



THE GOD CONCEPTS OF MOSES MAIMONIDES AND MARTIN BUBER

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## DIGEST

Rabbinic Judaism is built upon the theological basis of theistic absolutism. Both Moses Maimonides and Martin Buber expressed a Jewish God concept that was different from theistic absolutism. The striking contrast between Buber's, Maimonides', and Rabbinic Judaism's views of God exemplifies the variety of God concepts that can be found within Jewish thought. Reform Jews have the freedom to choose what to believe regarding God. Therefore a comparison of these non-theistic God concepts can help an individual Reform Jew clarify personal beliefs about God.

Moses Maimonides can be described as a Neo-Platonized Aristotelian. He derived his proofs for the existence of God from Aristotle, while rejecting Aristotle's notion that the universe is eternal. Maimonides based his cosmology on Plotinus and other Neo-Platonists. To Maimonides, God is the ground of being, and the First Cause of all that is. God is incorporeal and a unity. The perfection of God overflows to cause the creation of the Intelligences, and indirectly, the creation of the sublunar world, the world of the human person. Based on the incorporeality and unity of God, Maimonides rejected both essential and accidental attributes (positive attributes of God). God contains neither quality nor relation to any other being. The human person can know God only through God's actions and through the application of the negative attributes.

Maimonides' intention through his great work, The Guide of the

Perplexed, was to address those who have become perplexed by the disparity between philosophy and the literal words of Scripture. Maimonides intentionally concealed his true teaching from the masses, and communicated his true beliefs to his elite readers through concealment. Only those trained in philosophy can discern that, to Maimonides, Divine Providence is a natural event which requires the development of the human person's natural faculties. The essence of the human person is rationality, and authentic human existence occurs through the realization of the intellect. One receives Divine Providence to the extent that one develops the intellect. One achieves soteria through rational, intellectual activities that lead to the realization of the essence of the human person.

Martin Buber can be described as a religious Existentialist. According to Existentialism, the essence of the human person is developed through choices that are made throughout life. To Buber, the human person is not an isolated being, but a social, or relational being. Authentic human existence occurs in the genuine dialogue between a human person and a partner. The relational partner could be inanimate, animate or spiritual.

Buber rejected traditional philosophic proofs for the existence of God. To Buber, nothing can be known about God; God is not an idea. God can only be "met" through an I-Thou encounter. Buber's entire philosophy is based upon the I-Thou encounter which is ineffable and occurs through genuine dialogue and divine grace. Buber's view of the deity resembles a theistic, personal deity, in that the human person can directly relate to God through the I-Thou



encounter. However, Buber's personal deity cannot miraculously interrupt the laws of nature. The combination of these attributes create an interesting hybrid theology that is a cross between theism and naturalism. Perhaps because Buber's entire theology is based on subjective meeting, his conclusions regarding theodicy, soteria, and providence were nebulous and incomplete, especially in comparison to Maimonides' theology.

By comparing these two different God concepts, the variety of Jewish God concepts becomes apparent. Reform Judaism gives each individual the authority to choose and create a personal God concept. By comparing the God concepts of Maimonides and Buber, the individual Reform Jew can begin to gain an understanding of what issues are necessarily addressed when constructing a personal theology.

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IN LOVING MEMORY OF MY FATHER

Rabbi Jerry Jerome Pine

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## CHAPTER I

### **The Nature of True Belief in God for Moses Maimonides**

Rabbinic<sup>1</sup> Judaism is built upon the theological basis of theistic absolutism, but a number of other views of God have been subscribed to in Jewish religious thought. Moses Maimonides and Martin Buber each expressed a Jewish God concept that was different from theistic absolutism as well as different from each other. Buber and Maimonides lived during different time periods and their God views reflected the differences in their ideological, social, historical and political settings. I will compare their contrasting views of God. While exploring the God concepts of both of these thinkers, I will also compare their understanding of Scripture, epistemology, soteria<sup>2</sup>, and their evidence for the existence of God. Based on the fundamental differences between these two Jewish views of God, I will discuss the inherent problems in the study of theology from a Reform Jewish perspective.

#### **A. The Nature of True Belief for Maimonides and for the Rabbinic Jew**

In order to clarify the belief of Moses Maimonides it is necessary to establish what constitutes true belief for Maimonides in contrast to that which brings about true belief in Rabbinic Judaism. The nature of true belief is very different for Maimonides as compared to Rabbinic Jews. These variations in the nature of true belief exemplify fundamental differences between Maimonides' conception of Judaism and a Rabbinic view of Judaism.

Throughout the following chapters, it will be explained how Maimonides' conception of Judaism differs fundamentally from Rabbinic Judaism. In order to clarify these differences, it is essential to establish the nature of true belief to the Rabbinic Jew.

Saadya represents a Rabbinic Jewish understanding of the nature of true belief. Saadya's explanation of belief is similar to Maimonides', however they differ regarding the type of evidence required. Saadya explained the nature of belief:

We affirm that this is an idea arising in the soul as to what an object of knowledge really is: when the idea is clarified by speculation, Reason comprehends it, accepts it, and makes it penetrate the soul and become absorbed into it; then man believes this idea which he has attained, and he preserves it in his soul for another time... True belief means believing a thing to be as it really is, the large as large, etc.'

Saadya described belief as the final stage in the process of cognition. However, according to Saadya, if we were dependent upon speculation alone for religious knowledge, we would not have enough time to discover religious truth. Aware of the limits of the human mind, God, according to Saadya, sent Moses who transmitted the Tradition. God spoke to Moses in our presence through the Revelation at Sinai, and therefore we are obligated to accept the teaching.

We were immediately obliged to accept the teaching of religion with all that it implies since it was verified by the testimony of sense perception, and its acceptance is obligatory on the strength of reliable Tradition which has been handed down to us as we shall explain.'



Even though we did not experience the sense perception ourselves, we are still obligated to accept the belief verified by Reliable Tradition. Saadya indicated that God prepared our minds for the acceptance of Reliable Tradition, even though we did not experience the revelation ourselves. Saadya emphasized that not only religion, but societies rely on the basis of true reports.

Unless it is established that there is such a thing as a true report in this world, people will not pay heed to the command of their ruler nor his prohibition, except at such time as they see him with their own eyes, and hear his words with their own ears; and when no longer in his presence, they will cease to accept his commands and prohibition.<sup>5</sup>

Human affairs would be in a state of perpetual doubt if people only held to be true what they perceived with their own senses. According to Saadya, the Revelation at Sinai, although not directly verified, must be accepted as true on the basis of Reliable Tradition, just as other reports that are not directly verified are accepted in order to allow society to function and progress. According to Saadya, the human mind is predisposed by God to accept Reliable Tradition as evidence. Religious truth for the Rabbinic Jew can be said generally to be arrived at through Saadya's cognitive process and the acceptance of Reliable Tradition.

According to Rabbinic Judaism, by being born a Jew, one is born into a set of beliefs that one must accept.<sup>6</sup> In Deuteronomy 29:9, all Jews including future generations are necessarily party to the pentateuchal covenant and must accept the beliefs and practices laid down by the Pentateuch. Therefore simply by being

born of a Jewish mother, one is born obligated to accept a set of beliefs that allow no choice or flexibility. Saadya indicated that God prepares the human mind to accept Revelation at Sinai as evidence based on hearsay, however if an adherent to Rabbinic Judaism were to reject this evidence he/she would still be obligated to believe in the Reliable Tradition by virtue of birth.

To Maimonides, belief<sup>7</sup> is assent to a proposition that each individual must give on the basis of intellectual conviction brought about by consideration of the evidence.

Know that belief is not the notion that is uttered, but the notion that is represented in the soul when it has been averred of it that it is in fact just as it has been represented."

Unlike Saadya, Maimonides required evidence that the individual experiences and verifies directly. Whereas Saadya accepted the evidence of Reliable Tradition as verification of the truth of some event or belief, Maimonides demanded direct apprehension of the evidence for the belief by the individual.

. . . belief is only possible after the apprehension of a thing; it consists in the conviction that the thing apprehended has its existence beyond the mind in reality exactly as it is conceived in the mind. If in addition to this we are convinced that the thing cannot be different in any way from what we believe it to be, and that no reasonable argument can be found for the rejection of the belief or for the admission of any deviation from it, then the belief is true."

Maimonides, emphasized that belief follows logical steps. First one must apprehend something, and that apprehension must be verified as corresponding with reality on the basis of convincing

evidence. Next, the belief is challenged and if the belief cannot possibly be repudiated, the belief is proved to be true. In Rabbinic Judaism, an individual is born into required belief in the covenant and must accept it regardless of his/her conviction. However for a belief to be true for Maimonides an individual must directly experience the evidence that verifies that his belief corresponds with external reality. After no arguments can be brought to show that the belief is not true, the individual assents to the notion that the belief is true. Maimonides necessitated reasoning following logical steps and direct evidence in order for a belief to be true. As he states, "a proposition which can be proved by evidence is not subject to dispute, denial or rejection."<sup>10</sup>

Maimonides and a Rabbinic Jew required different types of evidence to bring about true belief. To Maimonides belief is the end product of a profound psychic process<sup>11</sup>, based on evidence that the individual apprehends directly. Maimonides' definition of belief points to the central role that the intellect plays in his system of thought. The intellect is the source of prophecy, providence and of soteria for Maimonides. The entire Moreh is focused around the development of the intellect, and the final chapter of the work expresses the ultimate centrality of the intellect for Maimonides.

## **B. The Role of the Intellect**

### **In the Realization of the Human Person's Essence**

It is important, to Maimonides, that individuals attempt to realize their essence. In the following chapters it will be explained why the realization of the essence is central to Maimonides. The essence of the human person, according to Maimonides and based on Aristotle, is rational animal. Therefore the most important activity that the human person can engage in is the realization of his or her rational faculty through intellectual speculation and development.

In the final chapter of the Moreh, Maimonides described four kinds of perfection that an individual could possess. These perfection lead the individual to the realization of the essence of the human person, as the fourth and final perfection realizes the essence of rational animal. The first kind, the lowest, is perfection regarding property. With this perfection, the individual owns goods and property. This perfection of ownership is internal to the individual, yet ownership itself is dependent upon entities that are external to the individual. Maimonides indicated that ownership of mere property is a spurious perfection.<sup>12</sup>

The one whose sole aim in all his exertions and endeavors is the possession of this kind of perfection, only seeks perfectly imaginary and transient things; and even if these remain his property all his lifetime, they do not give him any perfection.<sup>13</sup>

The second kind of perfection is the perfection of the body. Perfection in physical strength or speed is a perfection that is in common with the lowest animal species. Maimonides said that

this gives satisfaction to the body, yet the soul derives no profit from this kind of perfection.

The third kind is character or moral perfection. Even this perfection is not sought for its own sake. All moral principles concern the relation of individuals to one another. Therefore moral principles are only necessary and useful when an individual comes into contact with others.<sup>14</sup>

Maimonides found fault with the first three perfections because they could not lead to the realization of the intellect. Only the fourth allows for true perfection.

The fourth kind of perfection is the true perfection of man; the possession of the highest intellectual faculties; the possession of such notions which lead to true metaphysical opinions as regards God. With this perfection man has obtained his final object; it gives him true human perfection; it remains to him alone; it gives him immortality<sup>15</sup>, and on its account he is called man. <sup>16</sup>

Maimonides implied that the individual who reaches the fourth perfection has also obtained moral and physical perfection. Yet he indicated that ultimate perfection can only be achieved through intellectual activity. From a modern perspective it is naive of Maimonides to assume that all individuals who have achieved intellectual perfection necessarily also behave in a moral way.

In light of this final chapter that described the four perfections, Maimonides' definition of belief as comprising intellectual activity can be put into its proper context. Intellectual perfection enables the individual to assent to true beliefs based on evidence and rational thinking. Discovering true



beliefs through the specific process that Maimonides' described leads to providence, prophecy and soteria. The nature of true belief, and the structure of the human intellect are of utmost significance to Maimonides' system of thought, and therefore Maimonides described in detail the nature of the human intellect, how and if it should be developed, and specific instructions as to how to reach ultimate perfection through the intellect.

### C. The Limits of the Human Mind

The realization of the intellect was of ultimate value to Maimonides, yet he indicated that the human mind is limited. Therefore an individual can be limited to the extent that he or she could realize his or her intellect. One must understand the limits of the human mind before beginning Maimonides' careful prescription for how one can realize the intellect.

There are many things which exist in reality that the human mind is incapable of grasping or understanding.<sup>17</sup> Knowledge which is inaccessible to human understanding, such as the number of stars in the universe or the number of species in the sublunar world should be disregarded. The solutions to some metaphysical problems are only possible within certain limits. A transgression of this boundary of human knowledge is not only useless to Maimonides, but potentially dangerous. Maimonides warned of the hazard of challenging the boundary of human understanding by citing examples of both the senses and the intellect. If one attempts to see an object which is either too distant or too small, one will not only

weaken sight with regard to that object, but also for objects which one would be otherwise capable of perceiving."<sup>18</sup> Similarly, excessive intellectual activity can lead to confusion. Maimonides stressed the danger of attempting to exceed the limit of human perceptive power.

If you attempt to perceive things which are beyond your perception. . . you will not only fail to become perfect, but you will become exceedingly imperfect. Ideas founded on mere imagination will prevail over you, you will incline toward defects, and toward base and degraded habits, on account of the confusion which troubles the mind, and of the dimness of its light, just as weakness of sight causes invalids to see many kinds of unreal images, especially when they have looked for a long time at dazzling or at very minute objects."<sup>19</sup>

Both sense and intellectual perception are connected with matter, and therefore limited, and subject to error. Venturing beyond the boundaries of both intellectual perception and sense perception was dangerous and injurious according to Maimonides. One must realize that both the senses and the intellect have definite boundaries that must be respected in order to preserve and develop both faculties.

Even though every human mind is limited, the limit is not the same for every individual. An individual can develop and train the intellect to a certain degree. To Maimonides the study of Metaphysics was the highest possible form of intellectual activity. However, the study of Metaphysics, accessible to some, is too difficult for the ordinary capacity of the individual."<sup>20</sup> To Maimonides, only select individual are capable of realizing their



intellects and grasping the truth of Metaphysics. The majority of the population is made up of the masses who are potentially dangerous and who must be controlled. They can understand only a limited amount of information. According to Maimonides there are particular metaphysical notions that the masses must understand on a certain level. These ideas are expressed throughout the Torah, yet only the elite, trained individuals are capable of properly understanding the text.

To Maimonides, the Torah is written on two levels, one literal and one figurative or esoteric. Even though the masses only understand the literal meaning of the text, certain metaphysical ideas that are expressed through the esoteric level of the text must be communicated to everyone. Since the masses are not necessarily capable of arriving at metaphysical notions through speculative reasoning, they are taught according to a more direct method. The masses are simply told what to believe and they are to accept it according to Tradition, as would a Rabbinic Jew.

'The Torah speaks in the language of man,' as we have explained, for it is the object of the Torah to serve for the instruction of the young, of women and of the common people; and as all of them are incapable to comprehend the true sense of the words, tradition was considered sufficient to convey truths with were to be established; and as regards ideals, only such remarks were made as would lead towards a knowledge of their existence, though not to a comprehension of their true essence."

Maimonides specifically indicated the few metaphysical notions that the masses should learn by rote based on Tradition. Everyone should be taught that God is incorporeal, that God cannot be

compared to any creatures, and that God is not subject to external influences.<sup>22</sup> Even though the masses are incapable of grasping the esoteric meaning of the Torah, and even though they cannot attempt the study of Metaphysics through its proper preparatory approach, they must know and accept these specific concepts based on Tradition and the understanding of the wise. To Maimonides the incorporeality of God was necessarily understood by all; the belief in the corporeality of the Divine Being was equal to idolatry.<sup>23</sup> The masses were taught these notions by rote, yet the elite could engage in an all encompassing process toward intellectual perfection.

#### D. Maimonides' Approach to the Development of the Intellect

Maimonides outlined a very specific approach to the development of the intellect for elite thinkers. The intelligence of an individual is limited initially, since one only possesses intellectual perfection in potentia and must develop it into actuality.<sup>24</sup> The boundary of an individual's intellect can be expanded as the individual progresses toward the study of Metaphysics. However, just as transgressing the boundary of human knowledge can be harmful to the individual, approaching the difficult subjects without proper training exposes the individual to a similar risk. Maimonides warned that the preparatory studies are long and tiresome, and not every individual possesses the stamina and patience to work toward the study of Metaphysics. Before reaching the study of Metaphysics one must first master

Logic, next the various branches of Mathematics in their proper order, then Physics and finally Metaphysics.<sup>25</sup> Maimonides recalled the warning against beginning with Metaphysics without the proper background preparation.

He who approaches metaphysical problems without the proper preparation is like a person who journeys toward a certain place, and on the road falls into a deep pit, out of which he cannot rise, and he must perish there; if he had not gone forth, but had remained at home it would have been better for him.<sup>26</sup>

The study of Metaphysics is treated as an esoteric subject by Maimonides. He emphasized that it should only be cultivated by privileged and trained individuals.

Maimonides based his understanding of the universe on science, on his observations, and on intellectual conviction brought about by consideration of direct evidence. First Maimonides assented to the truth of propositions based on intellectual conviction and evidence, and following his metaphysical understanding, he inferred that Scripture must esoterically communicate true belief based on science and direct evidence. Maimonides allowed his scientific understanding of the universe to explain the true meaning of Scripture.

#### **E. Maimonides' View of the Commandments**

For Maimonides, attainment of soteria and providence was obtained through the use of the intellect.<sup>27</sup> To the Rabbinic Jew soteria and providence was obtainable through acceptance of Reliable Tradition and adherence to the commandments. Maimonides

indicated that adherence to the commandments was consistent with a lifestyle that emphasized the use of the intellect and the understanding of God's incorporeality. Observance of the commandments could lead to preparation and training for the higher purpose of the study of Metaphysics. Most of the statutes of the Torah were to serve as a fence against idolatry. To Maimonides, these laws served to "blot out wrong principles from the man's heart and to exterminate the practices which are useless, and merely a waste of time in vain purposeless things."<sup>26</sup> The commandments would help individuals live a lifestyle based on the golden mean of nothing to excess, yet no passions suppressed entirely.<sup>29</sup>

Maimonides described how one could obtain the utmost intellectual perfection within a lifestyle adherent to the commandments. He used a simile of a king within an innermost room of a palace. The effort to reach the king was likened to the attempt to develop the intellect through the study of Metaphysics. Many individuals endured throughout several levels of their search for the king, just as many individuals only possess the intellectual capabilities to reach certain levels of understanding.

Those who desire to arrive at the palace, and to enter it, but have never seen it, are the mass of religious people; the multitude that observe the divine commandments but are ignorant. Those who arrive at the palace, but go round about it, are those who devote themselves exclusively to the study of the practical law; they believe traditionally in true principles of faith, and learn the practical worship of God, but are not trained in the philosophical treatment of the principles of the Law, and do to endeavour to

establish the truth of their faith by proof. those who have succeeded in finding a proof for everything that can be proved, who have a true knowledge of God, so far as a true knowledge can be attained, and are near to truth, wherever an approach to the truth is possible, they have reached the goal, and are in the palace where the king lives.<sup>10</sup>

Maimonides equated the study of the *Halacha* with those who only study practical law. He equated those who understand Physics with those who have entered the hall of the palace. Those who have completed the study of Natural Philosophy, and who master Metaphysics are the only ones who enter the king's court to actually meet the king. The intellectual search for the understanding of God is the highest activity to Maimonides. This search must incorporate intellectual speculation, and not imagination. To Maimonides, "Man's love of God is identical with his knowledge of him. . . The intellect which emanates from God unto us is the link that joins us to God."<sup>11</sup> Therefore true perfection is achieved through an intellectual search for an understanding of God. Adherence to the commandments is simply one of the steps of preparation along the way to intellectual perfection. To the Rabbinic Jew, the performance of the commandments and daily prayer were ends in themselves. To Maimonides the lifestyle based on prayer and the commandments is simply conducive to intellectual perfection. A lifestyle based on prayer and the commandments can teach an individual to control desires and appetite while learning to focus and concentrate for long periods of time. This lifestyle can teach the individual the



importance of a life based on nothing to excess, where the individual can exercise self-control over his or her own physical and emotional desires. The form of the Rabbinic Jewish lifestyle was important to Maimonides in that the individual could learn self-restraint and control. However the content of the Rabbinic Jewish lifestyle was insignificant to Maimonides, as he indicated that the Rabbinic Jewish lifestyle could simply prepare an individual for the higher activity of intellectual speculation.

