as legal decisor and spiritual advisor. He was keenly aware of the great need for religious leadership and was singularly unimpressed by the quality of the Jewish leaders of his time. He witnessed the unreflective acceptance by the leaders—no less than by the laity—of crude religious views, as

[23] On the question of whether Maimonides regards himself as a prophet, see the opposing views of Warren Zev Harvey, "בין פילוסופיה מדינית להלכה במשנת הרמב"ם" ("Political Philosophy and *Halakhah* in Maimonides"), *Iyyun* 29 (1980) 198–212; "Maimonides on Human Perfection, Awe, and Politics," in *The Thought of Moses Maimonides* (ed. Ira Robinson, Lawrence Kaplan, and Julien Bauer; Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1991) 1–15; and Shlomo Pines, "The Limitations of Human Knowledge according to Al-Farabi, Ibn-Bajja, and Maimonides," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History* (ed. Isadore Twersky; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979) 82–109, the former of whom answers in the affirmative, the latter in the negative. If we judge by the criterion for the prophet found in 3.51, namely, one's exerting extra effort after and beyond the attainment of intellectual apprehension in order to draw nearer to God and to strengthen one's bond with him, it would appear that Maimonides must see himself as a prophet. After all, he rather explicitly says of himself (or of those who are like himself) that they are able to achieve the lower rank within this elite group (3.51:624). It is unclear, however, whether he thinks he experiences excess divine overflow to the imagination, a feature that is characteristic of prophets as described in 2.36. See n. 12.

[24] In a letter to Joseph, written slightly later, in the 1190s, Maimonides, after having been stung by criticism of his legal work, the *Mishneh Torah,* tells Joseph that he wrote that work primarily for himself. But that remains highly unlikely. See Maimonides, אגרות הרמב"ם : מכתבי רבנו משה בן מיימון ומכתבי בני דורו אליו (*Maimoides's Epistulae)* (ed. David Zvi Baneth; Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1946) 50–52.

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well as their widespread trust in the efficacy of vain and foolish superstitious rites. In his Introduction to the *Guide* (16), Maimonides indeed points to the exigency of the times to justify his writing a book that contains secrets of the Torah, which are normally not permitted to be discussed openly or publicly. He quotes Psalm 119:126: "It is time to act for the Lord; they have made void Thy Torah." And in the Introduction to his *Mishneh Torah* he articulates the source of his concern and his response to it, as follows:

> At this time inordinate sufferings befell us and the urgency of the moment pressed upon us all. The wisdom of our wise men and the intelligence of our intelligent men was hidden from us. . . . On these grounds, I [compiled] this work.

It would seem, then, that Maimonides emulated Moses and the patriarchs, engaging in the form of training that should yield the second, higher, rank. Yet he achieves for himself by this guidance no more exalted rank than that of those who spend their time concentrating on the *Šema'*, on prayer, on Torah reading, and on *miṣvot*, those who focus on worldly affairs while tending to worldly affairs and who, only in special moments, fix their thoughts on God alone. In his practice, then, Maimonides resembles the men of the higher rank—though, sadly, he falls short of their achievement. That is to say, Maimonides fails to attain the closeness to God that would enable him to keep his thoughts trained on God always, rather than only in rare moments of seclusion and solitude.

V. *Imitatio Dei* in 3.54

As we have noted, Maimonides in the final chapter of the *Guide*, 3.54 (635–36), explicitly endorses intellectual perfection as the highest category of human perfection, by comparison with which moral virtue pales.[25] Yet this is not his last word.[26] Just two pages later, Maimonides appears to insist that "the perfection

[25] One may hear Aristotelian resonances in this position—for Aristotle maintained, in Book 10 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, after devoting nearly the entire work to moral virtue, that the highest human life, the one through which alone the greatest happiness is attained, is the life of the intellect, with the life of moral virtue coming in a distant second.

[26] Earlier in this chapter (3.54:634), Maimonides makes reference to a saying of the Sages according to which, when the moment of judgment arrives, one will have to render an account first concerning one's knowledge of the Torah, then concerning the acquisition of wisdom—that is, is one able to demonstrate what one has learned from the tradition?—and, finally, concerning one's having derived the actions through which one's life will be ennobled. In summarizing the Sages' view, Maimonides points out that knowledge of the Torah is distinct from wisdom, and that wisdom is "the verification of the opinions of the Torah through correct speculation." Nothing more is said about action; moreover, Maimonides immediately and explicitly (3.54:635) ranks moral perfection lower than the intellectual perfection that leads to correct metaphysical views with respect to God. See *Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed, abridged* (ed. and introd. Julius Guttmann; trans. Chaim Rubin; new introd. Daniel H. Frank; Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1995) 225, n. 21, for Guttman's distinction between moral perfection and moral conduct, according to which the former requires no philosophical knowledge (of God) but the latter does. This distinction is not, however, borne out

