

THE LITTMAN LIBRARY OF  
JEWISH CIVILIZATION

MANAGING EDITOR  
*Connie Webber*

*Dedicated to the memory of*  
LOUIS THOMAS SIDNEY LITTMAN  
*who founded the Littman Library for the love of God*  
*and as an act of charity in memory of his father*  
JOSEPH AARON LITTMAN  
יהא זכרם ברוך

*'Get wisdom, get understanding:*  
*Forsake her not and she shall preserve thee'*  
PROV. 4:5

*The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization is a registered UK charity*  
*Registered charity no. 1000784*

# *Must a Jew Believe Anything?*



MENACHEM KELLNER



*Second Edition*

Oxford · Portland, Oregon

The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization  
2006

## *Maimonides on Reward and Punishment*

THE idea that individuals are rewarded for their good deeds and punished for their transgressions is, according to Maimonides, literally a dogma of Judaism. The eleventh of his Thirteen Principles is

that He, may He be exalted, rewards him who obeys the commands of the Torah and punishes him who violates its prohibitions; and the greatest of His rewards is the world to come while the severest of His punishments is 'being cut off'. We have already expounded sufficiently on this in this chapter.<sup>1</sup> The verse which attests to this foundation is: '... if You forgive their sin, and if not, erase me, then from Your book which You have written' (Exod. 32: 32), taken together with His answer, may He be exalted, 'Him who has sinned against Me, shall I erase from My book' (Exod. 32: 33). These verses are attestations to [the fact that] the obedient person and the rebellious person will reach [a point] with Him, may He be exalted, where He will reward the one and punish the other.<sup>2</sup>

On the face of it, this is an unambiguous statement of the doctrine that people are rewarded for good behaviour and punished for evil behaviour. It is certainly no surprise to find a figure like Maimonides, one of the foremost exponents of the rabbinic tradition, presenting the doctrine of divine retribution as a dogma of Judaism.<sup>3</sup> If any teaching finds near-unanimous support in rabbinic literature, it is surely this one.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Maimonides' principles appear at the end of his introduction to his commentary on the tenth chapter of Mishnah *Sanhedrin*, 'Perek helek'. The original Arabic text with modern Hebrew translation may be found in Maimonides, *Mishnah im perush rabenu moshe ben maimon*, 6 vols., ed. and trans. Joseph Kafih (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1963), iv, 195–217. For an English translation, see Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader* (New York: Behrman House, 1972), 401–23. Maimonides' reference here appears to be to the text at *Mishnah im perush rabenu moshe ben maimon*, ed. Kafih, 210 and Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader*, 412.

<sup>2</sup> I use the translation of David R. Blumenthal, as cited in Kellner, *Dogma*, 15–16, and in Appendix 2 below (p. 150).

<sup>3</sup> Strictly speaking, as I have argued throughout this book, it is surprising to find any exponent of the rabbinic tradition maintaining that any belief is a *dogma* of Judaism, but that is not relevant to our theme here.

<sup>4</sup> On the doctrine of reward and punishment in rabbinic thought see e.g. the discussion in Urbach, *The Sages*, vol. ii, ch. 15, sect. 2.

It is also no surprise, therefore, that readers whose understanding of Maimonides is coloured by the received tradition of Judaism are thunderstruck, often outraged, when confronted by the claim that Maimonides actually maintains that the righteous are not directly rewarded for their good behaviour, nor the wicked directly punished for their evil behaviour. Yet this understanding of Maimonides is the near-unanimous opinion of those of his interpreters whose approach to the 'Great Eagle' is informed by the canons of Western academic scholarship.<sup>5</sup>

Since many of the arguments in this book stand or fall on the question of Maimonides' understanding of reward and punishment, and since some readers of earlier drafts were indeed shocked by my assumption that Maimonides denies that the righteous are clearly and directly rewarded for the fulfilment of the commandments, I thought it necessary to write this appendix. It is my intention here to defend the 'academic' understanding of Maimonides on reward and punishment, show that he could not possibly have accepted the 'traditionalist' approach, and explain exactly in what sense he maintains that the righteous are indeed rewarded and the wicked indeed punished. I will argue further that in his own eyes his position is in no way heterodox (even though he took considerable pains to hide his true views from his less sophisticated readers). Attention will also have to be paid to the nature of Maimonides' esoteric writing in his halakhic works.

