

MAIMONIDES' CONCEPTS OF PROVIDENCE AND THEODICY

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MAIMONIDES' concept of theodicy is his vindication of the justice and goodness of God as the creator or ground of a universe in which there appears to be injustice and other evils. The problem of theodicy is clearly stated several times in the *Moreh*.¹ Maimonides writes:

... we notice an absence of system in human affairs. Some pious men live a miserable and painful life, whilst some wicked people enjoy a happy and pleasant life.²

Again, in describing theodicy as the central problem of the Book of Job, Maimonides states:

... that which is related of him [Job] is an experience of frequent occurrence, [and] ... a source of perplexity to all thinkers ... This perplexity is caused by the account that a simple and perfect person, who is upright in his actions, and very anxious to abstain from sin, is afflicted by successive misfortunes, namely, by loss of property, by the death of his children, and by bodily disease, though he has not committed any sin.³

Still, despite the seeming evidence of a lack of justice in human affairs, Maimonides insists repeatedly that the Jewish opinion, and the correct view, is that God is absolutely just. The evils that occur to man are completely deserved.

It is likewise one of the fundamental principles of the Law of Moses our Master that it is in no way possible that He, may He be exalted, should be unjust, ... all the calamities that befall men and the good things that

¹ I.e., the *Moreh Nevukhim*. The *Moreh Nevukhim* will henceforth be referred to in these notes as *MN*. Reference will be made to the following translations: S. Munk, *Le Guide des Egares* (Paris, 1856); M. Friedländer, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (New York, 1881); and S. Pines, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago, 1963). These translations have on occasion been altered to aid general comprehension. The discussion of Maimonides' concepts of providence and theodicy in this study is based solely on his work in the *MN*. The author's belief is that the *MN* is Maimonides' basic theological work, and is meant to provide the key to understanding whatever theological references he makes in his other writings, such as the *Mishneh Torah*.

² *MN*, III, 16, tr. Fr.

³ *MN*, III, 22, tr. Fr.

come to men, be it a single individual or a group, are all of them determined according to the deserts of the men concerned through equitable judgment in which there is no injustice whatever. Thus if some individual were wounded in the hand by a thorn, which he would take out immediately, this would be a punishment for him, and if he received the slightest pleasure, this would be a reward for him — all this being according to his deserts.⁴

Maimonides does not rest with the mere assertion of God's justice. In an elaborately devised theodicy, he attempts to resolve the apparent contradiction between the evils men suffer and a perfectly just and good God. Maimonides' concept of theodicy, however, is not presented in a single, systematic discussion. Relevant passages and even chapters appear scattered throughout the *Moreh*. The purpose of this study is to bring together and analyze these various materials relating to Maimonides' concept of theodicy, and thereby present a systematic exposition of his view.

I

Principal among the subjects that contribute to Maimonides' theodicy are his views on providence, cosmogony, cosmology, and metaphysics.⁵ Of these, none is more fundamental for theodicy than providence. One general point, however, must be noted before entering into a discussion of Maimonides' theory of providence. This is that Maimonides considers a proper inquiry into the nature of providence as constituting one of the "Secrets of the Law [Torah]."

As for . . . the discussion concerning His creation of that which He has created, the character of His governance of the world, the "how" of His providence with respect to that which is other than He . . . all these are profound matters. In fact, they are truly the Secrets of the Torah and the mysteries constantly mentioned in the books of the prophets and in the sayings of the Sages . . .⁶

A subject the proper discussion of which constitutes a "Secret of the Law" is one whose truth must be kept from the uneducated masses of ordinary men,

4 *MN*, III, 17, tr. Pines.

5 The subject of theodicy, involving as it does other "secret" subjects, must itself be considered one of the "secrets of the Law." For this reason alone, Maimonides would not discuss theodicy in an unambiguous, systematic discussion. Fragmentizing a subject into its constituent parts and then scattering them throughout the *Moreh* is one of Maimonides' favorite devices for hiding his true view on a secret subject. On the methodology of his secret writing, see Maimonides' Introduction to the *MN*. Cf. also my "Maimonides' Concept of Mosaic Prophecy," *HUCA* XL–XLI (1969–70) pp. 325 f. The primary purpose of this study is to systematize and elucidate Maimonides' concepts of providence and theodicy, not to review the long history that has been enjoyed by some of the elements making up these concepts.

6 *MN*, I, 35.

women, and children.⁷ The reason for this is that a true belief regarding a subject that must be dealt with as a secret requires a profound understanding of metaphysics and science in order to be understood. Since the masses lack such knowledge, they are unable to comprehend the true belief, and their misunderstanding would ultimately harm them.⁸ Still Maimonides agrees that the masses do require some sort of beliefs regarding those subjects classified as "Secrets of the Law," even though these beliefs, in reality, would be essentially untrue. This need of the masses is satisfied by tradition. The teachings of tradition, literally understood, are essentially untrue, but they do provide beliefs that are comprehensible to the masses and appropriate for their religious purposes. In the following passage, Maimonides summarizes his position.

You must know that it is very injurious to begin with this science, I mean the divine science . . . or to explain the meaning of the parables of the prophets . . . On the contrary, it is necessary to educate the young and instruct the less intelligent according to their comprehension . . . This is the reason why "the Torah speaks in the language of man" as we have explained. This is so because it [the Torah] is presented in such a manner as to make it possible for the young, the women, and all the people to begin with it and to learn it. Now it is not within their power to understand these matters as they truly are. Hence they are confined to accepting tradition with regard to all . . . opinions that are of such a sort that it is preferable that they should be pronounced true . . . and this in such a manner that the mind is led towards the existence of the objects of these opinions . . . but not toward grasping their essence as it truly is.⁹

Thus the recognition that Maimonides considers the subject of providence to be a "Secret of the Law" leads to two conclusions. First that Maimonides' theory of providence differs essentially from providence as traditionally understood; and second that Maimonides will deliberately obscure his discussion of providence to conceal it from the unqualified reader.

The traditional notion of providence among the Jews is laid down in Scripture, and is in general the view commonly associated with theistic religions. Providence, according to traditional Jewish usage, may be defined broadly as "the guidance of a potent and prescient God, conceived of as a person, who creates and conserves the universe, and who, through continuous miraculous intervention in human history, cares for the Jews in particular and mankind in general."¹⁰ This notion of providence is understood in patently human terms, and the God who administers its guidance and care is depicted

7 I.e., the uneducated masses among the Jews as well as the masses generally.

8 *MN*, I, 32–34.

9 *MN*, I, 33.

10 Other theistic religions, of course, understand God's particular care to be directed to their own communities.

anthropomorphically in Scripture and by the Sages.¹¹ Maimonides' rejection of the traditional view of providence is indicated throughout the *Moreh*. The fact that it is the view expressed by the literal meaning of Scripture and writings of the Sages is no evidence of its truth. Scripture, the Talmud, and Midrash, as noted earlier, were not intended to communicate truth in any ordinary sense. They are works intended primarily for the religious education of the philosophically uneducated masses, whereas truth comes through a knowledge of metaphysics and science. Hence Scripture and the rabbinic writings are written in the form of parables.¹² As such they contain two entirely different sets of meanings: an external, mythological sense appropriate to the masses' deficient understanding, and a secret, true sense intended for the qualified intellectual elite. Thus Maimonides says the traditional view of providence is based on the literal meaning of Scripture and is, therefore, not to be taken either as the real opinion of Judaism, or as the true opinion suitable for the philosophically trained thinker. In the following passage, Maimonides makes this point in barely concealed fashion.

We have already stated, in one of the chapters of this treatise, that there is a great difference between bringing to view the existence of a thing and demonstrating its true essence. We can lead others to notice the existence of an object by pointing to its accidents, actions, or even most remote relations to other objects, e.g., if you wish to describe the king of a country to one of his subjects who does not know him, you can give a description and an account of his existence in many ways. You will either say to him, the tall man with a fair complexion and grey hair is the king, thus describing him by his accidents . . . Now in all that we have said by way of parable there is nothing to give an indication of the ruler's essence and of the true reality of his substance in respect of his being a ruler. A similar thing has occurred with regard to the knowledge of God . . . given to the multitude in all the books of the prophets and also in the Torah. For it was found necessary to teach all of them that God exists . . . That God exists was then shown to ordinary men by means of similes taken from physical bodies . . .¹³ Our Sages laid down a general principle, by which the literal sense of the physical attributes of God mentioned by the prophets is rejected; a principle which evidently shows that our Sages were far from belief in the corporeality of God, and that they did not think this was a matter that lent itself to imagination or to confusion. For that reason they employ in the Talmud and the Midrashim phrases [with a literal sense] similar to those employed by the prophets, without any circumlocution; they knew that there could be no doubt about their metaphorical character . . . Now, it was well known that in parables

11 Authors of the Talmud and the Midrash.

12 On the nature of parables, see my *Maimonides and Abrabanel on Prophecy*, (Cincinnati, Hebrew Union College Press, 1970), pp. xviii ff., and elsewhere. By the phrase "rabbinic writings" is meant generally the works of the Pharisees, such as the Talmud, etc.

