

# maimonides

T. M. Rudavsky



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# preface

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The great eagle with the long wings and the long pinions, with the full plumage and the brilliant colors.

(Ezekiel 17:3)

By the time of his death in 1204, Maimonides had already established a reputation as one of the most influential and important Jewish thinkers of all time. To this day, his codification of the Talmud, his numerous commentaries on legal (*halakhic*) works, as well as his philosophical contributions, have assured him an enduring legacy in Jewish thought. The epithet “the Great Eagle,” referring to Ezekiel 17:3, was applied to Maimonides after his death and referred not only to his enormous impact and colorful history, but to the deep shadow he cast on subsequent Jewish thought. Scholars over the centuries have commented upon Maimonides’ works, puzzled over his intentions, and grappled with his conception of Judaism. That Maimonides was, and still is, one of the most influential and important Jewish legalists, who devoted himself to a reconceptualization of the entirety of Jewish law (*halakha*), has never been in dispute. To this day, Maimonides is still read in most orthodox Jewish circles as an expositor of the Law.

But to what extent can Maimonides be considered a philosopher? Are his major works, including *The Book of Knowledge* and *The Guide of the Perplexed*, works of philosophy, works of Jewish law, or possibly both? Maimonides himself called the *Guide* on several occasions a work devoted to religion. If by philosophy we mean (reflecting Maimonides’ own conception of philosophy) a systematic examination of natural science, the spheres, and divine science, then neither the *Guide* nor *The Book of Knowledge* can be construed as a strictly philosophical work, if only on the grounds that neither one is systematic. In his introduction to the *Guide*, Leo Strauss famously argued that the *Guide* is ultimately not a work of philosophy.

Other scholars, however, have construed philosophy more widely, and have suggested that inasmuch as the *Guide* (and other works as well) grapples with the tensions inherent in faith and reason, it is philosophical in the broader sense. In our recent volume on medieval Jewish philosophy, Steven Nadler and I had to wrestle with a similar set of issues: what is Jewish *philosophy*, and what is *Jewish* philosophy? In that work, we suggested that we must look first

at the aim of the work in question. Thus, while some texts may contain some philosophical topics, if their overall aim is not philosophical but religious, their concern being faith and obedience rather than objective truth, then their work is not philosophical. Secondly, we argued that a *Jewish* philosopher is somebody who, in his or her philosophical thinking, has been engaged in an intellectual dialogue with elements of Judaism, that is, philosophizing *about* and *with* the Jewish tradition (Nadler and Rudavsky 2008, 1–4).

On the basis of these two criteria, I believe that Maimonides did see himself as engaged in philosophical dialogue. We shall see that Maimonides was an eclectic reader, drawing not only upon his own tradition, but upon the ancient Greek and Islamic philosophers as well. The Greek philosophers who influenced Maimonides included Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, and the ancient Greek commentators, while the Islamic thinkers included al-Fârâbî, Ibn Sînâ, Ibn Bâjja, and the Islamic Kalâm theologians.<sup>1</sup> Maimonides was influenced as well by the ancient Greek medical doctor and practitioner Galen, and recent research has emphasized Galen’s importance with regard to both his medical and philosophical works. As Pines and others have noted, Maimonides may also have read a number of Jewish philosophers, although he tends not to quote them explicitly or mention them by name.

What underlies many of these Greek and Islamic thinkers is a form of naturalistic determinism, by which I mean that the world is governed by natural law and exhibits a rational order. Maimonides inherited a cosmological view of the world influenced by both Aristotelian and Neoplatonic sources, one in which the workings of our universe can be explained without recourse to supernatural intervention. All events and states of affairs, including human acts of volition, can be explained naturalistically, leading to a deterministic picture of reality. This naturalistic determinism can be construed in a number of ways: logical determinism, according to which statements about future contingents have a determinate truth value; astrological determinism, according to which the heavenly bodies order events in the sublunar universe; psycho-physical or biological determinism, according to which humans are born with certain physical and psychological dispositions that determine their actions and behavior; theological determinism, according to which God orders the universe in such a way that certain states of affairs cannot help but happen; and Kalâm conceptions of Divine Will and causality, according to which God is the direct and immediate cause of every event in the sublunar world. Maimonides considers each of these forms of determinism, weighing their implications for human action, theories of retribution, moral responsibility, and interactions between God and the world.

I shall argue throughout this volume that Maimonides tries to reconcile this naturalistic picture with a theological view drawn primarily from Scripture and Jewish tradition, a supernaturalism that emphasizes Divine Will, miracle, and revelation. In a recent work, Kellner has expanded this supernatural world-view to include what he and others have called “proto-Kabbalistic” elements. Kellner argues that Maimonides abhorred and decried proto-Kabbalistic texts (such as

*Sefer Yetzirah* and *Shi'ur Qoma*) that promulgated anthropomorphic descriptions of God, as well as belief in astrology, magic, and theurgic practices (such as the use of amulets and charms). Maimonides felt that these superstitious beliefs, grounded in a supernatural conception of occult powers (e.g. angels and demons, occult properties, etc.), undermined a proper philosophical understanding of God and the world.<sup>2</sup> Throughout this work, we shall assess Maimonides' success in his attempted replacement of supernaturalism with a naturalistic conception of reality. We shall see that although Maimonides tries to counter supernaturalism, and replace it with naturalistic explanations of such phenomena as miracle, prophecy, and creation, he is not entirely successful.

