

HONORING THE DIVINE AS VIRTUE AND PRACTICE IN MAIMONIDES

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Abstract

Honoring the divine is central to Maimonides' ethical and religious phenomenology. It connotes the recognition of radical divine incommensurability and points to the hard limits of human ability to know God. Yet it also signals the importance of philosophical speculation within those limits, indicating the intellectual and ethical *telos* of human life. For Maimonides, to honor or show *kavod* to God is closely related to the meaning of the divine glory (also known as *kavod*) that Moses demands to see in Exodus 33. Moses' demand to see the *kavod* is usually interpreted as a quest for some visible sign of God's presence or, at least, for a created light whose existence could testify to the authenticity of Moses' prophecy. Maimonides is alone among early interpreters in treating Exodus 33 as a parable of the philosophical quest to apprehend divine uniqueness, which leads first to negative theology and then to *imitatio Dei*. This article argues that the theme of divine *kavod* links Maimonides' philosophical, literary, and even medical concerns with his practical religious teaching, and connects the *Guide of the Perplexed* with his other legal and interpretive works. Maimonides' consistent fascination with Exodus 33 helps to organize his reflections on human perfection, ethics, and the relationship between idolatry and everyday religious language, distinguishing him from dominant trends in both Judaeo-Arabic and later kabbalistic thought.

It is the honor of God to conceal a matter, and
the honor of a king to search a matter out.¹

The call to honor the divine is the kind of ethical and theological imperative that an entire religious community can affirm, even when its members hold vastly different or even contradictory conceptions of what that imperative entails. Moses Maimonides (1135–1204)

¹ Proverbs 25:2. This verse is cited by R. Bahya ben Asher as an effective epigraph to his long and unattributed citation of Maimonides' views on divine *kavod*. "The honor [*kavod*] of God is to conceal a matter" refers to the knowledge of God's true essence according to the view cited by R. Bahya, while "the honor of kings" refers to the knowledge of God through attributes of divine action. See R. Bahya ben Asher, *Bi'ur 'al ha-Torah* to Exodus 33:13, ed. R. Ḥayyim Dov Chavel (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1994), vol. 2, 341–43.

engendered considerable controversy in medieval and later Jewish thought by suggesting that our way of honoring the divine—in Hebrew, showing *kavod*—is closely related to a radical reading of Exodus 33, in which the biblical Moses demands to see God’s glory or honor—also *kavod*—and is rebuffed. For Maimonides, this biblical episode and its rabbinic elaboration constitute the core of a model for divine service and philosophical reflection to which he returns repeatedly throughout his enormous written corpus. Indeed, my argument in this paper is that divine honor and its implications for human perfection are among the organizing theme of Maimonides’ teaching, and that this helps to bind some of his major philosophical, legal and biblical-interpretive concerns into a single moral and analytic framework. The way we understand divine *kavod* and seek to honor the divine has ethical, philosophical and even medical implications that Maimonides dedicated himself to demonstrating throughout the *Guide of the Perplexed* and elsewhere. His unique understanding of Exodus 33 as a parable of speculation at the very limits of human philosophical attainment serves as the literary fulcrum of a wide-ranging discourse about the nature of ethical and intellectual perfection and the limitations of human language. Honoring the divine correctly is fundamental, in Maimonides’ oeuvre, to the distinction between idolatry and true divine service.

I. *Pathologies of Divine Honor*

For Maimonides, idolatry is rooted in the pathology of misplaced divine honor. The word *kavod*, which may signify honor, glory, or substantiality and distinctiveness, depending on context, appears no less than six times in the first paragraph of his “Laws Concerning Idolatry and Idolaters,” or *Hilkhot Avodat ha-Kohavim*:

In the days of Enosh, the people fell into gross error, and the counsel of the wise men of the generation became foolish. Enosh himself was among those who erred. Their error was as follows: “Since God,” they said, “created those stars and spheres to guide the world, set them on high and allotted to them honor [*kavod*], and since they are ministers who minister before Him, they deserve to be praised and glorified, and honor should be rendered them; and it is the will of God, blessed be He, that men should aggrandize and honor those whom He has aggrandized and honored, just as a king desires that honor be shown to the officers who stand before him, and thus honor is shown to the

king.” When this idea arose in their minds, they began to erect temples to the stars, offered up sacrifices to them, praised and glorified them in speech and prostrated themselves before them—their purpose, according to their perverse notions, being to obtain the Creator’s favor. This was the root of idolatry.²

It is extraordinary that an entire chapter of Maimonides’ legal code, or *Mishneh Torah*, is devoted to narrative exposition.³ Maimonides traces human religious history from primeval monotheism through its decline into “gross error” (i.e., misplaced *kavod*) and then into full scale idolatry, only to be recuperated in fits and starts by the “pillar of the world Abraham” and his descendants. What remains unclear, however, is the precise nature of the “error” that Maimonides attributes to Enosh and his contemporaries.

This is because hidden within Maimonides’ prosaic and unexceptional language in this chapter is the radical core of his whole philosophical project, laid out most clearly in the first part of the *Guide*, which is that no analogy of any kind can be admitted between God and any element of the phenomenal world. Maimonides’ strategy in passages like this one is to write in a way that appears to conform with the commonplace assumptions of traditional religious language, so that only closer investigation reveals a more radical agenda. In this case, the reader who is not attuned to Maimonides’ philosophical ethic may well presume that Maimonides is making the

² *‘Avodat ha-Kokhavim* 1:1. I have relied with some changes upon the translation of Isidore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader* (New York: Behrman, 1972), 71–72. I have, for example, translated *kavod* as “honor” in every instance, in order to make the repetitive quality of the original Hebrew more apparent. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Hebrew in this article are my own. Notes on the original Arabic, where not otherwise credited, were made with the help of my able graduate student and research assistant Nathan Hofer, whose comments on this work at all stages have proven invaluable. Thanks also to research assistants Michael Ausubel and Daniel Goldstein, and to two anonymous reviewers at *JJTP*, for their insightful contributions.

³ On narrative and philosophical concerns in the *Mishneh Torah*, see Isadore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 356–507; *idem*. “Some Non-Halakhic Aspects of the *Mishneh Torah*,” In ed. Isidore Twersky, *Studies in Jewish Law and Philosophy* (New York: Ktav Publishing, 1982), 52–75; Warren Zev Harvey, “The *Mishneh Torah* as a Key to the Secrets of the *Guide*,” In eds. Ezra Fleischer et al, *Me’ah She’arim: Studies in Medieval Jewish Spiritual Life in Memory of Isidore Twersky* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), 11–28. This view should be contrasted with that of R. Menaḥem Schneersohn, whose view (influential in the contemporary non-academic world) is that every apparently narrative or philosophic passage in the *Mishneh Torah* bears only legal significance. See for instance *Kelalei ha-Rambam* (New York: Kehot Publications, 1991), 39–40.

commonplace assertion that worship belongs to God alone—and this is, in fact, how most traditional commentators have read him, even though few have succeeded in adducing a precise biblical or rabbinic source for this formulation. An exception that proves the rule is R. Joseph Rosen of Dvinsk (1858–1936), who argues that this passage draws upon a Talmudic discussion in which Uriah the Hittite of II Samuel is portrayed as a rebel against King David because he says, “My master Joab [the Israelite general] and Your Majesty’s troops are camped in the open.”⁴ According to Rashi’s eleventh-century reading of this Talmudic text, Uriah’s offense was to ascribe honor to David’s servant Joab—“my master Joab”—in David’s presence. R. Rosen reasons by analogy that such displays of divine honor directed toward created beings like the stars should also be culpable in Maimonides’ view.⁵

Yet note the subtle way in which Maimonides’ words actually undercut this reading: where R. Rosen depends upon the common-sense religious-language analogy between the divine and human monarchs, Maimonides takes pains to argue that the analogy itself is faulty. This was in fact the “gross error” committed by Enosh and his contemporaries, who thought that “men should aggrandize and honor those whom [God] has aggrandized and honored, *just as a [human] king desires that honor be shown to the officers who stand before him.*” Human kings like David may well desire that honor be shown to their servants, according to Maimonides, but idolatry begins when one takes too seriously the analogy between the authority of God and that of human rulers.⁶ We might suppose that this relates to the

⁴ R. Joseph Rosen of Dvinsk, *Zafnat Pa’aneah* (Jerusalem, 1979), 4a. The Talmudic citation is from *Qiddushin* 43a, quoting II Samuel 11:11.

⁵ The *Tosafists*, however, dispute Rashi’s reading, arguing that Uriah could only have been called a rebel on the basis of some real disobedience to the king. Rabbi Rosen’s older contemporary, R. Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, likewise argues (*Hiddushei ha-Neziv mi-Volozhin*, [Jerusalem, 1957]) that Uriah could not have been considered a “true rebel” in the Talmudic sense.

⁶ For a related reading, see Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 42–45. One nineteenth-century author who seems to have grasped Maimonides’ rejection of analogy was R. Gershon Henokh of Radzin (1839–1891), who worked to explicate the meaning of divine *kavod* for religious praxis. R. Gershon Henokh was a mystic who wanted to rehabilitate the analogy between divine and human kings, but who recognized Maimonides’ rejection of this approach and was forced to posit a distinction between our unredeemed world, in which such analogies are dangerous, and a future reality in which the manifest power of God would render it safe to honor God’s servants without fear of idolatrous substitution. See his marginal notes, or

insistent critique of *qiyās* (Heb. *heqesh*), or reasoning by analogy, found in Ha-Levi's *Kuzari*, but Ha-Levi is mostly concerned with the substitution of reason for divine revelation in determining forms of worship or practical details of the commandments.⁷ These issues are certainly relevant to Maimonides' warning about idolatry as a product of failed or misapplied reason, but mostly Maimonides wants to signal his opposition to a particular kind of theological presumption that is frequently suggested by traditional religious language, including that of Scripture. Idolatry begins not with gross anthropomorphism, suggests Maimonides, but rather with a fundamentally flawed conception of divine honor in everyday religious life.⁸

gilyonot, to his grandfather's *Mei ha-Shiloah*, vol. I *parashat Vayikra* (Bnei-Brak, 1995), 103. Maimonides himself would surely have rejected this solution, inasmuch as he rejects the sharp distinction between redeemed and unredeemed history. Divine *kavod* was frequently understood by Hasidic writers as an expression of radical divine immanence, which put them in tension with Maimonides even when they used Maimonidean terminology and ideas. Writers who wrestle explicitly with Maimonides on this matter include R. Menaḥem Mendl Schneersohn (*Zemah Zedek*) of Lubavitch, *Sefer ha-Haqqarah*, (New York: Kehot, 2003); R. Zadok Ha-Cohen of Lublin, *Sefer ha-Zikhronot*, and R. Gershon Henokh's already-mentioned *Hakdamah le-Vet Ya'akov* (Bnei-Brak, 1996), 17–29. On the importance of Maimonides to these mystical thinkers, see Shaul Magid, *Hasidism on the Margin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003); Alan Brill, *Thinking God* (New York: Ktav Press, 2000); and Don Seeman, "Martyrdom, Emotion and the Work of Ritual in R. Mordecai Leiner of Izbica's *Mei Ha-Shiloah*," *AJS Review* 27:2 (2003): 253–80.

⁷ *Heqesh* is Ibn Tibbon's translation of the Arabic *qiyās*. Saadyah and Ha-Levi both critique the Karaite interpretation of divine law without benefit of rabbinic tradition, but Ha-Levi extends this critique to other spheres in which the authority of revelation could also be said to be threatened, including the systematic innovation of Sufi-like pietistic practices that were designed to cultivate religious experience, as well as the philosophers' attempts to establish theological truths independent of Scripture. All of these can be classified as *qiyās* or *heqesh* according to Ha-Levi because they utilize reason to supplant the traditional authority of divine revelation. See Diana Lobel, *Between Mysticism and Philosophy: Sufi Language of Religious Experience in Judah Ha-Levi's Kuzari* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 58–60, 66–87. Like Maimonides, Ha-Levi (*Kuzari* 4:3) identifies the origin of idolatry in misplaced logical proofs about God, but Ha-Levi seems to blame the reliance upon logical proofs per se, rather than the misleading analogies with created beings that are the focus of Maimonides' critique.

⁸ I believe that this passage may be one of the sources of an important twentieth century mystic's complaint that "the honor of heaven which is embodied tends toward idolatry and debases the dignity of human beings and all creatures." See Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, *Middot ha-Ra'ayah* (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1985), 81. Elsewhere, I have argued that Rabbi Kook's (1864–1935) understanding of divine honor is crucial to undoing the logic of violence inherent to certain strains of contemporary Jewish mysticism, and that the influence of Maimonides in this matter was profound. See Seeman, "Violence, Ethics and Divine Honor in Modern Jewish Thought," 1028–1036. Rabbi Kook himself argues in his "special essay on Maimonides" that the latter helped to purify Jewish mystical thought by

Readers of the first chapter of the *Mishneh Torah* would already have been alerted to the importance of *kavod* to Maimonides' critique of naïve religious language. In chapter one of *Yesodei ha-Torah*, or "Fundamental Principles of the Torah," Maimonides argues that Scriptural attributions of corporeality to God are made "according to the intellects of human beings, who know only bodies, while 'the Torah speaks in human language.'" ⁹ "The Torah speaks in human language" is a Talmudic formulation that appears only once in the *Mishneh Torah* but is invoked frequently in the first part of the *Guide*, where it indicates that God has been described in inadequate and sometimes even misleading language because of human linguistic and intellectual limitations.¹⁰ Here, Maimonides puts the matter succinctly: since human experience encompasses only corporeal life, and even intellect is constrained by matter, it is impossible for humankind to grasp a fundamentally different (and non-corporeal) kind of existence. "The truth of the matter," he writes, "cannot be grasped or searched out by human intellect." This assertion of human limitation is immediately followed by a discussion of the divine *kavod* described in Exodus 33:

What was this that Moses our master sought to grasp, as it is written: "Show me please, Thy glory [*kavod*]"?¹¹ He sought to know the truth of the Holy One Blessed be He's existence, until it would be known in his heart like the knowledge of one of the people whose face he has seen and whose form is engraved upon his heart, so that this

insisting on the radical critique of divine embodiment to which kabbalistic thinking is prone. This essay has been re-published in *Ma'amarei ha-Ra'ayah* (Jerusalem, 1984), 105–133. On the debasement of human dignity that follows from too corporeal a conception of God, see the continuation of *Avodat ha-Kokhavim* chapter 1, which describes the gradual enslavement of humanity by a priestly class who are empowered by faulty theology.

⁹ *Yesodei ha-Torah* 1:9.

¹⁰ Scholars have pointed to the fact that Maimonides' use of this Talmudic principle to combat anthropomorphism goes far beyond the Talmud's more modest application to certain kinds of linguistic-interpretive problems, like the apparently needless doubling of words. "The Torah speaks in human language" is, however, used in much the same way by Maimonides' predecessor, R. Bahya Ibn Paquda, *Duties of the Heart* 1:10. R. Meir Simḥa Ha-Cohen of Dvinsk, in *'Or Sameah* (Jerusalem, n.d.), 1, also cites the late midrash *Pesikta Zuta* to *parashat Va-Ethanan*: "Who can speak of the prophets who said, 'I have seen God' (Isaiah 6:1), 'seek God while He may be found, call to him while He is near' (Isaiah 55:6) . . . and a limitless number of similar verses? Yet the Torah speaks in human language, and so do the prophets following the Torah, the Writings following the prophets, and the sages after them, all in a single manner, whose understanding requires some intelligence."

¹¹ Exodus 33:18.

person would be differentiated in his mind from other people. That is what Moses our master sought: that the existence of the Holy One blessed be He should be differentiated in his mind from the existence of other existents, until he knows [God's] existence as it is in itself.¹²

Moses' request to God, "show me please Thy *kavod*," represents the prophet's passionate philosophical quest to understand divine uniqueness and unity.¹³ For Maimonides, the quest to see divine glory does not represent a desire for the corporeal manifestation of divine favor, like the "created light" mentioned by Saadyah, Ibn Paquda, and Ha-Levi in this context, nor is it a quest for special access to the divine presence itself, as Nahmanides and other kabbalists would later write.¹⁴ Maimonides' Moses is enough of a philosopher to know that the divine *kavod* can only entail an abstract *conceptual* grasp of

¹² *Yesodei ha-Torah* 1:10.

¹³ The narrative account of the request and dialogue could therefore be read as a literary device for something far more abstract. Hannah Kasher ("Maimonides' Interpretation of the Story of the Divine Revelation in the Cleft of the Rock" [Hebrew]. *Daat* 35 [1995], 49) points out that this was the reading of Efodi on *Guide* I: 21. "Do not think that Moses engaged in bargaining with Him, may He be blessed through this question ['Show my please Thy *kavod*']. Rather [the meaning is] that he found with his intellect that this apperception [of the *kavod*] was inaccessible to him."

