

Article

Four Jewish Visions of the Garden of Eden

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Abstract: What was life like for Adam and Eve before they sinned? What was their sin? What was this mysterious Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil? The views on these questions of four major Jewish thinkers: Moses Maimonides (1138–1204), Moses Nahmanides (1194–1270), Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), and Solomon Maimon (1753–1800), are discussed and contrasted. For Maimonides, the Garden of Eden was the Garden of Pure Reason, and sin consisted in the abandonment of Reason. For Nahmanides, like Augustine, the Garden of Eden story is about the human beings' attainment of free choice with all its grave problems. Criticizing Maimonides and Nahmanides, Mendelssohn followed Plato and Judah Halevi, arguing that the Garden of Eden story is about maintaining a harmony between intellect and desire. Maimon agreed with Maimonides that the Garden of Eden was the Garden of Pure Reason, but, following Kant, he argued contra Maimonides that the moral rules are rational and a priori. All four thinkers held that the Garden of Eden was a paradigmatic place of tolerance—either because rational people do not harm others, or because desireless people have no desire to harm others, or because well-balanced people have noble virtues. In an Excursus, Maimon's "Merry Masquerade Ball" is interpreted.

Keywords: Garden of Eden; Augustine; Maimonides; Nahmanides; Mendelssohn; Maimon; Kant



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If you want to know what a person thinks is the best society, the ideal way of life, the happy community—ask him or her about the Garden of Eden. What was life like in the Garden of Eden before the sin? How did Adam and Eve live before they rebelled? What did they eat? Did they have enjoyable sexual relations? What were their hopes and dreams? You could also ask a Greek or a Roman what he or she thinks about the Golden Age. What went on in those days? How did people live then? When poets or philosophers describe the Garden of Eden or the Golden Age, they in effect describe their ideal world, their virtuous society, their notion of the happy life. In what follows, I should like to compare the opinions of four Jewish thinkers on the Garden of Eden: Moses Maimonides, Moses Nahmanides, Moses Mendelssohn, and Solomon Maimon. What was life like for Adam and Eve before they sinned? What was their sin? What was this mysterious Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil? In conclusion, I shall make some comments about tolerance.¹

1. Moses Maimonides (1138–1204)

For Maimonides, the Garden of Eden was the Garden of Pure Reason. He describes it in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, Part I, Chapters 1–2.² Before their sin, Adam and Eve lived entirely in accordance with their intellects. Their goal was true human happiness: intellectual contemplation, scientific knowledge. They knew, however, that in order to be fit for their studies, they had to satisfy their true bodily needs—neither excessively nor deficiently. We can imagine their life. They ate in accordance with the science of nutrition. They neither overslept nor underslept. They had sex in accordance with their combined needs—that is, in accordance with their common will and to their mutual joy. If they baked a cake, they divided it according to their respective needs. Living entirely in accordance with Reason, they knew only rational propositions (Arabic: *ma' qūlāt*; Hebrew: *muskalot*), which concern the objective concepts of “true” and “false”, and they could not even conceive of the generally accepted opinions or conventions (Arabic: *mashhūrāt*; Hebrew: *mefursamot*),

which concern the subjective concepts of “good” and “evil”. The radical notion that the perfectly rational individual cannot even conceive of the subjective concepts “good” and “evil” has no precedent in the Aristotelian literature, but is repeated in Spinoza (*Ethics*, IV, 68). “True” and “false” are defined by Maimonides as corresponding or not corresponding to what exists, while “good” and “evil” are defined as corresponding or not corresponding to one’s purpose or intent. As examples of rational propositions, Maimonides cites the propositions of physics (e.g., “The earth is flat is false”; “The heavens are spherical is true”). His vision of the Garden of Eden is clear and vivid. It is the Aristotelian vision of the contemplative life, which is also a life of moderation and cooperation. Such a life is prescribed by him in his Code of Jewish Law, the *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhhot De’ot (“Laws of Character Traits”).³ It is summed up perfectly by Eve’s words to the Snake in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*: “our Reason is our Law”.⁴ If Adam and Eve did not have free choice (*reshut*) before their sin, it was not because of any physical impediment or deficiency, but because truth forces itself necessarily upon rational minds (*Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhhot Teshuvah [“Laws of Repentance”] 5:1).

The sin of Adam and Eve, according to Maimonides, was that they deviated from Reason and pursued imaginary desires. They began to live irrationally. We may fancy them to have eaten junk food or to have slumbered during work hours. When Adam and Eve lived in accordance with Reason, Eve did not worry about Adam raping her. Once they began to live in accordance with their egocentric passions, Adam and Eve posed a threat to themselves and to each other. Suddenly, they needed moral rules or laws. Society had to take measures to moderate our foreparents’ imaginary desires. The first moral rule, or law, was the fig leaf. Other such “generally accepted opinions” include the prohibitions of murder and stealing. The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was thus the Tree of Generally Accepted Opinions, the Tree of Moral Rules or Laws (See Maimonides 1963, II, 33, p. 364).