Based on these considerations, I shall argue that Maimonides can be considered a Jewish philosopher on several counts. Clearly Maimonides was engaged in an extensive dialectical analysis of Jewish topics and beliefs. Second, his engagement drew upon an eclectic collection of philosophical works. In trying to accommodate traditional Jewish thought with the “new” ways of thinking exemplified by Aristotle, the Neoplatonists, and Islamic philosophers, Maimonides was embarked on a philosophical quest to underscore the underlying rationality of Judaism. I very much like Joel Kraemer's description of Maimonides as a “zetetic philosopher, a seeker” (Kraemer 2008b, 2). Like Socrates, Maimonides absorbed philosophical ideas from a variety of sources, and was not afraid to admit when he was perplexed, or did not have a definitive answer to a problem. In this Socratic tradition, admitting ignorance turns out to be the greater wisdom. While critics may decry Maimonides' philosophical attempts as derivative, I shall argue that the very attempt to synthesize Judaism and philosophy itself represents a creative and philosophical endeavor.

Chapter 1 provides an intellectual biography of Maimonides. Several excellent biographies have appeared in recent years and I shall draw upon these works extensively for details of Maimonides' life.<sup>3</sup> I will briefly discuss some of the major intellectual influences on Maimonides, focusing upon the importance of Aristotle, al-Fārābī, and the Kalām theologians. I will also mention in this chapter the reception of Maimonides' philosophical works, both by Jews and by Christian scholastics. As we shall see, while Maimonides' codification of Jewish law became recognized as a major achievement in the halakhic world, his philosophical works were extremely controversial and resulted in major upheavals among the rabbinical authorities. His works were banned in the thirteenth century, and rabbis even managed to convince the Inquisition to burn parts of the *Guide*. In part, this controversy has to do with Maimonides' own presentation of “secret” philosophical doctrines in the *Guide*, and the threat they posed to rabbinic authorities.

In Chapter 2 we will explore in greater detail Maimonides' exhortation to the reader in the introduction to the *Guide*, and we will emphasize the multivalent presentation of the work. In this (and other works), Maimonides repeatedly reminds his readers that his works have been written for different audiences. Just as the Torah speaks in human language in order to present complex views,

so too Maimonides adopts different modes of discourse to convey his beliefs to different types of readers. He realizes that not all individuals are capable of understanding what he has to say, and so he couches his beliefs in a carefully constructed web of contradictions in order to conceal his esoteric, or hidden, doctrines. I emphasize that we shall have to remain aware of Maimonides' explicit text, his subtext, and his commentators (both medieval and modern). One underlying theme of my work is that Maimonides' legacy consists precisely in the intertextual analysis of the scholarly community engaged in unpacking the meanings of his works: analyzing Maimonides' philosophical views becomes an exercise in hermeneutic interpretation as well as critical analysis. In Chapter 2 I shall show, for example, how Spinoza is the heir apparent of Maimonides' naturalism: walking through a door that Maimonides had opened just a crack, Spinoza offers a full-fledged naturalistic interpretation of Scripture while ironically rejecting the hermeneutic guidelines that Maimonides had established.

In Chapters 3 to 9, I examine what I take to be the most important philosophical topics in Maimonides' corpus. Although *The Guide of the Perplexed*, as his most philosophical work, will occupy center stage, we shall draw on halakhic works when relevant to our philosophical discussions. We will start with Maimonides' conception of God, and then turn to his philosophical cosmology and philosophical anthropology, focusing in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 on the relationship obtaining between God, the world, and human beings. We will first look at the nature of God, and proofs for the existence and knowability of God. We will then examine the implications of God's nature as it affects the world, and the immateriality and immortality of human souls. I will argue that what unifies these three chapters is Maimonides' attempt to come to terms with a material cosmology, one rooted in matter, and the profound differences that obtain between a material and immaterial state of affairs. Much of what Maimonides has to say about God, and God's interactions with the world, reflects the extreme ambivalence with which he holds matter itself, the underlying principle of corporeal reality.

In Chapters 6 and 7 I turn to prophecy and Divine providence. These doctrines reflect Maimonides' philosophical theology, and incorporate issues having to do specifically with God's interaction with and treatment of human beings. In Chapter 6, I examine such topics as the nature of prophecy, whether prophecy is a natural or supernatural event, and the nature of miracles. This chapter provides an excellent case study for Maimonides' attempt to reconcile naturalistic and supernaturalistic conceptions of reality. Next, we consider in Chapter 7 the cluster of issues under the general rubric of philosophical theology, having to do with God's care for humans. Given the existence of evil and suffering in the universe, how do we account for God's providential care of humans, and how do we account for human freedom in light of God's omniscience? Once again, I will argue that Maimonides' treatment of these issues incorporates his grappling with a natural conception of reality, one that leaves little room for free choice.

