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## Four Critiques of Crescas against Maimonides and the Relationship of Intellect and Practice in Religion

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# FOUR CRITIQUES OF CRESCAS AGAINST MAIMONIDES AND THE RELATIONSHIP OF INTELLECT AND PRACTICE IN RELIGION

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Moses Maimonides (1138-1204) and Ḥasdai Crescas (c. 1340-1410/1411) are both proponents of a conception of the Torah that synthesizes philosophy and religion, while differing on the nature of God and his relationship to the world. Though Crescas's *Light of the Lord* is an explicit attack on and refutation of Maimonides's arguments in the *Guide of the Perplexed* and the *Mishneh Torah*, they both recognize the important role of the intellect as a fundamental part of religion, despite differing on its centrality and scope. To appreciate how they differ, it is worth examining four areas in the *Light* where Crescas explicitly critiques aspects of Maimonides's philosophical-religious project: the Torah's command to believe in God, the negation of legal debate, the inability to describe God in positive attributes (negative theology), and the identification of the secrets of the Torah with philosophy. However, one might ask, is Crescas simply finding disparate weaknesses in Maimonides's writings, or is there a common thread tying together these different critiques? While at first

glance they appear unconnected, I will argue that they all revolve around Crescas's fundamental disagreement with Maimonides's description of the Torah as a tool for communicating the truths of natural philosophy to the popular imagination. Or to frame it differently, Crescas rejects the Platonic image of the prophet as philosopher-king who contemplates the structure of nature and educates the masses on nature's deepest truths. The philosopher-king legislates divine law for a political society, the purpose of which is to guide its followers to greater intellectual knowledge of God. It is clear that Maimonides adopts this model of divine law from the Islamic philosopher Al-Farabi and applies it to the Torah.<sup>1</sup> Looking at the Torah in this light, one might conclude that Maimonides does not simply make fallacious arguments and errors, but he presents a strikingly problematic worldview for Crescas, one that understands religious practice as a means towards intellectual knowledge. After presenting each of Crescas's critiques of Maimonides on these four topics, I will attempt to articulate Maimonides's likely response to him in order to illuminate the origin of their disagreement as grounded in two competing syntheses of philosophy and religion, one that sees practice as the vehicle towards intellectual perfection and the other that views intellectual perfection as the tool towards achieving perfection in the practice of the commandments.

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<sup>1</sup> Maimonides praises Al-Farabi in his letter to Samuel Ibn Tibbon (the translator of the *Guide of the Perplexed* from Arabic to Hebrew). He writes there that "all his writings are faultlessly excellent. One ought to study and understand them. For he is a great man" (Moses Maimonides, *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, ed. Isaac Shailat [Jerusalem], 1995), 552-554. English translation from Shlomo Pines, "The Philosophic Sources of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," in Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, ed. Shlomo Pines (Chicago, 1963), p. lix. The relationship between prophecy and law in Al-Farabi and Maimonides has been analyzed in Lawrence V. Berman, "Maimonides, The Disciple of Alfarabi," *Israel Oriental Studies* 4 (1974): 154-78; Joel L. Kraemer, "Alfarabi's *Opinions of the Virtuous City* and Maimonides' *Foundations of the Law*," *Studia Orientalia Memoriae D. H. Baneth Dedicata* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1979), 107-53; and Jeffrey Macy, "Prophecy in al-Farabi and Maimonides," in *Maimonides and Philosophy: Papers Presented at the Sixth Jerusalem Philosophical Encounter*, eds. Shlomo Pines and Yirmiyahu Yovel (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986), 185-201.

