



## Phronesis in Jewish and Islamic Virtue Ethics

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A virtue is a trait that helps something do its work well: Keeness and rigidity are virtues in a sword – unless it's a stage sword. In that case shine might be a virtue, but a dull edge would be prized by the actors who must use it. Our work as human beings is living, but not just surviving, living well. Human virtues are means to that end, so they can be tested, if we know what patterns of living are worthwhile. But if human virtues are more familiar or less contested than just what should count as living well, we can leverage our understanding of those virtues to enhance our understanding of human happiness. For happiness is a good name for what it means to live well, and happiness in that sense is the aim and goal of human virtues.

Aristotle's uses just such a strategy in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. We readily identify courage, generosity, and cheerfulness, and friendliness. Conceiving such virtues and others like them as means to an end (and understanding their opposites as impediments), we can zero in on a fuller, richer idea than we might have begun with of what should count as happiness. For happiness, *eudaimonia* in Greek, is not just euphoria or even good fortune – although it hardly hurts to be in good health or not desperately poor or hungry. Eudaimonia, as Aristotle understands it, describes a life rather than a moment or a situation. And a life here means an array of activities – what we do and how we do it. So activities that accord with an express human virtues would be constitutive in the good life. Our virtues would be the traits, moral and intellectual, that help us do well at such activities, and indeed integrate them with one another.

Human virtues are dispositions, character traits that reliably foster appropriate responses to our situations. They're not conditioned reflexes. The reliability of moral virtues like good humor or good temper rests on their being informed by the intellectual virtue that Aristotle calls *phronesis*, practical wisdom or good judgment.<sup>1</sup> It used to be called prudence in a time when 'prudence' had a richer sense than it retains today. *Phronesis* is critical morally because our moral virtues are dispositions of rational choice. Famously, they seek a mean between extremes – courage, say, between cowardice and foolhardiness; generosity, between tightfistedness and prodigality, etc.

The extremes are vices, deficiencies of character. They tend to be mechanical: The coward treats any risk as somehow mortal; those who are rash treat danger as if it were a positive good. But a courageous person has much to consider: not just the odds but the stakes. Courage, as Plato showed in the *Laches*, means knowing what's worth fearing and what's not. So the art of measurement, as Plato called it (*Protagoras* 356-57), must move beyond a mere hedonic calculus. One must consider not just immediate and apparent goods and ills – risks of gain and loss, threats to our self-respect, or opportunities to learn or grow – but every sort of good or ill our choices may provoke: We must think about our circumstances and relations – who we are and with whom we're dealing, what our intentions amount to, and what might be the long term impact of our acts on others and on ourselves. The manner of our actions matters, and so do seeming imponderables – reputation, of course, but also what a fair and honorable choice would be. So, as Aristotle urges, there are many ways to go wrong but a far narrower range of sound choices, although it's still a range. We must weigh every relevant good and ill in every choice we make. But fortunately, if

we're to act at all, most of our appraisals come rather naturally and spontaneously since virtues (and vices too) are habits.<sup>2</sup>

Rational choice makes human action distinctively human and opens our choices to the praise(or blame), markers of the moral realm. So knowledge matters critically to the work of moral virtues, although the knowledge that matters most may be implicit in our actions rather than painstakingly debated in each choice we make. Hence Aristotle's treatment of the seeming paradox of the Socratic dictum that to know the good is to do the good. Morally relevant knowledge is both more and less than conscious acknowledgment of the facts we face in a given situation. It need not be conscious in any explicit way, but it does need to be implicit in our character and thus in our practical appraisal of a situation.

For Plato, moral knowledge inevitably looks to the Form of the Good, the touchstone enabling us to judge among incommensurables like dignity and danger. But Aristotle argued that even access to the pure ideal goodness would not specify the "doable good" in concrete terms – just as access to the pure idea of goodness won't tell us concretely, say, how natural beings function, although our study of biology has taught us that nature does nothing in vain. We need experience to understand nature scientifically, and we need it as well in guiding our choices. Role models do help: If we know someone whose life seems well put together, we have a model for actions that may coalesce as habits in which good judgment is implicit.

Moral virtues, on an Aristotelian account, are acquired, not innate: No matter how often we toss a stone into the air we can't train it to rise and not fall. But we humans have a natural capacity to take on character traits. We acquire good habits or bad, by doing: Just as we become trustworthy or shoddy builders by the care we take or corners we cut and see others cutting, we become honest or dishonest people by the choices we make and the models we follow. Faced with danger, we build habits of timidity or resolution, anchoring cowardice or courage in our character and contributing to the tone set in our community. Similarly, our choices make us friendly or irritable, disciplined or self-indulgent, fair minded or inclined to bias, or to cheating. Habits, then, as Aristotle put it, are second nature, part of who we are, but not from birth. Just as we learn to play the flute by playing, we become just by doing just acts. So laws that foster wholesome habits can improve the character of citizens . And bad mores spread in a community and across the generations.<sup>3</sup> Knowledge is critical in framing all these patterns, I would argue. For even as we act and grow we learn about the moving target of the self.

We humans, as Aristotle urged, are social animals. So although our choices are always personal, every moral virtue reflects our social circumstances. Parents and peers are our first models; our social surroundings are the arena in which we make our choices and the theater in which our actions have their impact. So it's quite natural for Aristotle to embed a discussion of friendship in treating of the virtues: Friendship, at its best, is not just about good times or even our usefulness to one another but about earned and deserved respect, and thus the virtues friends can recognize and respect in one another. That kind of regard helps us see a real friend as a second self, as Aristotle put, treating the other's interest as one's own.

Besides our social nature, we humans, at our best, are rational beings, and the hallmark of virtuous action is that it is considered and considerate, quite unlike the more mechanical responses of those acts and behaviors of ours that stray from thoughtfulness and look almost like reflexes, pursuing a specious good or flinching at an apparent evil without broad and multifaceted reflection. Our theme this year is *phronesis*, practical wisdom, the intellectual virtue at the heart of every moral virtue, since it's active in our every well considered choice. It's easy, if we think romantically, to imagine that good morals are intuitive and therefore thoughtless, overlooking the reflective side of virtue, not least when spontaneity makes it look reflexive. But we can see the intimate living link of moral to intellectual virtues if we consider such familiar virtues as intellectual honesty and open mindedness. And, in fact, that link is always present, although only rarely overt and outspoken, perhaps latent in the thought processes and experience that framed our habits, or in the principles behind the rules we haven't found much need to think about or critique, or in the character of role models whose example we respect, not always stopping to wonder why.

What I'd like to do in this paper is examine the creative reception of virtue ethics in some of the classic medieval Jewish and Islamic thinkers, focusing on the role of *phronesis* in guiding moral choices. The thinkers I'll consider are Philo of Alexandria, Yah.yā ibn 'Adī, Miskawayh, Abū H.āmīd al-Ghazālī, and Moses Maimonides.

When friends heard I was writing a paper for a conference about virtue ethics, one responded with surprise: "I thought all ethics is virtue ethics!" She thought the notion redundant. But I can remember when ethical studies were supposed to divide neatly between the teleological and the deontological. Stoics clearly fell to the side of deontology; Aristotelians, being eudaimonists, were thought just as consequentialist as Epicureans or Utilitarians. Fortunately, the good work of Alasdair MacIntyre has put an end for now to that neat dichotomy. I've even argued that a eudaimonist virtue ethics can build a bridge uniting deontology with ethical teleology, if the exponents of those views can trim the jagged edges of the extremes toward which a purist impulse drives them.<sup>4</sup>

But we should remember that virtue ethics does not stand alone in ethics. Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle prize it, partly from an interest in character and the interplay of personal and social values in character formation, and partly from a sense that mere rules and recipes don't provide much reliable guidance in the nuanced situations life presents. Aristotle himself is not slow to note that not every moral issue fits the pattern he traces among the virtues: There is no proper mean of murder, or adultery. But virtue ethics, where it does apply in the crises and continuum of our lives, does have the advantages of being an ethics of tendency rather than rigid formulae, looking to the character and life patterns of individuals, groups, and even peoples.

