BEING AND THE GOOD: 
MAIMONIDES ON ONTOLOGICAL BEAUTY

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Abstract

Maimonides expresses the view that being is goodness; evil is a deprivation of being and goodness. This view is prominent in Neoplatonism but has strong roots in Aristotle as well.

While Maimonides problematizes moral language of good and evil, he makes use of an ontological sense of Necessary Existence as the absolute good. Plotinus wrote that beings are the beautiful. Avicenna adds that the pure good is Necessary Existence, which is free of deficiency, as it has no possibility of lacking existence. This notion has a strong Aristotelian core. Despite his strictures on language about the divine, Maimonides allows himself to express this vision—an affective-aesthetic appreciation as well as a purely cognitive one. Being is the absolute good, the source of ontological beauty and value.

Keywords
Aristotle; Good; Maimonides; Neoplatonism; Proclus

And God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. (Gen 1:31)

The Book of Genesis recounts that God creates and declares all of creation good. How, then, do we make sense of the presence of evil? Western thought has struggled to make sense of the reality of good and evil in this world. This study explores the approach of Moses Maimonides (1138–1204) in light of the teachings of some of his predecessors: Aristotle, Plotinus, Proclus, and Avicenna.

Maimonides addresses the problems of both moral evil and metaphysical evil, which raise two questions. First, the moral question: Why would God give human beings free will, allowing humanity to perpetrate horrific moral indignities? Second, the metaphysical or ontological question, that of the existence of evil itself: If the world is created by a good God, how does the very fact of evil and suffering enter our universe?
Maimonides accepts the view prominent in the medieval Neoplatonic tradition that being is goodness; evil is a deprivation of being and goodness. While Maimonides rejects moral language of good and evil, he makes use of an ontological sense of Necessary Existence as the absolute good. Despite his strictures on language about the divine, Maimonides allows himself to express this vision—an affective-aesthetic appreciation as well as a purely cognitive one. Being is the absolute good, the source of ontological beauty and value.

1. Ontological Goodness in Plotinus and Proclus

In fashioning his response to the problem of evil, Maimonides draws upon the philosophical tradition of Neoplatonism. Plotinus (204/5–270 C.E.), the founder of Neoplatonism, builds his philosophy upon a transcendent first principle he calls “the One.” Plotinus describes the world as emanating from the One like water from an overflowing fountain. This is not a temporal process; as long as there is One, being radiates from it just as a fragrance emanates from a blossom. The One is beyond being and non-being; all emanates from the One. Plotinus also calls the One “the Good.” Everything insofar as it is is good, for its being derives from the Good; being is goodness.

To understand Plotinus’ identification of the Good and the One, we must return to Plato’s notion of the Good. Plato believes that values are as fundamental to the world as facts.¹ To know what it is to be a chair, one must know what it is to be a good chair. Thus to explain what it is to genuinely be a chair or to possess a quality such as justice, Plato posited forms or ideas, abstract models or standards of objective value. In the words of David Ross, the forms are forms of excellence.² They are ideals and not just ideas; they are paradigms of what it is to be a thing or to be endowed with a quality.³ Goodness

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is that which makes things what they are; this is the essence of Plato’s teleological view of the world.

Because things are what they are by participation in goodness, for Plato the Good is also the principle of explanation or intelligibility. This may help us to understand why in his later works Plato seems to have conceived of the Good as the one, or unity. In every being of any complexity, there is a unity that brings parts together into a coherent whole. Unity therefore makes things both intelligible and good; unity enables things to be what they are meant to be. It thus stands to reason that in Plato’s enigmatic “Lecture on the Good”—in which students were disappointed that he discoursed on mathematics rather than ethics—Plato seems to have identified the Good with the one. The Good is the oneness that binds things together into a unified, coherent whole; goodness or unity is the binding force that holds together all things in the cosmos.

Plotinus may thus be drawing upon authentic teachings of Plato in identifying the Good with the One. However, he develops this
notion of the One as an actual source of emanation or radiation, a notion not present in Plato. The farther things descend from their origin, the less goodness they have, until we arrive at matter, which Plotinus identifies with evil and lack or privation.

For Plotinus, matter is thus a kind of non-being, the contrary of substance, of what truly is. This is in opposition to the view of Aristotle, who denied that substance has a contrary. For Aristotle, evil is merely the privation of a particular form, not that of substance in toto. The later Neoplatonist Proclus (412–485 C.E.) develops a view closer to the teaching of Aristotle than to that of Plotinus. Matter is not evil, for it is produced by the One and makes possible the creation of a full universe. Evils are due to privation, but evil is not identified with matter; there are many accidental causes of evils, not a single principle of evil. Evil is never the primary intention of any cause; it is caused accidentally. We will see that in several respects, Maimonides’ approach is more akin to that of Proclus (and Aristotle) than to that of Plotinus.

soul’s becoming able to endure “contemplation of what is (to on) and the brightest of what is (to ontos to phanotaton) and this, we say, is the Good.” Here, though, to on seems to include both the Good and the Forms. Another way to describe this relationship is that ousia is determinate being, while on is simply being. The Forms are many and different determinate beings; the Good is simply being, and is one. On the relationship between to on and ousia in these passages, see Robert E. Wood, “Plato’s Divided Line: The Pedagogy of Complete Reflection,” Review of Metaphysics 44, no. 3 (March 1991): 537 and n31. See also Stanley Rosen, Plato’s Sophist: The Drama of Original and Image (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 212–13; Martin Kavka, Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 43–44.

7 Hans-Georg Gadamer notes, too, that Plato’s one is not, like that of Plotinus, “the sole existent and trans-existente entity. Rather, it is that which on any given occasion provides what is multiple with the unity of whatever consists in itself. As the unity of what is unitary, the idea of the good would seem to be presupposed by anything ordered, enduring and consistent. That means, however, that it is presupposed as the unity of many.” Gadamer, The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy, tr. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 31.


It was Plotinus, however, who was the first thinker to formalize and fully develop an idea anticipated in part by Plato and Aristotle and adopted by subsequent Neoplatonic thinkers such as Proclus, the fourth-century Christian Augustine, and the twelfth-century Maimonides: that of the great chain of being. This is a hierarchical chain, with ultimate value at the top and nonexistence at the bottom. Every being along this chain has value in creation. In the infinite variety of forms, each has a unique value. Being is itself of value; every realization of being is a realization of value. In the monotheistic expressions of Maimonides, God’s purpose is to realize as much good as possible, to realize every rung possible on the chain of being; this is known as the principle of plenitude.\(^\text{10}\)

In this light, even things we might characterize as absolutely evil are not really so. As Augustine articulates the idea, what looks like evil is simply the fact that beings are at variance with one another; the life and purposes of one being seem to interfere with those of another.\(^\text{11}\) For example, bears enjoy their own existence but interfere with human enjoyment of camping. Bacteria benefit the ecosystem but can damage human health. Conflict is the apparent dissonance of contrasting values, but conflict is not evil as such. Everything has a place when seen within the larger gestalt of being; the realization of more rungs on the chain of being is greater than would be the existence of “higher” types of good—such as the angels—alone. Wedding the biblical and Neoplatonic traditions, thinkers such as Augustine and Maimonides derive support from the verse in Genesis, “And God saw all that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.” When looked at in the context of the whole, all things can be seen to be good.\(^\text{12}\)


Maimonides addresses the question of good and evil at the opening of his *Guide of the Perplexed*, in the context of a philosophical interpretation of the Garden of Eden story. For Maimonides, the original nature of humanity is one in which human beings do not see good and evil—only true and false. Maimonides explicates his position most clearly in *Guide I:2*, responding to an exegetical problem. It cannot be that human beings were given the gift of reason, the crown of human faculties, as a consequence of disobeying the word of God. Thus the knowledge of good and evil humans gained after eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil must be of a lower quality than the cognition with which they were born.  

Beyond this exegetical problem, Maimonides sees moral knowledge as inferior to knowledge of true and false. The categories of moral good and evil are not absolute categories; they arise from our subjective imaginings and desires. They cloud our cognition of the world; we see the world through the filter of our own distorted needs and perceptions. The goal of Maimonides’ *Guide* is to bring us back to

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15 Ibid. While Sara Klein-Braslavy and Warren Zev Harvey argue that it is the imagination that clouds our perceptions, Howard Kreisel and Lawrence Kaplan argue that relative, generally accepted opinions are not cognized directly by the imagination but, rather, by the practical intellect—the rational faculty—as a result of the power of the imagination. Klein-Braslavy and Harvey also argue that there is in fact an absolute “good” that is incumbent upon the original, ideal human being guided only by intellect. However, this *good* is not different from the *true*, since its dictum is to pursue humanity’s true, natural end, which is intellectual perfection, and to cognize only intelligibles. They argue that there is thus a universal morality of true and false, and not only a conventional, shifting morality of relative “good” and “evil.” See Sara Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides’ Interpretation of the Adam Stories in Genesis* (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, 1986), 133–36, 148–49 [Hebrew]; Warren Zev Harvey, “Maimonides and Spinoza on Knowledge of Good and Evil,” *Iyyun* 28 (1978): 177–83 [Hebrew]; trans. Yoel Lerner, in *Jewish Intellectual History in the Middle Ages*, ed. Joseph Dan (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 140–45; Howard Kreisel, *Maimonides’ Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law, and the Human Ideal* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 73–74, 102; Lawrence Kaplan, “I Sleep but My Heart Waketh: Maimonides’ Concept of Human Perfection,” in *The Thought of Moses Maimonides: Philosophical and Legal Studies*, ed. Ira Robinson, Lawrence Kaplan and Julien Bauer (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 150–54, n19;
that pure apprehension, cognition of the truth, which will bring about an end to enmity, hatred, and oppression. Thus Maimonides is a proponent of Socratic intellectualism, the notion that knowledge of the truth brings about human transformation, that to know the good is to live it. For Maimonides, of course, the Truth is ultimately God; knowledge of God brings about—or is identical with—human salvation.

3. Maimonides on Good and Evil: The Aristotelian and Neoplatonic Strands

In recent years, through detailed and beautiful exegesis, scholars have demonstrated a strong Aristotelian strand in Maimonides’ discussion of the good. In the following discourse, I focus on a strand that is more prominent in Platonic or Neoplatonic thought, but has strong roots in Aristotle as well; this strand brings out another significant dimension of Maimonides’ philosophical sensibility. The


Guide III:11.


dialogue between these two strands will illustrate the complexity and artistry of Maimonides’ own thinking on God and the good.

First, one Aristotelian strand. Maimonides observes that “in the language of human beings,” we use the term “good” to describe what conforms to our purpose (III:13). We also use the term “good” to describe what achieves a noble aim (III:25). From these two statements about the way we use the term “good” in ordinary human language, we learn that when Genesis 1:31 tells us that God looked at the world and saw that it was “very good,” the Bible is informing us that the world conformed to God’s purpose in giving beings existence. As Sara Klein-Braslavy has expressed it, reality, in conforming to the divine intention, is the absolute good.

So far Maimonides echoes language found in Aristotle, who opens the *Nicomachean Ethics* with the statement that every action, art, or investigation seems to aim at some good; thus the good has been well defined as that to which all things aim. (In *Guide III*:10–12, however, Maimonides expresses himself in language that is more prominent in Plato and the Neoplatonic tradition. In *Guide III*:12 he sets out to counter the views of those who believe that the world contains more evil than good. To the contrary, argues Maimonides, in the view of “adherents of the truth,” that is, monotheists, God is the pure good, and everything that emanates from him is indubitably a pure good.

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20 Ibid. III:25, 503.

21 Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides’ Interpretation of the Adam Stories in Genesis*, 143. Human beings also have an absolute good, which is God’s intention in creating them: to achieve intellectual perfection. Ibid., 145.