As Maimonides emphasized in the final chapter of the Moreh, intellectual perfection brings the realization of the intellect as the highest aim. The pious individual should seek retirement and seclusion, and should only in case of necessity associate with other human beings." One could educate and train oneself in order to attain ultimate intellectual perfection. One should think of worldly matters as little as possible; only while eating and drinking, bathing, and conversing with others. Maimonides indicated that at these times one should think about business health, and the household. However when one is engaged in the performance of religious duties, one should have one's mind exclusively directed on the religious act." The performance of the commandments act as a catalyst in which the individual can engage in the higher activity of pure speculative thought.

When you are alone by yourself, when you are awake on your couch, be careful to meditate in such precious moments on nothing but the intellectual worship of God, viz., to approach Him and to minister before Him in the true manner which I have described to you-not in hollow emotion. This I consider as the highest perfection wise men can attain by the above

training.<sup>34</sup>

The commandments are important in that they can prepare an individual to engage in speculative thought. To Maimonides everything meaningful and important in life comes about through intellectual pursuits. The ultimate purpose in life is to find and verify beliefs that are true. One arrives at the nature of true belief only through intellectual conviction brought about by consideration of the evidence. To Maimonides the one who reaches religious perfection is the one who develops and engages the intellect in speculative thought.

#### F. ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER I

1. When I refer to Rabbinic Judaism, Orthodox and Traditional Judaism are also implied. Traditional, Rabbinic, and Orthodox Judaism are basically the same as they contain the same basic set of beliefs. See Alvin J. Reines, Polydoxy Explorations in a Philosophy of Liberal Religion, (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1987).

2. Soteria is a technical term which means ultimate meaningful existence. The term soteria is developed and described in Polydoxy, by A.J. Reines. Throughout this thesis I will use the term soteria to denote ultimate meaningful existence.

3. Hans Lewy, Alexander Altman, Isaak Heineman, ed., Three Jewish Philosophers. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1960), p. 34.

4. Ibid., p. 46.

5. Ibid., p. 110.

6. Alvin J. Reines, "Birth Dogma and Philosophic Religious Faith, A Philosophic Inquiry." (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 1972), p. 3.

7. Belief and Faith are synonymous for Maimonides and these terms will be used interchangeably.



8. Moses Maimonides, The Guide of the Perplexed, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 111. Hereafter cited as MN I 50, F, p. 111.

9. Moses Maimonides, The Guide of the Perplexed, trans. M. Friedlander, (New York: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1881), p. 172. Hereafter cited as MN I 50, F, p. 172.

10. MN I 31, F, p. 108.

11. A. J. Reines, "Birth Dogma and Philosophic Religious Faith," p. 8.

12. In the following quote (see endnote 10) Maimonides seemed to have contradicted himself. He referred to 4 kinds of perfection, and then he indicated that the first perfection is not a perfection at all. I interpret this to mean that Maimonides thought that the first perfection was false and erroneously attributed in origin.

13. MN III 54, F, p. 301.

14. MN III 54, F, p. 302.

15. By immortality here, Maimonides means that the individual's intellect has become unified with the Active Intellect through intellectual perfection. The role of the Active Intellect will be discussed more fully in Chapter 4.

16. MN III 54, F, p. 302.

17. MN I 31, F, p. 106.

18. MN I 32, F, p. 111.

19. MN I 32, F, p. 112.

20. MN I 31, F, p. 106. See Friedlander's note.

21. MN I 33, F, p. 116.

22. MN I 35, F, p. 128.

23. MN I 35, F, p. 129. See Friedlander's note, p. 106.

24. MN I 34, F, p. 118.

25. MN I 34, F, p. 120.

26. MN I 34, F, p. 122.

27. Maimonides' concept of providence and soteria will be explained more fully throughout chapter 4.

28. MN III 49, F, p. 270.

29. MN III 49, F, p. 271.

30. MN III 51, F, p. 281.

31. MN III 51, F, p. 283-284.

32. MN III 51, F., p. 284.

33. MN III 52, F, p. 286.

34. MN III 51, F, p. 286.

## CHAPTER II

## PROOFS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

In the introduction to the second part of the Moreh, Maimonides summarized 26 premises proved by Aristotle which established the existence of the deity. Maimonides did not accept the 26th premise, which stated that time and motion are actual and eternal, leading to the idea that the universe is eternal. Nevertheless, Maimonides emphasized that Aristotle's proofs were useful building blocks for his own understanding of the proofs for the existence of deity. He temporarily accepted this premise as true as he continued to establish proofs for the existence of God.

## A. Maimonides' Four Proofs for the Existence of God

Maimonides expounded his four main proofs for the existence of God while referring back to the 26 premises just mentioned. His proofs were variants of the cosmological argument in which Aristotle described the principles of motion. Maimonides demonstrated that we see motion in the world, and that matter, which cannot move itself is being moved; and therefore it must have an agent that causes it to move. This series of motions can not be infinite.<sup>1</sup> The series of motion must end with the motion of the spheres, because there is no other substance that is capable of locomotion. The spheres were not made of the same kind of matter as was the sublunar world, and therefore the motion of the spheres is different than the motion of the sublunar world. The ultimate cause of motion in the sublunar world can be traced to the motion

of the spheres.<sup>2</sup> However the sphere must also have a mover, either residing within the sphere or outside of it. Maimonides then presented four alternatives: (1) If the mover is outside of the sphere, the mover must be a body like the sphere, because location can only apply to corporeal entities; or (2) it could be an incorporeal thing, like an Intelligence, separate from the sphere. If the mover is inside of the sphere, it must be (3) an internal corporeal power divisible with the sphere; or (4) it is an internal indivisible power.<sup>3</sup>

The first possibility is impossible. If the mover is a body like the sphere, it must be in motion itself, and it must have another body to set it in motion. This requires that an infinite number of bodies would be required before the sphere could be set in motion. This is impossible, as an infinite regress is impossible.<sup>4</sup>

The third possibility is impossible. The sphere is a corporeal entity and it is finite, and therefore its power must be finite, since it is distributed throughout the sphere. Therefore it cannot cause infinite motion. The fourth possibility is also impossible since this power could not cause infinite motion by itself. A soul that moves its body is moved according to accidental motion. Whatever moves accidentally must eventually come to rest, and consequently the thing moved by it will stop moving.<sup>5</sup> Aristotle maintained that the spheres move eternally and that motion itself is eternal, therefore only one possibility, the second one, remains. It must be an incorporeal entity, a separate

Intelligence. It is not moved by accident. Since everything subject to motion is divisible, it must be indivisible and unchangeable. Maimonides concluded that this Prime Mover is God.

From this proof it necessarily follows that there cannot be two Gods, because absolutely incorporeal existences are not subject to number, except in so far as one is cause and the other effect.<sup>6</sup> According to the sixteenth proposition, there is no way of distinguishing one incorporeal being from another, except by their causal relation. With two incorporeal beings, only one can be the First Cause, and the other cannot be distinguished from the First unless it is considered as the effect of the First. Since time is an accident of motion, there can be no time without motion. Since there is no motion in God as the Unmoved Mover, time is not applicable to God.<sup>7</sup> Maimonides summarized this first argument:

The result of the above argument is consequently this, the sphere cannot move *ad infinitum* of its own accord; the Prime Mover is not corporeal, nor a force residing within a body; it is One, unchangeable, and in its existence independent of time; three of our postulates are thus proved by the principal philosophers.<sup>8</sup>

The remaining three of Maimonides' proofs of the existence of God follow along the lines of Aristotle's denial of the possibility of an infinite regress regarding motion. The second proof is as follows. If there is something composed of two elements, and one of the two elements is known to exist also by itself apart from that thing, then the other element must also exist separately. This proposition is also related to motion. We see things in the

world which cause motion and are moved. We also find things which are moved only, but which do not cause motion. Therefore, there must exist something which causes motion, but is not moved itself. Since this object is not subject to motion, it is indivisible, incorporeal and independent of time, as was shown in the first proof.<sup>9</sup>

The third proof is also attributed to Aristotle. With respect to things that exists in the world, it must be that (1) all things are eternal; (2) Nothing is eternal; (3) some things are eternal and some are transient. The possibility that all things in existence are eternal is obviously not true, since we continually see things coming into existence and ceasing to be. The second is impossible because it would imply that all things could possibly come to an end. This could deny the existence of all things. However we see things existing and know that we, ourselves, exist. Since there are things that exist temporarily, there must also be an eternal being that is not subject to destruction and whose existence is real and not merely possible.<sup>10</sup>

There must be a being with absolutely independent existence, whose existence cannot be attributed to any external cause, and which does not include different elements. To Maimonides, this incorporeal being is God.<sup>11</sup>

Maimonides stated that his fourth proof was also based on a well-known philosophical argument. We constantly see things passing from potentiality to actuality, and an external agent is necessary to bring about this change, according to the eighteenth



proposition. The agent itself necessarily was once potential and moved from potentiality to actuality. It was potential at first either because of some obstacle in the agent itself, or because of the absence of a certain relation between the agent and its effect. To remove this obstacle or to create the required relation, another agent would be necessary.<sup>12</sup> This agent would need a different agent, and this would lead to an infinite series of causes which is impossible, as was emphasized in the first proof. Therefore, there must be an agent which is constant and in no sense potential. If something has potentiality in its essence, it may not exist in actuality, according to the twenty-third proposition. Therefore, this essence must be pure actuality. According to the twenty-fourth proposition possibility is always in matter, and that which has potentiality necessarily has matter. Therefore Maimonides concludes by summarizing the nature of the deity:

it cannot be corporeal, but it must be spiritual; and the immaterial being that includes no possibility whatever, but exists actually by its own essence is God. Since He is incorporeal, as has been demonstrated, it follows that He is One. <sup>13</sup>

Even by assuming the eternality of the universe, which Maimonides rejected, these proofs demonstrated the existence, unity and incorporeality of a God who does not exist as a force in any corporeal object. Next, Maimonides offered 3 other basic arguments that proved the incorporeality and the unity of God.

If there were two gods they would share a property and also have at least one property not in common. If they were made up of



these different elements, they could not have independent existence. Since God has independent existence, God must be one.<sup>14</sup>

The unity of God can also be proven from the fact that the universe is one organic body. If there were two deities, their actions would depend on time. The existence of two deities would cause both to pass from potentiality to actuality. Since the universe is a whole, the two deities would have to be united in some way. A cause would be required for the unity of these two forces. This would lead once again to the problem of an infinite regress. Maimonides concluded that there must be one simple being that is the cause of the existence of the Universe, which is one whole. It would make no difference whether we assumed that the First Cause had produced the Universe by creation *ex nihilo*, or whether the Universe co-existed with the First Cause.<sup>15</sup> Maimonides offered another argument concerning the incorporeality of God. Because every corporeal object is composed of matter and form, and it requires an agent as its cause, it cannot be a true unity. Since it has already been proved that God possesses no duality, God must be incorporeal.<sup>16</sup>

Like Aristotle, Maimonides based his proofs for the existence of God on motion, and on the idea that an infinite regress is impossible. An efficient cause must exist for the production of anything that has not existed previously. This efficient cause, for Maimonides, is one, it is incorporeal, and it is eternal. This cause is the First Cause and it is God. These proofs were presented while Maimonides temporarily ignored his disagreement

with the idea that the universe was eternal. Therefore, Maimonides indicated that belief in creation *ex nihilo*, or in the idea that the universe is eternal, was irrelevant to establishing proof for the existence of God. The existence, unity, and incorporeality of God was sufficiently proven without reference to the theory of creation or the eternality of the universe.<sup>17</sup> These proofs rested upon the 25 premises presented in the Introduction to the second book of the Moreh. Interestingly, Maimonides never questioned or explained the proof of, and validity of, these 25 basic assumptions.

#### B. Creation versus Eternality

Maimonides devoted numerous chapters to the discussion of whether the universe is eternal or created. However, he openly stated several times that definitive conclusions regarding the universe were impossible to deduce. Maimonides remained true to his own method of only drawing conclusions where evidence was possible. Through his method of concealment, he disguised some of his basic ideas about God within the discussion of whether the world is created or eternal. To mask certain ideas about the nature of the deity and what can be known about the deity, Maimonides wrote at length concerning the problem of creation *ex nihilo*. Maimonides was perhaps less concerned with the issue of creation versus eternality than a surface reading of the Moreh implied.

Limiting himself to those who believe in the existence of God,

Maimonides mentioned three theories concerning the problem of whether or not the universe is eternal. The first theory was that of the law of Moses. According to this view, all had been created by God out of nothing according to God's will and desire. As time is simply an accident of motion, time must be considered to be created like other accidents.<sup>18</sup> Maimonides emphasized the importance of understanding the act of creation as expressed in *Bereishit* as atemporal.

If you admit the existence of time before the Creation, you will be compelled to accept the theory of the Eternity of the Universe. for time is an accident and requires a substratum. You will therefore have to assume that something beside God existed before the Universe was created, an assumption which it is our duty to oppose.<sup>19</sup>

Maimonides stressed that this first theory was a fundamental principle of the Law of Moses; next in importance to the principle of God's unity. This theory of creation assumed that nothing was eternal except God.

The second theory Maimonides attributed to the philosophers, primarily Plato.<sup>20</sup> They assert that it is impossible that God produced something from nothing. To produce something without the prerequisite existence of matter is within the category of that which is impossible. This does not imply a limiting of God, since no agent, not even God, can do the impossible.<sup>21</sup> The philosophers concluded by assuming that a certain substance ~~has~~ co-existed with God from eternity and that neither existed without the other. Within this view is the idea that the heavens came into existence,

but not from nothing, and that although they may cease to exist, they cannot be reduced to nothing. The eternal substance from which they were made will remain.<sup>22</sup>

Maimonides attributed the third theory to Aristotle. Like the second theory, Aristotle maintained that a corporeal object cannot be produced without the use of a corporeal substance.<sup>23</sup> Unlike the second theory, he indicated that the heavens were indestructible. To Aristotle, the entire universe has always been the same and it will never be different. Time, motion and matter are eternal within the sublunar world. God produced the entire universe in its totality by God's will, but not from nothing. God's essence or desire is unchangeable to Aristotle, and it therefore follows that this universe has always been the same and will be the same eternally.<sup>24</sup>

Maimonides proceeded to critique Aristotle's view that the universe is eternal. He explained Aristotle's eight proofs which established his theory of eternality. In the first proof Aristotle maintained that the motion of the spheres must be eternal in order to avoid an infinite regress. Since time is related to motion, time also must be eternal. By this argument Aristotle proved the eternity of the universe.<sup>25</sup>

The second argument was a proof that the first substance must be eternal. Coming into existence is nothing but the action of receiving form. However, the first substance is formless, and therefore could not have been caused by another substance. Since this first substance must be without beginning and without end; it

is concluded that the universe is eternal.<sup>26</sup>

The third method of proof followed from the assumption that everything destructible had a beginning, and everything which had a beginning is destructible. Destruction is caused by opposite elements existing within one thing, and since the spheres contain no opposite elements, they will not end in destruction. It follows that the spheres are eternal, and the eternality of the universe follows from this.<sup>27</sup>

The fourth proof followed from the fact that the actual production of a thing is preceded in time by its possibility. The actual change of a thing is preceded in time by its possibility. From this idea Aristotle derived the eternity of the circular motion of the spheres.<sup>28</sup>

Maimonides doubted the fifth method of proof. It stated that God must have been a potential agent before an actual agent. If God produced the universe from nothing, and since potentiality is impossible for God, the universe must have been eternal.<sup>29</sup>

The sixth proof was based on the idea that an agent is either active or inactive depending on favorable or unfavorable conditions. Since nothing can change God's will, God cannot be active at one time and inactive at another. God must always be active, just as God is always in existence.<sup>30</sup>

The seventh stated that the actions of God are perfect. Therefore the existing universe must be perfect, beyond improvement and permanent. The universe is the result of God's wisdom, which is identical with God's essence.<sup>31</sup>



Aristotle based the eighth argument on public opinion. Since all people believed in the permanency and stability of the heavens, this belief must be based on fact and not on mere hypothesis."

For a belief to be considered true, Maimonides required evidence. No evidence was available regarding whether or not the universe is eternal, so Maimonides indicated that no conclusion could be drawn regarding the nature of the universe. Maimonides indicated that Aristotle was well aware that he had not proven that the universe is eternal. Maimonides suggested that Aristotle also realized that no conclusive evidence was possible regarding the eternity of the universe. Maimonides said that later philosophers assumed that Aristotle had proven the eternity of the Universe, and they accepted his arguments as conclusive. However, Maimonides emphasized that Aristotle only described his proofs as arguments, and that Aristotle only wanted to show that his theory was better than those of his opponents. Maimonides and Aristotle seemed to agree that the ways of proving whether or not the Universe is eternal "have their gates closed before us, there being no foundation on which to build up the proof."

Maimonides emphasized this point that neither creation or eternality could be proven. Since no evidence was possible to support his opinion that the universe is created rather than eternal, Maimonides must have included the lengthy discussion for some other reason. The real issue to Maimonides was not whether the universe is created or eternal, rather what could be deduced about the nature of the deity based on the proposition that the



universe is created.

Recognizing that the creation of the universe could not be proven, Maimonides endeavored to show why creation is more plausible than eternity. He began his discussion with an authoritative statement which was probably intended for the masses.

I intend to show that the theory of the Creation, as taught in Scripture, contains nothing that is impossible; and that all those philosophical arguments which seem to disprove our view contain weak points which make them inconclusive, and render the attacks on our view untenable. Since I am convinced of the correctness of my method and consider either of the two theories, the Eternity of the Universe, and the Creation, as admissible, I accept the Latter on the authority of Prophecy, which can teach things beyond the reach of philosophy and speculation.<sup>34</sup>

Maimonides systematically addressed several of Aristotle's arguments. First, Maimonides warned not to attempt to prove the nature of a thing in potential existence by its properties when it is actually existing. It is impossible to infer from the nature which a thing possesses after it has passed through all stages of its development, what the condition of the thing had been in the moment when this process began. Nor does the condition of a thing existing now show what its previous condition had been.<sup>35</sup> Maimonides gave the excellent example of human development. Based on the form of a living adult human person, it would be very difficult for a person not acquainted with human reproduction to comprehend the process of the fertilization of the egg, development of the fetus in the womb, birth, maturation and development. Aristotle said that the *materia prima* is eternal, and could not

have been produced. Maimonides agreed to the extent that he showed the production and development of *materia prima* were different from other productions and therefore could have been created from nothing. The properties of things when fully developed cannot give us any clue as to what their properties were before their perfection. Therefore, Maimonides did not attempt to prove creation, but rather only its possibility. After proving that creation *ex nihilo* is possible, Maimonides showed the weaknesses in Aristotle's arguments while he defended his own opinion that the universe had been created.<sup>16</sup>

Maimonides pointed out that the philosophers assumed that if the deity had produced a thing at a certain fixed time, the deity would have gone through a transition from potentiality to actuality. However, Maimonides refuted this by explaining the an incorporeal entity does not necessitate a transition from potentiality to actuality. Such a transition is necessary only in the case of forces connected with bodies. Since God is neither a body, nor a force within a body, we need not assume that the creation after a period of inaction was due to a change in the Creator Himself.<sup>17</sup> Maimonides offered an analogy of the Active Intellect. He pointed out that the Active Intellect at times acts and at other times does not, but since it is incorporeal, one cannot say that it passes from potentiality to actuality. His point was to show that if the Creator seems to act at one time and not another, it is not due to any potentiality within the Creator.

Maimonides refuted several of Aristotle's arguments for

eternality. He further attacked Aristotle's notion of necessity, and he posited his own notion of design against Aristotle's view. According to Aristotle, the universe is inseparable from God. God is the cause of the universe, and the Universe is the effect. This effect is a necessary one, in that according to the laws of nature and the structure of the universe, it could not have been otherwise. This leads to the conclusion that the nature of everything remains constant, that nothing changes its nature in any way, and that such a change is impossible in any existing thing." It would follow, according to Aristotle, that everything is the result of a law of nature and not the result of design.

