

Maimonides and Spinoza

Their Conflicting Views of
Human Nature

JOSHUA PARENS

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INTRODUCTION

Until the last century, it was generally agreed that Maimonides was a great defender of Judaism and Spinoza was one of its great opponents—if not an opponent of the Jewish people. In other words, it was recognized that Spinoza was one of the leaders in the Enlightenment drive toward secularization of politics. Since the 1960s, it has become commonplace to argue that Maimonides, not Spinoza, fired one of the first salvos in modernity or our modern secular world.¹ This introduction will eventually consider how a few very influential scholars, especially Harry A. Wolfson, Shlomo Pines, and Warren Zev Harvey, paved the way for this view. One of the key objectives of this book is to challenge the view that Maimonides is in any significant sense a protomodern. I contend that the main value to be derived from studying Maimonides is to gain distance from our own world and viewpoint, which has been so deeply shaped by the thought of Spinoza. The view that Spinoza is a modern and Maimonides is a premodern was once the prevailing view. For example, Leo Strauss argued this about Maimonides

1. See Shlomo Pines, "Limitations of Human Knowledge according to al-Fārābī, Ibn Bājja, and Maimonides," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 82–109; reprinted in *Collected Works of Shlomo Pines*, vol. 5, ed. W. Z. Harvey and Moshe Idel (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997), 404–31; Warren Z. Harvey, "Ethics and Meta-ethics, Aesthetics and Meta-aesthetics in Maimonides," in *Maimonides and Philosophy*, ed. S. Pines and Y. Yovel (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986), 131–38; Aryeh Botwinick, *Skepticism, Belief, and Modernity: Maimonides to Nietzsche* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Heidi Ravven, "Some Thoughts on What Spinoza Learned from Maimonides about the Prophetic Imagination," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 39, no. 2 (2001): 193–214 (pt. 1) and 39, no. 3 (2001): 385–406 (pt. 2); and David Biale, "Not in the Heavens: The Premodern Roots of Jewish Secularism," *Contemplate* 5 (2008–9): 4–12, a brief article anticipating the argument of his book *Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

and Spinoza.² As any reader will be able to see in short order, my reading of these two authors is deeply influenced by Strauss's—indeed, could even be considered a defense of his overall interpretation.

One difference between my approach and Strauss's is that I have shifted my focus to Spinoza's *Ethics* from what seemed in Strauss's time to be the neglected *Theologico-Political Treatise*. The present book compares primarily Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* and Spinoza's *Ethics*. Another difference is that it focuses on their views on human nature or what would more traditionally be called their anthropologies rather than directly on their approaches to what Strauss, following Spinoza, refers to as the theologico-political problem. In addition to offering a novel approach to the *Ethics*, this shift in focus has other advantages: Most of the scholarship on Maimonides since 1960—and there is an enormous amount of it—has focused on uncovering his well-guarded theoretical, especially his metaphysical, views. Although his anthropology is closely related to his physics, which is part of his theoretical teaching, physics and anthropology are not simply identical. Above all, this approach will make it possible to approach the core theoretical issues of Maimonides (the Account of the Beginning or physics and the Account of the Chariot or metaphysics) obliquely rather than directly. It may be that this more oblique approach will save us from, as it were, being blinded by the sun—to borrow a Socratic image from Plato's *Phaedo*.

This book's approach to Spinoza's *Ethics*, though it draws heavily on the last half-century of scholarship, including the last two decades of especially intense study, is deeply indebted to an unfortunately neglected 1980 article written by Richard Kennington.³ Kennington was first known as a Descartes scholar and later as a Bacon scholar. He published only one article on Spinoza, but it sheds brilliant new light on the *Ethics*. (See the appendix on Kennington's article.) Its main value is to compel the reader to take seriously certain methodological features of the *Ethics* too long assumed to be defects. For example, Kennington gives us a way to approach the fact that the opening definitions lack the intuitive obviousness that one would expect in an apparently synthetic or deductive argument such as the *Ethics*. Another example: he argues persuasively that Spinoza's use of synthesis or deduction is not nearly as continuous throughout the *Ethics* as is widely as-

2. *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1952; rpt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

3. "Analytic and Synthetic Methods in Spinoza's *Ethics*," in *On Modern Origins: Essays in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Pamela Kraus and Frank Hunt (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 205–28; originally in *The Philosophy of Baruch Spinoza*, ed. Richard Kennington (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1980), 293–318.

sumed—indeed, a prominent role is to be played by analysis. Others have noted that some of the most important moments in Spinoza’s argument, for example, in long appendices and scholia such as 1app and 3p2s, do not fit neatly into the putatively deductive structure of the whole, but no one other than Kennington, as far as I am aware, has made the argument that Spinoza seriously employs analysis.⁴ Above all, Kennington shows that the extended (analytic) digression on physics in part 2 between propositions 13 and 14 plays a more foundational role than has been previously acknowledged. In short, Kennington compels us to rethink our approach to the *Ethics*.

The most important contribution of this book is to contrast the views on human nature of Maimonides and Spinoza. Although these authors have been compared in a 2009 book aimed at a relatively wide audience,⁵ not since Wolfson’s magisterial *Philosophy of Spinoza* has an extended discussion of Spinoza and Maimonides been published in English. In *Spinoza, lecteur de Maïmonide: La question théologico-politique* (2006), Catherine Chalier has focused, as her title indicates, on Spinoza as interpreter or reader of Maimonides.⁶ And as her subtitle indicates, she is focused more directly on the theologico-political problem than we will be here. Although I will address the issue of the way Spinoza reads Maimonides in this introduction, my focus in the rest of the book is different from hers.