¹⁴ See Saadyah's *Beliefs and Opinions* 2:12; Ibn Paquda's *Duties of the Heart* 1:3; and Ha-Levi's *Kuzari* 2:7, and 4:3. In chapter 4:3, Ha-Levi writes: "'Glory of God' is that fine substance which follows the will of God, assuming any form God wishes to show the prophet. This is one view. According to another view the Glory of God means the whole of the angels and spiritual beings, as well as the throne, chariot, firmament, wheels, spheres and other imperishable beings. All this is styled 'Glory,' just as a king's retinue is called his splendour. Perhaps this is what Moses desired, when he said, 'I beseech Thee, shew me Thy glory.'" Translated by Hartwig Hirschfeld in Judah Halevi, *The Kuzari: An Argument for the Faith of Israel* ed. H. Slominsky (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 211. In general, Ha-Levi is much more comfortable than Maimonides with the use of corporeal imagery in Scripture, including the vision of divine *kavod*, because he believes (see chapter 4:4) that corporeal visions help to instill the fear of God in the human heart. Ha-Levi is an important counterpoint because, like Maimonides, he deploys *kavod* as a central organizing concept related to themes like the uniqueness of the land and people of Israel with regard to prophecy. See Lobel, *Between Mysticism and Philosophy*, 116–20; also R. Yehudah Moscato's sixteenth century commentary *Qol Yehudah* on the introduction to Part II of *Kuzari*, and the introduction to parts II and IV in the commentary of R. David Cohen, *ha-Kuzari ha-Mevor'ar*, ed. Dov Schwartz (Jerusalem: Nezer David, 2002). Despite his distance from Maimonides on the meaning of the divine *kavod*, however, Ha-Levi is equally far from the kabbalistic view elaborated by Nahmanides and others (see below), as is already noted by R. Israel Ha-Levi in his sixteenth century commentary, *Ozar Neḥmad*, at the end of *Kuzari* 4:3.

divine incommensurability.¹⁵ On a linguistic level, this means that *kavod* refers more to the *distinctiveness* of divinity than to its substantiality—its perceptible weightiness or presence—as many other writers apparently thought.¹⁶ Note how carefully Moses seeks to establish God’s difference from all beings, with the same level of clarity that allows one person to recognize the unique “face” of another, and how he wishes to have this intimate knowledge of divine difference “engraved upon his heart.”¹⁷ For Maimonides to compare God’s incommensurability to the unique face is just one more use of homol-

¹⁵ Maimonides’ son, R. Abraham, feels obligated not just to note the distinction between his father’s approach and that of his predecessors (i.e., Saadyah and others), but also to seek some middle position between the two. In his own commentary on Exodus 33, he writes: “All that my father and master, peace be upon him, has mentioned with regard to these matters, is closer to high level investigation and to the comprehension of the student, but what others have written is closer to the language [of the biblical text] . . . There is no avoiding, in my opinion, some compromise . . . between the intention of my father and master and those enlightened scholars who preceded him, which is to say that there was some sense of sight or a vision like sight of the created light [in Exodus 33], by means of which Moses was guided or sought help in the intellectual apprehension of the greatness of the Creator.” See *Perush Rabenu Avraham ben ha-Rambam ‘al Bereishit u-Shemot*, trans. Efraim Yehudah Weisenberg (Jerusalem: Keren Hoza’at Sifrei Rabanei Bavel, 1994 [1958]), 96. See, however R. Abraham’s commentary on Exodus 16 (p. 26), in which he seems to identify more closely with his father’s teaching.

¹⁶ See *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew-English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1979), 458–59. *Kavod* is derived from the root for heaviness or weight, and among its meanings in the biblical context are that of riches and material substance (as in Genesis 31:1), glory or splendor (as in Genesis 45:13), and honor or dignity of position (as in Numbers 24:11), all of which relate in different ways to the distinctiveness—*gravitas*, really—of a thing or person to which it is applied. *Kavod* can also signify the “seat of honor in the inner man, the noblest part of man” (as in Genesis 30:13), which may be comparable to the usage that Maimonides has in mind when he renders the divine *kavod* as God’s “essence.”

¹⁷ This reading of *Yesodei ha-Torah* 1:10 is also supported by a closely parallel passage in Maimonides’ commentary on the Mishnah, in chapter seven of the *Shemoneh Peraqim*, which is devoted to the limitations of human (i.e., Moses’) ability to know God. In *Shemoneh Peraqim*, Maimonides adds the words, “but when a person sees the back [of another], even though he recognizes him through this vision, sometimes he is in doubt and confuses him with others . . .” Based on R. Joseph Kafiqh trans. *Mishnah ‘im Perush ha-Rambam* (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1989), vol. 2, 259–60. Hannah Kasher (“Maimonides, Interpretation of the Story of the Divine Revelation”) notes some subtle differences between this source and the one in *Yesodei ha-Torah*, but she basically agrees that both are concerned with the problem of epistemology and human limitation. My only disagreement with Kasher is in the specific emphasis I bring to bear on the issue of divine incommensurability, which makes Maimonides’ parable of the face much more appropriate to his philosophical message.

ogous language, like verses that describe God's walking and sitting to make abstract conceptual points about the nature of divine being or action.¹⁸

Even so, Moses' request to know God's existence "as it is in itself" (that is to say, as wholly incommensurate and without any misleading analogies to created beings) is a request for something that lies beyond the limits of human comprehension.

[God], may He be blessed, answered [Moses] that it is not within the power of the mind of a living person, who is a composite of body and soul, to grasp the truth of this matter as it is in itself. [God] may He be blessed, made known to him that which no person had known before him and none will know after him, until he apprehended something of the truth of His existence, to the extent that the Holy One blessed be He was differentiated in his [Moses'] mind from other existents the way a person is differentiated when one has seen his back and perceived with one's mind [the difference between] all of [that person's] body and clothing from those of other people. This is what Scripture has hinted at and said, "You shall see My back, but My face you shall not see."¹⁹

Unable to grasp the fullness of divine difference represented by the "face," Moses has no choice but to accept a vision of the divine "back," which represents a lower degree of certainty about the incommensurability of the divine (similar to our uncertainty regarding the identity of a person we have only seen from behind).²⁰ A measure

¹⁸ On the homologous meanings of "face," including divine incommensurability, see chapter I: 37 of the *Guide*: "*But My face shall not be seen*, meaning that the true reality of My existence as it veritably is cannot be grasped." *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 68. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the *Guide* are from this edition. Italicized words in this translation indicate words used in Hebrew within Maimonides' original Judaeo-Arabic text. Maimonides' homologous reading of "face" may be contrasted with the approach of Nahmanides and many later kabbalists, who asserted that even though corporeal language in Scripture cannot be interpreted literally, there is nevertheless some kind of true analogy between human and divine attributes. For numerous examples of this principle, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "By Way of Truth: Aspects of Nahmanides' Kabbalistic Hermeneutic," *AJS Review* 14:2 (1989): 102–178.

¹⁹ *Yesodei ha-Torah* 1:10, citing Exodus 33:23.

²⁰ Menachem Kellner's recent important study of the *kavod* in Maimonides' corpus neglects his strong insistence on divine incommensurability in this and some related passages. Kellner argues instead that Maimonides reads the quest for *kavod* in Exodus 33 as a search for positive knowledge of the divine essence—a view I will dispute below. See Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism*

of ambiguity remains as to whether God's *kavod* is identified *only* with this sheer fact of divine incommensurability or also with some positive essence that remains partly inaccessible to human comprehension. However, this is an ambiguity that persists through Maimonides' discussion of *kavod* and negative attributes in the first part of the *Guide*, and which continues to divide modern scholars.²¹

What is abundantly clear for Maimonides is that Moses cannot grasp the fullness of divine honor/glory partly because of his composite nature as both matter and form (or body and soul) prevents him from doing so. Although he is undoubtedly the "master of all prophets," Moses nevertheless remains trapped in a web of concepts and language that oblige him to draw upon human attributes in representing the divine, even though Moses himself knows that this usage is false. R. Nissim of Gerona (1320–1380) was one of several medieval scholars who disputed Maimonides' reading of Exodus 33 by pointing out that, since Moses must already have known the impossibility of apprehending the divine essence, it makes no sense to suppose that he would have asked for such an impossible boon.²² But this misses the point of what Maimonides thinks Moses is really after in this text, which is not so much the positive knowledge of divine essence as it is a deepening and internalization of his prior understanding of divine difference: he wishes to "engrave it upon his

(Oxford: The Littman Library, 2006), 179–215. It should be noted that in the *Guide*, Maimonides seems to identify the divine "back" not with incommensurability per se, but instead with the vision of divine "goodness" (God's providence in the working of the cosmos). However, this seems to me not so much a contradiction as a shift in emphasis at a different moment in the intellectual process—as I will explain.

²¹ Hannah Kasher ("Maimonides' Interpretation of the Story of Divine Revelation," 45–47) usefully raises some of these questions through different readings of Moses' engagement with the question of the divine *kavod* in Exodus 33. Also see Shlomo Pines, "The Limitations of Human Knowledge According to Al-Farabi, ibn Bajja, and Maimonides," *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 82–109; Herbert A. Davidson, "Maimonides on Metaphysical Knowledge" *Maimonidean Studies*, vol. 3 (1992/1993): 49–103. A very helpful discussion is to be found in Ehud Z. Benor, "Meaning and Reference in Maimonides' Negative Theology," *The Harvard Theological Review* 88 (1995): 339–360, where Benor proposes that "Maimonides found in negative theology a method of uniquely identifying the ground of all being," and thus "determining the reference of the name 'God,' without forming any conception of what God is" (347).

²² R. Nissim of Gerona, *Derashot ha-Ran*, ed. Aryeh L. Feldman (Jerusalem: Makhon Shalem, 1977), 55 (fourth *derashah*).

heart.”²³ According to Maimonides, Moses would have engaged in progressively subtler and more profound affirmations of divine incommensurability until he inevitably came up against the hard limits of human understanding, represented by God’s negative response to his demand: “Show me, please Thy *kavod!*”

Maimonides returns to this idea near the end of the first book of the *Mishneh Torah*, where he tries to reconcile human free will with divine foreknowledge. This is a problem whose solution is “longer than the earth and broader than the sea, and has several great essential principles and tall mountains hanging from it.”²⁴ Maimonides refers back to the beginning of *Yesodei ha-Torah* to remind his readers that “God knows with a knowledge that is not separate from Him like human beings,” and that the incommensurate nature of divine knowledge makes human reason a poor tool for understanding God. Not surprisingly, he then harks back to Exodus 33, where he believes that divine incommensurability is already well established:

Rather, He, may His name be blessed, and His knowledge are one, and human intellect cannot fully grasp this. Just as human knowledge lacks the capacity to know and to find the truth of the Creator, as it is written [in response to Moses’ request, “Show me, please Thy *kavod!*”], “Man cannot see Me and live.”²⁵ Just so, a person cannot grasp and find the knowledge of the Creator. This is what the prophet has said, “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways My ways.”²⁶

Maimonides was criticized by some commentators for publicizing a dilemma of free will that has no definitive solution, but his austere insistence on divine incommensurability may have seemed like the only way to defend both human will and divine omniscience

²³ Even a sympathetic philosophical reader like R. Isaac Arama (1420–1494) assumes that Maimonides believes Moses’ request to see the divine “face” was really a quest for knowledge of positive attributes, as opposed to the divine “back” through which the so-called negative attributes were ultimately revealed. However, this leads Arama, like R. Nissim and others, to wonder how Maimonides could think Moses would ask for such an impossible boon. The advantage of my reading is that it obviates this question by making Moses’ request more philosophically plausible and also accounts better for Maimonides’ parable of the desire to distinguish people by their faces, as used in both the *Mishneh Torah* and his commentary on the Mishnah. See R. Isaac Arama, *‘Aqedat Yizḥaq*, ed. Ḥayyim Yosef Pollock (Jerusalem, n.d.), vol. 2, 198–201 (*Sha’ar* 54).

²⁴ *Hilkhot Teshuvah* (“Laws of Penitence”) 5:5, citing Job 11:9.

²⁵ Exodus 33:20.

²⁶ Isaiah 55:8.

simultaneously.²⁷ The phrase “My thoughts are not your thoughts,” from the biblical book of Isaiah, is treated as equivalent to “man shall not see Me and live” in Exodus, asserting the failure of logic and analogy to encompass divine incommensurability.

In a very real sense, then, Moses emerges in the first book of the *Mishneh Torah* as a typological counterweight to Enosh, who allowed idolatry to gain a foothold by mistaking his own immersion in human concepts and language for a true analogy between the honor of the divine and that of human kings. When he asked to see the divine *kavod*, Moses already understood that God was wholly incommensurate, but he lacked the depth of experiential clarity that would have allowed him to apprehend the divine as one person distinguishes another without fail by looking at his face. This is an extremely precise formulation; Maimonides means to underline for those readers who are philosophical initiates that, while human beings can grasp the incommensurability of different conceptual categories (“apples and oranges”) or the difference between bodies separated by space, neither of these ways of talking about difference is sufficient to encompass the radical incommensurability of God. Thus, to reject Enosh’s error and its potential to engender gross idolatry is only the beginning of an extended religious program. Having grasped that God has no corporeal form and that even relational analogies between God and human kings are ultimately false, the individual who aspires to perfection like Moses did must continue to press on with all due modesty against the boundaries of knowledge, precisely in order to establish God’s true distinction or *kavod*. We shall see that this is the very core of intellectual divine service according to Maimonides.

Taken together, these passages from the first book of the *Mishneh Torah* emerge as a layered and resonant literary representation of Maimonides’ overall philosophical and religious project. Idolatry in the form of crude image worship must inevitably be condemned in a code of Jewish law, but the point of Maimonides’ initial foray into human religious history is to call attention to the much subtler problem of well-intentioned divine worship subverted by a false and imaginary analogy between God and created beings.²⁸ “Maimonides’ brief historical synopsis of the fate of monotheism,” writes Twersky, “its

²⁷ See the criticism by R. Abraham ben David of Posquières, *Hasagot ha-Rabad, ad loc.*

²⁸ This problem is in a sense only intensified by those later kabbalists who, while

successive corruptions and corrections, is streaked with contemporary allusions and ideological directives sustaining his attack on externalism and his espousal of intellectualism.²⁹ But this can be put much more strongly. The distance between Enosh and Moses is really the distance between popular monotheism as Maimonides perceived it in his own day and the purified intellectual spirituality towards which he believed that intelligent people were obliged to strive. The popular notion of God's honor is always threatening to collapse into idolatry, starting with homage paid to those who are perceived as God's human intermediaries, but eventually devolving into the worship of material forms—all because the concept of divine honor has been insufficiently clarified.³⁰ This danger, described at length at the beginning of *Avodat ha-Kokhavim*, is what Moses' law and example each seek with effort to forestall.

they pointedly reject the strong form of anthropomorphism implied by divine corporeality, nevertheless insist upon the necessity of a real analogy between divine and human attributes, including human body parts. See Wolfson, "By Way of Truth." R. Menaḥem Recanati, for example, writes in his commentary on the Torah (76c) that although God is wholly incorporeal, Scriptural choices of language portraying God's hands or eyes "are an extremely inner matter concerning the truth of God's existence, since [these attributes] are the source and wellspring of the overflow that extends to all creatures, which does not mean that there is an essential comparison between Him, may He be blessed, and us with respect to form . . . It is like someone who writes 'Reuben the son of Jacob,' for these letters are not the form of Reuben the son of Jacob or his structure and essence but rather a recognition [*zikhron*] . . . a sign of that existent and well-known structure known as Reuben the son of Jacob." This kind of analogous conception of the relationship between God and human bodies was by no means unique to R. Recanati, and it also bore strong implications for the kabbalistic understanding of Jewish ritual. "Since God, may He be exalted and blessed, wished to confer merit upon us, He created within the human body various hidden and wonderful limbs that are a likeness of a sign of the workings of the divine Chariot [*ma'aseh merkavah*], and if a person merits to purify a single one of his limbs, that limb will become like a throne to that supernal, inner limb that is known as 'eye,' 'hand,' and so forth." Despite all of Recanati's hedging and subtlety, it is clear that this view would have been anathema to Maimonides.

²⁹ Twersky, *Code*, 227.

³⁰ In *Avodat ha-Kokhavim* 3:6, Maimonides concludes his discussion of the prohibited forms of idolatrous worship by detailing a lesser prohibition of acts of honoring idols, all of which are acts that emphasize the sensuous corporeality of the material form: "Anyone who hugs an idol or kisses it, or cleans before it, or washes it, or anoints it or clothes it or causes it to wear shoes, or any similar act of *kavod* has violated a negative commandment, as it is written [Exodus 20:5] 'nor serve them.'" This is a close citation of Mishnah *Sanhedrin* 7:6, except that our printed Mishnah omits the concluding words ("or any similar act of *kavod*").

II. Honor as Absence and Restraint

It is no accident that Maimonides' interpretation of the theophany in Exodus 33 aroused more commentary and opposition than the rest of his theological exposition in the first two chapters of the *Mishneh Torah*, or that it served as an organizing focus for large sections of his later *Guide of the Perplexed*.³¹ The radical nature of Maimonides' reading can be adduced through comparisons with those of two other towering figures whose widely influential views I have already noted. Both Saadyah (882–942) and Naḥmanides (1194–1270) agree that the verse “Show me please, Thy *kavod*!” implies a quest for a real vision of something that can be physically seen, although they disagree as to what that something is. In Saadyah's reading, “God has a light that He creates and reveals to the prophets as a proof of the words of prophecy that they have heard from God, and when one of them sees [this light] he says, ‘I have seen God's *kavod*!’”³² Because the light is merely created and not part of God, this reading neatly does

³¹ In his first gloss on the text of the *Mishneh Torah* (*Yesodei ha-Torah* 1:10), R. Abraham ben David of Posquières (Rabad) takes Maimonides to task for failing to recognize the “profound secrets” contained in the allusion to God's “face” and God's “back” in this biblical episode. Maimonides, he says, must not have known these secrets. R. Joseph Karo defends Maimonides without reacting in any way to his wholesale rejection of kabbalistic concepts, while R. Shem Tov Ibn Gaon (born in 1283) defends Maimonides in his *Migdal 'Oz* (*ad loc.*) by claiming that the latter repented later in life and became a kabbalist! It would seem that Maimonides' treatment of Exodus 33 in the *Mishneh Torah* struck a sensitive nerve. While Rabad, incidentally, remains circumspect about the specific meaning of the “secrets” Maimonides neglected, these are specified at greater length in the sixteenth century by writers like R. Meir Ibn Gabbai, *Avodat ha-Qodesh* Part III: 30 (Jerusalem: 1992), 317–20, and R. Issachar Eilenberg, *Be'er Sheva*, No. 71.