Saadia Gaon, the first systematic philosopher of the Jewish tradition, a pioneering exegete, grammarian, and lexicographer, seems quite innocent of virtue ethics. His ethical discussions, look to our choices of ends rather than means.<sup>5</sup> and for the overall appraisal of human lives he relies on the rabbinic idea of the preponderance of one's actions rather than the quality of one's character. As Taneli Kukkonen has noted, al-Ghazālī, a central figure in Islamic ethics, anchors his turn toward virtue ethics in the thought and practice of godly forebears who set a proto-Sufi stamp on what otherwise might seem a foreign import.<sup>6</sup> Even Maimonides makes a

point of suppressing mention of his Greek sources. His thoughts on ethics, he admits, “are not original.” Their roots biblical and rabbinic – but also Aristotelian, alongside a Platonizing Galen. He avoids naming his Greek sources, he confesses, lest their mention “suggest to spirits unfamiliar with the names cited that the argument bears some unseen taint.” At the same time, echoing Aristotle and resonating with the sentiments of the Muslim philosopher al-Kindī, he admonishes his reader: “Heed the truth, whoever speaks it.”<sup>7</sup>

Ethics is a sensitive area, not least for philosophers who are loyal members of the peoples of the book. So sources matter. Ghazālī seeks a suitable ancestry for his ethics. His use of Sufi and earlier spiritualizing sources gives a pietist cast to the framework he takes over from Miskawayh’s more courtly, humanistic virtue ethics. Maimonides, for his part, reads virtue ethics as the Torah’s aim, treating biblical commands not as ends in themselves but as means to our human perfection. But Philo, making Stoic allegorical techniques his springboard in reading scripture, embraces virtue ethics unreservedly. For his aim is to show that biblical Judaism embodies philosophical wisdom at its best.

### **Philo (ca. 25 B.C.E. - 50 C.E.)**

Philo paints Abraham as a Hebrew Socrates, abandoning Chaldean astrology and bringing theology down out of night heavens and into the light of human consciousness, the microcosm of the soul.<sup>8</sup> The mind, he argues, is our true identity, our ship’s captain, “judge and umpire,” but also, at times, “witness and accuser,” silencing our self-serving defenses, or giving them the lie when a slip of the tongue unwittingly confesses wrongdoing.<sup>9</sup> Conscience, Philo holds, knows and presses us to see a justice beyond our feeble schemes, detesting and condemning wrongful acts and the rationales we offer in their defense. Conscience here becomes the voice of God, but Philo’s reasoning as to how it does so reflects a Platonic vision, by which the divinity, as pure goodness penetrates the shadowy within of a guilty soul to shine its light on human reason, which is not fully shrouded within.<sup>10</sup>

In a more positive vein, Philo argues that the soul can be God’s abode within us, an invisible home for the unseen God, furnished and ornamented by learning. Intelligence, memory, and curiosity, gifts of God, lay the foundations, shored up by sound upbringing. For diligence and eagerness to learn must be cultivated. But our actions and the habits they mold stabilize the soul’s construction, making it ready and worthy of God’s presence, and His laws.<sup>11</sup>

Philo cuts clear of wrangles over whether virtues should be called Godgiven, gained by practice, or learned by instruction. All three matter if virtue is to be won: Nature, practice, and instruction – potential, endeavor, and inspiration. God sows the seed, we learn, not for Himself but for those who can profit from its germination.<sup>12</sup> Abraham’s virtue was chiefly taught; in Isaac good nature laid the foundation; in Jacob practice predominated, “scion and harvest of what comes by learning.” Natural goodness is the root. But none of the patriarchs, if they represent virtue’s mainstays, can have lacked all three: Teaching is incomplete without nature and practice; nature, unfulfilled without practice and learning; practice, inchoate unless grounded in nature and guided by instruction.”<sup>13</sup>

Learning is precious for Philo, and critical, he holds, in public life, steeping the mind in ancient traditions and the heroic exploits celebrated by poets and registered by historians. Grammar, literature, geometry, music, rhetoric, law, and composition adorn human lives – reason’s work safeguarded by logic and crowned by the divine science of philosophy. Learning, here is no mere ornament. It’s also virtue’s fruit – bearing new virtues’ seeds.<sup>14</sup> wisdom, in the person of Sarah tells Abraham that she has not borne him offspring because he was unready: “Great themes,” Philo writes, “need great introductions; and the greatest of all themes is virtue, for it deals with the greatest of matters, the whole life of man. So naturally, virtue will use no slight introduction, but grammar, geometry, astronomy, rhetoric, music, and all the other branches of intellectual study. These are symbolized by Hagar, Sarah’s handmaid, as I’ll show. For Sarah said to Abraham, we are told:

‘Lo the Lord has shut me out from bearing. Go in unto my handmaid, that thou mayest beget children upon her’ .... What is meant is a mating of the mind with virtue. Mind longs to have children with virtue, and if it cannot at once it is instructed to espouse virtue’s handmaid, preliminary instruction.<sup>15</sup>

But if learning the familiar sense is precious as the ancilla of virtue, more precious still is the insight of a self-taught mind, awakened by the unexpected ray of wisdom that makes us “seers rather than hearers.”<sup>16</sup> Sarah is Philo’s model of self-taught virtue, as spontaneous in goodness as ears are in hearing, or eyes in seeing, or minds in thinking. Her moral wisdom, heaven sent, is a rare but real chance on earth.<sup>17</sup>

Even natural virtue must be cultivated. So reflection is critical in Philo’s moral scheme. Sabbaths, he reasons, were given not for rest alone but for thought and study, pursuit of philosophy, in the broadest but also the most practical sense, people receiving guidance “in what should be said and done,” and thus advancing in practice and in growing in character. Theory, as Philo sees it, finds its richest application when it fosters goodness, not just more theory. So his people’s houses of prayer, he says proudly, “are schools of wisdom” – and, so, of wisdom’s offspring: “courage, self-control, and justice as well as piety, holiness, and every other virtue.” Thought here is not self-contained or self-absorbed. Its focus is on our duties toward each other and toward God, their content and the best means by which they might be met.<sup>18</sup>

The cardinal virtues addressed in Plato’s *Republic* surface here: Courage, self-control or temperance, justice, and wisdom are canonical. Wisdom, of course, is at the helm. Self-control, with courage to back it up, sees to it that each human strength does what it does best and pursues what it best loves. Justice is the outcome. Philo sets the already classic quartet in place here. But he does not neglect the piety and holiness that Plato addressed outside the scheme of the *Republic*. For these too are critical among the virtues Philo, like Plato, prizes – as they will be in any society where humanity’s transcendent aspirations are not forgotten and individuals are not reduced to their most pragmatic roles.

Wisdom, courage, self-control, and justice branch out from generic virtue, Philo writes, just as the four rivers flowed from Eden, watering God’s garden (Genesis 2:10-15), the four

sustained by generic virtue, itself sprung from God's joyous wisdom. The common source testifies to the unity of the virtues – but also to moral virtue's intellectual source.<sup>19</sup> Reason, Philo explains, teaches the unity of the virtues but also points to their intrinsic worth. For reason chooses goodness for its own sake, just as one chooses light or beauty for its own sake. Reading in scripture of God's calling the gift of manna a test (Exodus 16:4), Philo hears a challenge, "to prize excellence for its own sake." Right reason, he glosses, tests everyone, "as one tests coins to see if any is adulterated." Admixture is dilution of the soul's true good, making it dependent on some external thing, rather than keeping virtue pristine, unsullied by ulterior aims.<sup>20</sup>

Philo's purism as he rings virtue's coinage resonates of Stoic deontology. But its themes spring from Plato's philosophy and even Aristotle's. Plato pins the soul's hope of immortality on its purity of worldly attachments.<sup>21</sup> And Aristotle, despite the Peripatetic acknowledgment of "externals" as necessary props of the good life, even if not intrinsic to it, dismisses "pleasant amusements" as wasteful and potentially destructive, more suited to "the courts of tyrants" and the buffoons that divert despots – and keep youngsters entertained.<sup>22</sup> The deontological turn is taken by the Rabbis too: Antigonus of Socho (early 2<sup>nd</sup> century), the first of the Tannaim to bear a Greek name, cautions all who hear him to be not like servants who serve for the sake of a reward but like those who serve not for the sake of a reward but for the sake of Heaven.<sup>23</sup>

Moral virtue depends on intellectual virtue for its life and flourishing. But the linkage runs the other way as well. Reason, Philo writes, is profitless without action.<sup>24</sup> Learning that remains mere theory is untested and so remains immature as well as sterile. In one of the athletic images that seem to signal not just his hearers' interests but his own, Philo urges, that practice gives the edge in any contest: The athlete who practices, he writes, and presses to the finish comes to see clearly what he at first only saw dimly, "as if in a dream." The prize, in this case, is the stamp of noble character: Jacob, in maturity, is no longer "the supplanter," but Israel, "who sees God," Philo says, playing on the name in Greek.<sup>25</sup> Practice can make virtue habitual and spontaneous. But practice, if thoughtful, we add, brings principle to the plane of consciousness as we reflect on the themes that unite our acts and make our choices distinctively our own. So practice yields insight, the key to steady character. For virtue, as we've seen, is not mechanical. Children, Philo writes, have training; adults have wisdom.<sup>26</sup>

Wisdom, for Philo, is ultimately a gift of God. But so is training: The Torah's laws train those who follow them. And given the complementarity of instruction, practice, and moral receptivity, Philo readily resolves the seeming conflict between an active and a contemplative life, much as the Rabbis do when they weigh study of the Law against all its great commandments – since such study leads to the Law's fulfillment<sup>27</sup> – a jurist's way of echoing Socrates' equation of knowledge with virtue, by recognizing that knowledge in the morally fruitful sense, is not held at arm's length but entrenched in character – not in heaven or across the sea, as Deuteronomy puts it, *but very near to thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart, that thou shalt do it* (30:12-13). Or, as the Qur'ān would have it, in speaking of God and the promptings of conscience, "nearer to than one's jugular vein" (50:17).

