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Reasons, Commandments, and the Common Project



Abstract: The currents of thought characterized as 'Jerusalem' and 'Athens' have some significant affinities. Even giving due weight to the differences between wisdom and worship, between reason and revelation, and between understanding and faith, there are still respects in which philosophy and Judaism, or at least important currents within them, are alike in regard to the fundamental human aspiration. Jerusalem sees this as the loving cognition of God and Athens sees it as delight in excellent activity informed by knowledge of the true and the good. They share the conception of reality as normative for thought, and the conception of our perfection as an elevating knowledge of the real. To be sure, there are other ways of characterizing both philosophy and Judaism, but there is a strong basis for this rendering. The likenesses at issue are especially evident in medieval thought. While elements of the medieval understanding of the world are untenable, medieval thought suggests some central and enduring formulations of what is common to the intellectual and moral projects of Athens and Jerusalem. The issue of ascertaining 'the reasons of the commandments' is explored as a way of illustrating the main claims.

This discussion explicates some respects in which currents of thought often characterized as 'Jerusalem' and as 'Athens' are engaged in a common project. To be sure, there are important figures in each tradition that do, or would, disavow a common project. I do not intend to interpret philosophy overall and Jewish thought overall as being ultimately just one, unified intellectual undertaking. But there are significant ways in which

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a Jerusalem/Athens dichotomy can misrepresent common concerns and common features, including some that are significant and enduring. In ways that are quite significant, Jerusalem and Athens are not dissonant, and they certainly are not *essentially* dissonant.

The present interpretation does not depend upon specific thinkers directly arguing for a deep affinity between Jerusalem and Athens. It is more a study of conceptual architecture than an exploration of how thinkers presented their stances. Various pressures operate on thinkers, and diverse intellectual motives lead them to various kinds of self-identifications, repudiations, avowed affinities, and so forth. My point is that affinities between Jerusalem and Athens need not be forced, despite important differences, and that they are to be found at a fundamental level.

It is relevant to observe that in the use of the expression 'Judeo-Christian' it often seems that the meaning of 'Judeo' is mainly a matter of historical relevance without much substantive reference to Jewish thought itself. Instead, the emphasis tends to be on aspects of Christian theology and Christian thought. The view that distinctively Jewish thought has been superseded and need not be considered as centrally important in its own right is widely shared. One result of this is that the issue of 'Athens and Jerusalem' often involves a Christianized Jerusalem. That matters. It strongly influences the interpretation of Jerusalem—not as a place but as a philosophical, spiritual, and theological set of commitments. While the present discussion will not pursue contrasts between Judaism's Jerusalem and Christianity's Jerusalem in detail, it is intended to approach Athens and Jerusalem with Judaism's Jerusalem primarily in mind.

Much of the discussion here focuses on medieval thinkers. I am not commending a return to a medieval worldview. But the medievals supply an extraordinarily rich body of thought on, and for, the 'Athens and Jerusalem' issue, and their thought is relevant in ways not tied exclusively to the science, metaphysics, and politics of their time. The questions at issue are perennial, and there remains much to learn from those who came before, even long before, despite the fact that there is so much in their world and their worldview with no place in ours.

I.

In discussing this issue, a great deal depends upon the level of description. Is the relevant horizon the Western heritage, the Judeo-Christian

heritage, Jewish philosophy, Jewish theology, the reception of Plato's and Aristotle's works in the medieval period, modern thought, twentieth-century thought, or some other context? In addition, a fine-grained textual analysis may yield one result, and a highly general characterization, another. This is not a concession to epistemological relativism. It is just to note that the considerations that make a claim true or false depend upon the kind of claim and the types of evidence appropriate to it. I'll be discussing matters at a fairly abstract level, but I hope to make clear some specific points about some highly general matters. The main point is that Jewish thought (at least one important current of it) and Western philosophical thought (similarly qualified) share a fundamentally important character and aspiration.

One reason it might seem *obvious* that Jerusalem and Athens are engaged in fundamentally *different* projects is that those in Jerusalem see themselves as answering to the authority of an *agent* who has created the world and who providentially governs it in accord with justice and mercy. For Jerusalem, creation, revelation, and providence (which includes redemption) are fundamental. Those are not elements of the view from Athens, at least not in a way that has obvious, significant likeness. Thus, it could be argued that notwithstanding the interpenetration of philosophy and Jewish religion, the difference in starting points and in the very grounding of the world order makes *all* the difference. Creation, revelation, and providence; there are your markers of profound difference. Accordingly, one of the key differences concerns the place of obedience; answering to God's authority seems a quite different matter from answering to the authority of reason. We will say more about this below, as it concerns the reasons of the commandments.

