



## Self-Scrutiny in Maimonides' Ethical and Religious Thought

Jeanette Bicknell

Volume 58, numéro 3, octobre 2002

La question de Dieu

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/000631ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/000631ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Résumé de l'article

On a longtemps considéré l'examen de soi comme nécessaire à l'acquisition de la vertu. L'insistance, chez Maïmonide, sur l'importance de l'examen de soi dans la formation du caractère, lui vient d'Aristote, mais il développe ce thème de manière innovatrice. On explore ici trois thèmes : la conception du rôle de l'examen de soi dans l'évolution morale selon Maïmonide ; comment l'impératif de l'examen de soi influe sur son analyse de la loi mosaïque ; et le rôle spécifiquement religieux de l'examen de soi.

### Éditeur(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval

Faculté de théologie et de sciences religieuses, Université Laval

### ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)

1703-8804 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer cet article

Bicknell, J. (2002). Self-Scrutiny in Maimonides' Ethical and Religious Thought. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 58(3), 531–543.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/000631ar>

# SELF-SCRUTINY IN MAIMONIDES' ETHICAL AND RELIGIOUS THOUGHT\*

Jeanette Bicknell

University of Maryland  
College Park

**RÉSUMÉ :** *On a longtemps considéré l'examen de soi comme nécessaire à l'acquisition de la vertu. L'insistance, chez Maïmonide, sur l'importance de l'examen de soi dans la formation du caractère, lui vient d'Aristote, mais il développe ce thème de manière innovatrice. On explore ici trois thèmes : la conception du rôle de l'examen de soi dans l'évolution morale selon Maïmonide ; comment l'impératif de l'examen de soi influe sur son analyse de la loi mosaïque ; et le rôle spécifiquement religieux de l'examen de soi.*

**ABSTRACT :** *Self-scrutiny has long been considered necessary for the development of virtue. Maimonides' insistence on the importance of self-scrutiny in the formation of character has its roots in Aristotle, but is developed by him in such a way as to be innovative. Three related themes are discussed here : Maimonides' conception of the role self-scrutiny plays in moral development ; how the imperative of self-scrutiny shapes his analysis of Mosaic Law ; and the specifically religious function of self-scrutiny.*

---

Self-knowledge has been seen as germane to human well-being, from its earliest philosophical discussion in Plato's *Charmides*,<sup>1</sup> to more recent trends of insight-oriented psychotherapies.<sup>2</sup> Among the Ancients (and at least until Spinoza's *Ethics*), self-knowledge and the happiness resulting from it were considered inextricably linked to excellence of character. Consequently, an aspect of virtue was the attainment of self-knowledge, and the effort required for virtue had to include the practice of self-scrutiny. For present purposes, let me take self-scrutiny to be a focused and sustained form of introspection, the goal of which is character development and self-knowledge, particularly knowledge of one's weaknesses and habitual inclinations.

---

\* Works discussed are *Laws concerning Character Traits* and the *Eight Chapters*, both in Raymond L. WEISS and Charles E. BUTTERWORTH, *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, New York, New York University Press, 1975 ; and *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Two Volumes, trans. Shlomo Pines, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1963. Page references to the latter are given in brackets in the body of the text.

1. Critias links the two sayings of the Delphic oracle — "Be temperate" and "Know thyself" — and claims that a man cannot be temperate and wise unless he knows himself (164d-b).
2. Insight-oriented psychotherapies are those whose chief goal is that the patient will acquire insight into what has been formerly unintelligible. See *The Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Psychology*, ed. Rom HARRÉ and Roger LAMB, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1983, p. 512.

That the attainment of virtue requires self-scrutiny is implicit in Aristotle's ethics, although he does not greatly emphasize or develop this theme. Maimonides' insistence on the importance of self-scrutiny and reflexive knowledge in the formation of character has its roots in Aristotle, but is developed and justified in such a way as to be innovative.<sup>3</sup> Three themes will retain us now: the role played by self-scrutiny in moral development; the closely related issue of how the imperative of self-scrutiny shapes Maimonides' analysis of Mosaic Law; and the non-Aristotelian, specifically religious function of self-scrutiny which has ramifications for Maimonides' conception of the ideal life for man.<sup>4</sup> Let me begin with a brief discussion of the place of self-scrutiny in Aristotle's analysis of virtue.