Reflecting on God's promise to make Abraham *a great nation* (Genesis 12:2), Philo sees a qualitative as well as quantitative challenge: a populous, but also a worthy nation, as he takes *great*

to imply. Abraham's progeny, he hears God promise, will win intellectual virtues that complement the moral virtues fostered by practice of the Torah's commands. "What profit is there," he asks, "in gleaning from our teachers the yield of much study unless we advance to grow each seedling to its proper stature? A field might contain ever so many plants. It still lies fallow if they barely clear the ground and none shoots up to its full height, skillfully cultivated and ready to bear fruit."<sup>28</sup> Moral virtues lay the groundwork for the intellectual since maturation of the intellectual virtues demands the discipline of cultivation. So it's natural for Philo to expect the fullness of intellectual virtue and the wisdom it promotes to "spring up to meet those fittest to receive it, serious persons, who will know how to use it."<sup>29</sup> But the intellectual virtues are critical to moral growth as well. For one cannot adequately perform God's commandments without adequately understanding them – and without the sound intentions that distinguish purposive acts from mere rote or mimicry.

Learners, Philo writes, must listen. But those who rise to moral maturity, that phase of life most critical to both Aristotle and the Stoics, develop virtues of their own. They must look not simply the precept but to persons, modeling themselves on worthy exemplars, imitating a life rather than what words distill. Philo's counterpart of Aristotle's *phronimos* may be male or female. What matters is that virtue is made concrete in action, letting what is learned be practiced not aped but lived by, thoughtfully. The modeling is a learning process, but reflective, distinguishing cues that matter in tone and style from mere tics and idiosyncrasies, sifting out the elements of virtue in the actions of a worthy role model.<sup>30</sup>

The Rabbis link wisdom to practice by identifying the Torah as the tree of life spoken of in Proverbs (3:18)<sup>31</sup> and there called wisdom, a tree sustaining *those who hold fast to it* and blessing with happiness those who uphold it in turn. Proverbs pictures Wisdom iconically, as a woman: *length of days in her right hand; in her left, wealth and honor: Her ways, ways of pleasantness; and all her paths, peace* (3:13-17). The pleasantness (*no 'am*) wisdom guides one to enjoy is no mere holiday but a life of happiness like that promised by the virtues in Aristotle's account. Proverbs confirms the structural parallel with the word *shalom*. For *peace*, biblically, is not mere absence of conflict but the fullness of the good life. So When the Rabbis equate the Torah's ways with those of the wisdom celebrated in Proverbs they see the biblical commandments as avenues of well-being, constitutive in the good life, just as virtuous actions are for Aristotle: The life commended and commanded by the Torah is the high road to fulfillment. Correspondingly, one can grasp the tenor of the Torah's rulings if one has the wisdom to recognize the good life when one sees it. Constant remembrance of God – and thus of His commandments – Philo affirms, counters life's conflicts and gives one the strength, moral and intellectual, to address the steady train of life's vicissitudes.<sup>32</sup>

### **Yah.yā ibn 'Adī (893-974)**

Yah.yā ibn 'Adī (893-974) was a bridge person. Sometimes called the Logician, he hailed from Takrit, best known today as Saddam Hussein's hometown, but an important center of the Jacobite Christianity in behalf of which Ibn 'Adī wrote a good deal of theology. Yah.yā's thirst for knowledge and eagerness for its dissemination were cosmopolitan. He studied under the Nestorian philosopher Abū Bishr Mattā, who defended the art of logic against the charge of the Muslim



grammarian al-Sīrāfī that logic is the mere grammar of the Greeks and thus irrelevant in Arabic. He also studied under the celebrated Muslim philosopher al-Fārābī (ca. 870-950), a pioneer of Arabic logic, metaphysics, political, and cultural philosophy, known to this day as *al-Mu‘allim al-Thānī*, the Second Teacher – after Aristotle.

A scribe, bookseller, and translator from Syriac to Arabic, Yah.yā was a leading Baghdad Peripatetic. Muslims and Christians of varied denominations mingled among his followers.<sup>33</sup> An active conduit of classical learning and humanistic values, he stood at the center of what Joel Kraemer calls the Renaissance of Islam. Yah.yā told his friend the great bibliographer Ibn al-Nadīm that he had twice copied the 30-volume Qur’ān commentary of al-Tabarī as well as countless theological treatises, a striking feat for a Christian scholar. He had promised himself, he said, to copy at least a hundred leaves daily, making him an industrial scaled conduit of the new learning. He wrote his own commentary on Aristotle’s *Topics*, the handbook of dialectical argument or philosophical street fighting, whose earlier Syriac translation by the doyen of the translation movement, H.unayn ibn Ish.aq, he had improved. And he wrote extensively, in a faithfully Peripatetic mode, on the issues raised in Aristotle’s *Physics*.

Of central relevance ethically is a work of his rebutting “those who say that actions are created by God and only appropriated by His creatures.”<sup>34</sup> This was the doctrine of the Ash‘arite school, emerging in Yah.yā’s time and enshrined as a dogma in Sunni creeds – although branded by al-Fārābī “an outrageous conclusion, repugnant to all religions and very, very dangerous for people to believe.”<sup>35</sup> Yah.yā followed al-Fārābī’s lead here and, not surprisingly, took up Abū Bishr’s defense of logic,<sup>36</sup> holding out for universal reason against the rising tide of particularism and Islamic claims that knowledge must rest on received tradition.

Often pressed for philosophical defenses of the Trinity and Incarnation, Yah.yā answered not only rival Christian sects and polemicists like Abū Isā al-Warrāq (d. ca. 862) but also the first major Muslim philosopher al-Kindī (ca. 801-866/7), the famous Philosopher of the Arabs. In a treatise on monotheism, he appealed to the idea of three robust divine attributes, wisdom, benevolence, and power, a scheme traceable, via pseudo-Dionysius, to Proclus’ efforts to address neoplatonic problems of deriving a multifarious world from divine unity. Yah.yā’s trinitarian work, seeking in its own way to unite love and logic, became a mainstay of Arabic speaking Christians, not least the Copts. But amidst his many theological tracts, some 60 devoted to distinctively Christian topics, Yah.yā’s ethical treatise stands out.

Perhaps first titled *On Governance of the Soul*, the work is best known by another phrase it uses: *On the Refinement of Character*. Twenty classical manuscripts are known, attesting to the work’s wide diffusion. There are also over twenty printed editions. The surviving manuscripts are often falsely ascribed to celebrated Muslim authors including the essayist/theologian al-Jāh.iz. (d. 868), the pioneer of optics Ibn al-Haytham (d. 1041), and the mystic virtuoso Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240) – an ironic tribute to the work’s impact. One twentieth century Muslim scholar, sharing the moniker al-Takritī, unblushingly called Yah.yā a pioneer of Islamic ethics. In a sense, he was – just as Philo pioneered Christian philosophical theology and ethics.

Standing in for *eudaimonia* in Yah.yā's scheme of virtue ethics is self-perfection (*al-tamām wa-'l-kamāl*), the worthiest goal one can choose (*Tahdhīb* 1.2), attained by cultivating as habits (*'ādāt*) our noblest of character traits (*akhlāq*). Pace the Ash'arites, not only our actions but our character is in our own hands – although not absolutely or exclusively. Ill nature tends to dominate in most people, rendering one readily corrupted. Hence, the need for government – and moral handbooks. But such books, Yah.yā admits, will likely be most valued by those who are virtuously inclined – and least need them. Even so, those who are morally refined should welcome a book like his, he argues, as a guide, and a goad, to perseverance.

Tracing Plato's path, as viewed through Galen's window, Yah.yā identifies three “souls” or psychic faculties – appetitive, irascible, and rational. The rational marks the human difference from all other animals. It is the seat of memory and reasoning, discrimination and understanding. Reason ennobles man, makes him resolute, and imparts self-respect. Reason distinguishes fair from foul, valuing the one and rejecting the other (2.11). So, despite the nod toward thoughts of original sin in the mention of the rarity of good natures and the prominence of vices, manifested in a lust for domination or for vengeance, Yah.yā trusts reason to master the appetites and passions. Its work is not merely calculative. But, as in Plato, reason has its preferences. So it can guide one toward temperance and make an ally of the irascible soul, promoting “scorn for worldly things, love of legitimate authority, and a pursuit of higher planes” than mere sensuous desires can know (2.9).