2. Moses Nahmanides (1194–1270)

For Nahmanides, the Garden of Eden was the Garden of Natural Necessity. He describes it in his *Commentary on Genesis*, 2:9 (Nahmanides 1962, p. 36; 1971, pp. 71–73). Before their sin, Adam and Eve lived a flawless and determined existence. Their actions were not voluntary but wholly natural, like those of “the heavens and all their hosts”, which move perfectly, precisely, mechanically, and with “no love or hate”. The first couple engaged in sexual intercourse, but “without lust” (*ta’avah*). In their eyes, their genitals were no different from “the face, the hands” or other parts of the body, and thus they felt no shame in being naked. Their life was one of passionless perfection.

The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was, in effect, the Tree of the Will (*raṣon*), or the Tree of Choice (*beḥirah*) between Good and Evil. The Hebrew word for “knowledge” (*da’at*), Nahmanides remarks, can also mean “will” (e.g., Exodus 33:12; Psalms 144:3). The fruit of the Tree, he explains, gives rise to “will and volition” (*ha-raṣon ve-ha-ḥefes*).⁵ Through their sin, Adam and Eve acquired free will, that is, the ability to choose between “doing evil or good to themselves and to others”. Although the power of choice is a divine attribute (see Genesis 3:5 and 23), it is harmful to human beings, for it incites in us problematic desires and lust (*yeṣer ve-ta’avah*). Interpreting Ecclesiastes 7:29, “God made man upright [*yashar*], but they have sought out many inventions”, Nahmanides taught that God created Adam and Eve “upright”, but they forsook the “one straight path” and sought out “many inventions” according to their free choice [*beḥirah*]. In denying that Adam and Eve, before their sin, had free choice, Nahmanides may be said to agree with Maimonides, but he understands their transformation differently from him.

Nahmanides’ interpretation of the Garden of Eden story is in some evident respects indebted to Augustine (354–430).⁶ The idea that the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is the Tree of the Will is found in Augustine’s *City of God*, Part III, Book 13, Chapter 21: “the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil [is] one’s own choice of the will” (*lignum scientiae boni et mali proprium uoluntatis arbitrium*).⁷ The idea that Adam and Eve had no libido before

their sin is found in *City of God*, Part III, Book 14, Chapters 23–24. Whereas Nahmanides held that Adam and Eve, before they sinned, engaged in sex without lust, Augustine (in keeping with the predominant Christian view that there was no sex in prelapsarian Eden) had asserted counterfactually that *were* Adam and Eve to have engaged in sex before they sinned, it *would have been* without libido. The comparison of Adam and Eve's genitals with their other bodily members is found in Augustine's *City of God*, Part III, Book 14, Chapters 23–24. It is related there that, before their sin, Adam and Eve's will controlled the movement of their genitals just as it controlled that of "the hands, feet, and fingers . . . mouth and face", and thus they felt no shame in their nakedness, for such shame derives from the will's not having control over the movement of the genitals. Augustine also affirmed, like Nahmanides after him, that free choice is a divine quality but bad for human beings. Alluding to Ecclesiastes 7:29 in *City of God*, Part III, Book 13, Chapter 14 (see also *On Rebuke and Grace*, Chapter 32; and his unfinished *Against Julian*, Book IV, Paragraph 44; Book V, Paragraphs 57, 61), he holds that "God created the human being upright" (*Deus creavit hominem rectum*), that is, with a naturally good will, but "by their bad use of free will" (*a liberi arbitrii malo usu*) they sinned.⁸ In his *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, Book VIII, Chapter 14, Paragraph 31, on Genesis 2:16–17, Augustine mentions that free will is a divine quality but harmful in human beings: "the evil of disobedience, i.e., . . . the perverse imitation of God and the harmful liberty [*malum . . . noxiae libertatis*]".⁹

In summary, both Augustine and Nahmanides teach that Adam and Eve, in their original natural state, had no libido and no ability to choose between good and evil, that eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil gave them the power to choose, and that although the power to choose is divine, it is harmful to human beings. Both also cite Ecclesiastes 7:29: human beings were created by God "upright" (=doing by nature what is right) but they sought out "inventions" (=free choices).

Nahmanides, like Augustine, states that Adam and Eve, before their sin, considered their genitals to be like all other parts of the body, but does not repeat Augustine's explanation that their shame was due to their not having control over the movement of their genitals. However, this distinctive Augustinian idea is found explicitly in another Jewish thinker, David Kimhi (1160–1235), who gives it a very clever twist: "After [Adam and Eve] ate of the fruit of the Tree, there arose in them the lust for sex, their genitals became firm from the lust, and they felt shame in that one of their bodily members was out of their control [*reshut* = choice, authority]; now, this was measure for measure, for they had removed themselves from the control [*reshut*] of God and his commandments".¹⁰ The genitals rejected the authority of Adam and Eve just as Adam and Eve had rejected the authority of God and His commandments: the free and unruly genitals symbolized the free and unruly human beings.