Nonetheless, important currents of thought originating in Athens and Jerusalem share the crucial notion of *reality as having normative authority for thought*. I realize that this may strike one as an incorrect attribution on both counts. Not every denizen of Athens has held this view, and in the modern world especially, it has been assailed repeatedly. But it is a powerful, sustained, and, I believe, defensible theme of Western philosophy. It is also a central element of Abrahamic religion, though here too, there is room for debate about the formulation. To say that reality has normative authority for thought is to say (at least) the two following things: (i) that what we take to be true and what we take to be good should (and can) reflect the real; and (ii) that a comprehending grasp of the real, a knowing engagement with it, is the most complete perfection of a human being.

The realism in question here is the claim that there is a way that things are, independent of how we conceptualize and describe things, and that, at least to some extent, we can attain knowledge of the world. What there is and what it is like are not domesticated to our conceptions. Our capacities for comprehension are limited, but we are able to attain a correct understanding of many things, and that understanding is crucial to well-lived lives. Reason aspires to enlarge and deepen that understanding. Faith involves the steady conviction that the true and the good do indeed normatively order the world. (Moreover, we can increasingly recognize this to be true through the enlargement of our understanding.)¹ Athens and Jerusalem share the aspiration to be rightly responsive to reality. Thus, at an abstract level but in a significant way, Jerusalem and Athens share the conviction that our perfection centrally includes an *elevating knowledge of the real*. Jerusalem sees this as loving cognition of God. Athens sees it as delight in excellent activity (which may include intellectual and ethical activity) informed by knowledge of the true and the good.²

I am taking a liberty—and inviting plenty of criticism—by characterizing Athens in the way that I have. As remarked above, a great many philosophers would repudiate that description as applied to themselves or to the philosophers they most admire. Kant is one of the more impressive examples. Realism (in this philosophical sense) with regard to truth and in other disputed contexts (such as ethics, scientific theorizing, and aesthetics) does not have the commanding stature it once had. This is a very complicated matter, both analytically and historically. Realism faces challenges from skepticism, various formulations of naturalism, semantic antirealism, and other types of antirealism.

In making the claim on behalf of realism, I am not claiming to give a characterization of philosophy that will apply equally well to all philosophers in all ages. (I rather doubt that there is one.) But, certainly, the claim that there is a connection between realism and what is authoritative for thought is hardly philosophically eccentric, however disputed it

¹ In the Jewish tradition—as in other Western monotheisms—there are important figures that took love of God to have primacy over knowledge in respect of how a human being is most fully perfected and brought most close to God. Hasdai Crescas is a clear case. I do not want to overstate my thesis. However, Crescas, in the Jewish tradition, is like al-Ghazali in the Muslim tradition in using the methods of philosophy to show the limits of demonstration and philosophical knowledge. In that sense, Crescas is not really a striking counterexample to the general contours of the view presented here.

² We do not have to go as far as Alfarabi, who held that “the idea of the Philosopher, Supreme Ruler, Prince, Legislator, and *Imam* is but a single idea,” to recognize a significant confluence of the currents of thought originating in Athens and Jerusalem. Alfarabi, *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, trans. Muhsin Mahdi (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 47.

is. It is at the core of one of the fundamental, enduring conceptions of knowledge and reality. I will not defend it directly here, and in any case, I am not supposing that realism is an all-or-nothing affair—that one is a realist either about everything or about nothing. However, the way that realism figures in the rest of the discussion should indicate some of the reasons why it is to be taken quite seriously. It cannot be summarily regarded as anachronistic or as refuted. (In fact, I believe it can be successfully defended in some key contexts, including morality.)

The ‘elevating knowledge of the real’ of intellectualist perfectionism includes the notion that we are most at home in the world by understanding it, by finding it intelligible, and by answering to that intelligibility in how we lead our lives. This does not shut off further debate about whether the ethical life or the contemplative life is unequivocally best, and we will have a bit to say about that question below. The point is the broader one, that the exercise of reason is that by which we are able to lead distinctively human lives, including the normatively significant aspects of human life. (I should note that I am not using ‘reason’ in a way that is tied to one or another narrow interpretation. For instance, it is not restricted to ‘what can be demonstrated,’ or ‘what is self-evident’ or ‘fully evident’ or ‘logically certain.’)

Athens and Jerusalem are alike in that both faith and reason have truth as an objective, and in a way that completes *us*, rather than by being simply a concern with knowing what is the case. One of the ways in which faith *matters* is that it seeks to engage with the real, the true, and the good because that engagement perfects us. Granted, faith is different from *theorizing*, but that difference should not divert our attention from a common, fundamental concern of faith and reason. Also, wonder (in the philosophical sense) and worship are two different things. But they, and reason and revelation as members of another fundamental pair, need not be considered as competing, mutually exclusive sources of conceptualization and explanation. The members of such pairs can be complementary grounds of evidence and intelligibility. That is one crucial respect in which Jerusalem and Athens share a fundamental orientation.