The moral virtues begin with abstemiousness. They include contentment with one's lot, respectability (a mix of gravitas, self-respect, and high-mindedness), the famous royal virtue of *h. ilm* (clemency), sobriety (including attentiveness, patience and composure in responding – virtues of a teacher or pastor). Part of sobriety is delicacy or decency, reflecting a sense of shame. This is not Aristotle's shamefacedness but the opposite of shamelessness, impudence, or effrontery, commendable, “as long as it does not reflect inarticulacy or incapacity.” Aristotle's moral categories are re-tuned here for new roles and a new cultural context.

Like Aristotle, who saw friendship at its best as reciprocal and reciprocated virtue, Yah.yā counts friendship among the virtues, defining it as “a moderated love without the passionate pursuit.” Compassion is compounded of love and caring toward those in abject want. A Christian ethos blossoms here anchored in a Pauline ideal of love. Fidelity, for Yah.yā is steadfast devotion to one's cause, even in the face of hurt. Its rewards are trust and moral growth; its exercise is critical in an effective ruler. A related virtue: trustworthiness, whether with goods or women. Again Christian virtues of chastity are in play here. Discretion, for Yah.yā, is a blend of sobriety and trustworthiness. Reflecting a courtly context, Yah.yā calls discretion laudable in anyone but vital in the intimates of rulers.

Like other scriptural moralists and unlike Aristotle, who finds a mean in “proper pride,” Yah.yā calls humility a virtue, calling it a distaste for self-aggrandizement, preening, and the avid pursuit of dominance and marks of recognition. The humble do not brag. They avoid conceit and the arrogance it breeds. But only in leaders and dignitaries is humility a virtue. Others are humble by their station, not their character; they need not act the part.

Affability shows warmth and pleasantness to all, whether brethren (viz., co-religionists), friends, acquaintances, or relations – a virtue in kings and commoners alike. Candor means truthfulness, a virtue so long as it does not turn hurtful or harmful. Yah.yā echoes Plato’s instance, of the weapon not to be returned. But he enlarges the boundaries of discretion to include reticence about one’s own wrongdoing, endorsing a variety self-protection that may ring discordant with the notes of penitence that other monotheist moralists will sound.

Good will, for Yah.yā, is faith in the goodness of all and suppression of malice, backstabbing, conniving, and deceit. Liberality means spending freely, regardless of desert – so long as one does not bankrupt oneself. The Arab poets’ romantic image of carefree generosity is in play here, alongside Christian thoughts of *agape*. So Yah.yā does not cast every virtue into the mold of the middle way. Courage means facing what is hateful or destructive when one must. Another virtue critical in rulers, but also in saints.

Ambition is worthy, Yah.yā writes, when what one admires and emulates is virtue or some worthwhile attainment, but loathsome when bent on pleasures, pomp, or passions. Perseverance (*al-s.abr ‘inda al-shadā’id*) mingles sobriety with courage and reflects a principled response to persecution. Perseverance is highly praiseworthy, so long as one does not try to turn a profit from it or use trickery to project an illusion of pain or harm.” Yah.yā may have fakirs and stylites in mind, who make public display of self-imposed sufferings, real or counterfeit. He has high praise for perseverance but condemns bootless and sham sensationalism.

Like Aristotle, Yah.yā counts greatness of soul a virtue in kings and other leaders, and anyone who seeks high office and aspires to the heights. It engenders generosity and disdains pettiness and mediocrity. It is here that we encounter Aristotle’s virtues of proper pride, righteous indignation, and even a virtuous jealousy, which Yah.yā suggests is an unwillingness to suffer fools and incompetents and contempt for, say, seductive scheming. We catch a glimpse of Yah.yā’s world here and a rather less patient demeanor than Marcus Aurelius sought to cultivate in himself. Yah.yā has strikingly little to add about justice, describing it more in Justinian’s than Plato’s terms, as fair distribution and proper use of things. He does seek to steer between excess and deficiency, pairing that effort with the biblical virtue of impartiality. But it is, perhaps, a mark of deference to the powers that be that he does not define these guideposts too strictly.

The intellectual virtues may seem to have dropped into the background here: Yah.yā knows that refining one’s morals depends on the rational soul (4.22-24). But he simply reaffirms Plato’s maxim, that reason must rule appetite and passion. The rational sciences and the society of the learned will strengthen one’s reason. But Yah.yā does not detail just how. He contents himself with commending study of the rational sciences and books on morals and self-governance for those who seek moral growth, evidently convinced that good will (like good upbringing in Aristotle) and good nature, a gift of divine grace, are the key factors in setting a sound moral course.

But notice what Yah.yā says about patience, echoing thoughts of Galen’s that also resonate with Rāzī: A patient man won’t rise in anger against someone who assails him verbally. Seeing an adversary who seems unable to restrain himself, he feels no more anger than if he heard a dog barking at him. The angry man sets to. He’ll kick even some obstacle he trips over, too angry to

reflect that the obstacle meant him no harm (5.13). Passions can submerge good sense. Patience comes, as a Stoic would say, from realizing whom or with what one is dealing, recognizing even human limitations.

With money, once again, it pays to know and act upon an understanding of what money is: a medium of exchange, as Aristotle taught, “wanted only for the sake of something else and not worthy of being sought for its own sake (5.8). So, even in the simplest cases, moral virtue comes from keeping one’s understanding in control. That’s Yah.yā’s moral reason for valuing the sciences. One should study moral handbooks like his own, he writes, but also biographies and works on politics. One should school oneself “somewhat” in rhetoric and grammar, learn to speak eloquently and clearly, listen to wise and learned men, and spend his time with wholesome, modest people (5.4). The object is to train the mind to recognize a sound and dignified course of action and of life, spending time with works of literature and history, yes, but also with worthy friends, cultivating the habits that will show oneself worthy of worthy company.

### **Miskawayh (ca. 932-1030)**

The champion of virtue ethics among Muslims was the courtier philosopher, historian, and physician Abū ‘Alī Miskawayh. A Shī‘ite born at Rayy near present day Tehran, he stands out among Muslim philosophers for the centrality of ethics in his work. Trained in ethics by Ibn al-Khammār, the most prominent of Yah.yā’s Muslim students, he came late to ethics, having been a boon companion (*nadīm*) and thus a drinking fellow of the learned vizier al-Muh.allabī at Baghdad. Miskawayh’s wit and erudition had won him a place in court as a scholar and librarian. But he came to regret the dissolute life into which he was drawn by the eclat of court life and the rakish poetry of Imru’ al-Qays and other pre-Islamic poets. A sometime royal secretary and ambassador, Miskawayh owed his longevity (a hundred years by the Islamic lunar calendar) in part to his ability to move on adroitly when a patron died or fell from grace. Ultimately he weaned himself of his vices and came to see history, philosophy, and more uplifting literary genres as founts of moral guidance. In the “experience of nations,” as he called it in the title of his multi-volume history, he found practical wisdom for statecraft. Like Yah.yā and Abū Bishr Mattā, Miskawayh defended the Greek sciences against rising tides of parochial resistance, convinced by Ibn ‘Adī that our highest calling is universal love of humankind. His ethical work, best known by the same title as Yah.yā’s, *On the Refinement of Character*, set the pattern for centuries of work in Islamic virtue ethics. As a historian, ethicist, physician, courtier, and philosopher, hwas a cenral figure in what I’ve called Islamic Humanism.<sup>37</sup>

Miskawayh made good use of the libraries his patrons prized. Not least among their treasures were Arabic translations of Greek works of philosophy, medicine, astronomy, and mathematics. So he knew well the scheme of four cardinal virtues that Greek scholars had founded on Plato’s argument in the *Republic*. Like Plato, he links these virtues to three psychic interests. Like Galen and Yah.yā, he does not press their assignment to discrete souls. Rather than argue as Plato does, that their desires contradict one another, Miskawayh says that they compete: Overstressing one weakens the others.<sup>38</sup>

Reason, the royal faculty, contemplates the true natures of things and rules because it is discerning, distinguishing real from specious goods. The irascible faculty is manifest in anger, of course, but also in boldness, self-assertion, pursuit of dominance, superiority, and esteem. The appetitive pursues the delights of food, drink, sex, and other base pleasures. Larger virtues grow from lesser ones. So reason, when well balanced and not over-reaching, seeks genuine knowledge and rises further, to wisdom.<sup>39</sup> The appetitive animal soul, reined in by reason, becomes abstemious, then liberal. The irascible, moderated by obedience to reason's guidance, acquires clemency (*h.ilm*), then courage.<sup>40</sup>

We need self-control, it seems, before we can advance to generosity. *H.ilm* precedes courage, perhaps because clemency belongs to one who has the upper hand; courage always matters in facing a challenge. But Miskawayh may reason that the most critical challenges are those that monarchs face. For, often, his moral suasion, like those of Yah.yā, take the stance of a mirror for princes, no doubt reflecting Miskawayh's position and the role of his ideal audience. Thus, in his preface Miskawayh promises that those who cultivate the virtues he describes will perfect their humanity and rise high. He's careful not to limit the prize to otherworldly goods.<sup>41</sup>

Abstemiousness (*al-'iffa*) sounds a bit stronger than temperance in representing *sophrosyne*, but it's a virtue that well befits a man of the court, whose temptations Miskawayh knows all too well, and it's a virtue in good odor among the clerics and holymen, without sounding sanctimonious to others of more secular bent. All the virtues he lists here, Miskawayh stresses, are social: Generosity, toward ego alone, is prodigality. Courage, kept to oneself, turns arrogant. Knowledge, if selfish, is mere inquisitiveness. It may decay into pedantry or dogmatism, but Miskawayh tactfully avoids saying so.