There are two ideas in the medieval Jewish literature on the Garden of Eden that surely would have pleased Augustine immensely: (1) Nahmanides' philological observation that the Hebrew word "*da'at*" may mean "will" or "choice", an observation that supports Augustine's interpretation of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil; and (2) Kimhi's moral that the independence of the genitals illustrates the independence of Adam and Eve after their sin.

If in Maimonides' interpretation, the ideal Edenic life is a variation of the Aristotelian *vita contemplativa*, in Nahmanides' interpretation it is a variation of the Augustinian natural life free of lust.

3. Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786)

Mendelssohn develops his view of the Garden of Eden in conversation with Maimonides, Nahmanides, and also Judah Halevi (c. 1075–1141).

In his *Be'ur* on Genesis 2:9, Mendelssohn examines Maimonides' interpretation of the Garden of Eden. He criticizes Maimonides' view that "good" and "evil" are merely "generally accepted opinions" or "conventions" (*mefursamot*). He brands the view as "Aristotelian", although it is debatable if Aristotle held that moral rules are conventional

(see, e.g., *Rhetoric*, I, 13, 1373b). Maimonides, Mendelssohn argues, fails to distinguish between moral and aesthetic judgments. Aesthetic propositions, which are based on the senses (*ha-hushim*) and concern the “beautiful” and “ugly”, are, according to Mendelssohn, indeed subjective; but moral propositions, which are based on the intellect (*ha-sekheh*) and concern “good” and “evil”, are rational (*muskalot*). Thus, in Mendelssohn’s view, Maimonides’ interpretation that Adam and Eve fell from a state of scientific knowledge to a state of subjective knowledge is indefensible. The Garden of Eden was *not* the Garden of pure Reason. As for the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, it was *not* the Tree of Generally Accepted Opinions or the Tree of Moral Rules.¹¹

Having rejected the view of Maimonides, Mendelssohn now turns to that of Nahmanides which, in his view, is “more correct”. He agrees with Nahmanides that the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil had something to do with increasing desire and lust (*yeser ve-ta’avah*). However, he argues that Nahmanides’ extreme view, that Adam and Eve had no will or choice before they sinned, does not square with the literal sense of Scripture. Moreover, Mendelssohn rejects Nahmanides’ view that Adam and Eve’s sexual relationships before they sinned were without desire or lust (Mendelssohn 2018, pp. 313, 315).

Mendelssohn’s own view owes much to Judah Halevi’s discussion in his *Kuzari*, II, 50. Developing ideas of Plato (see *Republic*, IV, 439d–443e), Halevi had argued there that the Law of Moses aims to achieve a harmonious equilibrium (*ha-derekh ha-shaveh*) between all the faculties of the soul, giving each its due: “for an excess in one faculty causes a deficiency in another faculty, and one who inclines toward the faculty of lust [Arabic: *kuwwat al-shahwah*; Judah ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew: *koah ha-ta’avah*] causes a deficiency in the faculty of thought [Arabic: *kuwwat al-fikra*; Hebrew: *koah ha-ma’hashavah*], and the converse”. In his Commentary on *Kuzari*, ad loc., Mendelssohn’s onetime teacher, Rabbi Israel Zamość, remarks that God has fixed the proper equilibrium (*yaḥas ha-shivvui*) between the faculties.¹²

Citing Ecclesiastes 7:29, like Nahmanides (and Augustine), Mendelssohn relates that Adam and Eve were created “upright”, that is, enjoying a proper balance (*yaḥas ha-shivvui*) between their different faculties. According to Mendelssohn’s interpretation, eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil did not create in Adam and Eve the faculty of desire, which had always existed in them, but it amplified and exaggerated that faculty. It disrupted the proper equilibrium between the faculty of reason (*koah ha-sekheh* or *koah ha-hassagah*) and the faculty of desire (*koah ha-teshuqah*), which is necessary for the attainment of the noble virtues. After eating of the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve devoted themselves to material luxuries and sensual pleasures. Elaborating on Halevi’s abovementioned premise, Mendelssohn writes: “If the faculty of desire [*koah ha-teshuqah*] overcomes the intellect [*ha-sekheh*], this inclines one to crave luxuries and sensuous pleasure, and pursue the imaginary good . . . However, if the faculty of thought [*koah ha-hassagah*] overcomes desire [*ha-teshuqah*], a person will neglect to perform good deeds, will not gird himself like a lion . . . , and will not fight the wars of the Lord . . . for even the sound of a driven leaf [cf. Leviticus 26:36] will frighten him and cause him to refrain from action”. The dominance of lust over reason leads us to materialism and debauchery, while the dominance of reason over lust renders us apathetic and ineffectual (Mendelssohn 2018, pp. 314–15).