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We end with Maimonides’ moral and political theory. In Chapter 8 I will examine Maimonides’ moral claims, and consider how they both reflect and deviate from Aristotle’s theory of the mean. We discuss as well Maimonides’ far-reaching doctrine of “reasons for the commandments” (*ta-amei ha-mitzvot*), namely the view that all the commandments in Jewish law have a rational basis. Chapter 9 returns to topics introduced in Chapter 3, and concern the limits of human knowledge, and the ability of humans to know God. Maimonides tells us in the final chapters of the *Guide* that true perfection and ultimate happiness (akin to Aristotle’s *eudaimonia*) reside in knowledge of God. But can this knowledge be achieved, or is Maimonides ultimately a skeptic with respect to knowledge of Divine matters? While the first and last chapters of the *Guide* (GP 1.1 and 3.54) seem to suggest that we can overcome our inherent material natures, other chapters in the *Guide* have emphasized the impossibility of escaping the veil of materiality. Is it the case that the commandments are necessary only because we have corporeal natures, and that an individual who has transcended her corporeal nature will have no need for the commandments?<sup>4</sup> Here too, I will show that Maimonides’ speculations on Jewish law and commandments reflect the struggle between naturalism and supernaturalism as reflected in the role played by matter. As a halakhist, one who was engaged in the study of Jewish law, Maimonides was concerned to find a place for Jewish law within a universalist view of humanity that emphasized intellectual theory over religious practice. We shall have to consider the extent to which Maimonides is successful in synthesizing theory and practice, intellectual perfection and moral perfection, philosophy and religion.

Two caveats. First, I have tried to present Maimonides’ philosophy in a way that will be accessible to readers with little background in either Jewish or medieval philosophy. Inasmuch as Maimonides draws upon both the Greek and Islamic philosophical traditions, we shall have to consider some of these historical texts and issues in order to understand Maimonides’ stance. I have tried to keep these historical presentations short and succinct, and to provide the minimal tools necessary to understand Maimonides’ conversations with his predecessors and peers. For readers who want to follow these discussions further, I have provided secondary readings at the end of each chapter, as well as a bibliography of recent scholarly articles on some of the more pressing philosophical topics covered in this work. Needless to say, the secondary literature on Maimonides is immense, and grows by the day. Since I cannot even hope to provide a complete bibliography in this brief survey, interested readers are directed to Joel Kraemer’s online bibliography for a more comprehensive listing of recent scholarly materials.<sup>5</sup> Second, a comment pertaining to style. While I am certainly sensitive to contemporary concerns regarding gender-neutral language, I have found it exceedingly difficult to avoid using the male pronouns in expounding Maimonides’ works. Maimonides repeatedly refers to God and to humans using “masculinist” terminology, and so the reader must understand these references in light of historical and cultural realities of the twelfth century. To replace Maimonides’ language with more gender-neutral terms

would disrupt the cadence of his words, and so I have adhered to Maimonides' own style.

Finally, several acknowledgments are in order. First, to Professor Steven Nadler, editor of the series, who proposed this project to me a number of years ago, I owe a debt of gratitude. I thank Jeff Dean, philosophy editor at Wiley-Blackwell Press, whose patience in light of a much-delayed manuscript I greatly appreciated; and the Melton Center for Jewish Studies at The Ohio State University, which provided me research support. To my many students, both at Ohio State and in the community, who have forced me to clarify my thoughts while teaching Maimonides, I cannot offer sufficient thanks. For Nathaniel, who has always encouraged me to write clearly and with passion, I hope I have succeeded. And to Richard and Miriam, both of whom have read the manuscript with infinite care and attentiveness, I am deeply indebted; their willingness to struggle with the details of Maimonidean text and interpretation has made this book more intelligible. These are my ideal readers, and to them this book is dedicated.

notes

- 1 See Chapter 1 for details of each of these thinkers.
- 2 See Kellner (2006) for a support of this thesis (argued by Moshe Idel and others) that Maimonides' philosophical works were directed against what he saw to be the decadent and pernicious influence of "proto-Kabbalah" upon Jewish belief. As Kellner points out, it is ironic that within several generations, Maimonides' rationalist tenor was drowned out by the overwhelming clamor and popularity of mystical Kabbalah, based on the teachings of the *Zohar*.
- 3 See for example Davidson (2005) and Kraemer (2008a).
- 4 See *Guide* 3.8; 3.9; 3.32. For discussion of this point, see Shatz (1990).
- 5 For an extensive bibliography of recent works on Maimonides, see (<http://doubleday.com/2008/11/11/maimonides-by-joel-kraemer/>)

