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# Aspects of modern American educational philosophy as found in Maimonides

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Thesis

ASPECTS OF MODERN AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY  
AS FOUND IN MAIMONIDES

by

THELMA G. ADAMSON  
(A.B., Boston University, 1945)

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Approved  
by

First Reader . . . . . *Solomon Fejzo* . . . . .  
Professor of Romance Languages

Second Reader . . . . . *J. J. Chambers* . . . . .  
Professor of Education

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INTRODUCTION  
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It is an accepted fact that man is a social being, and consequently, the total educational process is directed towards producing people who will make worthwhile contributions to society. Bertrand Russell begins his book, Religion and Science by saying that "Science and religion are both aspects of social life". Upon examination of this statement, one realizes that questions might arise in education affecting every phase of living - from health rules to moral endeavor. And since education is life, Maimonides has succeeded in supplying the answers to the questions concerning life within the scope of his masterpiece.

The purpose of this thesis is to focus the attention of the reader upon the varied contributions to educational philosophy which Maimonides gave to the world in his works. Of course, his range of contributions covers a far larger field, but since this writing deals with education, the writer will limit the discussion to that area.

A student of Romance languages is often aware of how little emphasis is placed on philosophers of Spain who have influenced our own educational theory. Maimonides was a Spaniard, of Jewish faith, and a product of Arabic culture. He not only influenced very famous philosophers who followed him, but imparted teachings which have lived on to attain

significance today. Could it be that this Moses had been rewarded with the gift of prophecy, and had foreseen future events so completely, that his teachings can still be applied with only minor changes to suit our society? Thus, it is anticipated that the reader will experience some relationship between Maimonides' thoughts and beliefs, and our modern educational system.

Many school systems have had at one time or another for their goal The Pursuit of Excellence, and we find all through Maimonides' writings the expressed desire to accomplish this. The Progressive philosophy of education which allows children more freedom than was found in our schools for many years, certainly can find roots in Maimonides' philosophy. When we consider the question of whether we shall educate a few or all, there is an answer for that also in his writings.

Since all phases of education are supposed to contribute to the perfecting of the total man, how natural it is to be awakened to Maimonides who placed so much emphasis upon moral education as a means of perfecting the total personality. This appears particularly timely now that we are all anxious to possess a code of morals and methods which would produce a national behavior consistent with the fostering of better schools in a democracy.

## Chapter I

### Life and Background of Maimonides \*\*\*\*\*

Moses ben Maimon or Maimonides was born on March 30, 1135 in Cordova. His father, Maimon, was descended from a line of scholars and was a deeply learned man. Besides being a Talmudist, he was an astronomer, a mathematician, and versed in the literature of the Mohammedans. He wrote a number of works on Jewish subjects. He devoted himself to the instruction of his son, Moses. There was also a younger son in the family, named David and a daughter.

Moses never called himself Maimonides.

"This was an artificial name coined centuries later on the analogy of Greek names like Atrides, which denotes son of Atreus. He referred to himself sometimes as 'Hasepharde' the Spaniard, but usually as Moses, son of Maimon. His name became shortened to Maimuni and has come to us as Maimonides."

When Maimonides was born, Cordova had already passed its height of fame, although it was still beautifully adorned with Moorish architecture. During the years that followed the year 1000, there was an epoch of great progress for Hebrew and Arabic (later to be reinforced by Maimonides), and Jews could express themselves more accurately

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1. Adler, Herbert M.: An Outline of the Life and Works of Maimonides, The Jewish Memorial Council, London, 1935, p.6

after having adopted Arabic as their secular language. The Jewish people had profited by welcoming for many years the invading Moors.

However, by the time Maimonides came upon the scene, most of Spain was again in Christian hands. The 12th century found the Moors trying to regain a stronger foothold in Spain, and called in a Berber tribe in North Africa to help them. (In the end, the Moors of Spain were subjugated by the Berber tribe.) It was during the reign of Ali that Maimonides was born.

At first, conditions seemed promising for the Jews in Spain, but their hopes and expectations were soon shattered. These Moors became tyrannical towards the Jews. Synagogues were destroyed and houses of learning were closed. There were three possible means of escaping the fury - conversion, exile, or death. Naturally, outward conversion was practiced to a great extent; so much so, that some of the less educated Jews began to believe that the Mohammedan religion was more correct than their own. Of course, then as now, there were martyrs who elected the supreme sacrifice, as their conscience did not permit them to be hypocritical. This act of martyrdom was to receive little acceptance by Maimonides.

It was under these conditions that Maimon, the father, and his family found themselves in the early years of the 12th century. The course chosen by Maimon was exile, and



he and his family moved from place to place, endeavoring to escape the tyranny. After twelve years of wandering, the family left Spain.

If Moses had not been a sensitive, and inquiring child, having reached the age of "bar mitzvah", he would naturally have found this kind of life depressing. He tried at this young age to find a meaning to all this misfortune, by attending lectures in philosophy and science given by the erudite Arabs. These lessons made such a great impression that they later served as a basis for his own philosophical teachings. It was soon evident that Moses enjoyed an admirable memory for accuracy. Before leaving Spain, he had composed a book on the calendar and another on logic.

From 1160 to 1165 we see that this period is one of a dual life. Together with his father, Maimonides did many things in secret. They were forced to conceal their faith, and pretend to be Moslems. One writer disagrees with this generally accepted fact. J. H. Hertz has said, "There is no truth in the malicious myth, that under the stress of persecution, he at any time adopted the mask of Islam."<sup>1</sup> However, this writer disagrees with this statement in the light of Maimonides expressed views as stated in his famous "Letter on Apostasy".<sup>2</sup>

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1. Hertz, J.H. in Epstein, Rabbi Dr. I.: editor of Moses Maimonides, the Soncino Press, London, 1935, p.4

2. Maimonides, Moses: The Guide for the Perplexed, transl. by M. Friedlander, Dover Publications, 2nd ed., 1904, (hereafter referred to as Guide) p. xviii

Maimonides first gained prominence with his "Letter on Apostasy" in which he differed with a rabbi who desired to deprive the Jews of their position in Jewish society when they had assumed the guise of Mohammedans. Maimonides spoke out against the rabbi, by declaring that these Jews should not be branded as sinners, and although he would commend those who sought to be martyrs, he did not consider it their duty. Maimonides believed that they should escape at the earliest opportunity to a place where they could practice their religion freely.

This Letter was heralded by Jews, but put the spotlight on the family, and under imminent peril in a Moslem land, they left for Palestine, later going on to the old section of Cairo. In Fez the men of the family decided to set up a business in precious stones. Maimonides was not very active in this business, because he was too engrossed in his Jewish studies, and was also exploring the fields of philosophy and science.

In 1165, upon finding religious peace in Egypt, at Fostat, it became evident that this environment was more conducive to intellectual pursuits. It was at this time that Maimonides suffered a great loss - the death of his father, and the drowning in the Indian Ocean of his brother, who was carrying the jewels used in the family's business. It was only natural that after sustaining a double loss, Maimonides should turn his thoughts to earning

a living, apart from his religious duties. He decided to become a physician, and it was not long before he was the recipient of widespread fame.

By 1177, Maimonides was recognized as chief rabbi of the Cairo Jews. He did not believe that a person serving in religious duties should gain a livelihood from this service. This reason, coupled with his personal loss, caused him to turn to medicine. His medical knowledge had gained in general studies under Rabbinical and Moslem teachers. It was during this period that he wrote the Commentary on the Mishnah, and soon Jews from other parts of the world sought him out for advice.

In 1174, Saladin's brother, Turin Shah, became head of the government, and the lot of the Jews improved even more thanks to the influence of Maimonides. We must remember that it was Saladin who restored the inner faith needed by Maimonides, and this all took place in an Arab country. Although Saladin was convinced in the truth of his own beliefs, and himself participated in the Holy Wars, he was upright and kind, and fostered international justice. He protected the needy and sick, and furthered culture and education. It was his successor, appointed as Vizir during Saladin's reign, who continued this good work, allotted Maimonides an annual salary, and bestowed other distinctions.

Twelve years after the Commentary on the Mishnah appeared, there followed the famous work, Mishnah Torah or

"Double of the Torah". Its other title is Yad ha-Hachazukah. This took ten years to complete, and is the complete codification and digest of Biblical and Rabbinical law and religion. YaD or YD means 14 in Hebrew, and this work consists of 14 books containing 1000 chapters.

After marrying late in life, at the age of 51, Maimonides was blessed with a son, Abraham. There also entered his life at this time a pupil, Yosef ibn Akinin, who can certainly be said to have been a contributing factor to the completion of his widely read work, The Guide for the Perplexed. Now at the age of 53, he had completed the trilogy. By this time, he was acclaimed to be an aristocrat, not only by virtue of his ancestral tree, but by virtue of his intelligence.

As the well-liked personal physician to Saladin and his court, Maimonides now had the opportunity of becoming the personal physician to Richard the Lion Hearted, but he declined, due to his loyalty to Saladin, who has been called a Moslem saint.

All of Maimonides' works were written in Arabic, with the exception of the Mishnah Torah, which was written entirely in Hebrew. This Moses died in December, 1204, at the age of 70.