In fact, he reiterates, God’s bringing us into existence is absolutely the great good. All of God’s actions are a pure good, for God only creates being, and all being is good. The true reality of the act of God in its entirety is good, for it is being. He says several times that the ultimate intention is to bring into being as much existence as possible, for existence is indubitably a good. This is the principle of plenitude seen in Plotinus and Augustine; the great chain of being is a complete expression of every degree of being and goodness possible.

What does it mean for Maimonides to say that God is the pure good and that everything that emanates from him is a pure good? God is not the product of any intention or noble aim, so we must search further in the Maimonidean corpus to fully understand these statements; indeed, we must delve into Maimonides’s complex view of religious language. Maimonides’ sense of God’s transcendence is so absolute that we cannot make any positive statements about God’s essence. God’s being is utterly unique and unlike the world; God lies beyond what any human being can know. Echoing language of both Plotinus and the Islamic mystics, he writes:

All people, past and future, affirm that God cannot be apprehended by intellects, that none can apprehend what He is but He alone, that apprehension of Him consists in the inability to attain the farthest limit in apprehending Him. Thus all the philosophers say: We are dazzled by his beauty, and it is hidden from us because of the intensity with which he becomes manifest, just as the sun is hidden to eyes that are too weak to apprehend it.

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25 Guide III:10, p. 317 ll. 5–6; Pines, 440.
26 Guide III:10, p. 317 l. 10; Pines, 440.
27 In III:25, he explains that the fundamental principle of the nature of coming to be and passing away is that “the entire purpose consists in bringing into existence the way you see it everything whose existence is possible” (Joel, 366 l. 20; Pines, 504). Later in the same chapter, he speaks of “what is primarily intended—namely, the bringing into being of everything whose existence is possible, existence being indubitably a good.” (Joel, 368 l. 1; Pines, 506). It is interesting that Maimonides speaks of “the intention” rather than “God’s intention,” as if this is simply an impersonal cosmic process. He expresses here the principle of plenitude. See Arthur O. Lovejoy, The Great Chain of Being. He offers a definition of the principle of plenitude on p. 52. See note 59 on Pines’s remarks.
God is unlike any other being in the universe because God’s existence does not have a cause; it simply is. In technical language, God’s existence is necessary—that is, independent of any other being—while the existence of every other being in the universe is contingent, that is, dependent upon God. We are like waves on the ocean of God; the waves are dependent on the existence of the ocean, while the ocean does not depend on the existence of waves. Stated more simply, God exists whether or not the world exists; the world is dependent on God, not God on the world. This is Avicenna’s concept of God as Necessary Existence, which Maimonides articulates boldly at the opening of his code of Jewish Law (Mishneh Torah):

If it could be supposed that he did not exist, it would follow that nothing else could possibly exist. If, however, it were supposed that all other beings were nonexistent, he alone would still exist. Their nonexistence would not involve his nonexistence. For all beings are in need of him; but he, blessed be he, is not in need of them nor of any one of them. Hence, his real essence is unlike any of them.

29 However, note the very different way this metaphor is used by Hua-yen Buddhists, who assert that in fact the ocean cannot be conceived of independent of the waves: “The waves are waves which are none other than water—the waves themselves show the water. The water is water, which is no different from waves—the water makes the waves. Waves and water are one, yet that does not hinder their difference. Water and waves are different, yet that does not hinder their unity.” See JeeLoo Liu, An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy (New York: Routledge, 2006), 263, quoting Tu Shun (557–640), “Cessation and Contemplation in the Five Teachings,” in Entry into the Inconceivable: An Introduction to Hua-yen Buddhism, tr. Thomas Cleary (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), 58.

30 Compare this with Baba Y Ib Paqda’s distinction between essential and active attributes. Essential attributes belong to God as God, independent of creation. Maimonides rejects the notion of essential attributes, as introducing multiplicity into God. But Baba’s essential attributes, which he insists is distinct in name alone, describe three aspects of divinity that are conceptually quite similar to the conception of a Necessary Existent in Avicenna and Maimonides: God is one, existent, and eternal. On the Necessary Existent in Avicenna, see note 32. See Baba Y, Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart, tr. Menahem Mansoor (London: Routledge, 1973), 132–34; Kitāb al-Hidāya ilāt jarā’id al-qlūb (Torat hovot ha-levavot), tr. Josef Qaffih (Jerusalem, 1973), 73–77.

In the *Guide*, Maimonides offers a version of Avicenna’s proof for this Necessary Existent. All beings in the world other than God are only possible or contingent; their existence depends upon prior causes. If it were not for a particular chain of causes, any one of us might never have come into existence. God’s existence, in contrast, does not depend upon any cause; God simply *is*. The fact that there is an Existent who eternally *is* ensures that being as a whole will never cease.  

However, how can we speak at all about a God whose essence we can never know? Speech about God must be translated into language appropriate to a being who is transcendent and unknowable. If we say that God is “good,” we mean not only that God is not evil but also that God is not good in any sense we know of—that God is beyond qualities of both good and evil. When we say that God is living, knowing, and powerful, we mean that God is not inanimate but also that God lives “without life” and knows without knowledge and that God is not incapable; God’s existence suffices to bring into existence many beings from God’s overflow. In other words, there is a being who simply is, and from the emanation or overflow of this Being exist all the beings we see in creation, like water overflowing from a fountain. Or, more precisely: God is the form of the world;
everything exists by virtue of the existence of the Creator. God assists its continued existence by means of a function that, for want of a better name, is called “emanation.”

In other contexts—specifically, when explaining the qualities ascribed to God in the Bible—Maimonides speaks of God’s attributes of action; these are qualities that describe God’s relationship to the created world. Since we cannot know God’s mode of existence directly, we cannot strictly speaking assert that God is good or merciful in essence. What we can say with confidence is that the results of God’s actions are beneficial. We look at the created world and see that embryos are given all the nourishment they need; we can thus say that the being from whom they have sprung is a source of goodness or acts in ways that human beings do when we have qualities of goodness. In this way, we do not overstep the bounds of our knowledge of a God who must always remain in some sense hidden and unknown. We can infer qualities of our Creator by contemplating the beauty of this universe. However, we do not truly know the essence of a being who is the condition of everything in this created order.

Another reason we cannot ascribe any qualities to God’s essence is that to do so is to introduce multiplicity into God’s nature, which is absolutely one and simple. Any statement of the form “God is…” has already introduced multiplicity into the absolutely unified nature of the divine. For Maimonides, monotheism means not only that

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36 Guide I:69.
38 Guide I:54.
there is only one God but that God must be utterly one, a being who is absolutely simple and unified.

4. Maimonides on God and Good

With this understanding of Maimonides’ complex view of language about the divine, we can return to our question: What does it mean for Maimonides to say that God is the absolute good and that God’s bringing us into existence is the absolute good? One way we can understand Maimonides is as follows. As the Necessary Existent and source of the universe, God is the ultimate source of existence, truth, and value. God is the creator of every being in the universe. In Guide III:11, Maimonides suggests that if we have a clear perception of this fact, we will not treat any being with less than ultimate respect, since every creature is an embodiment of the source of worth, the Existent that is the pure good. Every creature has intrinsic value as an expression of the one God.

For Maimonides, then, “good” is an equivocal term; it has different meanings when applied to God and to creation; “good” is likewise different when applied to humanity in its ideal state and in its actual state. We can understand this best by examining what Maimonides says about evil. Things we think of as evil are only evil from our individual, subjective point of view. From the perspective of an individual person, death is an evil, for it deprives him of his

40 Guide III:12.
41 In “the language of human beings,” the fact that the world exists shows that it conformed to God’s “intention” in overflowing God’s being to others.
42 Guide III:10: 440. The twentieth-century mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, too, suggests that values are woven into the fabric of nature. His reasoning is similar to that of Maimonides and other heirs of the Neoplatonic tradition. The realization of existence is an embodiment of value. Every being strives to be; every moment beings achieve realization of their natures. Whitehead, Science and the Modern World (New York: Macmillan, 1953), 105.
43 Of course, strictly speaking from the point of view of Maimonides’s negative theology, we can no more say that God is “good” than we can say that God is “one” or “existent.” But neither can God be “that which conforms to purpose,” because God has no purpose other than God’s existence. See Guide III:13. On equivocal terms, see Maimonides, Treatise on Logic, ed. and tr. Israel Efros (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research 1938), 59; Aristotle, Categories, I, 1a, 1–6; Hyman, “Maimonides on Religious Language,” 177–79.
own life, which is precious to him; still worse, death deprives a per-
son of those he or she most dearly loves. But when looked at in
the context of the whole, death is necessary, for it ensures that the
planet will not be overpopulated; it allows room for succeeding
generations to also enjoy the gift of life. Thus nothing is truly evil
when examined within the context of the whole. This entire universe
is one living organism, and every creature and event has a unique
place within the whole.

Maimonides must deal with two kinds of evil: metaphysical evil
and moral evil. Like Plotinus and Proclus, he argues that meta-
physical or ontological evil is simply privation or lack. If the great-
est good is being, then evil is a lack of being, and evil that is inflicted
is anything that deprives another of its being.

Maimonides, indeed, seems closer to Proclus and Aristotle here
than to Plotinus; evils are many and relative to the specific being.
For each individual, evil is the privation of its form. Matter is not
evil as such; it is necessary for the generation of the world; while it
is the cause of all privations, it is also the price of having a world,
which involves the marriage of matter and form. God does not
have a primary intention to create evil; God only creates being, and
all being is good. Evils are simply a byproduct of the creation of
being, which is good. This recalls the doctrine of Proclus that all
evils are accidental, parasitical upon being, and never the primary
intention of any cause. Compare Proclus:

For the cause of all good things had to produce not only beings
that are good and that are good by themselves, but also the nature
that is not absolutely and intrinsically good, but that desires the good
and through its desire—and, as it were, by itself—gives others
things the possibility of coming into being. Indeed, through its need

has been definitely proved by demonstration that the whole universe of existing
things is like one organism in which everything hangs together.” Maimonides: Guide
46 Guide III:10–12.
47 Guide III:10; for Proclus, see Opsomer, “Proclus vs. Plotinus on Matter,” 163–64.
for good things this nature [matter] contributes to the creation of the sensibles.\textsuperscript{51}

And Maimonides:

All his acts are a pure good; for He only produces being, and all being is a good. . . . Even the existence of this inferior matter, whose manner of being it is to be a concomitant of privation entailing death and all evils, all this is also good in view of the perpetuity of generation and the permanence of being through succession.\textsuperscript{52}

Natural evils, such as earthquakes and floods, simply happen; they are an unfortunate byproduct of the fact of material existence.\textsuperscript{53} The immaterial infinite One chose to create a finite world. If the divine had chosen not to create, we would not be here to rail against the problems of finite existence, but neither would we be able to enjoy its benefits. Thus if we wish to enjoy the splendors of existence, we must come to terms with its limitations. Anything that is not God is finite; finitude entails privation or lack. We as physical, material creatures lack some of the perfections of the divine. Because we are finite, we will die; because we are finite, we are subject to physical and emotional suffering and deprivation. But we should not therefore deny all the good in existence, simply because a good existence also entails evil and suffering. Would the absence of a world be a better solution? God could have enjoyed eternal unchanging perfection forever. Instead, God chose to share some of God’s goodness—to overflow or emanate being without any loss. The absolute being shares existence; this act of endowing us with being is the greatest good.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{51} De mal subs 36, 23–8; Opsomer, “Proclus vs. Plotinus on Matter,” 176.
\textsuperscript{52} Maimonides, Guide III:10:440.
\textsuperscript{53} Guide III:10:440; III:12. See Kenneth Seeskin, Maimonides: A Guide for Today’s Perplexed (West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1991), 59. As Sara Klein-Braslavy points out, this is Maimonides’ interpretation of a midrash in Genesis Rabbah found written in the Torah of Rabbi Meir. In a play on words between two similar-sounding Hebrew terms “death” (mavvet) and “very” (me’od), the rabbinic sage interpreted Gen 1:31, “God saw all that he had made, and behold, it was ‘very good’ as ‘death (mavvet) is good.” Maimonides adds that even the existence of matter is good—despite the fact that matter brings with it lack, decay, and death—in that matter brings existence into actuality, in however imperfect a form. Klein-Braslavy, Maimonides’ Interpretation of the Story of Creation, 109–10.
\textsuperscript{54} Guide III:12. Warren Zev Harvey, Sara Klein-Braslavy, and Howard Kreisel have each undertaken substantive studies of the question of good and evil in Maimonides. Harvey and Klein-Braslavy have focused attention on Maimonides’s statement in Guide III:13 that the good is “that which conforms to our purpose,” and have deduced from it what they see as several derivative meanings of good, including the one discussed here, that good is Truth, Existence, or God. Kreisel
What of moral evil? What can we say about a depraved soul that knowingly and willingly inflicts suffering and harm upon others? Maimonides suggests that infliction of harm can only be a result of another form of deprivation—the deprivation of knowledge. Anyone who has a true perception of reality—knowledge of God—should be unable to inflict harm. Thus moral evil, too, can ultimately be

believes that the more foundational statement of Maimonides is his assertion in III:25 that good is the “realization of a noble end,” and that existence has intrinsic worth, and is thus good. I have benefited greatly from the substantial textual investigations that each of these studies has contributed, both of key passages in Maimonides and of thinkers such as Al-Farabi, Avicenna, Al-Ghazālī, and Spinoza.

