Guide to the Perplexities of the Soul

Educational Perspectives of Maimonides’ Doctrine of the Soul

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Abstract

A. Methodology and Aim

Maimonides psychological-educational theories, as revealed in his extensive literary works, are to a large extent, based upon Aristotle’s doctrines, which reached Maimonides by means of Arabic commentators, such as Alfarabi and Ibn Sina. Maimonides harmoniously intertwined and interconnected Aristotle with authentic Jewish religious principles. Although Greek philosophers and their Arab successors influenced him, Maimonides developed his own unique, original and independent philosophical-educational and social method that has great value to this day. Maimonides made great efforts to base new philosophical concepts on traditional sources, but this did not prevent him from offering new original explanations for certain Jewish traditional source material.

Maimonides’ conclusions as a doctor and as an expert in psychophysiology and psychotherapy were for the most part pioneering, due to his emphasis on the unity of the body and the soul. Maimonides had a holistic approach to healing, which encompassed healing the body and the soul as one, including psychoanalysis, ethical, cognitive, emotional, and rational treatments.

As opposed to Aristotle, who formulated his psychological principles based on deductive reasoning, Maimonides adopted the inductive approach. He would begin by utilizing the traditional Jewish way of life with which he was familiar and would then confront and define theoretical principles of the essence of the soul as well the basics of ethics in general. Usually their conclusions were similar, although not always identical. Maimonides based his conclusions on the achievements of other nations' scientific-philosophical research that preceded him. He felt there was no contradiction in continuing to use Jewish traditional sources while simultaneously delving into the knowledge of other nations because "one should accept the truth from whatever source it precedes."
The substructure of Maimonides' theory of ethics is based on Aristotle's methodology of the unity of body and soul, which decreed that all the interactions of the soul represent man's personality. The educational and moral ramifications of this supposition are such that man is responsible for all his actions, both spiritual and physical. He needs to be guided in order to bring all the forces of his soul to a state of harmony and to a position where he can obtain his higher goal and his personal inner perfection. Maimonides, like Aristotle, believed that the ideal purpose of mankind is to be intellectually perfect, a position that is unachievable, except for one who is morally perfect. A flaw in a character trait is considered a "psychological sickness" that blocks progression to one's final purpose. In general, the psychologically disturbed person is one who is uneducated but whose deviations are moral, although not in the sense in which modern psychologists would agree. Modern psychology's beginning point is anthropocentric, which generally deals with reactions of people that have deviated from the norms of society. It usually does not investigate the essence of the soul and its potential wholeness, or even what is desirable regarding moral values. However, in Maimonides' theory of the soul, he emphasizes the opposite. He stresses the teleological ideal as his central concern and therefore, does not look for socially accepted normalcy. Rather, he concentrates his efforts on bringing man to moral-educational perfection, despite the fact that this may, at times, be opposite to what society considers to be socially acceptable behavior. Whereas modern psychology concentrates on the reactions of pathological manifestations and offers therapeutic measures, Maimonides considers the prophet to be the ideal philosophical-psychological role model because he teaches the proper way of leading one's life. As a Jewish religious philosopher, Maimonides believed that purifying the soul from its moral illness is a religious obligation of the highest degree. Man should "search for evil thoughts that exist within himself and distance himself from them, such as manifestations of anger, hatred, jealousy, gluttony and other similar negative character traits."

Maimonides believed that the ideal healers of the soul are the wise sages, who he considered to be spiritual leaders well versed in sciences and human psychology. The educational authority of these spiritual leaders passes from
generation to generation as an unbroken chain of tradition that began with Moses. As a result, these leaders have the greatest influential ability to guide the multitude on the "True Path", and to be role models that society should follow and imitate. In this respect, Maimonides deviated from the philosophy of Aristotle and Alfarabi, who considered the ideal healer of the soul to be the political leader. On the other hand, with great intellectual courage Maimonides strongly criticized those "wise sages of the Torah" who encourage only education that aids in the fulfillment of the practical Torah commandments. They ignore education that instills pure character traits and the balancing of the soul because they "do not consider it a religious obligation." The basis for their mistake is their contempt for the study of the sciences, which they claim are foreign to Judaism. Thus, they are not able to understand the soul or how to purify it from its imperfections. This approach confines the moral introspective progression of man and leads to a superficial faith, as well as deficiencies in one’s awe of God, because the basis of faith "requires expertise in many different sciences." Maimonides strives to foster a type of complete individual, who is perfect in character traits and an expert in Jewish traditional sources, as well as qualified in sciences that prepare him for theology. When one arrives at this high level he acts in such a way that he imitates the ways of God (Imitatio Dei), and is then suitable to be an ideal leader who concerns himself with the political and moral perfection of society as a whole.