## Intellect vs. Practice

Both Crescas and Maimonides make the intellect a key part of their understanding of the Torah, but they differ on the role of philosophical speculation. One way to view this debate is by comparing how they interpret the Talmudic debate between Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva on whether study or action are of higher value (even though the conclusion is that study is greater as it leads to action).<sup>2</sup> For Maimonides, study of Torah is greater since he views philosophical knowledge as the ultimate purpose behind the commandments, though it is knowledge attained through constructing a just political community. He writes in the *Mishneh Torah*, “None of the commandments in the Torah compares with the commandment to study the Torah. Rather, the study of Torah can be equated to all the commandments, because study leads to deed. Therefore, study comes before practice.”<sup>3</sup> From reading Maimonides’s codification of the rabbinic debate, Maimonides does not ignore the necessity of action, but he concludes that study is of the highest priority. He expands upon this point throughout the *Guide*, but he is most explicit when he states that the Torah aims at the welfare of the soul (correct opinions) and the welfare of the body (morality and politics), guiding people to the ultimate perfection: “[T]o become rational *in actu*, I mean to have an intellect *in actu*; this would consist in his knowing everything concerning all the beings that it is within the capacity of man to know in accordance with his ultimate perfection.”<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, Crescas argues in *Light* that intellectual perfection is necessary as a means toward properly fulfilling the commandments. In the preface, Crescas cites the conclusion of the Talmudic debate between Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva over the issue of study versus action. However, his interpretation of the rabbis’ conclusion is that, although the

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<sup>2</sup> B. Kiddushin 40b.

<sup>3</sup> Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah* 3.3, 56. The laws in chapter 3 of *Mishneh Torah* follow this theme of prioritizing the study of Torah over its practice in multiple circumstances.

<sup>4</sup> Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) III.27, 511.

performance of action is the end goal, it requires understanding of the action for it to be fully meritorious: “[I]t is the performance of the commandments that leads to this perfection, but there can be no performance of them without an understanding of them.”<sup>5</sup> Later in *Light*, he translates the Talmudic discussion into Aristotelian philosophical language. He writes that “according to what appears in the words of our rabbis, the teleological element (*ha-ḥeleq ha-takhliti*) is the practical element (*ha-ḥeleq ha-ma’asi*)... Thus, they reckoned the practical element (*ha-mitzvot ha-ma’asiyot*) to be the final cause (*sibba takhlitit*) of the theoretical (*muskalot*).”<sup>6</sup> These practical commandments are a manifestation of God’s overflowing love leading to the true happiness of the soul.<sup>7</sup> While philosophy plays an important role in the Torah through the “perfection of views” (*shleimut ha-deot*), it is not its ultimate purpose.<sup>8</sup>

## The Command to Believe

The different relationships between intellect and practice emerge in Crescas’s disagreement with Maimonides concerning whether there is a command to believe in God. Maimonides is unmistakably clear on this point: he begins both the *Book of Commandments*, his early categorization of the six hundred and thirteen commandments of the Torah, and his *Mishneh Torah*, his reorganization and summary of Jewish law, with the first commandment: to know that there is a God. In the *Book of Commandments*, he writes, “The first commandment is that we are commanded to believe in God, that is to believe there is a Supreme Cause

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<sup>5</sup> Hasdai Crescas, *Light of the Lord*, trans. Roslyn Weiss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), Introduction, p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Crescas, *Light*, II.VI.1, 212. Here I am following the translation of Warren Zev Harvey, “The Philosopher and Politics: Gersonides and Crescas,” in *Scholars and Scholarship: The Interaction Between Judaism and Other Cultures*, ed. Leo Landman (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1990), 60.

<sup>7</sup> Crescas, *Light*, II.VI.1, 215 and II.VI.2, 234-235.

<sup>8</sup> Crescas, *Light*, II.VI.1, 209.

who is the agent of all existents.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in the *Mishneh Torah*, he begins the list of commandments as follows: “The first of the positive commandments is the commandment to know that there is a God, as He [Exodus 20:2] states: ‘I am Lord, your God.’”<sup>10</sup> Knowledge is the first and primary commandment of the Torah for Maimonides.