I believe that my simplified position, for the purpose of this study, is in harmony with elements of each of these approaches. My own approach suggests that God is the absolute Truth and Existent; another way of saying this is that God is the absolute “Good,” and thus that what God confers—existence—is an overflow of that “good.” God is the absolute Being, and God confers the absolute good of existence on other beings. This says nothing about the relative “goods” we choose when we have lost sight of our absolute, objective purpose, which is knowledge of God.

Harvey argues: “the term ‘good,’ like ‘perfect,’ may denote the ontic truth: existent reality or God. This use, however, is not—as in Plato—the primary and literal use of the term, but is merely a figurative use ‘in accordance with the language of man.’” He thus argues that good is a univocal, rather than an equivocal term. It has one primary sense for Maimonides: that which conforms to our purpose.

If we grant this point—that existence is good because it conforms to God’s purpose—this is simply to say that it is the product of God’s will and wisdom, which Maimonides takes to be one. Along these lines, Klein-Braslavy sums up her detailed argument by interpreting Gen 1:31 as follows: “‘God said,’ signifies that God willed the world into existence. God ‘saw’ intends that the world conformed to God’s ‘wisdom.’ And that the world was ‘good’ signifies that existence itself is the purpose of our existence” (Klein-Braslavy, Maimonides’ Interpretation of the Story of Creation, 113). That is to say, existence is an intrinsic “good” because it flows from an absolute, objective existent—i.e., the Necessary Existent—who has no purpose outside its Existence. There is no value outside its existence to which it could conform as “good.” Its purpose is simply to be. We could therefore say that God is not “Good” any more than God is “One” or “Existent.” But as the Necessary Existent, God is the absolute source of value from which all value flows. See note 59 for Pines’s articulation of this position. On the primary and metaphorical uses of “good,” see note 61. See Warren Zev Harvey, “Maimonides and Spinoza on Knowledge of Good and Evil,” Iyyun 28 (1978): 165–85 [Hebrew]; English translation in Jewish Intellectual History in the Middle Ages, ed. Joseph Dan (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994): 131–46; Klein-Braslavy, Maimonides’ Interpretation of the Story of Creation, 104–13, 168–74 [Hebrew]; idem, Maimonides’ Interpretation of the Adam Stories in Genesis, 137–49 [Hebrew]; Kreisel, Maimonides’ Political Thought, 63–124; Harvey, “Ethics and Meta-ethics, Aesthetics and Meta-Aesthetics in Maimonides,” 131–38; Ehud Benor, Worship of the Heart: A Study in Maimonides’ Philosophy of Religion (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 193n87; Stephen Menn, “Aristotle and Plato on God as Nous and as the Good,” Review of Metaphysics 45 (March 1992): 543–73; see especially 547–51, and his excellent summary on 570–73.
understood as a consequence of privation or deprivation.\textsuperscript{55} Evil is a lack of being and not a positive entity or substance that vies with the sovereignty of God.

5. Good and Evil and the Garden of Eden

Returning to the Garden of Eden, we recall that Maimonides argues that the knowledge of good and evil acquired after eating the fruit of the tree represents a deprivation of true knowledge. How can we understand Maimonides’ exegesis, given that elsewhere in the text he makes the Platonic identification of being as the absolute good? Maimonides must be using the terms “good” and “evil” in two ways.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{55} Guide III:11.

\textsuperscript{56} In an article published posthumously, Shlomo Pines explains this as follows: “When certain philosophers refer to knowledge of good and evil or (as we did above) to moral judgments, the assumption is that there exists a class of cognition and a class of propositions and judgments whose validity is a function of the opposition between good and evil, the existence of each of these contraries presupposing the existence of the other.

Now Maimonides rejects the intellectual validity of this conception of the good and relegates it to the sphere of universally held opinions. Opinions of this kind relating to good and its antithesis evil may be useful, indeed necessary, for the preservation of the human race, as they help to curb destructive appetites but do not correspond to what really exists, which is apprehended by the intellect.

However, ‘the good’ is an equivocal term. As Maimonides states in Guide III:12, ‘the good is being,’ which means that judgments concerning ‘the good’ (when it is given the above sense) are (to use the terminology of Guide I,2) concerned with what is true (and false).” (Pines, “Truth and Falsity vs. Good and Evil,” in Studies in Maimonides, ed. I. Twersky, 141; emphasis added). Pines adds in a note: “And not with good and evil. This inference is not spelled out in Guide III:10, a chapter in which Maimonides is concerned with establishing the proposition that ‘evil’ is relative and has no independent existence” (n131).

Thus in Guide I:2, Maimonides describes the arising of relative good and evil, which has no objective, independent, or strictly logical status; these concepts arise when we look at the universe from our limited, subjective point of view, based on our own desires and imaginings. And then there is absolute good (which is being, and so beyond relative good and evil), which is simply Necessary Existence. It is the condition of all existence and value, and as the absolute standard of truth and value it transcends “good” and “evil.” It is beyond “existence,” “oneness” and “goodness” because it is the condition of all three. This is God. Necessary Existence is the absolute good, and God’s overflow of existence is a sharing of that good to create a universe. Cf. Kreisel, Maimonides’ Political Thought, 121.

See also Pines’s remarks in his Introduction to the Guide, p. cxxxii: “In III:25 Maimonides, speaking of the final end of the universe and rebutting the anthropomorphic illusions to which men are prone, states that the primary purpose is to bring into existence everything that is capable of existence. For being
From an absolute standpoint, evil is not a positive substance or quality to be known; it is a lack. Those who see evil are seeing something that is not actually present. Whatever is is good. Evil has no real existence; it is that which is not.

The good is; being and the conferring of being are good. But this use of the term “good” makes it a synonym for the true. Truth is that which is; falsehood is that which is not.57 “Evil,” too, is that which is not. On an absolute level, then, good is that which is and evil is that which is not. This is the absolute, ontological sense of good and evil known by humanity in its ideal state in the Garden of Eden.

However, in our actual state, we choose relative good and evil. Relative good is what pleases a person according to his or her subjective desires, when he or she has lost sight of the absolute good. Relative, subjective good is thus not truly good.

In humanity’s ideal state—represented by Adam and Eve in the Garden—the term “good” represents humanity’s objective end of knowing absolute truth, of knowing God. In our actual state, we use the terms “good” and “evil” to describe our subjective aims, clouded by our individual desires. In fact, these relative goods can be seen from an absolute standpoint as evil in that they turn us away from the absolute good or truth. Thus Maimonides sees all human morality as relative, a function of our relative purposes.58

However, as Klein-Braslavv and Harvey suggest, Maimonides hints that there is also an absolute “commandment” of God: to see only the false and true, to realize our objective, divine end of knowing truth, that is, God.59 In our hypothetical ideal state, before eating


58 As an anonymous reader pointed out to me, moral evil is the result of preferring lesser goods. Thus while all created things are intrinsically, ontologically good, they are not all absolute goods; there is a hierarchy of goods, and thus in the moral sphere there are preferences and genuine choice.

59 Klein-Braslavv, Maimonides’ Interpretation of the Adam Stories in Genesis, 133–36, 145–49; cf. Alfarabi, The Political Regime (Siyyasa al-madani), ed. F. Najjar (Beirut:
of the “tree of knowledge of good and evil,” humanity knew the absolute good or the true. In our actual state, the terms “good” and “evil” characterize the shifting sands of human morality clouded by our imaginings and desires.

6. Summary: Maimonides on God and Good

Maimonides sees God as the pure or absolute good. In describing God as the pure good, Maimonides weds the biblical and Platonic worldviews. Earlier thinkers such as Augustine had made a similar move. However, Augustine is a thoroughgoing Platonist; his God is like a personal embodiment of Plato’s Form of the Good—a God he can describe as Sweetness, a God to whom he can talk. In contrast,

Imprimerie Catholique, 1964), 72–74 (Hyderabad ms. 42–44); tr. F. Najjar, in Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook, ed. Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), 34–35. A global question we must ask: is this Platonic or Neoplatonic strand in Maimonides his true voice? Does he believe that the ontological use of the term “good” is its primary sense, or a derived, metaphorical usage? There are two questions here. One is a question about the way we use language. The second is a deeper question about good. Does Maimonides believe that God is intrinsically good and identical with being, as Plato and Plotinus believe? On one level, the Necessary Existent simply is. When we reach the level of God, we are beyond the language of good and evil—indeed, we are beyond language. Nevertheless, it seems clear to me that for Maimonides, it is the Necessary Existent that is the absolute good. What we call good and evil “in the language of human beings,” which is relative, is that which conforms to our purposes, or that which achieves a noble aim. But the Absolute for Maimonides is God who grants being, and our purpose or noble aim is to know God and to further being, while God’s “purpose” or “noble aim” is to confer being. Maimonides, as a medieval Neoplatonic Aristotelian, believes that this world receives an overflow from the divine Being, which he terms “good” (III:13, II:11).

In III:13, Maimonides explains that there is a constant overflow of good from one thing to another, as he has explained in II:11. To deprive a being of existence—i.e. that overflow—is “evil.” But evil has no real existence; it is simply the deprivation of existence, which is divine overflow. Creation is “good” in that it is an overflow from God, who is Reality and Truth. In “the language of man” we speak of good as that which conforms to God’s purpose. But this kind of “good” is different from the sense in which God and existence are good; just as God’s “purpose” and “providence” are different from the way those words are used with respect to the human sphere. As Harvey suggests, God’s intention or purpose is simply God’s action (“Maimonides and Spinoza on Good and Evil,” 174 [Hebrew]; 138 [English]). We only infer that this reality is God’s “purpose” because it is here. The language of overflow lends itself to some of his rapturous expressions of divine presence and immanence, which have given rise to interpreting Maimonides as a “mystical” thinker, or at least expressing a kind of intellectualist mysticism. On Maimonides’ rapturous Neoplatonic expressions, see Altmann, “Maimonides on the Intellect and the Scope of Metaphysics,” 121–22.
Maimonides’ God is, at first glance, austere and impersonal, akin to the Aristotelian God who is “thought thinking itself” or the unknowable Neoplatonic One. However, we have also seen that for Maimonides, God can be known through God’s attributes of action in creation, such as loving kindness, justice, and righteousness.

Maimonides sees God and good as tied to being and sees evil as a lack of being. Metaphysical evil is simply the lack of being or reality. For a Christian such as Augustine, moral evil is a corruption of the original goodness of our will; for Maimonides, moral evil is a result of deprivation of knowledge of God. Maimonides thus makes a Socratic move; to know the good or God is to act in accordance with it.