B. The Structure of Man's Soul, its Essence and its Faculties

The definition of man's soul is a psychophysical unit, which is made up of a system of attributes on different complex levels ("parts" or "faculties"). These levels or faculties of the soul are not concrete divisions, rather they are functional divisions. There are five "faculties". Each faculty serves the one above it. The faculties are as follows: nutritive, sensory, imagination, appetitive, and reason. Maimonides classifies in hierarchical fashion the different faculties, beginning with the lowest function, which shares common terminology with vegetation, and ends with the highest level that is unique to man. We will present an overview of the components of the soul in the following chart:
This theory of the structure of the soul is obviously opposed to the theory of three souls: (natural, vital and spiritual), as well as to dualism, which maintains that the body and soul are separate entities. Thus, the concept of the soul is widespread and defined as an essential part of the organism and not as an independent entity which is separate from the body. With this theory Maimonides encompasses both the fields of psychology and biology and narrows the gap between the body and the soul. Like Aristotle, he defines the essence of the soul as "form" or actuality of specific "matter". However, this differentiation between the potential and the actual does not suggest that they are two separate physical objects, rather it indicates different manifestations of one object that can be conceptually but not physically divided.

This distinction between "form" and "matter" is the basis of Maimonides' psychological-educational theory, since it defines the essence of man and his mode of behavior. Unintelligent and immoral conduct is explained as behavior that derives from the temporary "matter", as opposed to moral and intellectual conduct that stems from the eternal "form". Thus, the moral demand is placed upon man, who was created in God's image, to strive to be similar to God in all
His ways, and to be like "honorable man" in all his actions. Man is described as a microcosm that consists of a complete singular unit directed by its intellect. Similarly, the universe is a macrocosm that is one complete unit guided by God. This obligates all the functions that compose the soul, including those which are common to the plants and beasts in name only, to be directed by the intellect. This explains Maimonides' fierce objection to social schools of thought that advocate asceticism as a way of life, as its disregard of any one of the faculties affects and disturbs the functioning of another. Damage to any aspect of the "one soul" disrupts the harmonious functioning of all its parts.

C. The Nutritive Faculty

The nutritive faculty is the most basic of the five faculties of the soul, and is directly responsible for biological nourishment and for sustaining life. The appropriate treatment for this faculty would seemingly belong to the field of conventional medicine and not to the psychological-educational method, given that the subconscious does not directly control automatic basic physical functions. However, since man is one psychophysical unit who requires harmonious interaction of all the parts of his soul, any damage to the proper functioning of its nutritive system is liable to adversely affect the remaining systems of the soul, including those that are responsible for spiritual and moral behavior.

D. The Sensory Faculty

The sensory faculty is the function of the soul involving the basic biological senses, which comes after the nutritive faculty. The different mechanisms of the five senses are the means by which one absorbs and gathers impressions of events and interactions that occur outside of the body. They are also utilized to determine what is occurring inside the body in order to establish one's condition and, subsequently, to decide on appropriate reactions and behaviors. Most of what makes up the soul, such as: knowledge, imagination, dreams and like, is the result of the information that is transferred inward from the outside world by the senses. Therefore the sensory faculty is the principal source of information
for all the faculties that are above it: "Imagination", "Appetitive" and "Reason". Although this particular faculty does not initiate anything, nor is it part of the soul that is responsible for one's actions, it is, however, directly involved in the behavior of man and plays an extremely important role in the process of moral-education. Maimonides ranks the five senses in descending order, according to their ability to discriminate, their clarity and the quantity of information that they supply to the consciousness: sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch.