In stark contrast, Crescas begins the preface of *Light* with a sharp polemic against the idea that one can command belief in, and thus command knowledge of, God.<sup>11</sup> He writes that “anyone who included belief in the existence of God among the positive commandments, thereby committed an infamous error (*ta’ah ta’ut mefursam*)—since commandments are relational and no commandment can be conceived without a certain commander.”<sup>12</sup> While he presents his interlocutor as an anonymous “anyone” (*mi*) at first, it is not a big leap to assume that he is referring to Maimonides, as he appears as Crescas’s interlocutor throughout the rest of the preface. Crescas lays out the “error” as follows: to command is premised on the idea that there is a commander, and therefore it would be patently absurd for such a commander to command you to believe in him, if you are already listening to the commander in the first place. The choice is stark: either one accepts in good faith the existence of a commander and the commandments *or* one rejects the existence of a commander and the commandments. Later in *Light*, Crescas adds an additional psychological argument: only actions can be commanded, but not beliefs, since beliefs and opinions convince us by the reality of their existence. For example, one cannot make oneself believe a false

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<sup>9</sup> Maimonides, *The Commandments: Sefer Ha-Mitzvoth of Maimonides*, trans. Charles B. Chavel, vol. 1 (London: Soncino Press, 1967), 1. My translation is modified from Chavel.

<sup>10</sup> Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah: The Code of Maimonides*, ed. Yohai Makbili (Israel: Or Vishua, 2009), 6.

<sup>11</sup> For an extended discussion of Crescas’s critique of Maimonides on this point, see Warren Zev Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics in Hasdai Crescas* (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1998), 148-149 and “Hasdai Crescas and Moses Mendelssohn on Beliefs and Commandments,” in *Moses Mendelssohn: Enlightenment, Religion, Politics, Nationalism*, eds. Michah Gottlieb and Charles H. Manekin, (Bethesda, MD: University Press of Maryland, 2015), 79-83.

<sup>12</sup> Crescas, *Light*, Preface, 26-27.

mathematical statement such as  $2 + 2 = 5$  even if we would like to, since the truth of  $2 + 2 = 4$  compels us to accept its veracity. Truths are independent of our desires; hence, it would be useless to try to compel people to accept them.<sup>13</sup> As Crescas phrases it, “belief is independent of will” such that sometimes “God graciously endows us with belief in Him.”<sup>14</sup> The attempt to transform the Torah into a guide to philosophical knowledge is a mistaken project, for Crescas.

Maimonides would likely respond that Crescas is misreading his understanding of the primary commandment to believe in God and ignoring the political nature of divine law—specifically the commandment to believe. Maimonides writes that a divine law educates its adherents through teaching them the correct opinions (*al-ara al-ṣaḥiḥa*), such as the existence of God (*wujud al-Ilahi*).<sup>15</sup> Belief for Maimonides is a form of knowledge, such that “belief is the affirmation that what has been represented is outside the mind just as it has been represented in the mind.”<sup>16</sup> Since most people will not be able to understand the demonstrative proofs of God, the divine law simplifies and summarizes certain key ideas about God.<sup>17</sup>

The challenge for Crescas, in the way he reads Maimonides’s scheme, is that the command to believe in God as a correct opinion is not coming

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<sup>13</sup> Crescas, *Light*, II.VI.5-6, 200-205. He also begins to introduce the argument in the preface, 27.

<sup>14</sup> Crescas, *Light*, II.VI.5, 201, 203.

<sup>15</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, II.40, 384 and III.28, 512.

<sup>16</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, I.50, 111.

<sup>17</sup> The limits to teaching divine science to the masses are presented at Maimonides, *Guide*, I.34, 72-79. One seeming contradiction here is that the existence of God is presented at *Guide* III.28 as a correct opinion, while at *Guide* II.33 it is presented as “knowable by human speculation alone,” discernible by every Israelite as one of the first two commandments of the Ten Commandments. One could perhaps reconcile this contradiction by suggesting that II.33 implies that non-philosophers can obtain independent knowledge of God’s existence, exemplified by the People of Israel coming to that realization, while III.28 concedes to the historical reality that most people will not come to these conclusions and need to be educated about this truth as a correct opinion.