Before turning to a more detailed discussion of the recent scholarship that has provoked this book, we need to consider briefly the general trend toward assimilation of Maimonides to Spinoza. An important argument made to justify this assimilation is that the theologico-political differences are obvious but that once one penetrates the practical surface of their teachings one discovers that at greater theoretical depths Maimonides and Spinoza are much closer than first appears. W. Z. Harvey may be the most outspoken proponent of this view.⁷ It is difficult to say exactly what drives such an interpretation: whether it is a certain version of Strauss’s own effort to promote the recognition of esotericism in both of these authors or perhaps the conviction that theoretical science is so much more important that it trumps merely theologico-political concerns. Whatever the motive,

4. See, for example, Efraim Shmueli, “The Geometrical Method, Personal Caution, and the Ideal of Tolerance,” in *Spinoza: New Perspectives*, ed. Robert W. Shahan and J. I. Biro (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), 197–215.

5. Marc D. Angel, *Maimonides, Spinoza, and Us: Toward an Intellectually Vibrant Judaism* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2009).

6. Catherine Chalier, *Spinoza, lecteur de Maïmonide: La question théologico-politique* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2006).

7. Warren Z. Harvey, “A Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19, no. 2 (1981): 151–72.

I will attempt to show in this book that the putative theoretical similarities between Maimonides and Spinoza are superficial.

Another important (largely tacit or implied) argument made to justify the assimilation of Maimonides to Spinoza is that Maimonides is so radical an author—a claim that hardly anyone can gainsay—that he must have presaged the kinds of all-too-radical theoretical breaks from the past exemplified by the Enlightenment.⁸ Although Maimonides deserves his reputation as the most pathbreaking of thinkers in the Jewish tradition, that pathbreaking character may not derive from theoretical innovations. Instead, I will argue that that character derives from the way that he relates the Jewish tradition to philosophy. No one before Maimonides had attempted to make room for philosophy within the Jewish fold. True, important thinkers had taken pages out of the books of philosophers to bolster their defenses of Judaism—such as Saadya Gaon, Judah Ha-Levi, and Bahya Ibn Pakuda—but none of them had opened the space that Maimonides opened. Although this interpretation of what makes Maimonides novel may not be as dramatic a claim as that he brought about radical metaphysical changes, I will try to show that it is truer to the facts. What if it were the case that the theoretical innovations of modernity were in one way or another misbegotten? Perhaps then Maimonides' lack of theoretical radicality might prove to be an asset.

Let us now turn to some of the details in the rise of the view that either Maimonides should be viewed as a protomodern of sorts or Spinoza as a medieval of sorts or both. (Readers who do not count themselves as specialists in Maimonides and Spinoza might want to skip this detailed discussion and go to the overview of the parts of the book near the end of this introduction.) Floris van der Burg in her 2002 book *Davidson and Spinoza: Mind, Matter, and Morality* reports that Seymour Feldman, in two different texts published in the same year, credits Harry Wolfson with dubbing Spinoza both “the last of the Medievals” and “the first of the Moderns.”⁹ Van der

8. Shlomo Pines, for example, “Truth and Falsehood versus Good and Evil: A Study in Jewish and General Philosophy in Connection with the *Guide of the Perplexed*, I, 2,” in *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 95–157.

9. Floris van der Burg, *Davidson and Spinoza: Mind, Matter, and Morality* (Hampshire, Eng.: Ashgate, 2002), 11–12 n. 3. Feldman infers the “last of the Medievals” in his fine review of the first volume of Yirmiyahu Yovel’s *Spinoza and Other Heretics* (“Spinoza: A Marrano of Reason?” *Inquiry* 35, no. 1 [1992]: 37–53, esp. 37–38) based on Wolfson’s “Spinoza and the Religion of the Past” originally delivered in 1949 and appearing in *Religious Philosophy: A Group of Essays by Harry Austryn Wolfson* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961; rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1965), 246–269, esp. 269. (To my mind, the passage cited is less convincing than the opening

Burg's report is a symptom of the ambiguity of Wolfson's views, as well as an indicator of some of the confusion to which they have contributed. The opening of Wolfson's massive two-volume *Philosophy of Spinoza* insinuates that Spinoza is the "last of the Medievals" by describing the method of his (Wolfson's) project as "reconstructing the *Ethics* out of scattered slips of paper figuratively cut out of the philosophic literature available to Spinoza" (3). What Wolfson considered the "philosophical literature available to Spinoza" is evident from a perusal of authors in Wolfson's "List of References." The vast majority are medieval. The most prominent modern is Descartes, but Wolfson has more citations referring to the Aristotelian corpus than to Descartes.¹⁰ Of course, this does not prove that Wolfson viewed Spinoza as a medieval in 1934; however, it does indicate that he thought Spinoza's "source material" is primarily premodern. That Wolfson viewed Aristotle's influence over Spinoza as profound is evident also from one of the last things he wrote about their relation: "Spinoza is daring, but he introduces no novelty. His daring consists in overthrowing the old Philonic principles which by this time had dominated the thought of European religious philosophy for some sixteen centuries. But in overthrowing these principles, all he did was to reinstate, with some modification, the old principles of classical Greek philosophy."¹¹

Lest we become sidetracked into the question of how we are to view the relation between a philosopher and his predecessors, I will simply posit that I do not share Wolfson's tacit view that philosophers—whether they realize it or not—are to a very great extent shaped by their predecessors.¹² Leaving that aside, the periodization conundrum that Wolfson faces, with respect to

pages of Wolfson's *The Philosophy of Spinoza* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934], esp. 1: 3–4.) Feldman infers the "first of the Moderns" in his introduction to the second edition of Samuel Shirley's translation of Spinoza's *Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 5, based on Wolfson's *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), vol. 2, chap. 14—Feldman seems to be referring to pp. 457–60. It should be noted that Feldman offered this account of Wolfson's views of Spinoza in his introduction to the first edition, published some ten years earlier than his review of Yovel. In other words, these comments were really made ten years apart.