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of man for which he may truly be praised"[27] is one that entails not only that the individual apprehend God but also that he "always have in view . . . loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment, through assimilation to His actions, may He be exalted" (638). Since it cannot be that this *imitatio dei* simply replaces intellection—indeed Maimonides makes clear, twice, on the final page of the *Guide* (3.54:638) that the pursuit of loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment is to follow the acquisition of "apprehension of Him"—might it represent a higher achievement, as some scholars have thought?[28]

Maimonides rests his conclusion on the two verses he has quoted from Jeremiah, 9:22–23. They read as follows:

> (v. 22) Thus saith the Lord: Let not the wise man be praised for his wisdom, neither let the mighty man be praised for his might, let not the rich man be praised for his riches; (v. 23) but let him that is praised be praised for this, that he understandeth and knoweth Me; that I am the Lord who exercise loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth, for in these things I delight, saith the Lord.

As we saw earlier, in Section I, Maimonides initially stops mid-verse, after "that he understandeth and knoweth Me" (636), although he eventually completes v. 23, on 637. He observes that Jeremiah might have stopped there and that indeed he would have stopped there had he thought the "noblest ends" were limited to apprehension of God (637). Moreover, Maimonides notes, if the reason Jeremiah continues beyond that point is in order to amplify "understandeth and knoweth Me," he might have specified: "that I am One" or "that I have no image" or "that there is no one like Me" (637). Instead, however, Maimonides continues, Jeremiah parses "understandeth and knoweth Me" as a matter of knowing God's attributes—his actions—as explicated by Maimonides himself in 1.54 in his interpretation of Moses's plea before God to "Make known to me now Thy ways" (Exod 33:13). As Maimonides understands God's "ways," they are the thirteen divine attributes listed in Exod 34:6–7, and it is these—God's acts of loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness—that Jeremiah enjoins the people to know *and imitate*. According to Jeremiah, then, it is in our compassionate and just deeds that the Lord delights. And Maimonides seems to agree—even though, as we have noted, Maimonides himself does initially stop at "that he understandeth and knoweth Me" (3.54:636). Perhaps

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by the text. For, in discussing moral perfection, Maimonides contends, unlike Aristotle, that moral virtues that are dormant are no perfections at all: "For if you suppose a human individual is alone, acting on no one, you will find that all his moral virtues are in vain and without employment and unneeded, and that they do not perfect the individual in anything" (3.54:635). For Maimonides, then, moral perfection is necessarily active. Nevertheless, its rank is below that of intellectual perfection.

[27] I depart here from the Pines translation, *Guide*, 638. See n. 8.

[28] See, e.g., Julius Guttmann, *Philosophies of Judaism: The History of Jewish Philosophy from Biblical Times to Franz Rosenzweig* (trans. David W. Silverman; intro. Zvi Werblowsky; NY: Holt, Rinehart, 1964) 200: "Ethics, though previously [i.e., before apprehension] subordinate to knowledge, has now become the ultimate meaning and purpose of the knowledge of God."

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it would be fair to conclude that for Maimonides, even though apprehension of God remains the highest perfection for man—and that, no doubt, is why he aborts the quotation from Jeremiah at "understandeth and knoweth"—there may still be some important reason for God's perfect ones to imitate his ways.

The break Maimonides introduces into the quote from Jeremiah is surely significant, as is his suggestion as to how Jeremiah might have interpreted—but did not—the first part of the quotation, "that he understandeth and knoweth Me." According to Maimonides, Jeremiah might have specified the essentials, the fundamentals, of what God is, the things one knows in knowing God: that He is one, unique, without image. Instead Jeremiah continues by identifying what Maimonides calls attributes of action—features that attach not to God but to his actions, or, one might say, to the effects of God in the world. We have, then, in Jeremiah's verse two different sorts of things one may know with respect to God: 1) things true of him, and 2) things true of his actions. By inserting a break in 9:23, Maimonides separates the two from one another.