Against Nahmanides, Mendelssohn emphasizes that lust existed in the Garden of Eden, and is necessary and beneficial. Reason enables us to know true and false and good and evil, but it is desire or lust that enables us to pursue the true and the good, and reject the false and the evil. It is the faculty of desire that enables us *to act*. Adam and Eve had pleasurable sex in the Garden of Eden. When erotic desire is properly balanced, Mendelssohn insists, “it is not a reproach [*genut*] or disgrace [*herpah*] to a human being, as some philosophers [*meḥaqqerim*] have thought”, but it is a thing of beauty for the human being (*ve-hi’ lo le-tif’eret*). Mendelssohn alludes here to the *The Holy Letter*, a popular Kabbalistic treatise which was mistakenly attributed to Nahmanides. Pseudo-Nahmanides argued there that sex is “holy and pure”, and attacked Aristotle and Maimonides for holding that it is a reproach (*genut*) or disgrace (*herpah*) to us. Mendelssohn’s use of the term “beauty” (*tif’eret*) hints at a Kabbalistic secret found in the same passage of *The Holy*

Letter, according to which the male partner in the sex act reflects the divine *sefirah* of Tif'eret and the female partner reflects the divine *sefirah* of Malkhut. Sex is thus not only necessary and beneficial, it is also divine. Mendelssohn thus sides with Pseudo-Nahmanides against Nahmanides (or if he considered the attribution of the *Holy Letter* to Nahmanides correct, he thought he was siding with Nahmanides against Nahmanides). Mendelssohn next cites the Talmud: "Whoever is greater than his fellow has a greater desire [*yešer*] than he" (BT *Sukkah* 52a). Lust, like reason, is vital to human existence. Mendelssohn envisions the Garden of Eden as a place and time in which human beings lived in harmony—maintaining a perfect equilibrium between intellect and desire. This is the secret of the good life: the felicitous balance of intellect and desire.¹³

It is interesting, parenthetically, to compare Mendelssohn's interpretation of Adam and Eve's sin with that of Immanuel Kant. Kant set down his interpretation in his "Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History", written in 1786, the year of Mendelssohn's death, and six years after the publication of the *Be'ur* on Genesis. It is thus impossible that Mendelssohn's interpretation was influenced by Kant's; and it is very unlikely that Kant, who could not read Hebrew, knew of Mendelssohn's interpretation. Both philosophers engage Augustine's interpretation, although Kant does so without mentioning Augustine's name, and Mendelssohn does so probably without even being aware he was doing so. Much like Augustine, Kant explains that the eating of the Edenic fruit represented the movement from "nature" and "instinct" to "free choice". Unlike Augustine, he lauds this movement as the awakening of human reason (Kant 1991, p. 224; 1786, pp. 1–27). Thus, both Mendelssohn and Kant reject the Augustinian interpretation: Mendelssohn Platonizes it and Kant turns it upside down.

If we may allow ourselves roughly to call Maimonides' interpretation of the Garden of Eden story "Aristotelian", and Nahmanides' interpretation "Augustinian", we can now call Mendelssohn's interpretation "Platonic" or "Halevian".

4. Solomon Maimon (1753–1800)

The Garden of Eden is discussed by Solomon Maimon in his Hebrew Commentary on Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, titled *Giv'at ha-Moreh*, Part I, Chapters 1–2, 15 (Maimon 1965, pp. 32–38, 48–51; See Pines 1990, pp. 146–50), and also in his German *Autobiography* (Maimon 2018, Pt. II, chp. 2, pp. 140–41; 1972–1973, pp. 32–37).

Maimon agrees with Maimonides that the Garden of Eden is the Garden of Intellect or the Garden of rational propositions (*muskalot*). He also agrees with him that the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is the tree of subjective or relative knowledge, and the sin of Adam and Eve was their rejection of the life of Reason. However, whereas Maimonides gave the propositions of physics (e.g., "The earth is flat is false"; "The heavens are spherical is true") as examples of rational propositions (*muskalot*), and considered the moral rules (e.g., the prohibitions of uncovering one's genitals in public, murdering, or stealing) to be examples of "generally accepted opinions" (*mefursamot*), Maimon, on the contrary, gave the moral rules as examples of rational propositions and considered the propositions of physics to be only possible or contingent. Moral rules, he held, following Kant, are rational and a priori, while the propositions of physics are empirical and, contrary to Kant, are all a posteriori. Thus, in physics it is taught, on the basis of the observation of stones, trees, metals, water, etc., that "gravity is common to all bodies in relation to one another". However, Maimon continues, this proposition, like all empirical propositions, is not apodictic, since it is possible that there exist thus-far unobserved bodies that are "weightless in relation one to the other". Maimon concludes: "This does not apply to the science of metaphysics, ethics, and other disciplines [e.g., logic and mathematics], whose principles are founded on Reason itself . . . without experience (*aus Erfahrung*)". If Aristotle and Maimonides held that physics was more certain than ethics, Maimon held the converse.¹⁴

Maimonides writes in the *Guide*, Part I, Chapter 2, that God gave commandments to human beings because they are created in the image of God, which is the intellect. Seizing

on this comment, Maimon aptly cites Genesis 9:6: “Whoso sheddeth the blood of a human being, by a human being shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God [i.e., the intellect] made He the human being”. The prohibition against murder, Maimon concludes, is a rational rule derived from the rational nature of the human being, who was created in the image of God. It is a universally valid principle of morality, conforming to the Categorical Imperative (Maimon (1965), I, 2, p. 35).