## Chapter II

### General Philosophy of Maimonides \*\*\*\*\*

There are certain general questions which we consider when studying philosophy, such as those suggested by Bertrand Russell.<sup>1</sup> Does the philosopher divide the world into mind and matter, and if so, what is mind, and what is matter? Is mind subject to matter, or is it possessed of independent powers? Has the universe any unity of purpose? Is the universe evolving towards some goal? Are there really laws of nature? What is man in the scheme of the universe? Is there a way of living that is noble and another that is base, or are all ways of living merely futile? Is the good worth seeking even if the universe is always moving towards death? Is there such a thing as wisdom?

Let us see how Maimonides answers some of these questions. Maimonides knew nothing of our systems of philosophy, as expounded in recent times. When he uses the word "philosopher" it is with one person in mind - Aristotle, who up to that time had been the most controversial thinker the world had known. Thus, philosophy had a much narrower meaning than it holds at present. It is precisely against that philosophy in its totality that prompts Maimonides to

1. Russell, Bertrand: A History of Western Philosophy, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1945, p.xiii

write and defend the Jewish creed, as handed down by the law giver, Moses.

Aristotle was not an atheist, but he did not believe in the living God of Maimonides. Aristotle held that God existed and that He was the beginning and the end of all existence, but He consisted of form (idea) and not matter (body). It is here that Maimonides begins to differ with Aristotle. Maimonides rejects Aristotle's conception of a mystical deity, who is supreme. This appears in keeping with the social aspects of his teachings. We are told that those who possess a true knowledge of God believe that His "various attributes of Might, Power, Greatness, Perfection, and Goodness denote His essence.<sup>1</sup> It is explained that the titles of High and Exalted refer to elevation in rank, and not in space.

Maimonides also rejects Aristotle's doctrine of the eternity of matter. God, says Maimonides, is not hampered by necessity, but is a free Personality, and Ruler of nature.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Maimonides removes the halo of infallibility. This Supreme Being who embodies individual thought, is endowed with the same characteristics as all lesser beings. Everything that man does is a lesson in  
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1. Maimonides: Guide: op. cit., I, Chap. 20, p. 29
2. Hertz, J.H. in Epstein: op. cit., p. 8

the scheme of believing and understanding the Supreme Being, and gives insight into eternity. Thus, man is not limited in his scope of learning, since the Ruler is not limited in His actions. With these views, Maimonides not only sought, but did achieve a synthesis of the teachings of Aristotle and those of religion as taught and revealed.

The philosophy of Aristotle, like the naturalistic philosophy in our day, is fundamentally opposed to the basic claim of traditional religion; namely, reason versus revelation as a guide to truth. Thus, Aristotle's God is limited and cannot perform miracles since His actions must always conform to natural law.<sup>1</sup> The philosophy of Maimonides is therefore Aristotelian only up to the point where Aristotelianism clashed with the fundamental beliefs in Judaism, and here Maimonides appealed to Revelation as the highest authority.<sup>2</sup>

With Maimonides there is no theology discussed, as one would expect, since philosophy is a subject located somewhere between theology and science. Maimonides has no need to discuss theology, because he does not find that

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1. Bokser, Ben Zion: The Legacy of Maimonides,

Philosophical Library, New York, 1950, p.14

2. Solis-Cohen, Solomon: in "The Phi Lambda Quarterly",  
Phi Lambda Fraternity, Philadelphia, 1935, p.27

science and theology are at odds and have to be mediated. According to Maimonides, philosophy consists of two parts:

1. theoretical: mathematics, physics, metaphysics
2. practical: ethics, economics, government of the<sup>1</sup> city, and government of great nations.

However, the only philosophical subject treated in the Guide for the Perplexed refers to the doctrine of God. Maimonides' God is abstract, and free from human affections, and like that of Spinoza, God is Nature; and an adequate conception of God is not possible to be made by man.

#### Existence of God

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Maimonides states that God exists as the most perfect Being, "not only in the sense in which the earth and the heavens exist, but He exists and possesses life, wisdom, power, activity, and all other properties which our belief in His existence must include." Maimonides goes further by showing how an ordinary person attributes to God in a figurative manner the usual actions of the various senses, using expressions referring to hearing, seeing, and smelling. The physical organs attributed to

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1. Strauss, Leo: in Baron, Salo Wittmayer, editor,

Essays on Maimonides, Columbia Univ. Press,

New York, 1941, p.42



God by the Prophets, he says, are either organs of locomotion, indicating life; organs of sensations, indicating perception; organs of touch, indicating action; or organs of speech, indicating the divine inspiration of the Prophets.<sup>1</sup>

If God were a corporeal being, all these organs would be subject to imperfection. Maimonides shows that God does not have a body, that He is incorporeal, and that God exists as an Absolute Being.

Maimonides felt that the acceptance of the knowledge of the unity of God was so important, that he placed it as his second commandment, in the preface to the Mishnah Torah or Yad. Of course, this commandment is stated in several places. In the Mishnah Torah (I,7) we read, "This God is One God; He is neither two nor more than two but One to whose unity there is no comparison among the individual units in the Universe."<sup>2</sup>

### The Universe

The Universe is considered by Maimonides as an organic whole and everything is arranged therein in accordance with a final purpose. His world is a world of law,

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1. Maimonides: Guide, op. cit., I, Chap. 46, p.60
2. Maimonides; Moses: Book of Mishnah Torah, translated by Simon Glazer, Maimonides Publishing Co., New York, 1927, (hereafter referred to as Mishnah Torah), p.121

open to inquiry, and always affirms his scientific faith. He believed that the variety of its interlocking parts further constituted its unity.<sup>1</sup> The Universe was created at will, emanating from the wisdom of God. This kind of creation is in direct opposition to natural determinism, as it implies that God can act freely to pursue whatever purposes that seem good to Him.<sup>2</sup> If the Universe were believed to be fashioned out of nothing, it "cannot place limitations in the path of the creator".<sup>3</sup>

Maimonides believed that although the Universe included many beings, without life or motion, it is a single being living through the motion of the Sphere.<sup>4</sup> Since Aristotle's Laws of Nature equal the will of God, the Universe does show evidence of design - the divine will of God who has designed everything at His will and pleasure.<sup>5</sup>

For Maimonides, all created things are composed of four elements: fire, air, water, earth. (Each of the four elements, however, are composed of matter and form alone.)

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1. Roth, Leon: The Guide for the Perplexed, Moses Maimonides, Hutchinson's Univ. Library, London, 1948, p.56

2. Bokser: op. cit., p.14

3. Ibid., p. 24

4. Cohen, Rev. A.: The Teachings of Maimonides, George Routledge and Sons, Ltd., London, 1927, p.81

5. Maimonides: Guide, op. cit., II, Chap. 19, p.184

He is then able to show how all things, gold, platinum, and man must ultimately dissolve. Thus, there is a scientific reason to justify the Biblical quotation of "Dust thou art to dust returneth".<sup>1</sup>

In the Guide, he points out that the world is essentially good, and most of our troubles are caused by our own imperfections.

He believes in God's exacting justice. God would reward an Israelite for the secret obedience of the Torah, even if he were compelled to profess outwardly another religion during times of persecution.<sup>2</sup> This was set forth in his "Letter on Apostasy", which led to much controversy, and finally caused him to go into exile with his family.

The foundation of Maimonides' whole system of thought is of course the Torah with its verbal inspiration. (This verbal quality is important as we shall see later.) The Torah has two described objectives: 1. Well-being of the soul, 2. Well-being of the body. "The Torah of God is perfect, pure, holy and true."<sup>3</sup>

It is necessary to instill good morals to produce a good social state. The practice of good morals is to no avail, if a person were to isolate himself; it is only

1. Maimonides: Mishnah Torah, op. cit., III,10 - IV,6 pp. 136-141

2. Cohen: op. cit., p.203

3. Ibid., p.155

by being a member of society that these actions count. The Torah provides rules to perfect the body, and maintain material relations in a healthy condition. Only after these basic wants have been supplied can a person devote his time, and concentrate exclusively on the study of the Torah. This leads to the perfection of soul, which in turn leads to the creation of a truly intelligent being.<sup>1</sup>

The highest good of human life is the love of God, achieved through knowledge. The principal concern of religion is also the love of God (another reason why Maimonides sought to bring philosophy in line with religious teachings). When a person achieves this higher knowledge, and has gained perfection of the intellect, he can contemplate Nature which will continue to yield knowledge concerning God and His wisdom.<sup>2</sup> Man's attitude towards God is emotional, and it is usually our reason that ultimately leads us to God's love. Maimonides made the study of philosophy a religious obligation, because he believed it man's duty to pursue a life of reason.<sup>3</sup> Man ought to direct his heart and all his actions towards knowing God.<sup>4</sup>

1. Maimonides: Guide, op. cit., III, Chap. 27, pp. 312, 313

2. Bokser: op. cit., p. 18

3. Ibid., p. 19

4. Maimonides: Mishnah Torah, op. cit., III, p. 245

At this point Maimonides quotes Solomon, 'In all thy ways<sup>1</sup> acknowledge Him, and He will direct thy paths'. This is not the only place where Maimonides states this belief. In the Commentary, we read that the real duty of man is to adopt measures to insure well-being and good health, so that the instruments of the soul will be in perfect<sup>2</sup> condition.