Maimonides supported his theory of creation and design by describing the teleological argument. The universe is structured in such an intricate and complicated manner, that there must have been intention behind its design rather than mere necessity. Maimonides showed that based on eternality, Aristotle could not explain the cause of the different motion, speed, and location of the spheres. By assuming that the universe was a necessary result of permanent laws in nature, Aristotle could not possibly explain why certain stars occupied certain positions in space. However, if we assume that the structure of the universe is the result of a design, the only question that remains is what is the cause of this design?" The cause of the design is incomprehensible to the human mind. Maimonides indicated that even though neither creation or eternality can be decided by proof, the eternality of the universe is subject to stronger objections. It is more apt to

corrupt the notions concerning God than the theory of creation.<sup>40</sup>

Maimonides took pains to systematically refute Aristotle's view of eternality, even though he stated from the beginning the impossibility of proving either theory. By attacking Aristotle's methods of proof, Maimonides effectively demonstrated the possibility that the universe was created. Therefore, creation from nothing, consistent with Scripture was a possibility. Perhaps Maimonides' underlying critique of Aristotle was that by assuming that the universe was eternal, Aristotle made too many assumptions about the nature of the deity. The important issue to Maimonides was not necessarily whether the universe is created or eternal, but rather what can possibly be known about deity. By adopting the notion that the world was created, Maimonides limited his assumptions about the deity. By assuming the universe was created by necessity, Aristotle assumed a tremendous amount about the nature of deity. By assuming that the universe was the product of design, but by denying knowledge of the cause, or reason of the design, Maimonides maintained that God was good and that God willed the creation of the Universe. However, he simultaneously denied basic presumptions about the deity, which Aristotle assumed.

#### C. ENDNOTES CHAPTER II

1. MN II 1, F, p. 12.

2. MN II 1, F, p. 13.

3. Samuel Nirenstein, "The Problem of the Existence of God in Maimonides, Alanus and Averroes," (Philadelphia: Dropsie College, 1924), p. 23.

4. Aristotle established the idea that an infinite regress is impossible. He explained that we constantly witness objects in motion. The motion of one object causes the motion of another. Something must cause the movement of the first object. There cannot be an infinite regress of causes of motion. There must have been a First Cause to the motion in the universe.

5. Ibid., p. 23.

6. Nirenstein, p. 23.

7. MN II 1, F, p. 16.

8. MN II 1, F, p. 16.

9. Nirenstein, p. 24.

10. MN II 1, F, p. 19.

11. MN II 1, F, p. 20.

12. Nirenstein, p. 26.

13. MN II 1, F, p. 21.

14. MN II 1, F, p. 22.

15. MN II 1, F, p. 23.

16. MN II 1, F, p. 24.

17. MN II 2, F, p. 25.

18. MN II 13, F, p. 63.

19. Ibid., p. 63.

20. Ibid., p. 65.

21. Ibid., p. 64.

22. Theodore G. Falcon, "The God of Reason and the God of the Imagination in the Theology of Maimonides," rabbinic thesis, HUC-JIR Cincinnati 1968, p. 49.

23. MN II 13, F, p. 65.

24. Ibid., p. 66.
25. Ibid., p. 68.
26. Ibid., p. 69.
27. Ibid., p. 69.
28. Ibid., p. 69.
29. Ibid., p. 70.
30. Ibid., p. 70.
31. Ibid., p. 71.
32. Ibid., p. 72.
33. Ibid., p. 75.
34. Ibid., p. 76.
35. Ibid., p. 77.
36. Ibid., p. 181
37. Ibid., p. 84.
38. Ibid., p. 87.
39. Ibid., p. 96.
40. Ibid., p. 108.



## CHAPTER III

## The Attributes of God

Maimonides developed his own division of attributes that was based on Aristotle and sources in Arabic philosophy. He discussed the division of attributes throughout 10 chapters of the Moreh. In these chapters, he slowly and carefully disclosed information leading ultimately to his discussion of the negative attributes of God. Maimonides began by indicating that there are two types of attributes: essential and accidental. The accidental attribute is that which is not contained in the essence of a thing, it is something different from the object described, and therefore is an accident superadded to that essence.<sup>1</sup> Essential attributes signify the essence of the subject. Essential attributes could be of two different types. Either the predicate may be a term having the same meaning as that of the subject, as in the proposition "man is man" or it could be the "explanation of a term" as in the proposition "man is a rational animal." Maimonides dismissed propositions like "man is man" as mere tautologies. Propositions like "man is a rational animal" represent the essence of the subject and are denoted as the "explanation of a term." The expression "explanation of a term" reflects Aristotle's expression "the statement of a thing's nature," which to Aristotle, is a real definition.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, what is predicated of a subject in a proposition can be either accidental or essential to that subject.

This general twofold classification of attributes given in Chapter 51 of the Moreh is expanded into five categories in Chapter

52. The five classifications are: 1. Attributes which include all the essential properties of an object, 'definition'; 2. Attributes which include only part of them, 'part of definition,'; 3. Attributes which denote nonessential properties, 'quality'; 4. Attributes which express the relation of an object to something else, 'relation'; and 5. Attributes which refer to the action of an object, 'action'.' There was no literary precedent for Maimonides' fivefold classification of attributes, yet he seems to have taken Aristotle's tenfold classification of categories and applied them as attributes.'

#### A. Maimonides' Fivefold Classification of Attributes

The first type of attribute describes an object by its definition. It is an explanation of a name, and it contains the true essence of the object.<sup>5</sup> This category of attribute cannot be used with reference to God.

All agree that this kind of description cannot be given of God; for there are no previous causes to His existence, by which He could be defined: and on that account it is a well-known principle, received by all the philosophers who are precise in their statements, that no definition can be given of God.<sup>6</sup>

The second type of attribute is that which describes an object by part of its definition. This type of attribute is also inappropriate in reference to God. If we would speak of a portion of God's essence, we would be considering God's essence to be a compound. The description of part of a definition includes a

necessary connection of at least two ideas. It is possible to speak of a human person as a rational being, because every being which has the characteristics of a human person must also have reason.<sup>7</sup> The essence of the human person has more than one property. However, since God is a unity, it is impossible to divide God's essence into parts. This kind of attribute is inapplicable to God.

The third type of attribute describes an object by something different from its true essence. This description relates to a quality which is an accident. Maimonides divided quality into four types which corresponded to Aristotle's subdivision. 1. A human person is described by any of his or her intellectual or moral qualities. Therefore a person might be a carpenter, one who avoids sin, or one who is physically ill. 2. A thing is described by a physical quality it possesses or does not possess; for example, a thing can be hard or soft, strong or weak. 3. A human person is described by nonpermanent, passive qualities or emotions, such as passionate, irritable, timid and merciful. Similarly, descriptions of color, taste and temperature belong to this class of attributes. 4. A thing can be described from its qualities which result from quantity. We would describe a thing that is long, short, straight or curved.<sup>8</sup> Maimonides emphasized that none of these attributes can be used in reference to God. God is a unity, therefore God could not possess any quality resulting from quantity. Since God is incorporeal, God is not affected by external influences. Emotional responses are the result of corporeality, and therefore God has no

emotional qualities. God has no strength since God is not subject to physical conditions. Since God is not an animate being, God could not be subject to physical conditions.<sup>9</sup>

The fourth type of attribute is the description of a thing by its relation to another thing, either to time, to space, or to a different individual. This type of attribute does not imply plurality or change in the essence of the object described, because relations are not the essence of a thing.<sup>10</sup> Even this type of attribute can not be used with reference to God. There is no relation between God and either time or space.<sup>11</sup> Maimonides emphasized that there is no relationship what so ever between God and any other being, because God is of a different essence than any other being. Since God has absolute existence, while all other beings have only possible existence, there cannot be any correlation between God and God's creatures.<sup>12</sup> Maimonides stressed that trying to relate God to any other being is like trying to compare apples to oranges.

It is impossible to imagine a relation between intellect and sight, although, as we believe, the same kind of existence is common to both; how then, could a relation be imagined between any creature and God, who has nothing in common with any other being. . . . For whenever we speak of a relation between two things, these belong to the same species; but when two things belong to different species though of the same class, there is no relation between them. We therefore do not say, this red compared with that green, is more, or less, or equally intense, although both belong to the same class--color; when they belong to two different classes, there does not seem to be any relation between them. . . .<sup>13</sup>

Since God has nothing in common with any other being, the attribute of relation is also impossible with respect to any other being.<sup>14</sup> Though subtly presented within his discussion of attributes, this notion that God cannot relate to others is central to Maimonides' theology. Maimonides portrayed his own God concept as completely different from the God of the Bible wherein God speaks with and influences directly, the lives of human persons.

The fifth and final of Maimonides' classification of positive attributes is the description by actions, in terms of the actions the subject has performed. This type of attribute is separate from the essence of the object involved. Since it is possible for one agent to perform many actions without possessing different substantial elements, this is the most appropriate attribute to be employed in describing God.<sup>15</sup> Maimonides stressed that the many attributes of God found in the Bible are qualifications of God's actions, without any reference to God's essence. These qualifications of God's actions do not imply that the essence of God is a compound of various elements.<sup>16</sup> According to Maimonides, an individual can comprehend God's actions without knowing the essence of God. For example, it is possible to know the nature of an illness without understanding the virus that causes the disease. Similarly, it is possible to know that God caused the universe, yet we can know nothing about the essence of God.

In describing positive attributes, Maimonides made clear that there are certain terms that cannot be used to describe God:

. . . nothing can be predicated of God that implies any of the following four things:



corporeality, emotion or change, non--existence,--e.g., that something would be potential at one time and real at another--and similarity with any of His creatures.<sup>17</sup>

The terms used to describe God must necessarily be different than the terms used to describe human persons, since God's essence is different from the essence of the human person:

There can be in no way or sense, anything common to the attributes predicated of God, and those used in reference to ourselves; they have only the same names, and nothing else is common to them.<sup>18</sup>

Maimonides proceeded in his argument to prove the necessity of even excluding the attributes of existence, unity and eternity from God as attributes. Existence is, for the human person and for all things, due to some cause, and it is therefore regarded as an accident added to the essence. Since God's existence is not due to any cause, the term existence is totally different when applied to God than to human persons. To the human person, existence is an accident or an attribute that is added to the human person as a property. God is not a substance to which existence is joined as an accident, as an additional element, like the human person.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, one must say that God exists without possessing the attribute of existence. Similarly, God lives without the attribute of life, has wisdom without that attribute, and is a unity without the accident of unity.<sup>20</sup> Maimonides concluded by indicating that when we use the term 'one' in reference to God, we do not mean to infer that an attribute of unity is added to God's essence. Rather by saying that God is one we are merely expressing that there is



nothing similar to God.<sup>21</sup>

### B. The Negative Attributes

Maimonides stressed the great limitations in using positive attributes with respect to God. Since we cannot know God, the use of positive attributes could inevitably lead to incorrect notions of God. Positive attributes imply Polytheism, because once positive essential attributes are admitted, one would assume that, besides the essence of God, other things co-existed with God eternally.<sup>22</sup> Maimonides developed a sixth category of attributes which he termed the negative attributes. To Maimonides, these attributes were the true attributes of God. Whereas positive attributes lead to misconceptions regarding God, the negative attributes do not include any incorrect notions of God. The negative attributes are like the positive attributes in that they both necessarily circumscribe an object to some extent, although with the negative attributes the circumscription consists only in the exclusion of what otherwise would not have been excluded.<sup>23</sup> The positive attributes describe either some, or part of, the essence of an object. Only indirectly by exclusion do the negative attributes tell about the essence of the object being described.<sup>24</sup>

Maimonides illustrated the use of negative attributes regarding God's existence. It is known that God's existence is absolute. However, since God possesses no positive attribute, God does not possess existence in addition to God's essence. If existence were described as an attribute of God's essence, God's essence would

have more than one component and would therefore be described as compound. When we say that God exists, we mean that God's non-existence is impossible.<sup>25</sup>

Maimonides illustrated the use of negative attributes by using an obscure example.

Even the negative attributes must not be formed and applied to God, except in the way in which, as you know, sometimes an attribute is negated in reference to a thing, although that attribute can naturally never be applied to it in the same sense, as we say, "This wall does not see."<sup>26</sup>

Friedlander termed this example "absolute negation." Absolute negation in this example means that the wall never has the potentiality to see. In other words, the wall does not see in the way a person does not see. This would be expressed as: The wall does not (not see). (Not see) would denote that the wall does not "see" in the way that a person would see. A person who does not see, still has the potentiality to see, but that potentiality is not actualized. If we would say that the wall does not (not see), we would be indicating that the wall does not see in the way a human person does not see. This absolute negation is not a double negative. If we would say that God does not (not exist), we would merely be indicating that God does not exist the way a human person would not exist. This example underscores the fundamental point that we cannot use terms that apply to the human person to describe or explain God.

Maimonides indicated that every attribute predicated of God either denotes the quality of an action or a negation. The use of

negative attributes underscores that nothing can be known about the essence of God. Therefore the one who reaches the highest level of knowledge regarding God, is the one who knows nothing about the essence of God. Maimonides expressed the necessity of the use of the negative attributes:

. . . every time you establish by proof the negation of a thing in reference to God, you become more perfect, while with every additional positive assertion you follow your imagination and recede from the true knowledge of God."

Through study and preparation, one arrives at the negative attributes as the highest level of knowledge of God. The use of negative attributes impedes the human person's tendency to ascribe human perfections to God. The term perfection in reference to the human person implies the acquisition of some quality which one did not possess before. Perfection in the sense of acquisition cannot be ascribed to God." The use of negative attributes compels the individual to verify that God cannot be described with terms applicable to the human person. Maimonides explained the fallacy of the use of positive attributes with reference to God.

. . . By affirming anything of God, you are removed from Him in two respects; first, whatever you affirm, is only a perfection in relation to us; secondly, He does not possess anything superadded to the essence; His essence includes all His perfection."

The only knowledge of God that is accessible to the human person is that we are unable to truly comprehend God.

To Maimonides, individuals, who understand the implications of the negative attributes, do not even discuss the nature of God.

Silence and intellectual reflection is the only true way to contemplate God. He cited passages in the Bible that reflect this method. Maimonides quoted two passages from the Psalms: "Silence is praise to you" and "Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still."<sup>10</sup> Solomon is the paradigm for Maimonides in that his knowledge and his words regarding God are few: "For God is in heaven, and thou upon earth; therefore let thy words be few."<sup>11</sup> The negative attributes, by denying that anything can be known about God, encourage private speculation about God. Since one cannot utter anything affirmative about God, one must necessarily result to silence and inner speculation and the utilization of the negative attributes. To Maimonides, the glorification of God does not consist in uttering what is not proper, but rather in reflecting what is proper.<sup>12</sup> Maimonides expressed the hazard of speaking of God using positive attributes.

If slander and libel is a great sin, how much greater is the sin of those who speak with looseness of tongue in reference to God, and describe Him by attributes which are far below Him; and I declare that they not only commit an ordinary sin, but unconsciously at least incur the guilt of profanity and blasphemy.<sup>13</sup>

Maimonides recognized that on the literal level of interpretation, the Pentateuch and the Prophets referred to God using positive attributes. He indicated that, understood esoterically, these descriptions were either attributes of God's actions, or expressions implying the negations of the opposite.<sup>14</sup> These biblical passages could be uttered, since they were written in the Bible and established as part of tradition. Prayers that

have been established by the Great Synagogue could be said as part of tradition. Maimonides emphasized that nothing resembling positive attributes could be added to the established written tradition, indicating it was permissible to utter these accepted passages within the limits of the Great Synagogue.<sup>35</sup> Maimonides implied that many other prayers expressing careless descriptions, depicted God incorrectly in human terms.

The masses regularly recite prayers and Biblical passages that describe God in terms of positive attributes. They are only capable of understanding the Bible on its literal level. Since they are incapable of understanding the esoteric reading of the Bible and the theory that the attributes are mere qualifications of God's actions, or negations of the opposite, they must not be taught the theory of negative attributes.<sup>36</sup> The esoteric reading of the Bible and the theory of negative attributes is only accessible to those who understand that one can only silently reflect on the idea that God cannot be known.

As stated previously, Maimonides indicated that an individual must follow a specific course of study to arrive at an understanding of the negative attributes. The masses are taught conclusions presented in the Bible according to tradition, and by rote, they learn to accept that God is incorporeal and dissimilar to any other creature. Maimonides insinuated that the Bible presented some basic conclusions about the universe which must be accepted and understood by all. Natural science could provide proofs to the conclusions presented in the Bible. The masses could



comprehend the conclusions in the Bible based on authoritative teaching, however, they could not understand the proofs. The trained and educated thinker could arrive at the philosophic proofs to comprehend the Bible on its esoteric level through a course of study in natural science. Natural science could lead the individual to the philosophic proofs for the existence of God, and to an esoteric understanding of the conclusions in the Bible. Through proper study and inner reflection, the trained individual can arrive at an understanding of the negative attributes. The negative attributes set certain limits for what one can say concerning the deity. Through speculative reasoning, the elite thinker necessarily arrives at the conclusion that the only thing that can be known about God is that God is unknowable. The notion of the negative attributes contends that God cannot be conceived of in human terms. Therefore the highest expression of knowledge of the deity is silent speculation.

### C. Endnotes to Chapter III

1. MN I 51, F, p. 174. Also see Theodore G. Falcon, "The God of Reason and the God of the Imagination in the Theology of Maimonides," rabbinic thesis, HUC-JIR Cincinnati 1968, p. 18.
2. Harry Wolfson, "The Aristotelian Predicables and Maimonides' Division of Attributes," in Essays and Studies in Memory of Linda R. Miller, (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1938), p. 10.
3. MN I 52, F, p. 178.
4. Wolfson, p. 16.
5. MN I 52, F, p. 178.
6. Ibid., p. 178.
7. Ibid., p. 179.



8. Ibid., p. 181. See also Falcon, p. 20.
9. Ibid., p. 181.
10. Ibid., p. 182.
11. Ibid., p. 183.
12. Ibid., p. 183.
13. Ibid., p. 184.
14. Ibid., p. 183.
15. Ibid., p. 185.
16. MN I 53, F, p. 188.
17. MN I 55, F, p. 200.
18. MN I 56, F, p. 203.
19. Ibid., I 57, F, p. 204.
20. Ibid., p. 204-205.
21. Ibid., p. 207. Also, Falcon, p. 22.
22. MN I 58, F, p. 208.
23. Ibid., p. 208.
24. Ibid., p. 208.
25. Ibid., p. 209.
26. Ibid., p. 211.
27. Ibid., I 59, p. 214.
28. Ibid., p. 215. See Friedlander's note, p. 215.
29. Ibid., p. 215.
30. Ibid., p. 216.
31. Ibid., p. 220.
32. Ibid., p. 20.
33. Ibid., p. 219.

34. Ibid., p. 220.

35. Ibid., p. 220.

36. Ibid., p. 220.

## CHAPTER IV

## Providence

Maimonides conception of providence was different from the Rabbinic Jewish conception of providence. The traditional Jewish notion of providence is established throughout the Pentateuch. It can be broadly defined as "the guidance of a potent and prescient God, conceived of as a person, who creates and conserves the universe, and who through continuous miraculous intervention in human history, cares for the Jews in particular and humankind in general."<sup>1</sup>

This definition of providence is based on a theistic God concept. Traditional Jewish belief constitutes belief in a God who created the universe, who relates to individuals, and who rewards and punishes individuals appropriately. Throughout the Moreh, Maimonides presented many views that contradicted the traditional Jewish notion of God and providence. He concealed these conflicting beliefs within many intentional contradictions in order to guard himself from charges of heresy by the multitude of Rabbinic Jews.<sup>2</sup> By using a method of concealment in the Moreh, he could insure that only readers properly trained would understand the true implications of his writings. It is important to explore Maimonides' literary devices before addressing the topic of providence. Maimonides' method of concealment fostered a selection process that could only reveal Maimonides' true beliefs to an intellectually elite group of readers.