directly from God, but from the prophet; as God's intermediary, the prophet is the one who legislates the laws of the community to bring people to greater knowledge of God. Maimonides describes prophecy as an "overflow overflowing from God" from the "rational faculty in the first place and thereafter towards the imaginative faculty" such that it often "compels him to address a call to people, teach them and let his own perfection overflow toward them."<sup>18</sup> However, Crescas does not subscribe to Maimonides's conception of the prophet, whom he sees as having too much human autonomy in shaping the message and is therefore not completely reliant on God. He responds to Maimonides directly on this point: if prophecy is merely a natural perfection, why are only Israelites described as being prophets in the Bible and not members of other nations like the Greeks or Chaldeans, who were renowned for their wisdom? To say that God miraculously withheld all the prophecies from wise nations seems to him unprovable and ludicrous.<sup>19</sup> For Crescas, prophecy must be transmitted to the prophet directly from God without human influence. In contrast with Maimonides, Crescas describes prophecy as "an overflow overflowing from God onto man" because "one who is disposed to this perfection is he who is attached to God and who continually secludes himself to worship Him."<sup>20</sup> While Crescas accepts the prerequisites for prophecy established in the Babylonian Talmud — i.e., wisdom, bravery, and wealth — these are not factors that endow the prophet with the ability to choose to become a prophet through his own initiative.<sup>21</sup> Crescas's

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<sup>18</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, II.36, 369 and II.37, 375.

<sup>19</sup> Crescas, *Light*, II.IV.4, 188. One could argue that Maimonides's position in *Guide* II.32 that the Torah views prophecy as a natural perfection which God can miraculously withhold from certain individuals is not his true position, such that he proceeds to undermine it in the further chapters on prophecy. If this is true, one might suggest that Crescas presents a simplified and strawman version of Maimonides's position here in order to mock it and reject it. For an explication of the challenges in Maimonides's position at II.32, see: Howard Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of An Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 222-230.

<sup>20</sup> Crescas, *Light*, II.IV.4, 187.

<sup>21</sup> B. Shabbat 92a and Crescas, *Light*, II.IV.4, 187.



conclusion is that prophecy is a direct gift of God to the prophet, independent of the intellectual knowledge that the prophet acquires.

## Debates in Law

Crescas is also critical of Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah* for only presenting the conclusions of rabbinic debates and not the debates themselves, thereby omitting the original sources and reasoning behind these discussions. The core issue behind this debate is whether the legal disputes can be simplified in order to place a greater emphasis on the intellectual knowledge of God as the true goal of the Torah, or whether the legal controversies over the proper practice of the commandments are the essence of the Torah itself.

Maimonides's codification of Jewish law in the *Mishneh Torah* was revolutionary in changing the way Jewish law, as derived from the Talmud, was discussed and interpreted. First, the Talmud strives to collect the various opinions and debates articulated by the rabbis, while the *Mishneh Torah* merely presents the conclusions that Maimonides derives from these debates. Second, Maimonides neglects to cite the Talmudic sources for his rulings. Third, the Talmud contains both the sources and the reasoning behind the various rabbinic arguments, while the *Mishneh Torah* leaves all of this out.<sup>22</sup> According to Crescas, the problem with reshaping Jewish law in this way is that it covers just a tiny fraction of the variations of cases that can arise, while the multiplicity of the Talmudic rabbis' approaches different issues represents the enormous range of cases which Jewish law attempts to solve. Crescas writes:

Since the great part of the commandments are in the category of the possible, a category broader than the sea, and since knowledge cannot encompass their details which are infinite in number, it appears that, were a single detail of those mentioned there [i.e. in the *Mishneh Torah*] to

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<sup>22</sup> Crescas, *Light*, Introduction, 21-22. For an extended discussion of Maimonides's aims and methods, see Isadore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (Mishneh Torah)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) and Moshe Halbertal, *Maimonides: Life and Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 164-196.

change, we could not reach a sure determination. Indeed, just as there is no comparison between a finite number and an infinite, so, too, there is no comparison between what is grasped of the finite details that are recorded there, and what is not grasped of the infinite details that are not recorded there.<sup>23</sup>

Crescas suggests that one should not expect Jewish law to cover the infinite particularities of possible cases. This is because the conclusions drawn from different cases will vary depending on the context and the unique characteristics of each situation. Hence, Crescas was critical of the *Mishneh Torah* for attempting to codify that which its author incorrectly regarded as all the cases of Jewish law; instead, Maimonides should have allowed the finite structure to better represent the infinite cases, including the reasons and principles, which would make it possible to apply his rulings to future cases. As Ari Ackerman has shown, Crescas's theory of codification is grounded in his view of creation, such that God's infinite overflowing goodness through eternal creation brings about a perpetually expanding Torah.<sup>24</sup>