Many of the ancients and medievals thought of the world order as intelligible because they interpreted it as pervaded by mind. To many thinkers the world was not only intelligible, it was normatively ordered by intelligence, and the connections between the true, the real, and the good were increasingly evident to us as our understanding was enlarged. We no longer think of the world order in that way, and we have very good reasons not to. In fact, in our time the very different view that the world order is dependent upon how it is constituted by modes of thought and by language is widely endorsed. There are variants ranging from a fairly

radical subjectivism to a more Kantian rendering of objectivity as constituted in part by conditions of cognition, among other views. Accordingly, intellectualist perfectionism resonates less with our sense of ourselves. Modern thought is quite skeptical of the notion that human beings have a *telos*, an intellectual *telos* in particular.

Notwithstanding the fundamental changes in how the world and human nature are conceptualized, the normativity of the real is not wrung out of the picture in any obviously conclusive way. Realism, as such, is not committed to mind pervading the world. Realism holds that reason enables us to comprehend the world, to attain a grasp of its intelligibility, including normative considerations. The latter are not to be automatically classified as fully dependent upon us by way of voluntarism, subjectivism, or expressivism. Realism maintains that correct understanding has action-guiding significance, because there are objective considerations underwriting good reasons for action as well as for belief. Not all value reflects *valuing* or voluntarist construction of normative principles. Rather, valuing and principles can be responsive to truth concerning the valuative significance of objective features of the world.³ Normativity is not a subjective laminate that we project onto value-neutral facts. This is not the same as the world's being pervaded by mind; it is the position that there is objective normativity, accessible to cognition.⁴

We rightly have abandoned the notion of a normative order interpreted in terms of a hierarchy of beings, each level of which is guided by its own intelligence, with each of those teleologically guided by the next and more noble one. But normative realism is not exclusively tied to an indefensible physics and metaphysics. One important current of thought in Judaism's conception of normativity is built in large part upon the notion of the 'reasons for the commandments.' This is a conception according to which revelation invites and needs continued study and interpretation, enabling us to better understand commandments as elements of the discipline of perfection they constitute; a discipline for rational beings. The reasons for the commandments are objective, not reflections of attitudes of approval and disapproval, subjectively supervening on facts and acts.

³ See my *Choosing Character: Responsibility for Virtue and Vice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), especially chapter 5, for a defense of metaethical realism in the context of an account of the respects in which agents are responsible for their characters. Chapter 3 contrasts Maimonides' view of some issues of moral epistemology and moral psychology with Aristotle's views. The discussion highlights some of the ways in which Maimonides uses Aristotelian philosophical idiom to make some un-Aristotelian claims.

⁴ See my *Dimensions of Moral Theory: An Introduction to Metaethics and Moral Psychology* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002) for a survey of many of the main positions in metaethics and moral motivation and the philosophical commitments shaping them.

The notion that there are reasons for the commandments implies that there is a point to ongoing reflection upon ethical matters, in order to act on the basis of an understanding of substantive, objective considerations. Taking that point seriously and explicating it is one of the ways in which the medievals showed themselves to be very sophisticated thinkers.

There is, in much Jewish thought, an emphasis on realism as the basis for the normative. The repeated reference to Deuteronomy 4:6 and what it says about the importance of the commandments in regard to understanding—"observe them and do them, for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples"—is indicative of the centrality of the exercise of reason as a basic commitment. Bahya ibn Pakuda writes, "It has thus been demonstrated from reason, Scripture, and tradition that it is our duty to investigate rationally every topic on which we can, by the exercise of our mental faculties, attain clearness."⁵ Jeremiah 9:22–23, too, reflects the special importance of understanding on account of its action-guiding significance:

Thus says the Lord: Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him that glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me. For I am the Lord, who exercises loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness (*hesed, mishpat, and tzedaka*) on earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord.

Knowledge of God and an understanding of the Law are the fundamental ways in which a person is engaged with reality, an engagement that can be corrupted by idolatry, by any form of distraction from the real.

Reason and faith are often regarded as very nearly antithetical in such a way that the best that religion can hope for is some partial accommodation of faith in those areas where reason is not conclusive. The present view calls that reading of the situation into question. We should not presume that reason and faith can at best be an odd couple held together only by some sort of confusion, or that with time and clear thinking, reason will exhaustively fill space previously filled by faith. Reason and faith both forswear idolatry as a corrupting orientation toward what is false, as a commitment to a spurious value and an improper object of concern.

⁵ Quoted in Isadore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 384. The passage is from Bahya ibn Pakuda, *Duties of the Heart*, trans. Yosef Kapah (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1973), p. 67 [Hebrew]. In *The Decisive Treatise* Averroes argued that "we are under an obligation to carry on our study of beings by intellectual reasoning. ... The Law, then, has urged us to have demonstrative knowledge of God the Exalted and all the beings of His creation." Excerpted in Arthur Hyman and James J. Walsh, eds., *Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), p. 298.

And it is not entirely evident that there is nothing essential for faith to do, if we only gave reason its proper and deserved scope and authority.