### A. Contradictions Within the Moreh

In the introduction to the Moreh, Maimonides described seven causes of contradictions in literary works. He indicated that the fifth and the seventh causes explained the reasons for contradictions in the Moreh. The fifth cause was related to the process of teaching a certain concept. A general, basic explanation of an idea would be initially presented. Later in the text, after the reader had absorbed enough information to understand the idea more fully, a complete exact explanation would be provided that might have contradicted the first general teaching. Even though the author would eventually resolve this contradiction, it was left up to the reader to connect the two definitions toward the deeper understanding of the concept.<sup>3</sup>

The seventh cause of contradiction was related to content. Maimonides emphasized that "in speaking about very obscure matters it is necessary to conceal some parts and to disclose others."<sup>4</sup> Maimonides intentionally contradicted himself throughout the Moreh. The duty of the reader was not to explain the contradictions, but to find out in each case which of the two statements was considered by Maimonides to be true and which he merely used as a means of hiding the truth. Those who were able to understand by themselves were in a position to attain the concealed statements of truth. By making contradictory statements about even the most important subjects, Maimonides revealed the truth to the elite, while simultaneously concealing it from the masses.<sup>5</sup>

### B. The Absolute Transcendence of God

Maimonides employed the method of contradiction to express the absolute transcendence of the deity. Absolute transcendence implies that God is in no way found in human experience, neither as an object of knowledge nor as an object that enters into relations with humans in any way.<sup>6</sup>

Maimonides addressed God's transcendence within his discussion of attributes. As explained in the previous chapter, Maimonides rejected all positive attributes of God, as he demonstrated that the deity cannot be described in human terms. Through this discussion Maimonides emphasized that since God has nothing in common with any other being; God cannot relate to any other being. God's essence is not intelligible to the human mind, and God cannot be affected by or acted upon by any other being. Maimonides indicated that the properties of emotion, change, and corporeality must also be denied. Humans cannot even understand the existence of God.<sup>7</sup> God is altogether ignorant of human affairs.<sup>8</sup>

The rejection of all positive attributes to describe the deity led Maimonides to the conclusion that the human person ultimately can know nothing regarding the deity. Maimonides even indicated that persons who think or feel that they have knowledge of God or that they are in relation with God, not only commit fundamental philosophic errors, but are also deluded by their imaginations into mistaking fantasy for reality.<sup>9</sup> Maimonides concept of God as being absolutely transcendent is completely unlike the God of Rabbinic Judaism who is known by the human person and can relate to

individuals.

### C. Maimonides' Cosmology

Maimonides' theory of providence is related to his understanding of cosmology. Even though God, according to Maimonides, does not directly relate to individuals within the sublunar world, God is the First Cause of everything. To Maimonides, the universe is made up of three parts: the Intelligences; quintessence, which forms the bodies of the spheres; and first matter, the primary constituent of bodies that exist below the spheres.<sup>10</sup> Through an eternal process of emanation, God is the cause of every event that takes place in the world just as God is the Creator of the Universe as it now exists.<sup>11</sup> Everything occurring in the universe, although directly produced by certain nearer causes, is ascribed to the Creator.<sup>12</sup> God is perfect or simple because God only thinks the thought that is God's self. There is no plurality within God. God has more than enough perfection to sustain God's self. Therefore this perfection overflows to create other entities.

The first overflow resulted in the formation of the first Intelligence. All of the Intelligences are incorporeal and are composed of pure thought. God is the ground of being that sustains the first Intelligence. The first Intelligence is less perfect than God as the ground of being, because the first Intelligence contains plurality. The first Intelligence thinks about God as well as its self. Since the first Intelligence is no longer a



simplicity, the overflow of the first Intelligence resulted in less perfect beings. The first Intelligence produced the first sphere and the second Intelligence, through the process of overflow or emanation. The spheres are composed of quintessence, a substance that forms the bodies of the spheres. Since spheres have body and are made of a type of matter, they are less perfect than the Intelligences which are composed of pure thought. The process of emanation continued until the ninth sphere and the tenth Intelligence, or Active Intellect, were emanated.<sup>13</sup> The tenth sphere is the sublunar world, the world of human beings. Emanation continued within the sublunar world until all of the species are created. Primary matter, which is different from the quintessence that formed the bodies of the spheres, is the material from which the physical bodies of the sublunar world are fashioned. The Active Intellect, the tenth Intelligence, provides the forms of the species. The Active Intellect transforms the forms into physical bodies using the four elements: earth, water, air and fire.<sup>14</sup> Even though the universe is completed with the emanation of the species within the sublunar world, the process of creation never ends, as new members of species are continually created.

The Active Intellect directly effects the sublunar world. However, God as the ground of being, emanates and sustains the first Intelligences, but has no direct effect on the Active Intellect itself. As God sustains the first Intelligence, the first Intelligence sustains the second, and this sustaining process extends throughout the universe.<sup>15</sup> Maimonides explained this chain

of existence which is begun by and sustained by God:

We find that every physical and transient form must be preceded by another such form, by which substance has been fitted to receive the next form; the previous form again has been preceded by another, and we arrive at length at that form which is necessary for the existence of all intermediate forms, which are the cause of the present form. That form to which the forms of all existence are traced is God.<sup>16</sup>

Maimonides emphasized that if God did not exist, the universe would not exist. "God maintains the same relation to the world as the form has to a thing endowed with a form; through the form it is what it is, and on it the reality and essence of the thing depends."<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the universe is not self-sufficient, and God as the ground of being eternally emanates and sustains the First Intelligence.<sup>18</sup> God indirectly sustains the entire universe, and ultimately the sublunar world, the world of the human species.

#### D. Matter and Form

Maimonides' understanding of the universe which is linked to his view of providence, assume an understanding of matter and form as it is found within the sublunar world. Maimonides' definitions of matter and form are not exactly the same as those thinkers who preceded him. To Maimonides the forms and species in the universe are permanent, unchangeable and eternal.<sup>19</sup> The source of the human form is the Active Intellect, which is the source of all forms within the sublunar world.<sup>20</sup> The human form ascribes to the human person an essence of rational animal. The ultimate goal of every living being is to realize its true essence. The human person can

realize his or her essence through rational activity. By engaging in pure, speculative, abstract thought, the human person's intellect can merge with the Active Intellect. The intellect of the human person, because it is incorporeal, allows individual members of the human species to reach a certain degree of intellectual perfection. The intellect of the human person can merge with the Active Intellect, the source of the human person's form. Therefore, according to Maimonides, the human person's highest activity is rational activity. Rational activity allows an individual to realize his or her essence, which in turn, merges the human intellect with the unchanging, incorporeal Active Intellect.

Maimonides did not conceptualize form by the Platonic ideals; he repeatedly said that the forms are not in existence without substance. Matter, unlike form, is instable and constantly seeks a new form.

Matter is never found without form, and is therefore always like such a wife who is never without a husband, never single; and yet, though being wedded constantly seeks another man in the place of her husband. The same is the case with matter. Whatever form it has, it will be disposed to receive another form; it never leaves off moving and casting off the form which it has in order to receive another.<sup>21</sup>

Since matter constantly adopts new forms, Maimonides indicates that matter produces all corruption, destruction, and defect.<sup>22</sup> Matter forces the human person to be subject to the forces of sickness, aging and death. Since matter constantly changes, the human person is subject to constant change. Matter also bestows the

characteristics of body to the human person. To Maimonides, the body is the human person's source of sin, distraction, and decay, whereas the intellect allows the human person to actualize his or her essence. Maimonides emphasized that the human persons' assets come from form, yet defects come from matter.

Man's shortcomings and sins are all due to the substance of the body and not to its form; while all his merits are exclusively due to his form. Thus the knowledge of God, the formation of ideals, the mastery of desire and passion, the distinction between that which is to be chosen and that which is to be rejected, all these man owes to his form; but eating, drinking, sexual intercourse, excessive lust, passion, and all vices have their origin in the substance of his body. . . . Man must have control over all these desires, reduce them as much as possible, and only retain of them as much as indispensable. His aim must be the formation of ideas, and nothing else. The best and sublimest among them is the idea which man forms of God, angels and the rest of the creation according to his capacity. This is man's task and purpose."

Therefore the human person must strive to actualize the human form of rationality, while subduing the passions that are the result of matter. These beliefs regarding form and matter, God's transcendence, and God's role in the universe all underlie Maimonides' discussion of providence.

#### E. Five Theories of Providence

Whereas the Rabbinic Jewish notion of providence is based on belief in a theistic God who knows and relates to individuals, Maimonides' definition of providence is grounded in his understanding of God as being absolutely transcendent. Since

Maimonides believed that God could not directly relate to individuals, his understanding of providence is not based upon the human person's direct contact with the deity, but rather on the human person's understanding of the natural universe, and the ability of individuals to actualize their essence. A general definition of providence according to Maimonides would be as follows:

Providence is the government, guidance, and care issuing from the ground of the universe, or from the universe itself that brings an entity into existence and/or preserves it in existence, and regulates or orders its existence according to some rational law or principle."

Maimonides presented five different theories concerning providence that were based on the views of other philosophers. Even though Maimonides did not adopt any of these theories as his beliefs, he used aspects of Aristotle and the second theory in his own understanding of providence. Maimonides presentation of five theories, none of which he incorporated directly into his own thinking, is another example of his method of concealment. Maimonides purposely leads the reader circuitously about before disclosing his true beliefs. By intentionally deluding the reader, Maimonides insured that only those prepared and equipped would understand his true beliefs regarding providence.

The first theory held that "there is no providence for anything in the Universe; all parts of the Universe, the heavens and what they contain owe their origin to accident and chance; there exists no being that rules and governs them or provides for



them."<sup>25</sup> This represents an atheistic point of view, and Maimonides basically disregarded it.

The second theory is that which Maimonides ascribed to Aristotle. While one part of the Universe is under the control of a ruler and governor, another part is abandoned and left to chance.<sup>26</sup> Providence extends only to part of the universe and it gives permanency and constancy to that which is permanent and constant in the universe, the species, the spheres and the Intelligences. Maimonides summarized Aristotle's opinion:

In short, the opinion of Aristotle is this: everything is the result of management which is constant, which does not come to an end and does not change any of its properties, as e.g., the heavenly beings, and everything which continues according to a certain rule, and deviates from it only rarely and exceptionally, as is the case in objects of Nature.<sup>27</sup>

Aristotle limited that which could attain providence, basing his views on his belief that nothing in the universe could be different from the way it now exists, and on his concept of the eternality of the universe.

The third theory is the reverse of the second. According to this theory, nothing is due to chance, and everything is the result of will, intention, and rule. Providence rules over everything, and consequently laws have no meaning since humanity is totally predetermined. There is no final cause for the actions of God, while all of God's actions are just.<sup>28</sup> According to this theory, "the deity does whatever the deity does for no purpose.



The fourth theory implied that providence extends over all things, yet the human person has freedom. All acts of God are due to wisdom, and no injustice is found in God. This is the Rabbinic Jewish view of providence, yet Maimonides disguised it as the theory of the Mu'tazila. Maimonides raised the problem of theodicy, why the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper, that confronts this theory.

This theory likewise implies contradictions and absurdities. The absurdities are these: The fact that some persons are born with defects, although they have not sinned previously, is ascribed to the wisdom of God, it being better for those persons to be in such a condition than to be in a normal state, though we do not see why it is better; and they do not suffer thereby any punishment at all, but on the contrary enjoy God's goodness.<sup>29</sup>

The contradictions inherent in this theory led Maimonides to reject it.

Maimonides introduced a fifth theory of providence. The two main articles of this view are that the human person is given freedom of the will by God, and wrong cannot be ascribed to God. All human affairs are managed with justice.<sup>30</sup> Maimonides did not elaborate further on this theory.

#### **F. Maimonides' Theory of Providence**

After offering these five theories as the different approaches to providence as described by the various thinkers that he cited, Maimonides stated his own theory of providence. Maimonides agreed with Aristotle regarding providence except regarding the human

species. Whereas Aristotle believed that providence extended to species but not to individual members of the species, Maimonides indicated that providence does not extend to the individual members of species in the sublunar world except in the case of the human person.<sup>31</sup> According to Maimonides, providence can only be extended to members of species who possess a rational faculty. Since the human person is the only type of intelligent being, providence can proceed only to members of the human species. Maimonides indicated that individual human beings are capable of receiving Divine Providence, and he emphasized that good and evil fortunes are the result of justice. On the surface, Maimonides view of providence resembled the traditional Jewish view in that he implied that God provides providence by treating individuals in a just manner. As his discussion unfolded Maimonides expressed a completely different conception of providence from that of traditional Judaism. Consistent with his view that God is absolutely transcendent, God's role in providence for the human person is indirect. Based on the essence of the human person, individuals play a direct role in their reception of Divine Providence.

Divine Providence for the human person is directly related to the human person's ability to realize his or her essence. Even though matter is inherently transient and the human person's body is the source of defect and corruption, the form of the human person grants the possibility of permanence and perfection. To realize the essence of the human form of rationality, the human person must engage in intellectual activity in order to achieve

true perfection. Just as intellectual activity is the only way to achieve perfection according Maimonides, it is also the sole manner in which an individual can attain Divine Providence. Maimonides directly connected providence with the intellect. The human intellect is a product of the natural world, and therefore is capable of achieving providence that is based within the natural world. An individual experiences providence according to Maimonides by acting carefully, and thinking rationally before acting. Whereas in Rabbinic Judaism an act of providence could be displayed as a miracle, to Maimonides an example of providence would be an individual's ability to analyze, comprehend, and understand the dangers and problems within the natural world.

It may be by mere chance that a ship goes down with all her contents, or the roof of a house falls upon those within; but it is not due to chance that in the one instance the men went into the ship, or remained in the house in the other instance. . ."

Matter is inevitably subject to chance, however the realization of the human form, rationality, leads to Divine Providence. The one who receives divine providence in this example, is the one who is able to intellectually deduce that a certain situation is unsafe. Even though accidents in nature are often due to chance, the human person who realizes his or her intellect through rational activity can be protected from phenomena that are the result of chance and matter. To Maimonides, providence is a natural event.

Providence is only extended to those individuals who actualize their intellect. The more one engages in speculative intellectual

activity, the more providence one would be capable of receiving.

the greater the proportion which a person has obtained of this divine influence, on account of both his physical predisposition and his training, the greater must also be the effect of Divine Providence upon him, for the action of Divine Providence is proportional to the endowment of intellect."

Since providence is directly proportional to the use and the ability of an individual's intellect, Maimonides admitted that the relation of Divine Providence is not the same to all people." Only those who follow through Maimonides specific intellectual preparations are capable of receiving providence. The greater the human perfection a person has attained the greater the benefit he or she would derive from Divine Providence.

Maimonides' description of providence as a completely natural event is distinctly separate from depictions of providence from a literal reading of the Pentateuch. The stories in the Pentateuch describe providence as a miraculous interaction between God and select Biblical characters. Consistent with his absolutely transcendent view of God, individuals who receive Divine Providence, according to Maimonides, never experience or interact with the deity. After subtly explaining this fundamental difference between his own view of providence and the Rabbinic Jewish interpretation, Maimonides explained how Biblical accounts of providence could be understood consistently with his own view of providence. Maimonides re-emphasized that the Bible was written on many levels, and the literal meaning was only intended for the masses. An esoteric reading of the Bible could explain that the

reason certain Biblical characters experienced Divine Providence was due to their intellectual perfection. Maimonides supported his argument with prooftexts as he showed that providence extended to those individuals in the Bible who achieved intellectual perfection. For those individuals who achieved intellectual perfection, providence was a natural even. It was not merely a random miracle produced by God, as a literal reading of the Biblical text would imply to the masses.

#### G. Problems in Maimonides' System of Providence

##### 1. Omniscience

Maimonides' natural view of providence raised several problems that he systematically explained. Firstly, some might argue that if God truly has no knowledge of human actions and events, God would not be omniscient. However, Maimonides explained that God cannot at a certain time acquire knowledge which God did not possess previously." In order for the knowledge of God to be perfect, it could not include any plurality. Therefore, God only thinks the thought that is God's self. Any further knowledge would introduce plurality into the deity and would subject the knowledge of the deity to change.

Since God's knowledge does not admit of any increase, it is impossible that He should know any transient thing. He only knows that which is constant and unchangeable (the intelligences, the spheres and the species in the sublunary world). Other philosophers raised the following objection: God does not know even things that remain constant; for His knowledge would then include a plurality according to the number of objects known; the



knowledge of everything being distinguished by a certain peculiarity of the thing. God therefore only knows His own essence."<sup>6</sup>

Maimonides' use of the negative attributes explained how the knowledge of God cannot be compared to human knowledge. The idea that God does not know about human affairs does not detract from God's perfection. On the contrary, because God only thinks of God's own essence, God's knowledge is equivalent to God's essence, and God is a unified perfection devoid of plurality. As a perfect being, God's knowledge, i.e. God's essence, is eternal and unchanging. The human person is composed of both matter and form, and therefore imperfect and subject to change. Human knowledge can change and increase. The human person ultimately strives to actualize his or her form as the only aspect of the human person which can exist eternally.

## 2. Theodicy

Maimonides' naturalistic view of providence also raised the problem of theodicy, why the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. Using Job as the paradigm of the problem of theodicy, Maimonides explained that generations of thinkers have pondered why Job who was upright in his actions and very anxious to abstain from sin, was afflicted by successive misfortunes.<sup>7</sup> The text emphasized Job's virtues and uprightness in the actions that he performed, however Maimonides pointed out that the text never mentioned that Job was intelligent, wise or clever. Consistent with his approach to the Bible, Maimonides read the story of Job on an esoteric, allegorical level, implying that the literal



meaning of the text was not the true understanding, but only intended for the masses. Even though according to the literal reading of the story, Job was famous among people for his practical wisdom, he displayed no speculative wisdom. Maimonides indicated that Job had no correct notion of God. He feared God only because he was trained to do so, yet he did not engage in speculative thinking and had no correct notions of God."

Maimonides expressed a variant reading of the story of Job that he introduced under the pseudonym Elihu. Elihu's theory reconciled God's goodness and justice with Job's suffering. Job did not possess the necessary intellectual faculty to achieve Divine Providence. According to Maimonides it is the possession of intellect and the development of rational faculties that entitles one to the benefit of Divine Providence, and Maimonides, attributing his ideas to Elihu, showed that Job was not fit to receive Divine Providence. Because Job was absorbed only in the world of matter, he measured his success and wisdom based on his material possession, his health, and his children. These possessions are ephemeral, and they relate primarily to the world of matter demanding Job's dependence on other human persons. In order to receive Divine Providence, one must realize his or her essence of rationality. Once Job began to speculate about true metaphysical notions of God, he realized that his physical and economic condition was insignificant. Only true knowledge brings meaningful existence to the human person. Matters pertaining to the physical world are beyond the realm of Divine Providence. The

one who achieves intellectual perfection will benefit from Divine Providence, by learning the laws of natural science in order to avoid particular unsafe circumstances that inevitably occur in the natural world. Intellectual perfection could enable the individual to realize that the inherent problems of the material world are ultimately insignificant.

### 3. The Limitations of the Sublunar World of Matter

To Maimonides Divine Providence is natural providence that is obtained through natural development and exercise of the human intellect. Divine Providence cannot effect the world of matter, and events in the natural world are often inevitably due to chance. However, Divine Providence can extend over the world of form, and individuals can learn to engage in their world of form while controlling and subduing the matter that necessarily makes up their existence. Unlike traditional Judaism, worship is not an avenue toward providence according to Maimonides; worship simply controls the masses and acts as a preparatory step toward intellectual speculation.

Maimonides emphasized that Job's major error was when Job cried out to question God's apparent unfair actions. Through his discussion of the negative attributes, Maimonides cautioned individuals not to fall into the error of imagining that God's knowledge is similar to human knowledge." Nothing can be known about God. The creation and structure of the universe are the result of God's wisdom and will, which the human person is unable to comprehend. Maimonides indicated that one can assume that the

works of God are the result of God's wisdom, even though it is impossible to understand the way in which God's wisdom works. Human beings become confused when contemplating the purpose of the universe because humans are ultimately egocentric. Maimonides emphasized that humans erroneously believe that the entire universe exists only for their sake.<sup>40</sup> The human species was created not for its own sake, but to serve God's ultimate purpose.<sup>41</sup> Humanity exists to satisfy God's supreme goodness. God's supreme goodness is expressed through God's ability to fill the cosmos with an infinite variety of different species, so that everything that possibly can exist exists. Humanity, consisting of form and matter fills a specific place in the order of the sublunar world. Human beings suffer because they are made of matter. It becomes irrelevant as to whether or not God is aware of humanity's suffering. Since the human species is composed of matter, it is subject to illness, death and evil. Divine Providence cannot protect humanity from the evils of matter, since matter is an integral aspect of the nature of the human person. Through intellectual perfection, the human person can receive a limited amount of Divine Providence.