Maimon explains the difference between life according to Reason, that is, the life in the Garden of Eden, and life according to the imagination, that is, life after the sin. He distinguishes between the *true* good or evil and *imaginary* good or evil. The true good is “the acquisition of perfection” (*shelemut* = *arētē*), that is, true knowledge, and “the true evil is the contrary”. Some things are called “good” or “evil” not because they are good or evil in themselves, but because they are a cause to attaining perfection or to deterring one from attaining it. “Money, for example, is not a good in itself, but is a good as a means relative to the end of acquiring necessary things”. People who love money for itself confuse ends and means, and follow “the imagination not the intellect”. Maimon remarks that this is the point of Qohelet’s dictum: “He that loveth money shall not be satisfied with money” (Ecclesiastes 5:9) (Ibid., I, 2, pp. 35–37).

In the Garden of Eden, affirms Maimon, Adam and Eve followed their true ends, not imaginary ones. They aimed at human perfection and lived in accordance with the universal and rational moral rules. They did not harm each other because a universal and rational moral rule forbids it. They did not avail themselves of the Hobbesian argument common after their sin, namely, “I will not harm the other because I fear the other will harm me”. This, explains Maimon, is not a universally valid moral law, since (1) if the fear is removed I would be allowed to harm the other, and (2) if the rule is universalized, I would have to agree to be harmed by the other (Ibid., I, 15, p. 51. Cf. Pines 1990, pp. 147–48).

5. Conclusions

In Maimonides’ Aristotelian analysis and in Maimon’s Kantian analysis, life in the prelapsarian Garden of Eden was one of Reason and cooperation. In Nahmanides’ Augustinian analysis, it was one of perfect conduct without desire. In Mendelssohn’s Platonic or Halevian analysis, it was one in which intellect and desire were happily balanced. All four thinkers held that the Garden of Eden was a place of absolute tolerance—either because rational people do not harm others, or because desireless people have no desire to harm others, or because well-balanced people have noble virtues. Adam and Eve’s nudity is the paradigmatic illustration of this tolerance.

Why were Adam and Eve able to walk around naked in the Garden of Eden with no fear of being harassed by the other? Why was their vulnerability not abused? According to Maimonides and Maimon, they could safely walk around nude in the Garden because they were purely rational people who do not harm others. According to Nahmanides, they could do so because they had no lust and thus no motivation to molest the other. According to Mendelssohn, they could do so because their faculties of reason and desire were perfectly balanced, which ensured ethical behavior. According to all four thinkers, Adam and Eve could safely walk around nude in the Garden because the Garden was a supremely tolerant place.

I have called Nahmanides’ interpretation “Augustinian”, Mendelssohn’s “Platonic” or “Halevian”, and Maimon’s “Kantian”. These adjectives are, of course, only partly appropriate, and are useful mainly to distinguish the views of the three from each other and from Maimonides. However, it is also true that Nahmanides, Mendelssohn, and Maimon all begin their discussions of the Garden of Eden story with Maimonides’ interpretation in *Guide of the Perplexed*, Part I, Chapters 1–2. Even when those three part ways from Maimonides, their new interpretations testify to the uncanny fecundity of Maimonides’ reading.

6. Excursus: The Merry Masquerade Ball

As noted above, Maimon argued in his *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy* (1790) and in his *Giv'at ha-Moreh* (1791) for the epistemological eminence of metaphysics.¹⁵ The natural sciences, he explained, are based on empirical observation, and thus are contingent and dubious; but metaphysics, like ethics, is founded on Reason itself, and thus is apodictic. Given this view of Maimon's, it is at first glance difficult to understand his charming allegorical story, "The Merry Masquerade Ball", appended to his *Autobiography* (1792–1793). He describes this playful text as "a story from a friend's diary" (Maimon 2018, conclusion, pp. 240–43; 1972–1973, pp. 276–84). He justifies its presentation as a "compensation" for his earlier discussion of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, which may have bored some readers (Ibid., ch. 17, p. 239; 1972–1973, p. 275).

The allegorical story is about a masquerade ball held in honor of a mysterious lady, named Madame Metaphysics. She has never been seen and is known only by means of the words of her gossip chambermaid, Physics. Old and young cavaliers were invited to the ball (Ibid., conclusion, p. 240; 1972–1973, pp. 276–77).