As 3.54 draws to a close, it repeats this division by way of commenting further upon the verses in Jeremiah:

> It is clear that the perfection of man for which he may truly be praised is the one acquired by him who has achieved, in a measure 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. (638) [italics added]

The two apprehensions contained in this passage are, first, "apprehension of Him," and, second, knowledge concerning his providence and governance. It is the latter apprehension, "this apprehension" (638), which directly precedes the perfection "for which one may truly be praised," namely, the perfection whereby one "will always have in view loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment." The sequence of events is, then, as follows: first, there is apprehension of him (which, as we have seen, may be stabilized and intensified either through *miṣvot* or through guiding others); second, there is knowledge of his providence and governance; and third, human actions follow, actions manifesting loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment in imitation of God's actions.[29] It is once one apprehends God that one is able to know his providence and governance. But these are grasped as a

[29] In the view of Lawrence Kaplan, "'I Sleep, but My Heart Waketh': Maimonides' Conception of Human Perfection," in *The Thought of Moses Maimonides* (ed. Robinson, Kaplan, and Bauer) 145, actions can only constitute "pure worship of great import" if they "flow from the intellectual contemplation of the divine cosmic governance . . . if they constitute a perfect imitation of that divine cosmic governance . . . namely the 'bring[ing] into being [of] a religious community that would know and worship God.'" In my view, the "pure worship of great import" in 3.51, which brings a religious community into being, is distinct from the *imitatio dei* of 3.54. As we have seen, the former brings about the closeness to God enjoyed by Moses and the patriarchs. The latter, however, whose prerequisite is knowledge of (the limits of) God's governance, may be pursued by each apprehender of God "in a measure corresponding to his capacity" (3.54:638).

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corollary to what is apprehended as true of God himself: that he is one, unique, and without figure. By the same token, it would seem that the value of and necessity for *imitatio dei* is a corollary of what one understands with respect to God's providence and governance.

Observe that the distinction between these apprehensions—the one, of God; the other, of God's providence and governance—which appears twice in 3.54 reprises the same distinction found in 3.51 flagged earlier. In 3.51 Maimonides had said that

> those who set their thought to work *after having attained perfection* in the divine science, turn wholly toward God, may He be cherished and held sublime, renounce what is other than He, and direct all the acts of their intellect toward an examination of the beings with a view to drawing from them proof with regard to Him, so as to *know His governance* of them in whatever way it is possible. (620) [italics added]

In other words, those who go on to cement their bond with God after attaining perfection in the divine science, turn their attention forthwith to the matter of divine governance. We have then the same idea expressed in 3.51 as is found twice in 3.54: that there are two apprehensions, the first, of God, the second, of God's providence and governance.[30] Yet 3.54 takes an additional step, from the second apprehension to *imitatio dei*.

Interestingly, Maimonides calls 3.51, a chapter that comes three chapters before the actual concluding chapter, 3.54, "a kind of conclusion."[31] And, to be sure, it is a kind of conclusion, for it completes—and concludes—the discussion of providence begun primarily in 3.17 and 3.18. Yet, it is no more than a kind of conclusion, insofar as resolving the matter of providence does no more than pave the way—though it does indeed pave the way—for Maimonides's final word, for his consideration of the place of *imitatio dei* in the life of the intellectually perfected person.

The resolution Maimonides arrives at in 3.51 with respect to the problem of divine providence and governance, which he calls, just a bit later on in this chapter, his "most extraordinary speculation" (624), is that individual human beings, just like individual members of all species, are vulnerable to chance (625–26), that

[30] Pines, "Limitations," 100, seeks to assimilate "apprehension of God" to "knowledge of God's governance." The text in 3.51 (620), however, leaves no doubt that the two apprehensions are distinct, as does the consideration of Jer 9:22–23 in 3.54 (637 and 638).

[31] In an illuminating paper on the final four chapters of the *Guide*, David Shatz, "Worship, Corporeality, and Human Perfection: A Reading of *Guide of the Perplexed*, III:51–54," in *Thought of Moses Maimonides* (ed. Robinson, Kaplan, and Bauer) 77–78, discounts the qualification, "kind of," and treats 3.51 as the *Guide*'s true conclusion. In his view, 3.54 "presents a highly *simplistic* and *misleading* picture of Maimonides' views on human perfection; III.51, on the other hand, is fraught with complexities, tensions, ambiguities, and uncertainties that better reflect Maimonides' thinking" [italics in original]. Shatz argues that in 3.54 persons who have reached the fourth and highest perfection have no further need for *miṣvot*; they have in effect escaped corporeality. In his view, 3.51 is, then, both more pessimistic and more realistic in recognizing that philosophers, even though they have attained the highest perfection, remain corporeal and so need the commandments in order to train for a higher level of worship.