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# abbreviations

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- BK *Mishneh Torah: Book of Knowledge*, trans. Moses Hyamson (Jerusalem: Boys Town Publishers, 1962).
- CT *Character Traits*, in Raymond L. Weiss with Charles Butterworth (eds. and trans.), *Ethical Writings of Maimonides* (New York: Dover, 1975), pp. 27–58.
- EC *Eight Chapters* [introduction to commentary on *Mishnah Avot*], in Raymond L. Weiss with Charles Butterworth (eds. and trans.), *Ethical Writings of Maimonides* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), pp. 60–104.
- ER *Essay on Resurrection*, in Abraham Halkin (trans.), *Epistles of Maimonides: Crisis and Leadership* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), pp. 209–33.
- EY *Epistle to Yemen*, ed. and trans. by Abraham Halkin and David Hartmann (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), pp. 91–131.
- GP *Guide of the Perplexed* [Arabic *Dalālat al-hāirin*; Hebrew *Moreh Nevukhim*], trans. by Shlomo Pines, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963); Hebrew translation by Michael Schwartz, 2 vols. (Ramat Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2002). Unless otherwise noted, references will be given by listing part, chapter, and page number of the Pines edition.
- HYT *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah*, in Moses Hyamson (trans.), *Mishneh Torah: The Book of Knowledge by Maimonides* (Jerusalem: Boys Town Publishers, 1962).
- KW *Kings and War*, in Isadore Twersky (ed.), *A Maimonides Reader* (New York: Behrman House, 1972).
- L *Letters and Essays of Moses Maimonides* [Igerot harambam], 2 vols., ed. and trans. by I. Shailat. (Ma'aleh Adumim, 1987) [Hebrew and Arabic]; English translation by L. Stitskin (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1977).
- LA *Letter on Astrology*, in Isadore Twersky (ed.), *A Maimonides Reader* (New York: Behrman House, 2000, pp. 463–73).
- MA *Medical Aphorisms of Moses Maimonides*, ed. and trans. by Fred Rosner and Suessman Muntner (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1970–1); *Pirkei Moshe Birefuah*, ed. by S. Muntner (Jerusalem: Mossad

- Harav Kook, 1987); ed. and trans. by Fred Rosner (Haifa: The Maimonides Research Institute, 1989); *Medical Aphorisms: Treatises 1–5* [*Kitâb al-Fusûl fî al-tibb*], ed. and trans. by Gerrit Bos (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2004).
- MT *Mishneh Torah: Book of Knowledge*, trans. by Moses Hyamson (Jerusalem: Boys Town Publishers, 1962).
- PH *Commentary on the Mishnah. Introduction to Helek: Sanhedrin, Chapter Ten*, in Isadore Twersky (ed.), *A Maimonides Reader* (New York: Behrman House, 1972), pp. 387–400.
- R *Repentance. Mishneh Torah: Book of Knowledge*, trans. by Moses Hyamson (Jerusalem: Boys Town Publishers, 1962).
- TL *Treatise on the Art of Logic*, ed. and trans. by Israel Efros, *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research* (1938) 8: 1–65 [English sect.]; 8: 1–136 [Hebrew sect.]; “Maimonides’ Arabic Treatise on Logic,” *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research* (1966) 34: 155–60 [English sect.]; 34: 1–42 [Arabic sect.].
- Fusûl *Al-Farabi: Fusûl al-Madani: Aphorisms of the Statesman*, ed. and trans. by D. M. Dunlop (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).

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# life and works

Unlike most medieval Jewish philosophers, about whom very little is known, Maimonides provided future generations with ample information about himself in letters and documents; many of these documents have been preserved in part in the Cairo Geniza, a repository of discarded documents discovered over a century ago in the Ben Ezra synagogue of Fustât (Old Cairo) where Maimonides lived. From these snippets of texts, scholars have been able to reconstruct at least some details surrounding Maimonides' life. He was known by several names: his original Hebrew name Moses ben Maimon; his Latinized name Maimonides; the Hebrew acronym RaMBaM, standing for Rabbi Moses ben Maimon; his Arabic name al-Ra'is Abu 'Imran Musa ibn Maymun ibn 'Abdallah ('Ubaydallah) al-Qurtubi al-Andalusi al-Isra'ili; the honorific title "the teacher [*ha-Moreh*]"; and of course "the great eagle."

In this chapter I provide a brief synopsis of Maimonides' intellectual biography, against the backdrop of twelfth-century Spain and North Africa. Recent biographies by Kraemer and Davidson have provided us with a detailed reconstruction of Maimonides' life, drawn from Geniza fragments, letters, observations by his intellectual peers, and comments by Maimonides himself.<sup>1</sup> We shall consider, ever so briefly, important philosophical influences upon Maimonides; scholars have explored in great detail which philosophers – Greek, Jewish, and Arabic – were most influential upon his intellectual development. I will then discuss Maimonides' major philosophical works, most of which we shall examine in more detail in subsequent chapters.