Aristotle uses the word virtue to mean, "those dispositions which are praiseworthy" (1103a9, I-13);<sup>5</sup> dispositions being qualities whereby we make decisions to perform certain types of actions. We inherit virtues, he says, by our nature and perfect them through habituation (1103a14-25, II-1). As is well-known, Aristotle says that every virtue is a mean between two non-virtuous extremes (1106a14-b35, II-4-5). For example, the virtue of courage is the disposition falling between the extremes of cowardliness (an extreme deficiency) and recklessness (an extreme excess) (1107b1-4, II-7). Virtue is a matter of delicate balance, since it consists in having appropriate feelings, towards suitable objects, at the correct time, and for the right reasons (1106b19-24, II-5). Self-scrutiny is important for moral development because of the particular or individual nature of virtue: virtue is determined not according to the arithmetic mean, but to the mean in relation to a given person (1106b35-1107a2, II-5-6). Different people have varying tendencies towards different natural goals. Hence each person must know his own disposition and inclinations — his own tendencies resulting from pleasure or pain. It is only with such knowledge that he or she will be able to pull themselves toward the mean and away from the non-virtuous extreme (1109b2-8, II-9).

A clearer picture of self-scrutiny in Aristotle emerges when we consider the virtue of "high-mindedness" or magnanimity, which is the mean with regard to honour

- 
3. The precise nature and extent of Maimonides' debt to Aristotle has been of enduring interest to students of the former. See for example Marvin FOX, "The Doctrine of the Mean in Aristotle and Maimonides: A Comparative Study," in Joseph A. BUIJS, ed., *Maimonides: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1988, p. 234-263; Daniel H. FRANK, "The End of the *Guide*: Maimonides on the Best Life for Man," *Judaism*, 34, 4 (Fall 1985), p. 485-495; and "Humility as a Virtue: A Maimonidean Critique of Aristotle's Ethics," in Eric L. ORMSBY, ed., *Moses Maimonides and His Time*, Washington, D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 1989, p. 89-99; Steven S. SCHWARZCHILD, "Moral Radicalism and 'Middlingness' in the Ethics of Maimonides," *Studies in Medieval Culture*, 11 (1977), p. 65-94; and Raymond L. WEISS, *Maimonides' Ethics: The Encounter of Philosophic and Religious Morality*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991.
  4. I know of no other commentator who discusses Maimonides with reference to the concept of self-scrutiny. Jonathan JACOBS touches on some concerns similar to my own in this paper in his "Plasticity and Perfection: Maimonides and Aristotle on Character," *Religious Studies*, 33, 4 (December 1997), p. 443-454. He argues that Maimonides' view of the truth and significance of revealed moral law involves a revision of his basically Aristotelian moral psychology; specifically, Maimonides endorses the possibility of redemption through repentance.
  5. References *Nicomachean Ethics* (Bekker number followed by book and chapter) are given in brackets in the text. I have used the translation of Hippocrates G. APOSTLE, Ginnell, Iowa, The Peripatetic Press, 1984.

and dishonour. (The vice of excess is vanity, and the vice of deficiency low-mindedness.) (1107b23-28, II-7). Magnanimity is one of the most glorious virtues : the magnanimous person possesses all of the other virtues, and the quality of magnanimity makes these other virtues seem greater (1124a2-4, IV-7). Magnanimity is grounded upon one's attitude to oneself, so an integral aspect of it is the correct assessment of one's own character and qualities. Most crucially, not only is the magnanimous man truly worthy of great things and aware that he is worthy of them, but he also *requires* of himself that he be worthy of great things (1123b2-4, IV-7). Hence the important role played by self-knowledge in the development of a regulative ideal. Correct assessment of one's own character and qualities, the result of self-scrutiny, is thus thought to entail an inner standard of virtuous action.

For Aristotle, then, self-scrutiny is necessary for the development of virtue : each person needs to know her particular tendencies and inclinations so as to aim at the mean more accurately. He also hints at self-scrutiny's role in the formation of an internal ethical standard. Maimonides follows Aristotle in saying that virtue is a disposition formed by habit, but grants self-scrutiny a more prominent and explicit role than does Aristotle. (We will see later that Maimonides sees self-scrutiny as having expressly religious aspects.) Furthermore, while both philosophers offer justifications for self-scrutiny, Maimonides provides his readers with methodical guidelines for its practice.