Among the old cavaliers were Monsieur Pythagoras, who danced with a ruler, triangle, and compass in hand, so he could measure his steps; Monsieur Xenophanes, who danced in a circle; Monsieur Heraclitus, who warned of a fire; Monsieurs Leucippus and Democritus, who had no interest in the mysterious lady but ogled her chambermaid; the Sophists, who flitted from one damsel to another; the querulous Monsieur Socrates, who was tossed out of the hall; Monsieur Plato, who claimed that one could win the favor of the mysterious lady only by focusing on certain floating images that he alone saw; Monsieur Aristotle, who wrote a book on the art of dancing (=the *Organon*); Monsieur Zeno of Citium, who danced with an excruciating cramp but pretended to be fine; and Monsieur Pyrrho, who was interested neither in the Madame nor her chambermaid, but thought dancing was salubrious (Ibid., pp. 240–42; 1972–1973, pp. 277–82).

So far Maimon's allegorical story is thought-provoking and not difficult to interpret. However, things become enigmatic when the young cavaliers are introduced.

The young cavaliers danced more gracefully than the old ones (i.e., logic had advanced since the days of the Greeks), but were still unable to get even a glimpse of Madame Metaphysics. Then there arose an exceptionally intelligent cavalier named Monsieur Kant, who said that "the celebrated lady was a child of their imagination [*eine Geburt ihrer Einbildungskraft*]" (Ibid., p. 242; 1972–1973, pp. 282–83). Now, the notion that metaphysics is a mere "child of the imagination" alludes clearly to Kant's introduction to his *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (Kant 1783), where Hume is said by him to hold that metaphysics is "a bastard of the imagination" (*ein Bastard der Einbildungskraft*). However, Kant does not identify with this view. He rejects it and criticizes Hume for holding it (Kant 1950, pp. 5–6; 1783, pp. 8–9). How then are we to understand Monsieur Kant's remark at the masquerade ball? The historical Kant, whose work Maimon had studied very carefully, did not say that metaphysics is a child of the imagination, so why does Maimon put this view into the mouth of Kant the Cavalier?

Had Maimon put these sceptical words into the mouth of Maimonides and not Kant, it would have made sense. As Maimon has explained in his exposition of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides considered metaphysics to be full of doubts, held that all positive attributes of God are figments of the imagination, that even the proposition "God exists" is meaningless, and that the only true praise of God is silence (Maimon 2018, chp. 2, 3, pp. 142, 149–51; 1972–1973, pp. 38, 54–59). Had he been invited to the merry masquerade ball, Monsieur Maimonides might have said that Madame Metaphysics is a figment of the imagination. Why did Maimon attribute the statement to Kant and not to Maimonides? Is it possible that Monsieur Kant has come to the ball disguised as Maimonides—or as David Hume? Or perhaps "Monsieur Kant" is Maimonides or Hume in disguise.

After Monsieur Kant proclaims that Madame Metaphysics is imaginary, the young cavaliers split into two parties or factions (*Parteien*): those who still believe in the existence of the mysterious lady, and those who deny it. We are now told that "My friend, who was

there at the ball, entered into the debate” (Ibid., p. 243; 1972–1973, p. 283). As far as I have seen, all scholars agree that this friend is Maimon himself. This identification follows from the original conceit that the text was copied by Maimon “from a friend’s diary”.

The friend’s friend, that is Maimon, agrees with Monsieur Kant that Madame Metaphysics does not exist, but adds that one can be “a good cavalier without falling in love with such a figment of the imagination [*Gehirngeburt*]”. He then challenges both parties to respond to his arguments (Ibid.). The motif of challenging both parties fits Maimon, who described his philosophy as *both* “rational dogmatism” and “empirical scepticism” (Maimon 2010, p. 222; 1790a, p. 436). In this spirit, he interpreted God’s words to the Snake in the Garden of Eden, “he shall bruise thy head, but thou shalt bite his heel” (Genesis 3:15): the critical philosopher subdues the sceptic with universally valid principles, but the sceptic annoys the critical philosopher with the argument that those principles may have no application (*quid facti?*).¹⁶ Now, while it is true that Maimon was both a Kantian and an anti-Kantian, that is, both an admirer and a critic, it is not true that he rejected the science of metaphysics. He held metaphysics to be rational and apodictic. His “empirical scepticism” concerns primarily physics, not metaphysics. Why, then, did Maimon attribute to himself the view that Madame Metaphysics does not exist? This makes no more sense than his attributing the denial of her existence to Kant.

At this point, a “masked coward from the anti-lady party” refuses Maimon’s challenge, giving the excuse that it was written illegibly. Scholars say that the masked coward is Karl Leonard Reinhold, a Kantian philosopher who was asked by a journal to review Maimon’s *Transcendental Philosophy*, but returned the book claiming it was incomprehensible.