³² See R. Saadyah Gaon, *ha-Nivhar ba-Emunot wa-De'ot*, trans. R. Joseph Kafiqh (Jerusalem: Makhon Moshe, 1993), 110–11 (Part II: 12). Also see *Ozar ha-Geonim: Thesaurus of the Gaonic Responsa and Commentaries*, ed. B. Lewin (Jerusalem, 1928), vol. 1, 15–17. For more on Saadyah's view and its later influence on Jewish thought, see Joseph Dan, *The Esoteric Theology of Ashkenazi Hasidism* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1968), 104–168. It is telling that the thirteenth century writer R. Avraham ben 'Ezriel, who was deeply influenced by R. Yehudah he-Ḥasid, cites Maimonides' formulation of divine non-corporeality from the first chapter of *Yesodei ha-Torah* at length in his liturgical compendium *Arugat ha-Bosem*, but stops short of Maimonides' interpretation of the divine *kavod* in that same chapter, which he simply omits in favor of Saadyah's view. See R. Abraham b. R. 'Ezriel, *Sefer 'Arugat ha-Bosem*, ed. Efraim E. Urbach (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1939), 198–199. Urbach also cites the opinion of R. Ḥananel (990–1050), later quoted by R. Yehudah he-Ḥasid (1150–1217), which is that the *kavod* constitutes an actual vision seen by the prophet as in Saadyah, but only “a vision of the heart” (*'wnata de-liba*). In I: 21, Maimonides lists this as one of the acceptable readings of the events in Exodus 33, although he makes it clear that it is not his preferred reading.

away with the problem of divine corporeality implied by the verse. However, it also leads to a different problem, which is that some verses in Scripture seem to portray the created *kavod* as an object of worship or at least of veneration, forcing later writers to engage in new apologetics to escape the charge that this reading imports idolatry to the very heart of Scripture.³³ Saadyah's view was further elaborated by other Judaeo-Arabic thinkers like Ibn Paquda (early 11th century) and Ha-Levi (1080–1145)—as well as by Maimonides himself, in certain passages to which we shall return. Nahmanides the kabbalist, by contrast, prefers to take a hint of divine corporeality in his stride: “Moses asked to see the divine *kavod* in an actual vision [*bi-mar'eh mamash*].” This interpretation was further elaborated by R. Baḥya ben Asher (d. 1340) and R. Menaḥem Recanati (1223–1290) as entailing a vision of the “higher *kavod*” (higher in the sefirotic sense), since “there is *kavod* above *kavod*” in the articulation of the divine *anthropos*.³⁴

³³ Nahmanides already notes that since Ezekiel 3:12 portrays the angels as blessing God's *kavod*, any reading that treats the *kavod* as a created light would essentially be portraying the angels as idolaters! See his commentary on Genesis 46:1 in R. Moshe ben Nahman (Ramban), *Perushei ha-Torah*, ed. R. Ḥayyim Dov Chavel (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1976), vol. 1, 250–251. Nahmanides' critique was amplified in the sixteenth century by R. Ibn Gabbai, *ʿAvodat ha-Qodesh*, part III: 30, 317–20. Although he was a member of the Nahmanidean school, R. Yom Tov ibn Avraham Asevilli (Ritva) defended Maimonides convincingly in the fourteenth century by pointing out that *kavod* means different things to Maimonides in different Scriptural contexts. See his *Sefer ha-Zikaron* (Jerusalem, 1956), chapter 4. Some of Nahmanides' fears may arguably have been realized among the Ḥasidei Ashkenaz of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, whose views were influenced by translated works of Saadyah and Ibn Ezra rather than Maimonides, and who sometimes portray the divine *kavod* as either a created entity towards which worship should be directed or as a permanent hypostatis, nearly coterminous with God. See Dan, *The Esoteric Theology of Ashkenazi Hasidism*. Also see Avraham Epstein in A. M. Haberman, ed., *Mi-Kadmoniyot ha-Yehudim: Kitvei Avraham Epstein* (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1957), vol. II, 226–241, who refers to the conception of *kavod* in at least one of these texts as “almost a second God.” Daniel Abrams, “*Sod Kol ha-Sodot: Tefisat ha-Kavod ve-Kavanat ha-Yefilah be-Kitvei R. Eleazar me-Vermis*,” *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah* 34 (1995): 61–81, shows that R. Eleazar of Worms insists that worshippers should not have the created *kavod* in mind during prayer, even though they may direct their prayers towards the place where the *kavod* is visible. The philosophically minded R. Joseph Albo (Spain, 1380–1444) solves this problem in another way, by arguing that sometimes the biblical text says “*kavod*” when it really means God, and sometimes God (the tetragramaton) when it really means a created light or angel who represents God. Thus, every problematic Scriptural verse can be explained in the least problematic way possible depending upon context. See section II: 28 of *Sefer ha-Iqqarim* (Jerusalem: Horev, 1995), vol. I, 255–56.

³⁴ See Nahmanides, *Perushei ha-Torah*, vol. 1, 621; R. Baḥya ben Asher, *B'ur ʿal ha-Torah*, vol. 1, 347; and R. Menaḥem Recanati, *Levishei ʿOr Yaqrut* (Jerusalem:

Maimonides' interpretive scalpel cuts through both of these approaches in order to suggest something much more profound than the simple need to understand corporeal imagery as metaphoric or equivocal. Instead, Exodus 33 serves the more important function of calling attention even to the limits of *that* project, which might have deluded a person into thinking that human beings can know God in some positive and ultimate sense once they have stripped away these layers of naïve Scriptural anthropomorphism. Maimonides' move is brilliant: instead of trying to explain or apologize for the apparent corporeality of *kavod* in this verse (as many other writers had done), Maimonides simply characterizes Moses' use of the term *kavod* as an already philosophically sophisticated attempt to proceed down the *via negativa*—the path to differentiating and distinguishing God from all other existents—which he has only hinted at in his legal writings but will go on to develop with great energy in the first part of the *Guide*.³⁵ Maimonides is able to do this because for him, unlike for any of the other writers whom we have mentioned so far, the

Zikhron Aharon, 2000), 194, whose wording may actually have been influenced by the Maimonidean formulation of divine incommensurability. It is ironic that the phrase “there is *kavod* above *kavod*” was apparently first coined by the author of the eleventh century Talmudic lexicon *‘Arukh*, in a paraphrasing of Saadyah’s “created light” theory as it was developed in his commentary on *Sefer Yezirah*. Joseph Dan [*The Esoteric Theology of Ashkenazi Hasidism*, 111–113] argues that Saadyah coined the idea of a “higher *kavod*” visible only to the angels in order to explain how Moses could have been denied the ability to see a species of created light that other prophets (like Isaiah and Ezekiel) were later granted. Saadyah’s notion of two different levels of created light is left sufficiently ambiguous in the *‘Arukh*, however, for later interpreters to be able to connect it with the Neo-Platonist view of divine emanation popularized within Kabbalah. For Nahmanides and his followers, “*kavod* above *kavod*” refers not to two levels of created light as in Saadyah, but to two stages of divine emanation, *Keter* and *Malkhut*, the latter of which was otherwise known as *Shekhinah*; Moses wanted to see the former but was only granted a vision of the latter. R. Meir Ibn Gabbai subjected Maimonides and the whole “created light” school to a withering critique on this score in the sixteenth century. In *‘Avodat ha-Qodesh*, part III, chapters 29–35 (vol. 2, 315–48), he argues that Moses sought a true, physical vision of God’s ineffable unity with the divine attributes or *sefirot*, which is normally perceptible only to the mind’s eye of a true prophet. For a similar reading, see the late sixteenth- or early seventeenth-century responsa of R. Issachar Eilenberg, *Be’er Sheva’*, no. 71.

³⁵ Ehud Benor, *Worship of the Heart: a Study in Maimonides’ Philosophy of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 47, also points out that in Maimonides’ view, Moses must have been virtuous and philosophically accomplished *prior* to the revelation of Exodus 33–34. I should note that Kenneth Seeskin raises some of the same conceptual issues I have raised here, but without the organizing focus on divine honor, in his *Jewish Philosophy in a Secular Age* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 31–70.

Scriptural appearance of divine glory or honor is related precisely to the *absence* of any legitimate comparison, and to the correspondingly hard limits of embodied human comprehension.

Divine *kavod* is not treated as a sensory stimulus like light or a revelation that one can perceive with one's eyes—nor is it even the *'uwneta de-liba* or “vision of the heart” (i.e., speculative vision) championed by R. Hai Gaon and R. Ḥananel ben Ḥushiel in the tenth and eleventh centuries.³⁶ In fact, for Maimonides, many prophetic visions do take place in the heart or mind—an interpretive stance for which he was criticized at length by Naḥmanides³⁷—but Moses' encounter with the *kavod* in Exodus 33 was no vision at all; rather,

³⁶ For R. Hai, see Avraham Shoshana ed., *Newly Discovered Geonic Responsa* (Notes by Simcha Emmanuel; Jerusalem: Ofeq Institute, 1995), 219–221 (resp. 155 [67]). As the editor notes, the opinion attributed in this letter to R. Hai is also identical with the commentary of R. Ḥananel on *Berakhot* 7a, and is attributed to the latter by many later authors, including R. Yehudah of Barcelona, *Perush Sefer Yezirah*, ed. Shlomo Hayyim Halberstam (Berlin, 1885), 32–33, so that perhaps the attribution to R. Hai is in error. R. Ḥananel also reads the vision of “Pardes” sought by some rabbis in *Hagigah* 14a as a “vision of the heart” rather than of the eyes, which is significant because Maimonides may be following his lead in reading the story of the “four who entered Pardes” and the biblical account of Moses' request to see the divine *kavod* as essentially parallel sources. As with the “created light” theory, however, Maimonides mentions this view in the *Guide* I:21 as a theologically acceptable but inferior interpretation. Maimonides' own view is that only abstract intellectual apprehension of speculative truth (but no “prophetic vision”) was involved in either case.

³⁷ See Naḥmanides, *Perushei ha-Torah* to Genesis 18:1 (vol. 1, 103–7). The subject in this context involves a debate over what precisely Abraham saw when he was visited by three angels disguised as humans. Maimonides contends that this episode took place within a prophetic vision, to which Naḥmanides retorts that it would strain credibility to believe that the whole cycle of events involving the visit of the angels, the destruction of Sodom and the salvation of Lot's family by those same angels all took place in a vision rather than external reality. He writes instead that “a special created glory [*kavod nivra'*] was in the angels,” making them visible to the naked eye. Although the language of “created glory” here seems like a nod to Maimonides, it is more likely that Naḥmanides had in mind those Geonim who held that all of the prophetic visions in Scripture involved appearances of a “created light” or glory that takes on different forms. (See the lengthy discussion of variations upon this theme by R. Yehudah of Barcelona, *Perush Sefer Yezirah*, 19–46). Although he assimilates the Geonic teaching into his own kabbalistic ontology (he calls the created glory a “garment” in the kabbalistic sense), Naḥmanides is strongly attracted to the Geonic insistence that the images of prophecy could really be seen with the human eye. R. Bahya ben Asher, *B'ur 'al ha-Torah* to Genesis 18:2 (vol. I, 167) likewise pauses to emphasize that Abraham's vision of the angels was “with the physical sense of sight,” which makes better sense once we understand the polemical context vis-à-vis Maimonides. For more on this issue, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “Beneath the Wings of the Great Eagle: Maimonides and Thirteenth Century Kabbalah,” in Görgo K. Hasselhoff and Otfried Fraisse, eds., *Moses*

it was an intellectual apperception of lack and constraint fostered by his recognition of God's radical incommensurability. R. Yehudah of Barcelona had already argued in the tenth century, on the basis of his readings in Geonic literature, that progressively higher degrees of prophetic acuity entail progressively *less* specific visions of the created light known as divine *kavod*. Ezekiel saw the *kavod* in the form of a man, for example, while Moses, who was less subject to the vagaries of the imagination, saw it only as "a form of splendor and light, and a great created fire," which R. Yehudah identified as the "back" of the created light known as the *Shekhinah* or *kavod*.³⁸ This view attributes less distinctive visions to higher forms of prophecy, but Maimonides was the first writer to extend this approach so far as to deny that Moses saw *anything at all* in Exodus 33.

Identifying the divine *kavod* with the hard limits of human apprehension also distinguishes Maimonides from some important modern interpreters. The Old JPS translation of the Hebrew Bible, published in 1917, ambiguously renders Exodus 33:18 as "Show me, I pray Thee, Thy glory," a phrase that can sustain many different interpretations, but the New JPS published in 1985 renders it more idiomatically as "Oh, let me behold Your Presence!" This accords well with the approach taken by medieval interpreters like Nahmanides and Ibn Ezra, but to Maimonides, it would have constituted an intolerable kind of anthropomorphism—he would have preferred something like, "Oh, let me apprehend the full measure of Your incommensurable uniqueness!"³⁹ Among modern Jewish thinkers, the same tension also pits Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel (the great theorists of divine presence) against Emmanuel Levinas,

Maimonides: His Religious, Scientific, and Philosophical Wirkungsgeschichte in Different Cultural Contexts" (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2004), 209–38.

³⁸ R. Yehudah of Barcelona, *Perush Sefer Yezirah*, 34–35. "But Moses our master, whose mind and heart were purified and whose eyes were more enlightened than any who dwell below, God showed him of His splendor and His glory [*kavod*] that He had created for the glory of His name, which was greater than the lights seen by any of the prophets . . . It was a true sight and not a dream or a vision . . . and therefore [Moses] understood that there was no human form or any other form, but only the form of the splendor and the light and the great created fire."

³⁹ Michael Carasik's consistent decision to follow the NJPS by rendering *kavod* as "presence" in *The Commentator's Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005), 299 works well enough for scriptural translations but wreaks havoc on the commentary of Saadyah, which he cites. The whole "created light" paradigm popularized by Saadyah is, after all, a response to the grave theological difficulties that may arise if one thinks that people are physically able to perceive the divine presence. Carasik seems to recognize this dilemma but is unable to fully compensate,

whose formulation of divine glory as excess or as absence, but never as presence, may actually be traceable to his early readings in Maimonides.⁴⁰ “Responsibility cannot be stated in terms of presence,” Levinas writes; “it is an impossibility of acquitting the debt . . . an *excess* over the present. This excess is glory (*la gloire*),” which as I have shown elsewhere can only refer to the biblical/Hebrew idea of *kavod*.⁴¹ In rebellion against Heidegger and much of Western theology, Levinas writes that he is seeking a conception of God as “wholly uncontaminated by being,” by which he means a God whose encounter with the world is consistently ethical rather than ontological. This forces him, as it does Maimonides, to reinterpret the divine theophany as an encounter with absence rather than with presence. This is in direct contrast to Heschel, who frames his own discussion of *kavod* as an explicit rejection of the Maimonidean philosophical paradigm: “The glory is the presence,” he writes, “not the essence of God; an act rather than a quality . . . Mainly the glory manifests

given the demand for consistency in translation. Maimonides, by contrast, specifically rejects the idea of consistency in translation with respect to *kavod* in chapter I: 64 of the *Guide*.

⁴⁰ “Presence” is a core theme of Buber’s whole philosophical and literary outlook, including his interpretation of biblical materials such as Exodus 33. See Pamela Vermes, *Buber on God and the Perfect Man* (London: Littman Library, 1994), 119–130. For Abraham Joshua Heschel’s approach, see *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1955), 80–87.

⁴¹ See Seeman, “Violence, Ethics and Divine Honor in Modern Jewish Thought,” 1036–1042. The Levinas citation is from Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 195. Shmuel Trigano (“Levinas and the Project of Jewish Philosophy,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 8 [2001]: 397–301) has argued that Levinas is indebted to Saadyah on this score: “it is as if Levinas had reworked Saadyah’s ‘glory’ using Maimonides’ negativization, for there is something affirmative in the other human being but there is no positivity.” Yet it is only in Maimonides that the “glory” of Exodus 33 appears not *even* as a representation or sign of the divine presence, but only as the radical critique of any quest for presence in the anthropomorphic sense. My argument linking Levinas with Maimonides here, rather than with Saadyah, is strengthened by the fact that Levinas used the *Guide* (especially chapters II: 13 and 17) to argue against Nazi (and Heideggerian) fatalism in the 1930s. The term *kavod* does not appear in these chapters, but the closely related idea of a God who transcends all of the categories and limits of human comprehension—and who creates the world *ex nihilo*—certainly does. “Paganism,” writes Levinas, “is a radical impotence to escape from the world.” See Emmanuel Levinas, *L’actualité de Maïmonide*, in *Paix et Droit* 15 (1935), 6–7 and Francesca Albertini, “Emmanuel Levinas’ Theological-Political Interpretation of Moses Maimonides,” in *Moses Maimonides: His Religious, Scientific, and Philosophical Wirkungsgeschichte*, 573–86. I would also add that Levinas is sure to have noted Maimonides’ argument (in *Guide* I: 56 and 63) that even the term “being” cannot properly be attributed to God without one’s doing violence to divine otherness.

itself as a power overwhelming the world.”⁴² For these modern readers, Maimonides’ view remains a powerful stimulus and, in Heschel’s case, an irritant that provokes response.