## Maimonides' Life

Moses ben Maimon was born in Cordova, Spain in 1135/8 and died in Cairo in 1204. Cordova was at this time the capital of Andalusia (Muslim Spain) and the most affluent city in Europe. Under the Spanish Umayyads (756–1031), and in particular under the reign of enlightened Caliph 'Abd ar-Rahman III, Jews and others experienced a cultural flourishing. The Jewish Quarter where Maimonides lived was located close to the Great Mosque and the royal palace in the southwestern section of the city. Under the caliphate, there developed a

Jewish intellectual elite that emphasized a synthesis of traditional Jewish learning with secular knowledge. As noted by Kraemer, the courtiers were men for whom the Arabic ideal of *adâb*, a system of cultured refinement, was fundamental in their educational program. The exemplar of the cosmopolitan and cultured courtier, learned in the secular sciences and in Jewish lore, set a precedent for Maimonides. Maimonides' father was himself an accomplished rabbinic scholar and judge. We know nothing about his mother, although we do know that he had a brother, David, whom he adored, and probably more than one sister.

However, the Andalusian environment was soon to fall apart. Muhammad ibn Tûmart (ca 1080–1130) founded the fundamentalist Almohad movement in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco, and he fought to restore the original faith of Islam as based on the Qur'an and the Sunna (Islamic law). The Almohads united North Africa and Andalusia under a single empire, and Jews were no longer welcomed in this environment. Many Jews ostensibly converted to Islam. One of Maimonides' earliest biographies, found in a Muslim biographical dictionary of al-Qiftî (a man who was friends with Maimonides' favorite student), notes that Maimonides himself converted to Islam, publicly "living the life of a Muslim, reading the Quran and reciting Muslim prayers, until he was able to put his affairs in order. He then left Spain with his family, traveled to Egypt, and reassumed the identity of a Jew" (Davidson 2005, 17). Scholars have found reason, however, to question the veracity and reliability of Qiftî's information; some historians have accepted the account of Maimonides' purported conversion to Islam, while others have rejected it.<sup>2</sup>

When the Almohads invaded Andalusia and occupied Cordova in 1148, the Maimon family left Cordova, wandering from place to place in Andalusia. During these years, Maimonides commenced his studies. He started with astrology, which he later rejected as useless. He became interested in astronomy as well, as an aid in fixing the religious calendar. During this period he studied with students of the Islamic philosopher Ibn Bâjja, as well as with a son of the astronomer Jâbir ibn Aflah. During this period he wrote several early books, including his *Treatise on the Art of Logic* and a primer on the calendar (*Ma'amar ha-'ibbur*).

Maimonides wrote during the height of twelfth-century Andalusian Aristotelianism. The most important names in this school were Abû Bakr ibn Bâjja (Avempace, d.1139), Ibn Tufayl (d.1185) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes, d.1198). Although both Maimonides and Averroes were born in Cordova and wrote during the same time period, we have no record of an encounter between them. Nevertheless, Maimonides knew of Averroes' works and recommended them to his own pupil Joseph ben Judah, as well as to his translator Samuel ibn Tibbon. Scholars have noted the many similarities between Maimonides and Averroes. Kraemer points out that both were descendants of venerable Andalusian families of scholars. Both were outstanding jurists and physicians, both mastered the sciences and philosophy, both embraced a naturalistic Aristotelianism, both emphasized that the Law summons us to study philosophy. The writings

	<p>life and works</p>
2	

of both Averroes and Maimonides were soon translated into Latin, and introduced Aristotelianism to the Latin scholastics.

In 1160 the Maimon family settled in Fez for roughly five years. It was in Fez that Maimonides wrote his *Epistle on Forced Conversion*, in reaction to a rabbinic decree to accept martyrdom rather than submit to Islam. Maimonides urged his fellow Jews to remain clandestine Jews, to continue to pray and observe the commandments in light of forced conversion. During this period, Maimonides also continued his medical studies and, according to his later comments on this period, presumably received some clinical training.

The family left Morocco on April 4, 1165, traveling east to the land of Israel. The ship arrived, after a fierce storm at sea, at Acre. The family remained in Acre until May 1166 when they left for Egypt. During this period Maimonides made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem where they remained for three days. Maimonides' memory of that trip was so searing that he swore to revisit the memory yearly:

I vowed to observe these two days as strict fast days for myself, my family and all my household, and to order my descendants to keep these fasts also in future generations and to give charity in accordance with their means. I further vowed to observe the tenth of Iyar in complete seclusion and to devote the day to prayer and study. On that day, God alone was with me on the sea; so upon the anniversary of this day, I wish to be alone with God and not in the company of man, unless I am compelled to.