I will be demonstrating, in other words, that Maimonides put forward an esoteric teaching on the nature of divine retribution, that that teaching is a consequence of antecedently held philosophical positions, and that he did not himself hold that teaching to be heterodox. In so doing I will be advancing a project to which I have devoted considerable attention, namely showing that Maimonides understood his philosophical and Jewish commitments to coexist harmoniously and that he was in his own eyes an 'orthodox' Jew.<sup>6</sup>

The best place to begin our investigation is with Maimonides' first

<sup>5</sup> Maimonides' view on this matter was well understood by R. Solomon ben Abraham Adret (Rashba; c.1235–c.1310), the leading halakhist of his generation, who complained about Maimonides' views, 'Are the pious men of Israel without philosophy not worthy of an afterlife?' The text appears in Adret's *Responsa* (Heb.), 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1990), i. 387. I cite it as translated by Moshe Halbertal in *People of the Book* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 119.

<sup>6</sup> See the following of my studies: *Dogma*, 10–65; *Maimonides on Human Perfection*; *Maimonides on Judaism*; 'Reading Rambam'; 'The Beautiful Captive'; *Maimonides on the Decline of the Generations*.

statement of his opinions concerning the nature of retribution in this world and the next, his introduction to the tenth chapter of Mishnah *Sanhedrin*, 'Perek helek'. It is at the end of this text that he enunciates his Thirteen Principles and it is in the light of this text, I maintain, that we ought to understand the eleventh principle of faith, cited above. In commenting on the mishnah which begins 'All Israelites have a share in the world to come', Maimonides writes:

I must now speak of the great fundamental principles of our faith. Know that the masters of the Torah hold differing opinions concerning the good which will come to a person as a result of fulfilling the commandments which God commanded us through Moses our Teacher. (p. 402)<sup>7</sup>

After describing five different views about the nature of reward for the fulfilment of the commandments, Maimonides introduces an analogy by way of explaining the correct understanding of divine retribution. A small child will study the Torah only if bribed to do so. Such a child cannot understand that study of the Torah brings us to our perfection and is thus worth doing in and of itself. As the child grows, the nature of the bribes changes (from food, to clothing, to money, to social status). This is deplorable, Maimonides says, but also unavoidable, 'because of man's limited insight, as a result of which he makes the goal of wisdom something other than wisdom itself . . . our Sages called this learning not for its own sake' (p. 405).

Learning the Torah for its own sake, on the other hand, means that 'the end of studying wisdom [should not] be anything but knowing it. The truth has no other purpose than knowing that it is truth. Since the Torah is truth, the purpose of knowing it is to do it' (p. 405).<sup>8</sup> This study and doing should be motivated by nothing extrinsic to itself:

<sup>7</sup> Here and below I cite from the translation found in Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader*, 401 ff. The translation is relatively loose but sufficient for our purposes. Page references in the text are to this edition. I have retranslated passages which require greater precision from the Arabic–Hebrew edition by Kafih, as indicated in the text.

<sup>8</sup> Y. Leibowitz (incorrectly) uses this passage to prove that the fulfilment of the commandments is 'not a means: it is the end in itself'. For Leibowitz's texts and a critique of them see the important article by Hannah Kasher, '“Torah for its Own Sake”, “Torah not for its Own Sake”, and the Third Way', *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 79 (1988–9), 153–63 at 157. This fine article provides significant support for the interpretation of Maimonides put forward here. Further on our issue, see the discussion between Hannah Kasher and Michael Zvi Nehorai in *Tarbits*, 64/2 (1995), 301–8. See also Dov Schwartz, 'Avicenna and Maimonides on Immortality: A Comparative Study', in Ronald Nettle (ed.), *Studies in Muslim–Jewish Relations* (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1993), 185–97. For another very useful and convincing study relevant to my theme here, see

A good man must not wonder, 'If I perform these commandments, which are virtues, and if I refrain from these transgressions, which are vices which God commanded us not to do, what will I get out of it?' This is precisely what the child does when he asks, 'If I read, what will you give me?' (p. 405)

In promising a child some sweet or toy in order to motivate it to learn, we are acting in accordance with Proverbs 26: 5: 'Answer the fool according to his folly.' It is reasonable to extrapolate and see that Maimonides is hinting that when a person is promised some earthly reward for the study of the Torah or the fulfilment of its commandments, that promise is an instance of answering the fool according to his folly.