Maimonides's response to Crescas's critique on the absence of debates, sources, and reasons in the *Mishneh Torah* would likely have two components: one philosophical and one political. First, for Maimonides, the practices of the Jewish tradition are not meant to be objects of endless debate, but a means towards acquiring ethical virtues and the proper knowledge of God. Knowledge of God, which is divorced from the minutiae of law, should be the greatest focus of one's intellectual energy.<sup>25</sup> The cumbersome complexity of Jewish law in the Middle Ages is an unfortunate reality of historic persecution that has led Jews to focus all

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<sup>23</sup> Crescas, *Light*, Introduction, 21.

<sup>24</sup> Ari Ackerman, "Ḥasdai Crescas on the Philosophic Foundation of Codification," *AJS Review* 37, no. 2 (2013): 315-331 and "Ḥasdai Crescas and his Circle on the Infinite and Expanding Torah," *Jewish Studies Internet Journal* 11 (2012): 217-33. For God's eternal creation, see Crescas, *Light*, III.I.5.

<sup>25</sup> Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of the Foundations of the Torah 4.10-13, 38-39 and Laws of Torah Study 1.12, 55. In both examples, the highest aim of the Torah is the study of *pardes*, the deepest secrets of the Torah, the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot.

their time on discerning the minutiae of practice, leaving no time for the study of the true goal of Jewish law: striving for the knowledge of God and the secrets of existence (*pardes*).<sup>26</sup> Second, Maimonides says explicitly that he is writing the *Mishneh Torah* not for expert jurists but for all individuals who simply want to observe the laws.<sup>27</sup> It is a code of law, and in order to be useful, a code must be clear and succinct. He believes that the Mishnah was such a code, and it is written in lucid and straightforward language. However, a thousand years have elapsed since its composition, and it is time to update it—that is, replace it with an up-to-date code. Furthermore, following Aristotle’s discussion of equity in Book 5 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Maimonides is not bothered by the fact that law cannot cover the infinite variations of cases. Law focuses on the most common cases, and the lawgiver must deal with the challenges of the specific time period and place or situation in which it is given. Adapting it to new cases is a problem for later jurists to deal with.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, this distinction between Maimonides and Crescas on the validity of debates in law reflects the essential difference between them on the nature of the Oral Torah. Maimonides regards the *Mishneh Torah* as a popular summary of rabbinic law meant to order a political community while ultimately bringing its members towards greater intellectual knowledge of God. While the core of the Torah originates in God, the legal debates are based on the human deliberations of the rabbis, occasionally entailing controversies based on human error, like misunderstanding or forgetfulness.<sup>29</sup> As Moshe Halbertal phrases it, “from the given material of revelation—both oral and written—the Sages, equipped with rules of derivation, deduce new norms which in turn become part of the

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<sup>26</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, I.73, 175-176.

<sup>27</sup> Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Introduction, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 5.10, 111-113 and Maimonides, *Guide*, III.34, 534-535.

<sup>29</sup> Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Introduction, section 4. In English, *Maimonides' Introduction to the Talmud*, trans. Zvi Lampel (New York: Judaica Press, 1975), 88-89.

accumulative material of halakhic knowledge.”<sup>30</sup> As such, Maimonides views the arguments of the Talmud as an unfortunate consequence of the Jewish historical context, which means that, being in exile, the Jews did not have a central judicial body to solve legal disputes.<sup>31</sup>

In contrast, Crescas’s position on the nature of debates in Jewish law and the nature of the Torah build upon those of his teacher, Nissim of Gerona (also known as the Ran), as explicated in *Derashot ha-Ran*. There, Nissim argues that all the debates contained in the Oral Torah were given at Sinai to Moses, such that controversy is part of the structure of revelation itself, including future controversies.<sup>32</sup> This suggests that each generation has to derive new norms out of the options given to them in the debates of Torah. Building on the work of his teacher, Crescas proposes the creation of an alternative compendium to the *Mishneh Torah* which he refers to as the *Lamp of the Commandment (Ner Mitzvah)*, a work that would also be organized thematically. But in this legal compendium he would maintain the disputes of the rabbis and show the history of interpretation of these disagreements by later generations of rabbinic leaders, while also providing the Talmudic sources and the general principles.<sup>33</sup> The wide-ranging and occasionally contentious arguments of the Talmud would be accompanied by governing legal principles so that future jurists would know how to handle whatever cases come before them, on the assumption that all future innovation derives from the wealth of opinions already debated in the Talmud.

