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Maimonides and Julian: A Guide to Love

Writing Process

For this project, the goal was to write an explanatory analysis of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, reconstructing his case on divine revelation and intellectual perception. We were asked to then compare Maimonides' themes to those represented in Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*. I began by closely rereading the assigned section of the *Guide's* introductory chapter and taking some notes on the main ideas Maimonides presents. Afterwards, I drafted the body of the essay, summarizing these themes and supporting the summary with specific textual evidence. I then reread Julian's *Revelations*, brainstormed major similarities and differences between her and Maimonides' ideas, and organized these comparisons into a paragraph following my explanation of Maimonides. After writing an introduction and conclusion, I created a bibliography, participated in a peer review, redrafted, visited the Write Place, revised certain sections based on the feedback I received, and finalized the paper.

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Maimonides and Julian: A Guide to Love

Alexandra Amrhein

The Jewish faith tradition traces its roots back to ancient civilization. Its sacred text, the Torah, has been read and interpreted for centuries by those seeking answers about God and themselves. In the mid-twelfth century, Jewish philosophers studied this text to derive such answers about human existence, as well as the meaning behind the code of law outlined in *Leviticus*. One philosopher of this time was Maimonides, born in Cordoba and a resident of Cairo; he would come to be known as “the Great Eagle” of Judaism. Maimonides believed that the Torah should be interpreted philosophically rather than literally, and he encouraged the use of reason when reading Scripture in order to perceive its Truths. However, the question remained of how these Truths are revealed by God and how they may be perceived. In his *Guide of the Perplexed*, he attempts to answer these questions and, in doing so, reconcile philosophy with faith. Two hundred years later, his ideas were echoed, with difference, incidentally in the writings of a young Christian woman from England. Maimonides claims that divine revelation is elusive and inherently sacred, so much so that it is only perceptible to the cleanest of hearts and only at certain moments. While sharing his view of the individual experience of revelation, Julian of Norwich implicitly offers the differing opinion that revelation can be taught as well as perceived, and taken together, their interpretations illustrate the possibility of both distinctions and connections existing between the different theologies.

Early in his *Guide's* introduction, Maimonides begins to delve into the concept of divine revelation. He argues that revelation occurs in flashes, meaning that God's Truths are elusive and oftentimes only known to the consciousness for a moment. To demonstrate this concept, he uses the metaphor of light: knowledge of God is compared to flashes of bright light, bursts of divine wisdom which He wishes to make known (43). God, he believes, purposefully presents His Truths for only brief instants because He wants to protect it from those who are

unprepared for His glory. Maimonides refers to these corrupt people as the vulgar crowd (42-43). This points to another of Maimonides' claims: divine revelation is precious and sacred, and therefore it is meant to be preserved by hiding it from what is corrupt. Additionally, he claims that revelation is unmediated: While it is possible to experience, it is impossible to teach. The Truth, he explains, is difficult enough to understand in the first place, so it would be even more challenging to then attempt to teach it to someone else (44). It could only be explained to another through the use of similes or metaphors, which would be insufficient comparisons (42). This is because in Maimonides' opinion, the elusive Truths revealed by God cannot be fully articulated. Since the Truths are revealed to humans in quick flashes, humans can only know bits and pieces about God's nature, so it is impossible to understand Him comprehensively. Therefore, human explanations of God would be in vain, and they would only fall short of the full depth of His essence. Many throughout Jewish history had attempted to describe God through comparisons; according to Maimonides, this is why Scripture can be so confusing, since it consists of similes that attempt to explain the unexplainable (43, 45). He believes that divine revelation is so complex and sacred that it is impossible to tie down with mere words, and at times, impossible to even know for one's self.