In Guide III:12, Maimonides quotes Psalms, “all the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth to those who keep his covenant and testimonies.” He comments that those who keep the covenant are those who “keep to the nature of that which exists; they thus keep commandments of the Law, and know the ends, apprehend the excellence and true reality of the whole.” Remi Brague has suggested that Maimonides gives the verse from Psalms an ingenious philosophical interpretation: the philosophical covenant with God is to see reality as it is in truth. The greatest commandment (mitzvah) is to see what the Buddhists call the “suchness” of things, to simply see reality as it is.

Does Maimonides thereby devalue the traditional content of God’s covenant—the positive and negative commandments of the Law? One need not read the passage as antinomian, as denying the authority or value of the active commandments of God—the “thou shalts”

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60 Lit.: “[its] thinking is a thinking of thinking” (noēsis noēseōs noēsis). Aristotle, Metaphysics XII.9, 1074b 27.

61 Personal communication, Boston, spring 2001. Also noted in The Law of God: The Philosophical History of an Idea, tr. L. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 203, in which Professor Brague comments: “To be sure, equating ‘covenant’ and ‘the nature of being’ in this context is not totally arbitrary: God’s covenant with Noah (Gen 9:9–17) concerns the whole of what we would call nature” (p. 203). Note that this would tie in with Maimonides’ interpretation of “all my goodness,” which God shows Moses in Exodus 33:19 as all of created reality.

and “thou shalt nots.” Maimonides maintains that God’s commandments of action are also part of the wisdom and excellence of God; they are the way that God has instructed human beings to live in this excellent reality. Thus, just as someone who knows the true reality of God will not hurt or oppress others, so he or she will keep the commandments of the Law. One who knows the truth will live the truth; for Maimonides the Torah is truth, and one who knows the truth will live it.63

7. Maimonides on God As the Pure or Absolute Good

For a conscious Platonist such as Augustine, the notion of God as the absolute good is unproblematic; Augustine inherits from the Platonic tradition the equation of goodness with being or that which is beyond being. As we have seen, Maimonides’ statements are more complex and problematic. Our next task, then, is to examine in more detail Maimonides’ notion of God as the pure good. How do we integrate Maimonides’ positive statements about God as the pure good with his theory of religious language, and what are his precedents for this expression?

Maimonides asserts that we cannot ascribe God with an essential attribute. The only positive name we can ascribe to God is Necessary Existence, because it has no equivalent among created beings. Any created being is just as likely not to have existed; created existence depends upon a cause. God is that entity or source that has no cause. All fragile, contingent beings are thus supported by One whose existence will never cease. However, strictly speaking, we cannot say that Necessary Existence is; to exist is a quality that we know about caused beings.

Since Maimonides does not allow himself to make positive statements about God, what can it mean for him to say that God is the pure good? According to his theory of divine attributes, the term “good” can signify as a negative attribute or as an attribute of action. Maimonides’ use of the term “good” shares features with both

attributes of action, such as gracious and merciful, and with those traditionally described as essential to God’s being—such as existent and one—which he interprets as negative attributes. As an attribute of action, the term “good” tells us that God’s actions in creating and governing the world seem to human beings like actions we describe as good.\(^{64}\) Good may also be interpreted as a negative attribute; the declaration that God is good tells us that God’s being has no lack, deprivation, or defect.

Maimonides is adamant that Scripture only describes God with attributes that human beings see as perfections.\(^ {65}\) God is described as hasid (one possessing loving kindness) and as the pure good (al-khayr al-mahd) because God confers the absolute greatest good: existence.\(^ {66}\) Maimonides thus reflects the Neoplatonic notion that existence is the good or the beautiful.\(^ {67}\) In Guide I:59, he suggests that all the philosophers are dazzled by God’s beauty, even as God is hidden because of the intensity with which God becomes manifest. It is not that philosophers perceive a divine essence that possesses the quality of goodness or beauty; Maimonides insists that human beings cannot apprehend the essence of God. Nor does this philosophical intuition rest upon the achievement of a purpose or noble aim; this is not a moral assertion. Beyond aims or purposes or intentions, there is simply the necessary existent one, the absolute value or source of value in the universe, that which simply is. Plotinus writes that “the [true] Beings are the beautiful (ta onta hē kallonē estin)”; there is some magnificent splendor or radiance to the simple quality of what truly is.\(^ {68}\) Maimonides appears to allow himself the freedom to express this vision—an affective-aesthetic appreciation as much

\(^{64}\) In Guide I:56, Maimonides insists that we cannot even say that God is existent, except in pure equivocation. God is not non-existent, but neither is God existent in the way we are. God is by necessity, while we exist contingently. Thus when we say anything positive about God, we must translate it into an exclusionary negation. God is not ignorant means God is not of the category of beings that can be called either ignorant or wise. God is one means God is not many, but nor is God in the class of beings to whom number applies. “God is good” must mean that God is not of the beings to whom the term good or evil applies.

\(^{65}\) I:26, I:59.

\(^{66}\) III:53, III:12.

\(^{67}\) I:59, III:10–12.

\(^{68}\) Enneads I:6.6, 1.22. On the quality of radiance, which Plotinus describes as a certain light or hue, see Enneads V.18.10, quoted at note 97. Maimonides’s ontology is not precisely that of Plotinus, but they share the conception of the nature of being as good or beautiful.
as a purely cognitive one—despite his strictures on language about the divine. Perhaps he allows himself this latitude by what he calls “looseness of expression,” to direct the mind toward that which ought to be believed of God: that if there is anything of beauty or value in the universe, it is the existence that ever was and that will never cease.\(^\text{60}\)

8. Ontological Goodness: A Surprising Aristotelian Strand

There are several philosophical precedents that may have brought Maimonides to this intuition. We associate with Plato and Plotinus the notion that being is beautiful and with Avicenna the sense that God is the Necessary Existent. But, perhaps surprisingly, there is a dimension to this notion that is also found in Aristotle. In *Metaphysics* XII:7, Aristotle writes that the Unmoved Mover, insofar as it exists by necessity, exists in a condition that is kalōs. The term *to kalon* can mean both “beautiful” and “good”; it is splendid, fine, supremely beautiful, and good in itself. In moral discourse, it is often translated as “the fine” or “the noble”; it is the action that is undertaken not for some instrumental benefit but simply because it is the right thing to do. Plato’s Form of the Good is called *to agathon*, which can mean both “instrumentally good”—good for something—and, rarely, “good in itself.” In contrast, the *kalon* is intrinsically good or beautiful.\(^\text{70}\) In *Metaphysics* XII:7, Aristotle writes:


\(^{70}\) See W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962–81), 177–78. On the relationship between *kalon* and *agathon*, see ibid., vol. 3, 170; Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1078 a 31; *Eudemian Ethics* 1248 b 18; *Rhetoric* 1390 a 1 (“for the useful is a good for the individual (or: oneself), while the noble (to kalon) is good absolutely (haplos).” Guthrie notes that “Plato would probably have agreed with him [Aristotle] that kalon was the wider term. That what is agathon is kalon he says more then once” (cf. Plato, *Timaeus* 87 c (“all that is good is beautiful, and the beautiful is not lacking in due measure”; *Lysius* 216d; *Symposium* 508a, “You hold, do you not, that good things are beautiful? I do. Then if Love lacks beautiful things, and good things are beautiful, he must lack good things too.” See also Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, tr. Michael Woods (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 43, 173. Note that there is a strong conceptual and linguistic connection between goodness and beauty in Arabic as well. Terms used for moral goodness such as jamīl (good, moral, beautiful) and for moral depravity such as qabīh (ugly, vile) are taken from the aesthetic realm. As Howard Kreisel writes, “beauty and goodness are intrinsically linked. Actions that are immoral are ugly. A moral human being is essentially a beautiful human being.” Kreisel, *Maimonides’ Political Thought*, 113.
Therefore, it [the Unmoved Mover] exists of necessity (eks anānkēs), and insofar as it exists by necessity, it exists beautifully (kalōs) and is in this way an origin (source, first principle: archē).

In this passage, Aristotle sees beauty in the simplicity of the Unmoved Mover’s mode of existence, the fact that it cannot be other than it is, as he goes on to say:

For the necessary [is said] in the following ways… [the third type of necessity] is [that of the Unmoved Mover]: that which cannot be otherwise, but only in a single way (all’ haplōs).\(^{71}\)

While it is difficult to document which actual Arabic texts and translations he read, Maimonides clearly has precedents in Aristotle as well as Plotinus, Proclus, and Avicenna for the notion that there is something splendid and sublime about that which is in pure simplicity. This is Maimonides’ God—an utterly unified essence, with no division or potentiality.\(^{72}\)

Maimonides thus speaks in two voices about good and evil. In one voice, he argues that there are no absolute moral judgments. Good and bad are universally accepted beliefs, not apodictic judgments like those of true and false. Thus, he wants to deny the moral connotation of good with respect to things that simply are. When God looked at the world and declared it good, this was not a moral declaration. God was pleased that the world conformed to God’s intention or plan. Maimonides therefore explains that sometimes we use the word “good” to signal harmony with intention or purpose and at other times to describe a noble aim.

But there is a third sense of good—an ontological sense. This is the sense in which reality is good or beautiful simply because it is.\(^{73}\)

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\(^{71}\) Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII:7 1072b 10–13. Compare *Metaphysics* V:5 1015b 12–15: “what cannot be in any other way, is in this way necessary… Hence the necessary in the primary and proper sense is the simple (haploun), for it cannot be in more than one way. Hence it cannot be in one state and in another; for if so it would then be in more than one way.” Translations by author.

\(^{72}\) The God of both Aristotle and Maimonides is pure actuality, with no trace of potentiality. However, while Aristotle’s God is simple in its necessity, it is complex in that it is nous, and unifies thinking, thinker and thought. While in I:68, Maimonides appears to identify God with nous, in other contexts his negative theology suggests that God transcends nous.

\(^{73}\) Note Stephen Scully’s words on the non-moral nature of to agathon in Plato. Speaking of the dichotomies in Plato’s *Divided Line*, he notes: “All this is illuminated by the Good, To Agathon, a mysterious force ‘beyond being, exceeding in dignity and power’ (*Rep.* VI. 509b). It is unlikely that this Good is a moral good but rather a principle which enables all things to be known—Good in the sense that it enables
From whence would Maimonides have derived this ontological sense of good, the notion that God is the absolute or pure good? We have seen one source in Aristotle. Let us investigate further the Neoplatonic context.

The term Maimonides uses in *Guide III:12*—often translated the pure good (*al-khayr al-mahd*)—is one he would have known from the very title of a central Arabic Neoplatonic source. Known in Latin as *Liber de Causis* (Book of Causes), the work is composed of excerpts from Proclus’ *Elements of Theology*. In Arabic, it bears the title *Al-Khayr al-mahd* (Book of the Pure Good); the work uses this term for the One source of all:

The stability and essence of every Intelligence is from the Pure Good (*al-khayr al-mahd*) which is the First Cause (Proposition 8).

The First Good (*al-khayr al-awwal*) emanates goodnesses (*khayrāt*) upon things in one emanation; however each individual thing receives from that emanation in accordance with its own being (*kawn*) and essence (*anniya*). (Proposition 19)

The First Cause is not only not diminished nor complete; rather, it is above completeness, because it creates things and emanates goodnesses (*khayrāt*) upon them with a complete emanation, for it is Good with no end and no limit. (Proposition 21).