(Twersky 1972, 3)

Maimonides and his family arrived in Fustât (Old Cairo) in 1166, after a brief stay in Alexandria. They settled in the Mamsûsa Quarter of Fustât, a neighborhood that had both Christian and Muslim residents as well as Jews. Three Jewish communities coexisted in Fustât: the sectarian Karaites, as well as two Rabbanite communities, Iraqians and Palestinian, each with its own synagogue. The Synagogue of the Palestinians, called the Ben Ezra Synagogue, has survived and is still standing; it contains a store chamber of documents and manuscripts, known as the Cairo Genizah, that are still being reconstructed by scholars. During the first five years of Maimonides' stay in Fustât, he had access to Ismâ'îlî writings and lectures. The Ismâ'îlî were an Islamic sect that emphasized esotericism and apophatic theology, according to which nothing positive can be attributed to God, only negative attributes. Scholars have emphasized the importance of these doctrines to the later development of Maimonides' thought, in particular in Maimonides' theory of negative predication, which draws upon both Neoplatonic and Ismâ'îlî strands.<sup>3</sup> During this period Maimonides wrote his celebrated *Mishneh Torah*.

Shortly after Maimonides' arrival in Egypt (1171–2), Saladin became sultan over Egypt and founded the Ayyûbid dynasty. Maimonides had in Fustât a patron, Al-Qâdî al-Fâdil al-Baysani (1135–1200), who was a scholar in his own right. He collected many books of Arabic thought, some of which presumably

Maimonides read and studied. Maimonides followed his patron in supporting Saladin; Al-Qâdî al-Fâdil soon became Saladin’s chief administrator, which turned out to be beneficial for Maimonides as well. Maimonides became “Head of the Jews” (*ra’is al-yahûd*) in 1191. As Head of the Jews, Maimonides took on the highest judicial authority in the Jewish community: he appointed chief judges, had broad communal responsibilities, and functioned as respondent to legal inquiries from Jewish communities in Egypt and elsewhere. We have available many of the legal decisions, or halakhic responsa, that Maimonides handed down. During this period Maimonides married into a prominent Egyptian family. Although we do not know his wife’s name, we do know that she came from the family of a government official, and that the union was well regarded. His only son Abraham ben Moses (1186–1237) was born when Maimonides was close to 50 years old; we don’t know whether he had any daughters. Abraham studied with his father, learning philosophy and medicine; Abraham’s first love, however, was his devotion to Sufism, which some scholars suggest may have influenced Maimonides in later life.

In 1172 Maimonides wrote an epistle to the Jews of Yemen who were contending with forced conversion. The letter was addressed to Jacob son of Nethanel al-Fayyûmî who had written on behalf the Yemenite community. In order to address a larger audience, Maimonides’ response to Nethanel was written in Arabic. The purpose of the letter was to provide hope, as well as an explanation for the animus between Muslims and Jews. Maimonides saw the agony of the Yemenite Jews as a prefigurement of the coming of the Messiah.

It is not clear how Maimonides supported himself during the period before 1177. From what we can tell, his brother David supported the extended family by trading, often traveling the trade routes by sea; as Maimonides writes in a letter, his brother “would conduct business in the marketplace and earn money, while I sat in security” (L 230). One of the most difficult events during this period (1177) was David’s drowning while on the way to India, leaving a young daughter and widow in Maimonides’ care. Suffering both a mental and physical breakdown, Maimonides was overwhelmed with depression that he describes in poignant terms:

The most terrible blow which befell me . . . was the death of the most perfect and righteous man, who was drowned while traveling in the Indian Ocean. For nearly a year after I received the sad news, I lay ill on my bed struggling with fever and despair. Eight years have since passed, and I still mourn, for there is no consolation. What can console me? . . . My one joy was to see him. Now my joy has been changed into darkness; he has gone to his eternal home, and has left me prostrated in a strange land.

(Twersky 1972, 4–5)

Maimonides notes that when David died, he had with him a large sum of money belonging to the family (L 229–30). After 1177, Maimonides took upon

himself the financial responsibility of supporting the family, presumably through medicine. Maimonides' major work *The Guide of the Perplexed* was written between 1185 and 1190, followed by many of his medical works.

Maimonides continued to devote himself to both the community and his intellectual needs. In 1191 he wrote a letter to his disciple Joseph ben Judah, for whom he composed the *Guide*, complaining about his schedule:

I inform you that I have acquired in medicine a very great reputation among the great, such as the chief Qadi, the prince . . . As for the ordinary people, I am placed too high for them to reach me. This obliges me continually to waste my day in Cairo visiting the [noble] sick. When I return to Fustât, the most I am able to do, for the rest of the day and night, is to study medical books, which are so necessary for me. For you know how long and difficult this art is for a conscientious and exact man who does not want to state anything which he cannot support by argument and without knowing where it has been said and how it can be demonstrated. This has further resulted in the fact that I find no time to study Torah; the only time I am able to read the Bible is on Saturday. As for other sciences, I have no time to study them at all and this distresses me very much . . . I have not yet found the time to read [Aristotle's] books.