#### **H. Soteria**

In this system, soteria is inevitably linked to providence. To Maimonides, soteria and providence are terms that can be used interchangeably. One finds soteria and providence through intellectual perfection. When the intellect of the human person

reaches pure abstraction and becomes merged with the Active Intellect, the individual realizes his or her essence and achieves Divine Providence or soteria. To Maimonides, human beings are capable of receiving Divine Providence to the extent that they actualize their intellectual faculty. Throughout the Moreh Maimonides indicated that true meaningful existence could be achieved through the use and development of the intellect. Physical and moral perfection are simply preparatory steps toward intellectual perfection. In Rabbinic Judaism one finds soteria through observing the commandments through deeds and study, building a home and family, and becoming part of a community. To Maimonides, commandments, family, and community are aspects of the world of matter. They can be useful tools to control the masses, but they cannot lead to soteria in and of themselves. Soteria is found through introspective rational activity which eventually leads the individual to realize his or her essence. The realization of the essence of the human person allows the human intellect to merge with the Active Intellect. Through Maimonides' specific preparatory steps, the individual ultimately finds that material possessions, other individuals, religious commandments, and morality are aspects of the material world and inapplicable to Divine Providence or soteria. Solitary rational activity is the only route to soteria to Maimonides.

#### I. Endnotes to Chapter IV

1. Alvin J. Reines, "Maimonides Concepts of Providence and Theodicy," Hebrew Union College Annual, 1972, p. 171.

2. Alvin J. Reines, "Maimonides True Belief Concerning God: A Systematization," (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 1972), p. 3.
3. MN Introduction, F, p. 24.
4. MN, Introduction, P, p. 18.
5. Leo Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing, (Glencoe, IL, The Free Press, 1952), p. 74.
6. Alvin J. Reines, "Maimonides' True Belief Concerning God: A systematization." 1972, p. 1. In this article, Dr. Reines presented specific contradictions within the Moreh regarding God's transcendence. Based on the many contradictions, either Maimonides was confused regarding God's transcendence, or there was some kind of systematization to his views. Dr. Reines pointed out that within the contradictions it is possible to dissect Maimonides' true belief. Maimonides believed that God was absolutely transcendent, that God in no way related to individuals, and that God showed no emotions. Because this view differed radically from traditional Judaism, and for various other reasons, Maimonides concealed his true belief that God was absolutely transcendent.
7. MN I 55, F, p. 200 ff. See chapter 3 on the attributes of God. Also see Reines, "Maimonides true belief Concerning God. . ." p. 2.
8. MN III 16, F, p. 63.
9. MN I 60, F, p. 224-26. Also see Reines, "Maimonides True Belief Concerning God. . ." p. 1.
10. Reines, "Maimonides' Concept of Providence and Theodicy," p. 6.
11. MN I 69, F, p. 259.
12. Ibid., p. 262.
13. Reines, "Maimonides' Concept of Providence and Theodicy," p. 7. See also MN II 4 and 11.
14. Ibid., p. 7.
15. Reines, "Maimonides Concept of Providence and Theodicy:" p. 7.
16. MN I 69, F, p. 263.
17. Ibid., p. 263.



18. Reines, "Maimonides' Concept of Providence and Theodicy." p. 7.
19. MN III 8, F, p. 24.
20. Reines, "Maimonides' Concept of Providence and Theodicy," p. 13.
21. MN III 8, F, p. 24.
22. Ibid. 22. p. 24.
23. Ibid., III 8, p. 25.
24. Reines, "Maimonides Concept of Providence and Theodicy." p. 5. In this article, Dr. Reines pointed out that Maimonides did not provide an explicit definition of providence. This definition is based on Maimonides' discussion of providence primarily in MN III 17. This definition was constructed by Dr. Reines based on several sections throughout the Moreh.
25. MN III 17, F, p. 65-66.
26. Ibid., p. 66.
27. Ibid., p. 68.
28. Ibid., p. 68.
29. Ibid., p. 70.
30. Ibid., p. 72.
31. Ibid., p. 74.
32. Ibid., p. 75.
33. MN III 18, F, p. 79.
34. Ibid., p. 80.
35. MN III 20, F, p. 86.
36. Ibid., p. 88.
37. MN III 22, F, p. 94.
38. MN III 23, F, p. 106, see Friedlander's note.
39. Ibid., p. 111.
40. MN III 25, F, p. 123.



41. Reines, "Maimonides Concept of Providence and Theodicy," p. 34.

## CHAPTER V

### I-It and I-Thou

Martin Buber was born in Vienna in 1878. He was reared in the home of his grandfather, Solomon Buber, a Haskalah scholar, who encouraged him to study both Jewish and secular subjects. Martin Buber became best known for his "philosophy of dialogue" in which he conceptualized a framework of relationships between individuals and between individuals and God. Buber's philosophy of dialogue is based on the two types of fundamental relationships in which individuals engage: I-It and I-Thou<sup>1</sup>. I-It is objective and found within the everyday, and I-Thou is subjective and inexpressible, yet it is the foundation for Buber's understanding of soteria. These two fundamental relationships will be discussed in depth following the background and history that led Buber to his philosophy of dialogue.

#### A. Buber's Existentialism

Buber is often categorized as a religious existentialist. Unlike many existentialists who are atheist, Buber is identified as a religious existentialist in that his philosophy contains belief<sup>2</sup> in a deity and in the value of religious experience to the individual. Buber's religious existentialism emphasizes the uselessness of rational arguments for the existence of God and the importance of commitment to and belief in God without reservation.<sup>3</sup>

Buber's understanding of the human person resembles that of other existentialists. His primary interest is the everyday

experience of the individual. His existentialist orientation is reflected within his belief in the uniqueness of every person. He wrote: "Every person born into this world represents something new, something that never existed before, something original and unique."

#### B. The Essence of the Human Person

Buber's understanding of the essence of the human person is reflected in his philosophical anthropology. Buber defined philosophical anthropology as the study of the wholeness of the human person. Philosophical anthropology addresses the following problems of the individual: the individual's place in the cosmos and in the world of things, the individual's connection with destiny, the individual's understanding of others, and the individual's awareness of existence as a being that knows it must die.<sup>5</sup> Whereas Maimonides believed that the essence of the human person is rational animal, Buber rejected the idea that reason is the distinctive characteristic of the human person. Buber built his understanding of the essence of the human person on the existentialist idea that each individual chooses his or her own essence. The essence of a human person is not predetermined according to the existentialist, rather one decides one's essence based on choices made throughout life. Buber defined the human person as the creature capable of entering into living relation with the world of things and with individuals. The individual necessarily grapples with 'the mystery of being,' and participates at the same time in both finitude and infinity.<sup>6</sup> The individual is

a fact of existence only through living relation with other individuals. Buber felt that by reducing the human person to rationality and animality, science was not confronting the depth of the human person. The study of the human person must encompass the individual's wholeness in response to the world of other individuals and things. Rationality is not the act that defines the individual as human according to Buber. Entering into relation is an act of the whole being, and it is the act by which we constitute ourselves as human.' Therefore, the essence of the human person can only be known in and through living relations.

### C. The Nature of True Belief

Just as the essence of the human person is taken out of the realm of the scientific and objective realms for Buber, so is his understanding of truth. Unlike Maimonides and other rationalist philosophers, Buber attempted to show that truth is not objective content and words, but rather truth is based on the subjective human experience of meeting. This meeting does not take place in the realm of subject-object, but rather in the realm of being itself.\* To Buber meeting, or "betweenness," functions as the fundamental category of being. Buber based truth on the world as our senses confront it. Maimonides and Buber would have agreed that the world of sensation is not illusion, and truth could be discovered within the everyday here and now. To Maimonides truth was scientific objective knowledge brought about by assent to a belief based on rational thinking and the outside world. To Buber,

truth was within the process of relation itself.

Truth does not consist in a correspondence with being, but is the correlate of a life authentically lived. Thus Buber wishes to remove from his conception of the truth any association with an assertion of objective content. The truth is wholly an attitude towards, an inquiry into, a struggle for the truth, i.e., the authenticity of a particular existence rather than an agreement between appearance and reality.<sup>9</sup>

Buber emphasized his de-objectification of truth in his work Eclipse of God where he discussed the fundamental differences between philosophy and religion. He indicated that "'faith' is not a feeling in the soul of man but an entrance into reality, an entrance into the whole reality without reduction and curtailment."<sup>10</sup> This emphasis on the immediacy of the moment is the foundation of Buber's understanding of religion. Religion, according to Buber, is based in the concrete situation. Philosophy looks away from concrete situations toward the primary act of abstraction. Buber said that "philosophy is grounded on the presupposition that one sees the absolute in universals. In opposition to this, religion, when it has to define itself philosophically, says that it means the covenant of the absolute with the particular, with the concrete."<sup>11</sup> In Eclipse of God, Buber criticizes a scientific approach to philosophic knowledge. If meaning is found in meeting, in the immediacy of the concrete, philosophic speculation and an objective search for truth, would, according to Buber, obstruct relation and block the way toward truth.

#### D. The Development of Buber's Philosophy of Dialogue

Buber's philosophy of dialogue developed out of his interest in mysticism and existentialism. Maurice Friedman described Buber's development leading to his greatest work I and Thou.

The development of Buber's thought from his earliest essays in 1900 to the statement of his mature philosophy in 1922 can best be understood as a gradual movement from an early period of mysticism through a middle period of existentialism to a final period of developing dialogical philosophy. Thus Buber's existentialism retains much of his mysticism, and his dialogical philosophy in turn includes important mystical existential elements.<sup>12</sup>

Buber integrated aspects of existentialism and mysticism while rejecting traditional rabbinism. His position toward rabbinic *halacha* was negative and hostile, because the lifestyle of strict adherence to law left few opportunities for encounter. Maurice Friedman has pointed out that Buber draws out of Hasidism the joy and sanctity of the everyday, and the emphasis on personal religious experience. Unlike Rabbinic Judaism, Buber does not attempt to instruct about religion or about God's nature, but rather to point the way toward meeting others.<sup>13</sup> Buber became grounded in Hasidism's emphasis on community life in which individuals live in connection to others. He drew from Hasidism the ability to see the sacred within the everyday and the potential for communion with God through many forms of spiritual expression. Buber's understanding of Hasidism encouraged him to leave behind the mystical experience that was based on rare, private moments of ecstasy.



### 1. Mysticism

Early in his life, Buber experimented with mysticism. His mystical experience fostered an apprehension of unity of the self with the world, while promoting a sense of otherness, a feeling of being outside of the world. Buber had a profound experience that encouraged him to reject the mystical experience of otherworldliness. He found that mystical religious experience did not fit into the context of his life. In his work Between Man and Man Buber explained that one day after a morning of "religious enthusiasm," a young man came to visit him. Buber was still captivated by the mystical ecstasy that he had just experienced, and without being completely there in spirit, he carried on a friendly, but shallow conversation. The young man had come to Buber to ask significant, religious questions, and Buber neglected to uncover the important questions that were not articulated. Buber later learned that the young man was no longer living, and the essential content of his questions were never answered. Out of guilt and out of necessity Buber gave up mystical experience for the sanctification of the everyday. He found that it was more important to confront individuals in true reality rather than to reduce life to subjective personal experience. He said:

Since then I have given up the "religious" which is nothing but the exception, extraction, exaltation, ecstasy; or it has given me up. I possess nothing but the everyday out of which I am never taken. The mystery is no longer disclosed, it has escaped or it has made its dwelling here where everything happens. I know no fullness but each mortal's hour's fullness of claim and responsibility.<sup>14</sup>

Buber ultimately rejected the ecstatic mystical moment for the everyday and for relationships in which individuals are responsible for one another. The sense of unification that he reached through the mystical experience must be sought in this world in relationships between individuals. The total unification experience that mysticism provided did not leave room for the development of the individual. Buber was too invested in the individuality of the human person to surrender personal identity to subjective ecstasy. Based on his personal life experience, he wrote:

If that extravagantly rich heavenly moment has nothing to do with my poor earthly moment--what is it to me as long as I still have to live on earth--must in all seriousness still live on earth.<sup>15</sup>

Even though Buber clearly rejected mysticism, the powerful sense of unity that the mystical experience fostered echoed in some of Buber's later writings.

## 2. Existentialism

Buber integrated his understanding of mystical experience and Hasidism with ideas raised by Kant, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. He used aspects of existentialist philosophy and Kant's understanding of reality to create his dialogical philosophy, and most important, the abstract realm of I-Thou. Buber began with Kant's teaching that we impose the order of space and time upon experience so that we may orient ourselves within it. The order that we impose of how we conceive the outside world is within us and not necessarily a

part of the outside world. According to Kant, we cannot know reality as it really is, only how it appears to our senses and rationality. Buber used Kant's categories of the "phenomenal" meaning reality as it appears and "noumenal" meaning reality as it really is, to frame his own philosophical categories of I-Thou and I-It.<sup>16</sup> Since we cannot know the noumenal realm, according to Kant, we cannot really know another individual, except through our own perceptions of that person. To Kant, the noumenal realm was beyond reason and unknowable. Buber transformed Kant's notion of the noumenal. Buber envisioned a sphere beyond rational, objective knowledge, where the human person can become a genuine self within the realm of the I-Thou relationship. The realm of I-It is close to Kant's conception of the phenomenal, but Buber's conception of the I-Thou is very different from Kant's noumenal. Buber indicated that through relationship individuals can reach the noumenal realm, which to Kant, was beyond human reach.<sup>17</sup>

Buber was also influenced by the existentialist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Maurice Friedman indicated that Nietzsche's influence may account for the dynamism of Buber's philosophy. Buber drew from Nietzsche a concern for creativity, and an emphasis on the concrete and actual as opposed to the ideal and abstract. Buber was also influenced by Nietzsche's idea of the fruitfulness of conflict and the emphasis on the value of life impulses and wholeness of being as opposed to detached intellectuality.<sup>18</sup>

Friedman emphasized that Soren Kierkegaard, also a religious existentialist, had the strongest influence on Buber.

Kierkegaard's early works expressed some of Buber's most important ideas. Kierkegaard stressed the direct relationship between the individual and God. He discussed the insecure and exposed state of every individual as an individual, and the concept of the "knight of faith" who cannot take shelter in the universal but must constantly risk everything in the concrete uniqueness of each new situation. Kierkegaard emphasized the necessity of becoming a true person before entering into relationships, and he stressed the importance of realizing one's belief in one's own life.<sup>19</sup> Kierkegaard's religious existentialist writings were based on personal experience, and his philosophy took on an autobiographical nature. Buber based his philosophy of dialogue on many of the issues that Kierkegaard addressed, and based on his own experience, Buber's writing took on a similar personal tone as did Kierkegaard.

Buber altered Kierkegaard's notion of the Single One. Kierkegaard emphasized the need to become a Single One, to become an independent, whole individual before addressing God through relationship. To Kierkegaard, to become a Single One, one must renounce other human persons and the world. Kierkegaard based his understanding of the Single One on his own personal life experience. The central event of Kierkegaard's life and the core crystallization of his thought was the painful renunciation of his fiancée, Regina Olsen, as representing women and the world.<sup>20</sup> According to Kierkegaard one can have dealings with God only as a Single One, and to become a Single One, one must be alone in the world and alone before God. Buber recognized the need for the

Single One to exist as a whole individual alone, but he rejected Kierkegaard's view that the individual must be alone to relate to God. In a sense, Buber turned Kierkegaard's notion of the Single One on its head. Relationship with God to Buber was not possible by rejecting other individuals, but rather it was only possible through relating to other human persons.

"In order to come to love," says Kierkegaard about his renunciation of Regina Olsen, "I had to remove the object." That is sublimely to misunderstand God. Creation is not a hurdle on the road to God, it is the road itself. We are created along with one another and directed to a life with one another. Creatures are placed in my way so that I, their fellow-creature, by means of them and with them find the way of God. A God reached by their exclusion would not be the God of all lives whom all life is fulfilled."

Buber opposed Kierkegaard in that he indicated that God "wants individuals to come toward God by means of the Reginas that God had created and not by renunciation of them." God, to Buber, is not an object, and hence cannot be reached by the renunciation of objects. God to Buber, is not to be found by rejection of other individuals. God is not to be loved by reduction. Buber transformed Kierkegaard's Single One from an individual who renounces other human persons, to one who can relate to individuals and God. To Buber, to become a Single One, one must first become whole within one's self. Kierkegaard's notion of the Single One, his religious existentialist emphasis on the everyday, his leap of faith beyond rationality, and his personal autobiographical style continued to influence Buber throughout his philosophical works.



Buber's understanding of the knowledge that can be known by the individual reflected his existentialist standpoint. He rejected rationalists, like Maimonides, who indicated that there are absolute truths that can be comprehended and understood by the human person. According to Buber, the individual walks along a "narrow ridge," avoiding the abyss of self-affirmation on the one hand and self-denial on the other. Buber described the narrow ridge as the inevitable state of the human person which offers no external securities. The only certainty for Buber was the meeting that cannot be predicted or understood prior to the experience of meeting. Buber said:

I have occasionally described my standpoint to my friends as the "narrow ridge." I wanted by this to express that I did not rest on the broad upland of a system that includes a series of sure statements about the absolute, but on a narrow rocky ridge between the gulfs where there is no sureness of expressible knowledge but the certainty of meeting what remains, undisclosed."

Despite the uncertainty of life along the "narrow ridge," Buber emphasizes that the wholeness of human existence can be found through meeting.

Buber's understanding of Judaism, like Maimonides', differs radically from Rabbinic Judaism. Buber, Maimonides and adherents of Rabbinic Judaism are all different in their approach to meaningful existence. Whereas in Rabbinic Judaism the route to soteria is to follow the commandments and uphold the covenant with God, to Maimonides soteria is possible through the development of the intellect. To Buber, religion is the acceptance of the



possibility of dialogue, and inclining of one's heart and mind toward unconditional, spontaneous relation.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, Buber's entire conception of religion and the soterial process are exclusively established within his dialogical philosophy.

### E. Dialogical Philosophy: I-It and I-Thou

Martin Buber's most important existentialist work was I And Thou, which was first published in 1922. I and Thou became the foundation for the entirety of Buber's philosophy. Whereas Maimonides' Moreh was the culminating product of his steady intellectual development, Buber described I and Thou as a work written out of "inner necessity." Buber's work developed from a feeling or an intuition that brewed within Buber's psyche for many years. In a postscript written approximately 40 years after the first publication of I and Thou, Buber described an emotional, almost prophetic experience surrounding the production of his work.

I felt impelled by an inner necessity. A vision that had afflicted me repeatedly since my youth but had always been dimmed again, had now achieved a constant clarity that was so evidently supra-personal that I soon knew that I ought to bear witness of it."

Buber's existentialist standpoint that there are no external certainties for the human person is reflected in the style of his writing. Unlike the careful, complicated organization of Maimonides' Moreh, Malcolm Diamond described I and Thou as a "philosophical-religious poem." Walter Kaufman, who completed the most recent and the clearest English translation of I and Thou

indicated that Buber's delight in language gets between him and his readers. He explained that Buber himself was not always sure of the exact meaning of his text. Kaufman described both the form and content of I and Thou to be "romantic." The work stands somewhere between the literary and the philosophical. The lack of clarity of I and Thou reflects Buber's rejection of the objectification of religion and of the individual.

I and Thou as well as most of Buber's other works, addressed the problem of the modern human person facing the rapid development of a technological culture. Within a technological society, the individual becomes overwhelmed by the impersonal world of machinery. According to Durkheim the individual unavoidably confronts "anomie," alienation between the I and the world. Buber addressed this modern problem of the alienation and objectification of the individual that the rise of technology had produced. He witnessed communities becoming "crowds" and through his work he strove to foster free and open communication between individuals. Throughout all of Buber's anthropological and theological works, human relationships are at the center. Within the emphasis on human dialogue, Kaufman found that the central message of I and Thou was a commandment to make the secular sacred. Buber's philosophy of dialogue brought the everyday realm of human communications to a state of potentiality to obtain the sacred.