10. Cf. *Philosophy of Spinoza*, 1: 19, where Wolfson identifies Descartes, Maimonides, and (indirectly) Aristotle as the greatest influences upon Spinoza.

11. "Spinoza and the Religion of the Past," 269. Wolfson's "with some modification" is extremely tame as compared with most scholars' views on the depth of Spinoza's break with all things premodern.

12. My phrase "whether they realize it or not" is inspired in part by the subtitle of Wolfson's Spinoza book. The full title is *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning* (my emphasis).

Spinoza, is evident as early as 1926 in his reply to Joseph Ratner's critique.¹³ Wolfson concludes that

[Ratner] feels quite confident that he knows *a priori* the difference between medieval and modern philosophy, and assures us that "Spinoza in every particular is a full-blooded modern," and that his God is not the God of Maimonides. . . . I must confess that I am not always sure as to what is medieval and what is modern in philosophy. But this much I can say with certainty, that I find nothing medieval in Maimonides' approach to the problem of religion except his modernist lack of logical consistency [by which Wolfson surely means "his lack of modern logical consistency"] in raising the superstructure of a traditional religious system upon a purely scientific conception of God. The advance made by Spinoza is not in modifying Maimonides' conception of God, but rather in escaping his logical inconsistency.¹⁴

The claim that Spinoza is a more consistent extension of Maimonides is crucial for the rest of this introduction because we will trace echoes of this view in the more recent scholars, Pines and Harvey.

To say that Spinoza is the logical extension of Maimonides is not necessarily to say that Spinoza is a medieval, because as we have just seen, as early as 1926 Wolfson identifies "logical consistency" as the centerpiece of what it is to be modern. It could be objected that all that Wolfson means by "logical consistency" is that moderns were deeply enamored of what Descartes famously dubbed "method." Yet Wolfson does not treat Descartes as truly modern. Indeed, he treats him as continuing the putatively medieval lack of consistency. According to Wolfson, at least the Wolfson of the 1940s and onward, Spinoza and Spinoza alone marks the first true break with medieval philosophy.¹⁵

13. H. A. Wolfson, "Towards an Accurate Understanding of Spinoza," *Journal of Philosophy* 23, no. 10 (1926): 268–73. This is a reply to Ratner's piece in the *Journal of Philosophy* criticizing Wolfson's interpretation of twelve of the first thirteen propositions in Spinoza's *Ethics* in *Chronicon Spinozanum* 1, 2, and 3.

14. Wolfson, "Towards an Accurate Understanding of Spinoza," 272–73.

15. Review both Wolfson, "Spinoza and the Religion of the Past," 269, and *Philo*, 2: 459, but esp. 2: 457: "Similarly, when toward the end of mediaeval philosophy, in the sixteenth century, new conceptions of nature and of the physical universe began to make their appearance, exponents of mediaeval philosophy, among whom Descartes is to be included, tried to show how easy it was for them to adjust their inherited principles of mediaeval philosophy to their new conception of nature and the physical universe. . . . Spinoza . . . for the first time launched a grand assault upon [Philonic philosophy]."

More troubling than the ambiguities in Wolfson's writings about the proper historical locus of Spinoza is his implied characterization of medieval philosophy as at bottom lacking logical consistency. For Wolfson medieval philosophy is what we have already heard him refer to as "religious philosophy,"¹⁶ and Philo is its founder. As he states in his 1961 collection titled *Religious Philosophy*, Philo "revolutionized philosophy and remade it into what became the common philosophy of the three religions with cognate scriptures, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This triple scriptural religious philosophy . . . reigned supreme as a homogeneous, if not a thoroughly unified, system of thought until the seventeenth century, when it was pulled down by Spinoza."¹⁷ Recently, I have argued against Wolfson's (and many other scholars') tendency to lump together the three traditions of medieval philosophy in this way. I revisit Strauss's argument that much of twentieth-century scholarship on medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophy has distorted those traditions by viewing them through the lens of Scholasticism.¹⁸ Rather than rehearse the details of my objections to Wolfson's overstatement of the homogeneity of medieval philosophy here, I want to focus on the putative lack of consistency of Maimonides and putative consistency of Spinoza.

It almost goes without saying that the view that Spinoza follows through or extends Maimonides has contributed to the view among scholars such as Pines and Harvey that Maimonides and Spinoza are far more similar than prior scholarship had recognized. Consequently, rather than ongoing confusion about whether *Spinoza* is the last of the medievals or the first of the moderns such as we find in Wolfson, what begins to emerge is confusion about whether *Maimonides* is not in some important sense modern. This notion gained credence because Pines began to insist on Maimonides's novelty, at least vis-à-vis Aristotle. In other words, contrary to Wolfson, it is Maimonides rather than Spinoza who exemplifies the break with the past—if not exactly Wolfson's Philonic past. For example, in his article "Truth and Falseness Versus Good and Evil" on *Guide* 1.2 and its possible sources, Pines argued that Maimonides represents a break from Aristotelianism, which may have some precursors in the Greek commentary tradition but which is

16. Consider for example the subtitle of the *Philo* book (*Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*) and the title of the collection of his essays (*Religious Philosophy*).