II.

It is important to guard against overestimating the extent to which reason is understood in a confidently clear and well-defined manner, as though, in contrasting reason and faith, the former is a largely settled, unproblematic matter. To a large extent, the history of philosophy *just is* the contested project of explicating what rationality is. As just one example, consider the different claims that were regarded by Descartes, Locke, Hume, and Spinoza as 'clear and distinct.' Each of them employed that criterion as a fundamental epistemic standard. The Cartesian conception of knowledge runs through all of those thinkers. Some of the most important differences between them are over whether, and to what extent, the conception is instantiated, rather than being disputes about whether being 'clear and distinct' is the correct criterion. In that sense, even Hume's conception of knowledge was Cartesian, though he held that no substantive knowledge claims satisfied it. And that is just *one* conception of what makes for rational knowledge; there are many others.

Since the eighteenth century, epistemology has largely been the project of ascertaining and elaborating the grounds for knowledge claims, given that the Cartesian notion of 'clear and distinct' was not successful. Epistemology has sought other criteria. The issue of certainty and the question of whether a successful knowledge claim must satisfy conditions for certainty remain among the most vexed questions. This hardly means that we are entirely unable to recognize what rationality requires or when a claim is not rational; that is not my point. Nonetheless, when we look at the disputes concerning what a justified knowledge claim is, what makes for necessary truth, how to explicate the nature of causality, and other central philosophical issues, what we find is reason's struggling to ascertain some of its own norms and principles.

This is not part of a case for skepticism but only a reminder that the claims of reason are not themselves always fully evident and beyond contest. We flatter ourselves unduly if we suppose that we possess a conception of rationality or rational justification that can be deployed unproblematically, thereby highlighting faith's epistemic deficiencies by contrast. In addition, we should not rush to the conclusion that questions about the epistemology of religious belief are discretionary, mere accessories to the *real* problems of knowledge. The question of what must be the case in order for us to attain explanatory comprehension of the world (if only incompletely and imperfectly) is a question that straddles

epistemology and metaphysics in a way that might very well overlap with theistic considerations. To be sure, philosophy gets much of its data from the senses and from *a priori* reason, while faith gets much of its data from revelation and authoritative testimony. But it is not evident that that fact signals an unbridgeable difference between them.

The history of theorizing about the criteria for genuine prophecy, about the role of the existence of God in epistemology, and about the epistemological aspects of testimonial authority reveals how religion raises some of the most basic epistemological concerns. Maybe the questions by which it does so are not of interest to a great many epistemologists, but that is not a sign of their unsuitability to be asked. Consider the epistemological role of God in Descartes' and Berkeley's thought, the role of God as a guarantor of knowledge and objectivity. This is not simply appealing to faith, so that God 'saves the day' as though a *deus ex machina*. God has a *logically* essential role in their theories. The theories may be flawed, but the notion that perhaps the fundamental dilemma is 'God or skepticism' is not conceptually contrived or less than fully relevant to epistemology.

If we contrast Jerusalem and Athens by listing propositions that purportedly could be known to be true *only* in one or the other city because of differences concerning what sort of evidence is needed for their truth-evaluability, that will obscure relations of mutual reinforcement between the two cities. For instance, 'Being morally perfect is not a condition for prophecy' is one such (Jerusalem) proposition. Another is 'If a person becomes drunk before ignoramuses, he profanes the Name.' Among (Athens) propositions are 'AIDS is caused by a virus, not a bacterium,' 'Gold has atomic number 79,' and 'Copper has atomic number 29.' The proposition that 'Everything is in the hands of Heaven except fear of Heaven' can motivate questions of determinism, knowledge, and voluntariness for both Jerusalem and Athens. This sort of thing is an interesting exercise, but it misses an important point. The main issue is not whether Jerusalem or Athens has a longer list of true propositions to its credit, or whether some of the entries under the 'Jerusalem' heading should be removed because they are inconsistent with some under the 'Athens' heading, or the other way around. Such an approach treats Jerusalem and Athens as offering competing conceptions only, and that is a misrepresentation.

If we try to answer the question of 'What would have been made of the Greek philosophical inheritance if there had been no Abrahamic religions to receive it?' I suspect that we will be groping without a clear sense of direction. If we ask, 'What would Judaism (in particular, but the Abrahamic religions in general) have become if the Greek philosophical inheritance had never been received?' the result is likely to be similar.

There is, of course, the rabbinic tradition, with significant currents of thought that did not engage directly with philosophy. But we cannot say with confidence what Jewish thought would have been like if medieval history had been quite different. Even when orthodoxy strongly opposed philosophy, it was affected by it, and at the least it changed the self-consciousness of religion. In Islam, al-Ghazali brings this fact into bold relief, and there are striking examples in Christianity as well. Halevi and Crescas do something similar for Judaism.