13 Including the human body, which is physical or corporeal.

God is compared to a king who commands, prohibits, punishes and rewards his subjects, and who has servants and attendants who carry out his orders and do for him what he wishes to be done. Thus the Sages adopted that parable, used it frequently, and spoke in conformity with what the parable requires, of speech, of a favorable answer being given, or of a refusal with regard to a particular matter, and of other such actions of kings.¹⁴

Maimonides thus rejects the traditional view of providence in which guidance and care are bestowed upon mankind by an anthropomorphic God in much the same manner as would a human king. In its place, he proposes a radically different theory of providence. The difference between the two views is fundamental, and the traditional meaning of the term providence must be redefined if it is to express Maimonides' usage.¹⁵ Maimonides does not state explicitly the distinctive meaning he gives the term providence, but the following, which has been abstracted from his overall discussion, may be taken as the general definition to which he subscribes. "Providence is the government, guidance, and care issuing from the ground of the universe, or from the universe itself, that brings an entity into existence and/or preserves it in existence, and regulates or orders its existence according to some rational law or principle."¹⁶ Consequently, an entity ruled by providence will not display irrational and incoherent variations. Its actions, and that which occurs to it, will take place in accordance with some intelligible law or principle. The opposite of providence is chance. Entities that come into existence, or are preserved in existence by mere accident, without government or regulation

14 *MN*, I, 46. Actually, Maimonides is not so sympathetic to those who understand God anthropomorphically as this passage might seem to indicate. Cf. *MN* I, 35 and the conclusion of I, 40. The point is that those who understand God anthropomorphically understand absolutely nothing at all, since the object they imagine is totally non-existent. God cannot be even partially understood by anthropomorphic language for Maimonides, since he rejects all positive attributes including analogy.

15 What is at stake here is whether the guidance and care Maimonides calls by the name providence is properly termed providence. Maimonides' concept of providence certainly would not fall under the traditional definition. Maimonides states explicitly that the term providence is equivocal, and that when applied to human control and care its meaning is essentially different from its application to God's management; *MN*, III, 20. There are then two definitions of providence, one suitable for man and anthropomorphic theology, and the other suitable for God as the ground of being. The definition here given as representing Maimonides' view would be an approximation of the one suited to include God's true providential action.

16 This definition is based on Maimonides' discussion of providence in *MN*, III, 17. Maimonides' definition of providence as suggested here is based in large part on Aristotle's use of the term; cf. S. Munk, *op. cit.*, III, p. 116, n. 1. However, Maimonides' definition must include the action of a creator God, which Aristotle does not subscribe to, believing as he does, in the eternity of the universe. M. Friedländer, *op. cit.*, III, p. 66, n. 4, mentions that Aristotle employs the term providence in a different sense from that of traditional religious usage, but he fails to note that Maimonides does the same.

exercised to produce or preserve them and reduce them to order, do not enjoy providence. They are produced and preserved by chance.¹⁷ On the basis of this definition, the various theories that have been proposed by philosophers and religious thinkers can be broadly classified into three groups. Theories that maintain there is no providence, and everything in the universe is left to chance; those that maintain everything in the universe is ruled by providence; and those that hold some entities in the universe are ruled by providence while others are left to chance.¹⁸ The distinction between Maimonides' definition of providence and the traditional meaning is readily apparent. Traditionally, only such care and guidance as comes miraculously from a personal God is viewed as providence, whereas, according to Maimonides, guidance and care that come through the ordinary workings of a natural universe are also properly termed providence. Maimonides' definition, consequently, allows for natural providence, the production and preservation of entities by nature alone. Also, in the traditional view, no allowance is made for a concept of limited providence, in which some entities are provided for and others are not. A limited providence entails the notion that God ultimately does not exercise purposeful control or influence over every event in the universe, with the result that some entities exist purely by chance. Thus Maimonides' general definition includes in the meaning of the term providence natural and limited providence, both of which are essential elements of his concept of theodicy.

Maimonides' theory of providence is intimately related to his cosmology and cosmogony, and cannot be understood apart from them. Broadly classified, the universe is divided into three parts: the Intelligences; quintessence, which forms the bodies of the spheres; and first matter, the primary constituent of bodies that exist below the spheres and are

17 By chance Maimonides means that no intellect orders and regulates their existence according to an intelligible, rational law. Rather they are left to the blind cause and effect of physical determinism. Cf. H.A. Wolfson, "Hallevi and Maimonides on Design, Chance, and Necessity," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* vol. xi, (1941), p. 105, n. 2, and throughout.

18 In *MN*, III, 17, Maimonides gives a fivefold classification of the theories of providence: those of Epicurus; Aristotle; the Ash'ariyya; the Mu'tazila; and Maimonides' own. According to our threefold classification, which, I believe, more clearly reveals the theories with significant similarities, Epicurus represents the first class, maintaining all things are left to chance; the Ash'ariyya and Mu'tazila belong to the second class, that everything is determined or regulated by God and nothing is left to chance; and the third class includes Aristotle and Maimonides, that some things are determined by providence while others are left to chance. It is notable that no mention is made of the traditional rabbinic position which is substantially similar to the view on providence of the Mu'tazila. Maimonides presents his own theory alone as the Jewish view, the theory of the Law (Torah).

encompassed by them.¹⁹ There are ten Intelligences and nine spheres.²⁰ The creation of the universe takes place through an act of emanation by God that produces the first Intelligence, which in turn produces the first sphere and second Intelligence, a process that is continued until the ninth sphere and tenth Intelligence, or Active Intellect, are emanated.²¹ With the emanation of the ninth [or lunar] sphere and the Active Intellect, the heavens are complete. The process of creation continues, however, with the emanation of the sublunar world, the world of man. Within the lunar sphere there is found a matter, the primary matter, which differs fundamentally from the matter, or quintessence, of which the bodies of the spheres are formed. Primary matter is the material from which the physical bodies of the sublunar world are fashioned. It receives the forms of the four elements from the Active Intellect, which transforms it into the physical bodies of the four elements: earth, water, air, and fire.²² From these four elements, through continuing influences emanated upon them by the Active Intellect and the spheres, all the entities of the sublunar world, including man, are eventually created. The universe is now complete, but the emanation-creation process never ends. The universe is not self-sufficient, and would cease to exist without being sustained by God.²³ God, therefore, is the continuing ground of being, eternally²⁴ emanating and sustaining the first Intelligence. This sustaining process extends throughout the universe. The first Intelligence, and each successive Intelligence in turn, is the continuing ground of the sphere and Intelligence it produces, with the Active Intellect and the spheres perpetual conservers of the sublunar world.²⁵ The actions of the Intelligences and spheres in creating and preserving the universe are not blind and determined. On the contrary, "The spheres and the Intelligences are conscious of their actions, and select by their own free will the objects of their influence . . ." Nonetheless, despite consciousness and freewill, the Intelligences and spheres do not vary their actions; they always perform the good, and the good is constant. Since their actions remain the same, the effects reaching the sublunar world from the Intelligences and spheres remain uniform and regular.²⁶

19 *MN*, II, 10, 11; also I, 72.

20 *MN*, II, 4. However, Maimonides gives different accounts of the way the heavenly beings should be reckoned. See, e.g., *MN*, I, 72.

21 *MN*, II, 4, 11; and elsewhere.

22 Maimonides apparently follows Aristotle and makes no reference to a corporeal form. For the meaning and history of corporeal form, see H.A. Wolfson, *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle*, (Cambridge, 1929), pp. 580-590.

23 *MN*, I, 69, 70.