Turning now specifically to Maimonides' writings, the clearest statement on the nature and importance of self-scrutiny is an eloquent admonition in the work which has come to be known as the *Eight Chapters*. For ease of commentary I have divided the extract into three parts :

When the man knowledgeable in the art of medicine sees his temperament changing ever so slightly, he does not neglect the disease and let it take possession of him so that he would need an extremely strong medicine. When he knows that one of his bodily organs is weak, he takes continual care of it, avoids things harmful to it, and aims at what is useful to it so that this organ becomes healthy or so that it does not become weaker.<sup>6</sup>

Given Maimonides' medical training and experience as a physician, it is not surprising that he would invoke the ancient theme that the health of the body is parallel to the health of the soul. (In the *Laws concerning Character Traits*, he advises those with "sick souls" to consult wise men, who are "physicians of the soul."<sup>7</sup>) Just as self-knowledge is crucial for physical health — the knowledgeable man takes certain measures when he "knows" that one of his organs is weak — so too will it be important for moral excellence. The comparison of physical health to moral excellence implies that there is an ideal standard of character, analogous to an ideal standard of physical well-being, that one must strive to achieve and against which less advanced states of ethical development can be measured. Moreover, the fact that Maimonides draws our attention to the actions of the man "knowledgeable" in the art of medicine

6. Raymond L. WEISS and Charles E. BUTTERWORTH, *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, p. 73.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

indicates that moral development likewise involves skill, the result of education and training.

The next part of the quotation makes explicit the comparison between physical and psychic health :

Similarly, the perfect man needs to inspect his moral habits continually, weigh his actions, and reflect upon the state of his soul every single day.<sup>8</sup>

Here Maimonides indicates that, like the maintenance of physical health, moral development is a continuous process requiring constant effort and diligence. Self-knowledge and excellence of character are not achieved definitively, any more than a present state of physical well-being means that one's health will never again be at risk.

In the last part of the extract I am discussing, Maimonides, as noted above, provides his readers with practical guidelines for the practice of self-scrutiny :

Whenever he sees his soul inclining toward one of the extremes, he should rush to cure it and not let the evil state become established by the repetition of a bad action — as we have mentioned. Thus, as we said above, he should attend to the defective moral habit in himself and continually seek to cure it, for a man inevitably has defects.<sup>9</sup>

Here Maimonides emphasizes the Aristotelian theme that virtue is a habit tending toward the mean : self-scrutiny is described as a process of monitoring the soul so that it does not tend toward a non-virtuous extreme. (This theme was similarly present in the first quoted sentence, where the man knowledgeable in the art of medicine is said to avoid “extremely strong medicine.”) The advice to attend to one's “defective moral habit” is intelligible only on the condition that the habit be known to the person in question. Self-knowledge (and the self-scrutiny which fosters it) takes on added importance as defects in character are said to be inevitable.

Self-scrutiny fulfills several basic functions in Maimonides' thought. In addition to its role in moral development (the function noted by Aristotle), self-scrutiny encourages one to turn from the world, thus facilitating a turn toward God. In addition, self-scrutiny induces tranquillity of mind, thus facilitating one's turn toward God yet again. To assess the value of these functions, we will need to address Maimonides' conception of the Law.

In contrast to Aristotle, Maimonides says that ethical commandments have a divine origin and object.<sup>10</sup> The Law induces proper beliefs, and as a whole has two distinct, basic aims : the welfare of the soul and the welfare of the body (510). In line with these aims, the commandments have three functions (513-514). First, a commandment may communicate a belief necessary for the abolition of reciprocal wrong-

---

8. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Michael P. Levine has argued that while Maimonides' primary focus on both the normative and meta-ethical levels is revealed law, a doctrine of natural law would not have been incompatible with the ethical teachings he propounded. See LEVINE's “The Role of Reason in the Ethics of Maimonides : Or why Maimonides could have had a Doctrine of Natural Law even if he did Not,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 14 (Fall 1986), p. 279-295.

doing, such as the belief that God avenges those who are wronged. Second, a commandment may communicate a belief necessary for the acquisition of a noble moral quality. For example, the prohibition against prostitution helps guard against the vice of intense lust (602). These first two functions would possibly not be out of place in any well-ordered polis. The third function is specifically religious and concerns the communication of correct theological beliefs, chiefly the belief in the unity and incorporeality of the deity. Such beliefs help to promote the unity of the religious community.