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God's providence extends no further than the maintenance of species, and that the only escape from natural evils is the total immersion in God that renders one immune to bodily sufferings.[32] In other words, Maimonides embraces in 3.51 the Aristotelian view he flatly rejects in 3.17 (464–66). Events in the natural world are, after all, products of chance (625, 626); the righteous and the wicked are equally vulnerable to evils; the only escape from misfortune is total intellectual absorption in God. There is indeed no difference between a cat's coming across a mouse and devouring it or a spider's devouring a fly, on the one hand, and a ravenous lion's meeting and devouring a prophet, on the other (3.17:466)—so long as the prophet is not, at the moment, absorbed in God but is "distracted." Having established the moral blindness of nature's order at the level of the individual—whether human or not—its indiscriminate wreaking of havoc on deserving and undeserving alike, and having enthroned chance as sovereign on earth at the level of the individual, Maimonides is in a position, in bringing his *Guide* to its true conclusion, to treat the matters of divine providence and governance in a way consonant with God's uncompromised transcendence.

As 3.54 draws to a close, and with it the *Guide* itself, Maimonides turns once again to divine providence and governance. He denies for a second time (the first was in 3.17) the opinion of the "overbold," the Aristotelian position, according to which divine providence "terminates at the sphere of the moon" so that "the earth and that which is in it are neglected" (637). He spurns the view expressed in Ezek 9:9 that "The Lord hath forsaken the earth," in favor of the competing assertion by Moses that "The earth is the Lord's" (Exod 9:29).[33] As Maimonides interprets Moses's utterance, however, it signals, not that God's providence extends over the earth in the same way that it extends over the heavens, but rather that his providence "extends over the earth in the way that corresponds to what the latter is, just as His providence extends over the heavens in the way that corresponds to what they

[32] See Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought*, 137: "The individual who attains the identity of an intellect separate from matter no longer feels the afflictions that continue to accompany the corporeal dimension of his existence." In the words of Eliezer Goldman, "העבודה המיוחדת במשיגי האמתות: הערות פרשניות למורה נבוכים חלק ג פרקים נא–נד" ("The Unique Worship of Those Who Apprehend Truth: Exegetical Remarks on *Guide of the Perplexed*, Part 3, Chapters 51-54"), *Bar-Ilan Annual* 6 (1968) 300: "At the time of intellectual attachment a human being's true essence is that of a separate intellect, and therefore he is not affected but only active," or (in a variant of this view [301]): "From the perspective of attachment to God via the apprehension of his intellect, the only good is the condition of attachment, and the only evil is the cancellation of this attachment; all other evils and goods are merely imaginary." See also Alfred L. Ivry, "Providence, Divine Omniscience and Possibility: The Case of Maimonides," in *Divine Omniscience and Omnipotence in Medieval Philosophy* (ed. Tamar Rudavsky; Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985) 156: "In connecting his intellect fully with that of the divine intellect, man assumes a new identity, at least for as long as he can maintain the conjunction. . . . The natural evils which can befall all men cannot touch him, for he is no longer mortal—at least, not essentially so. Should anything happen to his physical body while in this state, it will not affect his mind, his true being, which is with God." Several of Maimonides's medieval commentators offer similar interpretations.

[33] Maimonides explicitly links the Aristotelian view with this verse from Ezekiel at 3.17:466.

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are" (637). In other words, divine providence extends over the earth differently from how it extends over the heavens. Its supervision with respect to the earthly realm of flux and change is, of necessity, unlike its supervision with respect to the permanent and stable heavens. And what is the nature of divine supervision of the earth? The answer to this question is implicit in Maimonides's interpretation of the clause, "For in these things I delight, saith the Lord," the clause with which, as Maimonides puts it, Jeremiah "completes" the thought he expresses in 9:22–23, the idea that God governs with loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness. According to Maimonides, the meaning of this clause is that "it is My purpose that there should come *from you* loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness" (637) [italics added]. Maimonides's unmistakable message here is that the way in which God's providence extends to the earth is via those human beings who are able to act in it—as he is not—with loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment.[34]

The perfection that "truly" merits praise derives, as we have seen, from something the person who has apprehended God knows beyond this apprehension, namely, that God's providence as it extends "over His creatures" is "manifested in the act of bringing them into being and in their governance *as it is*" (638) [italics added]. Having apprehended God (as one and incorporeal), what this individual now knows in addition is that God's providence is limited. It is "*this* apprehension" (638) [italics added], that is, of the necessarily indirect or vicarious divine governance "in the earth," that leads perfected individuals who may "truly be praised" always to "have in view loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment, through assimilation to His actions, may He be exalted" (638).[35] "Assimilation to His actions" can refer, for Maimonides, only to the effortful, gracious, and just human governance of people[36] that mimics, yet differs from, God's effortless, gracious, and just governance as evidenced in the heavens and in the establishment of the natural order and in the preservation of and provision for the various species. With respect to the earth, all that God can and does do, according to 1.54:125–26, is bring the whole into being when it has no claim to this benefaction, and give his creatures life and equip them with the necessary means for survival—though all of these are gifts to which they can lay no claim. It is on account of these benefactions that he is called merciful and gracious.[37] In addition, he introduces into the world both things that appear

[34] Maimonides in 3.23 regards the "object of the Book of Job as a whole" (497) to be to teach that divine and human providence and governance have nothing in common "except the name alone" (496).