"Man is not endowed with perfection at the beginning, but at first possesses perfection 'in potentia', not in fact."<sup>3</sup> With this remark, Maimonides impresses the reader that casual study, or careless study will not result in perfection, nor lead to the love of God. It is the student's duty to convert potentiality into actuality.<sup>4</sup>

Study is necessary since man's conduct is not determined. If this were not so, his life would cease to have any kind of morality. Man would be beyond good and evil, and social order would disintegrate from lack of moral teachings; and in that case we would have to reject the doctrine of free will of humans. The question has been posed, by what justice, or by what right, could He punish the wicked or reward the righteous? If man's life were

1. Proverbs III, 6

2. Maimonides, Moses: The Eight Chapters on Ethics, transl. by Joseph I. Gorfinkle, Columbia Univ. Press, New York, 1912, (hereafter referred to as Eight Chapters), V, pp. 69-74

3. Maimonides: Guide, op. cit., I, Chap. 34, p.45

4. Cohen: op. cit., p. 298

predetermined, as the astrologers contend, why study the Torah, or any religious teachings given to us through divine Revelation?<sup>1</sup>

### Angels or Intelligences

Maimonides proceeds to substantiate further his belief in the existence of God with the belief in the existence of Angels. This leads us back to the belief in Prophecy and in the truth of the Torah.<sup>2</sup> In fact, he expressly indicated that the belief in Angels "is important next to the belief in God's existence."<sup>3</sup> "Our Sages have already stated for him who has understanding - that all forces that reside in a body are Angels, much more the forces that are active in the Universe."<sup>4</sup> In the Guide, II, 16, we find Maimonides saying that God rules the world through Angels, which are identical with the Intelligences. Thus, these Angels are intermediary forces through which God rules the world, and allows His will to operate. This idea is found in Greek and Hebraic speculation.<sup>5</sup>

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1. Bokser: op. cit., p.77

2. Maimonides: Guide, III, Chap. 45, p.356

3. Loc. cit.

4. Ibid., II, 6, p.160

5. Cohen: op. cit., p.68

These Angels, which God uses as instruments of His will, may be separate Intelligences, or any one of the elements of Nature. Therefore, in order for man to fully comprehend the universe, (which is doubtful according to Maimonides), he would first have to understand the importance of the existence of Angels in the scheme of Heavenly actions. This also allows man to be placed in his rightful position on this planet, and related realms. Although man is conceded to be the most perfect being on earth, in relation to other planetary influences and Intelligences, man has to be relegated to a far less important position, and in Their sight must be considered an "inferior and<sup>1</sup> lowly creature".

It is in this position that man realizes that his only hope to attain perfection in this world is by being imbued with wisdom emanating from God, and it is this wisdom which will lead him to the love of God, and thereby achieve eternal peace of mind.

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1. Bokser: op. cit., p.74

### Chapter III

#### Maimonides and Moral Education \*\*\*\*\*

The American people rely upon the public schools to transmit a philosophy which will be generally accepted by all groups. This philosophy will naturally include the subject of ethics, or character education. The amount or type of character education given in any particular geographic area depends on the parents of the school population. Most people expect that in addition to the transmission of knowledge in the traditional subjects, the schools will impart a substantial basis on which to build a cultured community. Here again enters the subject of ethics.

Due to the variety of religious groups in America, the problem of just what to teach in moral education has been with us since the inception of the public school system. Some would advocate a school system for each religious group, but this would soon lead to chaos in the amount of emphasis placed on the basic subjects. The more liberal religious denominations would follow closely the present educational system. In contrast, the more orthodox faiths would tend to allot more time to moral training than to academic subjects. The



argument of the latter group would be that perfection of the soul is more important than other subjects. This division would eventually lead to an academic struggle among other educators who would seek more time for their preferred subjects.

In order to maintain the public school system the majority of communities have had to delete from their moral educational programs any teaching which goes beyond the basic, accepted concepts of the belief in the existence of God, and the Golden Rule. Even the Bible as a whole has been questioned. Some schools limit the reading of the Bible to the Psalms, and others even oppose the teaching of the belief in God. "In 1956 New York City public school officials and their lay advisors found considerable opposition to a value policy statement that contained preferential references to God and belief in God."<sup>1</sup>

The public, who would want more religious teaching in schools, does not openly oppose this principle due to the American basic belief in freedom of religion. However, the ones who find it difficult to condone this, establish their own private schools where their tenets of religion may be instilled. Unfortunately, this does not settle

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1. McCluskey, Neil G., S. J.: Public Schools and Moral Education, Columbia Univ. Press, New York, 1956, p. 263

the public school problem, nor can this country advocate that this be done to any greater extent, because the very principle of the common school, upon which this country has grown to be successful in mass education, would soon disintegrate.

William Torrey Harris (1835-1908) "held that moral and intellectual education depended directly upon an acknowledgment of God's existence and man's immortal destiny."<sup>1</sup> He argued that 'even the doctrine of the existence of God implies a specific conception of Him.'<sup>2</sup>

In the last few years, the public schools have tried to cope with and partially resolve the problem by providing released time from school so that the student may pursue the religious training consistent with his faith. Catholics, as one large group, believe this insufficient, and when we examine the teachings of Maimonides, we can see why. Those who believe that youth is in need of constant guidance will readily agree that many public school systems of education do not, at present, provide sufficient facilities to promote proper growth in moral education. This inadequacy is of importance in the study of the educational ideas of Maimonides. He believes that adequate instruction in moral education will lead to a more united community because only in this way will it be composed of truly intellectually perfected personalities.

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1. Ibid., p. 265

2. Ibid.

Now, let us see what Maimonides proposed to provide for adequate moral education. We will then become aware of how many of these teachings are compatible with our own present day moral code.

Maimonides' ethical writings are found especially in the Commentary on the Mishnah, of which the famous "Eight Chapters" are devoted exclusively to this phase of education. We find more ethical teachings in the Book of Commandments, which has become an introduction to the Yad, or Mishnah Torah. In the Mishnah Torah they are found especially in the Book of Knowledge in the sections entitled, Treatise concerning Ethics, and Treatise on Repentance. Lastly, in The Guide for the Perplexed, they are found mostly in section III, chapters 51-54.

Concerning the Treatise on Ethics, in Maimonides' words we read, "The Treatise concerning Ethics embraces eleven commandments, five mandatory, and six prohibitive, namely: 1. to imitate His ways; 2. to cleave to His adherers; 3. to love neighbors; 4. to love strangers; 5. not to hate neighbors; 6. to rebuke; 7. not to put anyone to shame; 8. not to afflict the unfortunate; 9. not to bear tales; 10. not to seek vengeance; 11. not to bear a grudge."<sup>1</sup>

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1. Maimonides: Mishnah Torah, op. cit., p. 79

These teachings constitute "the most remarkable instance in medieval ethical literature of the harmonious welding of Jewish religious belief and tradition with Greek philosophy." <sup>1</sup>

Maimonides made it clear that the truth is not an exclusive possession of Israel. All noble human beings, of any nation, have, he declared in his code, the same sanctity as priests in Israel. To that end he wrote the Mishnah Torah for the people, or masses, who were not scholars and could not devote their entire life to learning. Thus, since Maimonides places mental duties far above physical actions, the Mishnah Torah is devoted to dealing with actions; while the Guide, the philosophical treatise, is devoted to the explanation of the secrets of the Torah, which even so, would require mental discipline to discover the true meanings he wished for the devoted scholar.

The Eight Chapters on Ethics, a part of the Commentary on the Mishnah, is devoted to the masses. Maimonides avoids philosophical discussion, and the teachings expressed require no additional aids to fully comprehend them. To avoid confusion, he gives precise examples. To avoid ambiguity, he demonstrates clearly how he has interpreted a Biblical passage, so that he has been able to reconcile the philosophy of his day with that of Rabbinical teachings.

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1. Gorfinkle in Maimonides: Eight Chapters, op. cit., p.5

The first chapter of the Eight Chapters, deals with moral life, whose sources dwell in the soul and its powers. The soul is said to be composed of actions or activities called powers, or parts. There are five major parts to the soul:

1. Nutritive - subdivided into seven powers.
2. Perceptive - refers to the five senses.
3. Imaginative - power of retaining impressions  
when they do not affect the senses.
4. Appetitive - power to long for a thing or to  
shun it (example: fear and bravery)
5. Rational - power peculiar to man; that which  
distinguishes him from other animals.

Chapter II is similar to Chapter I in that it also deals with the soul. We find that there are two kinds of virtues; 1. Ethical - moderation, humility, contentedness, bravery, uprightness  
2. Intellectual - wisdom, reason

Why be concerned with these virtues in life? Maimonides quotes Solomon from Ecclesiastes IX, 10, 'There is no work nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave whither thou goest.'<sup>1</sup> Thus, after death there will be no opportunity for a person to increase his wisdom nor attain perfection.

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1. Cohen: op. cit., p. 301

In the Mishnah Torah, Maimonides further reminds us that those who perform the laws of the Torah willingly, will be rewarded by being saved from illness, war, famine, etc. He even states that such good things will come to them such as an abundance of silver and gold. Here, at the end of his book he provides the incentive with suggested concrete gifts which would give the ordinary man the desire to be obedient to the laws of the Torah, as given to the Jewish people by Moses.

This strict obedience thereby leads to a position of well-being in the world to come. The Torah teaches that man should occupy himself with only two types of endeavors: 1. study of the Torah in order to perfect the soul in its wisdom, and 2. tasks necessary in regular living. From this viewpoint he denounced gambling as an anti-social act, because no advantage came from it to the advancement of civilization.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the complete obedience to the Torah would lead us to perfection through moderation in all things; ie. eating, drinking, and living among people of honesty and uprightness.<sup>2</sup> In correspondence, he quoted the rabbis who stated, 'Even a pagan who occupies himself with the Torah of Moses is equal in worth to a High Priest in Israel.'<sup>3</sup>

1. Cohen: op. cit., p. 296

2. Maimonides: Eight Chapters, op. cit., p. 63

3. Cohen: op. cit., p. 67

Maimonides insisted that "ethics like medicine is a science and that the ethical teacher like the physician must know how to make a diagnosis and suggest a cure.<sup>1</sup> This is in agreement with Greek teachers.