24 I.e., eternal in that the universe will never come to an end; but Maimonides believes the universe had a beginning. See *MN*, II, 27-29.

25 I.e., the Active Intellect and the spheres both create and preserve man and his world. Their creative and preservative actions are also called nature.

26 *MN*, II, 7. This accounts for the uniformity and regularity of natural causation.

A radical dichotomy exists between the mode of existence that is received by the individual Intelligences and spheres from God and their respective creator Intelligences, and the mode of existence received by the individual entities of the sublunar world. Once created, the individual Intelligences and spheres exist eternally.²⁷ In the sublunar world, however, only the species are eternal, the individuals are all transient, inexorably subject to generation (birth) and corruption (death).²⁸ The process of generation and corruption has its origin in the motion of the spheres. The outermost, all-encompassing sphere causes the spheres contained within itself to move, and this motion is ultimately communicated to the four elements in the sublunar world. The elements then mix together and combine, and from this intermixing and combination are created all species of things in the sublunar world. The forms of the species are bestowed by the Active Intellect.²⁹ Following a period of limited duration, all transient things, having been formed from the elements, decompose to their elements, and even the elements change and transform into one another. Maimonides summarizes the process of generation and corruption in this way.

... heaven in virtue of its motion exerts governance over the other parts of the world and sends to every generated thing the forces that subsist in the latter. Accordingly, every motion existing in the world has as its first principle the motion of heaven, and every soul existing in the beings endowed with souls that are in the world has as its principle the soul of heaven.

Know that, as has been made clear, the forces that come from heaven to this world are four: (1) The force that necessitates the mixture and composition – there is no doubt that this force suffices to engender the minerals; (2) The force that gives to every plant a vegetal soul; (3) The force that gives to every animal an animal soul; (4) The force that gives to every rational being a rational faculty.³⁰

Commenting on these four forces, Maimonides explains that they serve to produce and keep in existence the entities of the sublunar world. In other words, these forces constitute “nature,”³¹ the uniform, constant system of causation that totally governs man and his fellow beings of the sublunar world, creating and then preserving them for the period of time they have the capacity to exist.

27 *MN*, II, 17; also III, 17. Since there are no contraries or opposites in heavens the Intelligences and spheres are indestructible. Cf. I, 72.

28 *MN*, I, 72; and elsewhere.

29 *MN*, II, 4; and elsewhere.

30 *MN*, I, 72 (tr. primarily by S. Pines).

31 Nature is constituted of the combined emanations onto the sublunar world from the Active Intellect and the spheres; cf. II, 6. The Active Intellect provides the incorporeal causation and the spheres the corporeal causation.

Now if you consider the activities of these forces, you will find that they are of two species. For they cause either the generation of all that is generated or the preservation of what is generated – I mean to say the preservation of its species in a permanent way and the preservation of its individuals for a certain duration. This is the meaning of “nature,” which is said to be wise, having governance, caring for the bringing into existence of living beings by means of an art similar to that of a craftsman, and also caring for their preservation and permanence through the bringing into existence of formative forces, which are the cause of the existence of living beings, and nutritive forces, which are the cause of their lasting for whatever duration is possible.³²

In the light of this brief outline of Maimonides' cosmogony and cosmology, we can view more clearly the distinctive elements of his theory of providence.³³ Foremost is the notion that God takes no direct part in exercising providence over man. God neither creates man nor cares for him. The single providential act God performs is to produce and preserve the first Intelligence, whereas man and his world are produced and preserved by the Active Intellect and the spheres. Moreover, it cannot be argued that the Active Intellect and the spheres are mere passive agents of God, who is the real cause of their providential actions, for these heavenly beings possess free will and act according to their own choices. The one thing that can be said is that God is the ground of being, so that without God there is no universe, and of course, no providence of any kind.³⁴

The interpretation that God serves a limited providential function as the ultimate ground of being, and otherwise takes no part in human affairs, is corroborated by many passages in the *Moreh*. Since the literal meaning of Scripture generally seems to indicate that God exercises direct, supernatural providence over man, these passages not only present Maimonides' philosophy, but also serve as guides to the esoteric meaning of Scripture for the philosophically trained reader. Thus the first passage cited below explains that despite the fact that Scripture attributes almost everything to the immediate, personal action of God, rather than to natural causation, this is not in fact the case. These actions are attributed to God only as the ultimate cause or ground of the universe, not as the proximate efficient cause of the event itself.

The subject here . . . is God's being the efficient cause of the partial actions occurring in the world, just as He is the efficient cause of the world as a whole . . . It has been made clear in natural science that for every one of the four kinds of causes one also needs to seek a cause . . . For instance, the thing produced has a certain N as its efficient cause,

32 *MN*, II, 10 (tr. primarily by S. Pines).

33 As providence is defined according to Maimonides.

34 *MN*, I, 69.

and this efficient cause in its turn has an efficient cause; and this continues until the first mover is attained, who is in true reality the efficient cause of all these intermediaries . . . It is in this way that every action that occurs in the universe is attributed to God even though produced by one of the proximate efficient causes . . . God, considered as efficient cause, is then the remotest one.³⁵

The selection of passages that follow states clearly that God exercises providence over the sublunar world only through the natural action of the Intelligences and the spheres. That is to say, God is the ultimate ground of a universe in which the Intelligences and spheres naturally produce and preserve man and his world.

This is also what Aristotle says. But there is a difference in the terms; for he speaks of Intelligences and we speak of angels. As for his saying that these Intelligences are also intermediaries between God . . . and the existents; and that it is through their intermediation that the spheres are in motion which motion is the cause of the generation of everything that is subject to generation,³⁶ this too is what is stated in all the [sacred] books . . . Now our discourse here shall deal only with the angels, who are the Intelligences. For our Law does not deny the fact that He . . . governs that which exists here through the intermediation of the angels . . . If you told a man who is one of those who deem themselves the Sages of Israel that the deity sends an angel, who enters the womb of a woman and forms the fetus there,³⁷ he would be pleased with this assertion and would accept it and would regard it as a manifestation of greatness and power on the part of deity . . . But if you tell him that God has placed in the sperm a formative force shaping the limbs . . . and that this force is the angel, or that all forms derive from the act of the Active Intellect and that the latter is the angel³⁸ and the prince of the world constantly mentioned by the Sages, the man would shrink from this opinion.³⁹

Finally, God cannot exercise providence over man by the very fact of His divine nature. He enters into no relations with any of His creatures, so that He cannot be a "father" who provides for man and guides him.⁴⁰ Moreover, God possesses no emotions,⁴¹ so that He is absolutely incapable of feeling love and mercy for mankind. Men erroneously attribute to God providential

35 *MN*, I, 69; cf. II, 48 (tr. primarily by S. Pines and S. Munk). Also cf. *MN* I, 58.

36 I.e., generation of the entities of the sublunar world which are subject to generation and decay.

37 I.e., miraculously.

38 I.e., if you tell the uneducated man that the angel is nothing other than the natural agent called the Active Intellect, he would think this takes away from God's greatness and power. The ignorant think little of God producing the natural universe, they only think him great if he works miracles in their lives.

39 *MN*, II, 6 (tr. primarily by S. Pines and S. Munk).

40 *MN*, I, 52.

41 *MN*, I, 55.

emotions when they see certain actions they consider beneficent, but these actions are actually produced by nature.

There is, in truth, no relation in any respect between Him and any of His creatures . . . How . . . could there subsist a relation between Him . . . and any of the things created by Him, given the great difference between them in the reality of their existence, a difference that could not be greater.⁴²

Accordingly, whenever one of His actions is apprehended,⁴³ the quality from which this action proceeds [in man] is attributed to Him . . . For instance, one perceives the tender care he gives in forming the embryos of living beings, and in producing in them, and in those who rear them after birth, faculties that preserve them from destruction and annihilation, and protect them against harm and help them in their necessary functions. Now actions of this kind proceed from us only after we feel a certain affection and compassion, and this is the meaning of mercy . . . It is not that He . . . is affected and has compassion.⁴⁴

II

God's providence being limited to the existence of the first Intelligence, the Maimonidean cosmogony requires several forms of providence to account for the creation and preservation of all the entities present in the universe. Classified according to the general character and duration of the existents they produce, four forms of providence can be distinguished: *absolute individual providence*; *absolute specific providence*; *incidental specific providence*; and *conditional individual providence*.