17. Wolfson, *Religious Philosophy*, i.

18. Joshua Parens, "Escaping the Scholastic Paradigm," a paper presented at a conference titled "The Modern Invention of the Medieval" at the Institute of Jewish Thought and Heritage at SUNY Buffalo, June 6–8, 2010.

in many ways unprecedented.¹⁹ When this is combined with the observation that Spinoza establishes a divide between intellect and imagination based on the split between truth and falsehood versus good and evil, as Pines observes in this article, then one is quite close to insinuating that Maimonides represents a break with ancient thought that paved the way in decisive respects for Spinoza. Pines's most widely known declaration that Maimonides was a protomodern of some sort came in his 1979 "Limitations" article.²⁰ In a manner that is somewhat at odds with Pines's stress elsewhere on Maimonides's affinities with Spinoza, in "Limitations" he argues that Maimonides is a proto-Kantian about the limits of metaphysical knowledge. This claim about Maimonides's affinities with Kant gave rise to a great outpouring of scholarship about whether Maimonides (or Alfarabi or Ibn Bajja) believes that any kind of metaphysical knowledge is attainable.²¹

Warren Zev Harvey, perhaps Pines's most prominent student, was far less enamored of the Kantian thread in Pines's scholarship.²² Instead, he focused on the Spinoza thread and penned one article in English and one in Hebrew, which were so influential that the one written in Hebrew was eventually translated into English, in which he outlined what he considered the profound similarities between Maimonides and Spinoza.²³ Among the most striking claims about similarity that Harvey makes is that Spinoza's understanding of God is very close to Maimonides's save the addition of the attribute of extension. In explaining this claim, Harvey appeals explicitly

19. Pines, "Truth and Falsehood versus Good and Evil."

20. Pines, "Limitations of Human Knowledge."

21. Alexander Altmann, "Maimonides on the Intellect and the Scope of Metaphysics," in *Von der mittelalterlichen zur modernen Aufklärung: Texts and Studies in Early Modern Judaism* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1987), 2: 60–129; Herbert Davidson, "Maimonides on Metaphysical Knowledge," in *Maimonidean Studies*, vol. 3, ed. Arthur Hyman (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1992–93), 49–103; Alfred Ivry, "The Logical and Scientific Premises of Maimonides' Thought," in *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism*, ed. Alfred Ivry et al. (Amsterdam: Harwood, 1998), 63–97; Barry Kogan, "What Can We Know and When Can We Know It?" in *Moses Maimonides and His Time*, ed. E. Ormsby (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1989), 121–37; Kenneth Seeskin, *Searching for a Distant God: The Legacy of Maimonides* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Josef Stern, "Maimonides on Language and the Science of Language," in *Maimonides and the Sciences*, ed. R. S. Cohen and H. Levine (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000), 173–226; "Maimonides' Demonstrations: Principles and Practice," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 10 (2001): 47–84.

22. Harvey, "Political Philosophy and Halakhah in Maimonides," in *Jewish Intellectual History in the Middle Ages*, BINA series, ed. Joseph Dan (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 3: 47–64, esp. 58–59 and 48 n. 5; first published in Hebrew in *Iyyun* 29 (1980): 198–212.

23. "Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean"; "Maimonides and Spinoza on the Knowledge of Good and Evil" [in Hebrew], *Iyyun* 28 (1979): 167–85; trans. Yoel Lerner, in *Studies in Jewish Thought*, ed. Joseph Dan (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1989), 131–46.

to Pines but does not seem at the moment to be aware of the influence of Wolfson's claim that Spinoza extends Maimonides's line of argument with greater consistency than Maimonides himself.²⁴ After citing *Guide* 1.68's recapitulation of the Aristotelian claim that God is knower, known, and activity of knowledge, Harvey cites *Ethics* 2p7s and concludes that according to Spinoza, "Maimonides saw the truth 'as if through a cloud,' but did not pursue the logic of his own thesis. Had he done so, he would have realized that if extended space is intellectually cognized by God, then God—being the intellectually cognized Object—*must* be extended!" After acknowledging that Maimonides insisted in all of his writings on divine incorporeality, Harvey goes on to argue in explanation of Spinoza's putatively greater consistency.

Spinoza certainly has Maimonides in mind when he speaks about those who have in some way "contemplated the divine nature" but deny that God is a body. He complains that "they remove altogether from the divine nature . . . corporeal or extended substance, and state that it was created by God." Then he [Spinoza] exclaims with monotheistic indignation worthy of Maimonides: "By what divine *potentia* it could have been created they are altogether ignorant, so that it is clear that they do not understand what they themselves say" (*E* 1p15s). Spinoza's exclamation must be understood against the backdrop of another Maimonidean teaching: that in God "there is absolutely no *potentia*" (*Guide* 1.68). Spinoza must thus be understood as addressing Maimonides as follows: You do not understand what you are saying, for if you say that there is absolutely no *potentia* in God, how can you say that he created body and extension? Spinoza argues, in effect, that what Maimonides has said about intellect must—according to Maimonides' own monotheistic premises!—be true about *everything* [namely, that God is everything that He knows, including matter].²⁵

In the next paragraph, as if to drive home his point that Spinoza is under the distinctive influence of Maimonides, Harvey argues the following: Spinoza presses his case that God is body by mustering arguments for the view that body need not be finite, views he borrowed from Hasdai Crescas—yet,

24. Indeed, when Harvey discusses Wolfson, it is primarily to take him (along with Strauss) to task for failing to single out sufficiently the depth of Maimonides's "distinctive . . . influence" on Spinoza. See "Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean," 151–53. A much more recent article by Harvey may suggest that he has become more sympathetic to Pines's Kantian thread; see "Maimonides' Critical Epistemology and *Guide* 2:24," *Aleph* 8 (2008): 213–35.