Similarly, the *Theology of Aristotle*—an Arabic paraphrase of Books 4, 5, and 6 of Plotinus’s *Enneads*—and other Arabic Plotinian sources refer to the One as the True Pure Good (*al-khayr al-mahd al-ḥaqiq*) and

knowability. Regarding its moral force, perhaps it is enough to say that this Good lies at the pinnacle of a hierarchical order for which there is no antipodal evil. [Even in the Double Logoi of the Pythagoreans, good and evil are only one pair of many antagonistic elements].” Response to William Darrow, “Zoroastrianism and the Substance of Evil,” Conference on “Evil,” Institute for Philosophy and Religion, Boston University, April 2005.


the Pure One (al-wāḥid al-mahd). Maimonides echoes this Arabic Neoplatonic language when he writes in Guide III:12 of “all that is thought by adherents of the Truth [i.e., monotheists] regarding his being the pure good (al-khayr al-mahd) and regarding all that proceeds from him being indubitably a pure good (khayr mahd).”

A more proximate source who uses this Neoplatonic language is Avicenna. While it is not clear which primary Neoplatonic texts Maimonides would have had access to, it is clear that he was immersed in the Neoplatonized Aristotelianism of Al-Farabi and Avicenna. We know that Maimonides derives his notion of the Necessary Existent from Avicenna and that Avicenna refers to the Necessary Being as the Pure Good. In Shifāʾ (Metaphysics of the Healing), he writes: “The Necessary Existent in itself is the pure good (al-khayr al-mahd).”

In Risālat al-ʾishq (Treatise on Love), he explains:

It is clear that the First Cause possesses in itself the complete sum of those perfections (khayrāt) which in relation to It deserve that name, and that there is no element of possibility in It. It is also clear that the First Cause is good not only in its substance, but also in Its relations to all other beings, because it is the First Cause of their existence and preservation, more especially of their being and their desire for their respective perfections. Therefore, the First Cause is good, absolutely and in every respect.

Let us examine in more detail Avicenna’s argument in the Shifāʾ as to why God is the absolute good; this will shed light on Maimonides’ reflection of this Neoplatonic stance.

The good in general, Avicenna writes, is that which everything desires (or, yearns for: yatashawaqqā) and through which its existence is completed (yatamma). Evil has no essence (dhâl). Rather, it is either


the nonexistence (lack: 'adam) of a substance (Jawhar) or the nonexistence of the sound state of a substance. Thus, existence (al-wujûd) is goodness (khayria), and the perfection of existence is the goodness of existence.

Existence that is not joined by nonexistence but that is always in act (bi-l-fi'), is a pure good (khayr mahd). The thing whose existence in itself is (only) possible is not a pure good, because existence by itself is not necessary through itself. Its essence thus bears the possibility of nonexistence, and that which in some respect holds the possibility of nonexistence is not in all respects devoid of evil and deficiency. Thus the pure good (al-khayr al-mahd) is none other than that whose existence is necessary in itself (al-wâjib al wujûd bi-dhâtihi).\(^80\)

Avicenna here articulates his notion of the Necessary Existent using the language of goodness. Existence is goodness; evil is simply lack of existence. God is that which is good in itself, because God is pure existence, with no possibility of ceasing to be. This is precisely Maimonides’ argument in Guide III:10–12; evil is privation, the lack of existence or some aspect of existence. In the context of Guide III:10–12, then, good is not, first of all, that which is in harmony with intention but signals pure existence, which has no deficiency of being, for it will never lack existence or cease to be.\(^81\)

Avicenna and Maimonides thus extend the equation of being and goodness that we find in Plotinus, Proclus, and Augustine. However, Avicenna and Maimonides have reshaped this equation through the concept of Necessary Existence. It is not just that being as such is good; the pure good is being that has no possibility of non-being, because it is uncaused. Moreover, we have seen this notion suggested in Aristotle as well, not with respect to being as such, but being in its perfect state: since the Unmoved Mover or First Cause is of necessity, insofar as it is by necessity—with no possibility of being otherwise—it is in a condition of being beautiful (Metaphysics XII:7;


\(^81\) However, there is another way to look at the statement that the good is that which is congruent with intention. The good—the Necessary Existence—is always congruent with intention (mashi'ya, eternal will or wisdom), for God’s deed is God’s purpose. We return to this notion below. On the use of mashi’ya for divine wisdom and irâda for nature, see Avraham Nuriel, “The Divine Will in Moreh Nevukhim,” Tarbiz 39 (1970): 39–61 [Hebrew].
cf. *Metaphysics* V.V.6). This strand is thus not only Neoplatonic but Aristotelian as well.

In addition, Avicenna reflects the Aristotelian notion that pure existence is always in act (*bi-l-fā'il*) (see Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII:7). That which is pure actuality bears no trace of potentiality, which signals a deficiency. That which is fully lacks nothing. It is in a state of pure completion or perfection; it is fully actualized being. Good is thus existence and actuality; evil is lack, potentiality, or privation. Maimonides shares this intuition with Aristotle, Plotinus, Proclus, Augustine, and Avicenna. God is always in act, with no potentiality or deprivation.

In seeking to understand Maimonides, we must ask a question of his predecessors—Aristotle, Plotinus, Proclus, and Avicenna. Is existence good because all beings long for existence—because it is in harmony with their purpose—or do all beings long for existence?

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82 Avicenna’s continuation of his argument is also instructive for our understanding of Maimonides. He writes that “good is also said of that which bestows the perfections of things and their good [qualities] (*khayrā’īthā*). [Now] it has become evident that the Necessary Existent must in Himself be the furnisher of all existence and every perfection of existence. Hence, in this respect also He is good, deficiency and evil being excluded from Him. And all that is a necessary existent is truth. [This is] because the truth of each thing is the particularity of its existence that is established for it. Hence, there is nothing more “true” than the Necessary Existent.

“Truth” is also said of the veridical belief in the existence [of something]. Hence nothing is more worthy of this reality than [the object of] the veridical [belief], who, in addition to [being the object of] the veridical [belief], has permanence—with his permanence being due to Himself, not to another. [As for] the rest of things, their quiddities, as you have known, do not deserve existence; rather, in themselves and with the severing of their relation to the Necessary Existent, they deserve non-existence. For this reason, they are all in themselves nugatory, true [only] through Him and, with respect to the facet [of existence] that follows Him, realized. For this reason, “all things perish save His countenance” (Qur’ān 55:26). Hence, He is the most entitled to be [the] Truth.

The Necessary Existent is pure intellect because He is an essence dissociated from matter in every respect. You have known that the cause that prevents a thing from being apprehended intellectually is matter and its attachments, not [the thing’s] existence. As for formal existence, this is intellectual existence through which, if it resides in a thing, intellectual apprehension of the thing comes about. That which bears the possibility of attaining it is an intellect in potency, and that which attains it after potentiality is an intellect in act, by way of fulfillment. That for which [the form] in its essence is in itself an intellect. Likewise He is a pure intelligible, because that which impedes a thing from being an intelligible is its being in matter and its attachments. This is the impediment preventing [the thing] from being an intellect. This has been made evident to you. *Shifā: Ilāhīyāt* 8:6:4–6, tr. Michael Marmura, 284.
because it is intrinsically good. As statements about language, Maimonides’ comments in Guide III:13 and III:25 on purpose and intention reflect Aristotle’s words at the beginning of the Nicomachean Ethics: we use the word “good” to express that to which all things aim. But why is this an apt definition of the good? Is it because the term “good” refers to that which is the aim of action or because there is something objectively splendid to which all things aim?

Aristotle and Avicenna, each in his own way, suggest that while both are true, ontological goodness is prior. Existence in a fully complete and actualized state is in a beautiful condition. It is that which all beings long for. God is the pure good, and God’s granting of existence (for Avicenna) or mode of existence (for Aristotle) is a pure good. All noble aims derive from the fact that existence—or fully actualized existence—is good or beautiful in itself. As Plotinus writes:

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83 This is a variant on the question made famous in Plato’s dialogue Euthyphro: is something pious or good because God loves it, or does God love it because it is good? See Plato, Euthyphro 10a.

84 We do need to note certain fundamental differences. While Avicenna follows the Platonic tradition in equating the Good with being (or that which is beyond being), for Aristotle it is nous (intellec- tion) that is the ultimate good to which all things aim. For Aristotle, the term good is a pros hen equivocal—a form of predication by common reference. The paradigmatic example Aristotle cites to describe this form of predication is health. Only bodies per se can be said to be healthy. A diet is healthy by reference to the primary sense of health, for a diet can produce health in a body. Similarly, a complexion can be said to be healthy because it can be a sign of health. Health is a pros hen equivocal term that can refer to things that lead to or that signal health. Likewise, for Aristotle good is an equivocal term that refers to both the good itself and things leading to the good. In the Nicomachean Ethics 1096a, Aristotle explains that good is asserted across category lines—as substance, it is described as God (theos) or intellec- tion (nous). As Stephen Menn cogently argues, for Aristotle, the good in itself is God or nous and that which leads to the aim of nous. For Aristotle, then, the good is not simply being, but being in its pure, fully actualized state. For Avicenna, too, being in its pure actualized state is the Necessary Existent, although he does not describe it as intellec- tion. For Maimonides, too, good is a pros hen equivocal; the Good is the Necessary Existent and the intellec- tion that leads us to know—insofar as we are able—the Necessary Existent, the pure good. Finally, “good” refers to the emanation of being from the pure good. See Aristotle, Metaphysics 1075b; Nicomachean Ethics 1096a23–29; Eudemian Ethics 1217b 26–3; Joseph Owens, The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute, 1963), 109; Menn, “Aristotle and Plato on God as Nous and as the Good,” 550; Monte Ranson Johnson, Aristotle on Teleology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 278–79.

85 We are accustomed to thinking that while for Plato, there is an absolute good, Aristotle denies such a good. Stephen Menn, however, argues that Aristotle does not deny an absolute, immaterial Good-in-Itself existing separately from the many good things. Aristotle says explicitly: “it is clear then from what has been said that
there is a substance which is eternal and unmovable and separate from sensible things,” which he identifies as the good or end of the universe: “We must consider also in which of two ways the nature of the universe contains the good and the highest good, whether as something separate and by itself, or as the order of the parts. Probably in both ways, as an army does; for its good is found both in its order and in its leader, and more in the latter; for he does not depend on the order but it depends on him.” He identifies the good as nous, the virtue of thinking, both as striving and as end: “Anaxagoras makes the good a motive principle; for his ‘reason’ moves things. But it moves them for an end, which must be something other than it, except according to our way of stating the case; for, on our view, the medical art is in a sense health.” We participate in nous insofar as we think. Nous is that which inspires the heavens to revolve, and that is the absolute good (Metaphysics 1073a 3–5; 1075a 12–15). Thus, though Aristotle rejects a Form or Idea of the Good, he accepts in principle an absolute good in itself (Menn, “Aristotle and Plato on God as Nous and as the Good,” 549–51, 563).

Monte Ransome Johnson takes issue with Menn. Johnson denies that Aristotle is committed to the position that the first principle is a separate Good-itself, although he does go on to add: “if Aristotle does endorse the existence of a highest good in nature, or even a ‘separate good’, then it must be something attainable by humans.” Thus he comes close, in fact, to Menn’s position: “the most obvious candidate for a ‘highest good in nature,’ that is also attainable by humans, is intelligence (nous), and the activity of theoretical science and wisdom. Aristotle says that nous ‘either is itself also something divine, or is the most divine part in us’ . . . This is ‘the intelligence, i.e. the god’ of Eudemian Ethics (ho nous kai ho theos, 1217b30–1), and ‘the god, i.e. the intelligence’ of Nicomachean Ethics (ho theos kai ho nous, 1096a 24–5). It may be that this intelligence is in ontological terms a separately existing good. Aristotle in fact says that ‘the [Happiness] of the nous is separate (Nicomachean Ethics X:8, 1178a22).’” So he, too, holds plausible the notion that nous is in ontological terms a separately existing good, one in which humans can participate. What he wants to deny is that there is one universal good, which would make it like a Platonic Form. Menn is mindful of this problem as well. The debate between them seems to be on the definition of “separate.” Johnson makes a forceful argument that Aristotle’s teleology is thoroughly immanent throughout nature. The highest good for a human being is nous, but other organisms achieve their distinct good in other ways, by fulfilling their immanent nature and function. See Monte Ransome Johnson, Aristotle on Teleology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 273–76, 276–86.