Maimonides seems to confirm this interpretation immediately: 'Our sages have already warned us about this. They said that one should not make the goal of one's service of God or of doing the commandments anything in the world of things' (p. 406).<sup>9</sup> One who does so does not serve God out of love. The true servant of God, Maimonides continues, quoting the Talmud, desires God's commandments, not the reward of God's commandments.<sup>10</sup>

Maimonides admits that it is hard to motivate the masses to serve God out of love, with no thought of reward or fear of punishment. 'Therefore,' he says, 'in order that the masses stay faithful and do the commandments, it was permitted to tell them that they might hope for a reward and to warn them against transgressions out of fear of punishment . . . just like the child in the analogy which I cited above' (p. 406).

Having made his position tolerably clear, that only fools and children expect rewards for the fulfilment of the commandments or for the study of the Torah, Maimonides suddenly shifts his attention to a new question altogether: how to understand the words of the Sages (in mid-rashic and aggadic contexts). The suddenness of this shift of attention is actually more apparent than real. Maimonides is interested here in

Jerome Gellman, 'Radical Responsibility in Maimonides' Thought', in Ira Robinson *et al.* (eds.), *The Thought of Moses Maimonides* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 249–65.

<sup>9</sup> i.e. in this earthly world. The passage quoted is from BT *Avodah zarah* 19a.

<sup>10</sup> Maimonides' statements on service of God out of love have recently been collected and analysed by Abraham Feintuch, *Upright Commands* (Heb.) (Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot, 1992), 80–2. See further Menachem Kellner, 'Philosophical Misogyny in Medieval Jewish Thought: Gersonides vs. Maimonides', in A. Ravitzky (ed.), *From Rome to Jerusalem: The Joseph Sermonetta Memorial Volume* (Heb.) (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1998), 113–28. In addition to the sources cited in these two studies, see also *Guide*, iii. 28–9. For important new insights into the issue, see Howard Haim Kreisel, 'Love and Fear of God in Maimonides' Thought' (Heb.), *Da'at*, 37 (1996), 127–52.

teaching us how to understand rabbinic discussions of reward in the world to come.

There are those who interpret the Sages literally and accept their teachings on that level; there are others who also interpret the Sages literally but therefore reject their teachings as contrary to reason. The very small number of people who interpret the words of the Sages correctly realize that to interpret them literally is to impute nonsense to them. People of this sort understand that 'whenever the sages spoke of things which seem impossible, they were employing the style of riddle and parable which is the method of truly great thinkers' (p. 409).

Having made these introductions, Maimonides can finally 'begin to discuss the matter with which I am really concerned' (p. 410). This is, that true delight is spiritual. Such delight has no physical analogue, being of a different dimension altogether. The angels, heavenly bodies, and spheres 'experience great delight in that they know by experience the true being of God the Creator. With this knowledge they enjoy delight which is both perpetual and uninterrupted' (p. 411). Individuals who purify themselves in this world will achieve this 'spiritual height'.

How does one purify oneself in order to achieve this rarefied existence? Maimonides makes himself fairly clear, commenting on a passage from BT *Berakhot* 17a which reads: 'In the world to come there is no eating, drinking, washing, anointing, or sexual intercourse; but the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads enjoying the radiance of the divine presence.' The expression 'crowns on their heads', Maimonides explains,

signifies the existence of the soul through the existence of that which it knows, in that they are the same thing as the experts in philosophy have maintained . . . The expression, 'enjoying the radiance of the divine presence' means that those souls enjoy what they know of the Creator, as the *hayot hakodesh* and other degrees of angels<sup>11</sup> enjoy what they have cognized of His existence. (p. 412; my translation)

Maimonides explains to us here that the reward of the righteous in the world to come is the existence of the soul thanks to what it has learned. This existence is blissful because it involves the cognition of God. This is something taught by the 'experts in philosophy'.

Maimonides sharpens the point in the sequel: the final end of human beings, their ultimate felicity, consists in knowing God, which knowledge 'is the cause [of the soul's] continued existence, as was established in

<sup>11</sup> For Maimonides on the *hayot hakodesh* ('holy animals') and other degrees of angels, see 'Laws of the Foundations of the Torah', ii. 7.

first philosophy'. 'First philosophy', of course, is a standard Aristotelian expression referring to metaphysics.

Reward in the world to come, then, is a consequence of achieving a certain kind of knowledge in this life and consists of enjoying that knowledge without change and without end. If that is reward, what is punishment? Maimonides is quick to answer that the ultimate punishment 'consists in the cutting off of the soul so that it perishes and does not exist' (p. 412; my translation).<sup>12</sup> If this is the case, Maimonides continues, what could be 'the meaning of the promises of good and threats of evil punishment which are contained in the Torah?' When the Torah promises a reward, it means that God will remove obstacles to human fulfilment, 'so that men who strive to do the commandments will be healthy and at peace so that their knowledge will be perfected and they will [thereby] merit life in the world to come' (p. 413; my translation).