25. "Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean," 166.

according to Harvey, Crescas, not Spinoza, was Maimonides's true opponent. Spinoza merely sought to "carry the Maimonidean position to its proper conclusion."²⁶

My point here is that what Harvey and Wolfson portray as Spinoza's greater logical consistency has little or nothing to do with consistency. Rather, Spinoza employs the rhetoric of clarity and distinctness (and by implication "consistency") to discredit his medieval opponents. Unfortunately, at least Wolfson seems to have been won over by this rhetoric to such an extent that he accepts the view that Maimonides is a less consistent, merely Philonic philosopher. Taking the rhetoric of both Maimonides and Spinoza seriously, I hope to show that Spinoza is not as consistent as Wolfson and Harvey would have us believe, nor is Maimonides as inconsistent as Wolfson would have us believe. Rather, Spinoza deploys the rhetoric of logical consistency and Maimonides openly embraces the use of contradiction—which is not quite the same as saying that he tried, as Wolfson claims, to "rais[e] the superstructure of a traditional religious system upon a purely scientific conception of God."

The most widely known and generally misleading manifestation of Spinoza's rhetoric of consistency is his argument in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*: on the one hand, Maimonides foists an Aristotelian reading of scripture upon the Torah; on the other hand, he (Spinoza) interprets the Torah on its own terms. I, like others,²⁷ have attempted to show elsewhere that by subtly insinuating an all-too-modern standard of clarity and distinctness into his own interpretations of scripture, Spinoza distorts the original. In contrast, Maimonides, rather than pawning the Torah off as Aristotle, consistently draws the reader's attention to divergences between Aristotle and scripture. The present case, God's attribute of extension, is not so different from that far more widely known hermeneutic claim about scripture.

I return to "the present case." According to Harvey, Spinoza uses two (or three) Maimonidean premises, namely, (1) God is knower, known, and activity of knowledge;²⁸ (somewhat tacitly and as part of a *reductio ad absurdum* argument, the un-Spinozist premise, [2] God creates the world);²⁹

26. Ibid., 164–66.

27. See Martin Yaffe's interpretive essay to his translation of *Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise* (Newburyport, MA: Focus, 2004), 267–347 (hereafter *TTP*).

28. Harvey acknowledges the Aristotelian provenance of this claim. See "Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean," 164 n. 74, citing *Meta.* 1072b19–23 and 1075a10–11 and *De anima* 431a1–2 and b17–19; and Pines's translator's introduction to his translation of the *Guide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. xcvi.

29. "Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean," 166, top.

and (3) God is wholly lacking in potency,³⁰ to yield the conclusion that even for Maimonides it should be the case that (4) God Himself must be, or include as one of His attributes, matter. Now of the three premises from which Spinoza draws this conclusion, the first and third are obviously Aristotelian premises and the second is biblical. For Aristotle, God as pure actuality could know things only as form—consequently, God cannot know matter and thus cannot “be” it. For the moment, let us set aside Aristotle and consider Spinoza’s implied objection to the role of creation in Maimonides’ account, that is, that the very notion of creation implies that God is not purely actual. Maimonides would merely acknowledge that he raises the same problem himself.³¹ Harvey seems to be implying that Spinoza holds that Maimonides’s Aristotelian claim about the coincidence of knower and known object contradicts Maimonides’s claim (unbeknownst to Maimonides?) that God creates the world and that a more consistent view of the coincidence of knower and known entails that matter is one of God’s attributes—and that Spinoza discovered that more consistent view of God. (The inconsistency between premise 2 and the others is highly reminiscent of Wolfson’s claim that Maimonides raises traditional religion on scientific grounds.) What Harvey does not bring out is that Spinoza’s own modified version of the Aristotelian coincidence of knower and known presupposes the rejection of the Aristotelian distinction between potency and actuality (cf. *E* 1p34 and 2p13s–14). It is that very distinction between potency (that is, matter) and actuality (that is, form) that underwrites Aristotle’s implied claim that God (as pure rational actuality) could not know matter. Spinoza’s rejection of the Aristotelian conception of actuality is not a more logically consistent approach than Maimonides’s. Rather, Spinoza conceals the depth of his break from premodern thought by dressing up his thought in premodern parlance—appealing to well-worn tropes such as thinker = object = activity of thinking, as if he remained somehow premodern. In reality he fills these old vessels with very new wine. (For evidence that filling premodern philosophical terms with radically new meaning was a key way of making modern novelties more acceptable, see, for example, Francis Bacon, *Advancement of Learning* 2.7.2 and *New Organon* 2.2.)

Here, I turn from this rather extreme case of Harvey’s analysis of Spinoza’s arguments for extending God’s attributes to include extension to a broader and more synoptic look at Wolfson, Pines, and Harvey: (1) Wolfson

30. Here, Harvey cites only the Maimonidean source. See *ibid.*, 166 n. 80. Cf. Aristotle, *Meta.* 1050b18–20, 1071b13–23.