Maimon concludes his allegorical story: “I wonder how this strange masquerade ball ended” (Maimon 2018, conclusion, p. 243; 1972–1973, pp. 283–84. See Beiser 1987, pp. 285–323). How many cavaliers remained true to Madame Metaphysics until the end? How many repudiated her and went home early, disenchanted?

As for us readers, many will wonder why Kant and Maimon are presented in this allegorical story as denying the existence of Madame Metaphysics. After all, they both adored her, believed in her, and sought to rescue her.

Aware of this problem, Abraham Socher suggests that “metaphysics” refers in the allegory not to the discipline of metaphysics as historically understood, but to “the impenetrable thing-in-itself” (*Ding an sich*) (Maimon 2010, p. 141). Socher’s suggestion is on the face of it problematic, since, as we have seen, Maimon uses the term “metaphysics” often in his various works, usually in its commonly accepted sense, and in most cases very favorably. Nonetheless, Socher’s suggestion is strikingly confirmed by Maimon’s discussion of metaphysics in his “Reply to the Previous Letter [by Mr. R.]”, published in the *Berlinisches Journal für Aufklärung* in October 1790:

In [your article] you express the wish that I explain the plan of [my] work ... and ... to which faction [*Partei*] I belong ... [T]he results of [Kant’s] *Critique of Pure Reason* controverting the dogmatists are irrefutable, and hence ... the question “Is metaphysics possible?” (in the sense that Kant understood it, that is, as a science of things in themselves [*Dinge an sich*]) must be answered with a “No”. But ... [I demonstrate] that metaphysics, understood ... as the science of the limits of appearances [*Erscheinungen*] ... is not only possible, but is in fact necessary, because no cognition ... would be possible without it ... So I agree with Kant that the concepts of metaphysics are not real objects of experience, but merely ideas ...

[T]he logical forms of thought ... cannot be used of things in themselves ... So much against metaphysical dogmatism [following Kant] ... But I also join my sceptical friend David Hume in maintaining (in opposition to [Kant’s] critical dogmatism) that [they] do not have any direct application to sensible natural objects ...

I think I am in agreement with Kant as to the definition of metaphysics, namely, metaphysics is the science of things in themselves [*Dinge an sich*]. I differ from Kant only in this: according to him, things in themselves are the substrata of their appearances in us . . . [but] according to me . . . cognition of things in themselves is nothing other than the complete cognition of appearances [*Erscheinungen*]. Metaphysics is thus not a science of something outside appearances, but merely of the limits . . . of appearances themselves.¹⁷

Maimon defines metaphysics for Kant as “the science of things in themselves”, but he himself, under the influence of his “sceptical friend David Hume”, defines it as “the science of the limits of appearances”. On the face of it, this is a big difference, but Maimon nonetheless writes, “I think I am in agreement with Kant as to the definition of metaphysics”. This statement of Maimon’s about his “agreement” with Kant might perhaps be taken as ironic: we agree *except* that he speaks about the *Dinge an sich* and I speak about *Erscheinungen*! It is as if two prisoners in Plato’s Cave were to “agree” about the images on the wall, *except* that one believes they are the things in themselves and the other declares they are mere shadows. However, Maimon’s statement is not necessarily ironic: it may be that for him the difference between the *Dinge an sich* and the *Erscheinungen* is not very great—that is, it is not an absolute difference but merely one of degree. In any case, Maimon may be said both to disagree and to agree with the definition of metaphysics he has assigned to Kant.

Maimon’s “Reply to Mr. R”. makes reference to the “parties” or “factions” (*Parteien*) that sprung up in response to Kant’s philosophy, foreshadowing the “parties” or “factions” at the masquerade ball. If metaphysics is defined as the science of “things in themselves”, which are unknowable, then, according to both Kant and Maimon, Madame Metaphysics will never be seen. However, according to Maimon, but not according to Kant, metaphysics does not pretend to know the things in themselves but only the appearances; in other words, one can be “a good cavalier without falling in love with such a figment of the imagination”. One can be a good metaphysician without trying to embrace Madame Metaphysics. Indeed, Maimon is saying, one cannot be a good metaphysician until one surrenders the hope of embracing her.

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Notes

¹ In this essay, I develop themes discussed in [Harvey \(2007\)](#).

² [Maimonides \(1963\)](#), I, 1–2, pp. 21–26. Arabic original: [Maimonides \(1931\)](#). Medieval Hebrew translation: [Maimonides \(1981\)](#). See [Pines \(1990\)](#). Cf. [Harvey \(1986\)](#).

³ The *Mishneh Torah* is translated in [Maimonides \(1949\)](#). The Hebrew original is found in standard Rabbinic editions.

⁴ [Milton \(1674\)](#), IX, 654. See [Teicher \(1952\)](#), p. 100.