Chapter III of the Eight Chapters deals with the diseases of the soul. The soul, like the body, can be healthy or sick. Thus, it must be treated accordingly. When sick, the owner must seek a physician of the soul, in the person of a wise man. If wise men are not consulted, and the morally ill continues to neglect himself, the victim will surely meet an untimely and premature, moral death.

On the other hand, true morality presupposes that there will not be a perfect soul in an imperfect body. There must be a strict discipline which eliminates everything that is injurious to the body and soul. Therefore, a diet which suggests or forbids the eating of certain foods is prescribed. Maimonides also provides for the person born with a weak constitution. In the Guide, he states that a good constitution facilitates the rule of the soul over the body, but it is not impossible to conquer a bad constitution by training.<sup>2</sup>

Chapter IV of the Eight Chapters deals with the cure of the diseases of the soul. The main theme is moderation.

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1. Lipis, Rabbi Philip L. in "Phi Lambda Quarterly",  
op. cit., p. 13

2. Maimonides: Guide, op. cit., III, 8; also Cohen: op. cit.,  
p. 165

Man must constantly guard his actions so that he will maintain a proper balance between exaggeration and deficiency. Maimonides purports this to be the most perfect way of paying respect to the Deity. Maimonides cites the incident with Moses who on one occasion failed to show moderation and patience, and became angry "in the presence of the entire community of Israel, where wrath is unbecoming. . . . This was a profanation of God's name because men imitated the words and conduct of Moses, hoping thereby to attain temporal and eternal happiness." <sup>1</sup> Just think how important this situation is in the Jewish code of morals, because Moses was the only prophet in whom all moral and intellectual virtues were combined.

If a man always directs his actions "to the medium course, he will reach the highest degree of perfection possible to a human being, thereby approaching God, and sharing in His happiness." <sup>2</sup> Maimonides praises the person, (calls him "magnificent") whose whole intention is to do good to others by giving personal service, money, or advice, but doing so without bringing suffering or disgrace upon himself. For him, this was an example of the medium line of conduct. <sup>3</sup> Thus, a person who stole

1. Maimonides: Eight Chapters, op. cit., p. 67

2. Ibid., p. 68

3. Ibid., p. 68



from the rich to feed the poor had gained no perfection in the eyes of the sages.

We now ask ourselves: How does Maimonides propose to accomplish all this? In this fourth chapter he states the procedure recommended. He says, "these moral excellences or defects cannot be acquired, or implanted in the soul, except by means of the frequent repetition of acts resulting from these qualities which, practised during a long period of time, accustoms us to them".

In this chapter, he describes an approach to use with a mean man, in order that he may gain the medium course.

"The mean man needs to practice lavishness to a greater degree than should be required of the lavish to practice meanness. This is a fundamental principle of the science of curing moral ills, and is worthy of remembrance."<sup>1</sup>

The criterion we should use for determining the right path to follow and the right action to perform is the middle course.<sup>2</sup>

People should follow the teachings in the Code and not devote all their possessions to religious purposes. In Lev. XXVII, 28, these are called 'pious fools who destroy the world.'<sup>3</sup>

Maimonides states in the Abot II, 12, (Mishnah Torah) that the rabbis have said, 'Let all your actions be for

1. Maimonides: Eight Chapters, op. cit., p. 59
2. Maimonides: Mishnah Torah, op. cit., I, 4, p. 236
3. Ibid., VIII, 3, p. 276

the sake of God. In Chapter V of the Eight Chapters we read that men will act sensibly if all their actions are directed toward gaining bodily welfare and spiritual superiority. Man should not engage in idle talk, but restrict conversation to ideas that will benefit the soul, or avert danger from the body. Man should seek out what is the most useful for the preservation of bodily health and perfection of the soul, even if it is not agreeable to his tastes or desires. The purpose of this is to restore and maintain good body health which will lead to the acquisition of wisdom.<sup>1</sup> Maimonides likens that man to a beast, who insists upon indulging in "savory, sweet smelling, and palatable food" when he knows it is injurious to him. After all, a beast is not endowed with reason, the distinguishing characteristic of man.

In this same Chapter V, we are told that subjects such as mathematics, mechanics, and hydraulics, are to be studied for the purpose of sharpening the mind. When the mind becomes keen, it is then able to comprehend the essence of God. We are also advised to imitate only the good, and shun the bad; "to follow the paths of the righteous, and to shun the way of the wicked."

A sage should have beautiful surroundings and domestic comfort, because a weary mind finds relaxation by gazing upon pictures and other beautiful objects.

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1. Maimonides: Eight Chapters, op. cit., p. 70

Chapter VI deals with the truly saintly man, and one who knows how to curb his desires. At first we are led to believe that philosophers give greater praise to the holy man, but Maimonides explains this away, (again reconciling philosophical and Rabbinical teachings), and says that a saintly man earns greater stature in God's sight because his soul does not contain the evil, and is not tempted to do wrong. The one who curbs his desires suffers torment when he resists evil temptation.

Chapter VII of the Eight Chapters is concerned with partitions or walls which separate men from God, and also describes what prophecy is. Prophecy is said to rest only upon the wise (one who possesses all intellectual virtues); upon the brave (one who conquers his desires); and upon the rich (one who is satisfied with his lot). The spirit of prophecy belongs to those with a happy spirit. "Grief and anxiety may also cause a cessation of prophecy."<sup>1</sup>  
Of course God decides who will be blessed with this spirit. Even the most obedient man is not assured of it; but certainly those who have it are considered wise. Prophecy is impossible without training and study. Prophecy is not considered a gift, but a "degree of mental and moral perfection to which all may aspire."<sup>2</sup>  
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1. Ibid., p. 82

2. Cohen; op. cit., p. 129

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Maimonides emphasized that human beings are not born either good or evil.<sup>1</sup> Heredity does not decide a man's conduct in life. Because of his free will, he alone is responsible for the course in life he takes. Nevertheless, according to Maimonides, developing what is good, or conquering what is bad may be accomplished by instruction, guidance and habit.

Chapter VIII of the Eight Chapters deals with man's destiny. Astrologers had said that man was not wholly responsible for his actions, but that he was guided by the constellation under which he was born. Maimonides declared that these constellations did not influence one's being virtuous or vicious. As mentioned before in this writing, man is said to have free will, and having this, is responsible for his actions. A man cannot kill a person, and attribute it to his birth date, although Maimonides does concede that a man's "nature may be inclined to one way or another."<sup>2</sup> If man had chosen, he could have had eternal life, but he chose otherwise. In Deuteronomy XXX we read, "See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil; .....therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live."

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1. Maimonides: Guide, op. cit., I, 34, p. 45

2. Maimonides: Eight Chapters, op. cit., p. 86

Now let us take a look at other examples of Maimonides' moral teachings. In the Guide it is stated that a man's life should be motivated, and his actions guided, by three God-like qualities: kindness, righteousness, and judgment.<sup>1</sup> These then are explained in the following manner.

"Loving-kindness is practiced in two ways: first, we show kindness to those who have no claim whatever upon us; secondly, we are kind to those to whom it is due, in a greater measure than it is due to them"<sup>2</sup>

The first way of practising loving-kindness is considered to be the more God-like quality.

Righteousness "denotes the act of giving everyone his due, and of showing kindness to every being according as it deserves."<sup>3</sup>

We perform an act of righteousness when we fulfill those duties towards our fellow-men which our moral conscience imposes upon us.

"Judgment denotes the act of deciding upon a certain action in accordance with justice which may demand either mercy or punishment."<sup>4</sup>

In **Part III** of the Guide Maimonides asserts that most precepts of the law are merely a means for the acquisition of moral virtues, which in turn are only a means to the true end; i.e., true knowledge of divine things. For example, the practice of adhering to rules for killing animals are tests of man's obedience.<sup>5</sup>

1. Maimonides: Guide, op. cit., III, 53, p. 392

2. Loc. cit.

3. Ibid., p. 393

4. Loc. cit.

5. Ibid., III, 26, p. 310

We wonder sometimes why people are born with defects, since these people have not had the chance to sin. In God's wisdom, it is known that it is better for this person to be like that, rather than in a normal state. Upon contemplation, we find that these people are really enjoying God's goodness, for life could be worse for them. This just proves that we are often ignorant of the working of His judgment.<sup>1</sup>

At other times God penalizes a sinful person by curtailing his will to repent. In this way a person can later receive punishment in accordance with his misdeeds.

How is a man's conduct to be estimated? If a person should perform one great service, this does not replace the lesser services he might have performed. Thus, number and not quality of good actions is that which counts.<sup>2</sup>

A forgiving disposition is advocated, because the Torah does not teach that anyone should bear a grudge.<sup>3</sup>

In conclusion, in Chapter IV of the Eight Chapters, the reader feels relieved as he becomes aware of his shortcomings, when Maimonides offers consolation by saying, "Philosophers tell us that it is most difficult and rare to find a man who, by his nature, is endowed with every perfection, moral as well as mental."