31. *Guide* 2.14, esp. pp. 287–88 of Pines trans.

overstates Maimonides's inconsistency by (a) conflating premodern philosophy with a "scientific conception of God" and (b) failing to attend to the rhetorical role of contradiction in Maimonides's *Guide*—a complex cross between defense of Judaism and opening up a space for philosophy within the Jewish fold. (2) Pines and Harvey both overstate the novelty of some of Maimonides's positions (e.g., on true vs. good and intellect vs. imagination) because they adopt overly traditional, even Scholastic, interpretations of Aristotle. What they take to be a break from Aristotle is less a break from the original than a deviation from the received (mainly Scholastic) interpretations of Aristotle. In effect, they both failed to learn from Strauss just how unlike traditional readings of Aristotle are the readings of Alfarabi and Maimonides.³² (3) Pines and Harvey overstate Spinoza's consistency by failing to flag (a) the ways in which Spinoza distorts Maimonides to display his [Spinoza's] putative consistency and (b) the ways in which Spinoza distorts the Bible to suit his own purposes. And they fail at both (a) and (b) by (c) inattentiveness to Spinoza's subtle shifting of the meaning of terms.

Regarding 1a: Just how deep is Wolfson's confusion of premodern views of God and modern "scientific conception[s]" is evident in his efforts to bring out the Aristotelian provenance of many of Spinoza's arguments. As in the example from Harvey above, it is true that Spinoza will use long-standing tropes such as, in the case of God, thinker = object = activity of thinking. Yet he so transforms the meaning of knowledge that God must know not only form but also matter. This transformation in the meaning of knowledge is matched by a transformation in the object of knowledge, a transformation that I can merely adumbrate here as laws of nature as opposed to premodern forms.³³ Returning to the knower, God: In the premodern scheme He is the first cause; in the modern, God is a term that serves to gloss laws of nature—such laws, as Richard Kennington has shown so convincingly, are certainly not first causes and, in the most precise sense of the term, not even properly causes.³⁴ In spite of his declarations that Spinoza is

32. This may help explain why Harvey lumps Strauss together with Wolfson as someone who overstates the homogeneity of premodern philosophy ("Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean," 153–54). True, Strauss insists on a relatively strong break between premodern and modern, which Harvey opposes (153). More importantly, however, Strauss opposes the Wolfsonian view that medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophy is Philonic—though he might acknowledge as much about the main currents of medieval Christian philosophy. According to Strauss, the medieval Jewish and Islamic traditions reveal a side of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy lost to the modern world through its tutelage to Scholasticism.

33. See chap. 3 below.

34. See Kennington, *On Modern Origins*, 27.

the first true modern in *Religious Philosophy*,³⁵ Wolfson seems, like Harvey, to ignore the innumerable consequences of such a fundamental distinction between premodern and modern views of God,³⁶ by taking Spinoza's use of quasi-Aristotelian, even Scholastic, turns of phrase at face value.

Regarding 1b, the complex rhetorical role of contradiction in Maimonides, Wolfson surely misconstrues Maimonides when he claims that Maimonides tries to raise traditional religion on a contradictory scientific ground. Although much of the premodern tradition, especially the premodern Christian tradition, could be accused of blending elements of classical philosophy with monotheism—what Wolfson refers to as Philonic philosophy—Maimonides can hardly be accused of this. After all, what else accounts for the sense of readers over hundreds of years that Maimonides's *Guide* seems almost as much a source of perplexity as a guide out of it? The *Guide* does not provide the kind of harmonization or synthesis that most readers hope for. Although it cannot be denied that Maimonides juxtaposes inconsistent Aristotelian and biblical arguments or claims throughout the *Guide*, it is dubious to insinuate that the former serves as the ground of the latter.

Regarding 2: Pines and Harvey ascribe to Maimonides a radical break from the past on themes such as true vs. good, intellect vs. imagination, and opposition to teleology. I have already published on the first two pairs of oppositions (and chapter 6 below is one of those publications).³⁷ Here, I will consider briefly teleology, the theme of chapter 5. Maimonides's resistance to "ultimate finality" (the hierarchical ordering of all species) in *Guide* 3.13 is misinterpreted as a break from Aristotle, which is then purportedly taken up by Spinoza.³⁸ Maimonides is not as alone in the medieval tradition as Harvey insists in his efforts not to overstate teleology. Indeed, Maimonides merely takes a page out of Alfarabi's playbook. Although Alfarabi is renowned for offering rhapsodic descriptions of the hierarchy of beings that

35. See note 15 above.

36. Cf. note 32 above. Harvey views Strauss's distinction between premodern and modern as akin to Wolfson's account of Philonic philosophy, which seems to me to be highly misleading. As part of the effort to highlight Maimonides's novelty, Harvey, like Pines, insinuates that Maimonides evades distinctions between premodern and modern.

37. "Leaving the Garden: Maimonides and Spinoza on the Imagination and Practical Intellect Revisited," *Philosophy and Theology* 18, no. 2 (2006): 219–246 appears below in slightly modified form as chap. 6, "Prudence vs. Imagination." The other publication relating to the first two pairs of oppositions is "Prudence, Imagination, and Determination of Law in Alfarabi and Maimonides," in *Enlightening Revolutions: Essays in Honor of Ralph Lerner*, ed. Svetozar Minkov and Stéphane Douard (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 31–55.