The braiding of reason and revelation may seem peculiar to the medieval period, and that is how the matter is often handled in intellectual history. Among the plausible reasons for this are the absorption of Greek philosophy by faith traditions, the intellectual traffic between the different faith traditions, and their dominant position in intellectual culture. Despite all that, we should not overstate the extent to which the braiding is unique to the Middle Ages. The braids were not fashioned by taking a strand from here and a strand from there, with 'here' and 'there' having a sharply marked boundary between them. The medievals are evidence of how it is possible to seek an enlarged, more penetrating comprehension, employing both reason and faith, and how that helps us achieve a better understanding *of* reason and *of* faith. (Examination of the arguments concerning creation in contrast to the eternity of the world illustrates this powerfully. Those arguments concerned the question of where demonstration holds sway and just how the premises required for demonstration are attained.)

For all the presence and power of theological commitments, many of the medievals saw themselves as seeking truth, full stop, and they were interested in finding resources wherever they might be found. Maimonides wrote: "Hear the truth from whoever says it."⁶ Al-Ghazali wrote of religion that "the rejection of natural science is not one of its conditions, except with regard to particular points which I enumerate in my book, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*."⁷ For him, those points concern bodily resurrection, God's knowledge of particulars, and creation in contrast to the eternal existence of the world. There indeed were fundamental issues challenging the consistency of reason and revelation—the ones al-Ghazali mentions are among them. They were central issues for Jewish thinkers as well. But this is not decisive evidence that the members of the pairs 'reason and revelation' or 'faith and rational

⁶ Moses Maimonides, "Eight Chapters," in Raymond L. Weiss and Charles Butterworth, eds., *Ethical Writings of Maimonides* (New York: Dover, 1975), introduction, p. 60.

⁷ Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, excerpted in Hyman and Walsh, *Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, p. 272.

belief' have utterly distinct bases. Al-Ghazali and others were not simply arguing, "It doesn't matter what reason concludes; these are my beliefs." They claimed to show that in many contexts the arguments reason gives are not demonstrative and do not exclude beliefs with other grounds. Familiar formulations such as 'the synthesis of reason and faith' or 'the combination of reason and revelation' do not quite capture the medieval intellectual disposition in the right terms.

Returning to the moral context and the reasons for the commandments, we find a long Jewish tradition of elaborating these reasons through a complicated dialectic of moral thought. This includes questions about what it means for a commandment to be rationally justified. Are any moral principles necessarily true, self-evident or demonstrable? If not, what are the relevant justificatory standards? Could unaided reason have arrived at fully justified commandments, or is our situation such that, only *once disclosed* by revelation, we are able to ascertain the reasons for moral requirements? How do we draw the line between rational commandments and those that are fully dependent upon revelation? Do the latter have reasons though they exceed our capacity for grasping them?⁸ And so forth. While there is a version of these questions internal to the Jewish tradition, they are also the sorts of questions that address justificatory issues for moral thought in general. Are moral judgments and principles rational 'all the way down'? If so, what are the form and content of that rationality?

Among the enduring concerns of Jewish moral thought are these questions: (i) What is the moral worth of acting in conformity with what is required even though the agent might lack understanding of the rationale of the requirement? (ii) Are different levels of moral understanding appropriate to different people in a way that is not problematic for moral life? (iii) What is the standing of moral ideals in relation to moral requirements, and what is the relation of the assessment of moral agents to moral ideals? Jewish moral thought includes extensive reflection upon the relations between reasons, the understanding of those reasons, one's motives, and ideals; and upon the complex, concrete details of moral life and moral learning.⁹

⁸ Saadiah and Maimonides are especially rich resources for exploration of these questions. Bahya ibn Pakuda is also relevant.

⁹ In discussing the relation between reason and traditional authority in Maimonides, David Hartman writes: "Yet, according to Maimonides, the telos of Halakhah is to create ideal conditions for the realization of intellectual love of God. Maimonides must therefore develop an approach to halakhic authority which will make it compatible with a spiritual life dedicated to philosophic knowledge of God. He must know that obedience to authority is not the sole virtue of Halakhah. If Halakhah encourages the

In addition, Jewish thought is highly sensitive to several aspects of the intersection between moral epistemology and moral psychology in some very constructive ways. For instance, however rationalistic one's conception of moral principles, it is almost certainly true that people develop their patterns of judgment and deliberation, and the dispositions that make for virtues and vices, through acculturation and habituation rather than primarily learning a moral theory or body of principles. The understanding of principles and their rightness needs to be supported by habits of sensibility, attention, self-awareness, and perception. *Then* the justifications can be learned and understood and critically assessed. This points to the importance of social and community life in the acquisition of moral dispositions and capacities for making discriminating moral judgments.