According to Jewish tradition, there are two types of commandments : judgments (*mishpatim*) and statutes (*huqqim*). The former are rationally or conventionally necessary, and universally accepted (for example, the prohibition against murder). The latter are known by divine revelation and their validity depends essentially on divine decree (for example, dietary laws such as the prohibition against mixing meat and milk). In keeping with the tradition of Talmudic positivism, rabbis were afraid that rational justification of the commandments would lead to lack of respect for the law and encourage the view that the commandments were valid only to the extent required by rational justification. Maimonides, in his explanation of the commandments, departs decisively from that tradition. He reconceives the categories of judgment and statute such that all commandments can be rationally justified ; judgments are re-defined as those commandments whose utility is clear to the multitude, and the statutes as those whose utility is obscure (507).<sup>11</sup>

In the *Mishnah Torah*, his codex of the Jewish Law, Maimonides divides the commandments into fourteen classes. In *The Guide of the Perplexed*, he proposes to explain the utility of each class, the reason for individual commandments in each class, as well as the reasons for some of the particulars of the commandments. He tells us that there are only very few commandments whose cause (in the sense of "rational justification") he has not been able to ascertain (510). Maimonides claims that it is a "sickness of the soul" that compels certain people to think it grievous that causes be given for any law (523-524).<sup>12</sup> It is clear that he harbours a deep antipathy towards anti-rationalist accounts of the Law and traditional positivistic attitudes toward it.

Together with the distinction between those commandments whose utility is manifest, and those whose utility is more obscure, Maimonides distinguishes between those commands which concern the relationship between man and man, and those which concern the relationship between man and God. The prohibitions against transgressions among humans are grouped in the fifth class (prohibiting wrong-doing and aggression), the sixth class (on punishment), the seventh class (concerning property and business), and comprise some of the third class (on the improvement of

11. My understanding of Maimonides' reconceptualization of Jewish law has been influenced by Josef STERN. See his "The Idea of a *Hoq* in Maimonides' Explanation of the Law," in S. PINES and Y. YOVEL, ed., *Maimonides and Philosophy*, Dordrecht, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1986, p. 92-130.

12. I agree with Stern that Maimonides' claim that the particulars of commandments do not have causes is a smokescreen.

moral qualities). The remainder of the commandments pertain to the relationship between man and God. Maimonides stresses that commandments which concern the perfection of character, even though they sometimes affect relations between a person and those around him, essentially concern the relationship between man and God (538). In what follows, I will be concerned primarily with Maimonides' explanation of the statutes (those commandments whose utility is not immediately evident), and particularly with those concerning the individual's relation to the divine.

The commandments regarding dietary laws (the thirteenth class), and the prohibitions against certain sexual unions (the fourteenth class), are said to concern the perfection of the individual and his relation to God. In his preliminary discussion of these commandments Maimonides explicitly refers the reader to his discussion of these issues in the *Eight Chapters* (537-538). Turning to the appropriate section of that work we find the admonition to self-scrutiny quoted above. Why does Maimonides direct the reader in this way, and how is self-scrutiny relevant to these commandments ?

The dietary restrictions relate to the first and most clearly Aristotelian of the three functions of self-scrutiny noted above ; namely, its role in fostering moral development. According to Maimonides, dietary restrictions are not arbitrary prohibitions, nor does he relate them in all cases to health concerns. Rather, they contribute to the development of moral qualities and decline of vice. For instance, the reason for the prohibition against eating a limb cut from a living animal is that it harbours the "habit of cruelty" (598-599). The same holds for another prohibition, though not dietary, against killing an animal and its young on the same day. This is a precautionary measure to prevent killing the young animal in front of its mother. Were this to happen, the animal would feel great pain and, "If the Law takes into consideration these pains of the soul in the case of beast and birds, what will be the case with regard to the individuals of the human species as a whole ?" (599-600).

Thus the dietary restrictions encourage respect for the Law by indicating that the simplest and most routine commandments may have profound implications. The necessity to consider the vulnerability of others, not only humans but also animals, seems a straightforward contribution to excellence of character. Yet more is going on here ; according to this class of commandments (the thirteenth), the ethical treatment of others is primarily a duty to God, not only to others. This asymmetry of obligation highlights the second function of self-scrutiny : it facilitates the turn away from the world to oneself. One is obligated to treat others well, but one cannot properly be said to have duty towards them, as all duty is essentially to God. One's focus in fulfilling the commandments is not one's relations to others, but duty to God. However Maimonides does not mean the admonition to turn one's attention away from the world as an endorsement of self-preoccupation. Rather, one turns inward in order to attend more deeply and thus more completely to God.