We may now summarize Maimonides' position as it has been developed to this point. Fulfilment of the commandments enables us to learn about God. Learning about God is the key to the soul's survival after the death of the body. The fulfilment of the commandments itself without learning about God does not bring one to the world to come, while it appears that Maimonides would hold (indeed, has to hold, as I will show below) that learning about God without fulfilment of the commandments does bring one to the world to come.<sup>13</sup>

There is an important point which must be emphasized here. Life in the world to come is not a reward in the sense that if a person does *x* then God responds by granting that person a share in the world to come. For

<sup>12</sup> A consequence of Maimonides' position—a consequence from which he does not shrink—is that there is no actual punishment after death. He makes that point tolerably clear in his discussion of the biblical *karet* ('cutting off') in 'Laws of Repentance', i. 1 and i. 5, and explicitly in viii. 1. His statements on this matter have deeply troubled traditionalist interpreters of the *Mishneh torah*, starting with Nahmanides and continuing through R. Joseph Karo (in his *Kesef mishneh* on 'Laws of Repentance', viii. 1) to our own day in the commentaries of Rabbi Nachum Rabinovitch, and Rabbi Joseph Kafih. The ingenuity of these commentators aside, it will be shown below that Maimonides could not have held any other position. For Nahmanides, see his *Writings and Discourses*, trans. Charles B. Chavel (New York: Shilo, 1978), 390–5, 495–504; for Rabinovitch, see his *Yad peshutah* on the *Mishneh torah*, book 1 (*Sefer hamada*), 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot, 1990), i. 971; for Kafih, see his commentary on the *Mishneh torah*, book 1 (*Sefer hamada*) (Jerusalem: Makhon Moshe, 1986), 636.

<sup>13</sup> I hasten to add that Maimonides was not optimistic that many could learn about God without fulfilling the commandments, only that the possibility existed. For details, see Kellner, *Maimonides on Judaism*, 29–32.

Maimonides, one achieves a share in the world to come by learning about God. As he puts it,

When one perfects oneself as a human being, and genuinely differentiates oneself from the animals,<sup>14</sup> one becomes a perfected human being; a characteristic of this degree is that nothing external can restrain the soul from existing through that which it cognizes, and this is the world to come, as we have explained. (p. 416; my translation)

In other words, life in the world to come is a consequence of having achieved human perfection, not a reward for a particular sort of behaviour.<sup>15</sup> For Maimonides, correct behaviour (i.e. fulfilment of the commandments) is surely obligatory, and certainly an important condition for achieving human perfection, but in itself it does not constitute that perfection and there is, literally, no direct reward for it.<sup>16</sup>

Maimonides' position here in his commentary on 'Perek helek' is couched in very traditional language, and most readers, expecting to find a traditional account, and not familiar with the Aristotelian background to Maimonides' argumentation (which I will elucidate below), are not even aware that an unusual stance is being taken.

The position on reward and punishment which I have found in

<sup>14</sup> Accepting the Aristotelian definition of a human being as a rational animal (see *Guide*, i. 1–2), Maimonides is committed to the proposition that the specific difference which marks humans off from other animals is their rationality. Thus, one 'genuinely differentiates oneself from the animals' by achieving rationality and thus becoming fully human. Those who do not make the grade remain animals in human form. Such a one 'is not a man, but an animal having the shape and configuration of man' (*Guide*, i. 8, p. 33; cf. iii. 18, p. 475 and commentary on Mishnah *Hagigah* ii. 1). This last text is available in an annotated English translation: Menachem Kellner, 'Maimonides' Commentary on *Hagigah* ii. 1', in Marc Angel (ed.), *From Strength to Strength* (New York: Sepher Hermon Press, 1988), 101–11.

<sup>15</sup> The point is put very well by Kasher in "'Torah for its Own Sake'". As Kasher puts it, Maimonides replaces 'the principle of just recompense with a rational doctrine of natural consequence' (p. 157). Further, 'God's rule of the world and his providential actions are not based upon the idea of reward and punishment, but upon a natural process which leads to a desirable outcome' (p. 162).

<sup>16</sup> We are now in a position to understand why there can be no punishment after death for the wicked: nothing remains to be punished! If we are born, live, and die without perfecting ourselves as human beings, then we die as we were born: human beings *in potentia* only. Maimonides' Aristotelian doctrine of the soul makes it impossible for him to posit punishment after death for evildoers. The righteous (= intellectually perfected) create their own immortality and enjoy it when they die; the wicked (= those who have not actualized their intellectual potential even to a small degree) create nothing and therefore are nothing when they die.