⁵ The words “*raṣon*” and “*ḥefeṣ*” are used here synonymously. Cf. [Maimonides \(1963\)](#), I, 65, p. 158: “will and volition” (Arabic: *al-mashī’ ah wal-irādah*; Hebrew: *ha-raṣon ve-ha-ḥefeṣ*). Although the word “*ḥefeṣ*” sometimes means “desire”, it cannot bear that meaning here. Nahmanides holds that the Tree gives rise to voluntary choice, not desire or lust (which subsequently result from voluntary choice). He explicitly rejects the view of commentators, like Abraham ibn Ezra (*Commentary on Genesis* 3:6) and David Kimhi (*Commentary on Genesis* 3:7), who wrote that the Tree gave rise to “the lust for sex” (*ta’avat ha-mishgal*). The Commentaries of Ibn Ezra and Kimhi are found in standard Rabbinic editions.

⁶ See [Pines \(1988\)](#), pp. 159–64; and [\(1990\)](#), pp. 155–57. The Augustinian influence on Nahmanides was explored by [Funkenstein \(1982\)](#), pp. 129–52.

- ⁷ *De Civitatis Dei* is available in several editions and translations. Without the adjective “*proprium*”, the text would read: “the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil [is] the choice of the will [i.e., free choice]”. The adjective “*proprium*” clarifies that the reference is to the human being’s own independent choice in contradistinction to the will of God.
- ⁸ *De Correptione et Gratia* and *Contra Julianum Pelagianum* are available in several editions and translations.
- ⁹ *De Genesi ad Litteram* is available in several editions and translations. The apparent difference between Augustine’s explicit view that Adam and Eve originally had a “good will” and Nahmanides’ implicit view that they originally had no will is only semantic. See Nahmanides’ reference to “will” (*kirsono*) in his *Commentary on Genesis* 2:8, Nahmanides (1962), p. 35; (1971), p. 70.
- ¹⁰ Kimhi, *Commentary on Genesis* 3:7. See above, n. 7.
- ¹¹ Mendelssohn (2018), pp. 312–13. Hebrew original (Mendelssohn 1783). The *Commentary on Genesis* was written by Solomon Dubno but edited by Mendelssohn, who inserted additions, as it is the present case.
- ¹² Halevi (1880), *Kuzari*, p. 57b. As a student of Zamość in Berlin, the teenaged Mendelssohn transcribed a copy of his *Commentary on the Kuzari*. Arabic text: ed. D.H. Baneth and H. Ben-Shammai (Jerusalem: Magnes, Halevi 1977). See Altmann (1973), pp. 21–23, 25, 346.
- ¹³ Ibid. Cf. Pseudo-Nahmanides (1976), chp. 2, pp. 40–49. Mendelssohn calls the philosophers “*meḥaqquerim*” (inquirers); in chp. 5, pp. 110–11, they are called “*ḥakhme ha-meḥqar*” (sages of inquiry). See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 10, 1118b; and Maimonides (1963), II, 36, p. 371; II, 40, p. 384; III, 8, p. 432; and III, 49, p. 608. Mendelssohn’s harmonization of reason and desire may be seen as one instance of his general tendency to harmonize contradictions. See Strauss (forthcoming): “Mendelssohn understands contradictions as something positive: as a highly dynamic component of Jewish religion and culture . . . [which] is intimately linked to [his] understanding of Judaism as a form of living dialogue”.
- ¹⁴ Maimon (1965), I, 15, pp. 51–52. See also *ibid.*, introduction, pp. 2–3: “The great preeminence of the science of metaphysics over the other sciences has become clear . . . Thus, the science of metaphysics is not derived from experience (*aus Erfahrung*)”. The German words “*aus Erfahrung*” were inserted by Maimon himself in his Hebrew text. Cf. Pines (1990), pp. 147–49. See Maimon (2010), pp. 5–6: “However, there are only two sciences properly so called, insofar as they are based on *principia a priori*, namely, mathematics and philosophy”. See also, p. 127: “Ontology is the science of the general properties of things, that is . . . the properties of every *a priori* determined thing. [It is a] part of metaphysics . . . In metaphysics, [the form] is . . . *a priori*”; and p. 209: “moral good is good only because it is true, i.e., when the particular maxim of actions is in agreement with a universal rule of reason”. German original (Maimon 1790a), pp. 2, 240–41, 409.
- ¹⁵ See above, n. 20.
- ¹⁶ Maimon (1793), p. 58. Cf. Freudenthal (2003), pp. 15–16; Socher (2006), p. 102. In Maimonides’ interpretation of this verse, Adam is intellect and the Snake probably the imagination. If Maimon adopts this symbolism, then critical philosophy is intellect and scepticism is imagination. See Maimonides (1963), II, 30, p. 356.
- ¹⁷ (Maimon 1790b, pp. 52–54, 79–80; 2010, pp. 238–39, 248–49). Mr. R. is identified by scholars with Andreas Riem, editor of the journal.

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