[35] Jerome Gellman, "Radical Responsibility in Maimonides' Thought," in *Thought of Moses Maimonides* (ed. Robinson, Kaplan, Bauer) 262, interestingly derives from the limits of God's intervention in the world that the human individual is "self-initiating, self-chosen, not dependent on God in any way that implies his own inadequacy as agent or cognitive being."

[36] How could a perfection be one "for which one may truly be praised" if it is automatic and effortless? That prophets undertake their mission despite their reservations and reluctance (2.37:375) is surely what would justify their being praised.

[37] Goldman, "Unique Worship," 312, argues suggestively that, although God is an unmoved mover, he is also a creator, and that it is in his creation that his loving-kindness lies; were creation

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good to us and things that appear bad to us: on account of the latter he is called jealous, avenging, keeping anger, and wrathful, when in fact he metes out justice as deserved.[38] In 3.53 God's loving-kindness is associated with his bringing into being "this reality as a whole," his righteousness with his mercy toward the weak—that is, his governing of living beings through the means of survival with which they are equipped—and his judgment with the occurrence, "consequent upon wisdom," of relative good and bad things in the world (631–32). None of the kindnesses with which God is credited descends further than the species level—not even judgment. Whereas in 1.54 unwelcome events are associated with the meting out of punishment as deserved, in 3.53 punishment and desert are gone, and unwelcome events are simply "consequent upon wisdom": the intervening 3.51 has effectively eradicated the idea that God is in the business of punishing the guilty. It falls, then, to perfected human beings—of the fourth category, at whichever rank ("in a manner corresponding to his capacity" [638])[39]—to extend that macro-level management of the earth to the micro level. In a world otherwise left to chance, in which only those who are immersed in God—and only during the time they are immersed—are subject to divine providence, only perfect individuals whose actions exhibit the traits of divine actions can extend God's providence to the earth in the appropriate way. These perfect human beings are the ones best equipped to mete out mercy-inflected justice in a world in which direct divine judgment is absent. By doing locally what God does cosmically, those who are perfected do on earth the things God cannot do. Those who imitate God's attributes of action, those who after apprehension

an emanation from God's essence as intellect (and not a product of divine will), it would signify only his righteousness. *Imitatio dei*, then, according to Goldman, requires that the prophet function similarly—that is, not only as an intellect but also as political leader who brings a nation into existence and sustains it. This view, however, problematically assumes that God has *middot* (attributes), although Maimonides rejects the notion that divine attributes attach to anything but God's actions. All it could mean to say that God has the attribute of loving-kindness is that if human beings were to do the sort of thing God does, they would be exhibiting loving-kindness. Furthermore, righteousness is not easily separated from loving-kindness as they relate to God. The creation of living beings and the provision for their survival are not differentiated from one another in 1.54 but are both manifestations of God's graciousness insofar as the beneficiaries have no claim to these benefactions. In 3.53 the two are assigned respectively to loving-kindness and righteousness, but the division seems arbitrary at best and is no doubt driven by the fact that there is no counterpart in God to the phenomenon of righteousness in man as Maimonides somewhat awkwardly defines it, namely, as doing justice to one's own soul.

[38] Herbert Davidson, *Maimonides: The Man and His Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 365, 540, insists that Maimonides means to salvage for God some measure of "personality." It would seem, however, that in 1.54 what Maimonides is most at pains to do is to avoid the ascription to God of anything like "personality."

[39] Maimonides makes it clear in the parable of the palace in 3.51 that those who enter the inner sanctum and make "another effort" to be in the presence of the ruler do not all reach the same level of apprehension. All those who make a further effort to cement their bond with God after apprehension are, however, eligible to proceed to *imitatio dei*.