A) Absolute individual providence is the creative and preservative care God and the Intelligences extend to the respective Intelligences and spheres they bring into existence.⁴⁵ This form of providence provides eternal existence to

42 The term existence is equivocal; when applied to God it means something absolutely different from existence when applied to man; *MN*, I, 56.

43 It is, of course, not God's action that is referred to in the example, but the action of nature, the Active Intellect and the spheres. However, by the usage noted above that any event in the universe can be attributed to God since he is the ultimate cause of all things, natural events can also be attributed figuratively to him. Of course, the ordinary reader on seeing an event attributed directly to God will think of it as supernatural. Maimonides' use of figurative language in his own technical explanations compounds the difficulty of arriving at a clear understanding of the *Moreh*. This practice is certainly deliberate and intended to keep the unqualified reader from discerning Maimonides' real teaching.

44 *MN*, I, 54. Likewise in this chapter emotions such as anger, etc., relating to punishment are denied of God.

45 *MN*, III, 17. See particularly Aristotle's theory, the second opinion on providence Maimonides lists. Maimonides states he agrees with Aristotle on all points except providence as it relates to man.

particular entities, so that the Intelligences and spheres who receive its care maintain their individual existences eternally.⁴⁶ Absolute individual providence is limited to the heavens and does not extend to the sublunar world.

B) Absolute specific providence is the care extended to the sublunar world that gives permanence and eternity to its various species. The individuals belonging to these species, however, do not receive eternal providence, and exist, therefore, only a limited period of time after which they perish. Thus the individuals of the sublunar world differ fundamentally from the Intelligences and spheres, the individuals inhabiting the heavens; whereas the former must inevitably suffer annihilation, the latter enjoy eternal life. Absolute specific providence may also be termed natural providence. It is produced by the actions of the Active Intellect and the spheres, or nature.⁴⁷

C) Incidental specific providence is the care received by individual members of a sublunar species as a by-product or secondary result of absolute specific providence. Species, according to Maimonides, have no real existence apart from the individual members of the species.⁴⁸ Whatever existence a species has takes place through its individual members. Accordingly, if there were no individual members of a species, the species itself would not exist. Consequently, absolute specific providence can preserve a species only by preserving a number of the individuals belonging to that species. Moreover, absolute specific providence gives eternal existence to the species, whereas all individuals of the sublunar world ultimately perish. Accordingly, the individuals must not only be given the ability to endure whatever period of time they can, but also to reproduce themselves, so that after they perish, new generations can arise in perpetuity enabling the species to exist through eternity. Thus through incidental specific providence, the individuals of the sublunar species receive the various faculties or instincts necessary for survival, as well as a general environment in which their needs can be satisfied. Incidental specific providence is exercised by nature: the spheres and the Active Intellect. It is limited to providing the individuals of the sublunar world with preservative faculties and a general environment for individual and group survival. Otherwise, these individuals receive no providence and are left to chance. Maimonides describes incidental specific providence in this way.

Accordingly, with regard to the spheres, whose individuals are permanent, and what is in them, providence regarding them means that they remain permanent in a changeless state. But just as the existence of other things — whose individuals have not, but whose species have, an

46 I.e., the heavens will not come to an end. They were, however, created and had a beginning.

47 *MN*, III, 17; and cf. I, 72.

48 *MN*, III, 18; cf. S. Munk, *op. cit.*, III, 137, n. 2.

enduring existence — derives necessarily from theirs,⁴⁹ there likewise emanates from the providence in question something that necessitates the preservation and perpetuation of the species, although the permanence of the individuals is impossible. However, the individuals of each species are not absolutely abandoned. On the contrary, in all portions of this [sublunar] matter,⁵⁰ that have been purified to the point of receiving the form of growth,⁵¹ there are placed faculties that preserve them for a certain time through attracting toward them that which agrees with them and through repelling what is not useful to them. Again in those portions of the matter in question that have been purified to a greater extent so that they received the form of sensation, there are placed other faculties, which preserve and safeguard them, as well as another capacity: namely, that of moving so as to direct themselves toward that which agrees with them and so as to flee from that which disagrees.⁵²

D) Conditional individual providence is the creative and preservative care that is received uniquely by the human species. Owing to its somewhat complex nature, conditional individual providence will be discussed under three sub-headings: form; matter; and providence.

1) **Form:** As is the case regarding all real entities in the sublunar world, every human individual is composed of two fundamental metaphysical principles, form and matter.⁵³ The source of the human form is the Active Intellect, who is the source of all forms bestowed in the sublunar world. Each principle, form and matter, imparts to man certain characteristic qualities. Form itself is actual, immaterial, and eternal. The primary quality given to man by the human form is his essence as an intellectual or rational being. The ultimate purpose and ideal perfection of every existent is to realize his essence and act in accordance with its dictates. Man's highest activity, therefore, is rational activity, which takes two basic forms: theoretical (speculative) and practical (moral). In theoretical activity, man realizes his capacity for abstract thought and attains ultimately to a true knowledge of

49 I.e., from the spheres.

50 I.e., the primary matter of which the sublunar individuals are constituted.

51 Cf. S. Munk, *op. cit.*, III, 117, n. 2.

52 *MN*, III, 17. This passage is taken from Maimonides' description of incidental specific providence in his discussion of Aristotle's theory of providence. It is described more clearly there than in Maimonides' discussion of his own theory where he defends incidental specific providence as the view taught in Scripture; see S. Pines, *op. cit.*, p. 473.

53 *MN*, II, Introduction, Propositions 22 and 25; III, 8, and elsewhere.

God through the study of science and metaphysics.⁵⁴ In practical activity, man through the power of his intellect gains mastery over his desires and passions, so that he behaves in a moderate and even chaste manner.⁵⁵ Of the two forms of rational activity, theoretical study is qualitatively superior to moral behavior. This point is clearly made at the conclusion of the *Moreh* where Maimonides, summarizing the four species of perfection open to man, ranks morality beneath theoretical accomplishment. Indeed, all religious activity has intellectual perfection alone for its true end. Theoretical excellence thus constitutes the supreme perfection of man.

The third species is to a greater extent than the second a perfection existing within the essence of man. It is the perfection of moral virtues. It consists in the individual's moral habits having attained their ultimate excellence. Most of the commandments serve no other end than the attainment of this species of perfection. But this species of perfection is likewise a preparation for something else and not an end in itself. For all moral habits are concerned with what occurs between a human individual and someone else . . . For if you suppose a human individual were alone, having dealings with no one, you will find that all his moral virtues are in vain . . . and that they do not perfect the individual in anything.

The fourth species is the true human perfection; it consists in acquiring the intellectual virtues, that is to say, conceiving the intelligibles⁵⁶ which lead to true ideas concerning metaphysical subjects. This is in truth the ultimate goal [of man], which gives the individual true perfection, a perfection belonging to him alone; it gives him immortality, and on its account man is [truly] man . . . The Sages apprehended the very notions we have mentioned . . . that the possession of the treasures acquired and competed for by man and thought to be perfection are not a perfection; and that similarly all the religious practices prescribed by the Law, namely, the various kinds of worship, as well as the morals useful to people in their mutual dealings, all this is not to be compared with this ultimate goal and does not equal it, but are only preparations made for the sake of this goal.⁵⁷

54 The phrase "knowledge of God" as employed by Maimonides can be misleading. Man actually can have no "knowledge of God" according to Maimonides; see *MN*, I, 59, 60. God absolutely transcends human experience, and cannot be related to by man as an object of knowledge or in any other way. What man is capable of is knowledge of what God is not. This knowledge, the negative theology, is obtained through scientific and metaphysical study. I.e., the actual contents of man's mind when he has "knowledge of God" are the truths of science and metaphysics about the universe. The phrases "worship of God" and "love of God" for Maimonides are similarly figurative expressions. What they amount to is dedication to and passion for scientific and metaphysical truth; see *MN*, III, 51. Cf. also the quotation below cited in the body of the text.

55 *MN*, III, 8.

56 I.e., abstract scientific and metaphysical concepts.

57 *MN*, 54 (tr. primarily by S. Munk and S. Pines).