The contours of Maimonides’ rejection of *kavod* as divine presence were already discernable in his commentary on the Mishnah, which he completed while still in his twenties. The beginning of the second chapter of *Hagigah* is one of the most important textual loci for rabbinic discussions of esotericism and secret knowledge, and it is also one of the places in which the notion of divine honor is most clearly invoked. The Mishnah reads:

One should not expound the forbidden sexual relationships before three, nor the work of Creation [*ma’aseh bereishit*] before two, and the Chariot [*merkavah*] should not [be expounded] even before one, unless he is wise and understands on his own. And anyone who contemplates four things, it is better had he not come into the world: what is above and what is below, what is before and what is after. And whoever does not have regard for the honor of his Creator [*kevod kono*], it is better had he not come into the world.⁴³

In his Judaeo-Arabic commentary to this passage, Maimonides interprets the Mishnah through the lens of his own philosophical and medical commitments, premised on the danger of false speculation brought about by incorrect analogies and the cultivation of imagination at the expense of intellect:

[W]hen a person who is empty of all science seeks to contemplate in order to understand what is above the heavens or what is below the earth with his worthless imagination, so that he imagines them [the heavens] like an attic above a house . . . it is certain that this will bring him to madness and *melancholia*.⁴⁴

⁴² Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 82.

⁴³ *Mishnah Hagigah* 2:1.

⁴⁴ My English translation is based on the Hebrew translation of Kafiqh, *Mishnah ‘im Perush ha-Rambam*, vol. I, 250–51. I have, however, restored the word “melancholia,” which appears in transliterated form in the original Arabic text of Maimonides’ commentary, rather than following both Kafiqh’s and Ibn Tibbon’s rendering of the Hebrew *shemamon* (normally translated as “desolation”), whose connotations today are far less medical and technical than what I think Maimonides had in mind. Maimonides mentions *melancholia* quite frequently in his own medical writings, where he adopts the claim of Greco-Arabic medicine, and particularly that of Galen, that this malady involves “confusion of the intellect” as well as unwarranted fears or efflorescence of the imaginative faculties. This may be why Aristotle or one of his

The danger of speculation on physics (“the work of Creation”) or metaphysics (the “Chariot”) without rigorous intellectual preparation is that reliance on false and misleading analogies (“like an attic above a house”) and “worthless imagination” can easily unhinge the human mind. In keeping with the Greco-Arabic medical tradition that he practiced, Maimonides believed that certain forms of *melancholia* were caused by the perturbation of the unrestrained imagination, which excited the passions and caused an overabundance of black bile, the heaviest and most corporeal of humors.⁴⁵ The failure and breakdown associated with intellectual overextension thus leads to twin pathologies on the theological and medical planes. It invests our conception of the divine with false imagining of corporeal substance, while at the same time it also subjects the human sufferer to a malady that weighs the psycho-physical constitution down with heavy black bile. Overwrought passion and imagination are framed as gross and destructive intrusions upon the ethereal subtlety of a well-balanced intellect. “It is possible for mental activity itself to be the cause of health or illness,” writes Galen. “There are many who do not die because of the pernicious nature of their illness but because of the poor state of their mind and reason.”⁴⁶

Maimonides reads the final phrase of the Mishnah, “And whoever does not have regard for the honor of his Creator,” as referring to someone who fails to set appropriate limits for intellectual speculation: “The meaning of this is that he has no regard for his

students identified *melancholia* with literary and rhetorical genius as well. See Jennifer Radden, ed., *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), who makes it clear that *melancholia* was for many centuries an organizing principle of both medical and philosophical discourse rather than just a discrete medical diagnosis. It seems reasonable to suggest that Maimonides’ association of *melancholia* with the intellectual elite of rabbis who contemplate metaphysical matters draws precisely on this tradition.

⁴⁵ See for example R. Moshe ben Maimon, *Medical Works*, ed. Suesman Muntner (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1992), especially *Regimen Sanitatis: Letters on the Hygiene of the Body and of the Soul*, vol. 1, 59; (*Medical Aphorisms of Moses*, vol. II, 72, 80, 126–27, 140, 144, 148, 176; *Commentary on Hippocrates’ Aphorisms*, vol. III, 59, 122. For more on the Maimonidean virtue of equanimity, see Samuel S. Kottek, “The Philosophical Medicine of Maimonides,” in *Moses Maimonides: His Religious, Scientific and Philosophical Wirkungs-geschichte*, 65–82; Seeman, “Martyrdom, Emotion and the Work of Ritual,” 264–69.

⁴⁶ See Luis Garcia-Ballester, *Galen and Galenism: Theory and Medical Practice from Antiquity to the European Renaissance*, eds. Jon Arrizabalaga, Montserrat Cabre, Lluís Cifuentes, Fernando Salmon. (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2002), 150.

intellect, since the intellect is God's honor [*kavod*]." This extraordinary statement indicates both that the intellect is a testament to God's glory or *kavod*, and that it gives human beings the ability to apprehend God's *kavod* through speculation of the type that Maimonides thinks the Mishnah describes. Having regard for the Creator's honor in this context means husbanding one's intellectual resources to protect them from harmful overreaching. This teaching also encompasses an ancillary ethical benefit. Maimonides insists that "someone who does not recognize the value of that which has been given to him [i.e., the intellect] is given over into the hands of desire and becomes like an animal, as the sages have said, 'Someone who does not have regard for the honor of his Creator will commit a sin in secret,' and they have said, 'A person does not sin until a spirit of foolishness enters him.'"⁴⁷ These proofs serve to establish that honor for the Creator is related to restraint from sin (especially sexual and other appetite- or imagination-driven sins), and that this restraint is dependent in turn upon the control of "animal-like" passions by a sober intellect. Thus, Maimonides builds a strong semantic network linking themes of uncontrolled desire and imagination with ideas about sin, illness and intellectual overreaching.⁴⁸

It is not surprising, therefore, that Maimonides describes the unrestrained desire for a variety of foods as one of the consequences of *melancholia*.⁴⁹ Nor is it unexpected that he would break with Saadyah, who interpreted the verse in which the nobles of the children of Israel "visioned God and did eat and drink" (Exodus 24:11) as a

⁴⁷ Commentary on the Mishnah, *Hagigah* 2:1, citing *Hagigah* 16a, *Kiddushin* 40a and *Tanhuma, Naso* 5. Maimonides' linkage of intellectual overreaching with secret sin is also suggested by the juxtaposition of these themes in the Talmudic discussion in *Hagigah*. Other sources relevant to Maimonides' formulation include Jerusalem Talmud 2:1 and a variant of the same teaching in *Bereishit Rabbah* 1:5: "R. Huna quoted in Bar Kappara's name: *Let the lying lips be dumb . . . which speak arrogantly against the righteous* [Psalms 31:19], meaning [lips which speak] against [the will of] the Righteous One, who is the Life of all worlds, on matters which He has withheld from His creatures . . . in order to boast and to say, 'I discourse on the work of Creation! [*ma'aseh bereishit*] . . . To think that he despises My Glory [*kavod*]! For R. Yose ben R. Hanina said: Whoever honors himself through his fellow's disgrace has no share in the world to come. How much more so when [it is done at the expense of] the glory [*kavod*] of God!" My translation, with some stylistic emendations, is based on that of H. Freedman, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, vol. 1 (New York: The Soncino Press, 1983), 5.

⁴⁸ See Byron Good, "The Heart of What's the Matter: The Semantics of Illness in Iran," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 1 (1976): 25–58.

⁴⁹ See *(Medical) Aphorisms of Moses*, 80, 140.

simple expression of the fact that they went on living (i.e., that they did not die) after they had witnessed God's created light.⁵⁰ Indeed, Maimonides interprets the juxtaposition of eating with metaphysical speculation ("they visioned God") as a deep criticism of the Israelite nobles: "Because of the hindrances that were a stumbling block to *the nobles of the children of Israel* in their apprehension, their actions too were troubled; because of the corruption in their apprehension, they inclined toward things of the body. Hence it says, *and they visioned God, and did eat and drink.*"⁵¹ Regard for the honor of the creator entails a commitment to intellectual training and to the curtailment of one's appetite, which together give rise to a set of virtues including intellectual probity and gradualism. To show honor (*kavod*) to the Creator and to understand the nature of the *kavod* requested by Moses (God's unique and unknowable essence) therefore turn out to be closely related propositions, since the nature of the divine *kavod* described in Scripture already demands a particular mode of philosophical inquiry. Or, to put this in another way, it now becomes clear that mistaking the divine *kavod* for an object of sensory perception (like a created light) leads to a relative dishonoring of the divine.⁵²

These ideas are repeated and amplified with somewhat greater subtlety in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. In the thirty-second chapter of Part I, Maimonides returns to the second chapter of *Hagigah* in order to repeat his warning about the dangers of intellectual overreaching. He invokes the story of "the four who entered Pardes," four rabbis who engaged in metaphysical speculation; they were all harmed in some way except for Rabbi Aqiba, who "entered in peace and left in peace." According to Maimonides, Aqiba was spared because he

⁵⁰ See *Perushei Rabenu Saadyah Gaon 'al ha-Torah*, trans. and ed. Joseph Kafiqh (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1984), 90–91.

⁵¹ *Guide*, 30 (I: 5).

⁵² Although his interpretation differs in some ways from mine, Kellner (*Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism*, 196) put the correlation very succinctly: "He [Moses] sought to understand God's *kavod* (understood as essence) so that he could have more *kavod* (understood as honour) for God, and thus better express the *kavod* (understood as praise) for God." My reading attempts to account more explicitly for this set of homologies by linking them through the idea of intellectual restraint and acknowledgement of limitation. Yehudah Even Shmuel, similarly, comments in a note to chapter I: 32 that divine honor consists simply of the proper functioning of every created thing, but fails to emphasize the setting of correct speculative limits that, in my view, makes this possible. See *Moreh Nevukhim la-Rambam 'im Perush Yehudah Even Shmuel* (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1987), vol. I, 140–41.

was the only one of the four to recognize the appropriate limits of human speculation:

For if you stay your progress because of a dubious point; if you do not deceive yourself into believing that there is a demonstration with regard to matters that have not been demonstrated . . . if, finally, you do not aspire to apprehend that which you are unable to apprehend—you will have achieved human perfection and attained the rank of Rabbi Aqiba, peace be on him, who *entered in peace and left in peace* when engaged in the theoretical study of these metaphysical matters.⁵³

Here, Maimonides has skillfully appropriated one of the Jewish mystical tradition's greatest heroes to fashion an object lesson in rational sobriety and intellectual restraint. In his commentary on this chapter, Abravanel (1437–1508) complains that Maimonides seems to have defined the attainment of human perfection as an entirely negative ideal, neglecting the positive acquisition of moral and intellectual virtues. But I am arguing that the correct identification of that which cannot be apprehended (such as the essence of the divine) is a crowning virtue according to Maimonides, which indicates an already high level of moral and intellectual attainment.

This notion of self-limitation requires that one exercise a great deal of candor in considering one's own level of intellectual and spiritual attainment. Although he clearly speaks of limitations that no human being can overcome, Maimonides also writes that Moses approached those limits more closely than any other human being has done, thus indicating that the appropriate or necessary limits of speculation must differ from one person to another.⁵⁴ The danger of misjudging or wantonly ignoring one's level of attainment is again expressed in both medical and theological language, since the intellect can, like vision, be damaged through straining or overuse:

If, on the other hand, you aspire to apprehend things that are beyond your apprehension; or if you hasten to pronounce false, assertions the

⁵³ *Guide*, 68. These themes are also the subject of Sara Klein-Braslavy, "King Solomon and Metaphysical Esotericism According to Maimonides," *Maimonidean Studies*, vol. 1 (1990): 57–86. However, she does not discuss *kavod*, which might have contributed to the thematic coherence of Maimonides' various statements on this subject.

⁵⁴ See for instance the beginning of I: 33. On the debate among medieval (and modern) commentators as to whether Moses represents an attainable human ideal, see Benor, *Worship of the Heart*, 43–45, 186.

contradictories of which have not been demonstrated or that are possible, though very remotely so—you will have joined *Elisha Aher* [a well-known Talmudic rabbi turned heretic]. That is, you will not only not be perfect, but will be the most deficient among the deficient; and it will so fall out that you will be overcome by imaginings and by an inclination toward things defective, evil and wicked—this resulting from the intellect's being preoccupied and its light being extinguished. In a similar way, various species of delusive imaginings are produced in the sense of sight when the visual spirit is weakened, as in the case of sick people, and of such as persist in looking at brilliant or minute objects.⁵⁵

As he wrote in his commentary on the Mishnah, the weakening of the intellect leads to the flowering of “worthless imagination,” and to an ethical as well as intellectual collapse. It is more than a little ironic that Maimonides, who alone of all commentators insists that the divine *kavod* is nothing that can be seen with the eyes, nevertheless returns so forcefully to the comparison between intellect and vision to make his point, following Aristotle in arguing that the same type of straining and overuse can affect them both.⁵⁶ We are worlds

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 69. This passage should be compared with Ha-Levi's description of sight and its limitations with respect to the divine *kavod* in *Kuzari* 4:3. In III: 11 (*Guide*, 441) Maimonides adds that the relationship between knowledge and the human form (intellect) is analogous to that between the faculty of sight and the human eye. Both, that is, can be overwhelmed and damaged.

⁵⁶ *Guide*, 68. On “sight” as an equivocal term signifying intellectual apperception, see also *Guide*, 27–28 (I: 4), which cites Exodus 33:18 as a main proof-text. In books two and three of *De Anima*, Aristotle establishes a close analogy between intellect and sense perception, since both are premised on the impression of forms upon the sensory faculties: “as the wax takes the sign from the ring without the iron and gold—it takes, that is, the gold or bronze sign, but not *as* gold or bronze . . . And it is also clear from all of this why the excesses of the sense-objects destroy the sense organs. For if the movement is too strong for the sense organs, its formula [or proportion] is destroyed . . . just as the congruence and pitch are lost when strings are too vigorously struck (Book II: 12, 424a).” From Aristotle, *De Anima (On the Soul)*, trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 187–188; also see Book III: 2, 426a–b and III: 4, 429a–430a. Aristotle does, however, place certain limits on the analogy between the intellect and the senses: “a sense loses the power to perceive after something excessively perceptible; it cannot for instance perceive sound after very great sounds, nor can it see after strong colors nor smell after strong smells, whereas when the intellect has thought something extremely thinkable, it thinks lesser objects more, not less” (202). Presumably, Maimonides would argue that this is true only for that which is in fact “thinkable,” and not for something that transcends or frustrates thought entirely, like the incommensurability of the divine essence. Kasher (“Maimonides, Interpretation of the Story of Divine Revelation,” 32–33) has perceptively argued that Maimonides' discussion of prophetic vision may actually have been influenced by his understanding of optics and the effects of lenses.

away here from Saadyah's more literal interpretation of Moses' request "Show me please, Thy *kavod*" as being in part a prayer for strengthened eyesight that would allow him to look into the brilliance of the created light.⁵⁷ Yet it is worth noting that practically all of the significant readings of this passage in *Hagigah*, including Maimonides' own, circle around the unresolved question of limitations to vision and esoteric knowledge.

Maimonides' treatment of divine honor in *Guide* I: 32 recapitulates the main themes from his Commentary on the Mishnah:

For in regard to matters that it is not in the nature of man to grasp, it is, as we have made clear, very harmful to occupy oneself with them. This is what the Sages intended to signify by their dictum, *Whoever considers four things, and so on*, completing the dictum by saying *He who does not have regard for the honor of his Creator*; whereby they indicated what we have already made clear; namely that man should not press forward to engage in speculative study of corrupt imaginings.⁵⁸

He hastens to add that this teaching should not be construed as discouraging metaphysical speculation altogether, which would be tantamount, he comments acerbically, to "regarding darkness as light and light as darkness."⁵⁹ Unlike many earlier and later writers who

⁵⁷ *Beliefs and Opinions*, I: 12 (Kafiqh edition, 111).

⁵⁸ *Guide*, 70. It is worth noting that many of the arguments and proof-texts marshaled by Maimonides in this chapter are previously marshaled by R. Bahya Ibn Paquda, *Duties of the Heart*, part I, chapter 10. A careful analytic comparison of these two sources would exceed the scope of this article, but it is clear that Ibn Paquda does not thematize divine honor with the same force and persistence that Maimonides does.