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of those attributes respond to people with loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment, ensure that the earth is not, as Ezekiel claims, forsaken by God (Ezek 9:19), but that instead, as Moses declares (Exod 9:29), "The earth is the Lord's."[40]

VI. Prophecy

The end of the *Guide* is not especially forthcoming in explaining why some individuals attain the perfection that "may truly be praised" and others do not, why some people who have achieved apprehension of God's providence and governance do take it upon themselves to extend that providence and governance into the earth and others do not. The reader in search of an answer to this question is driven back to the discussion of prophecy in 2.37. There we find a remarkable and illuminating account of what it is that impels some people but not others to go beyond concern for their own personal perfection to tend to the perfecting of others. In 2.37, Maimonides distinguishes three classes of recipients of intellectual overflow: 1) those in whom the divine intellectual overflow reaches only the rational faculty—these are the wise who engage in speculation; 2) those in whom the overflow reaches both the rational and the imaginative faculties—these are prophets; and 3) those in whom the intellectual overflow reaches only the imaginative faculty—these are legislators, soothsayers, augurs, and dreamers of veridical dreams.

Maimonides further subdivides each of the first two classes. In each, the quantity of the divine overflow either may be such as to render the individual perfect but to have no further effect, or may be such that the measure "overflows from rendering him perfect toward rendering others perfect" (375). Note that it is not by quantity of divine overflow that prophets are distinguished from the wise who engage in speculation. Among both prophets and the wise there are those who receive more than the amount of divine overflow needed for their own perfection and those who receive just enough. Not all prophets, then, need be capable of bringing their prophecy to the people. According to Maimonides, those of the wise who do have the surfeit of overflow are "moved of necessity" or "compelled" "to compose works and to teach." A prophet in this condition will "address a call to the people, teach them, and let his own perfection overflow toward them" (375).

According to Maimonides, the difference between those with an amount of overflow sufficient for the perfecting only of themselves, on the one hand, and, on the other, those who have extra overflow with which to perfect others, is that the members of the first group lack both the ability and the desire to reach out to

[40] This service is reminiscent of one definition of piety proposed in Plato's *Euthyphro* (13d–14b)—namely, as the assistance that human beings render to the gods in their production of a magnificent work (*pankalon ergon* – 13e). Although the magnificent work the gods produce with the help of human assistants remains unnamed, it is likely that it is human virtue. See Roslyn Weiss, "The Piety of Socrates and Maimonides: Doing God's Work on Earth," *Expositions* 1 (2007) 141–72.

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others,[41] whereas those in the second group experience a compelling desire to do so (374–75). But why, we must wonder, should additional divine overflow, if it is intellectual, motivate, compel, or create a desire to perfect others? To be sure, such extra overflow might account for the ability to do more than perfect oneself, but why would it "of necessity" move a person to do so? It is striking that of the two—ability and desire—it is the latter in particular that Maimonides credits to the second group. Perhaps that group's greater ability can be assumed: one could not do what one lacks the ability to do.

Let us consider a parallel case. In *Guide* 2.11, to which Maimonides clearly alludes in 2.37 (375), the overflow that emanates from God onto the separate intellects and from them onto the Active Intellect and beyond is compared to the way in which the overabundance of wealth that a very rich man has is passed on to a second man and then to a third:

> It is as if you said, by way of example, that there is an individual who has wealth sufficing only for his own necessities, no residue being left over from it from which someone else might receive a benefit; and that there is another individual who has enough wealth for a residue to be left over from it for the enrichment of many people, so that this one may give a measure of it to another individual through which this second would also become rich, while a residue is left over from it that suffices for the enrichment of a third individual. (275)

In this analogous case, although the man who possesses excess wealth has enough money for it to flow from him to a second and then on to a third, there is no implication that the first man will want to, be moved to, or, a fortiori, feel compelled to, share his wealth with the second and third. Indeed, Maimonides acknowledges in *Mishneh Torah, Laws concerning Moral Conduct* 1.1, that there is "one type of individual who is so greedy that all the money in the world would not satisfy him. Of him it is said: 'For one who loves silver, no amount of silver will suffice' (Eccl 5:9)."

Just as Maimonides recognizes that simply having more silver than one needs does not in itself create the desire to part with the surplus, he must surely also see that the wise who write books and teach, and prophets who address a call to the people and seek to lead them to perfection, are moved by something other than surplus intellect.[42] What is true of God, namely, that his excess intellect simply spills over from him down the chain of intellects to the Active Intellect, is not true of human beings who must purposefully choose to direct their excess intellect to

[41] Maimonides distinguishes between ability and desire, thereby leaving open the possibility of having one but not the other.

[42] The same difficulty arises in 3.20, where obedience is attributed to divine overflow; see 3.8, where obedience is said to be on account of our form, and disobedience on account of our matter.