Shlomo Pines has also called attention to the ontological sense of good in Aristotle. Pines notes that in the Metaphysics, Aristotle speaks of the good as the ultimate telos of existence; he thus argues that good is an equivocal term in Aristotle as well as Maimonides. On the one hand, Aristotle speaks of good as the end of practical activity; and his commentators, from Themistius on, have seen a disjunction between good as the end of the practical intellect, and truth as the end of the theoretical intellect. But as Pines shows, Aristotle himself does not make such a complete disjunction. At times he speaks as if there is a kind of truth in action. Moreover, he suggests that in addition to the relative goods, which are defined by the ends we set for ourselves, there is an absolute good—nous, which is the object of desire for both heaven and earth. Pines, “Truth and Falsehood,” 98–116.

Pines suggests that Maimonides rejects this teleological sense of an absolute good (“Truth and Falsehood,” 114n53). Nevertheless, he notes that Maimonides does recognize an ontological good, a good which is simply being or truth (141).

It thus seems that there are two absolute senses of the term good. The Neoplatonic tradition identifies good with Being, or with the One which is beyond Being. Aristotle identifies good with Nous, the telos of the heavens and of our theoretical intellect.
The Good, therefore, must be desirable, but must not become good by being desirable, but become desirable by being good.86

9. The Good and the Beautiful: The Plotinian Strand

Turning to Arabic Plotinian sources Maimonides might have known, we find the following paraphrase of Plotinus in the *Epistola de Scienta Divina* (Letter on the Divine Science):

Therefore all who attain this first pure good (*al-khayr al-mahd*) are satisfied with it and stop, and seek nothing else beyond it, having traveled to the horizon of things and the goal of goals. For the great and glorious Creator is described as the beautiful (*hasan*) and the good is prior to the beautiful; not in time, but as being prior to it in truth and reality; and in the good is all power. The power of the good originated the power of the beautiful, being the cause of all things.

Whoever wishes to describe the Almighty Creator must remove from Him all attributes and regard Him as only good. The first good is the simple (*basîf*), which provides all things with good. He is none of the attributes because He is the cause of attributes. For He does not produce the beautiful (*hasan*) from the ugly (*qabîh*), or the good (*khayr*) from the bad (*shar*), nor any other attributes from their opposites: they come from a cause which is higher than they. I mean that the beautiful comes

Plotinus at times identifies the Good with *nous*, Being, and the One. These share in the quality of beauty, and are the objects of tremendous attraction and desire for the soul. Both Pines and Menn hold that the sense of being as intrinsically good enters the medieval scholastic tradition from Neoplatonism through Augustine, and is not in Aristotle (Menn, “Aristotle and Plato on God as *Nous* and as the Good,” 551n12). In contrast, I have shown here that Aristotle does affirm that the Unmoved Mover’s mode of being is intrinsically good or beautiful.

86 Enneads VI.7. 25, ll. 17–19. Compare Aquinas: “Something is not beautiful because we love it; rather, it is loved by us because it is beautiful and good.” *Super De div. nomin.* 4.19 (no. 439), cited by Jan Aertsen, “Beauty in the Middle Ages: A Forgotten Transcendental?” *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 1 (1991): 71. Medieval scholastic theology developed the doctrine of transcendentials, properties that belong to being as such and that therefore transcend the particular modes of being termed by Aristotle the “categories” (ibid., 69). Oneness, truth, and goodness are universally accepted as transcendentials. There is scholarly debate as to whether Aquinas, in particular, considers beauty a transcendental, an intrinsic property of being. See Aertsen, “Beauty in the Middle Ages”; Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 17–27; idem, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 20–48. An important thinker to consider on the relationship of being, goodness, and beauty is the Byzantine Christian mystic Pseudo-Dionysius the Aeropagite, who treats this question in his treatise *The Divine Names*. See Aertsen, “Beauty in the Middle Ages,” 78–84.
from a cause that is above the beautiful; the good comes from a cause above good—indeed, it is the pure good (al-khayr al-mahd). The noble agent is better than the act, and the attributes of the act are all in the agent, but in a more elevated and superior way.87

The Arabic Plotinus thus describes the One as the pure good, even while insisting that we cannot ascribe the term “good” to it—for the One is beyond all attributes and differentiation. In a passage from our Greek sources, Plotinus maintains that being and beauty are two interdependent qualities:

The power that is there [in the intelligible] has only being and being beautiful. How could beauty be deprived of being? And how could being be deprived of being beautiful? In being deprived of beauty there would also be an absence in being. For this reason being is desirable because it is the same as beauty, and beauty is longed for because it is being. Why should we inquire which is the cause of the other when both are of one nature?88

The intelligible is both absolute good and absolute beauty. It is true that Plotinus valorizes being as above and prior to beauty; it seems that both are qualities or forms in nous (Intellection), the first emanation from the One. And he is more comfortable using the terms “being” and “the good” for the One itself than he is “beauty.” Yet at times he does describe beauty in rapturous words that suggest it is perhaps closer to the radiance of the One than other qualities.

87 Plotinus apud Arabes, ed. Badawi, 182–83; trans. G. Lewis in Plotini Opera, vol. 2, ed. P. Henry and H.-R. Schwyzer, 357; Ennead V.5.12–13. Cf. Dicta Sapientia Graeci I: “He is good, not to himself, because his essence is the real pure good (al-khayr al-mahd al-˜aqq) but to all other things that have the potency to receive the good which he pours upon them.” Badawi, Plotinus apud Arabes, 186, Lewis, Plotini Opera, vol. 2, 474, Enneads VI.9.6; cf. Dicta Sapientia Graeci VIII (Words of the Greek Sage): The Pure Good is first to pour the good upon the things and to clothe them with good, like as the sun clothes the bodies with light, through which they become brilliant. The First Good is a pure good and not (good) through contact with something else, because no other thing is above it. Badawi, Plotinus apud Arabes, 194, Lewis, Plotini Opera, vol. 2, 477; Alfred Ivry, “Neoplatonic Currents in Maimonides’ Thought,” in Perspectives on Maimonides, 123.

88 Enneads V.8.9, ll. 36–42 (translation by author). While this particular phrase seems to be missing from the paraphrase of V.8.7–10 found in our extant versions of the Theologia, the idea is certainly present, as the previous and following passages we have quoted show.
This may reflect the influence of Plato’s *Symposium*, in which the summit of philosophical ascent is the vision of beauty. For Plato, too, beauty seems at times to be accorded the supreme place that the Good takes in the *Republic*. While some passages in Plato and Aristotle suggest contrasts between beauty and goodness, others note a close affinity between the two, which is reflected in the dual aspect of the word *kalon*. For example, in book 6 of the *Republic*, Socrates asserts that the good is the “cause for all things of all that is right and beautiful.” Earlier in the same book, Glaucon exclaims, “An inconceivable beauty you speak of, if it is the source of knowledge and truth and yet itself surpasses them in beauty!” (509b).

The close interface between beauty and goodness suggested by Plato is picked up and developed by Plotinus:

No eye ever saw the sun without becoming sun-like, nor can a soul see beauty without becoming beautiful. You must become first all godlike and all beautiful if you intend to see God and beauty. First the soul will come in its ascent to intellect and there will know the Forms, all beautiful, and will affirm that these, the Ideas, are beauty; for all things are beautiful by these, by the products of intellect and essence.

That which is beyond this we call the nature of the Good, which holds beauty as a screen before it. So in a loose and general way of speaking the Good is the primary beauty; but if one distinguishes the intelligibles [from the Good] one will say that the place of the Forms is the intelligible beauty, but the Good is That which is beyond, the “spring and origin” of beauty; or one will place the Good and the primal beauty on the same level: in any case, however, beauty is in the intelligible world.

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89 See note 64. Kenneth Sayre argues that while we cannot simply identify the Good of the *Republic* with the Form of Beauty in the *Symposium*, Plato does establish a close connection between the two Forms; there are striking parallels between the ascent to Beauty in the *Symposium* and the ascent to the Good in the *Republic*. Sayre notes further that in the *Philebus*, Plato identifies the Good as a unified trio of beauty, proportion, and truth, which are responsible for what is good in any mixture. He concludes that there are three dialogues that feature the Good, and each emphasizes one of these aspects. The *Republic*’s discussion of the Divided Line emphasizes the aspect of Truth, the *Symposium* that of Beauty, and the *Philebus* that of Proportion. Sayre, *Plato’s Literary Garden: How to Read a Platonic Dialogue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 185–88, 192–95. See also idem, *Plato’s Late Ontology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 171–74.

90 Republic (517d).

91 Enneads 1.6.9.
As Armstrong notes, language fails when we approach the realm of the absolute; Plotinus is not creating a mathematical system, and at times he contradicts himself. He even explains that his language here is to some extent experiential:

So we must ascend again to the good, which every soul desires. Anyone who has seen it knows what I mean when I say that it is beautiful. It is desired as good.  

Reflecting Plato’s *Symposium*, he describes the stripping away we must achieve in order to attain this vision:

Until, passing in the ascent all that is alien to the God, one sees with one’s self alone That alone, simple, single and pure, from which all depends and to which all look and are and live and think: for it is cause of life and mind and being. If anyone sees it, what passion will he feel, what longing in his desire to be united with it, what a shock of delight! The one who has not seen it may desire it as good, but he who has seen it glories in it is beauty and is full of wonder and delight.

Intellectually, one may seek the Good, but the vision of the Good reveals something more: a beauty that awakens a passionate response. Goodness is something we possess by our very being; in contrast, beauty is something we long for, which awakens in us both passion and pain. All of us possess a desire for the Good, but the longing for beauty is something that must be awakened by ascent and initiation. The good is complete and perfect being; beauty is its special quality, fragrance, or hue:

Just as the man who ascends a high and lofty place, then comes upon a red luminous earth and casts his gaze on it and looks long at it, is filled with that pure radiating red color and assimilates himself then to the color and splendor of that earth, so, whoever casts his gaze on the

92 *Enneads* I.6.7.
93 Ibid., l. 8.
94 *Enneads* V.5.12. Thus he argues that Goodness is prior—in value, not in time:

While both the good and the beautiful participate in the common source, The One precedes both; and that, in the Supreme also, the Good has no need of the Beautiful, while the Beautiful does need the Good. The Good is gentle and friendly and tender, and we have it present when we but will. Beauty is all violence and stupefaction; its pleasure is soiled with pain, and it even draws the thoughtless away from the Good as some attraction will lure the child from the father’s side: these things tell of youth. The Good is the older—not in time but by degree of reality—and it has the higher and earlier power. (V. 12)
upper world and looks at that beautiful luminous color and looks long
at it imparts that color and beauty to him and he assimilates himself
to it and becomes as though he were it in beauty and splendor.95

When Maimonides himself speaks of direct knowledge of the divine,
he uses the language of intellect, not of vision. But he clearly reflects
Neoplatonic language to describe the splendor of the One—even if
he seems to insist this splendor is revealed by philosophical reflection,
as for Aristotle, rather than by direct vision, as for Plato and
Plotinus.96

Maimonides was no doubt acquainted with such Neoplatonic
material from its absorption by Avicenna. Perhaps he knew it as well
from its circulation in Arabic sources such as the Theology of Aristotle,
the Letter on Divine Science, and the Book of the Pure Good; Shlomo Pines
and Alfred Ivry have shown that he was influenced by Ismā‘îlî sources
as well. There are also sources closer to home that had already drawn
upon Neoplatonic notions of the One. The eleventh-century Jewish
thinker Bahya Ibn Paquda argues for God as the True One (al-wāḥid
al-haqq), the absolutely simple source of all multiplicity. Bahya draws
upon both Islamic and Jewish sources to develop the argument that
there could be no multiplicity if there were no absolutely pure unity.
Maimonides inherits from Bahya the sense of a pristine, simple One
who is the source of a complex, variegated world.97