The moral qualities fostered by following and reflecting upon the dietary laws are those which Maimonides endorses more generally in social relations : regard for others, pity for the weak, and the avoidance of cruelty. (We will see shortly that these

qualities are emphasized in his discussion of the commandments regarding slaves and female prisoners of war.) Although the ethical treatment of others may have instrumental value, Maimonides tends not to make much of this.<sup>13</sup> By stressing the correct disposition of the agent, Maimonides points to the need for self-scrutiny, as this is the only means by which one can know if one appropriately attends to others and truly feels pity for the weak. And in emphasizing the deeper meaning of duty in God in duty to others, Maimonides indicates the second function of self-scrutiny, that of encouraging one to turn away from the world and toward God.

It is important to note that in stressing the feelings and inner state of the agent, Maimonides does not endorse an emotion-based approach to ethics. Such an approach would be inconsistent with his conviction that "all passions are evil" (126). Thus in a related point the ruler of the city should be merciful and gracious, not out of compassion but "in accordance with what is fitting" (126). Regard for others and pity for the weak are not merely appropriate affective responses ; they are divinely commanded and hence can be rationally justified.<sup>14</sup>

The second function of self-scrutiny, that of encouraging one to turn from the world, is likewise urged in Maimonides' explanation of a number of commandments in which he de-emphasizes their immediate social value and instead stresses the resultant promotion of a moral quality. This strategy is especially clear in his discussion of the fourth class of commandments. These are said to be useful through the instilling of pity for the "weak and wretched," giving strength to the poor, and inciting us not to afflict those in weak positions (550-551). Not only is one prohibited from returning a slave to his master ; but it is also necessary to protect and defend all those who seek one's protection, to consider their interests, and to be beneficent towards them. Maimonides repeatedly stresses that observing these commandments encourages feelings of pity for the weak and thereby helps develop noble moral qualities. Yet the fourth class of commandments pertain to the relationship between man and God ; so one's obligation to slaves is essentially an obligation to God. In protecting the slave, one's attention is to turn not so much directly towards the slave, but more deeply towards God.

Maimonides' emphasis on the acquisition of moral qualities, especially pity, at the expense of more immediate practical concerns, is similarly evident in his discussion of the laws pertaining to female prisoners of war. According to the Torah (Deuteronomy 21:10-14), a woman captured in war must be taken to her captor's home. There, she is allowed to mourn her family and to practice an idolatrous religion for thirty days. After that time, if she has converted to Judaism marriage is permitted. If

---

13. In a related point, Maimonides does not stress possible eudemonic benefits arising from the ethical treatment of others. See Alexander ALTMANN, "Maimonides' 'Four Perfections,'" *Essays in Jewish Intellectual History*, Hanover, Brandeis University Press, 1981, p. 65-76.

14. Compare his attitude towards pity with that of SPINOZA. For the latter, pity is a form of pain and hence in itself bad for a man who lives under the guidance of reason. It may be good only to the extent that it promotes acts of kindness by agents who are not adequately motivated to them by reason alone (*Ethics*, IV, prop. 50).



the captured woman has not renounced her former religion, marriage is impossible, but her captor is nonetheless forbidden to sell her as a slave.

In his explanation of the reasons for these commandments, Maimonides does not rehearse the many strong pragmatic reasons not to mistreat women captured in war ; perhaps most urgently, their relatives may seek revenge. One might expect him to reiterate warnings against excessive sexual desire in this context. Instead, Maimonides makes plain his disagreement with the traditional view that these sections of the Torah pertain to the reduction of concupiscence. Rather, he is convinced that the regulations regarding captured women are designed to engender noble moral qualities of pity towards the weak (567-568). Although these commandments primarily concern social relationships, rather than one's relationship to God, Maimonides explains them in such a way so as to emphasize the virtue of pity, rather than the welfare of those who are the objects of pity. By not stressing one's duty to others or the importance of obeying the details of the commandments, Maimonides draws our attention again to the disposition of the ethical agent.