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1. Ibid., III, 17, p.283

2. Cohen: op. cit., p. 264

3. Maimonides: Mishnah Torah, op. cit., II, 10, p. 239

## Chapter IV

### Maimonides and Intellectual Excellence \*\*\*\*\*

#### Educational Philosophy

Maimonides, aware of the sources of knowledge, was able to draw upon all the previous works available, particularly those of famous philosophers. He did not hesitate to include those ideas which he found useful in promoting his own philosophy. Therefore, it is not unusual to recognize that many of his ideas had been used or suggested earlier.

He made his educational philosophy part of his personal life. He felt that it was a sin for a person to teach when that person did not have full command of the subject matter. His own knowledge, had been well incorporated into his philosophy, and had formed a basis for his calm and deliberate nature which he felt was a basic requirement for teachers. A person of his nature could prepare the receptive mind to carry on educational curiosity, so necessary for the continuous progress of civilization. He held that everything that takes place in a person's mind or imagination is conditioned by his environment and moral life. Correct training of the mind can lead to the acquisition of the spirit of prophecy.

A broad education is indicated for the mental well-being of a person, because man needs more than just reason to guide his life. Man requires some kind of spiritual force, which will be the kind suggested by his own moral code. When there is an element of doubt involved in the search for truth, man will then seek truth in divine revelation. Divine revelation usually fills the gap of the mature mind, caused by things unknown and those which cannot be explained.

The ordinary person's quest for knowledge is hampered by the imperative need of earning a livelihood. The acquisition of necessities usually creates in a person the desire for worldly possessions. There is often little time left for devoted study. People who can pursue the continuous search for knowledge, are considered equal to the highest in society, regardless of other differences. For example, Maimonides said that even people outside Israel, who were well instructed in the faith and the laws of Israel, were considered no less noble than those within the physical limits. There is evidence here that Maimonides was in favor of a class society based on intellectual achievement, and this may have been a direct reflection of his Platonic teachings.

Maimonides does not think it strange that God did not give everyone the natural desire or ability to acquire knowledge. For even in this respect His wisdom is seen.



Our world is so complex, and society continues to require so many services, that it is fortunate that the majority are trained for some particular work or endeavor. The world could not exist with only the philosopher-type persons. God's wisdom is seen in this proper balance of thinkers and workers.

"In Maimonides' opinion, the appreciation of the universe and its problems is not a heaven-sent gift, but the painful result of long study."<sup>1</sup> If one studies the scriptures devotedly, previously unnoticed truths appear to clear the mind of confusion. This reward comes to those who have the time and desire to deduce conclusions, and apply philosophical principles to their thoughts.

The Book of Knowledge of the Mishnah Torah yields some specific recommendations in reference to the field of education. Indirectly it is suggested that an educator must continuously improve his store of knowledge, because "only one obliged to study is obliged to instruct." This statement found in Chapter I, was written regarding his policy of dissuading women from teaching their sons and thereby becoming teachers.

Times have changed since Maimonides indicated that girls should not be instructed in the Torah. He felt that they were apt to divert this instruction to nonsensical matters. However today in America there are schools

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1. Roth, Leon: Spinoza, Descartes, and Maimonides

which practice this theory, in the belief that girls should receive higher instruction only in literature, music and the other arts. These schools hold that the woman should be virtually part of the pleasant furnishings of the home in which the man could experience complete relaxation.

There have always been people who would like to further their own education, but hesitate, or postpone doing so, in order to give all the advantages to their children. Maimonides advises against this, with only one exception, which is, "if his son be diligent and intellectually more capable to grasp his studies than himself."<sup>1</sup> Even in this case, the parent is advised not to relinquish study completely. Maimonides declared that if one did not occupy himself with study, he would forget what he did study. Thus, he is in agreement with the current social point of view that the parent is obligated to endeavor to keep pace intellectually with his children. It is through the continued exchange of ideas that progress comes. When only a few in a family achieve a high level of knowledge in the general subjects, there is created a mental barrier which may later lead to other obstacles in the way of harmony.

It is suggested by Maimonides that children have a teacher possessing a quiet and pleasant manner. As Solomon

1. Maimonides: Mishnah Torah, op. cit., I, 4, p.236

said, 'The words of the wise are spoken in quiet.' (Eccles. IX,27). A teacher might show anger before a class, but really should be well composed within himself. Anger is considered an evil quality, and since it must be substituted for something else (according to the scientific axiom), it might well be supposed that it has supplanted wisdom.

In Chapter I of the Mishnah Torah, Maimonides advises that a male teacher be married. If this is not done before he undertakes the teaching of his disciples, the urge of marriage will cause a lack of concentration, as he will have a "heart not free to understand his studies." There is no parallel statement concerning women teachers because they were not usual in his day. Women were not deemed worthy of the usual classical type of education, and therefore could not be considered for teaching.

There is evidence that had Maimonides been living today, he would not have been in accord with the elementary school procedures as practiced today. He assumed that the young child of average intelligence is capable of learning more than he is taught, because childhood is a very highly receptive period in life. Maimonides felt that the young child should begin with that part of learning which is to be continued throughout his formal education. For example, young children find their stories dull and monotonous, because the average six year old is able to

tell or listen to a far more complex story. Modern education has now found itself accepting this theory, and has incorporated various phases of learning into the young child's curriculum.

As one reads the words in this Book of Knowledge, he becomes aware of another feature, lately receiving much attention. Maimonides taught that if a student should miss the usual instruction when young, there was no excuse for him not to acquire knowledge when he became conscious of his lack of it. Today, we see more and more adults seeking further education, in order to compensate for that which was lacking at a younger age. The desire to continue has led to serious consideration of a new aspect of learning - that of formal adult education. In order for man to continually and successfully adjust to the new phases of living, he must be adequately trained, not only in factual information, but in attitudes and concepts. Only in this manner is he able to cope with the new situations, constantly arising for which no precedent has been established. Life itself, being education must be approached with a mature and cultivated mind, if a person is to find satisfaction and establish effective communication with others. It is with great insight that Maimonides stated that everyone, whether rich or poor, healthy or weak, was obligated to study the Torah.

Maimonides definitely believed in public school education. In Chapter II of the Mishnah Torah he states:

"It is mandatory to appoint school teachers for small children in each and every state, and in each and every city."<sup>1</sup>

He felt that any town or city failing to do so should be excommunicated from the others; for, "the world cannot endure save only by the fervent recitation of school children in the house of their master." There has been a concurring and continuous opinion on this point in America since the beginning of the public school system. Our educators and leaders have always reminded any dissenters that an enlightened electorate is necessary to the progress of the democratic government which we enjoy.

In this same chapter we also find other ideas that are part of our educational philosophy. Maimonides felt that students should behold their instructors with reverence. A modern writer has stated that reason and faith, critical inquiry and awe are equally essential to an education.<sup>2</sup> The well-disciplined class, where truths about various subjects are sought and believed to be within the knowledge of the instructor, conveys to the student the feeling of humility and awe. However, in the event

1. Ibid., II, 1, p.238

2. Greene, Theodore, in Ehlers and Lee: editors of Crucial Issues in Education, Henry Holt and Co., New York, 1959, pp. 156, 157

that all known techniques to attain this desired knowledge have been exhausted, and there still remains an arrogant or uncooperative student, then it is the opinion of modern educators, as it was with Maimonides, that this student should be punished.

Recently there has been much discussion of lengthening the school year. The traditional length in our country has its roots in the original, agriculturally based economy. Maimonides felt that school should be closed only on holidays and on the eve of holidays.

We used to look forward to sending a child to school at the age of four and one half years. Currently, the age is five, and many advocate that it be six years. The reason proposed for the higher figure is that the child will have longer spans of concentration, and be better able to do the work commensurate with his age. This would save the public's money by eliminating the large number of children who are forced to repeat one of the elementary grades. This idea is also found in Maimonides, who states, "A child under six years should not be sent to school".<sup>1</sup>

Teachers are told to devote their energies exclusively to their task while engaged in teaching. They are not expected to carry out another task at the same time, because adequate teaching requires planning, continual learning, and giving the student advice that he may require.

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1. Maimonides: Mishnah Torah: op. cit., II, 2, p.238

If a teacher endeavors to do this important task well, while engaged in other tasks, he will soon discover that he has become slack in his duty. This is detrimental to society which the school serves and to the individual students who may become lethargic. This may lead to the gradual decline of educational standards. Maimonides was aware of all this, and considered such action on the part of the teacher to be immoral.

"A teacher of school children who leaves the children and departs from the school or who engages himself in another kind of work while he is with them, or who is negligent in teaching them, behold, he is included among those of whom it is said: 'Cursed be he that doeth the work of the Lord with a slack hand.'<sup>1</sup>

In the classrooms the ever increasing population is in evidence, and many times school construction has not kept pace. There are teachers who have fifty children in an elementary classroom. It is difficult to imagine how one person can adequately supply the mental needs of so many children in a heterogenous group. This teacher must plan, supervise, and correct suitable material for all these children. Maimonides, in reference to this, stated:

"Twenty-five children should be the maximum number for one teacher to instruct. If there be more than twenty-five children but not exceeding forty, an assistant should be appointed..... if the number exceeds forty children, two teachers should be appointed."<sup>2</sup>

Educators are constantly devising ways of reducing the class numbers for the teaching situation. Sometimes this

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1. Loc. cit.