Buber's I and Thou is based on a dualism, that there are two, and only two, modes of discourse which reflect the two basic attitudes one can adopt toward others and toward the world. Buber

describes these two separate realms of human existence, and he refers to them as word pairs: "I-It" and "I-Thou." The two word pairs describe the two different ways in which an individual can come to know the world. I-It is objective and can be described. I-Thou is both subtle and complicated, and Buber claims that it cannot be described, yet he tries to depict and portray I-Thou throughout his work. Paul Edwards indicated that Buber's attempted descriptions of I-Thou are often "epigrammatic and cryptic." By referring to I-It and I-Thou as word pairs, Buber emphasizes that the I comes into being in the act of speaking one or the other of these primary words.<sup>25</sup> The individual relationships of I-Thou and I-It will now be explained more completely. The explanation will begin with a description of the I-It relationship since it is concrete and relatively clear.

### 1. I-It

In the realm of I-It all things in the world, objects and other individuals, are filtered through the mental categories of the human person for purposes of knowledge or use. Buber stated that I-It can never be spoken with one's whole being, and the I-It relation produces subject-object knowledge. Maurice Friedman described the objectification of the world of I-It:

'Individuality,' the I of I-It, becomes conscious of itself as the subject of experiencing and using. It makes its appearance through being differentiated from other individualities and is conscious of itself as a particular kind of being. It is concerned with its My--my kind, my race, my creation, my genius. It has no reality because

it has no sharing and because it appropriates unto itself.<sup>26</sup>

I-It is the world of objective space and time in which one can continually locate one's self and other selves.<sup>27</sup> The world of experience belongs to the basic word I-It. Buber ultimately values relationships, and he indicated regarding I-It that "the improvement of the ability to experience and use generally involves a decrease in man's power to relate."<sup>28</sup> He seems to assign subtle negative implications to I-It. Even though individuals spend the most time within I-It, the goal of existence is to foster the more obscure I-Thou relationships.

However, a person cannot live without the world of I-It. Buber said that without It a person cannot live, but one who lives with It alone is not a person.<sup>29</sup> To Buber "all real living is meeting," yet meeting cannot come within the I-It. Clearly to Buber, I-It is incapable of fostering soteria, yet Buber emphasizes that I-It does not come from evil. On the contrary, I-It is of fundamental importance for the scientific ordering of nature. Pamela Vermes emphasized that it is a mistake to assume that anything pejorative is attached by Buber to I-It.

Nothing is wrong with the objectivity of I-It.  
 . . as long as it is able to change to I-Thou,  
 and does not become so habitual that entry into  
 relation is impeded. On the contrary,  
 irrelation (I-It) is inevitable and good, if  
 only for the reason that I cannot be present  
 with Thou except by leaving the world of It.<sup>30</sup>

I find both Vermes' and Buber's justification of I-It and their description of the function of I-It to be weak. However, since

Buber indicates that the interdependence and interrelation between I-It and I-Thou is significant to the human person, a more complete discussion of the role and value of I-It will follow a comprehensive analysis of I-Thou.

## 2. I-Thou

Buber emphasizes that the I comes into being in the act of speaking one of the two primary word pairs<sup>11</sup>: I-It or I-Thou. The two "I"s that emerge are not the same. The I of I-Thou can only be spoken<sup>12</sup> with the whole being. To Buber, I-Thou is the primary word of relation. The I-Thou cannot be described because it is a living dialogue between individuals who are not related to the objective contents of one another. Maurice Friedman explained that the I-Thou relation does not take place in the 'subjective' or in the 'objective,' nor in the emotional or rational, but in the 'between,' in the realm of being.<sup>13</sup> Betweenness functions as the fundamental category of being, and the human person is the locus where the act of being is being acted. The human person does meet, the human person is the meeting itself.<sup>14</sup>

Buber pointed out that there are three spheres in which the world of relation arises: life with nature, life with other human persons, and life with spiritual beings.<sup>15</sup> These realms of relation will be explained more explicitly following a description of the characteristics of the I-Thou. The meeting of the Thou of the human person and of nature is also a meeting with God. Buber emphasizes that the I-Thou meeting is ephemeral. I-Thou



continually becomes I-It.

Every Thou in the world is doomed by its nature to become a thing or at least to enter into thinghood again and again. In the language of objects: every thing in the world can--either before or after it becomes a thing--appear to some I as its Thou.<sup>36</sup>

The human person does not experience<sup>37</sup> the Thou. The human person encounters the Thou through relation. Within the realm of the I-Thou particulars disappear, and the human person knows everything about the Thou through intuition. Buber clearly values the realm of I-Thou as ultimate meaningful existence. For Buber, the route to soteria is through I-Thou relationships. However, he stresses that the human person can do nothing to foster the I-Thou. I-Thou happens because of grace.

the Thou encounters me by grace--it cannot be found by seeking. But that I speak the basic word to it is a deed of my whole being, is my essential deed.<sup>38</sup>

The random, unexplainable aspect of grace that establishes the I-Thou relationship leaves the human person somewhat helpless to the process of soteria, according to Buber..

### 3. Characteristics of I-Thou

#### a. Directness

Paul Edwards has pointed out that even though Buber stressed that the I-Thou could not be explained, ironically, much of the work I and Thou is focused on describing the I-Thou relationship. Edwards identified several characteristics that constitute the I-Thou relationship. The first and most basic is directness, which



implies a rapport or specific contact between persons. Walter Kaufman translated the concept of "directness" as unmediated.

The relation to the Thou is unmediated. Nothing conceptual intervenes between I and You, no prior knowledge and no imagination; and memory itself is changed as it plunges from particularity into wholeness.<sup>39</sup>

By directness or unmediatedness, Buber implies that within the realm of I-Thou there is an intuitive rapport that arises independent of knowledge, memory, or experience regarding the two individuals. Another characteristic of the I-Thou that Buber stresses is total involvement of both parties. Buber said "the primary word I-It can never be spoken with the whole being, the primary word I-Thou can only be spoken with the whole being." Total involvement implies that the whole self is involved in the relationship.

#### **b. Openness**

Openness is a characteristic of the I-Thou relation that is a pre-condition of directness and involvement.<sup>40</sup> Both parties must have an open or receptive attitude toward one another. According to Buber, the openness of the I-Thou is contrasted with the attempt to control, or predict, the other party as in I-It. Therefore, the world of I-It is the world of causality, order, and science, and the world of I-Thou is free from causality.

I and Thou confront each other freely in a reciprocity that is not involved in or tainted by any causality; here man finds guaranteed the freedom of his being and of being.<sup>41</sup>

### c. Mutuality

One cannot experience I-Thou according to Buber unless both individuals are participating. Buber calls this characteristic mutuality or reciprocity. He stated that "the I of the primary word I-Thou is a different I from that of the primary word I-It," indicating that within the I-Thou relationship both parties must have similar open attitudes. This openness and reciprocity is not present within the realm of I-It.

### d. Presentness

Presentness is a characteristic of the I-Thou relationship according to several of Buber's commentators. Whereas the world of I-It "hangs together in space and time. The Thou-world does not hang together in space and time."<sup>4</sup> Buber describes the I-Thou moment as "queer lyric-dramatic episodes" that have no duration. Because the I-Thou has no duration, it is always present, and Maurice Friedman described the presentness of I-Thou to be the "real filled present." Edwards explained how the necessary presentness of the I-Thou diverges from the causality of I-It.

Wyschograd treats Buber's remarks about the essential presentness of the I-Thou and the inevitable pastness of the I-It as a logical consequence of the assumption that I-Thou meetings occur outside any causal framework while I-It relations are perfectly determined by the events of the past. I-It relations lack "genuine novelty" and because of this "all objective knowledge" of human beings must always be about their past and not about them as they now are."

Buber emphasizes that the characteristic of presentness contributes a mystical quality to the I-Thou relationship. He describes I-Thou

as "the eternal now" or "timeless living." Edwards indicated that this sense of presentness that Buber describes is by no means peculiar to I-Thou relations. Other human experiences are characterized by a timeless sense of presentness.

**e. Ineffability**

Finally, Buber indicated that ineffability is a characteristic of the I-Thou relationship. An I-Thou relationship cannot be studied or described. Edwards stressed Buber's confusion regarding ineffability. He agreed with Buber that while in the midst of an I-Thou relationship, one could not step back to analyze the relationship. Similarly, when one is angry, one could not attempt to analyze the anger. The minute analysis would begin, the anger would subside. Similarly if one attempted to describe I-Thou in the midst of the experience, it would be impossible to maintain the relationship. However, Edwards indicated that just as it is possible to study and analyze human emotions following the experience, it is possible to discuss and describe the I-Thou following the moment of experience. Edwards highlighted Buber's confusion regarding ineffability in demonstrating that Buber's entire work I and Thou is an attempt to describe the I-Thou relationship.

On the basis of these characteristics, Buber describes a relationship that is very difficult to attain. An I-Thou relationship as Buber describes demands a certain level of maturity and intimacy. To Buber, the paradigm of the I-Thou relation is love fully manifest between husband and wife. Love, to Buber is

not a feeling, but rather responsibility of an I for a Thou. Love involves the recognition and confirmation of the other in his or her uniqueness, and to this end, marriage affords the greatest length of time and the greatest degree of intimacy." In a marriage relationship two human beings reveal the Thou to each other. Like every I-Thou relationship, even within marriage the Thou inevitably becomes an It. Buber emphasizes that even in the most intimate, reciprocal relationships, the moments of the I-Thou encounter are fleeting and unpredictable. However Buber emphasizes that the intimacy of marriage provides the best environment for I-Thou relations to take place.

#### 4. I-Thou and Inanimate Objects

Some of the I-Thou relationships that Buber identified did not necessarily contain all of the characteristics described above. Buber raised the controversial point that an I-Thou relationship is not limited to human persons, but can include trees, animals, objects in nature, and God. Emil Fackenheim "acknowledges that it may not be easy to be persuaded of the reality of I-Thou encounters when the alleged partner is something non-human."<sup>45</sup> Many have questioned how a lifeless and speechless object can achieve the mutuality of I-Thou as the human person is capable. Buber describes the I-Thou relationship with a tree:

I cannot say you to a tree and at the same time consider it in terms of profit as timber, or of adornment as an addition to my garden, or of study as an object of botanical research. When I say you to a tree, I am simply present with it; its whole unique self is present with

me and to me."

Although Buber describes a sense of presentness with inanimate objects, he never adequately explained how an inanimate object is capable of mutuality. Buber clearly values the I-Thou encounters between human persons more highly than those that take place between the human person and other beings, because of the greater degree of mutuality possible in human encounters."

### 5. Gradations of I-Thou

Buber also describes I-Thou relationships between human persons that do not contain all of the characteristics of an I-Thou relationship. He indicates that a relation with another human person that cannot be considered I-It does not automatically make it an I-Thou relation in its true sense. There are gradations of the I-Thou relation which differ from a true I-Thou relation because a person does not engage in total involvement and openness, or because of a lack of mutual affirmation of one another's subjectivity." In the "Afterward" to I and Thou that appeared in 1958, 35 years after the first German edition, Buber admits that relationships occur between individuals without full mutuality.

Yet there are also many I-Thou relationships that by their very nature may never unfold into complete mutuality of they are to remain faithful to their nature."

Buber gives the examples of relationships between teacher and pupil, psychotherapist and patient, pastor and congregant, to illustrate this point. Because of the nature of these



relationships, full mutuality is impossible, yet the apprehension of the individual as a whole leads to a quality in the relationship that would not be described as I-It.

Even though Buber admits the gradations of I-Thou he does not adequately explain the differences between types of I-Thou relationship. I and Thou is based on a dualism in which the reader is led to believe that every relationship is simply I-Thou or I-It. This lack of clarity regarding the gradations of I-Thou has led to misunderstanding regarding the nature of an I-Thou experience. Buber's oversimplified dualistic description of relationships has led students of Buber's philosophy of dialogue to a watering down of the true I-Thou. Many speak of attempting to treat others as a Thou. By speaking sincerely and treating others in a kind, loving, friendly manner, they claim that one can have an I-Thou encounter with almost anyone. However, Buber emphasized the role of "grace" within the I-Thou encounter. One can never know or control when the I-Thou encounter will occur. Buber's description of the characteristics of the I-Thou require deep knowledge and understanding of an individual. Therefore, one could not create an I-Thou encounter with another individual just by treating him or her in a kindly way.

Buber addressed this problem in Between Man and Man by distinguishing three different types of dialogue, two of which can occur within the realm of the I-Thou.

There is genuine dialogue--no matter whether spoken or silent--where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being



and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them. There is technical dialogue, which is prompted solely by the need of objective understanding. And there is monologue disguised as dialogue in which two or more men, meeting in space, speak each with himself in strangely tortuous and circuitous ways and yet imagine they have escaped the torment of being thrown back on their own resources.<sup>50</sup>

Buber describes technical dialogue as an intermediary between genuine dialogue and monologue. He described technical dialogue as

hidden in all kinds of odd corners and, occasionally in an unseemly way, breaks surface surprisingly and inopportunistly. . . as in the tone of a railway guard's voice, in the glance of an old newspaper vendor, in the smile of the chimney-sweeper.<sup>51</sup>

Technical dialogue allows for moments of "real dialogue" amidst everyday life. Even though technical dialogue characterizes a meaningful experience, perhaps a momentary intimate expression of glances between strangers, this, to Buber, is not a true I-Thou encounter. Even though real dialogue can occur through a friendly exchange with a cashier, an instant rapport with a waiter, or an overwhelming relationship between a musician and an audience, these encounters lack the necessary characteristics of a true I-Thou encounter.

By over simplifying all human relationships to either I-Thou or I-It, Buber neglected to fully describe different types of relationships. Several scholars invented new terminology to account for the gradations of the I-Thou. Paul Edwards described

"I-Thou-like" relations based on Buber's discussion of technical dialogue.

Buber does not contend that we have full-fledged I-Thou relationships in all these cases, but all of them are sufficiently different from I-It to be classified as "real dialogue." Perhaps it would be helpful. . . to distinguish between I-Thou relationships and I-Thou-like relationships. . . I believe that Buber would regard the meeting between a musician and his audience as I-Thou-like rather than as a full I-Thou encounter. The directness may well be there and so may the other characteristics of the I-Thou meeting, but the level on which the involvement takes place is not as deep as Buber appears to require for a true I-Thou relation.<sup>52</sup>

Buber's philosophy of dialogue provides a significant depiction of human relationships. However his oversimplified dualism inevitably leads to misunderstanding and confusion amongst his readers regarding the true nature of the I-Thou.

#### F. Soteria

Buber clearly indicates that soteria is found through the I-Thou encounter. If soteria is found only within the I-Thou, does this imply that asoteria is inevitable within I-It? Buber emphasizes that one cannot always live within the I-Thou, and that I-It is necessary for scientific progress and everyday existence. Several scholars have emphasized that Buber assigns nothing negative or evil to the realm of I-It. However, Buber did not adequately explain the nature of I-It and its relationship to the soterial process of the I-Thou encounter. Buber indicated that we live most of our life within the realm of I-It, and that I-Thou

can only come about through the act of grace. There is nothing significant that we can do to foster an I-Thou encounter. The best that we can do is attempt to address others as whole beings by entering into intimate relationships like the paradigmatic ground for I-Thou--the marriage relationship. By fostering deep, intimate relationships, we can create an environment for I-Thou encounters, however nothing can guarantee the occurrence of the I-Thou. Since Buber does not clarify the true nature of the I-It, it seems as though to him, the human person is inevitably stuck in I-It, a state of asoteria or dysoteria. Only through grace, random luck, will the individual experience an I-Thou encounter that will provide a soterial moment. This implies that soteria is a random uncontrollable occurrence that provides mere moments of meaningful existence. Can these moments of soteria that cannot be predicated or controlled, and that do not even necessarily occur in every individual's life, provide meaningful existence for the human person? Can mere moments of I-Thou encounter sustain a person throughout life's trauma and disappointments?

Buber indicates that the I-Thou encounter can sustain a person and provide true meaningful existence regardless of its random and unpredictable nature. If Buber truly means to indicate that the human person has nearly no control over soteria and simply exists to wait and hope for the random I-Thou moment that may or may not occur, he seems to be straying away from the existentialist understanding of the essence of the human person. According to existentialism, the individual is in charge of making decision that

lead to the voluntary creation of her or his essence. Buber's vague description of the soterial process leaves the human person helpless and incapable of achieving soteria without the random act of grace that fosters the I-Thou encounter.

I do not think that Buber intended to imply that the human person is a helpless individual who lives an absurd life of waiting for the random occurrence of I-Thou. However, his oversimplification of human relationships and his oversight of the underlying meaning of the realm of I-It left many unanswered questions in his philosophy of dialogue. Buber's description of relationships in terms of I-Thou and I-It is meaningful and important. However, his description of human relationships does not address the many issues of human existence. His theology, built upon his philosophy of dialogue, creates even more problems and confusion than his description of human relationships.

#### G. ENDNOTES TO CHAPTER V

1. Throughout this text I use primarily Walter Kaufman's translation of I and Thou. [Martin Buber, I and Thou, trans. Walter Kaufman, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970)] Kaufman emphasized the importance of referring to I-Thou relationships as I-You. He indicated that the use of the word "You" insinuates the intimacy that Buber intended. Kaufman's essay regarding the use of the word "You" in place of "Thou" was convincing and important. However, in order to avoid confusion, I will be substituting the word "Thou" for "You" within Kaufman's translation.

2. The use of the word "belief" in relationship to Buber's theology must be explained. According to Buber, one cannot "believe" in a deity. To Buber, one can only relate to the deity through an I-Thou relationship, and he emphasized that an I-Thou encounter cannot be described. Even though Buber emphasized that one cannot describe God or an I-Thou encounter, several of his books and articles actually describe and explain I-Thou relationships as well as the Eternal Thou. Buber contradicted himself by indicating that "belief" in a deity was impossible, while he simultaneously described and wrote about his own beliefs based on his experiences and interactions. Buber himself probably would have objected to my describing his theological statements as "beliefs." However in order to bypass the inherent contradictions in his work, I will refer to his theological statements as expressions of his theological beliefs.

3. Paul Edwards, "Buber and Buberism--A Critical Evaluation," The Lindley Lecture, University of Kansas, November 3, 1969, p. 3.

4. Martin Buber, Hasidism and Modern Man, from The World of Existentialism, ed. by Maurice Friedman (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 167. Also see Frank Muller, "The Existentialist Ethics of Martin Buber and Jean-Paul Sartre," rabbinic thesis, HUC-JIR Cincinnati 1983, p. 88 ff.

5. Martin Buber, The Knowledge of Man, trans. Maurice Friedman, (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 13.

6. Ibid., p. 16.

7. Ibid., 20.

8. Emanuel Levinas, "Martin Buber and the theory of Knowledge," in The Philosophy of Martin Buber, ed. Paul Arthur Schlipp and Maurice Friedman (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 139.

9. Ibid., p. 143.

10. Martin Buber, Eclipse of God, (New York: Harper Brothers Publishers, 1957), p. 3.

11. Ibid., p. 41.

12. Maurice S. Friedman, Martin Buber The Life of Dialogue, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1960), p. 27.

