Howard Kreisel

MAIMONIDES' VIEW OF PROPHECY AS THE OVERFLOWING PERFECTION OF MAN

One of the most thoroughly studied areas of Maimonides' philosophy is his theory of prophecy. This is not surprising in light of the fact that its impact on subsequent discussions of the subject, as well as its importance for the understanding of Maimonides' world view, can hardly be underestimated. Yet one crucial aspect of his theory has not been fully appreciated. I am referring to Maimonides' discussion of the feeling of stimulation, or compulsion, which drives the prophet to undertake his mission. Maimonides' approach to this topic not only helps illuminate his general theory of prophecy, but also holds the key to understanding his view of man's final perfection.

Maimonides opens his treatment of this topic with a description of the divine overflow as it relates to man.

For sometimes something comes from it to a certain individual, the measure of that something being such that it renders him perfect, but has no other effect. Sometimes, on the other hand, the measure of what comes to the individual overflows from rendering him perfect toward rendering others perfect. This is what happens to all beings.1

Any view that regards prophecy as different in this regard is immediately dismissed by Maimonides.

Sometimes the prophetic revelation that comes to a prophet only renders him perfect and has no other effect. And sometimes the prophetic revelation that comes to him compels him to address a call to the people, teach them, and let his own perfection overflow toward them.2

1 The Guide of the Perplexed, II, 37. All passages cited in this study are from S. Pines' translation (Chicago, 1963).
2 Ibid., II. 37; cf. III. 18.
The approach of Maimonides to understanding the prophetic mission underscores the naturalism which characterizes his philosophy in general. The God of Maimonides acts through the mediation of the impersonal cosmic order, prophecy being no exception. As is the case with Maimonides' views regarding the quiddity of prophecy and the circumstances under which it is received, his view of the divine command to publicly proclaim the word of God repudiates any direct contact between God and man in history. Rather than assuming the form of external speech, the divine command, to Maimonides, expresses itself by way of an internal compulsion. This compulsion is an intrinsic part of the higher grades of prophetic experience. It results from the same constant, impersonal overflow, whose immediate source is the Active Intellect, by which forms and intelligibles are attained by all who are prepared to receive them. This naturalistic view leads Maimonides to emphasize the significance the prophetic mission holds for the prophet himself, in addition to its import for society at large. The perfection of the intellect is regarded by Maimonides as the final end of man, with only the most perfect of individuals capable of attaining an overflowing intellectual perfection. The prophet is superior to the philosopher inasmuch as the overflow resulting in the perfection of the intellect overflows, in turn, to the imagination. The public prophet is superior to the private one, in that the overflow perfecting him continues to flow from him to others. The perfection of his imagination and intellect enables him to govern and teach others, leading them to moral and intellectual perfection.

The view of prophecy as the natural perfection _par excellence_ of man,

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3 _Ibid._, II. 32, 36. Maimonides does present the view that God can withhold prophecy from one worthy of its attainment. This would indicate that God does have a direct relation with the individual in history. However, Maimonides' disqualification of the examples he himself brings of this phenomenon suggests that his true opinion coincides with that of the philosophers. This conclusion was already reached by many of Maimonides' medieval commentators, including Kaspi, Efodi and Shem Tov.

Maimonides' views of Mosaic prophecy, the Law, and miracles appear to be the most noteworthy exceptions to his naturalistic approach. A. Reines argues, however, that in Maimonides' esoteric view, these are considered to be natural phenomena. See “Maimonides' Concept of Mosaic Prophecy,” _HUCA_, 40 (1969), pp. 325-62; “Maimonides' Concept of Miracles,” _HUCA_, 45 (1974), pp. 243-85. I have tried to further strengthen this argument in my doctoral dissertation, _Theories of Prophecy in Medieval Jewish Philosophy_ (Brandeis University, 1980), pp. 154-194.

4 _Ibid._, II.12. It is for this reason that Maimonides, in II.37, juxtaposes the compulsion felt by the prophets to perfect others, with that experienced by the philosophers.
with the public prophet standing on the highest rungs of human existence, raises a fundamental difficulty in the comprehension of Maimonides’ philosophy. The stress on the pure intellectual contemplation of God and His governance of the world as the goal of human existence, appears time and again in Maimonides’ writings. Providence and the felicity of the soul after death are seen as completely dependent upon one’s degree of intellection. Yet public prophecy, inasmuch as it involves the governance and teaching of others, entails a shift from the world of theoria to the world of praxis. This point is vividly depicted by Maimonides in one of his interpretations of Jacob’s dream.

For after the ascent and the attaining of certain rungs of the ladder that may be known, comes the descent with whatever decree the prophet has been informed of — with a view of governing and teaching the people of the earth.

The prophetic mission, termed here “descent”, seemingly involves a loss of perfection. Is it not a greater perfection for the prophet to remain at the summit — i.e., to keep his intellect constantly focused on God to its full potential — rather than become involved in the affairs of mankind? Does not the effort required to perfect others inevitably lead to the loss of one’s own intellectual perfection, the goal of one’s striving for felicity?

This problem has its classic formulation in Plato’s “Myth of the Cave”. The philosopher, having seen the sun, nevertheless must redescend to the world of shadows in order to lead the people. Plato, however, views this descent as a sacrifice of the philosopher’s own good for the good of society. The philosopher has no desire to return, but is compelled to do so by the community.

Maimonides is well aware of this clash of ideals. There is a latent tension in his thought as he attempts to grapple with it. At one point Maimonides depicts man’s final perfection in terms of the ascetic ideal — a minimalization of contact with society in order not to disturb one’s contemplative perfection.