E. The Imagination Faculty

The imagination faculty, like the two preceding faculties, is a physiological attribute that includes the "internal senses" which are parallel to the "external senses" of the "sensory faculty". Through the means of "common sense", the imagination absorbs sensory impressions, stores them in the memory and raises them anew through associative combinations and fantasies or by conjecture. The "conjecture" is the conscious judgmental ability that takes reality into consideration. Those who excel in this judgmental ability, such as "political leaders, lawmakers, magicians and accurate dream interpreters," arrive at correct and successful conclusions and are often able to foresee the future. The imagination faculty is also responsible for fostering emotions such as love, compassion and other similar feelings that bring one to positive situations and distance one from harm. The summation of the activities of the "imagination" is as follows:
Maimonides, like Aristotle, placed great value on the "imagination" as a source of the consciousness because thoughts are impossible without its presence. Someone who is graced from birth with a perfect imagination can freely and intensely contemplate events. When the imagination is guided by the intellect, it has the ability to create new ideas through intuition and is even capable of achieving scientific breakthroughs. The peak of its fruitfulness is in the sleep mode when it is not disturbed by new external stimuli that require physical reactions and when previous stimuli are already absent. In this subdued state the imagination can conduct quiet introspection that generates concepts ideal for prophecy.

Like all physiological components, within a complete and fertile imagination is an inherent source of inspiration for every craftsman and a vessel in which to receive God's prophetic "abundance" that is specified for those whose flawless character and intellectual perfection already exist within them. Prophecy is, however, a miraculous phenomenon which is dependent upon God's will.

Although man's consciousness does not have any control over the imagination, just as it does not have control over other physiological phenomena, Maimonides, as a doctor, believed that through willpower one could supervise and direct it. Such control is possible because the imagination consists of one's daily actions and thoughts, all of which can be directed toward a positive course by practicing good habits, doing good deeds and drawing near to acquiring the Truth, in accordance to "one's capabilities." Even with the imagination's creative contribution to humanity, it may still be an unreliable source of knowledge, especially when it acts in a divergent manner without the supervision of the intellect.

Maimonides also had practical psychological suppositions in the field of mental health that offered an optimistic approach to life and were based upon rational considerations. He cautioned against a common occurrence in which the imagination is inclined to exaggerate certain good or bad incidences in life, above and beyond their significance in reality. Imaginary illusions and exaggerated worrying disrupt the spiritual balance of man.
Based on his theory of the soul, Maimonides saw the dream as a product of the "imagination" and the result of both one's conscious and unconscious experiences during his waking hours. The close proximity of the dream to prophesy and the subsequent danger of a "false prophet" and other soothsayers caused Maimonides to sharpen the distinction between dreams and prophesy.

F. The Appetitive Faculty

According to Maimonides, "the appetitive faculty" (apetitus) is the most important and central faculty in educational psychology, since it is basically "the prime mover" through which man reacts and maintains a mutual relationship with his environment. The appetitive faculty operates in accordance with reality, which is revealed through three sources of consciousness: senses, imagination, and reason. It is responsible for the body's movements, which enable one to either satisfy his desires, or to distance himself from whatever causes him to suffer, thus allowing him to express himself through moral behavior. The process of man's reactions is as follows:

Maimonides adopted Aristotle's theory, which claims that the manner in which the "appetitive" faculty reacts depends on the type of "will" that is created by the integration of the faculty and the conscious, which presents stimulating substances. Sources of imaginary or sensory consciousness create an irrational "will" from a type of "desire" or "flame", which prompts an immediate or instinctive impulsive reaction. Alternatively, the combination of the appetitive faculty and the source of the intelligent consciousness create a rational "will", autonomous and carefully thought out, that is not enslaved to immediate instinctive impulses. In his demand "to bind all the faculties of the soul in
accordance to one's thoughts", Maimonides attempts to educate man to strive for continuous, cautious and moral behavior. Immoral behavior, including all of man's deficiencies, is the consequence of the submitting of the "appetitive" to "matter". Good behavior with all its fine qualities belongs to the "form". Man is capable, by means of this "will" to persevere in his mission to become educationally perfect, because the "form" has "the ability to overrule the matter." Nonetheless, Maimonides does not disregard the limitations of the human "will" which are conditionally indispensable. The "will" also does not have pure autonomy, due to its haphazard circumstances, subjective conditions ("impediments", or objective data), and "events" outside of itself, all of which either facilitate or disturb its functioning.

Maimonides' teachings in regard to educational philosophy include practical pedagogical suggestions that steer man towards the ideal behavior. Maimonides, in principle, does not believe in theoretical sermonizing, unless it combines intensive education for molding the child's appetite (apetitus) and spiritual desires with balanced and good habits. Educating one to acquire good habits should start at an early age, before one's intellectual potential matures and becomes dressed in a human "form" and can still be strongly influenced by bodily desires and imagination. With the crystallization of his personality and the rooting of noble character traits, man becomes less constrained and more in control of his instinctive impulses and, therefore, is able to guide his actions to correspond with his potential intellect and autonomous "will", which is imprinted in him. Maimonides also believed that man is not born with molded qualities, but gradually acquires them during his development and through the influences of his immediate surroundings. Each person is born with only natal inclinations, which can be refined and improved through correct educational approaches, in order to solidify the nature of the soul. The soul's refined nature is obtained through the amplification of good conduct over a continuous period of time, which aids one in performing even higher and loftier deeds free of impulsive conflicts. As such, things "will be easier for him and not a burden."