⁵⁹ Maimonides' view can, for example, be contrasted with that of Nahmanides, who argues in his introduction to the commentary on the Torah (*Perushei ha-Torah*, 7–8) that "my words [with respect to the secrets of the Torah] will not be apprehended or understood at all by any intellect or understanding, save from the mouth of a wise initiate [*mequbal*] to a receptive and understanding ear. Reasoning with respect to [these matters] is foolishness . . . brings great harm and prevents benefit." See Moshe Idel, "We Have no Tradition on This," in Isadore Twersky, ed., *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides: Explorations in his Religious and Literary Virtuosity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 51–74. Unlike Nahmanides, Maimonides explicitly seeks to understand the teaching of the "Chariot" through speculation, as he writes in the introduction to Part III of the *Guide*: "In addition to this there is the fact that in that which has occurred to me with regard to these matters, I followed conjecture and supposition; no divine revelation has come to me to teach me that the intention in the matter in question was such and such, nor did I receive what I believe in these matters from a teacher. But the texts of the prophetic books and the dicta of the *Sages*, together with the speculative premises that I possess, showed me that things are indubitably so and so. Yet it is possible that they are different and that something else is intended" (*Guide*, 416).

cite this Mishnah as a mystical testimony or as proof that one should rely only upon tradition (*kabbalah*) in metaphysical matters, Maimonides asserts that the Mishnah teaches an ethos of philosophical perseverance and measured restraint that allows one to avoid self deception.⁶⁰

This is the sense in which I am arguing that divine honor constitutes a diffuse virtue for Maimonides, consisting not only of a set of distinctive intellectual practices but also of a stance or settled way of being-in-the-world—an Aristotelian *hexis*—repeatedly conveyed through metaphors of restraint in eating, walking or gazing. One should eat honey—“the most delicious of foods,” which is here a metaphor for esoteric or elite teaching—only in moderation, writes Maimonides, “lest thou be filled therewith and vomit it.”⁶¹ The preponderance of powerfully visceral imagery in this chapter does not seem accidental, given Maimonides’ understanding of the close relationship between the abuses of physical and intellectual faculties. This is not only an analogy in other words, but also a veiled comment about the way in which overindulgence in the sensory pleasures can corrupt the speculative faculties. This is one of the reasons why every process of intellectual growth must be gradual and restrained, involving not just the training of the mind but of the whole persona. “When points appearing as dubious occur to him or the thing he

⁶⁰ As a contrast to Maimonides, consider, for example, R. Hai’s polemic against those who doubt that God enacts miracles or shows visions to the righteous, and his association of the “Four who Entered Pardes” with the esoteric visions of *Heikhalot* mysticism; *Ozar ha-Geonim*, 13–15. R. Hai is cited by later kabbalists in the context of their own polemic against philosophical texts and approaches. R. Isaiah Horowitz, for example, writes that “the avoidance of philosophy and its prohibition is clear from the words of all the early and later sages, so that it would constitute a burden for me to cite them all. You may observe a small piece of what they have written on this subject in the words of R. Hai Gaon . . . on the story about the four who entered *pardes* in *Hagigah*.” See R. Isaiah Horowitz, *Shnei Luhot ha-Brit*, ed. Meir Katz (Haifa: Makhon Yad Ramah, 1992), vol. 2, 259 (*Masekhet Shevuot* no. 55). Incidentally, Kellner believes that Maimonides’ impatience with the “re-mythologization” of Judaism through *Heikhalot* literature was one of the main reasons that he worked so hard to reinterpret the divine *kavod* (*Maimonides’ Confrontation with Jewish Mysticism*, 215).

⁶¹ *Guide*, 69, citing Proverbs 25:16. Here, too, the metaphors of overeating and vomiting blur into a decidedly non-metaphoric medical reading, since in his medical writings Maimonides sometimes associates *melancholia* with an appetite for “very many kinds of food . . . and in some cases disgust and rejection of food arousing nausea so that he vomits,” while in another passage he describes “melancholic confusion of the mind, which leads in some cases to strong stomach pains . . . and in some cases to vomiting after a time . . . so that they cannot find peace except through vomiting or excreting. . . .” See (*Medical Aphorisms of Moses*, vol. II, 80, 140).

seeks does not seem to him to be demonstrated,” Maimonides writes of his Aqiba-like model-student, “he should not deny and reject it, hastening to pronounce it false, but should rather persevere and thereby *have regard for the honor of his Creator*. He should refrain and hold back.”⁶² The feel of the Arabic—*wa-yakuffu wa-yaqifu*—may be better preserved by Ibn Tibbon’s translation, which instead of “refrain and hold back” renders *ve-yimana’ ve-ya’amod*, or “hold back and stand [in place].” This is not merely an expression of intellectual limitation but also a stationary posture of restraint that resonates with another verse that Maimonides quotes approvingly in this chapter, “*Guard thy foot when thou goest to the house of God*, and so on,” which also commends intellectual caution in metaphysical matters.⁶³

Maimonides in fact views whole classes of the commandments as promoting an ethos of measured restraint that entails “regard for the honor of the Creator.” In chapters III: 44 and 47 of the *Guide*, he asserts that all of the purity restrictions associated with the Temple when it stood were intended “to create in the hearts of those who enter it a certain awe and reverence,” that would keep people from entering the sanctuary too freely. The same can be said of the “honor and beauty” (*kavod ve-tif’eret*) allotted to the priests and Levites who guarded the sanctuary, and whose appearance was meant to foster humility among the people.⁶⁴ Several passages in Maimonides’ legal writings directly relate self-restraint in matters of ritual purity to the conquest of passions and the intellectual perfection that this conquest allows. At the end of “Laws Concerning Impurity of Foods,” for example, Maimonides urges the pious to accept additional, extra-legal restrictions upon what and with whom they may eat, since “purity of the body leads to sanctification of the soul from evil opin-

⁶² *Guide*, 70.

⁶³ *Guide*, 69, citing Ecclesiastes 4:17. The entire verse is translated by NJPS as “Be not overeager to go the House of God [i.e., the Temple]; more acceptable is obedience than the offering of fools, for they know nothing [but] to do wrong.” For Maimonides, the thematic association of reluctance, intellectual comprehension, and obedience to God should by now be clear. Also see *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 4:13, in which Maimonides cites *Hagigah* once more in order to admonish readers not to “stroll through Pardes” until they have achieved a requisite grounding in the knowledge of Jewish law. In *Guide* I:13, Maimonides establishes that “standing” can also mean “desisting” or “abstaining.”

⁶⁴ Citing Exodus 28:2.

ions,”⁶⁵ and sanctification of the soul causes a person to imitate the *Shekhinah* [here a synonym for the divine *kavod* or essence], as it is written, “You shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I the Lord sanctify you.”⁶⁶ Similarly, at the end of his introduction to the section of the Mishnah that deals with purity restrictions (*Taharot*), Maimonides remarks that purity rules are meant specifically to serve as “a ladder to the attainment of Holy Spirit,” by which he means a level of prophecy deriving from intellectual union with the divine.⁶⁷ All of the commandments together are described as having the effect of “settling the mind” prior to philosophical speculation, and Maimonides broadly interprets the prohibition of “turning aside to idols” as the need to recognize one’s intellectual limits by eschewing thoughts or investigations that would tend to lead one astray from the truth.⁶⁸

Already at the beginning of the *Guide*, in chapter I: 5, Maimonides cites “the chief of the philosophers”—Aristotle—as a universal model for this kind of personal and intellectual probity, also expressed in narrative terms by Moses’ reticence to speak with God at the ‘burning bush’ of Exodus 3. A person should not “from the outset, strain and impel his thoughts toward the apprehension of the deity,” writes Maimonides. “He rather should feel awe and refrain and hold back until he gradually elevates himself. It is in this sense that it is said,

⁶⁵ In the first chapter of *Hilkhot ‘Avodat ha-Kokhavim*, Maimonides used the term “evil opinion” to describe the analogy between human and divine honor that led to idolatry. Reading these two passages in tandem leads one to the sense (also supported in the *Guide*) that, for Maimonides, there is a close relationship between gross passions or appetites and the imaginative faculty, and that imagination clouds the intellect, leading directly to the attribution of imaginary, corporeal attributes to God. See, for example, chapter I: 32 of the *Guide*, described above.

⁶⁶ *Hilkhot Tume’at ‘Okhlin* 16:12, citing Leviticus 11:44 and 21:8. In “The Laws of Ritual Baths,” *Hilkhot Mikva’ot* 11:12, Maimonides similarly calls attention to the fact that laws of purity and impurity are divine decrees and “not among the things that the human mind can determine.” There is no physical change at all associated with purity and impurity for Maimonides, yet immersion in a ritual bath “hints” to the immersion of the soul in “waters of pure intellect,” which serve to counteract sin and false opinions—probably by symbolizing and also helping to bring about the subduing of the passions. See also “The Laws of Forbidden Foods,” *Hilkhot Ma’akhalot ‘Assurot* 17:32. Once the passions are subdued and the intellect disciplined, it is possible to achieve a non-corporeal conception of the divine, which apprehends the attributes of action and seeks to emulate them.

⁶⁷ Kafiqh edition, *Seder Taharot*, 23.

⁶⁸ See *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 4:13 and *‘Avodat ha-Kokhavim* 2:2–3, respectively. Both texts, it should be noted, make reference to the Mishnah in *Hagigah*.

And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God."⁶⁹ In the end, Moses was rewarded for this behavior, since God allowed to "overflow upon him so much of His bounty and goodness that it became necessary to say of him: *And the figure of the Lord shall he look upon,*" which is a way of saying that his initial reticence allowed him to attain an unprecedented degree of understanding.⁷⁰ Divine honor has philosophical, narrative, medical and ritual connotations for Maimonides, all of which point toward the same set of inescapable conclusions for intellectual practice.⁷¹ Maimonides believes that there is a natural human propensity to desire knowledge about divine matters and to press forward against limitation.⁷² Reason is at the very core of possibilities for being human.⁷³ But only the thoughtful and intellectually engaged recognition of those limits that have not yet been transcended can be said to demonstrate "regard for the honor of the Creator."

III. *Honor, Ethics and the Limits of Religious Language*

Maimonides' ethics are broadly Aristotelian in their shape, though not always in their specific content. Intellectual and practical virtues are interdependent, as they are in Aristotle. As in Aristotle, furthermore, the practical virtues are conceived of as relatively stable acquired states or dispositions (*hexoi* in Greek, *middot* or *dé'ot* in Hebrew) that typically include an emotive component, but which have been

⁶⁹ *Guide*, 29, citing Exodus 3:6.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, citing Numbers 12:8.

⁷¹ Divine honor is therefore closely related to the virtue of *yishuv ha-da'at* or deliberateness and equanimity that Maimonides describes in I: 34 and in many other contexts throughout his legal and philosophical works, including *Yesodei ha-Torah* 4:13. For a reworking of this theme by a Hasidic thinker influenced by Maimonides, see Seeman, "Martyrdom, Emotion and The Work of Ritual."

⁷² Commentary on the Mishnah *Hagigah* 2:1. Compare Aristotle's opening to the *Metaphysics* (980a), which not incidentally also touches on the role of sight in knowledge acquisition: "All human beings desire to know [*eidenai*] by nature. And evidence of this is the pleasure that we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are enjoyed for their own sake, and above all others the sense of eyesight . . . for this more than the other senses allows us to know and brings to light many distinctions." See the discussion of this passage by Nancy Sherman, "The Habituation of Character," in *Aristotle's Ethics: Critical Essays*, ed. Nancy Sherman (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 239.

⁷³ For one example among many, see chapter I: 1 of the *Guide*.

directed and habituated for the right ends in accordance with reason.⁷⁴ At the beginning of *Hilkhot De'ot*, Maimonides goes so far as to connect the “middle path” derived from Aristotle with the “way of God” taught by Moses and Abraham and to assert that this path can also be understood as the fulfillment of the sweeping biblical and rabbinic injunction to emulate God or “walk in God’s ways.” Aristotle, however, seems to posit a broad continuum between divine and human virtue, including “a heroic, indeed divine, sort of virtue” that is quite rare; he notes that “so they say, human beings become gods because of exceedingly great virtue.”⁷⁵ Aristotle also says that the gods do not possess virtue at all in the human sense, but that “the god’s state is more honorable than virtue,” which still might imply a difference of degree or magnitude rather than one of fundamental kind.⁷⁶ For Maimonides, by contrast, the distinction between the human and the divine is immeasurably more profound. While words designating human virtues, like mercy or loving-kindness, are sometimes applied to God, Maimonides explains that these are merely homologies that in no way imply any continuum or essential similarity between divine and human attributes. While Maimonides’ “divine honor” is inevitably related to themes of self-sufficiency and large-scale generosity that also characterize the Aristotelian “great-souled man,” for example, there is simply no sense in which Maimonides would apply the term *megalopsuchos* to the incommensurate divine.⁷⁷ On the contrary, while Maimonides devotes a great deal of attention to the human emulation of certain divine attributes, or *imitatio Dei*, he almost always invokes divine *kavod* (and Exodus 33) to signify that this “emulation” must be qualified, since one cannot really compare God with anything human.

In chapter I: 21 of the *Guide*, for example, Maimonides returns at length to the apparent theophany of Exodus 33 in order to explain the equivocal meaning of the word ‘*abor* (to pass by). The term need not refer to physical movement, according to Maimonides, but may also refer to a shift from one objective or purpose to another. The

⁷⁴ For more on this understanding of virtue in Aristotle’s ethics, see for example *Nicomachean Ethics*, 42 (1106a); Roger Crisp, “Aristotle on Greatness of Soul,” in *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Richard Kraut (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing), 78. Compare the first two chapters of Maimonides’ *Hilkhot De’ot*.

⁷⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 172–73 (1145a).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ See Crisp, “Aristotle on Greatness of Soul.”

stated topic of the chapter is anthropomorphism, but the sheer number of chapters in the *Guide* featuring words crucial to Exodus 33–34 should make it clear that Maimonides' choice of proof texts is far from arbitrary.⁷⁸ Having explained that the word *‘abor* need not refer to physical movement, he now cites the phrase “And the Lord passed by before his face,” which is from the continuation of Moses' unsuccessful quest to “see” God's *kavod*:

The explanation of this . . . is that *Moses*, peace be on him, demanded a certain apprehension—namely, that which in its dictum, *But My face shall not be seen*, is named *the seeing of the face*—and was promised an apprehension inferior to that which he had demanded. It is this latter apprehension that is named *the seeing of the back* in its dictum: *And thou shalt see My back*. We have already given a hint as to this meaning in *Mishneh Torah*.⁷⁹ Scripture accordingly says in this passage that God, may He be exalted, hid from him the apprehension called that *of the face* and made him pass over to something different; I mean the knowledge of the acts ascribed to Him, may He be exalted which, as we shall explain, are deemed to be multiple attributes.⁸⁰

Here, Maimonides explicitly identifies his teaching in the *Guide* with that in the *Mishneh Torah*, where he depicts Moses' request for clear and experientially irrefutable knowledge of divine incommensurability. But Maimonides has also introduced another feature here upon which he will elaborate in later chapters, namely, that Moses' desire to apprehend the “face” of God was not only frustrated (he could see only God's “back”), but actually pushed aside or “passed over” into knowledge of a different kind, called “knowledge of the acts that are ascribed to Him, may He be exalted.” More important than the attack on anthropomorphism, which was ostensibly the subject of this chapter, is the way in which Maimonides has quietly elucidated an entirely different way of approaching the knowledge of God. This approach eliminates the need for problematic assertions

⁷⁸ The multiplicity of chapters in the *Guide* in which Maimonides discusses words from the theophany of Exodus 33 was already noted by R. Yizhak Abravanel at the beginning of his commentary to Exodus 33: *Perush ‘al ha-Torah* (Jerusalem: Arbel Publishers, 1964), vol. 2, 324. Also Kasher, “Maimonides' Interpretation of the Story of Divine Revelation,” and Mordecai Z. Cohen, *Three Approaches to Biblical Metaphor* (Boston: Brill Publishers, 2003), 202–3, who proposes a schema for understanding the organization of chapters 1–49 of the first part of the *Guide*, which highlights Maimonides' use of these verses.

⁷⁹ In *Yesodei ha-Torah* 1:10.

⁸⁰ *Guide*, 48–49.

about divine ontology by focusing on the knowledge of divine actions or action-attributes.

Maimonides builds his argument about *imitatio Dei* gradually, over the course of several chapters in the first part of the *Guide*. In chapter I: 38, he returns to the meaning of the expression “to see God’s back,” from Exodus 33, which he explains can mean “following and imitating the conduct of an individual with respect to the conduct of life. Thus: *Ye shall walk at the back of the Lord your God . . .* In this sense it is said: *And thou shalt see My back*, which means that thou shalt apprehend what follows Me, has come to be like Me, and follows necessarily from My will—that is, all the things created by Me, as I shall explain in a chapter of this Treatise.”⁸¹ Maimonides does not make good on this promise until I: 54, where he explains that God’s willingness to show Moses the divine “back” is not just an expression of lesser certainty concerning divine uniqueness, as he implies in the first chapter of the *Mishneh Torah*, but also a positive revelation of the attributes of divine action:

When [Moses] asked for knowledge of the attributes and asked for forgiveness for the nation, he was given a [favorable] answer with regard to their being forgiven. Then he asked for the apprehension of His essence, may He be exalted. This is what it means when he says, *Show me, I pray Thee, Thy glory* [kavod]; whereupon he received a favorable answer with what he had asked for at first—namely, *Show me Thy ways*.⁸² For he was told: *I will make all My goodness pass before thee*.⁸³ In answer to his second demand [i.e., to see the *kavod*], he was told: *Thou canst not see My face*, and so on.⁸⁴

According to Maimonides’ reading, the *first* question that Moses asked concerned the philosophically radical quest to know God’s essence, which begins with the certain and unshakeable knowledge of divine incommensurability. But from that question, God “passed over” to Moses’ second question, which was his desire to know the divine attributes that would allow him to earn forgiveness for the Israelites, who had recently sinned by building a golden calf. Even though Moses’ attempt to know God’s essence was frustrated according to Maimonides, the implication is that this was a necessary stage in gaining divine assent regarding his other request, since “he who

⁸¹ *Guide*, 87.

⁸² Exodus 33:13.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 33:19.

⁸⁴ *Guide*, 124.

knows God *finds grace in His sight*, and not he who merely fasts and prays, but everyone who has knowledge of Him.”⁸⁵ An appropriate understanding of the action attributes (which are extrinsic to God) is thus subsequent to and consequent upon one’s understanding the divine essence to the extent humanly possible. The moment at which Moses is forced to recognize the ultimate limits of human understanding (“A human cannot see Me and live!”) is thus also the moment at which Moses is pushed from an ontological revelation of God’s *essence* towards an ethical and political revelation of God’s *ways*.⁸⁶

Maimonides insists that the “thirteen attributes of mercy” revealed to Moses in Exodus 34 (“The Lord! The Lord! A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, etc.”) were actually part of a much broader revelation that was not entirely recorded by the Torah. God’s assertion that “I will cause all my goodness to pass before you” in Exodus 33:19 thus “alludes to the display to [Moses] of all existing things of which it is said: *And God saw every thing that He had made, and, behold, it was very good.*”⁸⁷ This was a broad and possibly incommunicable vision of the full span of divine governance in the world: “I mean that he will apprehend their nature [the nature of all created things] and the way they are mutually connected so that he [Moses] will know how He [God] governs them in general and in detail.”⁸⁸ The revelation of God’s “goodness” (i.e., attributes of action or Providence) is therefore a substitute for the vision of *kavod*-as-divine-essence that Moses initially sought. This is quite different from Saadyah’s suggestion that “goodness” might be read as a synonym for *kavod* in Exodus 33, which would imply that Moses actually received what he asked for, a vision of the “created light.”⁸⁹ For Maimonides, it is precisely the *difference* between “goodness” and “*kavod*” that is critical in this biblical narrative because he wants to

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 123–124.