2. Ibid., p.240

takes the form of combining a few students from two classes so as to still have a small homogenous group, and make the teaching period more valuable. At other times special activities are carried out in the same classroom, in separate groups.

When we consider how methods are changing in regard to reading and grammar, the following statement by Maimonides merits attention. "A school child may be transferred from one teacher to another one who is more diligent than he either in reading or in grammar."<sup>1</sup> This certainly suggests an increasing field of specialists in this area. Even in past years, students found to be less proficient in reading than expected have been sent to reading classes where they were put in the care of a specialist, until such time as they were ready to return to their regular classrooms. On a group scale, there was an attempt to have homogenous grouping on the basis of reading grade levels. From the quotation just given above, it can be seen that Maimonides was also interested in student grouping. There was no provision for dropping any teacher; however, children were expected to be transferred to instructors to suit the learning situation.

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1. Ibid., II, 6, p.239



### Techniques employed by Maimonides

While reading any portion of the Guide, one is constantly aware of the personal nature of the book. It seems as if the reader is listening to a conversation, except that the listener's views are **not recorded**. This method, which Maimonides uses in letters to his student, Joseph Ibn Akin, comes closest to the oral teaching advised by the sages.<sup>1</sup> With this method Maimonides found he could circumvent the written prohibition of explaining the secrets of the Torah.

The whole structure of the Guide is characterized by an approach which features three points of view.<sup>2</sup> This involves, first, giving the opinions of the ordinary man, then those of the theologian, whose thoughts are finally weighed against those of the philosopher.

It is noted that Maimonides is constantly aware of the preciseness of research. In his correspondence, he states that he is willing to change anything in his works, wherever an error occurs. Maimonides intended his writings in certain fields to be definitive; in every case he tried to demonstrate that there was nothing wrong with his reasoning. Many times it is noticed that Maimonides checked

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1. Strauss, Leo in Baron: op. cit., p.47

2. Roth: Spinoza, Descartes, and Maimonides: op. cit., p.68

his statements against those found in the Bible, because although he borrowed freely from various authors, he was careful to give exact quotations from the Scriptures. This is just one of the techniques he uses to conceal the secrets of the Torah. It is not difficult to impress his readers with the validity of his statements, since he recognizes the Scriptures as the Supreme Authority where any conflict may exist.

Another device employed by Maimonides is that of silence.<sup>1</sup> Most scholars will notice an omission in a popular quotation, and Maimonides used this method to call attention to certain statements. Of course, this method was very adequate for obscuring the revelation of secrets from the masses of readers, thus abiding with the moral and written prohibition.

One also notices that there are several stories in the Guide, and yet it is said that Maimonides disliked stories.<sup>2</sup> This becomes another method for attracting the attention of the scholar. If Maimonides uses stories to illustrate his points, especially in the Guide, these must have some intrinsic value. The explanation is found in the introduction. He felt that clarifications in the forms of parables or enigmas were the methods best suited to the

1. Strauss in Baron: op. cit., p.72

2. Ibid., p. 63

theme of the Guide.

Lastly, Maimonides does not exhibit any definite style in writing. His emphasis is on clarity, and he does not hesitate to use several synonyms to stress a point.

### Eminence of Maimonides

Maimonides was fortunate in gaining recognition in his own time. "No other person in all Jewish history had his name so much in public prayers."<sup>1</sup> Other philosophers openly stated that he wrote as if his books were to be adopted as the official code for the Jewish community. This reaction resulted from Maimonides' statement to the effect that he wrote the Mishnah Torah to fulfill the need of recasting all the Jewish laws in a digest form which he considered as final. He had also hoped that the Guide would offer a final interpretation of the secret teachings of the Bible. Since this book involved his personal opinions, it has not enjoyed the immunity to attack or discussion as the Mishnah Torah. Having greater universal appeal, the Guide has led to more discussion than any of his other writings.

The greatness of Maimonides does not lie in his originality, because he was not original. He had gathered

1. Adler, Dr. Cyrus in "Phi Lambda Kappa Quarterly",  
op. cit., p.26

knowledge from various sources, assimilated it, and later<sup>1</sup> given it to the world in a systematic order. Through his precise form of logic, he was able to construct a complete system of thought, including God and the Universe in their entirety. "To have accomplished this is his<sup>2</sup> supreme achievement."  
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1. Cohen: op. cit., p.27

2. Ibid., p.19

## Chapter V

Maimonides and Dewey: A Comparison of Philosophies  
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Since this thesis is concerned with aspects of modern American educational philosophy as found in Maimonides, it might be well to consider some of the characteristics of modern education. In view of the fact that educators often associate John Dewey with the moral democratic principles engendered in our modern education, it would seem logical to examine Dewey's approach to some of the problems, wherein they agree, and wherein they differ. The following discussion will show how Dewey proposed to inculcate moral education within the framework of the traditional subjects, while placing the total instruction in its proper niche in society. For Dewey, separate instruction is not needed in character training, because each day of the school year provides the true social and intellectual environment for adequate practice.

John Dewey has expressed in his books, A Common Faith<sup>1</sup> and Moral Principles in Education,<sup>2</sup> what he considers to be an adequate working basis for popular moral instruction.

1. Dewey, John: A Common Faith, Yale Univ. Press, New Haven, 1934

2. Dewey, John: Moral Principles in Education Philosophical Library, New York, 1959

He has shown how there is no general religion in America, since this country as a democracy has always been religiously pluralistic. In spite of the divergence of tenets, there are nevertheless, accepted moral ideals which serve the American society very well. They are based on securing harmony, and promoting a better society. However, these ideals could be improved, because they have not as yet produced the desired effect upon our democratic education. Apart from participation in social life, the school as the institution of education, must serve to promote moral ends and aims. The end of education is the harmonious development of all the powers of the individual.

The child must either live his social life as an integral unified being, or suffer loss and create friction. The child is an organic whole, intellectually, socially, morally, as well as physically. He will be a voter, a member of a family, and most likely be in charge later of the training of young children.

The ethical value of subjects comes from their being taught in their social perspective. Geography may be made to show how man is dependent upon his natural environment. History is no longer dead when presented from the sociological standpoint. History may also be taught by showing the methods of social progress, for the same kinds of influences that are operative now were operative a thousand years ago.

Often the student does not realize how each subject fits into the social system. The subjects are presented as isolated units, with no immediate purpose, except the extrinsic one of attaining a favorable grade. The only way to prepare for social life is to engage in social life. Teachers should be aware of healthy growth, not failures in students.

#### Dewey in agreement with Maimonides

Maimonides says that all actions should be for the sake of God. Dewey, although seldom using the word "God", is essentially in agreement, for he speaks of actions in support of the moral principles incorporated into our common faith. Dewey interprets moral ideas as those ideas which take effect in conduct and improve it, making it better than it would otherwise be.<sup>1</sup> He states that it is the business of the educator, parent or teacher, to see to it that "the greatest possible number of ideas acquired by children and youth are acquired in such a vital way that they become moving ideas, motive forces in the guidance of conduct".<sup>2</sup> The agreement between these two philosophers on this point is emphasized when Dewey says that this demand and this opportunity make the moral purpose universal and dominant in all instruction.

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1. Ibid., p. 1

2. Ibid., p. 2

Dewey goes on to say that there cannot be two sets of ethical principles, one for life in the school, and the other for life outside the school.<sup>1</sup> "There is no fact which throws light upon the constitution of society, there is no power whose training adds to social resourcefulness that is not moral."<sup>2</sup> In education, there is always a change in a person, and this change should always be directed at producing more enlightened behavior.

Ideas acquired by children should be aimed at the desired guidance of conduct. Insofar as the curriculum is selected and organized to provide material affording the child a consciousness of the world in which he has to play a part, and the demands he has to meet, the school is organized on an ethical basis.<sup>3</sup>

Maimonides' philosophy is opposed to the basic claims of traditional religion which disclaims that reason offers truth. Dewey also finds that the method of intelligence is open and public.<sup>4</sup> With this premise, more people are able to form the same conclusion about truth, since this method is objective. There is no question of which faith approaches the truth in the best way. When we seek truth in the doctrinal method, there is bound to be a conflict

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1. Ibid., p.7

2. Ibid., p.43

3. Ibid., p.44

4. Dewey: A Common Faith, op. cit., p.39



of conclusions, because the basic conceptions differ in accordance with personal beliefs.

For Dewey, there would be no stopping when an obstacle in religion is encountered. He would not seek the answer in divine revelation. There is only one road to truth - "the road of patient, cooperative inquiry operating by means of observation, experiment, and controlled reflection." <sup>1</sup>

Maimonides and Dewey begin with similar aims of encouraging the pursuit of knowledge to ascertain truth. However, at this point there is a divergence in their basic philosophies. Maimonides seeks truth only to understand Nature, or the essence of God; and this understanding is expected to make for men of wisdom in society. Dewey and modern democratic education seek truth in order to create a more perfect society for mankind. Thus, while Maimonides would accommodate mankind to conditions, Dewey would modify conditions so that they would be accommodated to our wants. <sup>2</sup>

Maimonides declares that our troubles are caused by our own imperfections. One can infer that these imperfections refer to our morals. Dewey is in agreement when he states, "Many persons feel perplexed because of the multiplicity

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1. Ibid., p. 32

2. Ibid., p. 16

of churches and the conflict of their claims." <sup>1</sup> Here we have these two philosophers in agreement because Dewey refers to our troubles as perplexities which have been brought about by the inconsistencies contained in the various conflicting doctrines expounded by the many churches - all of which is the work of imperfect human beings.