The Law provides the guidance of action that shapes the dispositions people need to attain a clear and intelligible grasp of what makes the commandments rationally sound requirements. In this respect, the Law's role is akin to that which Aristotle attributed to habit; without good habits, agents will not develop the dispositions (of judgment, awareness, sensibility, desire, and so forth) needed in order to understand what makes the elements of practical wisdom what they are. In Judaism there is a dynamic of reciprocal reinforcement between following the Torah and perfecting one's understanding of God, morality, and human good. For the person who starts out with fundamental, correct beliefs about such things as the existence, unity, and moral perfection of God, and whose life includes a sustained effort to follow the Torah and to attain understanding, his understanding and commitment to virtuous activity will be enlarged and deepened.

The task of a well-led life involves study, consideration, and reflection upon the requirements.¹⁰ The realist aspiration is committed to the need for inexhaustible reflection and the pursuit of understanding that is never complete. Reason may not render the point of all the laws trans-

development of a critical mind capable of independent reflection and evaluation, it cannot be exclusively characterized by appeals to authority which demand unconditional obedience." Hartman, *Maimonides: Torah and Philosophic Quest* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1976), pp. 104–105.

¹⁰ That moral requirements may not be rationally assessable in a full and transparent manner is probably a more pervasive feature of morality than is often acknowledged. Consider how difficult it is to draw a sharp line between morality and etiquette. Consider, also, how important habits of etiquette can be to developing moral sensibility. Addressing the issue of the rationality of the *hukkim*, Twersky writes: "Maimonides—foreshadowed by R. Abraham ibn Ezra and immediately followed by R. David Kimhi—sees the antecedent of "wisdom and understanding" in *hukkim*: it is precisely the *statutes*, those troublesome, tantalizing, rationally recalcitrant laws, which are a source and a sign of wisdom. The apparent paradoxicality of this interpretation quickly gives way to a refreshing inference: the *hukkim must* be intelligible and rational:

parent, but there is always more intelligibility that can be attained. There is always further to go in attaining an elevating knowledge of the real, and further attainments are also attainments of human perfection.¹¹ In the Jewish tradition, revelation does not end with the giving of Torah; in important respects, it *begins* with it. Disclosure of the Law depends upon ongoing interpretation, commentary, dialectic, and argument. Rational elaboration of the Law is also elaboration of our self-understanding and our understanding of the world.¹²

otherwise they could not prove that the Torah as a whole is grounded in reason and wisdom.” Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides*, p. 385.

¹¹ This is not to say that ‘(Platonist) loving knowledge of the Good’ is the same as ‘Maimonidean loving knowledge of God,’ or that Jewish piety is just a modification of Greek virtue, or vice versa. As noted above, creation, providence, and revelation make a fundamental difference, whatever other differences there are. (Consider differences between Jerusalem and Athens concerning the moral psychology of shame and repentance, one’s relations with other members of the community, the nature of politics, and so forth.) And anyway, the inheritances from Athens and Jerusalem are diverse in their own right. Each has been a center of multi-layer, multi-dimensional argument, dialectic, and intellectual heterogeneity. Still, in the midst of that we can discern a center of gravity concerning what makes for a person’s most basic relation to the world.

¹² It should be noted that within realism, one influential approach to ethics is naturalistic, and naturalistic ethics typically charges religious ethics with including something both unnecessary and inscrutable. For its part, religious ethics charges naturalism with an inexplicable anchoring of the normative. The world, as understood by practical reason (so the naturalistic position would hold), contains normative reality, objective value considerations, and that is just a fact, one with which the naturalist is comfortable. There is no further level or type of explanation required in order to account for moral requirements and their rightness. Given the way the world is, and given what we are, we can recognize moral requirements grounded in objective features of human beings and the world. Yet this is what a theistic conception of ethics finds unsatisfactory and incomplete. The issue is whether normative realism could be a brute fact. If practical reason, virtue, and perfection are adequately underwritten by objective considerations, why clutter the account with non-naturalistic facts or agents? Why is it necessary to include God, revelation, and commands? This is a serious point of dispute between approaches both plausibly coming under the heading of ‘realism.’ I will not pursue the question here, though it merits acknowledgment because of its importance. It gets to the core of some of the most fundamental issues concerning the ‘placing’ and status of moral values in the world overall. Of Maimonides, David Hartman writes, “Maimonides’ description of *olam ha-ba* in his legal works would be both unintelligible and undesirable to anyone who did not appreciate contemplative joy and disinterested love...” (Hartman, *Torah and Philosophic Quest*, p. 78). And: “The role of philosophy in transforming the individual’s worship of God from one based on self-interest to one of disinterested love is, in part, a function of its capacity to inculcate notions of joy which transcend the pleasures of the body. The activity of intellectual reasoning brings about a new man insofar as it alters man’s conception of what constitutes joy and happiness...” (p. 79). Isaac Husik’s description of ibn Pakuda’s thought shows how, in it, several of the issues and themes we have been discussing are integrated: “The admonition of the positive law serves as an introduction to the suggestions of our own reason and prepares the way for the latter.... To worship God not merely because the law prescribes it, but because reason itself demands it, denotes a spiritual advance, and puts one in the grade of the prophets and pious men