⁸⁶ In *Duties of the Heart* I:10, Ibn Paquda also emphasizes that attributes of action are the sole accessible way of achieving positive knowledge about the divine, but one gets the sense from his discussion that practical and cognitive knowledge are simply distinct, whereas Maimonides maintains a much more robust sense of the interdependence between them. This is partly the result of Maimonides’ strong literary reading of Exodus 33–34, for which *Duties of the Heart* offers no parallel.

⁸⁷ *Guide*, 124, citing Genesis 1:31.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Perushei Rav Saadyah Gaon le-Sefer Shemot*, 217–18.

present Exodus 33–34 as much more than a problematic Scriptural passage requiring explanation. It is rather a model for how people who seek ethical and intellectual advancement ought to proceed. According to this model, it is not enough to study the cosmos (God’s “goodness”) in order to achieve perfection, as some modern scholars of Maimonides intimate.⁹⁰ One must *also* engage in philosophical speculation about the divine at the limits of human apprehension, recognize those limits, and engage in the ongoing and progressive apprehension of what makes the divine and the human incommensurable.

Maimonides’ account is informed by the fact that the classical rabbis had already identified the “thirteen attributes of mercy” revealed to Moses in Exodus 34 as principles for divine emulation. “Just as He is called gracious, so you should be gracious, just as He is called compassionate, so you should be compassionate, just as He is called holy, so you should be holy . . . in order to emulate Him to the extent possible.”⁹¹ Maimonides chose to follow the version of the *Sifri*, rather than that of the Talmud, perhaps because the former seems to emphasize that God is *called* gracious, compassionate and holy, while humans are *called upon to be* gracious, compassionate and holy.⁹² Even with respect to the attributes of action, the “great eagle” remains committed to minimizing anthropomorphic and anthropocentric conceptions of divine activity that inhere almost inescapably to religious language:

⁹⁰ This is perhaps my primary disagreement with Kellner’s discussion of *kavod* in *Maimonides’ Confrontation with Mysticism*.

⁹¹ *Hilkhot De’ot* 1:6. Also see *Sefer ha-Mizvot*, positive commandment number 8.

⁹² Commentators have noted that Maimonides eschews the formulation of the Babylonian Talmud (*Shabbat* 133b, *Sotah* 54b), “Just as He is compassionate, so you should be compassionate,” in favor of *Sifri*, *Ekev* 13, which is close to the language cited here. Also see *Midrash Tanhuma*, *Shemot* 20, in which God responds to Moses’ request to know God’s name at the beginning of Exodus: “What do you wish to know? I am called according to my actions—When I judge the creatures I am called ‘Judge’ (*’elohim*) . . . and when I conduct myself in the attribute of mercy, I am called ‘Merciful.’ My name is according to my actions.” Most other commentators, it should be pointed out, cite the Babylonian Talmud unless they are directly quoting Maimonides. An exception that supports my reading is the heavily Maimonidean *Sefer ha-Hinnukh*, *mizvot* 555 and 611, which cites the Maimonidean formulation in order to make a point about the impossibility of God’s possessing actual attributes. In *Guide* I: 54, ironically, Maimonides does cite the simpler version of this teaching from the *Bavli*, but this is in the context of a lengthy discussion about the nature of the attributes, which makes it less likely that the reader will misunderstand.

For instance, one apprehends the kindness of His governance in the production of embryos of living beings, the bringing of various faculties to existence in them and in those who rear them after birth—faculties that preserve them from destruction and annihilation and protect them against harm and are useful to them in all the doings that are necessary to them. Now actions of this kind proceed from us only after we feel a certain affection and compassion, and this is the meaning of mercy. God, may He be exalted, is said to be *merciful* just as it is said, *Like as a father is merciful to his children. . .*⁹³ It is not that He, may He be exalted, is affected and has compassion. But an action similar to that which proceeds from a father in respect to his child and that is attached to compassion, pity, and an absolute passion proceeds from Him, may He be exalted, in reference to His holy ones, not because of a passion or a change.⁹⁴

Humans may be compassionate, but God is only “called compassionate” when human virtues are really what we have in mind. It is in fact the incommensurability of the divine that links our knowledge of God with the attainment of ethical perfection, since *imitatio Dei* expresses our inability to attain real knowledge of divine intentionality and forces us to focus on the *results* of divine action instead of their cause. “For the utmost virtue of man is to become like unto Him, may He be exalted, as far as he is able; which means that we should make our actions like unto His . . . The purpose of all this is to show that the attributes ascribed to Him are attributes of His actions and that they do not mean that He possesses qualities.”⁹⁵ The very term *imitatio Dei*, which I have been using for the sake of

⁹³ *Guide*, 125 (chapter I: 54), citing Psalms 103:13.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* Passion or affect (*infīʿāl* in Arabic, *hifʿalut* in Ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew) is used in the Aristotelian sense of “being acted upon” and hence changed by an external force, which is one of the reasons Maimonides holds that this kind of language cannot be applied to God. He is preceded in this argument by Ha-Levi’s *Kuzari*, 2:2. “The sage said: ‘All of these names are descriptions of attributes that are added to His essence, since they are borrowed from the passions that created beings are moved by . . . Thus, He is called ‘Merciful’ when He does good for man . . . even though the nature of [these qualities] in us is nothing other than weakness of the soul and the activation of our natures, which is impossible to predicate of Him, may He be blessed. . . .’” Later writers who sought to preserve Maimonides’ authority while rejecting his cosmology sometimes argued that these strictures on divine emotion applied only to the upper reaches of divinity in the sephirothic sense—an argument that Maimonides himself would have rejected. See Seeman, “Ritual Efficacy, Hasidic Mysticism and ‘Useless Suffering’ in the Warsaw Ghetto,” *Harvard Theological Review* 101: 2 (2008), and *idem.*, “Ethics, Violence and Divine Honor in Modern Jewish Thought.”

⁹⁵ *Guide*, 128.

convenience, must remain in brackets for Maimonides, because the term “emulation of the divine” is potentially so misleading.

Some modern readers have been misled into supposing that, since God cannot be said to possess emotive virtues, human perfection must therefore also reside either in the performance of the commandments or in the cultivation of a rational persona, without any expectation of embodied and frequently affective qualities like compassion or kindness that must be inculcated over time.⁹⁶ Maimonides’ son R. Abraham, by contrast, insists that Maimonides thinks *imitatio Dei* is an ethical directive distinct from general obedience to the commandments because it requires not only correct actions but also the cultivation of freestanding moral virtues.⁹⁷ It would be surprising if anyone writing in a broadly Aristotelian context like Maimonides thought otherwise.⁹⁸ When Maimonides writes in I: 54 that “all passions are evil,” readers ought to remember the strong distinction he makes in both philosophical and medical writings between the stormy transience of passing affect (*infī‘āl* in Arabic or *hif‘aluyot* in Ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew)—which is a dangerous departure from the mean (Galen calls it *pathe psyches*) related to illness and error—and settled moral/emotional states (*middot* or *dé‘ot*) that are duly chosen and inculcated

⁹⁶ See for instance Howard Kreisel, *Maimonides’ Political Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 140, 175, who argues that *imitatio Dei* leads to the transcendence of all emotional traits, and other writers who identify *imitatio Dei* with the performance of the commandments as objective acts, without reference to the expression of any intentional virtue. Cf. Kenneth Seeskin, *Searching for a Distant God: The Legacy of Maimonides* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 95–98; Menahem Kellner, *Maimonides on Human Perfection*; and Shalom Rosenberg, “You Shall Walk in His Ways,” trans. Joel Linsider, *The Edah Journal* 2 (2002).

⁹⁷ I have relied upon the Hebrew translation of R. Abraham’s responsa, which is printed as a commentary on the eighth positive commandment (“To Emulate God”) in Maimonides’ *Sefer ha-Mizvot*, trans. Moshe Ibn Tibbon (Jerusalem: Shabse Frankel Publisher, 1995), 218. Maimonides’ own language in *Sefer ha-Mizvot* mentions the imitation of God’s “good actions and honorable traits,” which is also the topic of the first chapter of *Hilkhot Dé‘ot* and the fourth chapter of *Shemoneh Peraqim*.

⁹⁸ J. O. Urmson, “Aristotle’s Doctrine of the Mean,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 157–70, reminds critics that for Aristotle, “excellence of character is concerned with both emotions and actions, not with actions alone” (159), so that ultimately there is “no emotion one should never experience” (165–66). Aristotle himself writes: “We have now discussed the virtues in general . . . they are means and they are states. Certain actions produce them and they cause us to do these same actions, expressing the virtues themselves, in the way that correct reason prescribes.” See *Nicomachean Ethics*, 70 (1114b); cf. L. A. Kosman, “Being Properly Affected: Virtues and Feelings in Aristotle’s Ethics,” in *Aristotle’s Ethics: Critical Essays*, 261–276.

through habitual training in accord with reason.⁹⁹ In his legal writings, Maimonides frequently invokes *imitatio Dei* in characterizing actions that transcend the requirements of the law in order to realize meta-legal values such as “His mercy is upon all His works,” values that describe a generative ethos rather than a set of specific actions known in advance.¹⁰⁰

Maimonides’ decision to situate this question of the imitation of the divine within these two contexts—a discussion of political governance in I: 54 of the *Guide* and a discussion of personal ethical development in the first chapter of *Hilkhot De’ot*—points more to the different genres of the two works than it does to any fundamental discrepancy between his messages.¹⁰¹ Aristotle too opens the *Nicomachean Ethics* by identifying his object of study as both individual ethics and political science, “for while it is satisfactory to acquire and preserve the good even for an individual, it is finer and more divine to acquire and preserve it for a people and for cities.”¹⁰² The structural opposition that some modern readers posit between politics and ethics has little or no relevance in this context, where “the true politician seems to have spent more effort on virtue than on anything else, since he wants to make the citizens good and law abiding.”¹⁰³ Yet here, too, we must remember that the dual ethical and political nature of Moses’ revelation in no way detracts from the need to continue

⁹⁹ See *Nicomachean Ethics*, 42 (1106a); Garcia-Ballester, *Galen and Galenism*, 140–41. Maimonides makes this distinction in a medical context in *Regimen Sanitatis*, 58–63. Also see Benor, *Worship of the Heart*, 46. Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean, upon which Maimonides relies, is itself arguably based upon a medical analogy. See Izhak Englard, “The Example of Medicine in Law and Equity—On a Methodological Analogy in Classical and Jewish Thought,” *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 5:2 (1985): 238–47.

¹⁰⁰ Psalms 145:9. See for example the “Laws of Slaves” (*Hilkhot ‘Avadim*) 9:8 and “Laws of Impurity of Foods” (*Hilkhot Tum’at Okhlin*) 16:12. “[T]he law alone,” Twersky notes, “. . . is not the exclusive criterion of ideal religious behavior, either positive or negative. It does not exhaust religious-moral requirements. . . for the goal of the Torah is the maximum sanctification of life” (*Introduction to the Code of Maimonides*, 428).

¹⁰¹ Also see *Sefer ha-Mizvot*, positive commandment number 8.

¹⁰² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1985), 3 (1094b) and 23 (1100a) respectively. Also see the useful discussions in Eugene Garver, *Confronting Aristotle’s Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) and Malcolm Schofield, “Aristotle’s Political Ethics,” in *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Richard Kraut (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), 305–322.

¹⁰³ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 29 (1102a).

the graduated and possibly asymptotic philosophical quest to refine the apprehension of divine uniqueness.¹⁰⁴

On the contrary, while the moment of Moses' confrontation with human limitation can be described as a collapse of ontology into politics and ethics (the vision of God's "goodness" rather than God's *kavod*), this collapse is neither total nor catastrophic. The point of Maimonides' repeated appeals to the biblical narrative in Exodus 33 is not that Moses was wrong for seeking to know the divine *kavod*, but rather that Moses' confrontation with his own speculative limits was a necessary prerequisite for his later apprehension of the divine attributes. Without the intellectual training and virtue associated with "Show me please Thy *kavod*," in other words, the knowledge of positive attributes (even action attributes like those made known to Moses) leads too easily to reification and idolatry, or to the *melancholia* caused by false analogy and "vain imagining." It was after all the inability to "refrain and hold back" and to "have regard for the honor of their Creator" that led the children of Israel to idolatry in the matter of the Golden Calf, which forms the narrative backdrop for Moses' appeal to know God in Exodus 33:

That I may know Thee, to the end that I may find grace in Thy sight and consider that this nation is Thy people—that is, a people for the government of which I need to perform actions that I must seek to make similar to Thy actions in governing them.¹⁰⁵

The lonely philosopher's quest to know God and the prophet's active intercession in his people's governance turn out to be different moments in a single process concerned with knowing and emulating God.¹⁰⁶ Divine emulation only strengthens, but does not obviate, the religious and philosophical obligation to continue purifying speech and thought.

¹⁰⁴ See the useful discussion of various modern views on this matter in Kellner, *Maimonides on Human Perfection* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990).

¹⁰⁵ *Guide*, 124–125, citing Exodus 33:13.

¹⁰⁶ Various readers have puzzled over the relationship between ethical and speculative knowledge in Maimonides' corpus. I find especially intriguing the sixteenth-century kabbalist R. Isaiah Horowitz's suggestion that each of Maimonides' famous "Thirteen Principles of Faith" is actually derived from one of the "Thirteen Attributes of Mercy" described in Exodus 34. While some of R. Horowitz's readings feel forced, and there is no evidence to suggest that Maimonides himself could have held such a view, this intuition of a close relationship between speculative and ethical knowledge in Maimonides does seem to me to be correct, and is supported by the revelation of ethical knowledge at the limit of philosophy in Exodus 33–34. See R. Isaiah Horowitz, *Shnei Luhot ha-Brit*, vol. 1, 212–219 (*Sha'ar ha-'Otiyot, Sha'ar 'Alef*).

Maimonides' own philosophical labor models this graduated approach. With respect to the understanding of divine *kavod* in Exodus 33, he admits of at least three different classes of readings that appeal to different classes of readers.¹⁰⁷ First, there are false and vulgar notions like divine corporeality (i.e., the idea that "Show me please Thy *kavod*!" was really an attempt to see some kind of divine form) that must be extirpated at almost any price. Onkelos' and Saadyah's belief in the created light hypothesis, by contrast, is incorrect yet tolerable, because it does not contravene any point of philosophical necessity.¹⁰⁸ The most sophisticated views, like Maimonides' own equation of God's essence (*kavod*) with unknowable incommensurability, cannot be grasped by everyone and must sometimes actually be hidden from those who would misconstrue them. Thus, the author's much cited principle that "the Torah speaks in human language" takes on different meanings throughout the *Guide*. In the early chapters of the first part of the *Guide*, it means that the Torah eschews certain kinds of anthropomorphic language that would portray God in a negative light. God is never portrayed as sleeping or copulating even according to the plain meaning of Scripture, for example, but is frequently portrayed as seeing, hearing and feeling emotion.¹⁰⁹ Later chapters in the first part do however call attention to the anthropomorphic nature of ethical and emotive language that is applied to God by Scripture.¹¹⁰

Finally, in chapters I: 57–59, Maimonides teaches that even highly abstract qualities like "oneness" cannot really be attributed to God except in a certain negative or equivocal sense that constantly gives way to unintelligibility. "Similarly, when we say that He is *one*, the

¹⁰⁷ See James Arthur Diamond, *Maimonides and the Hermeneutics of Concealment: Deciphering Scripture and Midrash in The Guide of the Perplexed* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

¹⁰⁸ See for instance I:18, where Maimonides teaches that the nearness of God refers to intellectual cognition. "The verse (Exodus 24:2) is to be interpreted in this way, unless you wish to consider that the expression *shall come near*, used with reference to *Moses*, means that the latter shall approach the place on the mountain upon which the light, I mean *the glory of God*, has descended. For you are free to do so. You must however, hold fast to the doctrinal principle that there is no difference whether an individual is at the center of the earth . . . or in the highest part of the ninth heavenly sphere . . . For nearness to Him, may He be exalted, consists in apprehending Him" (*Guide*, 44–45). Also see chapters I: 4 and 25.

¹⁰⁹ *Guide*, 104–106 (chapter I: 47).

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 133, 140 (chapters I: 57, 59).

meaning is that He has no equal, and not that the notion of oneness attaches to His essence.”¹¹¹ It is worth pointing out that the Arabic word translated here as “essence” is *dhātihi*. This word had previously been used by Ibn Paquda throughout chapter I:10 of his *Duties of the Heart*, which foreshadows many of the themes raised by Maimonides in the first part of the *Guide*. Ibn Paquda’s translator Judah Ibn Tibbon consistently translated *dhātihi* as divine *kavod* in his 1160 translation, some thirty years before his son Samuel Ibn Tibbon published his famous Hebrew translation of Maimonides’ *Guide*. As we have seen, Maimonides himself also directly makes this association of *kavod* with unknowable essence in chapter 1:10 of *Yesodei ha-Torah*, the first chapter of his legal code. The association continues in a somewhat more elliptical form throughout the *Guide*.