Liberality, we note, jostles against asceticism when *sophrosyne*, modestly, allows it. Wisdom, of course, is not merely calculative but judicious, as it must be in its role as our moral judge. Temperance is good judgment about the appetites, as it was for Yah.yā. Courage, in its proper role, is reason's executive, still in the role Plato assigned it in the well ordered soul. So, although justice remains a mean between wronging another and being wronged, justice still means a proper balance among psychic faculties, achieved, as in Plato, by their subordination to reason's rule. The conclusion comes naturally enough since justice, in Arabic is called '*adl*, that is, balance. The same root underlies the word Miskawayh uses for moderation or modulation.

Miskawayh gathers the intellectual virtues under wisdom: Intelligence means catching on quickly, and deftly reaching conclusions. So, where Aristotle stressed intuiting the middle term, Miskawayh cuts to the chase, drawing the conclusion pointed to by a syllogism's middle term. Memory means retention of an image. So it depends on imagination, a lesser faculty than reason, but one that links reason to the senses. To be reasonable, Miskawayh holds, is to see things as they are. Clarity is readiness to pursue an inference. Perspicacity is the capacity to see what follows from a premise. A ready learner is one prepared to grasp ideas for himself. We seem almost in a classroom now. But the conclusions Miskawayh calls *desiderata*, might as readily be practical as intellectual.

Under temperance he lists modesty, calm, steadfastness, honesty, and contentment. His ideal man is gentle, orderly, personable, cordial and conciliatory, serious and pious – as shown in

the good deeds piety inspires. Liberality has subspecies: charity, altruism, openhandedness (generosity, even to one's cost), remission of one's due, and a delight in helping others that becomes a way of life. Temperance moves from the stringencies imposed on children to the more positive modes of generosity commended for adults.<sup>42</sup>

Under courage Miskawayh lists greatness of soul (contempt for triviality, readiness to bear adversity although deserving of great things), dauntlessness, composure (even the face of death), steadiness under fire, clemency, imperturbability, gallantry, and fortitude. We're no longer in a classroom or courtly interior now but perhaps in a military camp.

Under justice itself, Miskawayh groups friendship, fellowship, motherlove, pleasantness, fairness, equity, reciprocity, reverence, and the rejection of jealousy, spite, and talebearing.

Each virtue, he explains, adapting Aristotle's schema, is like a bullseye, surrounded by alternatives, some so peripheral they count as vices. Even wisdom is a mean, between cunning and stultification. So is intelligence, between the sly and the stolid. Because knowledge addresses values and not mere neutral facts, and because truth remains a value, Miskawayh sees the moral side of the intellectual virtues. Intellectual sloppiness, laziness and passivity, then, might be added to the lexicon of vices, along with intellectual dishonesty. As in Aristotle, we all must work with the intellectual tools we have. But the moral stress is on our *using* those assets. With a keen eye to the swift or halting channels of inference, Miskawayh pinions dullness (and the attitudes that promote and preserve it). He praises penetration, not just insight but the drive to press for solutions.

Miskawayh loves the middle enough to call good memory a mean between recollecting too little and too much. He makes a similar point about mental rambling and overshooting. Sophistry is a vice. But even intuition can leap too far and too fast. Clarity lies between foggy headedness and an almost paranoid seeing too much. Even a quick study can advance too fast to digest what has been learned. So density is not the only intellectual weakness, and cleverness is not always a virtue. It too must be controlled, by a kind of sophrosyne of the mind.

Miskawayh knows reason's crucial role in every moral virtue. All things, he explains, reach perfection in their own ways. What makes the best horse is not what makes the best falcon. The same is true not just for animals and plants but even for the sun and moon, and all the planets. Man's distinction is the capacity for thought. Just as the best horse is the nimblest, swiftest, most responsive and spirited, the best man is the most discerning capable of attaining the goods a man was created to achieve. A horse that fails of equine excellence is relegated to work as a pack animal. And, similarly, Miskawayh argues, a man whose powers of thought remain unperfected and whose actions are therefore lacking, fails to reach the heights to which reason beckons. Enslaved by beastly pleasures, he is degraded by God, and his fitting punishment rids the world of him.<sup>43</sup> Miskawayh seems keen here to dress in Islamic, penal terms his Platonizing argument for moral accountability, grounded in the claim al-Kindī broached,<sup>44</sup> that sensuous appetites bind one to the physical and thus thwart the soul's rise to spiritual/intellectual immortality. He bolsters his claim to the Islamic credentials and credibility of the argument with a proof-text from the Qur'ān: *By the soul and Him who framed its symmetry, inspiring it to discern piety and vice – he who keeps it pure will prosper; he who sullies it is lost!* (91:7-10).

The moral side Miskawayh finds in the intellectual virtues highlights his awareness of how multifaceted and multidimensional minds and thoughts can be and reflects his thoughts about context and wisdom, the indissoluble links of truth to other values, and his deep seriousness about humanity's social nature. "Man," he writes, "cannot reach perfection by himself alone. He needs many others to achieve a good life and to manage his affairs properly. That is why the philosophers called man political by nature. One needs a good sized city fully to attain human happiness. Everyone, by nature, depends on others. So one must live with them, relate well to them, and sincerely care for them since it is through them that one's identity is made complete and one's humanity perfected."<sup>45</sup> Quite a contrast from the view Ibn Bājjah would project, of the thinker as a recluse or a weed. And still more at variance with the *modus vivendi* Ibn Tufayl conceived in the eye of the Almohad storm: rather than live in isolation with a friend on an uninhabited island, one might find a way of living in the world but not of it.

Miskawayh's virtue ethics was highly influential among Shi'ite writers, most notably in the spiritualizing ethics of Nas.īr al-Dīn al-T.ūsī (1201-1274), the astronomer, chemist, biologist, mathematician, physician, and philosopher (known after al-Fārābī as "the Third Teacher," but bitterly condemned in Islamic sources, whether for his Shi'ism, his rationalism, or his betrayal of the last Caliph, defecting to the bloodthirsty Mongol conqueror, Hulagu). T.ūsī's work was popularized by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Dawānī (1427-1502), who equated T.ūsī's paragons of natural virtue with the '*ulamā*' (clerics) and dervish shaykhs, and called his own patron the "shadow of God on earth."<sup>46</sup> But it was Abū H.āmid al-Ghazālī, author of *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, a systematic attack on the neoplatonic Aristotelians of Islam, who made virtue ethics all but canonical in Sunnī Islam.

### **al-Ghazālī (1058-1111)**

Ghazālī adopted the framework of Miskawayh's Aristotelian virtue ethics, as my teachers Richard Walzer and H. A. R. Gibb explained. But they glossed over his substituting Sufi pietism for Miskawayh's courtly humanism. As I wrote, "The ancient architecture is strikingly preserved – Aristotle's profound and profoundly original conceptualization of the virtues. But, like the mosaics in the Byzantine basilicas, the faces are erased or plastered over: Where the lithe forms of pagan demigods once danced and later the spiritual lineaments and heavenward gaze of late antique piety and paideia could once be seen in the tesserae of the mosaics, the space is filled with painted sayings from the Prophet and his Book."<sup>47</sup> Ghazālī rejects Miskawayh's dismissal of Sufi asceticism and his endorsement of the youthful study of mathematics as vital to the good life. He suppresses Miskawayh's dismissal of a life of solitude and has no use for his appraisal of communal worship and the Hajj as means of binding together the community of Islam. Following Miskawayh line for line but erasing his humanistic orientation, Ghazālī dropped about a third of what Miskawayh had to say about ethics.<sup>48</sup>

Wisdom, courage, and temperance remain the cardinal virtues, still linked with the rational, appetitive, and irascible faculties. Justice still reflects their integration. Like Miskawayh, Ghazālī groups other virtues under the cardinal three. But he sets no sub-virtues under justice. He

retains the ancient idea of retributive and distributive justice that Miskawayh adopted from Aristotle but, understandably, seems less concerned with self-assertion. Still, like Miskawayh and Aristotle, Ghazālī rejects Plato’s denial that justice is a compromise between doing wrong and being wronged. Wisdom still rules, but love of God is teased out and set ahead of the knowledge that Aristotle made the ground, expression, and goal of such love. Where Miskawayh prized memory and clarity, Ghazālī canonizes discernment in a controversy. In place of reasonableness he sets insight, the ability to hit the truth without need of argument.