Of course, we must grant that if we see moral life as answering to divine command, the notions of moral authority, the nature of sanction, and the character of moral motivation are all impacted in significant ways. Answering to the Lord differs from being committed to what reason rightly understands to be good, even when answering to the Lord is answering to what reason rightly understands to be good. Here it may seem that Athens and Jerusalem put us on different pathways. One of the things that may account for the difference is the covenantal revelation. It is not just a differentiating feature; it seems to change *everything*. It has an impact on metaphysics, moral anthropology, politics, and even conceptions of will and causality. In that respect, a case could be made that Jerusalem and Athens are not just different cities but different worlds.

For example, if the Law is given in revelation, then human beings must have the volitional capacity to fulfill its requirements. Otherwise, the Law would be (as Maimonides argued) futile. But in order to fulfill its requirements—and to repent when one should ethically re-orient oneself—it must be possible to act in ways that are in conflict with one's dispositions as so far formed. This explains why character change is a possibility in Jewish moral anthropology in a more robust manner than in Aristotle's view of the matter. What we can do is altered by what is required of us.

Another important feature of the covenantal relation is that *gratitude* has a fundamental role that it does not have in a non-theistic ethics. A non-theistic ethics may assign key places to the metaphysical dependence of beings on a first cause, to naturally pleasing virtuous activity, to gratitude toward others, and to other things that are key elements of theism. But there won't be the sort of gratitude which in a theistic ethics is based upon the very being of things; the character of the *awareness* of dependence is quite different. It is grounded in the relations between the real, the good, and the true, with their source in a creating, just, and merciful God. This is connected to other differences concerning the meaning and role of humility, pride, self-love, and repentance.

It is understandable that many see the issue of answering to God and answering to reason in terms of either/or. Yet the spiritual dimension of answering to God is not eliminated by there being objective ethical considerations, and the latter are not rendered otiose by the spiritual dimension. Again, it is crucial that reason and revelation may be modes of access to one reality and one body of truth. We have already noted

chosen of God. In this world their reward is the joy they feel in the sweetness of divine service; in the next world they attain to the spiritual light which we cannot declare or imagine." Husik, *Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), p. 99.

an important analogy between the philosophical suspicion of distraction from the real and the good, on the one hand, and the theological suspicion of idolatry as a corrupting distraction from the true and the good, on the other. Maimonides took the elimination of idolatry from the world to be the very point of the Law: “You know from the texts of the Torah figuring in a number of passages that the first intention of the Law as a whole is to put an end to idolatry....”¹³ And this is related to his intellectualist perfectionism. He says that “the bond between you and Him... is the intellect”¹⁴ and that “we have made it clear several times that love is proportionate to apprehension.”¹⁵ For all of the differences between Athens and Jerusalem, they are not naturally or necessarily alien to each other.

An important feature common to Athens and Jerusalem as sources of thought about perfection is that the exercise of knowledge of the good is appreciated *as* a good. Intellectual perfection is *enjoyed*. It is, as Aristotle argued, pleasing by nature and the very core of happiness. It is an activity, not simply a state or condition or experience. Perhaps virtuous activity is not always pleasurable in the most familiar sense, but it is gratifying insofar as it is an excellent exercise of our capacities, reflective of the true and the good, free of internal conflict and unspoiled by regret.¹⁶ The Aristotelian insight about the enjoyment of virtuous activity can be at home in the context of Jewish moral life. Indeed, it can help us understand how there can be joy in fulfillment of the Law. In addition, it does not require acceptance of an Aristotelian philosophy of nature. There is nothing essentially anachronistic or untenable about the asserted relation between the excellence of activity and the objectivity of normative considerations, on one hand, and finding excellent activity pleasing in a distinctively rich and enduring manner, on the other.¹⁷

¹³ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 3:29, p. 517.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3:51, p. 620.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 621.

¹⁶ Aristotle observed that facing lethal dangers is not pleasurable, but the ways in which it is not are distinct from the painfulness of cowardice. The courageous person can appreciate his or her courage, and that appreciation is merited even though, in Aristotle's view, the virtuous agent feels great pain at the prospect of death because of how that person finds it worthwhile to be alive. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 3, ch. 10. Theism may disagree with Aristotle on this and several other points of moral psychology. But there can be considerable agreement on some of the main contours of the moral psychology of virtue and vice.

¹⁷ The passages quoted from Hartman (about Maimonides) in note 12, above, are relevant here as well. They point to the joy of intellectual love of God and the way in

In Aristotle's philosophy, the question of the relation between ethical activity and intellectual activity is complicated by the fact that he did not conclusively state whether by the completeness or perfection that constitutes happiness he meant 'immortally sharing in life-activity (contemplation) that is no longer dependent upon our biological existence,' or whether he meant 'exercising our capacities as fully as we are able to, given the fact that we are natural beings who will not attain immortal life-activity.' In book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics* he appears to supply considerations in favor of each interpretation. We need not try to resolve the interpretive issue here, while we acknowledge its genuine bearing on theistic concerns with human perfection. Some of the same issues about what it is that is the best thing in us, and what is its best activity, inform the theistic tradition.