In chapter I: 59, Maimonides insists that no religious speech, no matter how refined, can do justice to the divine glory:

Glory [or praise] then to Him who is such that when the intellects contemplate His essence, their apprehension turns into incapacity; and when they contemplate the proceeding of His actions from His will, their knowledge turns to ignorance; and when the tongues aspire to magnify Him by means of attributive qualifications, all eloquence turns to weariness and incapacity!¹¹²

The Arabic term for glory used here is *subhān*, which is a cognate of the Hebrew *shevah* or praise, and is identified in I: 64 as one of the equivocal meanings of *kavod*. In a different context, “weariness and incapacity” are identified with the pathology of *melancholia* that comes upon a person who ignores intellectual limitations, yet here the inability to speak, or to conceive of the divine essence, is paradoxically a source of praise at the very heart of true divine worship.

This has strong implications for the life of prayer. According to Maimonides, fixed prayers and some anthropomorphic language are necessary for a broad religious community, yet the enlightened believer must also recognize that all words of praise are potential obstacles to understanding:

The most apt phrase concerning this subject is the dictum occurring in the Psalms, *Silence is praise to Thee*, which interpreted signifies: silence with regard to You is praise. This is a most perfectly put phrase regarding

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 137.

this matter.¹¹³ For whatever we say intending to magnify and exalt, on the one hand we find that it can have some application to Him, may He be exalted, and on the other we perceive in it some deficiency. Accordingly, silence and limiting oneself to the apprehension of the intellects are more appropriate—just as the perfect ones have enjoined when they said: *Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still, Selah.*¹¹⁴

Maimonides has already told us that “praise” is sometimes a synonym for *kavod*, and here the concept of praise without speech parallels the biblical *kavod* with no image. In *Guide* I: 59, Maimonides famously cites the Talmudic story of Rabbi Ḥaninah, who criticized a man for praising God as “the Great, the Valiant, the Terrible, the Mighty, the Strong, the Tremendous, the Powerful,” because of the multiplicity of terms that had not already been ratified by the prophets and sages of Israel.¹¹⁵ “It is as if a mortal king who had millions of gold pieces were praised for possessing silver ones,” Maimonides writes, indicating that the composition of endless, varied liturgies and flowery praises of God should be disallowed.¹¹⁶

Other writers took a less extreme position on this issue—R. Hai, for instance, thought that the stricture on linguistic flourish applied only to formal prayer and not to informal supplication.¹¹⁷ One of the great offences, from Maimonides’ point of view, was ironically a medieval hymn known as *Shir ha-Kavod* (the ‘Song of Glory’), because of its robust anthropomorphic imagery of divine grandeur. Maimonides takes precise aim at this kind of religious poetry, whose objectionable nature connects to the theme of intellectual restraint and divine honor with which we began:

¹¹³ Psalms 65:12.

¹¹⁴ *Guide*, 139–140, citing Psalms 4:5. On the importance to prophecy of sleep and the moments before sleep, see Diamond, *Maimonides and the Hermeneutics of Concealment*. For a comprehensive view of Maimonides’ attitudes towards prayer, see Benor, *Worship of the Heart*.

¹¹⁵ *Guide*, 140, based on Talmud *Berakhot* 33b.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ In his “Laws of Prayer,” or *Hilkhot Tefillah* 9:7, Maimonides rules somewhat sweepingly (and in language reminiscent of the *Guide*) that the multiplication of divine titles and praises beyond those used by Moses is prohibited under Jewish law, since “it is not within human power to adequately praise Him.” Later commentators (like Maharsha to *Berakhot* 33b) cite Rav Hai’s view. Along these lines see *Shulḥan ʿArukh*, *ʾOrah Hayyim* 113:9 and related commentaries.

This kind of license is frequently taken by poets and preachers or such as think that what they speak is poetry, so that the utterances of some of them constitute an absolute denial of faith, while other utterances contain such rubbish and such perverse imaginings as to make men laugh when they hear them . . . Accordingly if you are one *who has regard for the honor of his Creator*, you ought not listen in any way to these utterances, let alone give expression to them and still less make up others like them.¹¹⁸

Just as “regard for the honor of the Creator” is expressed in intellectual terms through resistance to “false analogy and vain imagining,” so it is expressed in ritual terms through restraint to liturgical flourish.

The relationship between speech, apprehension, and the divine *kavod* which “fills” the world is made even more explicit in *Guide* I: 64:

In fact, all that is other than God, may He be exalted, honors Him. For the true way of honoring Him consists in apprehending His greatness.¹¹⁹ Thus, everybody who apprehends His greatness and His perfection honors Him according to the extent of his apprehension. Man in particular honors Him by speeches so that he indicates thereby that which he has apprehended by his intellect and communicates it to others. Those beings that have no apprehension, as for instance the minerals, also as it were honor God through the fact that by their very nature they are indicative of the power and wisdom of Him who brought them into existence . . . Thus Scripture says: *All my bones shall say, Lord, who is like unto Thee*,¹²⁰ whereby it conveys that the bones necessitate this belief, as though they put it into speech . . . It is in view of this notion being named *glory* [*kavod*] that it is said, *The whole earth is full of His glory* . . . for praise is called *glory*.¹²¹

Maimonides specifies in this chapter that *kavod* is an equivocal term. It can “signify the created light that God causes to descend in a particular place in order to confer honor upon it in a miraculous way: *And the glory of Y.H.V.H. abode upon Mount Sinai, and [the cloud]*

¹¹⁸ *Guide*, 142.

¹¹⁹ “Honoring him” here is *taʿzimuhu*, from the same root as “His greatness,” *ʿazmatahu*, so that another way of translating this might be “Rendering God great means apprehending His greatness.” This is well within the homonymic sense of *kavod* as praise, set forth by Maimonides in I: 64.

¹²⁰ Psalms 35:10.

¹²¹ *Guide*, 157, citing Isaiah 6:3.

covered it, and so on.”¹²² Or it can “signify His essence and true reality, may He be exalted, as when [Moses] says, *Show me, I pray Thee, Thy glory [kavod]*, and was answered: *For man shall not see Me and live.*”¹²³ Or, finally, it can signify praise, as in “the honoring of Him, may He be exalted, by all men,” including the manifest (and silent) witness of creation.¹²⁴

This concept of “the honoring of Him, may He be exalted,” which calls for correct forms of praise, is however also clearly dependent upon the knowledge of “His essence and true reality.” The many possible meanings of *kavod* invite the reflective reader to contemplate with some urgency its appearance in any specific narrative context. None of Maimonides’ predecessors put such great emphasis upon a handful of verses in Exodus 33–34, but that is because none of them viewed this episode as a fundamental prism through which both *imitatio Dei* and the limits of religious speech could be understood. The whole Maimonidean attempt to clarify religion is encapsulated by his reading of these verses, whose meaning he must therefore jealously guard from misinterpretation. And so, as Part I draws to a close in chapter I: 64, Maimonides tellingly pauses to insist that we take care to understand the Scriptural term *kavod* correctly. “Understand then likewise the equivocality [multiplicity of meanings] with reference to glory,” he notes with laconic understatement in chapter 64, “and interpret the latter in every passage in accordance with the context. You shall thus be saved from great difficulty.”¹²⁵

IV. *On Divine Honor and the Phenomenology of Human Perfection*

In chapter 8 of the first part of the *Guide*, while ostensibly just describing the question of divine corporeality, Maimonides alerts us to the fact that *kavod* will be central to his whole philosophical project in the *Guide*. He references the word “place” (*maqom*) and explains that this term, when applied to the divine, refers not to a location but rather to “a rank in theoretical speculation and the contemplation of

¹²² *Ibid.*, 156, citing Exodus 24:16.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, citing Exodus 33:18–20.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 157.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

the intellect.” Yet Maimonides restricts his focus to just two biblical verses that each thematize divine glory in this context: Ezekiel’s “Blessed be the glory [*kavod*] of the Lord from His place,” and God’s response to Moses, “Behold there is a place by Me,” from Exodus 33.¹²⁶ He then interrupts the flow of his argument in order to offer a striking methodological recommendation for how the *Guide* should be studied:

Know with regard to every term whose equivocality we shall explain to you in this Treatise that our purpose in such an explanation is not only to draw your attention to what we mention in that particular chapter. Rather do we open a gate and draw your attention to such meanings of that particular term as are useful for our purposes . . . These our words are the key to this Treatise and to others; a case in point being the explanation we have given of the term *place* in the dictum of Scripture: *Blessed be the glory of the Lord from his place*. For you should know that this very meaning is that of the term *place* in its dictum, *Behold, there is a place by Me*.¹²⁷

Here, we have Maimonides’ more or less explicit admission that the episode in Exodus 33–34 and *kavod* in general are “key to this treatise” as a whole. We have already seen how frequently this theme is referenced throughout Part I of the *Guide*, as Maimonides pushes the theme of divine incommensurability to exclude more and more of our linguistic and conceptual categories. The divine *kavod* is not mentioned again in Part II, but it is central to the discussion of theodicy and human perfection that occupies much of Part III.

In chapter III: 9, for example, Maimonides describes how matter acts as a “strong veil” to prevent the apprehension of the non-corporeal. The theme is not new, but in this context it facilitates the transition from Maimonides’ discussion of metaphysics (“the Chariot”) to his consideration of the vexing problem of human suffering. Maimonides wants to emphasize that the material substrate of all human understanding makes impossible the full comprehension of divine ways, and that this should inspire in readers a deep reservoir of humility that will influence how they reflect upon the problems of evil and human misery. Rather than doubting divine power or beneficence, in other words, one should acknowledge that some

¹²⁶ Ezekiel 3:12 and Exodus 33:21.

¹²⁷ *Guide*, 34.

things are beyond the power of human apprehension. "This is also what is intended," he writes, "in [Scripture's] dictum: *darkness, cloud, and thick darkness*,¹²⁸ and not that He, may He be exalted, was encompassed by *darkness*; for near Him, may He be exalted, there is no darkness, but perpetual, dazzling light the overflow of which illumines all that is dark—in accordance with what is said in the prophetic parables: *And the earth did shine with His glory [kavod]*."¹²⁹ This is not a perceptible light for Maimonides, but a parable of human intellectual perception at its limits.

In the chapters that follow, Maimonides insists that most people are born under all of the conditions required to achieve felicity, but that suffering is frequently caused by human agency, in the form of violence that ruins the social order or overindulgence that ruins the individual constitution.¹³⁰ Despite the inevitable ravages of privation in which "the harlot matter" seeks and then discards new material forms (causing sickness and decay), existence itself remains one of the greatest goods that the Creator bestows.¹³¹ Yet Maimonides also insists that divine "goodness" cannot effectively be measured by human desires or prejudices, and that we must learn to view creation from the perspective of divine (rather than merely human) intentionality.¹³² "I will cause all My goodness to pass before thee," in Exodus 33, was a promise that Moses would apprehend the workings of divine providence, but it was no promise that these workings would always be pleasurable to the people whom they concern. Even death and passing away are described as "good" by Maimonides, in "view of the perpetuity of generation and the permanence of being through succession," though he harbors no illusion that these experiences will always be perceived as "good" by the individual sufferer.¹³³ A crucial proof text, which also links this discussion to Maimonides' view of the divine *kavod*, is a verse from Proverbs chapter 16: "*The Lord hath made everything* *lima'anehu*," which may be translated as either "for its own sake" or "for His [God's] sake."

¹²⁸ Deuteronomy 4:11.

¹²⁹ *Guide*, 437, citing Ezekiel 43:2.

¹³⁰ This is the overall theme of III: 12.

¹³¹ In III: 10 for instance, he writes, "Rather, all His acts, may He be exalted, are an absolute good; for He only produces being, and all being is a good." In III: 12, "For His bringing us into existence is absolutely the great good, as we have made clear . . ." See *Guide*, 440 and 448, respectively.

¹³² *Guide*, 448–56 (chapter III: 13).

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 440 (chapter III: 10).

Maimonides takes this phrase to mean, “for the sake of His essence, may He be exalted—that is, for the sake of His will, as the latter is His essence.”¹³⁴

This reading dispels the popular anthropocentric view held by Saadyah, and possibly by the younger Maimonides himself, which purports that the world was actually created for the sake of human beings.¹³⁵ Maimonides’ insistence that “for His [God’s] sake” really means “for the sake of his essence” also combats the view that the world was created in order to open a space for divine service from which God too would benefit, as in the theurgist’s credo that “human service is a divine need,” which was popularized by the school of Nahmanides.¹³⁶ Indeed, this chapter of the *Guide* has even sometimes been cited by later kabbalists seeking to qualify the radical implications of this early kabbalistic teaching.¹³⁷ For Maimonides, the discussion of God’s unique and unknowable essence leads inevitably back to his earlier discussion of the unfathomable divine *kavod*:

¹³⁴ Ibid., 452–53, citing Proverbs 16:4.

¹³⁵ See Norman Lamm, “Man’s Position in the Universe: A Comparative Study of the Views of Saadia Gaon and Maimonides,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 55 (1965): 208–234. Also see the statements Maimonides made as a young man in the introduction to his commentary on the Mishnah, where he cites the view that the world was created for the sake of the righteous individual. This anthropocentric position was typically embraced by later kabbalists. For a classical statement, see R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto’s early eighteenth century ethical tract *Mesilat Yesharim* (Dialogue Version and Thematic Version), ed. Avraham Shoshana (Jerusalem: Ofeq Institute, 1994), 369, as well as 66–74 of the dialogue version and 204–8 of the thematic version. Luzzatto argues that since the world was created for the sake of human spiritual advancement, human beings can either elevate or desecrate creation through their behavior. Joseph Avivi’s introductory essay to this edition suggests that Luzzatto was specifically motivated (especially in the dialogue version) by his disagreement with Maimonides on this score.

¹³⁶ See Nahmanides’ commentary to Exodus 29:46, where he writes that the building of the Tabernacle by the Israelites fulfilled “a need of the *Shekhinah* and not merely a need of human beings,” which was later formulated as ‘*avodah zorekh gavoah*’ or “human service is a divine need.” See R. Baḥya ben Asher’s commentary on Exodus 29:46 and Numbers 15:41, as well as the whole second section of R. Meir Ibn Gabbai’s ‘*Avodat ha-Qodesh*, which details this principle and makes it one of the central points of his long polemic against Maimonides.

¹³⁷ The important Lithuanian writer R. Shlomo Elyashiv (1839–1926) goes out of his way to cite Maimonides’ *Guide* (especially I: 69 and III: 13) in his qualification of this principle. The idea that “human service is a divine need” still requires “sweetening and clarification,” he writes, despite its extensive and widespread kabbalistic credentials. “As for what is written [in Proverbs 16:4] that God made everything for His own sake,” writes R. Elyashiv, “and similarly what has been established

We have already explained that His essence is also called *His glory* [*kavod*], as in its saying: *Show me, I pray Thee, Thy glory*. Thus, his saying here, *The Lord hath made everything lima'anehu* [For His sake] would be like saying: *Everyone that is called by My name, and whom I have created for My glory, I have formed him, yea, I have made him.*¹³⁸ It says that everything whose making is ascribed to Me, has been made by Me solely because of My will.¹³⁹

This radical rejection of both anthropocentrism and false analogies between human and divine intentionality has medical as well as philosophical implications in Maimonides' writing. It lends a degree of equanimity to human consciousness by forestalling foolish and unanswerable questions about the purpose or *telos* of different created beings. A person who "understands every being according to what it is," writes Maimonides, ". . . becomes calm and his thoughts are not troubled by . . . seeking any final end for what has no final end except its own existence, which depends upon the divine will—or if you prefer you can also say: on the divine wisdom."¹⁴⁰ This is precisely the opposite of the *melancholia* and desolation that attend those who pursue questions beyond human comprehension and thereby "fail to have regard for the honor of their Creator."¹⁴¹

that [God] created everything for His glory [*kavod*], the meaning is not, heaven forbid, that it was for His advancement or benefit, but the deep intention is that His light and glory [*kavod*] should be revealed to those who are worthy of it, because the revelation of His light and the revelation of His glory, may He be exalted, is itself the joy and sweetness and brilliance for all those who are worthy to cling to Him and to be together with Him." R. Shlomo Elyashiv, *Sha'arei Leshem Shevo ve-Ahalama* (Jerusalem: Aharon Barzani, 1990), 1–10 (chapter 1:1). R. Elyashiv's sometime student, R. Abraham Isaac Kook directly advanced this same approach in his treatise on ethical development *Musar 'Avikha* (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1971), 46–49. Rabbi Kook attempts to reconcile the Maimonidean and Kabbalistic positions by arguing that human perfection is the greatest of divine "needs"; this is essentially R. Elyashiv's position. On the influence of Lithuanian Kabbalah upon Rav Kook's thought, see Tamar Ross, "The Concept of God in the Thought of Rav Kook" (Hebrew), *Daat* 8 (1982): 109–128.

¹³⁸ Isaiah 43:7.

¹³⁹ *Guide*, 453. It is worth noting that all three of these biblical sources are already juxtaposed in *Sifri 'Egev* 13, which we have already cited above as the source of Maimonides' formulation of *imitatio Dei*. Thus, it may be argued that Maimonides' rich thematic associations were already evident in one of his primary rabbinic sources.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 456.

¹⁴¹ In III: 19 (479), Maimonides punctuates this set of reflections on providence and the problem of evil with a reflection on Psalm 73:11, in which he says that the Psalmist "begins to make clear . . . that God, may He be honored and magnified, who has given us the intellect with which we apprehend—and because of our incapacity to apprehend His true reality, may He be exalted, there arise in us these

Theological truth and psycho-spiritual well-being are always closely connected in Maimonides' corpus, and these, in turn, are dependent upon correct belief and practice.