Maimonides' commentary on 'Perek helek' is repeated in other of his works, both halakhic and philosophical. I have cited and analysed these texts in another context;<sup>17</sup> here I must be content briefly to summarize them.

In 'Laws of the Foundations of the Torah', iv. 9, Maimonides explicitly connects knowledge of God with the persistence of the soul after death. In 'Laws of Repentance', viii. 3, again quoting from BT *Berakhot* 17a, Maimonides repeats that the expression 'their crowns on their heads' 'refers to the knowledge they have acquired, and on account of which they have attained life in the world to come'.

Maimonides' position on fulfilment of the commandments and reward in the world to come finds clear expression in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. A human being's ultimate perfection, Maimonides maintains,

is to become rational in actu; this would consist in knowing everything concerning all the beings that it is within the capacity of man to know in accordance with his ultimate perfection. It is clear that to this ultimate perfection there do not belong either *actions or moral qualities* and that it consists only of ideas toward which speculation has led and that investigation has rendered compulsory.<sup>18</sup>

Perfection consists only in knowledge.<sup>19</sup> This perfection is purely intellectual; 'actions or moral qualities' do not constitute it all.

What is going on here? Does Maimonides really mean to teach that fulfilment of the commandments is a waste of time, and that in order to reach ultimate perfection one must devote oneself wholly to perfecting one's intellect? Were that his position, he would really have placed

<sup>17</sup> See Kellner, *Maimonides on Human Perfection*, 1–5.

<sup>18</sup> *Guide*, iii. 27, p. 511; emphasis added.

<sup>19</sup> Some students of Maimonides maintain that such perfection is actually impossible and thus hold that he denied that anyone could really achieve a share in the world to come. This view, held by Shlomo Pines, obviously turns Maimonides into a self-consciously heterodox thinker. Pines' position has been criticized by Alexander Altmann and Herbert Davidson. See Shlomo Pines, 'The Limitations of Human Knowledge According to al-Farabi, ibn Bajjah, and Maimonides', in Isadore Twersky (ed.), *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, i (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 82–109; Alexander Altmann, 'Maimonides on the Intellect and the Scope of Metaphysics', in *Von der mittelalterlichen zur modernen Aufklärung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1987), 60–129; Herbert A. Davidson, 'Maimonides on Metaphysical Knowledge', *Maimonidean Studies*, 3 (1992–3), 49–103. The question of what sort of knowledge constitutes human perfection has also been debated. See Warren Zev Harvey, 'R. Hasdai Crescas and his Critique of Philosophic Happiness' (Heb.), *Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, 3 (1977), 143–9.

himself so far outside the mainstream of the rabbinic tradition as to justify the claims of those who see him as an *epikoros*, a self-conscious heretic.

Maimonides, however, neither says nor intimates that Jews are not obligated to fulfil the commandments. We are indeed so obligated, and it is good for us to do so. What he does hold is that there is no direct, *quid pro quo* compensation for the fulfilment of the commandments. We ought to fulfil the commandments in a mature fashion, out of love, with no expectation of reward.

What good then are the commandments and their fulfilment? Maimonides essays an answer to this near the very end of the *Guide*:

all the actions prescribed by the Torah—I refer to the various species of worship and also the moral habits that are useful to all people in their mutual dealings—... all this is not to be compared with this ultimate end and does not equal it, *being but preparations for the sake of this end*.<sup>20</sup>

The commandments are preparations which enable human beings to achieve their proper end, intellectual perfection. Through the achievement of such perfection, one constitutes one's own immortality.

How does this work? In order to answer this question we must look at Maimonides' psychology, or theory of the soul. This is a subject to which I have also paid attention elsewhere, and so here, again, I will only summarize the key elements of Maimonides' theory.<sup>21</sup> Maimonides adopted an account of the nature of human psychology called the theory of the acquired intellect. According to this theory, humans are born with a potential to learn, which they may or may not actualize, and it is this

<sup>20</sup> *Guide*, iii. 54, p. 636; emphasis added.