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others. Composing works and teaching and addressing a call and leading people to perfection does not happen by itself; it is anything but automatic.[43]

What is it, then, that spurs some of the wise, but not others who are equally able, to compose written works? What is it that inspires some prophets but not others—even if they are equally perfect in intellect and imagination—to reach out to the people? Just as there is something that induces some abundantly wealthy people to share their wealth while others hoard theirs, there must be something that motivates some intellectually able persons to act on their ability to perfect others while others do nothing. Although Maimonides points to "this divine overflow" as responsible for "moving them and by no means letting them be quiet, even if they met with great misfortunes" (375), it is evident that "overflow," in the case of human beings, signals a fierce passion to serve God. Maimonides indeed quotes Jer 20:8–9, where Jeremiah confesses that, after suffering reproach and derision all day, he made up his mind not to continue to speak in God's name—but he could not stick to his resolve: "There is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I weary myself to hold it in, but cannot." Not all perfected individuals, however, discover within themselves so powerful a desire for *imitatio dei*, so compelling a wish to serve God by extending his governance into the earth. And so, not everyone achieves the perfection "for which one may truly be praised."[44]

VII. A Final Question

One question still remains: if Maimonides, as 2.37 certainly suggests, prefers those perfect individuals who treat others with loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment, to those who do not, and if he believes, as in 3.54, that only the former "may truly be praised," why does he in 3.54, in discussing the third category of

[43] Harvey, "Political Philosophy," 198–212, opposes Pines, "Limitations," 82–109 (see n. 48). Harvey, who is convinced that for Maimonides intellectual excellence is the supreme perfection, maintains, against Pines, that the political life is a "by-product" of the achievement of intellectual perfection. Kogan, "What Can We Know?" 134, goes a step further, contending that the conduct that "accords with" the theoretical apprehension of those who have attained the fourth and highest perfection "is not merely the by-product of the fourth perfection, but part of it." A similar view is proposed by Kaplan, "'I Sleep,'" 145: contemplation and the physical imitation of what is contemplated "blend together in a perfect harmony; they are two sides of the same coin." Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought*, 92, regards "perfect practical activity" as "the natural complement of perfect theoretical apprehension." As I have argued, whereas it is true of God that his governance is a by-product of intellection, or part of it, or its natural complement, human loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment in dealing with others, by contrast, require effort and are not automatic concomitants of intellectual perfection.

[44] The "truly" on 638 may signal a refinement or correction of an earlier statement. On 636 Maimonides asserts, in the name of the prophets, that "the perfection for which *one should be praised* and that one should desire is knowledge of Him, may He be exalted, which is the true science." On 637, Maimonides qualifies this assertion, citing as the "noblest ends" those that surpass apprehension of God and include apprehension of his ways, ways that "ought to be known *and imitated*" [italics added]. But on 638 it becomes clear that one is not truly to be praised until one acts on one's knowledge.

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perfection, namely, moral perfection, so harshly disparage it and caution specifically against "wearying and troubling yourself for the sake of others"?

> This perfection regarding moral habits is, as it were, only the disposition to be useful to people; consequently it is an instrument for someone else. . . . Therefore you ought . . . not weary and trouble yourself for the sake of others, O you who neglect your own soul so that its whiteness has turned into blackness through the corporeal faculties having gained dominion over it. (635–36)

The answer, it would seem, lies in the phrase "for the sake of others."[45] For whereas Maimonides clearly approves of wearying and troubling oneself with respect to others, he apparently disapproves of wearying and troubling oneself "for the sake of" others.[46] The two commendable reasons to engage in *imitatio dei* are, as we have seen: 1) for the sake of bringing oneself closer to God; and 2) in service to God, as a way of completing for God the task of governing that he himself cannot complete.[47] The severity of Maimonides's reproach to those who weary and trouble themselves for the sake of others should decisively dispel any illusion that in the end the *Guide* recommends service to others as a third-category moral activity. The exercise of loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment that is encouraged as the *Guide* comes to a close is firmly rooted in the fourth category: it requires apprehension of (the limits of) God's providence and governance; and it is driven by a passion to draw ever nearer to him.

VIII. Conclusion

The ultimate perfection of man is surely intellectual. Yet it comes with a demand: to extend God's providence into the earth. Any person whose apprehension of God, "in a measure corresponding to his capacity" (3.54:638), proceeds beyond

[45] Consider, too, these remarks by Maimonides regarding moral perfection: "For all moral habits are concerned with what occurs between a human individual and someone else. This perfection is . . . only a disposition to be useful to people; consequently it is an instrument for someone else" (3.54:635).

[46] An interesting alternative is proposed by Hartman, *Maimonides*, 197–98. Hartman contends that the relationship of prophets to the community in the ascent to apprehension differs from their relationship to it in the descent following apprehension. During ascent, prospective prophets are "to view the community as a herd of cattle"; they are at that time "struggling to transcend the political leader's dependency on the community." But, Hartman says, whereas "disdain for the community characterized the prophet during his ascent; in exact contrast love for the community becomes his characteristic quality during his descent." I question, however, whether the prophet's view of the community shifts at all in the descent stage: there is, after all, no talk of the prophet's putative love of community but only of devotion to God ("it is *My purpose* that there should come from you" [637] [italics added]).