The educational process can be best described as follows:

**Good deeds >> Good Habits >> Good Qualities >> Loftier Good Deeds**

The ideal behavior is moderation, which is derived from balanced characteristic
traits of the soul. Maimonides and Aristotle are united in the belief that the good middle course is determined by the intended goal, so that all that helps to reach this goal is good and all that deviates from it is bad. However, they differ on the definition of the goal itself. Aristotle held that one's actions based on introspection represents "complete happiness." Whereas Maimonides agreed that intellectual activity is true perfection, he remained consistent in his viewpoint that the ultimate purpose is knowledge of God. Even more so, Aristotle wavers in determining the ideal middle path and admits "that it is not easy to reach the middle in all matters." Maimonides, however, believed that the laws of the Torah, which are "righteous laws and statutes", are "God's most middle path and straight way" whose whole purpose "is to restore the knowledge and improve one's behavior."

Maimonides preferred preventive treatment in regard to healing the body, as well as in regard to education and mental health. Just as a man is commanded to shield himself from physical harm, so too is he obligated to prevent himself from being exposed to negative enticements that are liable to stir up instinctive reactions of the irrational "will". Nevertheless, Maimonides leaned towards moral asceticism as a desirable lifestyle for certain exceptional individuals whose natural inclinations are passionately egotistical to the extreme, such as: anger, haughtiness, sexual desires, and the like. It is preferable to maintain a strict manner of supervision over these types of inclinations in order to prevent digression to the morally lacking and valueless extremes.

The moderate educational approach that takes one's emotional state into consideration is, for all practical purposes, the way in which God runs the world and we are obligated to incorporate it into our lives, just as we do His other attributes. Consequently, the teacher needs to penetrate to the depths of the soul of his student and not to be conservative with the educational rules and predetermined didactics. His success in arriving at the student's educational goals depends upon his academic flexibility and his ability to suit the educational instruction to a changing reality, which will have an affect on the future character and behavior of his students. In short, the ideal educator is one that is graced with being broadminded, deep thinking, and academically flexible. Maimonides himself was both a model educator and leader. In his
letters and writings a man of noble character is revealed, whose sole efforts were to investigate the pristine Truth and to impart it to the multitude: "every group according to its level".

G. The Reason Faculty

The reason faculty is unique to man. With the perfection of this faculty and its gradual process of educating man, one can reach the peak of the goal of humanity: a connection to God and attainment of eternal existence. The sources of the reason faculty are the faculties that preceded it; nonetheless, with its perfection and departure from the "potential" to the "actual intelligence" it becomes an entity unto itself, independent of the other faculties, and does not cease to exist as do the other faculties, with the demise of the body. First and foremost, this faculty, unlike the others, is a potential one that is not present upon birth. By means of the primary sources of the consciousness that already function at birth - the senses and the imagination - in time, the child begins to recognize his surroundings and acquire the understanding of concepts. At that point, his basic intelligence is gradually revealed. As stated before, man is compared to, "a compact world" that is ruled by his intellect, just as the universe is ruled by God. The world cannot exist without God's supervision, and man, as opposed to the rest of animals, cannot exist without the guidance of the "image of God" that is within him.

The purpose of all the deeds and actions of an educated man is the perfection of the soul. It is the realization of this intellectual objective that brings one to accumulated pure knowledge – the "acquired intelligence" or "surplus of knowledge" - that is the inspiration passed on from God to man. In this situation, the intellect is raised one level and becomes the "form" of "the soul", which is in itself the body "form". The relationship between the "body," "soul" and "intellect" as follows:
Maimonides attempted to advance man towards this deeply introspective and attainable goal. He firmly believed that by studying according to one’s inborn capabilities, man is able to develop his intellectual potential and to progress toward his connection with the "active intelligence," the status the prophets reached and a "delight beyond all". It is indeed difficult to understand the essence of this spiritual contentment, due to our inability to embrace the intangible, just as a blind person is not able to grasp the essence of colors. However, in reality, we also experience non-corporal pleasures, such as honor, revenge, and the like, which teach us of the existence of spiritual pleasures.