For Maimonides, the only way to understand God's revelation is through intellectual perception. He defines intellectual perception as humans' ability to discern truth and falsehood, granted by God in order to understand Him (54). However, this act of perceiving the Truth is complex, just as the Truths themselves are. Maimonides acknowledges that no one, not even himself, can fully grasp God's mysteries, because they are elusive to the human mind (43). Here, Maimonides extends his metaphor of light. At some moments, he describes, they become easy to understand, as though one has found themselves surrounded by bright daylight. In this light, everything is perfectly clear and easy for the eye to perceive. At other times, however, it can seem that one is plunged into darkness, and the Truth's clarity becomes obscured by the impurities of the human mind and the material world in which they dwell. Even for those who are capable of discerning the Truth, sometimes they may struggle to understand it and only know it at certain moments. The Truth about God can be like a strike of lightning: perfectly clear at one second, then instantaneously dissipating and lost in confusion (43). This connects back to his definition of intellectual perception, which also touches upon its limits. Human intellect is not indefinite—it is limited in what it can perceive, able to comprehend some Truths yet not others (55-56). Because of this, the entirety of the Truths cannot be fully grasped by the mind, so it is easy for them to come into consciousness and then slip away again. Revelation, as Maimonides implies, is sacred. Oftentimes it is beyond human

comprehension, but this is what makes it precious in the moments when it is perceived.

Intellectual perception is also an individual experience. In Maimonides' eyes, there is not a single form of perception. He claims that it is difficult for some, but for others it may be impossible. This is because some people, based upon their cleanness of heart, are naturally more prepared for God's revelations than others. According to Maimonides, there are different degrees to which a person may be enlightened (43). Some perceive flashes almost constantly, such as prophets. Others, as described earlier, perceive revelation like intermittent lightning, living predominantly in darkness but occasionally seeing the bright flashes of the Truth. Finally, there are those who dwell in pitch darkness that is occasionally lit by the meager light of perception, similar to the glow of a polished phosphorescent stone (44). While the Truth shines brightly for everyone, only some are able to perceive its flashes, and very few people experience them often (44). In describing these variations in perception, Maimonides implicitly argues that divine revelation is not meant to be understood by everyone. Only those who are morally perfect are capable of having an uncorrupt intellect, because moral corruption causes the Truth to be indiscernible to the intellect. Intellectual perception, therefore, signifies purity and one's ability to reach God. By studying Jewish philosophy, minds are purified and become prepared to receive divine revelation, so that the flashes of Truth can be perceived.

Maimonides' perspective on these topics is, in many ways, similar to the perspective of a Christian woman, Julian of Norwich. Both view revelation and perception as individual experiences; however, they differ in their opinions of the transferable nature of perception. In her personal account, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Julian demonstrates that divine revelation can come in physical or visionary forms, that they involve personal contact with God, and these revelations can be interpreted through one's individual intellectual perception. When relating her experience with divine revelation to her audience, she describes it as a direct encounter with God: He reveals Himself through the materialization of Jesus' blood, as well as speaking to her through a vision (28-30). Similarly to Maimonides, who describes revelation as an unmediated experience, Julian's experience with revelation is personal since God contacted her directly. For her, intellectual perception of these revelations is also an individual experience, in which one draws their own meaning from a divine sign to which they were witness. This connects well with Maimonides' philosophy on intellectual perception: in his opinion, God's Truths must be perceived by an individual alone. However, unlike Maimonides, Julian implicitly argues that these Truths can be transferable, because she attempts to teach her individual perception to her

audience. In writing about her experiences, Julian demonstrates that she has been able to take meaning from her heavenly encounters. She then proceeds to explain what she has learned about God in an attempt to educate readers about God's nature: that He is all-good, all-loving and all-knowing (31). Maimonides would likely argue that her attempt is in vain, because he feels that it is impossible to teach or even articulate God's nature; a description such as "all-knowing" would fall short of His depth. While sharing substantial viewpoints, this key difference in their outlooks on perception is what sets Maimonides and Julian apart.

In his *Guide*, Maimonides lays out his argument that the Truths of God are not easily or widely perceived, but they are blessed in the moments when they are understood. Julian of Norwich shares this view of the sanctity of revelation to the individual who perceives, though she seems to believe that it does not necessarily need to be limited to this individual and can be taught to others. By placing the texts side by side, one may see how surprisingly connected the two are. Though they were composed over two centuries apart, on two different continents, by two people of different origins, genders, and religions, they demonstrate amazing similarities. Even if they use different names to define it, both authors recognize the concept of intellectual perception. Though they show a stark contrast in their views on one element of perception, both appreciate the importance of letting go of the material world and working to purify one's soul in order to know God. This shared ideal points to the possibility that even between people of very different faith traditions, backgrounds, and lives, perhaps the similarities outshine the differences.

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