Similarly, the encouragement to turn inward, away from the world, is an explanation for the reading of sacred texts on the occasion of offering first fruits to God :

A wandering Aramean was my father ; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number ; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the Lord the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression ; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders ; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which thou, O Lord, hast given me (Deuteronomy 26:5-10).

This annual reading of sacred texts encourages one to remember states of distress in prosperity. It focuses the attention on affliction — the harsh servitude in Egypt — and God's deliverance. Maimonides tells us that the sacred texts express apprehension that those brought up in prosperity will acquire unpraiseworthy moral traits — conceit, vanity and neglect of correct opinions (552). So the readings encourage self-scrutiny by drawing attention to previous misfortunes and God's mercy, and are thus meant to affect moral development. Yet the distress described in these texts is not literally suffered by those who perform their readings. So while the readings encourage general self-reflection, at the same time they effect a turning away from one's own bodily or temporal distress towards God.

The need sometimes to turn inwards, away from the world, is also evident in Maimonides' explanation of the prohibitions against "certain sexual unions."<sup>15</sup> We noted earlier that Maimonides connects his explanation of these commandments, together with the explanation of dietary restrictions, to his admonition to self-scrutiny in the *Eight Chapters*. The proscriptions against incest, homosexuality, and bestiality

---

15. Maimonides' views on sexuality are extremely complex and deserve much longer and more detailed treatment than I can offer here. I will confine myself to a few remarks.

are said to have the utility of making sexual intercourse rarer and “instilling disgust” for it (606). Maimonides’ occasional suspicion of sexual relations may be due to the fact that they are a particularly intense form of human mutuality and hence a potential threat to the individual’s turning inwards and thus towards God. This conjecture is consistent with Maimonides’ general encouragement of self-scrutiny in the context of intimate relationships.<sup>16</sup>

\*  
\* \*

As self-scrutiny is necessary for the development of moral virtues, and as moral virtues are but a propaedeutic to rational virtues, self-scrutiny is also germane to the acquisition of rational virtue. Moreover, one cannot attain perfect rationality unless “endowed with the qualities of tranquillity and quiet” (76-77). This requirement brings us to another function of self-scrutiny — the maintenance of tranquillity, of a “quiet” or untroubled mind.

The way this function operates in Maimonides’ rational justification of the commandments is evident in his discussion of the commandments regarding sacrifice and repentance. In this context he considers the first class of commandments, comprised of fundamental opinions. These include commandments concerning fasts, the need to confess sins, and sacrifices in expiation of both negligence and certain intentional sins (535). Similarly, the purpose of the fast on the Day of Atonement (discussed in the eighth class of commandments concerning rest days) is to establish the notion of repentance. On that day, one must abstain from all corporeal pleasure and work in various crafts, confining oneself, “to confessing one’s sins and to turning away from them” (570).

As indicated above, Maimonides is convinced that the statutes, which have traditionally been deemed merely decreed by Scripture and hence lacking a rational basis, in fact lead to the acquisition of noble moral qualities. This strategy is clear in his discussion of the commandments concerning animal sacrifice (the eleventh class). He claims that, “The true reality of particulars of commandments is illustrated by the sacrifices” (509). Furthermore, these particulars of sacrifice are set forth consistently and are “wonderfully meaningful” (588). Maimonides tells us that they are designed to keep the sinner cognizant of his sin : “[T]he end of all of these actions is to establish firmly in the soul of every disobedient individual the constant need for remembering and making mention of his sin [...]” (589). The commandment is explained so as to emphasize self-scrutiny, the need sometimes to turn inward, and the importance of repentance.

---

16. For example, in *Laws concerning Character Traits*, sex is permitted only when both the man and the woman wish it and are “in a state of mutual joy.” Sexual relations are proscribed when either is drunk, lethargic, or sad. See Raymond L. WEISS and Charles E. BUTTERWORTH, *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, p. 43.

Maimonides displays acute psychological insight in his discussion of repentance. He considers repentance to be crucial to moral development and capable of having profound effects : “The general characteristic of repentance from any sin consists in one’s being *divested* of it” (540, my emphasis). An individual cannot but sin and err, either through an incorrect opinion or because he is overcome with desire or anger. If he were to believe that the sin could not be remedied, he might persist in error and perhaps disobey to an even greater degree. With the possibility to repent and be divested of the sin, however, a person can correct himself and return to a more perfect state than the one he was in before (540).<sup>17</sup>

It is not hard to see the relevance of self-scrutiny to Maimonides’ discussion of repentance. Repentance is an internal movement accomplished in silence. While the community may be involved in hearing confession, the psychological activity of repentance is inwardly directed. One cannot feel regret over one’s actions or omissions, or have the awareness that one ought to have done other than one did, without introspection. As repentance concerns moral perfection, its primary nexus is man’s relation with God, rather than his social relationships. Furthermore, the self-scrutiny involved in repentance is necessary for the maintenance of an untroubled mind.

