

A PHILOSOPHER BETWEEN TWO CULTURES

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1. *A Philosopher of No Persuasion?*

Salomon Maimon was a philosopher. But did he also develop a philosophy of his own? Or did he rather engage in “problem solving”, improving on the philosophies of others? This question has been discussed for two centuries already, but has yet to be resolved.¹

The issue is often circumvented with the claim that Maimon was the philosopher who opened the way from Kant to Fichte and Hegel. Thus his achievements can be acknowledged, while the question of whether he also developed a philosophy of his own loses its importance. In this perspective, the significance of his thinking derives from its telos, i.e., the philosophies of Fichte and Hegel, which it helped bring about, and not from its own merit.

This approach is unsatisfactory both on philosophical and historiographical grounds. If we do not share the view that the development from Kant to Hegel (via Fichte and Schelling) followed a “logical necessity”;² if, moreover, we are not even convinced that the philosophy of Hegel is an *Aufhebung* of its predecessors; then we have good reasons to consider all the contemporary alternatives in their own right, and not simply insofar as they prepared the way for Hegel. Without philosophical motivation, there is certainly no reason to engage in such teleological historiography. Maimon’s philosophy should hence be considered in its own terms; and in order to promote such a re-examination, I plan to discuss major

¹ “Maimon ist kein Systematiker. Ihm liegt die Analyse mehr als die Synthese, die Frage mehr als die Antwort.” Klapp (1968), 2. Engstler (1990) begins this discussion with reference to Maimon’s “eigenwilligen Anspruch, zugleich eine dogmatische und eine skeptische Position vertreten zu können” (ibid., 243). Engstler believes that Maimon was not a systematic philosopher, but rather a “*Problemdenker*” (ibid., 250-251), and suggests that this is due to his Talmudic heritage (ibid., 254-255). Beiser (1987; 285-323) attempts to synthesize a compromise position (ibid., 303-306).

² Kroner (1921), V.

hindrances to its interpretation, its “notoriously obscure” presentation, and its seemingly “paradoxical combination of rationalism, skepticism and criticism”.³

In particular, I will suggest that the difficulties in understanding Maimon’s philosophy are due to its unique inter-cultural character. I will propose that Maimon philosophized in the form of commentaries, as was common in pre-modern philosophy, and that reading these commentaries requires special hermeneutic techniques, usually unfamiliar to modern readers. Furthermore, I will argue that Maimon, who was already well-versed in medieval Jewish philosophy when he became acquainted with modern European philosophy, combined both traditions, and that the interpretation of his writings should take their inter-cultural nature into account.

2. *The Outsider*

Maimon was and remained a philosophical and a social outsider (both to Jewish-German and to German society in general), and these roles reinforced one another. At least one aspect of this constellation was well formulated by Maimon himself in a letter to Goethe:

My circumstances are quite well known. They are just as the circumstances of a man cannot otherwise be, who has no fortune, no profession, who practices no business or trade, who thoughtlessly fell in love with philosophy, wedded himself to it without first considering how he would support himself and philosophy. [...] I can also make no claim on no public teaching position. The novelty of the case in itself (since no one of my nation has yet ever held such a teaching position), want of language and diction, an original way of thinking very different from the usual, and the love of independence from everything that limits performance according to a particular norm put impediments enough in the way.⁴

³ Beiser (1987), 287

⁴ Schulz (1954), 272-288; the letter, 282-283. Maimon proves his point concerning “want of language and diction” in this very paragraph: the double negation in the penultimate sentence is grammatically wrong, and the German style of the entire letter is rather helpless. I am indebted to Peter McLaughlin for the translation of this paragraph, as well as for the text by Gerhard Lehmann, quoted below.

Maimon also knew that he paid a price for his exclusion from academic circles. He wrote with bitterness that Herr Reinhold was professor at a renowned university, whereas “*ich hingegen gar nichts bin*” (IV, 204; see also 208 and 261).

Maimon's autobiography and the anecdotes told about his lifestyle⁵ show that his eccentricity also excluded him from the cultural and literary circles in Berlin. Intentionally or not, he offended the civil conventions of hygiene, tidiness, and courtesy, as well as the ethics of supporting oneself and not being dependent on patrons; and thus he was eventually rebuffed by both the literary and academic sets.⁶

In addition, Maimon's attempts to collaborate with the *Haskala* (Jewish Enlightenment) circles in Berlin were of brief duration, and his projected (perhaps also written) Hebrew textbooks in mathematics and physics, which were announced in *Hameassef*, the organ of these circles, were never printed. Moreover, the publication of his Hebrew commentary to Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* was halted after the issuance of just the first part. In spite of ample recognition from Kant, Fichte, and others, he did not fare much better as a German author. His first book in this language was adjudged too complex to be reviewed, and in the preface to his later *Logik* he deemed it necessary to address potential reviewers and thereby forestall the devastating criticism he expected — and it seems that the *Logik* was also his last publication to receive any notice worth mentioning. In later years and until his death, he lived on the country estate of his benefactor, Count Kalkreuth, in Silesia, remote from all centers of learning and Enlightenment, and his later writings seem to have been a cry in the wilderness. Most of his *opus posthumum* (both in Hebrew and German) was not published, and some of it was possibly lost or willfully destroyed. Maimon again received attention only with the rise of Neo-Kantianism, which brought some of his themes back

⁵ Salomon Maimon's *Lebensgeschichte. Von ihm selbst geschrieben und herausgegeben von K. P. Moritz. In zwei Theilen*. Berlin: Friedrich Vieweg dem ältern, 1792 und 1793 (I, X-588). Later editions and translations of this important autobiography are unfaithful to the original, and sometimes the alterations are extremely irresponsible. The text is usually abridged considerably, and the order of its chapters rearranged.

See also Wolff (1813).

⁶ Maimon's person comes into vivid relief when contrasted with Mendelssohn's. Mendelssohn came from a different, yet comparable, background, assimilated to German culture and was at home in both. So much so that he became a foremost representative of normative German Enlightenment philosophy. He was dubbed the German Socrates, while Maimon was very aptly called a "Cynic" philosopher. See Schulte (2002), 209-219. See also Freudenthal (2002b), 369-385.