2) **Matter:** Without matter individual human beings would not exist. Form provides man with his essence, which determines the species to which he belongs, but essence alone does not produce concrete, individual existents. This is the function of matter, the principle of individuation.⁵⁸ Matter, however, has a nature⁵⁹ which imparts two basic characteristics to men: transience and body. Transience is the result of the inherent instability of matter. Although matter always exists together with some form, its union with the form it has does not satisfy and fulfill its potentiality for receiving other forms.⁶⁰ It remains in a state of privation with respect to other forms. To satisfy its potentiality for receiving other forms, matter must rid itself of the form it has. Matter, therefore, is in a continuous state of instability seeking to shed the form it has for new forms of which it is deprived. Maimonides finds a parable relating to this characteristic of matter in Proverbs.

How extraordinary is what Solomon said in his wisdom when he likened matter to a married harlot, for matter is in no way found without form and is consequently always like a married woman who is never separated from a man and is never free. However, notwithstanding her being a married woman, she never ceases to seek for another man to substitute for her husband, and she deceives and draws him on in every way until he obtains from her what her husband used to obtain. This is the state of matter. For whatever form is found in it does but prepare it to receive another form. And it moves ceaselessly to throw off the form it possesses in order to obtain another. When it has obtained that other form, the same thing again takes place.⁶¹

As a result of matter casting off the form it has, the individual that is constituted of that particular combination of matter and form perishes. Individual men, therefore, owing to the matter which is necessary to give them their particular existences, inevitably must die by reason of the very matter that gives them life.⁶² Similarly, the body men require given them by matter produces various ills.⁶³ Three major categories of human defects, physical, moral, and intellectual, can be attributed to the body. Of physical defects, Maimonides writes.

Thus, in the case of man, for instance, all deformities, unnatural shape of limbs; weakness, the disruption or disorder of actions; whether innate or not, originate in his corruptible matter, not in his form.

58 *MN*, III, 12; and implied in numerous passages.

59 It should be understood that matter does not have a nature in the formal sense of processsing form and essence. Maimonides, in *MN*, III, 8, e.g., must himself speak of "the true nature of matter."

60 *MN*, I, 17.

61 *MN*, III, 8; (tr. primarily by S. Munk and S. Pines). Cf. Maimonides' *Introduction to the Moreh Nevukhim*; and *MN*, I, 17.

62 *MN*, III, 8.

63 *MN*, III, 12.

Similarly, every living being dies and becomes ill solely because of his form.⁶⁴

Moral defects equally have their source in matter.

All man's acts of disobedience and sins are consequent upon his matter and not upon his form . . . his eating and drinking and copulation, and his passionate desire for these things, as well as his anger and all bad habits found in him, are all of them consequent upon his matter.⁶⁵

Intellectual defects can result from matter in more than one way. The very fact that man is a material being whose intellect is necessarily associated with matter keeps him from conceiving pure intelligibles. Moreover, owing to his possession of body, man has imagination, a corporeal faculty, which not only gives rise to evil desire, but also, whenever possible, produces false fantasy that it deludes men into accepting as true. The following two passages illustrate these points.

Matter is a strong veil preventing the apprehension of that which is separate from matter, as it truly is. It does this even if it is the noblest and purest matter, I mean to say even if it is the matter of the heavenly spheres. All the more is this true for the dark and turbid matter that is ours. Hence whenever our intellect aspires to apprehend the deity or one of the Intelligences, this great veil is found interposed between it and them.⁶⁶

There is no better way of describing the action of an incorporeal being than by this analogy; and no term can be found that would accurately describe it. For it is as difficult to form an idea of that action as to form an idea of the incorporeal being itself. As we *imagine* only bodies or forces residing in bodies, so we only *imagine* actions possible when the agent is near . . . There are therefore persons who, on learning that God is incorporeal . . . believe that He gives commands to angels, and that the latter carry them out by one body approaching another and by direct contact . . . Some of them believe further that God commands an action in words, consisting like ours, of letters and sound . . . All this is the work of the *imagination*, which is, in fact, identical with the "evil inclination." For every defect of reason or character is due to the action of the *imagination* or consequent upon its action.⁶⁷

64 *MN*, III, 8 (tr. primarily by S. Munk and S. Pines).

65 *Ibid.*, and elsewhere.

66 *MN*, III, 9 (tr. primarily by S. Pines), and elsewhere.

67 *MN*, II, 12 (tr. primarily by M. Friedländer). In this passage, Maimonides is discussing incorporeal causation or emanation, and the difficulty the human intellect has in comprehending this concept as well as the concept of incorporeal beings generally. When the intellect falls short of understanding some difficult, abstract concept, the imagination then enters into the knowing process to supplement the intellect's inadequacy. But the imagination, owing to its corporeal nature, is absolutely incompetent to serve this purpose, and its notions are not only erroneous but delusive. See my "Maimonides and Abrabanel on Prophecy," *op. cit.*, pp. liv f., and references in the index under, "Imagination." Cf. also my, "Maimonides' Concept of Mosaic Prophecy," *op. cit.*, pp. 327 ff.

3) **Providence:** If Maimonides is to maintain that individual men come under the rule of providence, he must be able to show that there is justice in human affairs.⁶⁸ Providence having been defined as "government, guidance, and care . . . that regulates . . . existence according to . . . rational law or principle," it is necessary to show that the happiness and misery men experience follow an intelligible order. This order may be termed justice, in which men receive the reward of happiness or the punishment of misery according to whether they have been good or bad. So far as the Intelligences and spheres are conceived, the problem of providence and justice does not exist. Inasmuch as these heavenly beings enjoy a constant, perfect existence throughout eternity, they evidently follow an intelligible order and come under the rule of providence. Likewise, the species of the sublunar world exist in unchanging permanent excellence and are obviously governed by providence. But in human affairs the good seem to suffer and the wicked prosper. If this apparent lack of justice is the case, then human existence does not follow an intelligible order, and men, therefore, do not enjoy the rule of providence. They are abandoned, and left to chance.⁶⁹ Consequently, to prove that providence does govern human life, Maimonides must show that there is justice: happiness follows goodness, and misery wickedness.

68 Maimonides presents his concept of human providence as opposed to the theories of both the traditional religionist and Aristotle. Maimonides' disagreement with the traditionalist anthropomorphic, miraculous concept is total. But he is in substantial agreement with Aristotle on providence as extended to the Intelligences and spheres and to the non-human species of the sublunar world. Where Maimonides understands himself to disagree with Aristotle is over man. Maimonides claims providence can extend to individual men, and he says Aristotle denies this. Maimonides therefore sees himself as having to prove that providence does extend to individual men. An interesting problem, however, arises here regarding whether Aristotle does, in fact, deny individual human providence. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 8, Aristotle makes a general comment on the special happiness that comes to the philosopher from the gods. This thought is not developed and has obvious mythological elements. The problem is that Maimonides makes a primary characteristic of Aristotle's theory of providence the notion that providence does not extend to individual men. Yet here we have a remark by Aristotle to the contrary. Several reasons for Maimonides' failure to mention Aristotle's statement regarding individual human providence can be given. Maimonides' may not have known of Aristotle's statement, or if he knew, did not take it seriously seeing its mythological formulation. It is also possible that he consciously pretended Aristotle's position was completely different from his own so that he could then attack Aristotle to show his position to be more pious than that of the pagan philosopher. This last would be consistent with concealing the esoteric teaching. A final determination of the problem requires a separate inquiry. See S. Munk, *op. cit.*, III, 135, n. 1; M. Friedländer, *op. cit.*, III, 81, n. 1; and S. Pines, *op. cit.*, lxx ff. At any rate, the purpose of this study is to systematize Maimonides' own view, and is not affected by the problem. Maimonides' theory of individual human providence is qualitatively so superior as a thought through position that it has nothing significant in common with Aristotle's vague comment.