The admonitions to silence in the *Laws Concerning Character Traits* likewise show the importance Maimonides placed on self-scrutiny, particularly with reference to tranquillity of mind and turning away from the world towards God. One is advised to speak only about those matters concerned with wisdom or necessary to maintain the body ; otherwise one should be silent.<sup>18</sup> In some cases, silence has ethical significance within the community. Maimonides’ proscriptions against gossip and slander, and the exhortation to consider the feelings of others and not speak unless it is appropriate, seem clearly germane to the maintenance of good social relations. Yet the admonitions to silence can also be seen as a means to encourage introspection. Speech is a communal act through which one initiates relations with others or responds to them. Silence, in contrast, is a turning away from the world towards the self and perhaps towards God. It is crucial in the development of an inner life and helps engender reflection.

Further evidence that silence is meant to encourage a turning inward is found if we examine those places where Maimonides tells us that speech — and hence interaction with others — is necessary. When a man sins against you, you must not hate him and remain silent : “You shall surely rebuke your neighbour” (Leviticus 19:17).<sup>19</sup> However, if the man who sins against you is “exceedingly simple” or distraught, and if you forgive him in your heart, it is a mark of piety to forego rebuke : “The Torah

---

17. Again, it is interesting to compare Maimonides’ discussion of repentance with Spinoza’s. For SPINOZA, repentance is not a virtue but a form of pain. Anyone who repents of an action is doubly wretched, first being overcome by evil desires and second by painful remembrances. Repentance may be good only to the extent that it prevents one who is not perfectly wise from further unvirtuous behaviour, but does not contribute to character development (*Ethics*, IV, prop. 54).

18. Raymond L. WEISS and Charles E. BUTTERWORTH, *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, p. 32.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

was particularly concerned only about animosity.”<sup>20</sup> So speech is necessary in those cases in which the person sinned against would suffer an unquiet mind if he were to remain silent. Essentially one interacts with others to preserve one's own mental tranquillity. Self-scrutiny is important in this context because introspection is necessary to distinguish when it is permissible to remain silent from those times when rebuke is obligatory.

\*  
\* \*

In the final book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle discusses the nature of pleasure and happiness. While anyone, even a slave, might enjoy bodily pleasures, happiness is found only in those activities expressing virtue (1177a7-10, X-6). The activity which is the most conducive to happiness and yields the most pleasure is contemplation, or theoretical study (1177a10-1177b, X-7). The life of contemplation realizes the supreme element in human nature and is characterized as “god-like” (1177b25-1178a10, X-7). Yet the *Nicomachean Ethics* ends not with the praise of contemplation, but with a discussion of moral education, the role of the state in legislating morality, and the nature of political systems. We are left with the question of how these two aspects of the good life — solitary contemplation and involvement in political life — are to be understood in relation to one another.

One of the enduring controversies in Maimonides scholarship is over how his conception of the ideal life — the *imitatio Dei* described in the final chapter of the *Guide* — is best to be understood. Some commentators have emphasized the priority of intellectual and contemplative aspects. Alexander Altmann has argued that Maimonides treats *imitatio Dei* on a par with the knowledge of God and his attributes, and that imitation of God is a practical consequence of the intellectual love of God. Hence the political meaning of *imitatio Dei* does not detract from the supremacy of theoretical life.<sup>21</sup> R.Z. Friedman finds a defence of religion as a source of metaphysical knowledge in the *Guide*, combined with a lack of emphasis on morality. He finds support for this position in Maimonides' interpretation of the Book of Job; Maimonides notes that Job is described as a pious man, but is not said to be wise. According to Friedman, Maimonides reads the Book of Job as a story about the inadequacies of a pietistic world view and the ultimate triumph of a metaphysical view.<sup>22</sup>