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<sup>30</sup> Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning and Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 60.

<sup>31</sup> Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Rebels 1.14, 1214: “So long as the Supreme Court was in existence, there was no controversies in Israel. Whoever was in doubt with regard to a point law consulted the local court...After the Supreme Court ceased to exist, disputes multiplied in Israel” (*The Code of Maimonides [Mishneh Torah]: Book Fourteen*, trans. Abraham Hershman [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949], 139).

<sup>32</sup> Nissim of Gerona, *Derashot ha-Ran* (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook Press, 2008), 120-121. This point is analyzed well in Halbertal, *People of the Book*, 63-67.

<sup>33</sup> Crescas, *Light*, Introduction, 22-23.

## Negative Theology and Attributes of Action

Another area of division between Maimonides and Crescas regarding the centrality of intellect or practice as the highest value is whether describing God with positive attributes is an appropriate means for practical imitation. In particular, Crescas regards Maimonides's distinction between an unknowable essence of God and knowable attributes of action as both contradictory and problematic. Maimonides asserts that since we cannot know the essence of God, it is not possible to describe God using positive attributes. For example, it is problematic to say that God is strong, since we would be imposing our own anthropomorphic conceptions of strength onto a being that is incorporeal. As a result, when describing God's attributes, we can only discuss them using negative terminology, such as stating that God is not weak since we know God lacks all imperfections, such as weakness.<sup>34</sup> However, he concedes that what we *can* describe positively is God's attributes of action, which represent nature. As Maimonides writes, this is what it means for Moses to be rejected in his request to see God's "face," but to be allowed to see God's "back" (Exodus 33). The face represents the essence or positive attributes of God, and the back represents the attributes of action possessed by God, which are not credible attributes of God but attributes of nature.<sup>35</sup>

Crescas criticizes Maimonides for making what he sees as a false and artificial distinction between God's essence, which one can only describe in negative terms, and God's actions, which can be described in positive terms. First, he avers that a negative description of the divine is really a positive one. In other words, negative theology is a problematic game to play:

For what absence of ignorance signifies is a certain knowledge and apprehension...even though His knowledge is different from our knowledge, as His essence is different from our essence, nevertheless

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<sup>34</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, I.58, 134-137.

<sup>35</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, I.54, 123-128.

there is no avoiding the fact that the absence of ignorance indicates the presence of something affirmative.<sup>36</sup>

Here Crescas points out that underneath this negative description of God is a recognizable positive attribute. What else can the absence of ignorance be but knowledge? He writes that “when we say of God that He is not nonknowing, we have in effect affirmed of Him that He is knowing.”<sup>37</sup> Second, we should not be concerned about describing God in positive attributes, since these positive attributes are not the same as God’s true essence, which is unknowable and consists of infinite attributes. Indeed, Crescas suggests that these positive attributes are essential for understanding God’s loving relationship with the world, which he describes as follows:

For the attributes are predicated of God as infinite, and of us as finite. And they are predicated of God also insofar as He bestows their existence on us, and of us insofar as we acquire them from Him....But positive attributes are not excluded with respect to God—God forbid.<sup>38</sup>

Third, Crescas argues that the distinction between God’s essence and God’s action is really an artificial one. If God acted, made, or created, would that not imply a privation, a lacking in God, before he acted? In other words, changes in God’s actions would affect his essence. This would seem to make the Maimonidean distinction between attributes of action and negative attributes to be nothing less than nonsensical.<sup>39</sup>

Yet one must bear in mind that the importance of this distinction for Maimonides is not merely about questions of God’s essence, but about how God can be a model for human imitation in the governance of a political community.<sup>40</sup> By presenting God’s essence as unknowable and describable only through negative theology, Maimonides is attempting to

<sup>36</sup> Crescas, *Light*, I.3, 110.