Maimonides’ sense of the beauty of the necessary one, that which
simply is, thus has precedents in multiple sources: Aristotle, Arabic
Neoplatonic material, Ismā‘îlî sources, and Bahya. He sees good
in the orderly unified nature of reality, which he describes as one
living individual or organism; all things and events are interconnected,
and all receive their reality and intrinsic worth from one divine
source.98

95 Theologia VIII 144–54; Enneads V.8.10.
96 On the complex dialectic between positive and apophatic discourse in
Maimonides, see Elliot Wolfson, “Via Negativa in Maimonides and its Impact
on Thirteenth Century Kabbalah,” in Maimonidean Studies, vol. 5, ed. Arthur Hyman
and Alfred Ivry (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2008), 393–42.
97 Bahya’s sources for his argument include al-Shahrastani, al-Kindi, and Ibn
Gabirol. See Diana Lobel, A Sufi-Jewish Dialogue: Philosophy and Mysticism in Bahya Ibn
Paquda’s Duties of the Heart, 66–95.
98 I:72; II:1; cf. Aristotle: “We must consider also in which of two ways the nature
of the universe contains the good and the highest good, whether as something
separate and by itself, or as the order of the parts. Probably in both ways, as an
army does; for its good is found both in its order and in its leader, and more in the
9. The Absolute Good (al-Khayr al-mahd) and Harmony with Purpose

There is a further linguistic strand to Maimonides’ discussion that has not received adequate attention. We have explored the term al-khayr al-mahd found in Guide III:12. Upon closer inspection, we find an abundance of Arabic terms in this chapter that connote overflowing grace. We hear about God’s generosity (ifdāl), and beneficence (jūd); God is the pure good (al-khayr al-mahd), and all that proceeds from God is pure good (khayr mahd). An individual’s existence is a magnificent good to him (khayr ‘azīm lahu), an act of grace (iḥsār), for God has singled out the human being and given him or her perfection (khaṣṣa bi-hi wa-kammalahu). Although we rue the fact that we pass away, were it not for the passing away of individuals, the future of the species would not continue. Thus that pure munificence (ifdāl), beneficence (an‘ām), and activity causing good to overflow (ifdāl al-khayr) are made clear. The abundance of natural resources that we need are also manifestations of God’s generosity (ifdāl) and beneficence (jūd). God’s bringing us into existence is absolutely the great good (al-khayr al-kabīr bi-l-īṭlāq).

For Maimonides, the khayr al-mahd is the source of all; it graciously endows existence upon other beings. Thus to say that God is the pure good is for Maimonides a statement of ontological fact: the Necessary Existent not only has existence sufficient for itself, but overflows or emanates to grant existence to other beings (Guide I:58). That emanation or overflow of being is transmitted from separate intelligence to separate intelligence and through descending levels of existence (II:11; III:13). Those who look at the universe and see more evils (shurūr) than goods (khayrāt) focus on relative privation. In the finite, created world, it is inevitable that at times an entity will lack something that would enhance its being or purpose. But the fundamental nature of reality is one of generosity. Although he insists that emanation or overflow (fayd) is simply a metaphor, Maimonides

latter; for he does not depend on the order but it depends on him.” Metaphysics 1075a 12–15.

99 In III:53, Maimonides notes that hesed can refer to any excess, but that it is usually applied to excess in beneficence (ifdāl). On Maimonides’ linguistic assertion, see sources cited in Michael Schwartz, tr., Moreh ha-Nevukhim (Ramat Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2002), 668n1.
uses the term “good” to describe the ontological emanation or overflow of being from God.\textsuperscript{100}

What precisely overflows from Necessary Existence? Being, but also knowledge. Being and knowledge are the \textit{fayd} or emanation that flows through the hierarchy of separate intellects. In \textit{Guide} I:69, however, he qualifies this language as metaphorical, instructing us to interpret overflow as ontological dependence. Everything depends for its continued existence on the Necessary Existent. In that sense, everything “flows” from it. If the Necessary Existent ceased to exist, all would cease to exist; God is therefore the “form of the world” and the “form of forms,” not in the sense of form informing matter, but in the sense that the form ensures the permanence of a thing.\textsuperscript{101}

What then do we make of Maimonides’ argument about the good as according with purpose in \textit{Guide} III:13? In this passage, he seeks

\textsuperscript{100} Maimonides gives us insight into his view of this \textit{fayd} at the end of II:12, in a brilliant Aristotelian interpretation of Psalm 36:10: For with You is the Fountain of Life; in your light, we see light: “Through the overflow of the intellect that has overflowed from you, we intellectually cognize, and consequently we receive correct guidance, we draw inferences, and we apprehend the intellect.”

The metaphor of light is developed by Al-Farabi from a remark in Aristotle’s \textit{De Anima}: “And in fact, mind as we have described it is what it is by virtue of becoming all things, while there is another which is what it is by virtue of making all things: this is a sort of positive state like light; for in a sense light makes potential colors into actual colors. And this mind is distinct, unaffected, and unmixed, being in essence activity” (Aristotle, \textit{De Anima}, Chapter 5, 430 a 10, tr. Richard McKeon; see also Aristotle’s \textit{De Anima}, Books II, III, tr. D. W. Hamlyn [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968], 60).

Light, says Aristotle, makes potentially visible colors actually visible. Just as when light hits a sensory percept we are enabled to see, so we are enabled to think when something analogous to light illuminates our thinking.

For the subsequent Aristotelian tradition, there was an ongoing debate about whether this activating light of the active intellect is a feature of the human mind, or something that emanates from without. In Maimonides too, there are various possibilities of interpretation. From the light humans draw from God, human beings are enabled to think, draw guidance in divine governance and providence, and draw prophetic information. Emanation is a metaphor to convey the action of a Being that does not act by physical contact, that affects many beings at once, and that affect others continually, just as a fountain ever produces water. On the metaphorical nature of emanation, and its applicability to God and to separate intelligences, see Hyman, “Maimonides on Causality,” in \textit{Maimonides and Philosophy}, 164–68; idem, “Maimonides on Creation and Emanation,” in \textit{Studies in Medieval Philosophy}, 59–61. On the light metaphor in Alfarabi, see “The Opinions of the People of the Virtuous City (Arā‘ āhl-al-madīna al-fāḍīla),” in \textit{Alfarabi on the Perfect State}, tr. Richard Walzer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 200–03; Herbert Davidson, \textit{Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on Intellect} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 19–21, 50–51.

\textsuperscript{101} I:69:169.
to counter the notion that the universe exists for the sake of human beings. Each thing in the universe is an intrinsic good; each is created and exists for its own sake, not for the sake of something else. The good overflows; the final end or purpose of that overflow is not a particular being who receives existence or goodness. Maimonides insists, instead, that the act of overflow follows necessarily from the nature of the sublime (al-rafa‘a); it is the nature of the supreme existent to spread being, and all other entities receive their reality from it. The heavens receive their intrinsic value from the overflowing source of existence and value.

*Guide III:13* thus beautifully illustrates the principle of plenitude. From Plato onward, we are presented with a paradox of being. In one sense, being is self-sufficient, perfect, complete. In another sense, being expresses its completion by overflowing outward.

This notion is portrayed most graphically by Plotinus. For Plotinus, the One is absolutely self-sufficient and simple, having no needs or desires. Arthur Hyman suggests that the principle of plenitude might well be called the dynamism of existence; whatever is perfect produces something other than itself. The world proceeds from the One like water from a spring, light from the sun, heat from fire, or fragrance from something scented. There is a natural quality to this; each of these things has an internal nature that also radiates outward. For Plotinus, when things reach perfection, completion or maturity, they naturally overflow.

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102 See notes 1, 18, 41.

103 See Hyman, “From What Is One and Simple Only Something One and Simple Can Come to Be,” in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, ed. L. Goodman, 113–14, citing *Enneads III*.8.10; V.1.6; V.4.1, and Arabic sources in note 9. It is true that perfection is itself a metaphor; we might prefer more neutral terminology. Aristotle uses the language of biology. He sees acorns coming to fruition as oak trees and describes the tropic movement toward growth in teleological language; everything in nature aims toward some end or purpose. He further identifies the end of motion with its good; he thus suggests that all things aim toward some completion or perfection. The heavens revolve out of attraction for the simplicity and unity of the unmoved mover; they also strive to fulfill or perfect their natural form, just as the unmoved mover is perfect actuality and form. Thus even Aristotle—the empirical natural scientist—resorts to evaluative language in his description of that in nature which he finds splendid.

In fact, Aristotle has highest regard for metaphysical matters; even though we know least about them, he ascribes to them ultimate value. It is true that in purely quantitative terms, we can learn more about matters of this world—biology and physics—than we can about matters of the heavens. But our ultimate fulfillment comes in knowing that which is most sublime. Aristotle uses the term divine to signal the wondrous nature of that which is always as it is and is a cause of unity
However, Plotinus insists that this is not a process that takes place in time. As long as there is fire, there is a radiation outward of heat; a scented body radiates fragrance. As long as there is a One, there is an expression of the One in a universe. Maimonides, in contrast, maintains that contingent existence is dependent upon an act of divine will, although he, too, insists that creation does not take place in time. For Plotinus, the principle of plenitude appears to be a purely natural process—although at times he also comments, to the contrary, that it is the product of intention—while Maimonides, at least exoterically, insists it is an expression of divine will and wisdom.

These reflections should help us unravel the contextual meaning of Maimonides’ statement in Guide III:13 that good is used in human language to express that which is in harmony with purpose. In this context, Maimonides is offering an exegesis not of the Arabic term khayr but of the Hebrew word tov in the account of creation. He tells us that when God looks at the world and declares that all is very good (tov me’od), the term “good” (tov) signals that the creation was accomplished according to divine purpose. He uses his exegesis to counter the notion that some things are created for the sake of other things, that they have a purely instrumental, rather than an intrinsic, purpose or good—that is, that the entire cosmos was created and order. And he suggests that we model our lives on that which is orderly and unified. Theology is the most sublime science because it is the science of both that which is best and that which is most intelligible. For while farthest from us, that which is pure matterless form—and thus has an unchanging nature—is ultimately most knowable.

Thus while Plotinus describes a movement of perfection flowing from the One which is Good—as well as a striving to return to the One source—Aristotle portrays a movement towards the good. Aristotle describes a good in itself toward which all things aim—that which is unchanging, pure, simple, and ever active. For Aristotle, this is God who is the activity of pure thought (nous). See Aristotle, Parts of Animals, 644b22–645a10; C. D. C. Reeve, tr., Aristotle’s Politics (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), xlv–xlv. Maimonides cites in Guide II:4 Aristotle’s explanation that the spheres revolves in imitation of the Unmoved Mover.

Emanation is a metaphor to convey the action of a being that does not act by physical contact, that affects many beings at once, and that affects others continually, just as a fountain ever produces water. However, Maimonides rejects Avicenna’s explanation of the emanation of a complex universe from One. The only way to successfully account for the derivation of multiplicity is to posit will, as one unified will can produce many diverse actions. On the metaphorical nature of emanation, and its applicability to God and to separate intelligences, see Hyman, “Maimonides on Causality,” 164–69; idem, “Maimonides on Creation and Emanation,” in Studies in Medieval Philosophy, 59–61.
for the sake of humanity. The term “good” (tov) signals that each thing was accomplished according to its purpose—for in human language, we use the term “good” to signal something that is accomplished according to purpose.106

Maimonides indicates that this definition of “good” is in accordance with ordinary human usage, following the rabbinic saying that the Torah speaks in accordance with human language (dibra Torah ki-leshon bnai adam). Maimonides generally uses this phrase to signal that a term that might ordinarily suggest an anthropomorphic quality to God should be understood metaphorically. Avraham Nuriel has analyzed each of the passages in which Maimonides uses the phrase and concluded that in each instance, Maimonides wants to show that God is not physical and does not act as human beings do.107 How, then, does Nuriel analyze Maimonides’ statement in Guide III:13? Nuriel asserts that in that passage Maimonides wants to separate God from an expression such as “good,” which suggests a judgment of value. Nuriel thus holds that Maimonides’ pragmatic definition of “good” in this chapter is meant to tell us that we cannot apply assertions of value to God. Just as God’s nature transcends time, space, and corporeality, so God’s nature is beyond judgments of value.