If the perfect man who lives in solitude thinks of them (other people) at all, he does so only with a view to saving himself from the harm

6 Ibid., III.51.
7 Ibid., I.15.
that may be caused by those among them who are harmful if he happens to associate with them, or to obtaining an advantage that may be obtained from them if he is forced to it by some of his needs.  

Ultimately, however, Maimonides reconciles these conflicting ideals in a most penetrating manner. For Maimonides, no conflict between theoria and praxis need exist in the one who attains final perfection. Both contemplation and social activity are engaged in simultaneously. Mental solitude, according to Maimonides, can be attained while interacting with people. Maimonides conceives of the final perfection in terms of descent from the mountain without leaving the summit, of governing others without ceasing to contemplate God.

And there may be a human individual who, through his apprehension of the true realities and his joy in what he has apprehended, achieves a state in which he talks with people and is occupied with his bodily necessities while his intellect is wholly turned toward Him.  

This is the rank of Moses and the Patriarchs, in Maimonides' view. They performed these actions (governing people and increasing their fortune) with their limbs only, while their intellects were constantly in His presence.

The attainment of this state reflects imitatio dei in its fullest sense for Maimonides. There is a striking parallel between Maimonides' conception of the activity of the prophets and that of the Separate Intellects. The activity of the Separate Intellects is also termed "overflow" and "descent". The constant overflow from the Active Intellect, for example, is responsible for the sublunar forms, human thought and prophecy. No deficiency ever results in it, however, as it perfects that which is below it. Indeed, no deficiency results in any of the Separate Intellects as they move the heavenly spheres. Through the intellection of the heavenly intellects, all which is below them is governed. Yet their intellection is permanently fixed on the One. God Himself is depicted by Maimonides as pure Intellect, through

10 Ibid., III.51.
11 Ibid., III.51.
12 Ibid., I.10; II.4, 11, 12.
13 Ibid., II.4, 12, 36.
14 Ibid., II.4, 11.
Whose overflow the world exists. The prophets' intellects thus are similar to the divine intellects. In attaining final perfection, the prophets at the same time complete the chain of divine governance of man. For this reason, the prophets are referred to as angels — as are all forces which carry out the divine decree. The greater the perfection of the prophet, the more noble is his contemplation, and the more widespread the overflow from him. The intellect of the prophet par excellence to a large degree is separate from his soul and body, but continues to rule them. The faculties of the soul act in obedience to his intellection. Their action, in turn, helps perfect those around him in proportion to the level of perfection he has attained. The prophet leads and teaches others — attempting to guide each person to the highest perfection he is capable of attaining — while his intellect never ceases to focus on the divine world. This is why his activity is described by Maimonides as an overflowing perfection — that is to say, one which does not lead to any loss of perfection in its bestower.

Maimonides' notion of overflowing perfection helps resolve the apparent contradiction in the positions presented by him at the end of The Guide of the Perplexed. The stress on praxis at the end of III. 54, standing in sharp contrast to the emphasis on the purely contemplative life in III. 51, reflects nothing more than the 'bodily' dimension of complete perfection. Maimonides' insistence that the perfection of the intellect lead to the practice of acts of lovingkindness, righteousness and judgement does not signify that these acts represent for him a higher ideal than contemplation, but rather a complementary one. These are the acts that the perfect individual practices with his limbs, while at the same time his intellect is focused on God. The imitation of God's governance by means of physical activities is the

15 Ibid., I.68; II.11, 12.
16 Ibid., I.15; II.41, 42. Cf. I.49; II.6.
17 In speaking of the acquired intellect (al-'aql al-mustafad), which is the highest form of human intellect, Maimonides maintains: "This intellect is not a faculty in the body but is truly separate from the organic body and overflows toward it." (Guide, I.72). The source for Maimonides' description of the acquired intellect is Al-Farabi. This intellect, according to Al-Farabi, is both self-intelligible and self-intellective. It is an entity which exists and functions independent of the body, though it continues to rule it. Maimonides compares the relation between the acquired intellect and the body to the relation between God and the world. Intellect governs the body — whether it be the body of man, heavenly sphere, or the body of the universe — while being separate from it.
18 See The Guide of the Perplexed, II.11.
final perfection of the body governed by the perfect intellect, just as the
final perfection of the intellect is the contemplation of the divine world. The
person who achieves intellectual perfection has a dual identity — that of a
'separate' intellect and that of a corporeal entity. Both parts simultaneously
engage in the activity which is most noble for them.

To what extent Maimonides felt that this goal is attainable in reality is a
difficult question to answer. One is tempted to speculate whether Maimo-
nides, who amidst his strenuous schedule labored so assiduously in his
attempt to perfect the body and mind of the Jewish people, posited this
goal at least in part on the basis of personal experience. It is significant,
however, that in Maimonides' view, even Moses, the paradigm of human
perfection, could not maintain this ideal state. After the incident of the
spies, Moses was not able to receive prophecy in the manner he did pre-
viously. In the final analysis, the engagement in governance poses a con-
stant threat to the contemplative life of the most perfect individual. Never-
theless, the compulsion felt by such an individual to allow his perfection to
overflow to others overrides all other considerations. Thus while public
prophecy is for Maimonides he natural perfecton of man, and an intrinsic
part of the world order, it never loses its character of a mission.

20 That Maimonides felt that he had attained a state similar to prophecy has been
shown by A. Heschel, Ha-He'emin ha-Rambam she-Zakhah la-Nevu'ah, Louis
Ginzberg Jubilee Volume, Hebrew Section (New York, 1945), pp. 159-88.
21 The Guide of the Perplexed, II.36; cf. B.T., Taanith, 30b.