Ghazālī, like Miskawayh, values liberality. But he qualifies his praise since such virtues suit only those still enveloped in the world of material possessions – and worldly power. Aristotelian magnificence (listed under courage) is shown well in building mosques, roads, hospitals, and bridges. But, again, it is relevant only for those still caught in worldly toils. If Miskawayh could expatiate on the varieties of liberality, Ghazālī will list twenty evils of the tongue, a characteristically pietist concern. Cheer and good humor are valued; but sociability can become a chore. Solitude is preferable. Courage is needed, but only in confronting enemies of Islam. Greatness of soul means caring little for honors. Righteous indignation, an Aristotelian virtue elided by Miskawayh, is set back in place, with cautions against confusing it with spite or envy. Where Miskawayh praised actions done for their own sake or God’s, Ghazālī pairs the quest for immortality with the desire to draw nearer to God. Intrinsic worth smacks too much of worldliness to hold its own here.

Setting a pietist mantle over the virtue of contentment, Ghazālī urges one not seek one’s needs beyond a single day – a month at most. All worldly excess is frowned on. But one cannot be too sober or sedate: The Prophet preferred a smile to laughter, and the Sufi saint H.asan al-Bas.ri did not laugh for thirty years. Miskawayh had related personable demeanor very much to dress. Ghazālī gives clothing even greater emphasis: The Prophet, he teaches, wore whatever came to hand, saying he was a slave and should dress accordingly. We should wear only the coarsest of fabrics, just enough to give the necessary coverage and stout enough to last a day and a night – showing our trust in God.

Saadia Gaon (882-942), exegete, lexicographer, grammarian, and talmudist, the first systematic Jewish philosopher, does not develop a full virtue ethics. But he does hold, with Mu’tazilites of Islam, that sin takes hold of one’s character. Our wise or wilful choices enlarge or constrict our degrees of freedom, as the Talmudic rabbis taught: Fulfillment of one divine commandment draws another in its train, and so does each act of disobedience dig one into a moral rut. So not only is virtue its own reward but each dutiful or disobedient act is of intrinsic worth or a stifling slip into deeper bondage than what led to it.<sup>49</sup>

Saadia follows the rabbinic doctrine that we are judged by the preponderance of our actions.<sup>50</sup> Working inductively with the values he finds in scripture, he lays out a pluralistic ethics, critical of attempts to order all of life “by a single moral trait.” God, he argues, gave humans diverse interests, just as He made us of diverse elements and parts. We don’t build houses of stone or brick or thatch alone but combine our materials to complement one another. The same is true with foods, he urges. Just as music must harmonize diverse tones and rhythms,<sup>51</sup> and medicines compound many ingredients, a good life blends varied ends, balancing the sensuous with the



ascetic, the goods of the appetites with those of procreation, urban and agrarian development, health and longevity, governance and knowledge, leisure and rest, gratitude in worship and retribution for crimes. None of these, Saadiah argues, is rightly made the be all and end all of our lives, as single minded advocates might imagine. Each is sorely wanting when pursued to the detriment of the rest – self-undermining, in fact, when not balanced by the other goods, to yield the good life the Torah proposes.<sup>52</sup>

### **Maimonides (1138-1204)**

Moses Maimonides, philosopher, physician, and jurist, knows his Aristotle well and uses virtue ethics to unify Saadiah's lively crowd of ends. Seeking a highest goal, he marshals our diverse authentic goods as means to a single summum bonum. Reason, he affirms, links us with God and is the referent of scripture's poetic affirmation that humanity is created in God's image.<sup>53</sup> Our ultimate end is perfection of the intelligence that distinguishes us from all other animals, and reason's quest is consummated in knowing God. That open ended goal is the rightful pinnacle of our aspirations, fulfilling Plato's counsel to become just and pious and as like to God as possible (*Theaetetus* 176b). Scripture frames the aim in its own distinctive register, as an imperative: *Ye shall be holy, for I, the Lord thy God, am holy* (Leviticus 19:2). This we do, Maimonides' holds, by practicing the kindness, grace, and generosity revealed to Moses in God's governance of nature and through the quest to know God. Thus, we emulate God by striving to perfect ourselves through exercise of the moral and intellectual virtues.

The ancient rabbis had long glossed the imperative to emulate God's holiness by making God the model of benevolence – clothing the naked, visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, burying the dead,<sup>54</sup> actions that typify the life of goodness that realizes and deepens a character aspiring to emulate God's love, *h.esed*. In an individual or a community, the rabbis call that character *middat h.asidim*, the ethos of the devoted, piety manifested in acts of generosity. For Maimonides this moral side of *imitatio Dei* is complemented by fulfillment of reason's yearning to know God – reconnecting with the Source of understanding and of life itself. God makes Himself known in our recognition of his absoluteness, voiced in his I AM THAT I AM (Exodus 3:14), and its shorthand expression in the Tetragrammaton – and by a more a posteriori route, through study of His works in nature. For the more we know of nature the more we see God's grace and wisdom, and the more we see and love God's transcendent perfection.

Jacob's ladder, with God at its summit and angels ascending and descending, like Plato's ladder of love, or the line in the *Republic*, maps the ontic, axiological, and epistemic scale that souls must climb. The angels, Maimonides stresses, descend again after their ascent. For all messengers have a mission beyond their own fulfillment, to bring guidance, counsel, and instruction to those still below. Here enlightenment links up with responsibility, and intellectual virtue touches moral virtue and is touched by it. The two meet in the Torah, and God's commandments training the soul in moral virtue and preparing it for the intellectual perfection that pursues a knowledge of God. But notice, once again, that although intellectual perfection fulfills man's inner affinity to the divine, it also guides us in the definition and development of the moral

virtues, and not least in their expression. For without Godgiven reason human beings would be no better than animals and no more subject than they to any moral imperative.

If a system of law, Maimonides writes, aims for civic order, checking wrongdoing and promoting what the lawgiver takes for human happiness, but without regard to ideas, it is clearly a law of human devising. A divinely inspired system pursues not just material welfare but the reform of character and enhancement of belief, seeking to elevate human understanding and allow those it serves to fathom the true nature of things. Such, Maimonides holds, is the Mosaic law. It does seek to curb the harm wrought by force and fraud and to enhance the material well being of those sheltered by its rules. But it also mandates behaviors and institutes actions and abstentions aiming to perfect human character and inculcate moral virtues. Beyond that, it seeks to enlighten its adherents, not by way of dogma but through symbols.

A paradigm case of the Torah's moral project is the mandate to assist one's enemy whose ass lies sprawling under its load (Exodus 23:5; cf. Deuteronomy 22:4). An enemy is specified, Maimonides explains, because this law, like the prohibition of vengeance and grudges (Leviticus 19:18), seeks "to abate the force of anger and spite." The commandment to return an enemy's stray beast (Deuteronomy 22:1) seeks to purge any drift toward avarice. Israelites are told to "rise up before a hoary head" (Leviticus 19:32) – to instill an ethos of respect, reflected also in the commandment, to honor one's father and mother (Exodus 20:12), and more impersonally in the obligation to obey duly appointed magistrates (Deuteronomy 17:11). The law, Maimonides says, seeks to purge arrogance and foster modesty. But it would be out of balance if it steered one to extremes of shamefacedness. So it commands reproof of wrongdoing (Leviticus 19:17) and stern and resolute resistance to false prophets (Deuteronomy 18:22). "Test most of the commandments by this standard," Maimonides writes, "and you'll find they aim to guide and train our dispositions."