38. See Pines, "Truth and Falsehood versus Good and Evil," 114 n. 53 and Harvey, "Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean," 164.

would make Lovejoy blush, closer reading reveals in a Farabian work that Maimonides knew well and praised highly (*The Principles of Beings* or the *Political Regime*) that the hierarchical order of things is not what it appears to be at first: two key things reveal the breakdown in that order, namely, vipers and the so-called weeds, among whom the philosophers can be counted. In effect, the lower often not only does not serve the higher but also harms the higher—contrary to the traditional views of “ultimate finality” that Maimonides rejects in Aristotle’s name in *Guide* 3.13.³⁹

Regarding 3a and 3c: I believe that I have already displayed Harvey’s inattention to or unwillingness to bring out Spinoza’s intentional distortions of Maimonides and subtle transformations of key Aristotelian/Maimonidean terms and tropes. Here, I bring out a striking confirmation that Pines was insensitive to Spinoza’s intentional distortion of Maimonides. Near the beginning of Pines’s article “Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Maimonides and Kant,” he says, “Spinoza seems to have been blind to the political obligations and apprehensions motivating the great philosophical tradition of coded writing; he seems also, in spite of Maimonides’ explicit statements, to have been unaware of the fact that the *Guide* is, in point of fact, a hermetic book and that many of its statements cannot be taken at their face value.”⁴⁰ It is precisely by reading Maimonides literally or naively that Spinoza often makes Maimonides appear “inconsistent”—as we have seen in the case of God’s attribute of extension. Could Spinoza be so Machiavellian as to interpret Maimonides literally in his own writings while understanding perfectly well how he ought to be read? Although Pines made the just quoted claim in 1968, after publishing his translation of the *Guide* in 1963 at least to some extent in collaboration with Leo Strauss, and even dedicates the article to Strauss; Pines appears to be oblivious that, according to Strauss, Spinoza as himself a practitioner of coded writing must be aware of its presence in others—indeed, must have learned how to practice it from those very others whose writings he so artfully distorts.⁴¹

39. Cf. the moment in the Aristotelian corpus when Aristotle comes closest to embracing “ultimate finality” in *Politics* 1.8 and the various claims made by Pines about medieval Islamic and Jewish awareness of the *Politics* (or lack thereof) in “Aristotle’s *Politics* in Arabic Philosophy,” *Israel Oriental Studies* 5 (1975): 150–60.

40. Shlomo Pines, “Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Maimonides and Kant,” in *Further Studies in Philosophy*, ed. Ora Segal, *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, vol. 20, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1968), 3–54; reprinted in *Collected Works of Shlomo Pines*, ed. W. Z. Harvey and Moshe Idel (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997), 5: 660–711, esp. 662.

41. See Leo Strauss, “Persecution and the Art of Writing” and “How to Study Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise*,” in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1952; rpt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 22–37 and 142–201, esp. 33–35 and 181–89.

Regarding 3b, Spinoza's distortion of biblical terms: The most egregious case is his distortion of the meaning of God. As Spinoza conceives Him, God would violate His own nature if He allowed for miracles (*TTP*, Yaffe trans., 6.1.33). It almost goes without saying that Spinoza knows that his God is not the God of the Bible. Spinoza, then, is not more consistent than Maimonides; rather, above all in his *Ethics*, the main focus of Wolfson and Harvey, Spinoza sings the siren song of consistency and subtly compels the assent of his theologically inclined readers to unprecedented views on God, by wrapping those views up in familiar terminology and definitions.⁴² In contrast, Maimonides proffers novel views of God (novel at least to his intended audience) while highlighting for all but the laziest or most headstrong among his admittedly high-end target audience just how inconsistent are those views with the biblical inheritance.

In this introduction, I have argued that Harry A. Wolfson, Shlomo Pines, and Warren Zev Harvey too readily assimilate Maimonides to Spinoza and vice versa. Whatever other benefits these scholars have provided us, and those are many, I believe that at least in this respect they have impeded rather than increased our access to Maimonides and Spinoza. When Spinoza insinuates that he is providing a more consistent version of Maimonides, he is almost uniformly distorting the Maimonidean original to score his own points. Although Spinoza learned from Maimonides more than his renowned attacks in the *Theologico-Political Treatise* imply, it is misleading to claim that an accurate portrayal of Spinoza renders him a Maimonidean. I intend over the course of this book to offer a more accurate portrayal.

Because this book grew out of an effort to respond to Harvey's portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean, it may help for me to list the elements of Harvey's portrait before sketching the outline of my book: (1) for both thinkers, intellect : imagination :: true vs. false : good vs. evil, which means that good and evil are primarily the object of our imagination,⁴³ (2) both thinkers view intellectual perfection as our highest end,⁴⁴ (3) both thinkers oppose anthropocentrism and teleology,⁴⁵ (4) Spinoza's God = Maimonides's God + extension,⁴⁶

42. That Spinoza is in the business of compelling assent is apparent if one compares the geometrical, that is to say, the synthetic organization of the *Ethics* with Meyer's preface to Spinoza's *Descartes's "Principles of Philosophy"* and Descartes's Replies to the Second Objections to the *Meditations*. See chap. 3 and the appendix, below.

43. Harvey, "Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean," 155–61.

44. *Ibid.*, 161–62.

45. *Ibid.*, 162–64.

46. *Ibid.* 164–66.

(5) Spinoza and Maimonides, because of their views on intellect vs. imagination, are equally “inequalitarian.”⁴⁷

I have responded to Harvey’s claim 1 in two previously published articles,⁴⁸ one of which is included as the final chapter of this book. I touch on point 2 throughout the book. Chapter 5 on teleology responds to 3—on the matter of both teleology and anthropocentrism. I have already addressed point 4 briefly in this introduction, and I continue to touch on it throughout the book in my various discussions of Maimonides’s stress on divine incorporeality and especially in its relation to forms in chapter 3. I address 5 the issue of “inequalitarianism” or inegalitarianism in chapter 2—though I approach it from a different angle than Harvey’s claim 1.