Nuriel’s approach thus suggests that when Maimonides calls God “good” in Guide III:12 he does so by absolute equivocation and that when in Guide III:13 he says that the overflow from separate intellects is a good, this is absolute equivocation as well. As we have noted, Maimonides’ assertion that God and the granting of existence are the pure good has nothing to do with moral judgments of good and

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106 Notice that in context, this is again an ontological sense of good.

107 In I:46, Maimonides denies that God has physical limbs. In I:26, he comes to deny that God has any relation to space. In I:29 and III:13, Maimonides denies that God has accidents of soul. In I:47, he denies that God has “inner thoughts.” In I:57, he denies that God has any relation to time. Here, the rabbinic phrase “the Torah speaks in the language of human beings” overlaps with the category of looseness of expression. Language simply fails us when we arrive at the mystery of God’s mode of being: we move to the ideal expression in I:59, which is silence. The Torah speaks in the language of human beings, because it can only direct us toward the truth, through looseness of expression. In I:33, the prophets engage in speaking according to the language of human beings to instruct those who are not yet fully ready to understand the mysteries of the Torah, of the account of creation and the account of the chariot, i.e. physics and metaphysics. Avraham Nuriel, “‘The Torah Speaks in the Language of Humans,’” in Religion and Language, ed. M. Hallamish and A. Kasher (Tel Aviv: University Publishing Projects, 1981), 97–103 [Hebrew].
bad. Pure good is like pure existence; it simply is. Nevertheless, Maimonides expresses awe before the Necessary Existent; he clearly values the source of being and truth. To say that God is the source of existence, knowledge, and value for Maimonides is a statement of ontological awe, not a moral judgment.

Howard Kreisel offers a complementary approach to that of Nuriel, one that makes sense of the larger context of *Guide* III:13. He notes that "tov" here is not an attribute of God but a statement about God’s creative activity. Human beings see things as good when they accord with our purpose. However, Maimonides informs us in *Guide* III:20 that the term “purpose” is equivocal. One reason may be that while human action sometimes misses the mark, divine creative action always takes place according to intent. Since divine action always accomplishes its purpose; it cannot be primarily for this reason that in Genesis 1 divine action is termed good. It is called good, according to Maimonides, to signal that each act of creation is effected for its own purpose, not for the sake of something else—the intent of Maimonides’ global argument in *Guide* III:13. Every being in existence, from the heavens to the smallest ant, is a *khayr*, an overflow of Necessary Existence into contingent existence, and each exists for its own sake. The purpose (of the all) is to overflow as much being as possible (*Guide* III:25).

Maimonides emphasizes this point in discussing the creation of the stars. The Torah’s statement that the stars were created to give light and to rule simply explains the utility that comes from them and overflows to the level below; it does not suggest that they do not themselves possess essential, ontological value. It is not true that they exist for humans’ sake, so that good (*khayr*) should come to us from them—although there is utility that flows toward that which is below. This, he explains is “in accordance with what I have made clear to you concerning the nature of the constant overflow (iṣṣādah) of the good (*khayr*) from one thing to another. As far as what is reached by the good (*khayr*) that is constantly flowing is concerned, it may seem that the benefit is the final end of the thing that caused its good and its liberality to overflow toward it.” However, this is not the case;

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108 Note, however, that Maimonides insists that all the acts of creation took place simultaneously. The different stages of “and God said” “and God saw that it was good” are meant to point out that each has intrinsic value. Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides’ Interpretation of the Story of Creation*, 113.

rather, the good overflows because it is its nature to do so—although
Maimonides also insists that this process is not automatic but involves
divine will. Any text that seems to suggest that something sublime
has been made for the sake of something lower actually means that
this act follows necessarily from the nature of the sublime. Maimonides
thus expresses a notion that Harry Wolfson has described as an
“ever-flowing grace from the divine.”

We use terms like “overflow,”
“generosity,” and “goodness” to describe the fact that contingent
existence is supported by God.

Maimonides has emphasized throughout the chapter that all divine
activity takes place according to and for the sake of divine wisdom
and will, which are identical to God’s being or essence (dhāt). Is God
called the pure good (al-khayr al-mahd) because everything God does
is effected according to purpose? It seems to me that matters are the
other way around. For Maimonides and his philosophical sources,
God is called the pure good because there is no deficiency or lack
in an existence untouched by uncertainty or possibility. God brims
with and overflows existence, thus endowing other beings with abun-
dant goodness (khayrāt), all according to aim.

There is a further dimension to Maimonides’ argument. In Guide
III:25, Maimonides tells us that none of God’s actions are frivolous.
Here Maimonides introduces two new terms for the goodness of
God’s actions. He insists that everything God does achieves a noble
aim (ghāya sharīfa) and is a good and excellent action (al-fi‘l al-jayyid
al-hasan); it is the product of will in accordance with wisdom, with
nothing preventing the accomplishment of God’s purpose.

If God’s wisdom had required something other than what we see in existence,

110 Harry A. Wolfson, “Maimonides and Halevi on Prophecy,” in Studies in the
108; cf. Altmann, “Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas: Natural or Divine Prophecy?”
AJHS Review 3 (1978): 7. Of the term fayd, Wolfson writes that “emphasis should be
laid upon the element of liberality and generosity in the act of emanation” (108n178).
The abundance of terminology reflecting these notions in III:12 bears him out.

111 On the uncertainty of any being that comes into existence, cf. Kierkegaard,
Philosophical Fragments, tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton
University Press, 1985).

112 The good and excellent action (al-fi‘l al-jayyid al-hasan) is that accomplished by
an agent aiming at a noble end (ghāya sharīfa).… A person of intellect is incapable
of saying that any action of God is vain, futile, or frivolous. According to our
opinion—that is, that of all of us who follow the Law of Moses our Teacher—all
his actions are good and excellent (jayyid hasan). It says: “And God saw everything
that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Gen 1:31) (III:25:503, 505–6).
this would have been accomplished. Thus the world is the product not simply of necessity but of will in accordance with wisdom. As Klein-Braslavy suggests, not only the ends are good but God’s means beautifully achieve their purpose.\footnote{Klein-Braslavy, Maimonides’ Interpretation of the Adam Stories, 143–44.}

For Maimonides, then, good is both a negative attribute and an attribute of action. God is called the pure good to negate all deficiency; as Necessary Existence, God has no lack, for God’s nature is not tainted with the possibility of ceasing to be. God also overflows existence to others, thus endowing other beings with abundant goodness (khayrāt); good is an attribute of action, because we know that existence has been granted to this world.

There is no contradiction in acknowledging the ontological sense of goodness and at the same time noting that for Maimonides, the existence of the world is in harmony with God’s purpose and achieves a noble aim. The ascription of tov as corresponding to purpose is metaphorical human language; it goes without saying that the world exists according to God’s intent. In the act of creation, every created entity has an intrinsic purpose and goodness. God is called the pure good because God is the Necessary Existent who endows the gift of being, which is a pure blessing. This is an absolute good not simply because it is the perfect expression of divine will and wisdom (which it is) but because the Necessary Existent has no lack of being and endows others with some of that good.

10. Conclusion

It will be instructive to conclude with Maimonides’ words on awe and beauty:

Now since everyone is aware that it is not possible, except through negation, to achieve an apprehension of that which is in our power to apprehend, and that, on the other hand, negation does not give knowledge in any respect of the true reality of the thing of which the matter has been negated, all people, past and future, affirm clearly that God can not be apprehended by the intellects, that none can apprehend what He is but He alone, that apprehension of Him consists in the inability to attain the ultimate in apprehending Him. Thus
all philosophers say, “We are dazzled by his beauty, and he is hidden from us because of the intensity with which he becomes manifest, just as the sun is hidden to eyes too weak to apprehend it.” This theme has been expounded at length . . . the most appropriate saying on this subject is in Psalms: “Silence is praise to You” (Ps. 65:2), which means, “Silence with regard to you is praise.” This is a most perfect expression regarding this matter, for whatever we say intending to magnify and exalt, we find it has some application to Him, may He be exalted, but we also perceive in it some deficiency. Thus silence and limiting oneself to the apprehension of the intellects is more appropriate, just as the perfect ones have enjoined: “Commune with your heart upon your bed, and be still. Selah” (Ps. 4:5).\textsuperscript{114}

This passage provides a key to Maimonides’ complex views on the divine. The passage is by no means completely negative. The philosophers are dazzled by God’s beauty; they dare not speak, not because there is nothing to say but because the tongue cannot possibly convey accurately what it seeks to express.\textsuperscript{115} They are dazzled by the intensity of the sun’s radiance, not by its absence; they are overwhelmed not by the emptiness of God but by God’s fullness.\textsuperscript{116}

Apprehension of God consists in the inability to completely apprehend God. But the inability to attain complete comprehension is not the same as attaining nothing. God is hidden because of the intensity with which he becomes manifest; what the philosophers see is more than they can adequately express. They are overwhelmed by God’s beauty; they are liable to err if they try to express in language what they apprehend, and that is why “silence is praise to You.” The more one tries to praise a flawless pearl, the more he or she depreciates it.\textsuperscript{117}

\textsuperscript{114} Guide I:59, pp. 139–40 (Pines), 95 (Joel). Cf. Lenn Evan Goodman, Rambam: Readings in the Philosophy of Moses Maimonides (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 96.\textsuperscript{115} Cf. Plotinus, Enneads, V.3.14, V.3.17, V.8.11, VI.7.34–36, VI.9.3–11.\textsuperscript{116} Cf. Enneads, VI.7.31: “So Intellect was raised to that height and stayed there, happy in being around that Good; but the soul also which was able turned to it and, when it knew and saw, rejoiced in the vision and, in so far as it was able to see, was utterly amazed. It saw, as if in utter amazement, and, since it held something of it in itself, it had an intimate awareness of it and came into a state of longing, like those who are moved by an image of the loved one to wish to see that same beloved” (Plotinus, tr. A. H. Armstrong, 180–81). Cf. Altmann, “Maimonides on the Intellect and the Scope of Metaphysics,” 120–21. I draw here from my article “Silence Is Praise to You,” 44.\textsuperscript{117} Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 18b; also see Jerusalem Talmud, Berakhot 9:1. Quoted also by Bahya, Duties of the Heart I: 10, p. 84 (Qafih), 142 (Mansoor).
“We are dazzled by his beauty” calls to mind the ontology of Plotinus. Beauty and goodness are qualities of being. Maimonides shows traces of the Neoplatonic—and, as we have seen, Aristotelian—view of ontological goodness or beauty as a quality of the Necessary Existent. In the language of human beings, the world is good because it conforms to God’s purpose in creating and because each aspect of creation has intrinsic worth. In the language of metaphysics, we can speak about God only through negation, through positive assertions about God’s actions or by looseness of expression. God endows being through a hierarchy of existents that flow from one source. Maimonides’ language of goodness is not primarily moral or purely cognitive but ontological, affective, and aesthetic. It conveys to the mind the absolute transcendent truth of the Necessary Existent, which—in all its splendor—simply is.

118 On “looseness of expression” in Maimonides, see Lobel, “‘Silence Is Praise to You’,” 36–40. I would like to thank Joshua Pareni and an anonymous reader for their very useful comments and suggestions.