<sup>37</sup> Crescas, *Light*, I.3, 111.

<sup>38</sup> Crescas, *Light*, I.3, 106-108 and IIIB.I.1, 322-323.

<sup>39</sup> Crescas, *Light*, I.3, 103-104.

<sup>40</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, I.54, 125-128. Throughout this chapter, the language of governance is intertwined with that of the attributes of action.

pedagogically de-anthropomorphize God, stressing the enormous gap between God and the physical world. At the same time, Maimonides preserves God's attributes of action, for he is steadfast in maintaining God as the moral and political exemplar for a community. One could say that Maimonides wants God to be philosophically unknowable and transcendent, while at the same time morally and politically imitable. This is a precarious balancing act that, for Crescas, is religiously untenable due to what he sees as the limiting and politicizing of God, who should be venerated as a symbol and source of unlimited overflowing goodness beyond the needs of a leader or a community.

### The Secrets of the Torah

Lastly, Crescas expresses his doubts about Maimonides' identification of the great secrets of the Torah as being identified with Aristotelian physics and metaphysics. Crescas is worried that this approach could make the Jewish tradition into a handmaiden to Greek philosophy.<sup>41</sup> While Crescas is not denying the importance and relevancy of Aristotelian science, he is denying that they are central components of the Torah's objectives and secrets. As Crescas points out, Maimonides writes in both the Introduction to the *Guide of the Perplexed* and in the first book of the *Mishneh Torah*, the Book of Knowledge, that the great secrets of the Torah, described originally in the Mishnah Hagigah as the Account of the Beginning (*maaseh bereshit*) and the Account of the Chariot (*maaseh merkavah*), are equivalent to Aristotelian physics (or natural science) and metaphysics (or divine science).<sup>42</sup> Thus, Maimonides interprets the story of creation in Genesis 1 and the story of the divine chariot in Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1 as allegories that reflect deeper scientific and philosophical truths, hidden beneath the stories. Crescas, however, contends that on this point Maimonides's methodology and conclusion are highly problematic

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<sup>41</sup> Crescas, *Light*, IV.10, 349-351.

<sup>42</sup> Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of the Foundations of the Torah 4.10-13, 38-39 and *Guide*, Introduction, 6-7.

for two reasons. First, he argues that there is no reason that Aristotelian science should be such a great secret, since he writes that in his time, such matters were studied by youths and discussed in large crowds. They were the conventional science of the fourteenth century and commonly discussed topics, not matters that required secrecy.<sup>43</sup> He affirms that “concealment is not mandated for the notion of necessary existence of which he spoke; rather, this is something that ought to be publicized to the multitude of men and women.”<sup>44</sup> Second, if physics and metaphysics are the secrets of Genesis, Ezekiel, and Isaiah, then they are at a higher level than rabbinic oral tradition, and so Judaism becomes merely “philosophy for the masses.” As such, Crescas suggests that Maimonides makes Judaism no different from any other religion. Furthermore, unlike Maimonides, Crescas contends that the secrets of creation and the chariot must be understood as matters that are beyond nature and human reason alone.

One could argue that Maimonides would respond that Crescas had simply misunderstood the complexity of his identification of the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot with Aristotelian physics and metaphysics. For if it were the case that Maimonides thought that Aristotelian physics and metaphysics were great secrets aimed only at an elite few, why would he have made them the starting point of his popular legal code, the *Mishneh Torah*? Indeed, the first four chapters of the Book of Knowledge in the *Mishneh Torah* present one of the most concise summaries of Aristotle’s physics and metaphysics available. However, after discussing these topics, Maimonides writes that his account is not as simple as it may appear on the surface:

All these things that we have said about this subject are like a drop from a bucket. They are profound things, though not as profound as the subject of chapters 1 and 2. The explication of all these things that are in chapters 3-4 is what is called the Account of the Beginning. Thus the early sages

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<sup>43</sup> Crescas, *Light*, IV.10, 349-350.