[47] In the Introduction to Part 1 (16) Maimonides justifies his writing of the *Guide* by citing *'Abot* 2.17: "Let all thy acts be *for the sake of Heaven*." See, too, אגרות הרמב"ם (*Maimonides's Epistles*) (ed. and trans. Yitzhack Shailat; 2 vols.; Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot, 1987) 1:301: "For, as God lives, I have been zealous on behalf of the Lord God of Israel, seeing a nation lacking a true comprehensive book of its laws and lacking true and clear opinions, so I did what I did *for the sake of God alone*."

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apprehension of God to the discovery of the nature of divine governance can take up the charge. It is not, then, as Pines would have it, that the limits of human knowledge make the political life the highest form of existence possible for human beings,[48] but rather that an additional apprehension, beyond apprehension of God, namely, knowledge of the nature and limits of divine governance, a knowledge attained only after attainment of the divine science, calls upon those who know to serve God through *imitatio dei*.[49] Those who answer this call are arguably the most praiseworthy human beings,[50] insofar as they not only know God and his providence and governance, but translate their knowledge into action—for his sake.

[48] In his later years, Pines, "Limitations," 82, 94, 100, came to believe that Maimonides ranks the political life above the intellectual, primarily because human beings, he thinks, are, in Maimonides's view, incapable of intellectual apprehension of God (as well as of the separate intellects and possibly of the heavens as well). Pines quotes 3.9:436–37: "Matter is a strong veil preventing the apprehension of that which is separate from matter as it truly is. . . . Hence whenever our intellect aspires to apprehend the deity or one of the intellects, there subsists this great veil interposed between the two." Halbertal, *Maimonides: Life and Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 356, sees in 3.54 a description of "the philosopher's return to worldly life after coming to recognize that all he can know about God are His actions in the world as it exists." Stern, *Matter and Form*, 316, similarly attributes to Maimonides a rather dismal view of human intellectual ability—he contends that human beings have no criterion by which to distinguish intellectual from imaginative apprehension—yet Stern, 308, resists the conclusion that political activity is therefore for Maimonides the highest human aspiration: "From the beginning to the end of the *Guide*, Maimonides is faithful to the ideal of intellectual perfection." So, too, Harvey, "Maimonides on Human Perfection," 9: "Maimonides' profound consciousness of the limitations of human knowledge does not lead him to despair of science, but rather to the awe of God, and this awe—far from discouraging him in the quest for consummate intellectual knowledge—is seen by him as a necessary condition for that knowledge." In my view, the implication of the discussion of lightning flashes in the Introduction to Part 1 of the *Guide* is that, although there is, to be sure, a veil, or, as it is called here, a "dark night" (7), the veil can part, the darkness can be illuminated—for some, for just a moment; for others, for a longer stretch of time; for most, never. Even though matter hinders our apprehension, some people, sometimes, can escape the fetters of the body and exercise their intellects as if disembodied. Note that at 3.51:628, where the death of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam is discussed, Maimonides says of "the other prophets and excellent men" that "they are beneath this degree" [viz., the one attained by the three children of Amram], but that for all of them "the apprehension of their intellects becomes stronger at the separation [i.e., at death]," "the impediment that sometimes screened [them] off having been removed." Striking in this passage is the use of the comparative, "stronger," implying that the difference between what is experienced at death and what is experienced in life is only a matter of degree. Also of note is the "sometimes": the impediment that is removed permanently at death is, Maimonides says, removed sometimes even in life.

[49] The assimilation to God's ways through the exercise of loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment as found in 3.54 is surely not unrelated to the narrowly political governance discussed in 1.54 to be exercised by Moses in accordance with the thirteen divine attributes (Maimonides refers back in 3.54 to his earlier discussion in 1.54 of "Make known to me now Thy ways"). Presumably, not all men who might be in a position to act with loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment will be in Moses's position as "governor of a city," and certainly not in the position of governor of "this nation" that is "Thy people" (Exod 33:13). See Hartman, *Maimonides*, 263, n. 53.

[50] These individuals are, as Kogan puts it in "What Can We Know?" 135, "a certain kind of person." Gilad Bareli, "על יראת ה' אצל הרמב"ם" ("On the Fear of God in Maimonides") *Iyyun* 45 (1997) 385–86, speaks of the transition from propositional knowledge about God to a direct apprehension of his ways that is then reflected in the way individuals live their lives.

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