69 As Aristotle, according to Maimonides, claims.

a) Fundamental to understanding Maimonides' position that individual men are subject to providence is his view of human virtue. What is true human goodness? When do we pronounce a person genuinely good? Maimonides' view differs fundamentally from the view generally held in traditional theistic communities. Traditionally a person is judged good who obeys the creedal and ritual commands of revelation, and gives particular heed to its ethical injunctions regarding temperance, honesty, and charity. For Maimonides, a person is truly good only if he has realized his intellectual capacities through the study of science and metaphysics,⁷⁰ and thereby overcome, to the degree possible, his initial endowment of matter. It goes without saying that such a person, by reason of his intellect, will possess the usual moral qualities as well, but, true human virtue and goodness come only from intellectual perfection.⁷¹ No matter how religious and moral a person may be in ordinary and traditional terms, how pious and kind, he is nonetheless wicked and without virtue so long as he has not actualized his intellectual potentiality through a mastery of science and metaphysics.⁷² This view of virtue explains at the start why it is that many persons who seem to be good suffer deep unhappiness. The reason simply is that they are not really good, only moral, and their suffering comes justly from a lack of virtue.⁷³ Thus the truly virtuous man is one who has attained intellectual perfection. His reward is that he will receive providential care proportionate to his intellectual attainment. Members of the human species who have not undergone any appreciable measure of intellectual realization have a status similar to that of individuals belonging to the non-rational, animal species. They receive the general care of incidental specific providence, but as individuals are abandoned and left to chance. The providence extended to individual members of the human species is, therefore, conditional, dependent upon the degree to which they meet the requirement of intellectual realization. Maimonides states this view in a number of passages in the *Moreh*, but in none so pointedly as the following.

Hence it follows . . . that the greater the proportion which a person has obtained of this intellectual emanation, by reason of his material disposition and his training, the greater must also be the protection given him by providence, if it is true, as I have stated, that providence is dependent upon intellect. Accordingly, divine providence does not watch in an equal manner over all the individuals of the human species,

70 Science and metaphysics, for a religious rationalist like Maimonides, includes true religious knowledge, as, e.g., theology.

71 See the passage from the *Moreh* (III, 54) quoted above, p. 1. This reflects Aristotle's distinction in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (vi, 13, and elsewhere) in which the intellectual virtues are held to be superior.

72 Cf. *MN*, III, 51.

73 This is a fundamental point in Maimonides' interpretation of the Book of Job. See below, p. 27.

but providence is graded as their human perfection is graded. According to this reasoning, it follows necessarily that the providence that watches over the prophets is very great and proportionate to the degree they occupy in prophecy, and that the providence that watches over superior and virtuous men is proportionate to their superiority and virtue.⁷⁴ For it is such a [high] degree of emanation from the divine Intelligence that makes the prophets speak, guides the actions of virtuous men, and perfects the knowledge of superior men. As for ignorant people and sinners, their state is despised proportionate to their lack of this emanation,⁷⁵ and they are placed on the same rank as the individuals of all the other species of animals; "He is like the beast that speaks not" (Ps. 49:13,21). For this reason it is considered a light thing to kill them, and has even been commanded when useful.⁷⁶

b) Maimonides' position, therefore, is that only those members of the human species who are intellectually perfect can be accounted virtuous, and, therefore, deserving of providence. But it is equally significant to note that the intellectually perfect are not only those who deserve providence, they are the only ones capable of receiving providence. The reason is that providential care comes to the individuals of the human species through their intellects alone, and only a fully developed intellect has the power to act as a providential force. Moreover, as a function of the human intellect, the providence men receive is entirely a natural event. For the human intellect is a natural faculty bestowed and actualized by the Active Intellect.⁷⁷ The providential care exercised by the intellect takes three forms: scientific providence; ethical providence; and ontological providence.

i. *Scientific providence*: Through the intellect man attains a knowledge of physical science, the laws governing the invariable order of cause and effect in the natural world. Once knowledge of a given cause and effect relationship is acquired, the future can be predicted whenever the cause is present, — for the effect will invariably follow if the cause exists. In this way, man can prevent much suffering. By understanding the causes that produce injurious effects, he can either learn to control the causes, so that the effects do not occur, or if control is not possible, he can avoid those situations where he knows causes are present that will produce injurious effects. In the following passage,

74 The prophets in order to attain prophecy, achieved the highest degree of intellectual perfection. This same intellectual perfection gave them the greatest degree of providence as well since providence and prophecy are both functions of intellectual development. The prophets varied in the degrees of intellectual perfection they achieved, and therefore, differed in the degree to which they received providence. Cf. *MN*, II, 45; and my *Maimonides and Abrabanel on Prophecy*, pp. 183 ff.

75 I.e., lack of the emanation that produces intellectual perfection. Ignorance is a cardinal sin.

76 *MN*, III, 18.

77 As noted above, the actions of the Active Intellect and spheres directed to the sublunar world constitute nature.

having first affirmed that providence for men comes through the human intellect, Maimonides gives an illustration of the working of scientific providence.

But as I view the matter, divine providence occurs as a result of the divine [intellectual] emanation; and the species with which this intellectual emanation is united, so that it becomes endowed with intellect to which is disclosed all that is disclosed to an intelligent being, is the one to which divine providence is joined, which measures all actions so as to reward or punish them. If, as Aristotle states, the sinking of a ship and the drowning of those in it, or a roof falling down upon the people in a house, are due to pure chance, the fact that the people in that ship went on board, and that the people in the house were sitting in it, is, according to our opinion, not due to chance, but to divine will in accordance with the deserts of those people . . .⁷⁸

In other words, if a person, through science, were in possession of competent knowledge regarding the fitness of a ship to navigate the sea, or the strength of a house to support its roof, he would be able to avoid traveling on an unsound ship or inhabiting an unsafe house. Hence it was due to their ignorance and intellectual deficiency that the people on the ship and in the house perished.

ii. *Ethical providence*: The intellect, by providing man with wisdom and truth, enables him to fulfill the innate tendency he receives from his form to follow a moral course, and thereby overcome the evils that originate in the material aspects of his being. These evils are social and personal. They bring deep unhappiness to man, and threaten the existence of others as well as his own. This it is through ignorance that men quarrel and war with one another.

These great evils that came about between the human individuals who inflict them upon one another because of [certain] propensities, desires, opinions, and beliefs, are all of them likewise consequent upon privation. For all of them derive from ignorance, I mean from a privation of knowledge. Just as a blind man, because of absence of sight, does not cease stumbling, being wounded, and also wounding others, because he has nobody to guide him on his way, the various sects of men — every individual according to his ignorance does to himself and to others great evils from which individuals of the species suffer. If there were knowledge, whose relation to the human form is like that of the faculty of the sight to the eye, they would refrain from doing any harm to themselves and to others. For through cognition of the truth, enmity and hatred are removed and the inflicting of harm by people on one another is abolished.⁷⁹

iii. *Ontological providence*: Intellectual activity, for Maimonides, has an ontological dimension beyond its cognitive function. Through intellectual

⁷⁸ *MN*, III, 17. For the meaning of the phrase “divine will” here, see below p. 37.

⁷⁹ *MN*, III, 11 (tr. primarily by S. Pines).

study, man not only attains knowledge, he acquires new being and a different mode of consciousness as well. The reason for this is to be found in the nature of the human intellect.⁸⁰ At birth, the intellect is a mere potentiality called the hylic intellect.⁸¹ Through learning, the hylic intellect becomes realized by grades into an actual intellect. The highest stage of realization is achieved when the hylic intellect is actualized to the point where it becomes a new entity called the acquired intellect. The various stages of intellectual actualization are produced naturally by different kinds of knowledge. In the case of the acquired intellect, the knowledge required is abstract science and metaphysics. When a person studies science and metaphysics, his hylic intellect is realized by actually becoming the abstract ideas he studies.⁸² In the comprehension of abstract knowledge, there is a union between subject and object.⁸³ The realization of the intellect from potentiality to actuality not only requires study by man but action by the Active Intellect, the agent who, as nature, brings all things in the sublunar world from a state of potentiality to actuality. Ontological providence functions in two ways. The first is that it gives a man a mode of consciousness or psychic activity that can provide him with a life of felicity and prevent all suffering. It is significant to note here that what is really meant when it is said that a person attains an acquired intellect is that he *becomes* an acquired intellect. The acquired intellect is nothing other than new personal being, an emergent structure of self. Having thus become a new self, the person enjoys a mode of consciousness qualitatively different from that of those whose intellects are not equally developed. This difference results from the fact that the acquired intellect unlike any other faculty of man is absolutely separate from the body. Its activity therefore is free from all material values and bodily concerns. It engages only in abstract speculation, contemplating such intelligible objects as the theoretical concepts of science and metaphysics, and the incorporeal beings of the heavens. Still another aspect of existence at the level of the acquired intellect is that the person establishes a relation with a heavenly being, the Active Intellect. The abstract concepts that are constitutive of the acquired intellect are the identical intellectual entities present in the Active Intellect. Thus, through his acquired intellect, a person achieves union with the Active Intellect,⁸⁴ which serves as a link between God and man. This union is the closest relation to God man can attain.⁸⁵ When existing at the level of the acquired intellect, man is entirely free from

⁸⁰ Cf. S. Munk, *op. cit.*, I, 304, n. 1; and I, 277, n. 3.