<sup>21</sup> See Kellner, *Maimonides on Judaism*, *passim* and esp. 9–16. With respect to Maimonides' adoption of the theory of the acquired intellect, Isaac Abrabanel also attributes it to him in his commentary on *Guide of the Perplexed*, i. 1, i. 41 (Abrabanel's commentary is found in the standard Hebrew editions of the *Guide*), in his commentary on Genesis (Jerusalem: Bnei Arabel, 1964), 67, and in *Yeshu'ot meshiho*, section (*iyun*) 1, ch. 5 (Benei Berak: Me'orei Sefarad, 1993), 92. He sees Alexander of Aphrodisias as Maimonides' source and criticizes the latter heartily for following Alexander in this matter. In his commentary on 1 Samuel 25, third root (Jerusalem: Torah Veda'at, 1955), 286, Abrabanel argues, against Maimonides, that immortality is not restricted to the 'souls of perfected individuals, who survive through their concepts or their desired actions, but the souls of the wicked also survive in the world of souls in order to be punished there'. Abrabanel goes on to connect the view he rejects (that the wicked have no world to come) to the psychology of Alexander of Aphrodisias, according to which the human soul is at birth (only) a disposition. This latter view he also attributes to Maimonides, and he hints rather broadly that Maimonides also accepts the view that the wicked do not survive to be punished in the world to come.

capability and its actualization in which their humanity lies. In slightly more formal terms, we are born with a capacity to know; to the extent that we actualize that capacity by learning truth, we become actual intellects—we have acquired our intellects; if we fail to actualize our intellects, that capacity with which we are born is wasted and nothing survives the death of our bodies.<sup>22</sup> It is important to note here that on the theory of the acquired intellect the only way to achieve immortality, what Jews call earning a portion in the world to come, is through actually acquiring an intellect by perfecting ourselves intellectually. There is simply no other mechanism available to Maimonides on his own understanding of the nature of human beings.

One could reply, of course, that there is nothing to stop God from working a miracle and granting a saintly but simple person a share in the world to come. On Maimonides' theory of miracles this solution is not available. Maimonides' understanding of the stable character of nature, and his consistent attempts to explain miracles in naturalistic terms, make it impossible that he should hold that God works miracle after miracle to guarantee a share in the world to come to every saintly but philosophically unsophisticated person who dies. Maimonides, indeed, explicitly distances himself from the 'masses', who, he says,

like nothing better, and in their silliness, enjoy nothing more, than to settle the Torah and reason at opposite ends, and to move everything far from the explicable. So they claim it to be a miracle, and they shrink from identifying it as a natural incident . . . But I try to reconcile the Torah and reason, and wherever possible consider all things as of the natural order. Only when something is explicitly identified as a miracle, and reinterpretation of it cannot be accommodated, only then I feel forced to grant that this is a miracle.<sup>23</sup>

Now, Maimonides is quite clear in maintaining that in order to perfect our intellects we must achieve and maintain a high level of moral perfection. In the *Guide of the Perplexed*, he discusses four types of perfection which pertain to human beings (possessions, physical constitution, morals, and intellect). Of the third he says:

The third kind is a perfection that to a greater extent than the second kind

<sup>22</sup> As we saw above, this is what Maimonides calls *karet*, the biblical punishment of being 'cut off'.

<sup>23</sup> This passage is found in Maimonides' 'Treatise on Resurrection'. I cite it (with slight emendations) as translated by Halkin in *Crisis and Leadership*, 223. Further on this subject see my discussion of Maimonides' understanding of nature and miracles in Kellner, *Maimonides on the Decline of the Generations*, 27–36.

subsists in the self. This is the perfection of the moral virtues. It consists in the individual's moral habits having attained their utmost excellence. Most of the commandments serve no other end than the attainment of this kind of perfection. But this kind of perfection is likewise a preparation for something else and not an end in itself.<sup>24</sup>

Most of the commandments serve to bring us to moral perfection.<sup>25</sup> But this perfection to which we are brought by the fulfilment of the commandments is not an end in itself; rather, it is 'a preparation for something else'. For what is it a preparation? Maimonides answers immediately:

The fourth kind is the true human perfection; it consists in the acquisition of the rational virtues—I refer to the conception of the intelligibles, which teach true opinions concerning the divine things. This is in true reality the ultimate end; this is what gives the individual true perfection, a perfection belonging to him alone; and it gives him permanent perdurance; through it man is man.

Fulfilment of the commandments is thus not valuable in and of itself; it is, rather, a means for achieving the one truly human virtue, the one truly human perfection, the one activity which constitutes us as human beings in this world and guarantees our existence in the next, namely, the 'conception of the intelligibles, which teach true opinions concerning the divine things'.<sup>26</sup>

Maimonides himself stresses this point, stating further

that similarly all the actions prescribed by the Torah—I refer to the various species of worship and also the moral habits that are useful to people in their mutual dealings—that all this is not to be compared with this ultimate end [wisdom] and does not equal it, being but preparations made for the sake of this end.<sup>27</sup>

As we saw above, looking for rewards in this world for the fulfilment of the commandments is a sign of immaturity and foolishness; while the only reward in the next world is an outgrowth and consequence of (not a

<sup>24</sup> *Guide*, iii. 54, p. 635.