Other interpreters, inspired by the work of Leo Strauss, have instead found moral or political concerns to be primary. Ralph Lerner has pointed out the incongruity between Maimonides' praise of solitary contemplation and his own active involvement in Jewish public affairs. Lerner offers two possible explanations: first, having attained intellectual perfection, the philosopher imitates God by his desire to perfect

20. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

21. See A. ALTMANN, “Maimonides' ‘Four Perfections’” (cited above).

22. R.Z. FRIEDMAN, “Maimonides and Kant on Metaphysics and Piety,” *Review of Metaphysics*, 45 (June 1992), p. 773-801.

society. Second, prophets are a special class of philosopher who “descend to the cave” in order to govern others.<sup>23</sup> According to Lawrence V. Berman, *imitatio Dei* is identified with acting in accordance with the Aristotelian mean. Moses instantiates the ultimate perfection of man, which consists in the foundation and maintenance of political states.<sup>24</sup>

Still other commentators have recognized both intellectual and political aspects in *imitatio Dei* and seek to reconcile them. Daniel H. Frank has argued that Maimonides’ conception of the best life for man does not remove him from practical life. The imitation of God consists in knowledge of Him, but this knowledge entails action ; deeds of justice must be performed with the awareness that they are the sort of actions God does.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, according to Menachem Kellner, one imitates God in the fullest sense of the word by first attaining intellectual perfection and then fulfilling the dictates of the Torah, which has moral and possibly political aspects.<sup>26</sup>

The thesis of the present essay, that self-scrutiny is a crucial and innovative aspect of Maimonides’ ethical thought, is irrelevant to the dispute over the correct understanding of *imitatio Dei* and is not intended to add to the discussion. But since self-scrutiny has a role to play in both the contemplative and the political aspects of *imitatio Dei*, it is a relevant consideration for both sides of the debate.

Self-scrutiny is important for the contemplative view of *imitatio Dei*, since it results in tranquillity of mind, which is in turn indispensable to the acquisition of the rational virtues. According to Maimonides, prophets are turned wholly towards God, (620) and “excellent” men begrudge the time when their attention is not turned to God (621-622). Those who have reached the highest state may at times seem to be occupied with their bodies or with other people, but their intellects are occupied with God. For instance, Moses and others almost like him are said to have ruled and interacted in the world “with their limbs only” while their intellects were constantly in the presence of the Lord (623-624). Again, Maimonides interprets self-scrutiny in a way that should discourage involvement with others for its own sake, yet guard against self-preoccupation and thus facilitate a turning towards God.

Similarly, self-scrutiny is important for the political interpretation of *imitatio Dei*. The moral qualities developed through self-scrutiny — regard for others, pity for the weak, and the avoidance of cruelty — have application to one’s relations with others, as well as to social stability more generally. Most crucially, the practice of self-scrutiny ensures that all social and political relationships are grounded in the individual’s relation to God.

---

23. Ralph LERNER, “Maimonides and Governance of the Solitary,” in Joel L. KRAEMER, ed., *Perspectives on Maimonides : Philosophical and Historical Studies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 33-46.

24. Lawrence V. BERMAN, “The Ethical Views of Maimonides within the Context of Islamic Civilization,” in J.L. KRAEMER, ed., *Perspectives on Maimonides*, p. 13-32.

25. Daniel H. FRANK, “The End of the Guide : Maimonides on the Best Life for Man,” *Judaism*, 34, 4 (Fall 1985), p. 485-495.

26. Menachem KELLNER, “Maimonides’ Conception of the Ultimate Meaning of Life : Human Perfection. A Further Contribution to URAM Maimonides Studies,” *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*, 14, 3 (Spring 1991), p. 175-184.

\*  
\* \*

Aspects of Maimonides' analysis of self-scrutiny are likely to have influenced Spinoza, who makes self-knowledge crucial for control of the passions. However Spinoza, like Aristotle but unlike Maimonides, does not indicate that self-scrutiny has specifically religious functions. I have tried to show that a recognition of the importance of self-scrutiny is necessary for an adequate understanding of Maimonides' ethical and religious thought. The extent to which Maimonides' searching analysis of the importance of self-scrutiny can be understood apart from its religious aspects, and so be of relevance to the project of philosophical psychology more generally, is a topic for further study.<sup>27</sup>

---

27. I am very grateful to Joseph Gonda for his kind assistance in the development of this paper. For comments and suggestions, thanks are also due to Joseph Agassi and Ian Jarvie.