Biblical ethics here is no mere mass of dos and don'ts – the thou-shalts and thou-shalt-nots mocked by Nietzsche as a camel's burdens. Biblical commandments, as Maimonides reads them, aim to cultivate virtue and attune the ethos toward a wholesome middle ground. Thus the Psalmist's words, as Maimonides glosses them: *The Law of the Lord, which is perfect, reforms the soul* (19:8) – passing on in concrete terms amenable to action and imagination, its ideal of human perfection.<sup>55</sup>

How is intellectual perfection to be sought without dogmas or catechisms? Maimonides faces this question when he reads in the Mishnah (Sanhedrin 10.1) that all Israel have a portion in the World to Come – as do the righteous of all nations, the Tosefta adds. The World to Come, as Maimonides understands it, is timeless contact (Arabic, *ittis.āl*, Hebrew, *devekut*) of the rational soul with the Divine. That goal, Plato taught, is won philosophically. How, then, is it reached by those who are not philosophically adept? To this Platonic question, Maimonides has a Platonic answer. For, as Plato makes clear in the *Meno* (97a), for most practical purposes (although not for teaching when explanations are required, nor for creative work) true belief is as good as knowledge.

Poets are the mediators, as Plato proposed in the *Republic*, when he urged that enlightenment of the unenlightened requires “an art whose aim would be... the conversion of the soul... not to put the power of sight into the soul’s eye, which already has it, but to ensure that instead of looking in the wrong direction it is turned the way it ought to be.” For, as Plato has Socrates argue, “the soul of every man does possess the power of learning the truth, and the organ to see it with,” but “just as one might have to turn the whole body round in order that the eye should see light instead of darkness, so the entire soul must be turned away from this changing world, until its eye can contemplate reality and that supreme splendor which we have called the Good.”<sup>56</sup> Al-Fārābī, adept in Plato’s thought and deeply respected by Maimonides, had carried that thought a step further, seeing it as the special task of prophets to translate the pure ideas known to a philosopher, through rhetoric and imagery into beliefs and practices accessible to those who never dream of practicing philosophy.

Scripture, Maimonides argued, imparts true beliefs about God and His governance of the world. It makes practices too a vehicle of ideas. Sabbath observance, critically, just as Philo said, offers not just a day of rest but the opportunity to contemplate the two great themes that Sabbath rest is made symbolically to intend: providence, as exemplified in the Exodus; and creation, which Sabbaths memorialize. Beliefs can point beyond themselves, toward knowledge; symbols can stand in for concepts. So the Torah’s ritual laws, far from being merely ornamental or empty “ceremonial,” carry rich messages, via the imagination, to the emotional lives of those unused to sustained conceptual thinking. Indeed, they invite deeper probing. Taking up an image from the Book of Proverbs, Maimonides finds a symbol addressing the workings of biblical symbolism itself:

*Golden apples chased with silver is a word well spoken*, says the sage (Proverbs 25:11). To explain that idea: The chasing here is a filigree tracery with tiny openwork eyelets like those that silversmiths make. They’re called eyelets because you can see through them.... What it says is that a poetic figure is a golden apple encased in silver filigree with tiny piercings.... See how marvelously this describes well wrought imagery. It says that when words work on two levels, a surface and a deeper meaning, the outer sense should be fine and fair as silver, but the inner must be more, just as gold is more precious than silver. Still, the surface meaning must lead those who ponder it toward the inner, as the tiny eyelets do in the silver tracery around this apple. From a distance or at a glance it looks like a silver apple, but a keen observer who studies it closely will see inside and realize it’s gold. Just so the prophets’ poesy holds practical wisdom on the surface, including much that is socially beneficial.... But the inner sense bears a wisdom beneficial in a different way, imparting true convictions about Reality.<sup>57</sup>

The Torah’s laws and narratives bear an implicit intentionality, toward higher truths. By inscribing ideals of justice, mercy, and loving kindness (*hesed*), the ethical laws point toward their transcendent Source. The ritual laws, through their symbolism, point in the same direction, giving a worldly, even bodily concreteness to ideas like holiness. So practice builds more than character. It guides the beliefs that make knowledge articulate affectively and intellectually inviting.

There’s more than one virtuous circle here. Actions build habits, and habits yield further, reliable actions expressive of the dispositions now instilled. So society’s material well being is

enhanced: Life is surer; basic needs for civil security and material well being are more readily met as the ethos grows more just and generous. That matters for the intellectual project Maimonides expects a good society to sustain. For no one, he argues, can think much of higher things when hungry, cold, or frightened.

The ideal of Perfection itself inspires emulation, contributing to the betterment of character and thus to enhanced material well being. Medicine and wholesome lifestyles, for Maimonides, are not ends in themselves. But they are valued for improving the human condition, and they too are improved when practiced with discipline and devotion. So even the highest thoughts prove worthy means as well as precious ends.

Moral virtue, Maimonides holds, lays a foundation for the deeper thoughts that are our highest goal and *raison d'être*. For only the pure soul wins knowledge of God. Why so? The most natural answer, which Maimonides affirms forthrightly, is that appetites and passions are distractions: Truth shines unstintingly. But habit and the demands of our embodiment obscure it, “plunging us,” us, he writes, echoing Avicenna’s language, “back into the black of night.” For a prophet of the highest order, light may gleam “like lightning flashing repeatedly overhead.... so steadily that he seems in constant, unbroken light.... For others lightning flashes but once the whole night through.... Still others never reach a plane where lightning lights up the darkness for them. But some highly polished body, might, a stone or some such thing gleaming in the dark. But even so faint a light shining down on us will not be constant.... The degrees of enlightenment vary accordingly: Some never see this light even once but stumble in the dark.”<sup>58</sup>

Enlightenment is obscured or blocked not just by intellectual but by moral weaknesses. Moses, having purged such defects from his own soul, saw, as the Talmud put it, “through a pellucid lens.”<sup>59</sup> But gluttony, pride, ill temper, stinginess, avarice, and many another vice impede intellectual access to God. Maimonides cites Isaiah here: *your sins have sundered you from your God* (59:2). Sins here are character flaws. So Maimonides finds the sin that barred Moses from the promised land, not in lack of trust or faith but in his allowing his self-control to slip to the point that he let anger get the better of him, lashing out at his dispirited people by saying, *Listen, rebels!* (Numbers 20:10).<sup>60</sup>

Prophets, for Maimonides, are the paragons of enlightenment. But their special awareness of God and His expectations is continuous with natural, rational insight. It demands not just intellectual virtuosity but moral virtue, not just to avoid distraction but to prepare the ground. Maimonides cites the Talmud to underscore the point: “Prophecy rests only on the wise, the brave, and the rich.”<sup>61</sup> He explains that language by reference to the words of the rabbinic sages themselves: The wise are those who possess the intellectual virtues. ‘Rich’ stands for the moral virtue of contentment, as the rabbis say: “Who is rich? He who rejoices in his lot.”<sup>62</sup> ‘Brave’ here stands for self-control: “For they say, ‘Who is brave? He who conquers his bent.’”<sup>63</sup> Courage and *sophrosyne* thus undergird the wisdom prophetic insight requires, filling out the trio of Plato’s cardinal virtues. “Do not be surprised,” Maimonides writes, “that a few moral defects diminish prophecy. Some character flaws, we find, block it altogether. Anger is one. Thus they say, ‘If any prophet is enraged, his prophecy is suspended’<sup>64</sup>.... Likewise, anxiety and grief.” Jacob, the Talmud reports, lost contact with the Holy Spirit all the while that he mourned for Joseph.<sup>65</sup>

Since moral imbalance clouds one's spiritual vision by allowing passions or appetites to distract the mind from its quest, one can hope that moral virtue will pave the way to thoughts of God. There's a hint of that in the intimations of God's absoluteness implicit in moral virtue. Just as one might see such intimations of divinity in pure mathematical concepts, say, of unity or infinity, or in the pure idea of truth, one might see such intimations refracted in the character of loved ones, or reflected in the elegance of natural patterns, the constancy of natural laws, or the beauty of a sunrise or a sunset. Perhaps purity of character can become one of those shiny surfaces that take up and reflect divine light. That possibility shines most brightly, perhaps, when prophets take the role of "monishers," whose moral purity is critical to their credibility as well as their vision – the reflex of the idea that the learned sanctify or desecrate God's name by actions or omissions not earthshaking in others but devastating in those seen as exemplary.<sup>66</sup> Just as a moral vice can subvert one's vision, moral virtues may sharpen it and point the way toward God's perfection.