<sup>25</sup> Most, but not all, since some commandments bring us to adopt true beliefs, such as observance of the Sabbath, which teaches creation, and the first of the Ten Commandments, which teaches God's existence.

<sup>26</sup> i.e. metaphysics. For an analysis of the many texts in which Maimonides makes the identification, 'secrets of the Torah' = 'Account of the Chariot' = metaphysics, see Kellner, *Maimonides on Judaism*, 65–80. See also the important study by Sara Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon and Philosophical Esotericism in Maimonides' Teaching* (Heb.) (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1996), 48–75, 203–10.

<sup>27</sup> *Guide*, iii. 54, p. 636.

response to) our intellectual perfection and nothing else. We can now see why for Maimonides there can be no reward or punishment in this world or the next for the fulfilment of the commandments or their violation as such.

Why, then, should we fulfil the commandments? The very question would have given Maimonides a stomach-ache, I think, since in his view it is so wrong-headed. In the first place, Jews are commanded by God to fulfil the commandments. Jews who love God will fulfil the commandments with devotion and joy, with no thought whatsoever of reward. Furthermore, the fulfilment of the commandments is good for you. It makes you into a better person. Even more, a society of individuals fulfilling the commandments of the Torah will be a stable and just society, as Maimonides makes clear in the *Guide* (iii. 27). Finally, in order to realize our potential we must lead ordered, structured, disciplined, and moral lives, otherwise we will never fulfil ourselves as human beings, i.e. as rational animals. Maimonides was convinced that there is no better way to achieve that end than through the fulfilment of God's commandments.

A word of explanation concerning this last point is warranted. Achieving intellectual perfection is extremely hard work, demanding years of disciplined study and devotion in the search of truth, not enjoyment of the pleasures of this world in and of themselves.<sup>28</sup> Very few people can discipline themselves in this fashion. Adopting a mode of life which channels our desires in a healthy fashion, disciplines our behaviour, and leads (those who are able) to intellectual perfection makes the likelihood of perfecting ourselves as human beings much greater.<sup>29</sup> It is not impossible for Gentiles to accomplish this; it is simply much harder for them than for Jews since they do not have the Torah.<sup>30</sup>

Maimonides' position may be summarized thus: fulfilment of the commandments is both an obligation and also certainly good for you, but brings no direct reward, in this world or the next; transgressing the commandments is forbidden and bad for you, but brings no direct punishment, in this world or the next.

All this being said, it is still the case that in not a few places Maimonides

<sup>28</sup> Intellectual perfection must also be constantly renewed. As Lenn Goodman once pointed out to me, it is not like money in the bank, but is, rather, like health or vigour. Without constant exercise, one loses one's vigour. In this sense, intellectual perfection is like treading water: if you stop, you sink.

<sup>29</sup> On this way of life, see Kellner, 'Revelation and Messianism'.

<sup>30</sup> On this point, see Kellner, *Maimonides on Judaism*, 23–32.

clearly speaks as if he accepted a traditionalist account of reward and punishment. Thus, in 'Laws of Repentance', Maimonides writes: 'In that it is known that the reward for the [fulfilment of the] commandments, and the good that we will receive if we observe the way of the Lord as written in the Torah is life in the world to come . . .'. Maimonides here says that life in the world to come is earned through the fulfilment of the commandments.<sup>31</sup> This is, of course, good solid traditional Judaism, but it is a far cry from the doctrine which I hope I have shown here to be espoused by Maimonides and summarized in the previous paragraph.

We have a number of choices here. We can accept the text from the 'Laws of Repentance' as normative and attempt to interpret the texts adduced above in support of the interpretation of Maimonides urged here in its light; or, alternatively, we can take 'my' interpretation of Maimonides as correct and seek to understand why he seems to diverge from it here in the 'Laws of Repentance'. Not surprisingly, I propose to adopt this second alternative, and I would like to explain why.

The interpretation of Maimonides' stance on reward and punishment presented here follows from several other positions which Maimonides clearly holds. If we reject it, we must also reject Maimonides' views on the nature of human beings, their perfection, and his understanding of miracles. That is an unacceptably high price to pay.