We should note one important difference between Athens and Jerusalem concerning perfection, a difference related to the issue of gratitude. In Judaism, God is said to love human beings, and human beings can and should love God. This is quite unlike the relation between the intellect and the world in the philosophical tradition, in which there is no one to whom gratitude can be directed, and, while we can love knowledge, what we know does not love us. The love of knowledge is unlike the two-way love between God and creatures.¹⁸ It may be that the good is the cause of desire in the widest sense—that the good is the formal cause of life-activity in an ultimate sense—without providential care (in the one direction) or loving cognition (in the other). Covenant, gratitude, and love are elements of the religious tradition in ways that distinguish

which this elevates one above bodily pleasures. The pleasure is not what is aimed at in intellectual love, but it is a perfecting feature, making the activity enjoyable in itself.

Hasdai Crescas did not endorse the sort of intellectualism found in Maimonides and others. He put as great an emphasis on the pleasure of good activity, but in his view, the will was the locus of both the activity and the enjoyment. For "the coveted purpose of acts of worship and good deeds is the desire and joy therein. This conforms both with the Torah and speculation, and it agrees with numerous rabbinic statements. Furthermore, this [i.e., the desire and the joy] is nothing other than the pleasure of will in doing good." Crescas, *The Light of the Lord*, excerpted in Charles Manekin, ed., *Medieval Jewish Philosophical Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 231.

¹⁸ In the discussion following my presentation of a version of this paper at the September 2008 conference on political Hebraism in Princeton, Joshua Weinstein raised the question of the difference between philosophical (unrequited) love and religious (requited) love. While from the religious perspective love of knowledge appears incomplete, from the philosophical perspective it could be said that love of knowledge is that through which a human being's *telos* is perfected. The richest, most enduring enjoyment is thereby attained; no excellence necessary for happiness remains unattained. The theist still finds this inadequate, but the philosophical love of knowledge is not clearly or certainly somehow defective.

it from the philosophical tradition. But they do not alienate the former from the latter, and they can be helpfully articulated and understood through the latter. Again, these highly general features of knowledge, reality, and the human *telos* need not be confined to the overall metaphysics and philosophy of nature of the medievals.

CONCLUSION

Athens and Jerusalem supply different starting points for the way into life and through life and the world. Despite the differences between starting points, when there has been interaction between Jerusalem and Athens, some of the deepest concerns have been understood as shared, and there has been formidable mutual reinforcement between the approaches to those concerns. We are enormously fortunate in that. We are thereby provided with inexhaustible resources for asking and answering questions regarding the most significant concerns of rational agents. This is biblical (and talmudic) inexhaustibility and, at the same time, intellectual inexhaustibility.

We should guard against overstating the commonality; so much of Western intellectual history has involved battles between religion and science, and intense competition—sometimes constructive, sometimes not—between their claims to authority. However, it is easy, and mischievous, to caricature Jerusalem and Athens, and to create tension and conflict where it need not be. Reason is not in a realm wholly free of history and dispositions of substantive, normative concern. Religion is not unquestioning obedience to authority without regard to reason. We can *say* that reason is free in that way and that religion is beholden in that way; such things are often said. But in most cases, they are neither illuminating nor accurate, and they often misrepresent and misdirect intellectual aspiration. As noted at the outset, I am not claiming that philosophy and Judaism are one and the same project. Instead, I have tried to bring into relief a deep current of affinity between them, having to do with the realist aspiration of each.

There are respects in which the given of faith is not determined, not set, by reason, though we reason *from* it; while for reason, the given may yield to reason's own dialectic. It often does; that is the history of philosophy. But in Judaism, what is given does not shut down reason's dialectic. It would be more accurate to say that it is given *for* that dialectic and that it requires the critical, justificatory, and explicatory activity of thought, in contrast to being an ossifying, constraining dogma.

There is a great deal in Torah that is deeply perplexing to reason. On the other hand, rationality can appear unanchored and vulnerable

to nihilistic, skeptical, or relativistic challenges without a grounding that exceeds that which unaided reason can ensure. Each can seem incomplete to the other. Perhaps it really is that reason's incompleteness cannot be made up by reason alone, and that there is a place for faith that reason can acknowledge. Perhaps religion, in turn, cannot be complete without reason's articulating and elaborating what is given by faith. Important currents of Jewish thought are enduring evidence that there are significant respects in which seeking to understand the Law and seeking to understand the world are informed by one overall *telos*, in which reason, nature, history, and revelation are integrally ingredient.

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