When Dewey said that education must concern itself with the whole child, immediately educators felt obliged to consider the emotional, social, and physical development of the child. Dewey gives the illustration of once looking for some desks and chairs to suit the children from all points of view - artistic, hygienic, and educational. Those he found were for listening only, all to be arranged in geometrical order.<sup>2</sup> Maimonides also provided for growth changes. In reference to the emotions, he gave specific instructions in Chapter IV of the Mishnah Torah stating that a child should not feel ashamed to request to have material repeated until it is mastered. Also, the pitch of the teacher's voice while giving instructions received his attention. There was provision for creating a natural social atmosphere in the classroom by

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1. Ibid., p. 67

2. Dewey, John: The School and Society, Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1956, p. 31

dictating seating arrangements which would place the student and the teacher in a position where exchange of information was natural. He felt that if the teacher sat in a chair, the pupils should not sit on the floor. This is of importance when one realizes the value placed on intellectual exchange. In Chapter V he quotes from the sages: 'Much wisdom have I learned from my masters, more than that from my colleagues, but from my disciples more than from all of them combined.'<sup>1</sup>

Although Dewey placed his educational proposals in a social situation, he did not fail to be cognizant of the value of an introvert in society. For him, "Some education is social; some education must be solitary and individual."<sup>2</sup> Here again similarity is found in the educational principles of Maimonides, who knew that it was only through adequate perception that a scholar could uncover the depths of what is contained in the divine revelation. It would indeed be difficult to conceive of a scholar achieving this success if he were not working in solitude.

Maimonides made the study of philosophy a religious obligation, because he believed it to be man's duty to

1. Maimonides: Mishnah Torah, op. cit., Chap. V, p. 259

2. Woodring, Paul: Let's Talk Sense about Our Schools, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1953, p. 40

pursue a life of reason. Here Dewey is only in partial agreement. Dewey also believes that all religion involves specific intellectual beliefs. Religions insist that there is some special and isolated channel of access to the truths they hold.<sup>1</sup> Upon further investigation, it is seen that the "channel" is usually a road involving the supernatural. It is this element of the supernatural that destroys the value of intellectual beliefs because, whereas this method may lead to a more perfect understanding of the essence of God, it does not satisfy the Deweyan goal of creating a more flexible, democratic society.

#### Dewey opposes Maimonides

It has been stated earlier in this writing that Maimonides believed that man was not endowed with perfection, but possessed it 'in potentia'.<sup>2</sup> Dewey said that aims and ideals do not exist simply in the individual's mind, but in character, in personality, and in action; i.e., as contrasted with 'in potentia'.<sup>3</sup> It is not only study that creates a more perfect personality, but environment and adoption or rejection of current philosophies. It is the total society which provides the incentive for man to

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1. Dewey: A Common Faith, op. cit., p. 29

2. See p. 15

3. Dewey: Ibid., p. 48

achieve perfection.

There is disagreement between Dewey and Maimonides relative to the acceptable conduct of a student in the presence of his teacher. We read in the Mishnah Torah, "In the presence of his master a student should not lean but sit as if he were sitting in the presence of a king."<sup>1</sup> Dewey criticized a segment of the proponents of progressive education 'for indulging pupils in unrestrained freedom of action and speech, of manners, and lack of manners.'<sup>2</sup> However, he did not believe in the rigid positions of students who were being prepared for community life.

He wrote: "there is a certain disorder in any busy workshop; there is not silence; persons are not engaged in maintaining certain fixed physical postures; their arms are not folded; they are not holding their books thus and so."<sup>3</sup>

It is interesting to note in which respects Maimonides and Dewey differ in their moral principles. Dewey would not be able to find his whole system of thought in the Bible, as Maimonides did in the Torah. Dewey's faith requires confirmation. He is not sympathetic with those people who practice a faith because of a vision of reward or eternal punishment. Christian dogma, similar to the faith of Maimonides, believes in the supernatural power for the apprehension of the ideal. With new discoveries, the chasm

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1. Maimonides: Mishnah Torah, II, Chap. V, 6, p. 260

2. Woodring: op. cit., p. 51

3. Dewey: The School and Society, op. cit., p. 17

between the supernatural appears to widen. As knowledge becomes more complete, the conflict between science and some branches of organized religion appears to be highlighted. Maimonides would be able to effect a reconciliation by saying that science had at last been able to prove the reliability of divine revelation. Dewey would not have to justify or reconcile these two forces, because his common faith or moral principles would transcend this discussion, and allow science to proceed in the Quest for truth, and thus aid in completing the knowledge of the universe.

We read in Maimonides that the highest good of human life is love of God, achieved through knowledge. Dewey opposes this, since he believes that knowledge is a product of the cooperative and communicative operations of human beings living together. He does not envision knowledge as a means of understanding Nature (in the sense of Maimonides' God). Dewey would rather enlist the knowledge of nature or natural environment in the continuous endeavor of creating a society which is admirable in all ways. Dewey says that growth in the understanding of nature, in this sense, is seen to be organically related to the formation of ideal ends.<sup>1</sup> This understanding of nature leads

1. Dewey: A Common Faith, op. cit., p. 57

to the formation of moral principles in society. Dewey reminds us that these moral principles do not occupy a special region or portion of life.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, true comprehension of the natural environment for Dewey, is the fulfilment of the highest good of human life.

Maimonides' God is abstract and free from human affections. His God is similar to the one conceived by Spinoza; i.e., God is Nature. Dewey rejects any "impossible eternal and abstract basis", and assigns the unity of the universe to human desire and purpose.<sup>2</sup> This he believes to be closer to human acceptance. He therefore releases the unity of the universe from the religious base (in the institutionalized sense), and places it in the realm of knowledge.

Maimonides considers the universe as an organic whole, and everything in it is arranged according to a final purpose. He believes that although man is the possessor of free will, his actions are limited by the purposes of God. Dewey contends that this is just the kind of philosophy that strangles the progress of civilization. He says, "Men have never fully used the powers they possess to advance the good in life, because they have waited upon some power external to themselves and to nature to do the work they are responsible for doing."<sup>3</sup>

1. Dewey: Moral Principles in Education, op. cit., p.58

2. Dewey: A Common Faith, op. cit., p.86

3. Ibid., p.46

## Chapter VI

### Summary and Conclusion

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Dewey rejects the supernatural origins and foundations for his philosophy. He seeks truth, not the eternal truth of Maimonides, because truth is always changing due to continual variations of the earth and its inhabitants. Therefore, truth is always relative to the knowledge in existence. Maimonides seeks truth, as a result of research, but it is to be contained within the confines of divine revelation. He has made no allowance for changing truths. Maimonides also seeks wisdom, but his wisdom is that which is derived from understanding God. Dewey seeks wisdom in the application of knowledge to human life.

Dewey would not be able to define good and evil so well as Maimonides, because Maimonides could use the supernatural as the base. Dewey says that any dogma is necessarily private, and thus the definition of good and evil is bound to be subjective. It clearly eliminates the atheist from discovering what is good or evil, because he cannot resort to supernatural means. In effect, according to Maimonides, it allows only a religious person to have access to certain kinds of knowledge.

Maimonides believes that the devoted scholar who is

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able to dwell in abstract thought is far superior to the vocational arts student. Dewey believes that both types of students contribute equally well to civilization, as long as they both realize how they fit into the unified democratic society. Dewey feels that the traditional separation of knowledge into classes is a relic of the past, and does not fit into our changing social life.

However, Maimonides was aware of some of our ideas which have become current in educational philosophy. He wrote his Mishnah Torah not only for the intellectual elite, but for those whose emotions rule their life.<sup>1</sup> This is significant when one realizes that it is the masses who produce the greatest changes, not only in language, but in customs. Intellectuals influence change gradually through multiple discussions.

Dr. Federbush has said: "Humanity at large has admired in Maimonides not so much the answers he has given, but rather the way he searched for truth and the methods he employed in finding it."<sup>2</sup> He was able to provide a moral code in simplified, but definitive form for all the people. He was able to help preserve the greatness of Greek philosophy throughout the Jewish world. If it had

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1. Hertz, J.H. in Epstein: op. cit., p.6
2. Federbush, Dr. Simon: editor of Maimonides: His Teachings and Personality, Cultural Dept. of World Jewish Congress and the Torah Culture Dept. of the Jewish Agency, New York, 1956, p.11

not been for his interest in Aristotle, the Jewish community might not have been so aware of his teachings.

Maimonides may be said to be an absolute idealist. Mind or consciousness is truly real, and everything exists only in relation to the mind. It is understood by idealists that all space, energy and matter are the functioning of some mind. For an absolute idealist, such as Maimonides, this mind is that of the Supreme Being. Idealism binds people to rigorous eternal values.<sup>1</sup>

Dewey is said to be a relativist. He opposes a fixed value system in any area. For him, truth is a series of ideas, beliefs and other processes, called instruments. For this reason, Dewey's philosophy is known as instrumentalism.<sup>2</sup> Dewey rejected idealism because it permitted those who pride themselves upon being realistic to so interpret and manipulate events as to produce consequences dictated by their own private and class advantage.<sup>3</sup>

Now the reader's attention is directed to the effect of these philosophies on education. A democracy cannot afford to ignore the vocational and give its attention

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1. Brightman, Edgar S.: An Introduction to Philosophy, Henry Holt and Co., New York, 1925, pp.236-242
  2. Dewey, John: The Child and the Curriculum, Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1956, p. vii
  3. Dewey, John: Philosophy of Education, Littlefield, Adams and Co., Ames, Iowa, 1956, p.25

only to cultural, i.e. humanistic education.