It almost goes without saying that I would not have expended as much time and effort addressing Harvey’s claims if I did not respect him and think his arguments are powerful.

This book is divided into six chapters and an appendix, as well as an epilogue. Chapter 1 begins with the most basic contrast between Maimonides’s and Spinoza’s views on human nature: Should all passions be traced to a single source (Spinoza) or are they irreducible to fewer than two sources (Maimonides)? The discovery of a single source for the passions, if true, would fit together neatly with Spinoza’s effort to unify the parts of philosophy or science—which recurs as a theme later in the book in chapters 3 and 4. This unification is part and parcel of Spinoza’s determinism about human nature. In contrast, Maimonides’s view preserves the distinctiveness of a key principle of human nature, choice. Having described the sources of the passions in chapter 1, in chapter 2 we turn to the most obvious divergence between Spinoza and Maimonides—evidenced by Spinoza’s open attack on Maimonides in the *Theologico-Political Treatise* for promoting the veneration of religious authorities such as himself. (I take the opportunity provided by this point of convergence between the *Ethics* and the *TTP* as the occasion to explain my understanding of the relation between these two works.) Veneration is a passion (or affect) rooted in wonder, which may be the one passion most uniformly opposed by early modern philosophers in general and Spinoza in particular. The opposition to this passion flows directly from the rejection of premodern notions about desire and love as they fit into the economy of the philosophic way of life, as discussed in chapter 1. Although Spinoza maintains the philosophic elitism of

47. *Ibid.*, 167–69.

48. See note 37, above.

premodern thinkers, his attack on veneration and his promotion of liberal democracy and religious toleration undercut the long-term maintenance of premodern views of inequality. Chapter 3 connects Maimonides's dual root of the passions to his views on form, especially as those views manifest themselves in his inculcation of a belief in divine incorporeality among all Jews. Love or desire must be distinguished from spiritedness as long as love or desire of things incorporeal remains a primary, irreducible passion. Spinoza's reduction of all passions to the singular root, *conatus*, evinces his rejection of the premodern notion that desire or love is somehow primary. His determination to add corporeality as a divine attribute presupposes his decidedly modern view of "laws of nature." Such laws are the replacement for premodern form. Along with Bacon and Descartes, Spinoza rejects forms, despite his ongoing use of the word "essence" throughout the *Ethics*. Chapter 4 takes up one of Spinoza's most widely decried innovations: his affirmation of determinism. Ultimately, the weakening of premodern notions of freedom aids religious tolerance. Well aware of the explosive nature of his teaching on determinism, Spinoza is not beneath judiciously mixing talk of political freedom in the *Theologico-Political Treatise* and philosophic freedom in the *Ethics*. (This may be one of the most obvious indicators that Spinoza writes esoterically—though many commentators continue to deny that he does so.) Although Harvey never goes so far as to insinuate that *Maimonides* embraces a form of determinism, Pines has at least entertained the possibility.⁴⁹ In earlier chapters, especially chapter 3, I pave the way for showing the connection between, on the one hand, Maimonides's premodern understanding of forms in particular and causality in general and, on the other, his views on choice. In chapter 4, along with anticipating the connection between final causality or teleology and freedom in chapter 5—a connection often denied because causality is often confused with necessity⁵⁰—I describe three subtle ways in which Maimonides makes his argument for freedom: his critiques of astral determinism, the views of Abu Bakr al-Razi, and Ash'arite views on providence. In effect, Maimonides uses these non-Jewish sources of fatalism to steer Judaism clear of its own proclivities toward it. Chapter 5 concerns teleology and its counterpart an imagined ideal. I argue that Maimonides's views on natural teleology are

49. "Excursus: Notes on Maimonides' Views concerning Human Will," in *Studies in Philosophy*, ed. Samuel Hugo Berman, *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, vol. 6 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1960), 195–98.

50. For the distinction between causality and necessity, see Richard Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause and Blame: Perspectives on Aristotle's Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980; rpt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), chap. 2.

not nearly as novel as Harvey claims—finding evidence for the same views in Alfarabi, whose books Maimonides commends highly. Although these views are not widely shared in the Scholastic appropriation of Aristotle, they may very well be a more accurate understanding of Aristotle. They may also indicate ways in which Aristotle may be read more subtly and usefully for modern purposes. Regarding Spinoza, I take up the hotly contested question whether he allows for human teleology, as opposed to divine teleology, which he obviously rejects. I argue that Spinoza is thoroughly consistent in his rejection of all teleology. The teleological conditionals, whose status in the *Ethics* is widely debated, are not an expression of his most considered philosophic views but a concession to everyday speech, which conforms more to the way we imagine we think than the way we really think, according to Spinoza.⁵¹ Chapter 6 concludes with the issue that served as the basis for many of Pines's and Harvey's claims for Maimonidean novelty, the role of the imagination. Maimonides maintains an important role for prudence in the discovery of good and evil, a role that Spinoza no longer has room for—except when, as with his teleological conditionals, he makes concessions to everyday speech or the imaginings of the multitude.

51. This gap between everyday speech and an accurate understanding of how we really think and feel should be compared with contemporary descendants such as twentieth-century attacks on so-called folk psychology. See the early salvos in the eliminative materialist critiques of folk psychology by Richard Rorty ("Mind-Body Identity, Privacy, and Categories," *Review of Metaphysics* 19, no. 1 [1965]: 24–54) and Paul M. Churchland ("Eliminative Materialism and Propositional Attitudes," *Journal of Philosophy* 78 [1981]: 67–90), which can both be found in *Materialism and the Mind-Body Problem*, ed. David M. Rosenthal (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000).