13. Maurice Friedman, Martin Buber and the Eternal, (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1986), p. 15.



14. Martin Buber, Between Man and Man, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith, ( Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), p. 14.
15. Martin Buber, I and Thou, trans. Walter Kaufman. (New York: Charles Scriber's sons, 1970), p. 135.
16. Frank Muller, "The Existentialist Ethics of Martin Buber and Jean-Paul Sartre." rabbinic thesis, HUC-JIR Cincinnati, 1983, p. 103.
17. Ibid., p. 104.
18. Friedman, Life of Dialogue, p. 35.
19. Ibid., p. 35.
20. Buber, Between Man and Man., p. 40.
21. Ibid., p. 52.
22. Buber, Between Man and Man, p. 140.
23. Lowell D. Streiker, The Promise of Buber. (New York: J.B. Lipincott Company, 1969), p. 24.
24. Martin Buber, I and Thou, trans. Kaufman, p. 171.
25. Friedman, Life of Dialogue, p. 57.
26. Ibid., p. 68.
27. Malcolm L. Diamond, "Dialogue and Theology," The Philosophy of Martin Buber., ed. Paul Arthur Schlipp and Maurice Friedman, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 236.
28. Buber, I And Thou, trans. Kaufman, p. 92.
29. Will Herberg, ed, The Writings of Martin Buber. (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), p. 17. This is not a direct quote. The language was changed to incorporate non-sexist terms.
30. Pamela Vermes, Buber on God and the perfect Man, (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980), p. 193.
31. Even though Buber labeled I-Thou and I-It word pairs, he also refers to each word pair as one word.
32. Buber used the word "spoken" here in a poetic sense. He seems to mean that the I of the I-Thou can only be called into existence with the whole being.
33. Friedman, Life of Dialogue., p. 60.

34. Emanuel Levinas, "Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge," The Philosophy of Martin Buber, p. 140.
35. Buber, I and Thou, trans. Kaufman, p. 57.
36. Ibid., p. 69.
37. Buber seems to avoid the word "experience" because experience is meant for sensation. The I-Thou relationship is meta-empirical, in that it occurs in a realm outside of the five senses.
38. Ibid., p. 62.
39. Ibid., p. 62.
40. Edwards, p. 8.
41. Buber, I and Thou, trans. Kaufman, p. 100.
42. Ibid., p. 84.
43. Edwards, p. 14.
44. Muller, p. 110.
45. Edwards, p. 11.
46. Vermes, p. 195.
47. Muller, p. 106.
48. Ibid., p. 111.
49. Buber, I and Thou, trans. Kaufman, p. 178.
50. Buber, Between Man and Man, p. 19.
51. Ibid., p. 19.
52. Edwards, p. 5 and p. 8.

## CHAPTER VI

## The Eternal Thou

Buber's God concept is an integral part of his dialogical philosophy. The human person meets God, the Eternal, Thou through I-Thou relationships with other individuals. Maurice Friedman has pointed out that Buber's Eternal Thou does not stand for God, or the Absolute, but rather for our unique dialogue with an Absolute that cannot be known.<sup>1</sup> When an individual engages in meaningful dialogue, the realm of "between" is created. The human person's dialogue brings about a realm that exists between "individual and individual," and simultaneously a realm between "the individual and God." Just as the human person is defined in terms of relationship, so also is the Eternal Thou. The human person realizes his or her essence through dialogue with other humans, and ultimately through dialogue with the Eternal Thou. The human person cannot enter into relations with God unless he or she meets the Eternal Thou through relationships with others, and through relationships with the world of things. Each relationship with other human persons leads to a relationship with the Absolute.<sup>2</sup> Buber indicated that "God is the Eternal Thou in whom the extended lines of relation meet. . . Every particular Thou is a glimpse through to the Eternal Thou; by means of every particular Thou the primary word addresses the Eternal Thou." Therefore God is the center of the circle of existence, the apex of the triangle of life.<sup>3</sup> In the "Afterward" to I and Thou, Buber indicated that "God

is the Absolute Person who is not a person but becomes one, so to speak to love and be loved, to know and be known by us."<sup>4</sup> Just as the human person exists through dialogue, the Eternal Thou comes into being through dialogue. The human person has a direct relationship with the Eternal Thou. That relationship calls the Eternal Thou into being. The human person directly effects and influences the Eternal Thou.

The Eternal Thou is different from all other "Thou"s in that a relationship involving the Eternal Thou can never degenerate into the objectivity of I-It.<sup>5</sup> Buber emphasized that all other "Thou"s necessarily become It at some point. Other "Thou"s are constantly fluctuating between the I-Thou realm of subjectivity and the I-It realm of objectivity. The Eternal Thou by its very nature remains Thou to us and can never become it. Due to the limitations of our own being, we often speak of the Eternal Thou in terms of the world of It, but the Eternal Thou never changes from a Thou to an It as do all other Thous.<sup>6</sup>

#### A. Panentheism

Buber's conception of God is panentheistic. Hartshorne and Reese indicated that Buber's God concept unintentionally outlines the main theses of panentheism.

The primary reality is relation; the only absolute is the absolute relation (which is mutual) of the I to the Eternal Thou; the world is in God, who is self-related to all things, deriving value from them, so that there is real becoming of the God who is, though not a God who becomes.<sup>7</sup>

The fundamental aspect of panentheism, that the world is in God,

and that God is ultimately more than the world, is reflected in Buber's general statement: "in every Thou we address the Eternal Thou, in every sphere according to its manner. All spheres are included in it, while it is included in none."<sup>8</sup> Panentheism is also expressed in Buber's discussion of I-Thou relations with inanimate objects. One can have an I-Thou encounter with a tree, because the tree is grounded in God, the Eternal Thou. The Eternal Thou is the ground of all I-Thou encounters. Buber's panentheistic God concept allows the individual to embrace both the world and God. It avoids the painful isolation of the religious self from the human community which is so striking in Kierkegaard.<sup>9</sup> Buber also avoids the denial of both the self and the community as in Buddhism and to some extent of Brahmanism. Hartshorne and Reese emphasized how Buber's God concept preserves both the religious self and the world of reality.

When we encounter God, we encounter the world as contributory to the life of God, which is social, receptive, very far from "impassible," or exclusive of finite things. To find God, we do not leave the world or deny its reality; we "hallow" it; we see it as integral to the actuality of him who is Thou for each of us and who alone is individually the same Thou for all.<sup>10</sup>

According to Hartshorne and Reese, Buber's God concept fits into their five point definition of panentheism. A panentheistic God according to Hartshorne is:

E    Eternal--in some. . . aspects of his reality devoid of change, whether as birth, death, increase or decrease  
T    Temporal--in some. . . aspects capable of change, at least in the form of increase of some kind



C     Conscious, self-aware  
 K     Knowing the world or universe, omniscient  
 W     World-inclusive, having all things as  
       constituents <sup>11</sup>

It will be demonstrated that Buber's panentheistic notion of God is not as clearly described as Hartshorne implied. Buber does not specifically address the five points of panentheism, and therefore Hartshorne attributed characteristics to Buber's God concept that Buber never explicitly stated.

### B. Buber's Objections to Philosophy

Buber emphasized that he differed from the philosophers Kant, Hegel, Hermann Cohen and others in that he believed that God is not an idea. God cannot be known as an idea. We cannot know God, we can merely respond to God, according to Buber.

The true God can never be an object of our thought, not even the 'Absolute object from which all others derive. We do not discover God, therefore; we respond to him.'<sup>12</sup>

By conceiving of God as an idea, Buber indicated that the philosophers constructed a mere image. Buber claimed that the philosophers "God-idea" removed God from the realm of "this world" toward an intangible, irrelevant realm that does not confront human existence in the everyday. According to Buber, God can only be met in concrete, real living.

I have been concerned about establishing the simple fact that I do not mean by 'God' the highest idea but that which can be fit into no pyramid as its apex, and that, accordingly, the link between God and man does not go by the way of the universals, but by way of concrete life.<sup>13</sup>

In the previous chapter it was pointed out that Buber, unlike Maimonides, valued human relationships over human intellectual activity. Similarly, since knowing God as an idea is impossible, Buber stressed that entering into relation with the Eternal Thou is the ultimate goal of human existence. By entering into relation with God, Buber emphasized that the human person learns to love God, which allows the individual to rise above the idea.<sup>14</sup> To believe in God, to Buber, meant therefore, "to stand in a personal relationship to that God; a relationship in which it is possible to stand only toward a living entity."<sup>15</sup> To Buber God cannot be discovered as an object of our thought, or experienced as one would experience an It. We can merely respond to God. Buber emphasized that "we know God only in relationship; we cannot know God as he is in himself."<sup>16</sup>

Interestingly, Buber presented absolutely no proofs for the existence of God. Whereas Maimonides offered extensive proofs regarding the existence of God and evidence for faith in God, to Buber, faith is based on personal relationship to the deity. The attempt to prove the existence of God is irrelevant. To Buber, God cannot be known as an idea, and he made no attempt to prove God's existence. Both Maimonides and Buber would have agreed that God cannot be known. However, Maimonides' belief in the existence of God is based on extensive proofs following logical conclusions. Buber's belief in the existence of God is based on personal, subjective experience that cannot be described or verified.

### C. The Attributes and Intentions of God

Buber, unlike Maimonides, emphasized that we can know positive attributes of God as well as some of God's intentions. Maimonides indicated that through the negative attributes, there is nothing that we can know or predicate of God. Maimonides directly addressed the subject of attributes throughout many specific chapters in the Moreh. In contrast, Buber scattered his statements about attributes throughout his works. He rarely presented a coherent, clear notion of what can be known about the attributes of God. He claims that there are attributes of God that we can know, yet even these attributes are not clearly explained or defined by him.

His most clear and direct statement on attributes appears in the "Afterward" of his work I and Thou. Even though he rejected the study of theology as reducing God to a mere idea, in this instance he embraces the language of philosophy:

If for once I were to translate what I mean into the language of a philosopher, Spinoza, I should have to say that of God's infinitely many attributes we human beings know not two, as Spinoza thought, but three: in addition to spiritlikeness--the source of what we call spirit--and naturelikeness, exemplified by what we know as nature, also thirdly the attribute of personlikeness. . . . And only this third attribute, personlikeness, could then be said to be known directly in its quality as an attribute.<sup>17</sup>

Buber acknowledged Spinoza's two attributes of spirit and nature, and emphasized that the only attribute of God that we know directly is God's personhood. He said that "the concept of personhood is

utterly incapable of describing the nature of God; but it is permitted and necessary to say that God is also a person."<sup>18</sup> Even though Buber described God's personhood in admitted contradiction, he acknowledged that God can be known as the absolute person. Buber has emphasized that, unlike Maimonides, logical arguments are not necessary for a description and understanding of God. Ultimately, relationship and "meeting" override logic. This approach of Buber's leads to a confusing and contradictory description of God and God's attributes.

As stated earlier, to Buber, the human person "meets" God through relation. Through this meeting, the human person receives not an idea or a content, but a "presence." Buber described this presence as a "presence as strength" that encompasses three aspects:

First, the whole abundance of actual reciprocity, of being admitted, of being associated while one is altogether unable to indicate what that is like with which one is associated, . . . And this is second: the inexpressible confirmation of meaning. It is guaranteed. Nothing, nothing can henceforth be meaningless. . . This comes third: it is not the meaning of "another life" but that of this our life, not that of a "beyond" but of this our world, and it wants to be demonstrated by us in this life and this world.<sup>19</sup>

Buber acknowledged that God is a "presence" whom we meet in the everyday world. God exists in the present.

Buber emphasized that God and the human person engage in a reciprocal relationship based on love and mutual need. Buber indicated that "'the man who loves God,' who lives in the grateful

consciousness for God's love, 'loves also him who God loves.'"<sup>20</sup> God and the human person also share mutual need as Buber indicated, "You need God in order to be, and God needs you--for that which is the meaning of your life."<sup>21</sup>

Buber frequently referred to God as eternal and as a unity, although he never formally or extensively discussed, or tried to prove, either point. He implied that God's unity and eternity are assumptions that underlie his understanding of God. His term for God as the "Eternal Thou" implied that he believes that God is eternal. In many instances throughout his writing, he discussed God "in the fullness of His eternity."<sup>22</sup> Similarly, he described God as the one who addresses us as a unity.

In such a way, out of the givers of the signs,  
the speakers of the words in lived life, out  
of the moment Gods there arises for us with a  
single identity the Lord of the voice, the  
One.<sup>23</sup>

Aspects Buber's vague description of attributes resemble theism. He emphasized that God is a person, and that God is eternal and one. In some of his writings through his adoption of Hasidism he referred to the Hasidic notion of God creating the universe, however, he never formally discussed creation. He never directly indicated how the universe was created and how or if the deity was involved in the creation.

Buber did not address, or mention, the traditional theistic attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence. Buber described a theistic personal deity without the powers to defy the laws of nature through miracles. Buber seems to have draw on some



theistic attributes and aspects of naturalistic theology to create a hybrid theology. Like naturalistic theologies, Buber indicated that God does not miraculously interrupt the laws of nature. However, unlike naturalistic God concepts, the human person can relate to God, and God knows and needs individual human persons. The combination of these attributes presents Buber's theology as an interesting cross between naturalism and theism. However, the lack of clarity and in depth explanation of so many of Buber's own terms as well as commonly used theological ideas makes it difficult to pinpoint his theology.

#### D. Buber and Rabbinic Judaism

##### 1. *Halacha*

Buber rejected traditional *halacha*, and he indicated that his position might be mistaken for antinomianism. Will Herberg described Buber's attitude toward Rabbinic Judaism.

Buber's earlier writings reveal a distant, often hostile attitude to traditional rabbinism, and although the sharpness has been much mitigated with the years, Buber's position in regard to the rabbinic *halakhah* remains fundamentally negative.<sup>24</sup>

For the responsible person, Buber saw the personal as the only way. He said, "In three hundred years there may be a new *Halakhah*. But now this is just the way of modern man. I am only against life becoming rigid. I want to warn man against anticipated objectivication."<sup>25</sup> Buber indicated that strict adherence to *halacha* would leave few opportunities for genuine dialogue. Buber

would not accept tradition unless he could confirm it out of his own personal testing, wrestling, and life experience of meeting.

## 2. The Bible

To Buber, the Bible was not an infallible document. He rejected the traditional notion of revelation. The Bible to Buber is the reception and the distortion of the human person's original encounter with God.<sup>26</sup> The Bible is the record of the real meetings in the course of history between a group of people and the divine, seen through the human person's eyes.

Buber discussed the traditional Biblical ideas of creation, revelation, and redemption within the framework of his dialogical philosophy. Buber described all of these events as ongoing occurrences. None of these events were described by Buber as supernatural events. As stated previously, Buber never addressed God's role in the creation of the universe. He adopted an attitude toward the term creation similar to that of Hasidism. Buber viewed creation as an ongoing process that the human person and God engage in together. The act of creation goes on incessantly. Maurice Friedman described Buber's understanding of the human person's ultimate freedom, yet responsibility to the act of creation.

And in one's freedom one acts not only as a creature but as a co-creator with God, able through one's actions and through one's life to alter the fate of the world and even, according to the Kabbalah, to reunite God with His exiled Shekinah.<sup>27</sup>

Friedman said that according to Buber, "God wants to come into the world through man. Man is the completer of God's creation and the initiator of His redemption." Therefore, creation is an everyday event in which both human persons and God participate regularly. The human person and God share a mutual responsibility in the act of creation. Even though Buber often referred to God as the "creator" and individuals as "creatures" he never formally addressed how, when, or if God created the universe, the human person, or anything else. Since he offered no clear explanation, it seems to be impossible to determine what exactly Buber meant by the word creation.

Revelation to Buber is the human person's meeting with God's presence rather than information about God's essence." Revelation is not a content, but an encounter. Like creation, revelation is never past, and it always takes place in the present. Buber indicated that revelation as it occurred in the Bible need not be interpreted literally:

What meaning are we intended to find in the words that God came down in fire, to the sound of thunder and horn, to the mountain which smoked like a furnace and spoke to his people? It can mean one of three things. Either it is figurative language used to express a "spiritual" process. . . Or it is the report of a "supernatural" event, one that severs the intelligible sequence of happenings we term natural by interposing something unintelligible. But there is a third possibility: it could be the verbal trace of a natural event."

Buber emphasizes that revelation is preserved and reported from within the fallible memory of the human person. He emphasized that

"natural events are the carriers of revelation, and revelation occurs when he who witnesses the event and sustains it experiences the revelation it contains."<sup>30</sup>

Redemption to Buber, according to Friedman, takes place always and never. Redemption means "the bringing of evernew layers of the world of It into the immediacy of the Thou."<sup>31</sup> Like creation and revelation, the human person has direct involvement in redemption. Redemption begins when the human person turns from evil toward the direction of the Eternal Thou. Redemption is not dependent upon Messianic calculations or on any apocalyptic event, but on the unpremeditated turning of our whole world-life to God. However redemption is not complete without God's grace: "Our turning is only the beginning, however for our action must be answered by God's grace for redemption to be complete. When we go forth to meet God, he comes to meet us, and this meeting is our salvation."<sup>32</sup>

Buber described creation, revelation, and redemption as events that occur in the natural world between the human person and God. These events are subjective and personal, and therefore contingent upon the infallible report and description of the human mind. Buber describes these events as reciprocal relationships between the human person and God. Buber did not formally address the subject of providence, as did Maimonides. Buber seems to have indicated that, since the Eternal Thou cannot obstruct the natural order, there is no Divine Providence. Whereas Maimonides equated soteria with Divine Providence, Buber emphasized that soteria was found within the I-Thou encounter, which evidently, had nothing to

do with Divine Providence.

It is necessary to realize the centrality of God's grace within Buber's theology. No I-Thou relationship, no creation, revelation, or redemption occur without the presence of divine grace. We can strive to foster I-Thou relationships and to meet the "Eternal Thou" through creation, revelation and redemption, but ultimately the event only occurs in the presence of God's grace, which Buber describes as somewhat random and unpredictable. As stated in the previous chapter, Buber implies that the human person can do nothing to encourage divine grace. Therefore, to the human person, creation, revelation, redemption, and I-Thou is left to chance.

It is foolish to seek God, 'for there is nothing in which He could not be found.' Rather one must go one's way and simply with that it might be The way. The meeting with God is 'a finding without seeking, a discovering of the primal, of origin.'

Buber's understanding of creation, revelation and redemption differs radically from that of Rabbinic Judaism. Even though he described them as natural events, his emphasis on divine grace bestows a supernaturalism that, once again, places Buber's theology nebulously between theism and naturalism.

### E. Theodicy

The incompleteness of Buber's theology is most apparent in his dealing with the problem of theodicy. The following is Buber's definition of good and evil:

Evil is lack of direction and that which is



done in it and out of it. . . Good is direction and what is done in it; that which is done in it is done with the whole soul, so that in fact all the vigour and passion with which evil might have been done is included in it."<sup>5</sup>

To Buber, evil is the refusal to enter into relation; the lack of need for confirmation of one's being by another. Evil is objective and contained within the realm of I-It. Good is that which one does with the wholeness of one's being, and evil is that which concerns only a part or a segment of one's total experience."<sup>6</sup>

Maurice Friedman described Buber's two stages of evil:

First. . . evil grows directly out of a "decisionlessness" the failure to find the direction to God through responding with one's whole being to the concrete situation, and second in which evil takes the form of a decision, but not with the whole being."<sup>7</sup>

Buber's definition of evil is grossly oversimplified. This becomes clear by examining other thinkers' more complex definitions of evil. E.S. Brightman classified evil in several ways. First he distinguished moral evil from natural evil. Next he described five different types of evils: 1. a will that is more or less incoherent; 2. the intellectual evil of ignorance; 3. Maladjustment; 4. Incompetence; 5. dysteleological surd. Brightman explained the dysteleological surd in relation to the other types of evil:

The other types may sometimes be superseded by internal development. . . But a dysteleological surd is a type of evil which is inherently and irreducibly evil and contains within itself no principle of development or improvement."<sup>8</sup>

Brightman then raised the crucial question of whether or not dysteleological surds exist in the world. Buber neglected to describe a type of evil like the dysteleological surd, and he did not question the possibility of the existence of evil like the dysteleological surds. His shallow understanding of evil leads to an even less fulfilling treatment of the problem of theodicy.