The idea may be generalizable: If captiousness or narrow mindedness can blind one, receptivity and intellectual openness are critical to creativity and invention. With intellectual, as with moral virtue, there is a mean to be found, between blanket skepticism and credulity.<sup>67</sup> So moral and intellectual virtue once again support each other. It's not enough to be discerning. To be discriminating about values and practical decision points demands habits of thoughtful reflection on hypotheses and options. The same is true of the social graces that make dialogue possible and even profitable and pleasant: One must learn when and how to listen as well as make a point. Tact is the sister of keenness. And moral virtues prove as critical to spiritual and intellectual fulfillment as social epiphanies (and exemplars) are to moral grace – a rather special case of the Socratic intuition of the unity of the virtues and the centrality of reason in the moral life. Just as *phronesis* mediates between thought and action, making actions thoughtful and ideas actionable, it seems not unreasonable to expect *sophrosyne* to serve as reason's guide, making thinking, judicious.<sup>68</sup>

## Notes

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1. Where Plato spoke of *sophia*, wisdom, e.g. *Republic* IV 428b and used the term interchangeably with *phronesis*, e.g. *Laws* O 631c, Aristotle distinguishes the two, saying that *sophia* treats of things divine, *Metaphysics* I 2, 983a 6-7, whereas *phronesis* addresses human concerns, *NE* VI 5, 1140a24 - 1140b30. But *phronesis* remains an intellectual virtue *NE* O 13. 1103a5-6.
  2. *NE* 1103b 2-6.
  3. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II 1.
  4. See L. E. Goodman, *On Justice*
  5. Compare Cicero, *De Finibus bonorum et malorum*, Of Ultimate Goods and Ills. For Saadiah's ethics, see *ED* X.
  6. Taneli Kukkonen, "Al-Ghazālī on the Origins of Ethics," *Numen* 63 (2016) 271-98.
  7. Maimonides, "Eight Chapters"; Aristotle, *Metaphysics* ; Kindī, *On First Philosophy*, Introduction...
  8. *De Abrahamo* 68-70, Loeb 6.38-41, Winston, 222.
  9. Philo, *Quod Deterius Potiori insidiari solet*, 22-24, Loeb 2.216-19.
  10. Philo, *De Confusione Linguarum* 120-21, Loeb 4.76-77.
  11. Philo, *De Cherubim* 98-105, Loeb 2.68-71.
  12. Philo, *De Cherubim* 43-47, Loeb 2.34-37.
  13. Philo, *De Abrahamo* 52-54, Loeb 6.30-31 and *De Somniis* 1.167-70, Loeb 5.384-85.
  14. Philo, *De Cherubim* 104-05, Loeb 2.70-73.
  15. Philo, *De Congressu quaerendae Eruditionis gratia* 14-19, Loeb 4.464-67.
  16. Philo, *De Sacrificiis Abelis et Caini* 78-79, Loeb 2.152-53.
  17. Philo, *De Mutatione Nominum* 255-58, Loeb 5.272-73.
  18. Philo, *De Vita Mosis* 2.215-16, Loeb 6.256-57.
  19. Philo, *De Legum Allegoriae* 1.63-64, Loeb .....
  20. Philo, *De Legum Allegoriae* 3.167-68, Loeb.

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21. Plato, *Republic* X 612b.
  22. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* X 1176b 9-25.
  23. Mishnah Avot 1.3.
  24. Philo, *De Vita Mosis* 2,130, Loeb 6.512-13.
  25. Philo, *De Somniis*, 1.171-72, Loeb 5.386-87.
  26. Philo, *De Migratione Abrahami*, 46, Loeb 4.156-57.
  27. Mishnah Pe'ah 1.1, Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 40b.
  28. Philo, *De Migratione Abrahami*, 55, Loeb 4.162-63.
  29. Philo, *De Praemiis et Poenis*, 17.100.
  30. Philo, *De Congressu quaerendae Eruditionis gratia* 69-70, Loeb 4.492-93.
  31. See Babylonian Talmud 7a, where the Torah is the tree of life, *to those who study it for its own sake*.
  32. Philo, *De Migratione Abrahami*, 10.56.
  33. Sidney Griffith in the Introduction to his edition and translation of Yah.yā ibn 'Adī, *The Reformation of Morals* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2002) xviii.
  34. See Shlomo Pines and Michael Schwarz, "Yah.yā ibn 'Adī's Refutation of the Doctrine of Acquisition (*iktisāb*)," *Studia orientalia memoriae D. H. Baneth dedicata* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1979) 49-94.
  35. Al-Fārābī, on Aristotle's *De Interpretatione*, ed. Wilhelm Kutsch and Stanley Marrow (Beirut: Catholic Press, 1960) 98.
  36. The work is edited by Gerhard Endress as *Maqāla fī tabyīn al-Fas.l bayna Sinā 'at al-Mant. iq al-Falsafī wa al-Nah.w al- 'Arabī* (Treatise on the Distinction between the Philosophical Art of Logic and Arabic Grammar), *Journal for the History of Arabic Science* (Aleppo) 2 (1978) 181-93.
  37. See Goodman, *Islamic Humanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 101-21, 199-201.
  38. Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb*, editor unnamed (Beirut: Khayyat, 1961) 19-20; Zurayk 14-15.
  39. Cf. Aristotle: "wisdom must plainly be the most finished of the forms of knowledge." *Nicomachean Ethics* VI 7, 1141a 17.

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40. Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb*, Beirut 20; Zurayk 15-16.
  41. Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb*, Beirut 5, Zurayk 1.
  42. Cf. M. Abdul Haq Ansari, *The Ethical Philosophy of Miskawayh* (Aligarh: Aligarh Muslim University Press, 1964) 104.
  43. Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb*, Beirut, 15-16; Zurayk, 12-13.
  44. *R. Fī Daf'i 'l-Ah.zān* (Essay on How to Banish Sorrow).
  45. Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb*, Beirut 34-35, Zurayk 25; cf. Beirut 19, Zurayk 14.
  46. For T.ūsī and Dawānī, see Majid Fakhry, *Ethical Theories in Islam*, second edition (Leiden: Brill, 1994) 130-47. T.ūsī's ethics is translated by G. M. Wickens as *The Nasirean Ethics* (London: Allen Unwin, 1964); Dawānī's, by W. F. Thompson as *Practical Philosophy of the Mohammadan People* (London: Oriental Translation Fund, 1839; reprinted, Karachi, 1977).
  47. Goodman, *Islamic Humanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 119.
  48. Muhammad Abul Quasem, "Al-Ghazālī's Rejection of Philosophic Ethics," *Islamic Studies*, 119-20 (full page run, 111-27).
  49. See *ED* tr. Rosenblatt, 249 and Mishnah Avot 4.2.
  50. See *ED* V 1-2, ed. Kafih, 174, tr. Rosenblatt, 210; and see Rabbi Akivah, at M. Avot 3.16, B. Kiddushin 39b, Rosh ha-Shanah 17a, Berakhot, 5ab, Sanhedrin 101a, Bava Batra 15b, Genesis Rabbah 33.1.
  51. Cf. Aristotle, *Politics* II 5, 1263b 31-36.
  52. See Goodman, *God of Abraham* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 141-52; and for Maimonides' alternative, 153-66.
  53. Maimonides, "Eight Chapters," 5; *Guide* I 2. See Goodman, "Happiness," in Robert Pasnau, ed., *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 1.457-71.
  54. Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 14a; Genesis Rabbah 8.13; Sifre, Piska 49.
  55. Maimonides, "Eight Chapters," 4.
  56. Plato, *Republic* VII 518, tr. Cornford; cf. III 377-78, 401-02.
  57. Maimonides, *Guide* Introduction, Munk, 1.7a.



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58. *Guide* Introduction, Munk 1.4ab
  59. Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 49b.
  60. Maimonides, “Eight Chapters,” 4.
  61. Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 38a; cf. Shabbat 92a, cited at “Eight Chapters,” 7 and *Guide*. II 32.
  62. Mishnah Avot 4.1.
  63. Maimonides again cites Mishnah Avot 4.1. Philo too connects prophecy with the intellectual and moral virtues: “The wicked may never be God’s interpreter. So no worthless person is truly God-inspired. The name befits only the wise.” *Quis Rerum Divinarum Heres Sit*, §§ 52-53. 259-65, Loeb 4.416-19. The Mishnaic thesis about courage or heroism is echoed in the Islamic idea that self-mastery is the *Greater Jihād*.
  64. Babylonian Talmud Pesah.im 66a, 117a.
  65. Maimonides, “Eight Chapters 7,” citing Jerusalem Talmud Sukkah 55a, Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 30b, Pesah.im 117ab. Cf. Plato, *Phaedo* 65c.
  66. Thus Babylonian Talmud Yoma 86a, Shabbat 51, cited by Maimonides in his “Epistle on the Persecution.”
  67. See Maimonides, *Guide* I 32, 63; cf. II 13, 17, 22, 23.
  68. Aristotle argues, on etymological grounds, that *sophrosyne* is what “preserves” *phronesis*. See *NE* VI 5, 1140b 12-14; cf. Plato, *Cratylus* 411e. Aristotle goes on to connect *phronesis* with intellectual honesty, since pleasure and pain “do not destroy and pervert every conviction we hold – not, for example, our conviction that a triangle does nor does not have the sum of its angles equal to two right angles.” The suggestion, borne out by the balance of Aristotle’s chapter, is that as *sophrosyne* guards our choices in a moral sense, *phronesis* preserves the intellectual foundations of our moral resolve.