(Twersky 1972, 6)

In a letter of 1199 written to Samuel ibn Tibbon, translator of the *Guide* from Judaeo-Arabic into Hebrew, Maimonides attests to his harried schedule:

God knows that in order to write this to you, I have escaped to a secluded spot, where people would not think to find me, sometimes leaning for support against the wall, sometimes lying down on account of my excessive weakness, for I have grown old and feeble . . . I attend to my patients, write prescriptions . . . I converse and prescribe for them while lying down from sheer fatigue, and when night falls, I am so exhausted that I can scarcely speak.

(Twersky 1972, 7)

Maimonides seems to have devoted himself seriously to medicine in the later years of his life, after the composition of his theological and philosophical works. Some of these medical works were translated into Hebrew and Latin, and contributed to his fame as a physician. According to his grandson David, Maimonides died on December 13, 1204. Maimonides is supposedly buried in Tiberias, although we cannot be sure where his body actually resides.

## Philosophical Influences

Maimonides' works fall into three broad categories: rabbinics (*halakha*), philosophy, and medicine. Little is known about Maimonides' educational situation

life and works	5
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or teachers. Presumably he received a rabbinical education from his father, although there we have no actual evidence. Nor do we have much information about how and from whom he learned philosophy. Maimonides does mention, in the context of astronomy, having met the son of the Islamic astronomer Ibn Aflāh of Seville; he also mentions having read texts under the guidance of a student of the renowned Spanish Arabo-Islamic philosopher Ibn Bājja (d.1138). But Maimonides does not mention a single teacher from whom he explicitly learned philosophy. In fact, it is possible that he was largely self-taught in both rabbinics and philosophy. In the case of medicine, Maimonides does in fact list some of his teachers, and tells us that he studied medicine when in his twenties in Andalusia, before arriving in Egypt. He is clearly influenced by the works of the famous Greek physician Galen: Galen is cited most often in his medical works, and he calls Galen the greatest physician ever to have lived (MA 25.59:433).

Maimonides did not consider philosophy prior to Aristotle worthy of the title of “genuine philosophy.” And yet it is not clear what his sources of Arabic Aristotelianism were. Whereas in the areas of rabbinics and medicine Maimonides took the trouble to study and familiarize himself with the primary sources, such does not seem to be the case with respect to the philosophical corpus. Many references can be found in the *Commentary on the Mishnah* to Aristotelian examples and texts, most of which can be traced to Arabic authors. He mentions at the end of the *Commentary* that he was studying “other sciences,” that is, non-Jewish sciences, in particular the works of Galen and Ptolemy. In the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides provides a section with detailed astronomical calculations that employ data very similar to astronomical tables compiled by the Arabic astronomer al-Battāni. Davidson concludes that “by the age of forty [Maimonides] was thus familiar with the contours of medieval Arabic Aristotelian philosophy, he had studied other sciences, and he was well-versed in mathematics and astronomy” (Davidson 2005, 98).

By the time he wrote his major philosophical work *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides demonstrates more intimate knowledge of Aristotle. In the *Guide*, Aristotle is the philosopher named most frequently. That Maimonides held Aristotle in the highest esteem is evidenced in the following passages from his letter to his translator Samuel ibn Tibbon:

(1) The writings [words] of Aristotle’s teacher Plato are in parables and hard to understand. One can dispense with them, for the writings of Aristotle suffice, and we need not occupy [our attention] with the writings of earlier [philosophers]. Aristotle’s intellect [represents] the extreme of human intellect, if we except those who have received divine inspiration.

(2) The works of Aristotle are the roots and foundations of all works on the sciences. But they cannot be understood except with the help of commentaries, those of Alexander of Aphrodisias, those of Themistius, and those of Averroes.

(Marx 1934–5)

Several passages in the *Guide* attest to Aristotle's eminence. In *Guide* 1.5, Maimonides describes Aristotle as "the chief of the philosophers" (GP 1.5:29). In *Guide* 2.14 Maimonides says he will only pay attention to Aristotle, "for it is his opinion that ought to be considered" (GP 2.14). Maimonides calls attention to the "depth of Aristotle's penetration and to his extraordinary apprehension" (GP 2.19). And in *Guide* 1.5 Maimonides emphasizes Aristotle's willingness to investigate very obscure matters, noting that in the case of such obscure matters (e.g. celestial mechanics), one must be tentative (GP 1.5).

Maimonides appears to have read at least some of Aristotle's works in translation, and compares, in one of his letters to Ibn Tibbon, the merits and quality of several translations. He names five of Aristotle's books by name: the *Physics*, *On the Heavens*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Rhetoric*, and *Metaphysics*, and quotes directly from the first four works. In his *Medical Aphorisms* Maimonides quotes extensively from Aristotle's two works *History of Animals* and the *Generation of Animals*. But many of Maimonides' purported Aristotelian references turn out, instead, to rely on Arabic summaries of Aristotle. It is also interesting to note that no mention is made of Aristotle's *De Anima*, a much studied and influential treatise on psychology and the intellect, although he clearly read al-Fârâbî's commentary on the *De Anima*. Perhaps by this point in his life he simply did not have the time or the energy (as evidenced in the letter above) to engage in serious study of Aristotle. Nor is there any evidence that he read first hand the very Aristotelian commentaries that he recommended to his student Joseph, namely the works of Alexander of Aphrodisias, Themistius, and Averroes. Although other philosophers are mentioned (Plato, Plotinus, Epicurus, John Philoponus, Euclid), there is no evidence that he actually read them.