In Buber's work Eclipse of God, he attempted to respond to the atheism of Nietzsche and Sartre in anticipation to the "God is dead" theologies. There are two versions to Buber's eclipse of God theory. The first resembles Heidegger's claim that the modern human person, because of the immersion in being and excessive concern with technology, has forgotten being." In Buber's terminology, individuals have become so absorbed in I-It that they have lost their capacity for I-Thou. This has made it impossible for them to find God, the Eternal Thou. According to this version, God is not deliberately hiding from individuals, they have become incapable of seeing God.<sup>10</sup>

The more radical version of the eclipse theory maintains that God has concealed God's self from the world in the modern age. Human persons cannot find God in modern times, not just because they have become incapable of I-Thou relationships but rather because God has turned God's back on the world.<sup>11</sup> Buber indicated that this silence of God is real and implies that something has taken place not merely in human subjectivity but in Being itself. Buber emphasized that we need not despair, since the future may not be as dark as the present. God's self concealment may soon come

to an end." He says, "if the I-Thou relationship has gone into the catacombs today, who can say with how much greater power it will re-emerge."<sup>3</sup> Buber encourages us to "endure the divine silence, and at the same time move existentially toward a new happening, toward that event in which the word between heaven and earth will again be heard."<sup>4</sup>

The eclipse of God led to a loss of confidence in human existence and a loss of trust in God. This crisis was brought about by humanity's lack of trust in being. Despite this sickness and the 'cold war' that was its symptom, Buber affirmed his belief that the peoples could enter into genuine dialogue with one another, that each, even in opposing the other, could heed, affirm and confirm its opponent as an existing other.<sup>5</sup>

Through his work The Eclipse of God, Buber indicated that even though individuals suffer and God is in hiding at times, if the individual waits patiently God will be revealed again. This was Buber's main explanation of the book of Job. Maurice Friedman presented Buber's explanation:

Job accuses God of injustice and tries in vain to penetrate to Him through the divine remoteness. Now God draws near Job and Job 'sees' Him. It is this nearness to God, following His apparent hiddenness, which is God's answer to the suffering Job as to why he suffers--an answer which is understandable only in terms of the relationship itself.<sup>6</sup>

Buber implied that the mere re-establishment of the I-Thou relationship with the Eternal Thou erased all of Job's suffering. "God's nearness" is simply not an adequate explanation to pain and

suffering, or in Brightman's terms, to dysteleological surds. Buber does not provide any answer or explanation to dysteleological surds like AIDS, Cancer or the Holocaust. He did not acknowledge their existence as examples of evil. Nor did he address the problems and pain that evil like the dysteleological surd can cause to the human person. The only answer that Buber provided was that it is worth our while to wait for God to come out of hiding, so that we can re-establish I-Thou relationships with the Eternal Thou. However, ultimately, human beings have absolutely no control over the divine grace that accompanies every I-Thou relationship.

Buber's theology is incomplete in several areas. However his seemingly obliviousness to the deep human problem of evil and suffering shows his theology to be unsubstantial. The problem of theodicy is so meagerly dealt with in Buber's theology that the substance of his God concept appears scant.

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## CHAPTER VII

## A Comparison of Maimonides and Buber

As depicted in the preceding chapters, the God concepts of Moses Maimonides and Martin Buber are very different from one another. They differ in their fundamental approach to truth, the human person, soteria and theodicy. Maimonides presented his theology in his last work, the Moreh, and Buber conceptualized his dialogical philosophy in a relatively early work, I and Thou. The place of these two works in the lives of the two thinkers contributes some insight into the development of the different theologies.

## A. Literary Style and Intended Readers

Maimonides wrote the Moreh as his final and most theologically comprehensive work. The Moreh was designed to be a "Guide for the Perplexed," a guide for those students who could not reconcile the Bible with scientific thought and Metaphysics. Maimonides wrote specifically for his pupil, Rabbi Joseph. In the Epistle Dedicatory, Maimonides indicated that Rabbi Joseph was a unique student. Maimonides described Joseph as having a "powerful longing for speculative matters," and because of his quick grasp of difficult material, Maimonides indicated that Joseph was "worthy to have the secrets of the prophetic books revealed to him." Maimonides wrote the Moreh specifically for select students like Rabbi Joseph. He recognized that very few students would have the background, stamina, and capability to grasp the material

throughout the "dispersed chapters," yet he composed the work specifically and exclusively for them. Maimonides covered a tremendous amount of material in great depth and detail throughout the Moreh. The organization of the work reflected his method of concealment and contradiction. Only the elite readers would be able to sort through the material to discover the secret teachings. Because of the secret nature of the work, and its inevitable contradiction with Rabbinic Judaism, Maimonides wrote through his code of contradiction and concealment. By making clear his specific method to his select readers in the introduction to the Moreh, Maimonides insured that only certain readers would grasp the true meaning of his words. Through reading the Moreh carefully, one can begin to understand the organization and intention of the work. Although at times the contradictions imply the confusion of the author, through a careful reading, one can detect Maimonides' consistent, coherent ideas. This method of concealment and contradiction protected Maimonides from the masses of Rabbinic Jews, while allowing his students to solve metaphysical and religious problems.

For whom was I and Thou written? Buber does not seem to say. Based on his interest in Hasidism, he seems to address I and Thou to everyone. Whereas Maimonides' system of thought was available to the select few, Buber did not perceive a modern population as composed of the masses. Buber openly intended his work for anyone who was interested, Jew and Gentile alike. Unlike Maimonides' Moreh, Buber's work demanded little preparation and prior knowledge

on the part of the reader. Buber specifically indicated that I and Thou was based on his own intuition, on an inner necessity. It was not necessarily the product of extensive speculative thought. I and Thou was the product of Buber's relationships with individuals and the world. His style, unlike Maimonides, is spontaneous and poetic. Whereas Maimonides intentionally wrote in an obscure matter to conceal his true beliefs, Buber's many ambiguous passages seem unintentional as Buber admitted to not always understanding the meaning of his own words. Several scholars have shown that the Moreh is comprehensible. However, no scholar, to my knowledge has indicated that I and Thou is ultimately comprehensible. Even though, perhaps, it was not Buber's ultimate intent that I and Thou would be completely comprehensible, the lack of clarity of his ideas inevitably mislead his readers.

#### B. The Nature of True Belief

Comparing Maimonides' and Buber's understanding of the nature of true belief is valuable. The different criteria that Buber and Maimonides used to accept a belief as true forces readers to decide on what basis one would personally choose to accept beliefs as true. Both thinkers emphasized that truth can be discovered within the everyday, and both stressed that the world that we experience with our senses is the "real" world. Maimonides based all of his beliefs about the nature of the universe and about God on both empirical evidence and logical conclusions. To Maimonides, belief is assent to a proposition that each individual must give on the

basis of intellectual conviction brought about by consideration of the evidence. The individual must directly apprehend the evidence in order to assent to the truth of the proposition.

In contrast, Buber emphasized that truth is based on the subjective human experience of meeting. Truth cannot be found in the concrete, objective, empirical world. Rather Buber based truth on the meta-empirical experience; the subjective experience that cannot be verified logically or by the senses. The sharp contrast between Buber and Maimonides regarding the nature of true belief challenges the reader to identify a personal requirement for truth. Should one base truth on Maimonides' logical conclusions based on empirical evidence? Or is it possible to arrive at true belief through Buber's subjective meta-empirical experiences? The reader is forced to confront whether one or both of these methods can constitute true belief.

### C. The Essence of the Human Person

Maimonides and Buber held different views regarding the essence of the human person. Maimonides followed Aristotle in that he maintained that the essence of the human person is rational animal. Maimonides emphasized that the species and the spheres are eternal, therefore the human person's essence has and will always be rational animal. Maimonides indicated that the human person was made up of many different parts. To Maimonides, there was no concept of the whole person, as Buber had emphasized. The human person, according to Maimonides, ultimately strives to realize his



or her essence. This is accomplished by engaging in rational, intellectual activity.

Buber followed his existentialist predecessors and indicated that the essence of the human person is not static, as Maimonides and earlier thinkers maintained. Rather, the essence of the human person is created and shaped throughout each individual's life experience and choices that are made within those experiences. To Buber, the most important life experiences were relationships. The individual exists, to Buber, only through living relationships with others. Buber emphasized that the definition of the human person as rational animal does not encompass the individual's wholeness in response to the world. However, Buber did not clarify his concept of the whole self. Maimonides carefully described the human person as composed of many distinctive aspects. Buber referred to the human person as a unified entity, but he neglected to specifically clarify what constitutes a whole self. To Buber, the individual is a growing and changing being who is constantly shaped by the world of things and others. This dynamic understanding of the human person reflects Buber's modern existentialist perspective, in contrast to Maimonides' Aristotelian standpoint.

#### **D. Attitudes Toward Rabbinic Judaism and the Bible**

Both Maimonides and Buber rejected Rabbinic Judaism.\* Maimonides' anti-rabbinic philosophy necessitated concealment. He could not have openly expressed his naturalistic God concept

without facing possible excommunication. Through his expert knowledge of *halacha* displayed through his renown *Mishnah Torah*, Maimonides could keep himself on the fringe of the Rabbinic Jewish community, while gaining respect from its leaders. Only through his method of concealment could Maimonides express his true beliefs to his students. Maimonides emphasized that the commandments and regular prayer were activities intended for the masses. The elite could use ritual and prayer as a catalyst to achieve the higher intellectual pursuit of the study of Metaphysics. To Maimonides, prayer, ritual and the commandments were simply means to a higher end.

Maimonides understood the Bible to be written on two different levels, one for the masses and one for the elite. Maimonides explained the Bible based on his observations of the natural world, rather than explaining the natural world based on the Bible, as did Rabbinic Jews. Throughout the Moreh, Maimonides expressed a consistent approach to the Bible. He carefully highlighted many specific passages and he explained their double layer of meaning.

Buber also rejected *halacha*. Since he had lived during the Haskala, Buber was able to publicly renounce Rabbinic Judaism. Buber openly criticized *halacha* as leaving no room to foster relationships. To Buber, the only true way of life was through meeting and relationships. Prayer, in the traditional sense, was unimportant to Buber, as true meeting could take place primarily in dialogue.

Like Maimonides, Buber also rejected Reliable Tradition, and

he indicated that the Bible was primarily a human document that was open to wide interpretation. Buber generally interpreted the Bible as human communication with the divine. However, within his open interpretation, he neglected to address many issues that the Bible raised. Whereas Maimonides carefully suggested a two-layer meaning that he explained using many textual examples, Buber's understanding of the Bible was nebulous. He discussed creation, revelation, and redemption, yet his understanding of the Bible is difficult to discern within his broad, general statements about the meaning of the Biblical text.

#### E. Basis for Belief in God

Not only are the God concepts of Buber and Maimonides contrasting, but their foundations for belief are strikingly different. Maimonides based his belief in God on proofs logically deduced as well as his empirically verified experiences of the natural world. Buber based his belief in God on subjective meeting. This meeting could not be empirically or logically verified. Buber stressed that God is not an idea, and therefore God could only be "met" and not experienced or logically understood. Ironically, Maimonides and Buber would have agreed that one cannot know anything about the deity. Maimonides, through the use of negative attributes, taught that the human mind can know nothing about God, since God's essence is utterly different and incomprehensible to anything relating to our universe. However, to Maimonides, one could study the natural universe and the laws

of Metaphysics to merge one's human intellect with the Active Intellect. Buber emphasized that God could only be met through I-Thou and encounter, and, although the meeting fostered direct communication between the human person and the deity, this meeting did not provide information about God.

#### F. Knowledge of God

Even though Maimonides and Buber both indicated that God cannot be known, the extent to which each conceded knowledge of God was reflected in their discussions of attributes. Maimonides proved that God is a unity and that God is eternal. He indicated that it is impossible to prove whether or not the universe is eternal, but he explained that the theory that the universe was created was more plausible. To Maimonides, the negative attributes were the true attributes of God. The masses were to be taught, according to tradition, that God is incorporeal, that God cannot be compared to any creatures, and that God is not subject to external influences. However, those elite students capable of true understanding only accept the negative attributes. Solomon, whose knowledge and words regarding God are few, is Maimonides' paradigm. To Maimonides, the highest knowledge of God is to admit that absolutely nothing can be known of the deity. Even though the Moreh is filled with contradictions in order to appease the majority of Rabbinic Jews, Maimonides ultimately expressed a God concept that is absolutely transcendent. Based on his absolutely transcendent God, Maimonides depicted his own clearly articulated

definitions of Divine Providence and revelation that reflected his naturalistic God concept.

Unlike Maimonides, Buber admitted that attributes of God can be known. Through his hybrid theology that mixes theism and naturalism, Buber presented an omniparental God incapable of obstructing the natural order. Buber's most clear statement reflected that he admitted Spinoza's attributes of spirit and nature, and Buber added the attribute of personhood. Unlike Maimonides, Buber offered no logical proof for these attributes. Buber's God concept is not transcendent, which is proved through the subjective encounter of the human person with the Eternal Thou. The human person can meet God directly as a presence through nature, through objects, and through other individuals. Even though the human person is capable of meeting God, the human person has no control over when and whether or not he or she will meet God. God acts through "divine grace," however Buber neglected to clearly define and explain this term. Buber's God concept reflects theism in that God is a person who can be met, yet Buber's Eternal Thou does not obstruct the natural order. Unlike Maimonides, Buber only vaguely addressed the issue of creation. He referred to God as one and as eternal, and he emphasized that any type of logical proof is irrelevant to Theology. He indicated that revelation and redemption are natural events, and he incorporated these terms into his dialogical philosophy. However, he neglected to offer a clear and coherent explanation of these terms as did Maimonides.



### G. Theodicy

Buber's God concept appears incomplete and vague next to Maimonides' especially regarding the issue of theodicy. To Maimonides, the human person is composed of matter and form, and the aspect of the human person that is matter is inevitably subject to chance. However, regardless of the defects of matter, the development of the intellect and rational faculties entitles a person to the benefits of Divine Providence. To Maimonides, Divine Providence is a natural event that is obtained through the natural development and exercise of the human intellect. Divine Providence cannot effect the world of matter. Events in the natural world which are closely connected to matter, are often inevitably due to chance. Maimonides explained that Job suffered because he was incapable of receiving Divine Providence. He did not adequately develop his intellect through the study of Metaphysics. Job did not comprehend the negative attributes. Had he exercised his intellect, he still might have lost his children and become ill, but he would have realized that the world of matter is subject to chance. With the proper understanding that the intellect is of supreme importance, his losses, relating only to the material world, would not have effected his ability to attain ultimate meaningful existence through the realization of his intellect.

Buber explained the problem of theodicy through his theory of the eclipse of God. In the modern age, according to Buber, God is hiding. Due to the rise of the complex technological society the

human person has become incapable of entering into I-Thou relationships. On the one hand, Buber indicated that human persons have become incapable of seeking God. However his more radical version of this theory maintained that God is concealed from the modern world. This silence of God implies that something has fundamentally changed in being itself. Buber's answer to this problem is simply to wait and endure the divine silence. The Eternal Thou could re-appear. This theory is consistent with Buber's understanding of God in that the role of divine grace is emphasized. The human person has no control over the I-Thou encounter and the encounter is subject to divine grace. Similarly, Buber implied that the silence of God will come to an end because of divine grace. Even though this theory is consistent with Buber's God concept, it does not adequately solve the problem of evil. Buber defines evil as the absence of the I-Thou, and this simplifies evil. He does not address the presence and significance of dysteleological surds. He belittles Job's suffering by indicating that God's arbitrary nearness erases Job's anguish.

#### H. Soteria

Maimonides' and Buber's concepts of soteria encompass their understandings of providence and theodicy. To Maimonides, soteria is linked to Divine Providence. The one who develops the intellect and realizes that the material world is subject to chance is capable of obtaining soteria. Soteria is a process that takes excruciating intellectual preparation, and Maimonides admitted that

only certain minds are physically disposed to the soterial process. Soteria is achieved for Maimonides through the development of the intellect. The one who is capable of understanding Logic, Mathematics, and Metaphysics, through Maimonides' demanding and specific course of study, discovers that one can ultimately realize one's essence. Physical and moral perfection, and the observance of religious commandments are simply preparatory steps toward intellectual perfection. Other individuals are simply part of the preparation that leads to solitary intellectual introspection for the one who is capable of attaining soteria.

In contrast, Buber's concept of soteria directly incorporates other individuals. To Buber, soteria is the I-Thou encounter, and Buber ultimately values I-Thou relationships between human persons. Meaningful existence is found in the everyday world through I-Thou encounter. Unlike Maimonides, an individual cannot do anything to prepare for this encounter, and it is possible for any individual to have such an encounter. Even though the I-Thou meeting is a fleeting, unpredictable moment, one soterial moment can sustain the individual until the next happens to occur, according to Buber. Several thinkers raised problems within Buber's soterial system. If one can only achieve soteria through the I-Thou, what is I-It? Buber indicated that I-It is necessary, and that individuals spend most of their time within I-It. This implies that individuals spend most of their time in a state of asoteria or dysoteria. Buber did not adequately address this problem, as well as the many other issues that he neglected to confront within his dialogical

philosophy.

These contrasting God concepts illustrate an important point about Reform Jewish Theology. Both Maimonides and Buber are regarded as important Jewish philosophers. They both reject the Rabbinic Jewish God concept as well as the Rabbinic Jewish view of the Bible. The presence and acceptance of two diametrically opposed Jewish God concepts illustrates that there have been many Jewish God concepts throughout Jewish history. If Buber and Maimonides, as well as other Jewish thinkers, were free to stray away from the Rabbinic notion of God, then any Jew should be free to create a new and different God concept. The presence and acceptance of Maimonides' and Buber's God concepts within what is considered to be "Jewish" emphasizes that Jews have held many different views of God throughout Jewish history.

The comparison of Buber's and Maimonides' God concepts raises many interesting considerations for modern students of Theology. Maimonides' explanation of his God concept is strikingly more clear and comprehensive than the God concept of Buber. Maimonides offers proofs for the existence of God, a clear explanation of the problem of theodicy, and a specific prescription for how to receive Divine Providence. Buber leaves far too many questions unanswered, and does not even address some of the many important topics that Maimonides discussed at length throughout the Moreh. By recognizing these outstanding differences in these two God concepts one is forced to confront what one would accept within a personal God concept. One must decide whether or not it is important to

believe in a God that can be verified by empirical and logical evidence as in the case of Maimonides' God concept. Should one adopt Maimonides' intellectual methodology based on logical proof to arrive at a God concept? Or should one rely on Buber's personal meta-empirical experiences to discover one's own beliefs about God? Because Maimonides' God concept is more comprehensive and based on logical conclusions, is it necessarily superior to Buber's? These are decisions that each individual is led to make when confronted by the contrasting differences of these two God concepts.

Maimonides, as a 12th century thinker, obviously neglected to address some of the issues that confront the human person today. Later thinkers illustrated how Maimonides' proofs for the existence of God could be refuted. Maimonides' cosmology and understanding of the human person is based on the Aristotelian notion that species are eternal. The spheres, intelligences, and the deity are incapable of change. Darwin showed the world through his theory of evolution that species are not eternal. Only after Darwin did philosophy begin to address the idea that as species evolve, perhaps the deity is also capable of change. Through Buber's eclipse of God theory, he hints at the idea that being is capable of changing. Hartshorne classified Buber as a panentheist, and he explained that a panentheistic God changes as the universe itself changes. The idea that the deity changes and evolves is the fundamental issue of Process Theology. Buber vaguely skimmed the surface of Process Theology through his indication that being is fundamentally changing. Process Theology in general responds to



evolution in a way that Maimonides could not.

A God concept for today's modern Jew must account for evolution as well as the other problems that both Buber and Maimonides attempted to explain. It is possible to incorporate Maimonides' nature of true belief with current information regarding the universe to arrive at a naturalistic, transcendent God concept that recognizes evolution. However, based on the idea that the individual is made up of many "I"s, it is important to recognize that individuals may have an emotional need to believe in a God that can respond to the human person. Maimonides' soterial process can fundamentally remove the human person from interpersonal dialogue. An individual could adopt a transcendent naturalistic God concept like Maimonides, yet incorporate a soterial process that necessitates interpersonal interaction as well as intellectual speculation.

By comparing these two radically different God concepts, the variety of Jewish God concepts becomes apparent. Reform Judaism gives each individual the authority to choose and create one's own God concept. This difficult choice can only authentically be made through a process of study. By comparing Jewish God concepts presented throughout history, the individual Reform Jew can gain an understanding of what issues are involved in the study of Theology. Through study and comparison of Jewish theologians, it becomes apparent that a modern Jewish God concept must at least confront the role of Scripture, epistemology, evolution, soteria and theodicy. With an understanding of Buber's and Maimonides'

different solutions and explanations to these fundamental problems, the individual Reform Jew is given some basic equipment with which to build a personal Jewish God concept.

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