Nearly half of the third part of the *Guide* is devoted to a discussion of the commandments and their purpose. Maimonides argues that the commandments collectively foster *tiqqun ha-nefesh*, or the perfection of opinion and intellect, as well as *tiqqun ha-guf*, which literally means the perfection of the body but actually refers to both individual and socio-political organization and welfare.¹⁴² It should be noted that these two types of perfection correspond broadly to the primary causes of human suffering—immoderate desire and political violence—that Maimonides described in his chapters on theodicy. We have already touched upon Maimonides' belief that some of the commandments promote an ethos of self restraint identified with showing honor to the divine. But the performance of the commandments is by itself insufficient to guarantee the attainment of human perfection, as Maimonides makes clear in the parable of the palace in *Guide* III: 51. Those who perform and study the commandments without speculative understanding are, at best, like those who walk about the palace from the outside and hope for a glimpse of the king. It is only in the last few chapters of the *Guide* that Maimonides returns to an integrated depiction of what constitutes human perfection, in which *kavod* plays an important role.

In chapter III: 51, for example, Maimonides invokes the intensity of passionate love and attachment (*ishq* in Arabic or *hesheq* in Hebrew) that accompanies profound contemplation and apprehension of the divine. One attains this kind of love through a lifetime of ritual and intellectual discipline whose net effect may well increase with advancing age and physical decline. “[T]he fire of the desires is quenched, the intellect is strengthened, its lights achieve a wider extension, its apprehension is purified, and it rejoices in what it apprehends.”¹⁴³ Just as the moments preceding sleep are treated throughout the *Guide*

great doubts—knows, may He be exalted, this our deficiency; and that no attention should be directed to rash reflections . . . proceeding from this our inadequate thought.”

¹⁴² Compare Schofield, “Aristotle’s Political Ethics,” which describes the relationship of law and political science to both individual and collective excellences in Aristotle.

¹⁴³ *Guide*, 627.

as precious times during which the disciplined intellectual seeker can attain a level of apprehension not available at other times, so “when a perfect man is stricken with years and approaches death, this apprehension increases very powerfully, joy over this apprehension and a great love for the object of apprehension become stronger, until the soul is separated from the body at that moment in this state of pleasure.”¹⁴⁴ This is the level described in biblical language as “death by a kiss,” which is attributed only to Moses, Aaron and Miriam:¹⁴⁵

The other prophets and excellent men are beneath this degree; but it holds good for all of them that the apprehension of their intellects becomes stronger at the separation, just as it is said: *And thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory [kavod] of the Lord shall be at thy rear.*¹⁴⁶ . . . Bring your soul to understand this chapter, and direct your efforts to the multiplying of those times in which you are with God or endeavoring to approach Him and to decreasing the times in which you are with other than He and in which you make no efforts to approach Him. This guidance is sufficient in view of the purpose of this Treatise.¹⁴⁷

In this chapter, *kavod* has once again been invoked at the limits of human knowledge, although here the implication is that human limitation can be transcended to at least some degree when the hold of matter has been weakened. The phrase “The *kavod* of the Lord shall be at thy rear,” from Isaiah 58:8, can also be rendered as “The *kavod* of the Lord shall gather you in,” which, in this context, means that a person devoted to intellectual perfection may die in passionate contemplation of the divine *kavod* or incommensurate essence of God.

Yet far from being in disjuncture with his previous discussion of reasons for the commandments, here Maimonides emphasizes that speculative attainment like that described as “death by a kiss” is grounded in a lifestyle linked to all of the religious practices, “[which] have only the end of training you to occupy yourself with His commandments, may He be exalted, rather than occupying yourself with

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ Miriam’s inclusion is important here because of what it says about Maimonides’ view of women’s potential for intellectual perfection, which he hints at in a more veiled and possibly ambivalent way in relevant passages of the *Mishneh Torah*, such as *Yesodei ha-Torah* 4:13 and *Teshuvah* 10:1.

¹⁴⁶ *Guide*, 628.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

that which is other than He.”¹⁴⁸ The directive to hold God as unique and without analogy to worldly things has here been activated and expressed through a set of practical ritual interventions that make even the quotidian routines of daily life into a series of sites for reflection upon “His commandments, may He be exalted,” rather than “that which is other than He.” This is divine incommensurability ritualized.

Maimonides continues to elaborate the philosophical value of the commandments in III: 52. However, here he posits a distinction between the passionate love of God—which is attained “through the apprehension of His being and His unity, may He be exalted”—and the fear or awe of God—which is inculcated “by means of all the actions prescribed by the Law,” including practices that cultivate humility, like walking about with a bent carriage and with one’s head covered—since “*The earth is full of His glory [kavod]*; all this being intended firmly to establish the notion that . . . we are always before Him, may He be exalted, and walk to and fro while His *Indwelling [Shekhinah]* is with us.”¹⁴⁹ This is just another way of saying that the multiplicity of commandments allows a person to be constantly occupied with the divine to the exclusion of that which is not divine. It should come as no surprise that Maimonides invokes *kavod* to make his points with respect to both overpowering love in chapter 51 and fear (the impulse to “refrain and hold back” and “to have regard for the honor of the Creator”) in chapter 52. In the second chapter of *Yesodei ha-Torah*, too, he links the commandments “to love and to fear this awesome and honored (*nikkbad*) Deity” within a single halakhic formulation. One begins by contemplating the wisdom

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 622. For more on this theme, compare *Hilkhot Mezuzah* (“Laws of *Mezuzah*”) 6:13 and *Hilkhot Shemittah ve-Yovel* (“Laws of Sabbatical and Jubilee Years”) 13:12–13.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 629, citing Isaiah 6:3. Sometimes, even the details of a commandment or the gesture with which it is performed can be conceived as an instantiation of divine honor, as in the important passage at the end of *Hilkhot Shehitah* (“Laws of Slaughter”) 14:6. Maimonides describes the law mandating that the blood of certain kinds of slaughtered animals and birds be covered with earth, and cites the Talmudic teaching that this should be done with the hand or with the slaughter knife rather than with one’s foot, which would appear to debase the performance of the commandment or show it to be disgraceful in the eyes of the person performing the act. Maimonides adds a peroration which is not found in his rabbinic sources: “For honor [*kavod*] does not pertain to the commandments themselves, but to the one who commanded them, may He be blessed, and saved us from groping in the darkness. He prepared for us a lamp to straighten perversities and a light to teach us straight paths. Just as it is said [in Psalm 119:105], ‘Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.’”

attested to by God's "great and wondrous creations," which inspire praise and the passionate desire to know God's great name. Yet "when a person thinks about these very things he is immediately thrown backwards and frightened, terrified in the knowledge that he is a tiny and inconsequential creature remaining in his small and limited intellect" before the perfect intellect of God."¹⁵⁰ Love draws the individual to know God, while fear literally "throws him back" upon his own limitations, a movement reflected in ritual gestures, in obedience to the divine law, and in medical and theological terminology found throughout the broad Maimonidean corpus. We need an analytic framework subtle enough to encompass these different moments in the phenomenology of divine *kavod* without unnecessarily reducing them to a single frame.

One of the ways in which Maimonides accomplishes this rich reverberation of *kavod*-related themes is by shifting attention to different aspects of the verses that he cites in different contexts. In the last chapter of the *Guide*, he returns to Exodus 33 in the course of making a point about the inseparability and mutual reinforcement of speculative and ethical human perfection:

For when explaining in this *verse* the noblest ends, he [Jeremiah] does not limit them only to the apprehension of Him, may He be exalted. For if this were His only purpose, he would have said: *But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth Me that I am One*; or he would have said: *that I have no figure, or that there is none like Me*, or something similar. But he says that one should glory in the apprehension of Myself and in the knowledge of My attributes, by which he means His actions, as we have made clear with reference to the dictum: *Show me now Thy ways*, and so on.¹⁵¹ In this verse, he makes it clear to us that those actions that ought to be known and imitated

¹⁵⁰ *Yesodei ha-Torah* 2:1–2. In his edition of the *Mishneh Torah*, R. Joseph Kafiqh adduces a possible source for this formulation. It is from *Sifri* to Deuteronomy 33:26. "All of Israel gathered before Moses and said, 'Moses our master, what is the measure of honor above [*kavod ma'alah*]?' He said to them, 'From what is below you can learn what the measure of honor above is.' This may be likened to a person who said, 'I desire to behold the honor of the king.' They said to him, 'Enter into the kingdom and you will behold it.' He [attempted to] enter the kingdom and saw a curtain stretched across the entrance with precious stones and jewels affixed to it. Instantly, he fell to the ground. They said to him, 'You were not even able to feast your eyes before falling to the ground. How much more so had you actually entered the kingdom and seen the face of the king!'"

¹⁵¹ Exodus 33.

are *loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness*. He adds another corroborative notion through saying, *in the earth*—this being a pivot of the Law.¹⁵²

The Hebrew word that Pines translates here as “glory” is actually *hillul*, which is usually rendered as “praise,” but which Maimonides has already identified as one of the synonyms or equivocal meanings of *kavod* in I: 64. The glancing reference to Exodus 33 and the phrase “Show me now Thy ways” might well be missed by a careless reader, but it corresponds to the apprehension of divine attributes that Moses only experienced when he reached the hard limits of his ability to understand the divine essence or *kavod*—thus, “the knowledge of Myself and . . . of My attributes.”

Although Maimonides has taught that ethical perfection is a more “external” or disposable form of perfection than intellectual perfection, it is clear from chapter 54 that he is not referring there to the kind of ethical perfection that follows upon speculation at the limits of human capacity. The person whose ethical behavior rests only upon tradition or instrumental rationality can hardly be compared with Moses, whose “Show me now Thy ways” implies a crowning perfection of *imitatio Dei*. Essentially, the same point is made at the end of the first book of the *Mishneh Torah*, where Maimonides writes that a person who has come to acquire knowledge and love of God “performs the truth because it is the truth,” without any instrumental concern for reward or punishment.¹⁵³ Indeed, we are told that one can love God and seek to perform God’s will “only to the extent that one knows God—if much, much, and if little, little.”¹⁵⁴ Neither cognitive nor practical knowledge can be conceived in isolation because knowledge of God translates into an intense love accompanied by the desire to approximate those attributes that Scripture has specified for human emulation. The observance of the law is

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 637.

¹⁵³ *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 10:1. A similar statement can be found in the introduction to the tenth chapter of *Sanhedrin* in the Commentary on the Mishnah (*Kafiqh* edition, 135): “The only *telos* of truth is to know that it is the truth, and the commandments are true, therefore their *telos* is their fulfillment.” Compare Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* 2:4, on the performance of virtuous actions for their own sake—also discussed by M. F. Burnyeat, “Aristotle on Learning to be Good,” in *Aristotle’s Ethics*, 205–239.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

spiritualized through a powerful consciousness of *imitatio Dei*, which, in turn, promotes the ongoing, asymptotic acquisition of deeper and more refined intellectual apprehension.

Both divine *kavod* and the concept of honoring the divine are invoked at each stage of this graduated intellectual process. Thus, *kavod* accompanies the passion to know God's incommensurable essence ("Show me please, Thy *kavod!*") and is also identified with the ethos of restraint known as "having regard for the Creator's honor"; it signifies both the collapse of religious speech into silence which is true praise ("His *kavod* fills the world") and the collapse of ontology into an apprehension of God's "goodness," which humankind can emulate through kindness, judgment and righteousness. Taken together, these different instantiations of divine honor constitute a graduated model of spiritual and intellectual practice that appears in different forms throughout Maimonides' corpus but is brought together in a single overarching statement at the *Guide's* conclusion:

It is clear that the perfection of men that may truly be gloried in is the one acquired by him who has achieved, in a measure corresponding to his capacity, apprehension of Him, may He be exalted, and who knows His providence extending over His creatures as manifested in the act of bringing them into being and in their governance as it is. The way of life of such an individual, after he has achieved this apprehension, will always have in view *loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment*, through assimilation to His actions, may He be exalted, just as we have explained several times in this Treatise.¹⁵⁵

Maimonides' claim that he has already explained this concept several times over the course of the treatise should not be taken lightly. We have already had occasion to note the repetition of key themes involving the interpretation of Exodus 33–34.

Those who (1) have achieved the apprehension of God (i.e., divine incommensurability) within human limits, (2) accepted those limits and gotten "pushed aside" into the knowledge of divine providence, and (3) emulated God's "loving-kindness, righteousness and judgment," are those who have modeled their moral and intellectual practice upon the example of Moses. While we may refer to this last stage as *imitatio Dei* for the sake of convenience, it is crucial to understand that this is not the emulation of the divine personality or mythic biography revealed in the stories of Scripture. It is rather

¹⁵⁵ *Guide*, 638.

the adoption of moral-conceptual categories like mercy or graciousness that have been abstracted through the intellectual apprehension of divine governance. While Maimonides' radical de-anthropomorphization of God might be thought to rob *imitatio Dei* of any real content, it actually goes hand in hand with the progressive unfolding of ethical exempla that are now essentially without limit because they have been freed of mythological constraint.¹⁵⁶ It is not the specific actions of God described in Scripture that are the real focus of divine emulation in this framework, but rather the core values—like mercy and compassion—that can be abstracted from them (and from nature) by reflection.

Maimonides' insistence on the equivocal meaning of words like *kavod* in the first part of the *Guide* is thus not just an exegetical caution or a strategy for attacking gross anthropomorphism, as has typically been presumed. Instead, it is a central organizing feature of his pedagogy, which presumes that the *Guide* should really serve as a *guide* for practical religious and intellectual growth.¹⁵⁷ The false analogy between human and divine honor is at the very root of idolatry for Maimonides, and his thoughts never strayed far from this foundation. Yet the equivocal nature of this labile and resonant term allows for different conceptions of divine honor to emerge along a continuum of differently positioned virtues and related practices: sometimes *kavod* means trying to understand the essence of divine incommensurability, while at other times it means acknowledging our human inability to complete that task, or the collapse of ontology into politics and ethics—the drive to know and to emulate attributes like “loving-kindness, righteousness and judgment in the earth,” with

¹⁵⁶ This is, I believe, the heart of R. Kook's argument (*Middot ha-Ra'ayah*, 81) that “When the honor of heaven is lucidly conceptualized, it raises the worth of humanity and of all creatures . . . [while] the honor of heaven that is embodied tends towards idolatry and debases the dignity [*kavod*] of humans and all creatures.” Failure to purify the God concept leads to an anthropomorphic understanding of divine honor, which tends to collapse over time into “a cruel demand from a physical being that longs for honor without limit.” Only exaggerated human servility is thought to magnify the glory of such a God, the same way that it often helps to promote the glory of human kings. See Seeman, “Violence, Ethics and Divine Honor in Modern Jewish Thought,” in which I previously underestimated Maimonides' influence on this formulation.

¹⁵⁷ Kellner, *Maimonides on Human Perfection*, 56. Focusing on *kavod* would in my opinion give Kellner's argument an operational aspect that could sharpen his conclusion.

which the *Guide* concludes. Human perfection cannot be reduced to any one of these features without the others. On the contrary, it relies upon the dynamic interrelationships reproduced in these chapters, and sometimes upon the tensions that arise between them over time.

Time is, in fact, the crucial and frequently missing element of commentary upon Maimonides' elaboration of these themes. By unearthing the different aspects of divine honor and their associated virtues within a single biblical narrative and a few key rabbinic passages, Maimonides gives *kavod* an organic exegetical frame that is richer, more flexible, and ultimately more evocative than any simply declarative statement of philosophical principles could be. This may be one of the most distinctive features of Maimonides' presentation as compared with that of other writers like R. Bahya Ibn Paquda, who raised some of the same issues in a less dramatic form.¹⁵⁸ We should not, in other words, view Maimonides' decision to embed his most radical theoretical propositions within readings of Scriptural narratives like Exodus 33 as an esoteric gesture or an attempt to apologize for traditional religion in a philosophical context. Instead, we should attend to the ways in which his decision to convey teachings about divine honor through an unfolding analysis of Scriptural narrative renders those teachings compatible with a reading that also unfolds over time, in the form of an educational strategy or a ritual model rather than just a static philosophical assertion that is difficult to operationalize. Ritual, like narrative, is fundamentally diachronic in nature.¹⁵⁹

Ultimately, the goal of honoring the divine is asymptotic for Maimonides. It may never be fully realized within human consciousness,

¹⁵⁸ *Duties of the Heart* 1:10.

¹⁵⁹ On the unfolding of ritual process over time, see for example Victor Turner, *In the Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967). For an application of this anthropological principle to a Jewish mystical text, Seeman, "Martyrdom, Emotion and the Work of Ritual." The importance of learning and inculcating virtue over time in an Aristotelian context has been described by M. F. Burnyeat, "Aristotle on Learning to be Good," and *idem.*, Nancy Sherman, "The Habituation of Character." Burnyeat writes: "What is exemplary in Aristotle is his grasp of the truth that morality comes in a sequence of stages with both cognitive and emotional dimensions (206–7) . . . Given this temporal perspective, then, the real problem is this: how do we grow up to become the fully adult, rational animals that is the end towards which the nature of our species tends? . . . In a way, the whole of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is Aristotle's reply to this question."

yet it remains for all that a powerful *telos* that must never be forsaken. Divine *kavod* is a concept broad and deep enough to encompass multifaceted goals of human perfection in both cognitive and ethical terms while helping to dispel the naïve anthropomorphism of religious language. It serves as a primary conceptual fulcrum for the process of human self-education away from idolatry that begins in Scripture with Abraham and reaches a certain kind of apogee in Moses, yet remains tantalizingly incomplete.