Neglect of the development of the intellectual potential not only harms the future of man and his happiness, but also causes disarray in society. A man that did not receive "his form" is liable to use his innate intellectual ability for "a variety of destructions and for creating of evil," as evidenced by the scheming of organized crime and terror. Therefore, it is the obligation of all proper countries to invest in the development of high-level educational systems for all its citizens, with special emphasis placed upon the needs of the disgruntled sectors of the population, which are fertile ground for crime.

The educational process is deliberate and continuous and the student should not have delusions that in a short period of time he will easily be able "to change his situation" from that of the "state of being ready" to the state of "active intelligence". Before man begins to delve into metaphysics he should first perfect himself in all branches of the qualified sciences such as logic, math, medicine, astronomy and physics. The wisdom of the Creator is revealed to one that investigates nature and is reminded of his physical as well as spiritual limitations, which in turn leads to modesty, an attribute that is essential for progressing in scientific investigations.
Studying the sciences is not easy and involves a plethora of difficulties. One not familiar with all the requirements who doesn't receive encouragement or proper directions is liable to despair and quit at the commencement of his path. Maimonides strives to expand the sphere of those who learn and worship from a position of love, and accordingly encourages each person "from the small to the large" to continuously progress in his thorough investigation "according to his capabilities."

For those who endeavor to reach this lofty goal of perfection, at times, it may be necessary, for the instructor to employ educational tactics such as promising material rewards that the pupil may mistakenly interpret as the end and not the means. Despite the fact that this psychological method may employ "impure" incentives, it still encourages desirable behavior. This is true because a concrete act can lead to internal values and ethics that will be fixed within the soul for a prolonged period.

Maimonides' sharp discourses against "the multitude" and his elitist undertones that were revealed mainly in his book, "The Guide of the Perplexed", was not meant to teach contempt for the common people. On the contrary, he usually described them in superlative terms such as "the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob". The severe expressions are designed to uproot the phenomenon of ignorance as a way of life and to encourage man to choose the intelligent path.

An in-depth analysis of the works of Maimonides and his public daily schedule proves that he hardly concentrated on the matters concerning the intellectual nobility; rather he invested most of his energy on educating the general public. As such, he did not counsel the division of the nation into separate classes, despite the many intellectual and ethical levels that exist. He viewed the nation as an integral unit that is interdependent and requires mutual value and honor. The "individuals" should concern themselves with the education and elevation of the "multitude," and the masses, in turn, should cleave to and respect the "individuals." The role of the "individual", who has reached a high level of closeness with God and imitates his attributes (Imitatio Dei), is to serve as a medium for the general populace to enable them to also become close to God, and to emulate His ways, despite their relatively lower position.
Maimonides' educational objective of encouraging man to acquire intellectual perfection was to shape the ideal personality to act with "complete morality." This "complete morality" is achieved by realizing God's untainted Truth and not through "relative morality," which stems from the "accepted trends", which are the changing norms of society and are based upon human impulses, self interests or practical ideas involving the spirit of man.

From our deliberation, it seems more likely that Maimonides professes an integration of an introspective and practical life, because there is no value for one to elevate one to such heights if he is not a mentor or guide who is involved in the community. Lofty speculative achievements, according to Maimonides, lead to a life of superior moral practices.

In summation, the definition of the perfect man, according to Maimonides, is different from that of Aristotle, in that he is not disengaged from the practical world. Maimonides does not aspire to an Aristotelian philosopher image that focuses on the speculative life from within intellectual tranquility. The perfection of the latter is derived from natural human curiosity and from aspiring to reach personal perfection, but the individual remains in the sphere of human limitations and does not see any obligation to be involved in social political leadership. Maimonides prefers the persona of the prophet, the ultimate in human perfection, who strives for an absolute bond with God and who elevates himself above nature. At this plateau the prophet aspires to imitate the ways and attributes of God (Imitatio Dei) who operates within the cosmos and influences the world through His goodness towards his creations. Consequently, the prophet "descends to the earth" like the philosopher Plato, in order to direct mankind on the course that will lead it to this same perfection.

By the use of these spirals, it is possible to describe the ideal man's process of educational progression:
Thus, the role models of humanity, the three patriarchs and Moses, who were "engaged in the guidance of man," behaved, without interfering with their own spiritual development. Maimonides also conducted himself in this way and served as a role model of true educational leadership in regard to "practicing what one preaches".