<sup>44</sup> Crescas, *Light*, IV.10, 351.



commanded not to expatiate in public concerning these things as well. It is to a single man alone that these things may be conveyed and taught.<sup>45</sup>

In this passage, Maimonides makes clear that Aristotelian physics and metaphysics do not encompass the complete teachings on these topics. Thus, although Maimonides would likely have lauded the Christian readers during Crescas's time that were studying Aristotle's physics and metaphysics, at the same time, he would have been skeptical about whether they could all equally grasp its subtle truth. It seems, then, that Maimonides and Crescas are allied in their belief in the importance of these two secret doctrines, but remain divided on whether their identity is achievable through the study of the philosophical sciences or beyond it.

## Conclusion

The priority of intellectual perfection and the practice of the commandments in the Torah is one of the key differences in comparing Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* and *Mishneh Torah* to Crescas's *Light of the Lord*. For Maimonides, the ultimate purpose behind the commandments is the acquisition of philosophical knowledge, while for Crescas, intellectual perfection is necessary as a means toward properly fulfilling the commandments, which are a manifestation of God's overflowing love. Another way of framing this debate is whether knowledge is the end goal of the Torah or merely a means towards understanding the commandments.

An implication of these two contrasting approaches is the extent to which the Torah is a hierarchical or egalitarian project. Maimonides's philosophical model of religion, which strives for knowledge as the supreme goal is more hierarchical than Crescas' relatively egalitarian model that prioritizes a spiritual union with God based on the practice of the commandments available to all. If the goal of the Torah for

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<sup>45</sup> Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of the Foundations of the Torah 4.10, 38. Translation from Ralph Lerner, *Maimonides Empire of Light: Popular Enlightenment in an Age of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 152.

Maimonides is based on the acquisition of knowledge, then the world to come appears not to be accessible to everyone and is restricted to an elite with philosophic interests. In the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides elaborates on this point:

In the world to come, there is no body or physical form, only the souls of the righteous alone, without a body...Since there is no physical form, there is neither eating, drinking, nor any of the other bodily functions of this world like sitting, standing, sleeping, death, sadness, laughter, and the like....Thus, the Sages of the previous ages declared: "...the righteous will sit with their crowns on their heads and delight in the radiance of the Divine Presence"...The phrase, "their crowns on their heads," [is also a metaphor, implying] that they will possess the knowledge that they grasped which allowed them to merit the life of the world to come...What is meant by the expression, "delight in the radiance of the Divine Presence"? That they will comprehend the truth of Godliness which they cannot grasp while in a dark and humble body.<sup>46</sup>

The more knowledge one acquires in this world, the greater one's existence is in the next world, where one can augment that knowledge and acquire a greater and more perfect contemplation of God. While non-philosophers will acquire that part of that knowledge through the correct opinions educated through the Torah, it is still the educated minority that has an advantage.<sup>47</sup> Crescas, however, follows an alternative rabbinic source, *Midrash Tanhuma*, which he quotes:

They said in the name of R. Meir: When do children become deserving of life in the world-to-come? When they know how to answer amen, as it is written: "Open the gates, that the righteous nation that keeps faithfulness may enter in." Read not "that keeps faithfulness" but "those that say amen," that is, those who know how to answer amen.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 8.2, 86. Translation by Eliyahu Touger (New York: Moznaim Publishing Corporation, 2000).

<sup>47</sup> For Crescas's critique of the philosopher's conception of the afterlife, see Crescas, *Light of the Lord*, II.6, 221.

<sup>48</sup> Crescas, *Light of the Lord*, II.6, 220-221.

If every child just learning how to say the most basic religious one-word response has a place in the world to come, then the goal of human life is not rooted in the deepest contemplations of nature, but in the simplest religious rituals that any Jew can perform, representing a modicum of intellectual understanding. You do not need to be a great scholar to say "Amen." In fact, one can say it is the most minimal religious action one can do.

Hence, the essential difference between Maimonides and Crescas is illuminated in the disparity between how they view the true goal of Torah: for Maimonides it is the attainment of intellectual contemplation as the supreme goal of all the commandments (within a political community), while for Crescas it is the spiritual bond formed by practicing commandments, of which knowledge is simply a means towards their successful practice.