⁸¹ Other names include material and passive intellect.

⁸² Traditional religious study therefore will not actualize the hylic intellect. Cf. III, 51; and elsewhere.

⁸³ *MN*, I, 68.

⁸⁴ Cf. S. Munk, *op. cit.*, I, 304, n. 1; and I, 277, n. 3.

⁸⁵ *MN*, III, 51.

suffering of any kind. For the source of all human suffering is matter or body, from which the consciousness of the acquired intellect is completely divorced. That is to say, no matter what ills or misfortunes may overtake his body or material possessions, the consciousness of the acquired intellect is entirely unaware of them, and continues to enjoy the blessedness of intellectual contemplation.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, so long as man lives he has a body which involves him necessarily with matter. Consequently, the most perfect of men must at times withdraw from the level of consciousness of the acquired intellect and occupy himself with material concerns. When he does this, he is vulnerable to the misery and pain that afflict ordinary human existence. In the following summary of providence generally, Maimonides alludes to the first function of ontological providence.

A most extraordinary speculation has occurred to me just now through which doubts may be dispelled and divine secrets revealed. We have already explained in the chapters concerning providence that providence watches over everyone endowed with intellect proportionately to the measure of his intellect. Thus providence always watches over an individual endowed with perfect apprehension whose intellect never ceases from being occupied with God.⁸⁷ On the other hand, an individual endowed with perfect apprehension, whose thought sometimes for a certain time is emptied of God, is watched over by providence only during the time when he thinks of God; providence withdraws from him during the time when he is occupied with something else. However, its withdrawal then is not like its withdrawal from those who have never had intellectual cognition. But in his case that providence merely decreases because that man of perfect apprehension has, while being occupied, no intellect in actu; but that perfect man is at such times only apprehending potentially, though close to actuality. At such times he is like a skillful scribe at the time when he is not writing. On the other hand, he who has no intellectual cognition at all of God is like one who is in darkness and has never seen light, just as we have explained with regard to its dictum: 'The wicked shall be put to silence in darkness.' He who apprehends and advances with his whole being toward the object of his apprehension, is like one who is in the pure light of the sun. He who has had apprehension, but is occupied, is while he is occupied in this state like one who has a cloudy day in which the sun does not shine because of the clouds that separate it and him. Hence it seems to me that all prophets or excellent and perfect men whom one of the evils of this world befell, had this evil happen to them during such a time of distraction, the greatness of the calamity being proportionate to the duration of the period of distraction or to the vileness of the matter with which he was occupied. If this is so, the great doubt that induced the philosophers to deny that divine providence watches over all human individuals and to assert

86 Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics*, X, 8.

87 As explained above (n. 54), being "occupied with God" means the study of theology through science and metaphysics.

equality between them and the individuals of the other kinds of animals is dispelled for their proof for this opinion was that excellent and good men experienced great misfortunes.⁸⁸ Thus the secret with regard to this has been explained even according to the requirements of their opinions: The providence of God, may He be exalted, is constantly watching over those who have obtained this overflow, which is permitted to everyone who makes efforts with a view to obtaining it. If a man's thought is free from distraction, if he apprehends Him, may He be exalted, in the right way and rejoices in what he apprehends, that individual can never be afflicted with evil of any kind. For he is with God and God is with him. When, however, he abandons Him, may He be exalted, and is thus separated from God and God separated from him, he becomes in consequence of this a target for every evil that may happen to befall him. For the thing that necessarily brings about providence and deliverance from the sea of chance consists in that intellectual emanation.⁸⁹

Thus the first way in which ontological providence functions is to provide man with the acquired intellect, a mode of consciousness whose intellectual activity of contemplating intelligible objects brings man a life of bliss, and whose unawareness of material concerns prevents all suffering. The second way in which ontological providence functions is by giving man immortality.⁹⁰ The body of man, constituted as it is of matter, must inevitably die.⁹¹

88 Maimonides is here defending his view that providence comes to individual men. To do this he must show an intelligible, constant relation between evil and suffering. (See above, p. 17) Maimonides' point is that ultimately suffering is a state of mind. Hence the mere fact that someone loses his possessions or undergoes other evils is not necessarily evidence of suffering. If the person continues his intellectual contemplation, he will come under ontological providence and will not suffer regardless of his material circumstances. Hence only a person who forsakes his intellectual contemplation will suffer, and this is justice. Forsaking intellectual contemplation is evil and the person then deserves to suffer. Maimonides has thus demonstrated a rational cause and effect between evil and suffering, and proved thereby the existence of individual human providence.

89 *MN*, III, 51. S. Munk (III, 446, n. 1) seems not have understood the nature of ontological providence. Clearly enough, Maimonides' statement that no evil will befall someone in a state of intellectual contemplation is nonsense if this is taken to mean that such contemplation will keep an earthquake or invading army away. Munk, therefore, says Maimonides in this passage is making only pious rather than philosophic comments. However, Maimonides' claim, as has been explained, is that the psychic state of suffering can be overcome by contemplation, not that contemplation per se can control natural and social evil. This claim is plausible and in accord with philosophic speculation.

90 Maimonides does not believe in individual immortality; *MN*, I, 74; cf. S. Pines, *op. cit.*, p. 221, n. 11, and Introduction. This means that all individuality dies with the body. However, for someone who enjoys ontological providence, the death of individuality has in a sense already occurred even before his death. For matter is the principle of individuation, and the person under the influence of ontological providence contemplates only immaterial universal concepts. He has then, in life, joined with the Active Intellect and left his body behind.

91 See the discussion on matter above, p. 15.

The faculties of man dependent upon body all perish with it. the acquired intellect, however, is eternal. Since it is constituted of purely intellectual entities, and exists absolutely separate from the body or matter, the acquired intellect is imperishable and survives the death of the body.⁹² Accordingly, by means of its two functions, ontological providence removes all suffering that comes to man from the fact of death. First, it provides man with a mode of consciousness that is unaware of the body and is not cognizant of its pleasures or pains, thereby removing whatever anxiety and concern may accompany thoughts about the body, including the fact that it dies.⁹³ Second, it provides man with immortality, and so overcomes death in actuality.⁹⁴ Maimonides cites the deaths of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam as illustrations of the working of ontological providence. The happiness given man by the acquired intellect increases as the body and its influence weaken at the time of death, so that the perfect man dies in a state of bliss.

The philosophers have already explained that the bodily faculties impede in youth the attainment of most of the moral virtues, and all the more that of pure thought, which is achieved through the perfection of the intelligibles that lead to intense love of Him,⁹⁵ may He be exalted. For it is impossible that it should be achieved while the bodily humors are in effervescence. Yet in the measure in which the faculties of the body are weakened and the fire of the desires is quenched, the intellect is strengthened, its lights achieve a wider extension, its apprehension is purified, and it rejoices in what it apprehends. The result is that when a perfect man is stricken with years and approaches death, this apprehension increases very powerfully, joy over this apprehension and a great love for the object of apprehension become stronger, until the soul is separated from the body at that moment in this state of pleasure. Because of this the Sages have indicated with reference to the deaths of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam that the three of them died by a kiss . . . [The Sages], may their memory be blessed, mentioned the occurrence of this kind of death, which in true reality is salvation from death, only with regard to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. The other prophets and excellent men are beneath this degree; but it holds good for all of them that the apprehension of their intellects becomes stronger at the separation, just as it is said:

92 The reason traditional religion cannot give a person immortality is that immortality is a natural event which requires its proper cause if it is to occur. This proper cause is abstract speculative knowledge which traditional religious study does not provide.

93 The acquired intellect does not think about body or individuation at all, and inasmuch as death cannot be thought of apart from body and individuation, the consciousness of the acquired intellect cannot be aware of death.

94 The acquired intellect simply continues its universal contemplation when the body ceases to be. The fact that it is now entirely one with the Active Intellect should take place without notice.