'Man belongs to two worlds - the world of things and the world of experience, the world of fact and the world of faith, the world of matter, and the world of mind, the world of sense and the world of spirit'<sup>1</sup>

The primary business of education is the unification of two worlds in each individual.

Maimonides allowed for the education of youth whose talents were not academic, but he felt that they were not equally endowed by God, that they were in the universe only to fulfill the banal duties of living, and could not be expected to contribute anything valuable to society. He also believed that the kind of education begun at an early age should be continued throughout the formal period of instruction.

One must not forget that Maimonides viewed education not only as a means of approaching and knowing God, but also as a means of perfecting society, and this from the standpoint of religious faith. Thus, he envisioned many of our ideas and practices which we find valuable. He suggested grouping in accordance to ability. He proposed small classes, so that the teacher could question students on material related to the lesson. The students were expected to ask questions, and be instructed to the point where a thorough understanding of the subject would be assured.

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1. Ehlers and Lee: op. cit., p.260

Knowledge for Maimonides occupied a much smaller area than it does today. Probably if he had lived at a later period, he would not have been anxious to find eternal truths via the path of reason. He might have been anxious to find his answers in the changing role of society. Then these answers might have been confirmed by investigation, even if it meant that religious faith had to be laid aside to make room for more natural explanations.

As already noted, education in the works of Maimonides is always in reference to the religious. This is understandable since most of the important knowledge of his day was disseminated by teachers of religion. These teachers were considered members of the highest level of society. Then, as now, there existed the natural aspiration of all those who felt capable, to try to reach that level. In order to reach it, the pursuit of an education which would develop man's intellectual powers was always the ambition of the devoted scholar. In this respect, Maimonides also has counterparts in modern education, although these are not in agreement with the Deweyan philosophy. Many modern educational institutions still hold that a liberal education which trains the mind is best. This gives a solid foundation and adequate knowledge of society whereby the individual's character is formed. With the proper insight of this general nature, the student is then able, with his trained mind, to

successfully pursue any technical or isolated subjects in which his interest may lie.

The distaste for paid employment goes back to Aristotle, and that may be why Maimonides does not suggest any technical training following an intellectual education. Maimonides declared that a formal education would equip the student with mental abilities necessary to unlock the secrets contained in the Torah. This preparation for abstract thinking was thus intended for people of sufficient means. Workers could neither afford to get such an education, nor follow its intent. To this day, we still have remnants of this principle in the fact that much of the population feels that the average person should be prepared for a trade or profession immediately, and not spend time nor money in laying a foundation with a liberal education.

When Maimonides suggested that education be pursued for a lifetime, this education was also in reference to the intellect. Here we come closer to practices in modern education. When so many return to colleges as adults, it is noticed that these adults feel the need for acquiring that kind of knowledge which will lead them to a clear and conscious understanding of their opinions and judgments. This kind of education entails a longer period of study; it does not involve the acquisition of a motor skill, but creates instead habits of the mind,

and an enlargement of the spirit. Maimonides sought this as his ideal, and to all appearances, modern man also has the same desire to complete his personality by creating the feeling of harmony in his experiences. "The more windows opened for the individual the better, for man does not live by bread alone."<sup>1</sup>

As regards the type of education proposed by Maimonides, one can easily see that it does not, in theory, always fit a democratic community. He did not obscure his intentions of dividing his public into the masses and the educative elite. This is clearly shown in his reason for writing the Guide which is directed to the enlightened esoteric group. However, certain proposals he made are similar to those stated in the report of the 1957 President's Commission on Higher Education. This report stipulated that the majority of students should attend two year colleges, and not four year colleges. This emphasizes the theory that not everybody should be expected to be equally educated. Only those who would benefit, should matriculate in the usual four year colleges.

America's present educational proposals allow for a universal general education. At first, it seems that Maimonides' proposals are less democratic. Then one realizes that although America has attempted for many years to provide an equal education for all, it is now

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1. Horn, Francis: in Ehlers and Lee:, op. cit., p.290

considering a more personalized education, an education geared to differing aptitudes, as espoused by Maimonides.

It has been shown that certain aspects of our modern educational philosophy are found in the philosophy of Maimonides. Some have had the same approach, but different goals. Some have been in direct contrast with what we now associate as modern in our democratic society. However, both similarities and contrasts have had the same basic premise: that man is by nature free, and also social. The aim of an educational system in every age and in every society has been to improve man. To accomplish this in a society, man needs moral virtues. Good moral habits, along with good intellectual habits are essential to the community, especially a democratic one, whose chances of survival rest on a community of good men.

## Chapter VII

Abstract  
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Moses ben Maimon, popularly known as Maimonides, was born in Spain, of Jewish parents. He was the son of a cultured father who instilled in him decisive habits of learning. The family's life became very uneasy under the Moslem rulers. Eventually refuge was sought in Egypt, where it was no longer necessary to profess the Mohammedan faith. Due to Maimonides' proficiency as a physician, he enjoyed special favors, as a result of his appointment as court physician to the ruler, Saladin. It was while in this position, that his inner faith was restored and he felt encouraged to improve the life of the Jews in Cairo.

Maimonides first gained prominence with his "Letter on Apostasy", in which he differed with rabbis who wished to expel the Jews who seemingly professed the Mohammedan faith. Maimonides felt that as long as they followed their own precepts, if only in secret, they should not be reprimanded nor expelled from the Jewish community.

It is with his trilogy, that Maimonides gained literary and philosophical fame. The Commentary on the Mishnah has for its introduction, "Eight Chapters on Ethics". These are well known because the major part of Maimonides' moral code is contained therein. Twelve years later, the Mishnah



Torah, or Yad ha-Hachazukah, appeared. This is the codification of Biblical and Rabbinical law, and is written for the general population. Maimonides intended that this work be definitive, so that a student would need no other commentary to comprehend the written laws as given in the Torah by Moses. This was the only book which he wrote completely in Hebrew.

Later, came the Guide for the Perplexed, which has the greatest circulation, due to the general philosophy which it contains. Here Maimonides followed the pattern set by the Bible. His work is interesting to the average reader, but contains hidden truths which are revealed only as a reward for deep understanding on the part of the devoted scholar. He used several techniques to accomplish this task of exposing the secrets to the esoteric group. This style was deemed morally necessary due to the admonition found in the Torah: If a scholar discovered the hidden truths, he should not make them public. The student, as a result of Maimonides' work, was able to synthesize philosophical and rabbinical teachings. When any contradiction does seem imminent, Maimonides resolves the situation by resorting to the teachings found in divine revelation. Maimonides' system of philosophy is that of absolute idealism, although at times he appears to be a rationalist. He feels that all knowledge has its source in one mind, contained in the Supreme Being. He searches

for eternal truths, since the Torah and the Bible are not subject to change. With this philosophy, he bases his whole system of thought on the Torah. He believes that good morals lead to a good social state. He stresses the interactive forces of body and spirit. The well-being of the body contributes to the well-being of the soul which allows a person to acquire wisdom. Wisdom is the product of understanding gained from knowledge, and moderation in all actions is the key. Man's only hope for perfection lies in his love of God gained through understanding.

Maimonides' educational philosophy is based on religion. Many of his principles are found in the Book of Knowledge of the Mishnah Torah. Here he sets forth the ideal relationship between student and teacher. He emphasizes that all instruction is given for the purpose of having the student become a wiser person and of being imbued with God's wisdom. Specific suggestions are given to accomplish this goal.

It is upon intellectual achievement that Maimonides places greatest honor. He teaches that it is only through the intellect that a person can achieve the moral standards sufficient to warrant him a place among the sages. For him, the people who are not able to benefit from higher instruction still fulfill a purpose in the scheme of the universe. They can perform the tasks necessary for daily living. Maimonides does not specify any exact age at which formal

education for the masses should end; but he stipulates that children should be exposed from the beginning of their instruction to those subjects which will constitute the major part of their learning. Neither does he conclude that just because a man has failed to receive adequate instruction in his youth, he should relinquish all opportunities for study thereafter. Maimonides thus paves the way for all those who are ambitious and capable of understanding to become members of the truly educated class, and be the possessors of the truths contained in the Torah.

Since Dewey's philosophy is commonly associated with what is considered modern in American educational philosophy, the writer has compared it with that of Maimonides, and has shown that much of what we consider modern may be found in the works of Maimonides. Here we find a philosophy less flexible than that of Dewey. This is not only because Maimonides worked within the framework of a smaller amount of knowledge, but because he based all his philosophy on the wisdom of God. Maimonides knows what God has said, and he knows that it is true. With this basis, he had the confidence of a knowing mind, and the knowledge of how to utilize the available information.

In conclusion, it may be said that Maimonides sought to perfect the individual for the good of society. The

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individuals of moral virtue would constitute a good social state. He provided for the education of all, but he did not seek Utopia, since he recognized individual capacities for learning. He was aware of the need of a thorough liberal education, because the aim of a liberal education is wisdom. In the words of a modern educator: "Every man has the duty and every man must have the chance to become as wise as he can."<sup>1</sup>

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1. Hutchins, Robert M.: The Conflict in Education,  
Harper and Brothers, New York, 1953, p. 70

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