A different story emerges when we turn to Islamic philosophers.<sup>4</sup> Maimonides had clear regard for the works of al-Fârâbî, Ibn Bâjja, Avicenna, and Averroes. Al-Fârâbî is the Arabic philosopher most cited in the *Guide*, and clearly a thinker whom Maimonides read carefully and held in high esteem. Abu Nasr al-Fârâbî (870–950) was considered the "second Aristotle," because of his numerous treatises and commentaries upon Aristotle's works, and he evinced a great influence in many fields of medieval Jewish philosophy, including logic, epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, politics, and jurisprudence. We shall see that Maimonides is very much influenced by al-Fârâbî's conception of philosophy. He wrote to Samuel ibn Tibbon that there was no need to study any other logical texts other than those of al-Fârâbî, since "all that he wrote" was "full of wisdom" (Marx 1934–5, 379). In his *Book of Letters* and other works, al-Fârâbî argued that religion is subordinate to philosophy, seeing the former as a tool or "handmaiden" for the latter: this theory has important repercussions for the relation between religion and philosophy. Berman has argued that Maimonides was more influenced by al-Fârâbî than was anybody else in the medieval world; that while others read al-Fârâbî, "no one else in a major work attempted to apply this theory in detail to a particular religious tradition" (Berman 1974, 155). In al-Fârâbî's view, philosophy represents the highest of the

disciplines, flanked on one side by dialectic and on the other side by religion, jurisprudence, and theology.<sup>5</sup>

Other influential philosophers include Ibn Bâjja, Ibn Sînâ, al-Ghazâlî, and Ibn Rushd. Ibn Bâjja is referred to five times in the *Guide*. Although an important philosopher in his own right, Avicenna (Ibn Sînâ 980–1037) played a less obvious role in Maimonides’ thought. Avicenna was extremely influential upon Jewish philosophers prior to Maimonides, and Maimonides states in his letter to Ibn Tibbon that Avicenna’s books, although subtle and difficult, are “useful” and should be studied (Marx 1934–5, 380); nevertheless Maimonides does not make explicit use of his works. Recent scholars have only begun to explore traces of Avicennian ideas in Maimonides’ writings (Harvey 2008). Al-Ghazâlî (1058–1111) is not explicitly mentioned by Maimonides either, although scholars are beginning to explore possible influences.<sup>6</sup> Ibn Tufayl (d.1185), a popular philosopher best known for his philosophical allegory about a boy growing up on a secluded island (*Living Son of the Watchful* [*Hayy ben Yaqzan*]), may have had a slight influence upon Maimonides, although the jury is still out. Averroes (Ibn Rushd, 1126–98) represents a tantalizing case study. Maimonides held Averroes in high regard, telling Ibn Tibbon not to read Aristotle’s works without the commentaries of Alexander of Aphrodisias, Themistius, and Averroes (Marx 1934–5, 378). As noted above, both Averroes and Maimonides embraced a naturalistic Aristotelianism, and both emphasized the importance of philosophy. Yet scholars have yet to determine explicit evidence of Averroes’ influence.

How extensive was Maimonides’ knowledge of Islamic Kalâm? The Kalâm theologians were a school of Islamic thinkers who presented a strict and rigorous interpretation of the Qur’an. Followers of Kalâm were called Mutakallimûn, and were divided into two main schools of thought: the Mu’tazilites, a moderate branch of Kalâm that emphasized human freedom, and became known as “the partisans of justice and unity,” and the Asharites, who emphasized God’s unknowability, and God’s power over human action. In the *Commentary on the Mishnah*, composed when he was 30 years old, Maimonides mentions several Kalâm positions briefly and rejects them. By the time he wrote the *Guide*, in his fifties, Maimonides refers to the Kalâm much more extensively. Four chapters in the *Guide* are devoted to Kalâm arguments for the creation of the world and existence. Maimonides distinguishes among different Kalâm schools of thought and provides extensive details of their positions. And yet, as recent scholars have demonstrated, the accuracy of his accounts is questionable at best. This raises a tantalizing but unanswerable question: what sources provided Maimonides with his acquaintance with Kalâm thought? Davidson has suggested that possibly Maimonides was extrapolating what he inferred to be Kalâm principles from their proofs, rather than having actual knowledge of their texts.<sup>7</sup>

Interestingly enough, medieval Jewish philosophers are not quoted in Maimonides’ philosophical works. With the exception of Isaac Israeli (ca 855–ca 955), Saadia Gaon (882–942), and Ibn Tzaddiq (d.1149), no Jewish