Why, though, does Maimonides not present his position clearly and unambiguously? Why does he force us to tease it out of texts like the introduction to 'Perek ḥelek' (as we did above), and why does he seem to contradict it (as in the passage just cited from 'Laws of Repentance')?<sup>32</sup> An answer to this question may be found in *Guide of the Perplexed*, iii. 28. There we are told that in addition to teaching truths in a summary fashion, the Torah 'also makes a call to adopt certain beliefs, belief in which is necessary for the sake of political welfare'. That is, the Torah teaches things which are themselves not strictly and literally true, but are beliefs which the masses must accept so as not to undermine the stability of society. The example cited by Maimonides clearly confirms this inter-

<sup>31</sup> 'Laws of Repentance', ix. 1. For further examples, see 'Laws of Forbidden Inter-course', xiv. 3; Commentary on Mishnah *Makot*, iii. 17.

<sup>32</sup> In actual fact, I think that the contradiction is more apparent than real. If we understand Maimonides here in light of a passage already cited from the commentary on 'Perek ḥelek' ('so that men who strive to do the commandments will be healthy and at peace so that their knowledge will be perfected and they will [thereby] merit life in the world to come'), we can understand him to be saying that obedience to the commandments leads to health and peace, which in turn enables people to devote themselves to the acquisition of knowledge, which brings them to the world to come.

pretation: 'Such, for example, is our belief that He, may He be exalted, is violently angry with those who disobey Him and it is therefore necessary to fear Him and to dread Him and to take care not to disobey.' Now, Maimonides makes it abundantly clear in many contexts that God does not really get angry.<sup>33</sup> But it is certainly useful for religiously immature people to believe that God gets angry so that they 'take care not to disobey'. At the end of the chapter Maimonides sums up his position very clearly:

In some cases a commandment communicates a correct belief . . . In other cases the belief is [only] necessary for the abolition of reciprocal wrongdoing or for the acquisition of a noble moral quality—as, for instance, the belief that He, may He be exalted, has a violent anger against those who do injustice, according to what is said: 'And My wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill . . . ' [Exod. 22: 23] and as the belief that He, may He be exalted, responds instantaneously to the prayer of someone wronged or deceived: 'And it shall come to pass, when he crieth unto Me, that I will hear; for I am gracious' [Exod. 22: 26].

It is hard to state the point more clearly than this: it is important that people believe that God gets violently angry with sinners and it is important for them to believe that God immediately answers the prayers of the wronged. The Torah therefore teaches that these beliefs are true; that does not mean that they are actually true in and of themselves. They are necessary beliefs, not true beliefs.<sup>34</sup>

The notion that the righteous are rewarded for the fulfilment of the commandments in this world and the next, without any reference to their intellectual attainments, and that the wicked are punished in the next world, if not clearly in this world, for their transgressions,<sup>35</sup> is, I submit, a necessary belief without being a true one. As Maimonides himself told us in the introduction to 'Perek ḥelek', very few people are mature enough

<sup>33</sup> See esp. *Guide*, i. 54. Further on Maimonides' extremely negative attitude towards anger, see *Guide*, iii. 8; 'Laws of Character Traits', ii. 3; commentary on *Pirkei avot* ii. 10; and *Book of Commandments*, positive commandment 317.

<sup>34</sup> As we saw above, Maimonides writes in his commentary on 'Perek ḥelek', 'in order that the masses stay faithful and do the commandments, it was permitted to tell them that they might hope for a reward and to warn them against transgressions out of fear of punishment'.

<sup>35</sup> It is crucial to remember that for Maimonides moral perfection is a prerequisite of intellectual perfection. He does not have to 'worry' that an intellectually perfected wicked person will 'sneak' into the world to come. Wicked people do not achieve true intellectual perfection. This position is, I think, objectively false (Martin Heidegger, for example, was a moral pygmy and at the same time an important philosopher); but that does not mean that Maimonides did not hold it. He is allowed to be wrong.

to fulfil the commandments of the Torah for its own sake. They must be motivated by promises of reward and threats of punishment. These promises are in one sense false: there is no *quid pro quo* reward for the fulfilment of the commandments; one does not earn credit points in some heavenly bank account for obeying the commandments of the Torah. But in another sense these promises are true: obeying the commandments of the Torah is surely good for you. In most cases such obedience in and of itself (with no divine intervention) leads to a happier and more fulfilled life, and to a better and more just society. Obedience to the commandments is also a crucially important, if neither necessary nor sufficient, step towards achieving true human perfection and the life in the world to come which is a consequence of that perfection.