95 The love of God is nothing other than a love for intellectual contemplation, see above, n. 54.

'And thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the Lord shall be at thy rear.'⁹⁶ After having reached this condition of enduring permanence, that intellect remains in one and the same state, the impediment that sometimes screened him off having been removed. And he will remain permanently in that state of intense pleasure, which does not belong to the genus of bodily pleasures, as we have explained in our compilations and as others have explained before us.⁹⁷

c) Having examined the major elements of Maimonides' theory of providence, we can now describe systematically his argument for the view that human affairs are governed by justice, namely, the good enjoy happiness and the wicked suffer. The major points of Maimonides' argument are the following:

- i. All evil, natural and human, comes from matter.⁹⁸
- ii. Man can overcome the suffering matter causes him by the use and realization of the intellect.
- iii. Man possesses freedom of the will.⁹⁹
- iv. Through use of his freedom, man can choose to undergo the moral discipline and philosophic study necessary to realize his intellect. The realization of the intellect brings him under the rule of providence.¹⁰⁰
- v. If a person does not use his freedom to realize his intellect, he does not come under the rule of providence and is left to chance. It is important to note that a person who is left to chance does not necessarily suffer misfortunes. He simply does not receive justice; that is, there is no rational order to the events of his life.¹⁰¹ He can behave in an immoral manner and still seem to enjoy prosperity, or, on the other hand, act morally, and suffer great afflictions. Persons left to chance deserve their irrational and uncertain condition because they chose out of their freedom not to develop their intellects so that they might thereby come under the orderly rule of providence.
- vi. If man chooses to realize his intellect and come under the rule of providence, he receives justice. He will suffer only when he sins, and enjoy pleasure when he is virtuous.
- vii. Virtue is intellectual perfection and evil is intellectual defect. Stated in other terms, virtue is the triumph over matter and defect is the triumph of matter.

96 Isa. 58:8.

97 *MN*, III, 51.

98 See above, pp. 15 ff.

99 *MN*, III, 17 (Fifth theory).

100 *Ibid.*, also *MN*, III, 8.

101 This unusual aspect of Maimonides' theory of providence means that the person who fails to come under the rule of providence will not be punished by providence just as he will not be rewarded. Whatever happens to him occurs entirely by chance.

viii. Providence comes to man by means of the intellect. Intellectual perfection not only deserves happiness because it is the virtuous state, it is also the means whereby man attains happiness. Through scientific providence man can control natural evils such as sickness, and through ethical providence he can control moral evils such as wars. Ontological providence, however, is the ultimate care man receives and is absolutely necessary for true happiness or salvation. It is clear that man cannot and probably will never control all natural or moral evils. Therefore, scientific and ethical providence can only partially contribute to human happiness. Ontological providence is different from the other two forms of providence. It does not produce happiness by seeking to control events outside of man, but by acting to give him a psychic structure that cannot be made unhappy by the outside events that occur. Hence no form of scientific or ethical providence may be able to keep a person from losing his family and possessions to an earthquake or war, but ontological providence will prevent his suffering from these happenings. For ontological providence gives to the one under its care a state of consciousness whose bliss is not affected by calamitous events. The mode of consciousness of the acquired intellect concentrates on eternal, intelligible objects and has no awareness of transient occurrences or of ordinary emotions and feelings such as love, pity, grief and hate. These emotions are connected to body and matter, from which the acquired intellect is absolutely separate.

ix. Suffering comes to a person under the rule of providence only when he lapses from intellectual perfection or is intellectually defective in some way. This is easily seen in each of the three kinds of providence. Scientific providence fails when the intellect does not have sufficient knowledge to control sickness or other natural evils. Ethical providence fails when the intellect cannot control desire or aggression. Ontological providence fails when a person lapses from the state of consciousness where he contemplates unchanging, intelligible objects and becomes concerned with the world of transient, material objects and events.

x. In conclusion, then, there is justice. Every person deserves the suffering he undergoes.

Maimonides' theory of providence is illustrated by his interpretation of the Book of Job.¹⁰² The Book of Job, he contends, is a parable containing both a literal, exoteric meaning, and a figurative, esoteric meaning.¹⁰³ The esoteric meaning teaches Maimonides' theory of providence. Job is portrayed as a pious and upright person who despite his evident goodness undergoes a series of calamitous misfortunes: loss of property, death of children, and painful

sickness. These misfortunes typify the various kinds of afflictions that beset mankind, bringing them to doubt a just providence and even God himself.¹⁰⁴

[Job's] misfortunes are enumerated in the same order as they rank in man's estimation. For some people are not frightened by the loss of their fortune and think little of it, but are horrified by the death of their children and die because of their grief. Others bear with patience and without despair even the loss of their children, but no one possessing sensation can bear pain patiently. Now all men, I mean the vulgar, glorify God with their tongues¹⁰⁵ and attribute justice and benevolence to Him when they are happy and prosperous or even when they are in a state of endurable suffering. However, when the misfortunes mentioned in Job befall them, some of them become unbelievers and believe that there is little order in all that exists at the time when they lose their fortune; others hold to the belief in justice and order in spite even of their having been stricken by the loss of their fortune, but do not keep patient if tried by the loss of their children. Others again are patient and keep an untroubled belief even when they lose their children but none of them supports patiently the pain of the body without complaining and repining either with the tongue or in the heart.¹⁰⁶

Maimonides' interpretation of the solution given to the problem of Job, how a virtuous man comes to suffer, is simply this. Job was not virtuous; he was, on the contrary, evil, and the suffering he underwent, consequently, was deserved. Job, according to Maimonides, was an ignorant man; and inasmuch as ignorance is sin, and intellectual perfection alone virtue, despite all appearances Job was evil. It is true that Job appeared to be pious and moral, but this was not intellectual or real virtue, rather goodness as understood by the uneducated masses. Maimonides states this point explicitly.

The most marvellous and extraordinary thing about this story is the fact that knowledge is not attributed in it to Job. He is not said to be a wise, intelligent, or sagacious man. Only moral virtue and righteousness in action are ascribed to him. For had he been wise, the cause of his suffering would not have been obscure to him, as will be explained further on.¹⁰⁷

Job's ignorance, or evil, and consequent suffering, is to be attributed to the fact that he based his religious belief and practice on the traditional literal interpretation given Scripture. The truth is that such traditional beliefs and practices offer no salvation and do not bring a person under the rule of

104 The Book of Job is entirely a work of fiction according to Maimonides. Job symbolizes mankind, and his afflictions are those that overtake mankind generally.

105 One glorifies God with his tongue when he does so without a knowledge of philosophic theology; cf. *MN*, I, 50 ff.

106 *MN*, III, 22 (tr. by S. Munk and S. Pines).

107 *Ibid.*

102 *MN*, II, 22 and 23.

103 *Ibid.* 22.

providence.¹⁰⁸ The only way a person can attain salvation and the rule of providence is to reach intellectual perfection, which can be acquired through the study of philosophy alone. A knowledge of the esoteric meaning of Scripture offers salvation and providence because it presupposes a mastery of science and metaphysics. Consequently, since Job was ignorant, he had not come under the rule of providence and there was no justice in the pleasure or suffering he experienced. Without providence, his life was determined by chance. Only when Job became virtuous through intellectual perfection was he redeemed from the tyranny of chance, and at the same time, from his suffering as well. For he now understood that the pleasures which come from possessions, children, and one's own body are imaginary or material.¹⁰⁹ True felicity came to Job from intellectual perfection through which he arrived at the mode of consciousness of the acquired intellect. At this level of consciousness, material events cease to exist, and the pleasure or pain they bring depart with them. It no longer brought him suffering, then, that his wealth was gone, his children dead, and his body grievously ill.

It is, however, not the object of this work as a whole to describe in what they agree . . . but to elucidate the opinion of each as regards the question why the greatest and heaviest misfortunes befall the most perfect individual, who was the most unblemished of them in righteousness. Job's opinion on this is that this happening proves that the righteous man and the wicked are regarded as equal by Him, may He be exalted, because of His contempt for the human species and abandonment of it.¹¹⁰ . . . The view was such as arises at the first reflection and in the beginning thereof, especially in the case of one whom misfortunes have befallen, while he knows of himself that he had not sinned — which is not denied by anyone. For this reason this opinion is ascribed to Job. However, the latter said all that he did say as long as he had no true knowledge and knew the deity only because of his acceptance of authority, just as the multitude adhering to a Law know it.¹¹¹ But when he knew God with a certain knowledge, he admitted that true happiness, which is the knowledge of the deity, is guaranteed to all who know Him and that a human being cannot be troubled in it by any of all the misfortunes in question. While he had known God only through the traditional stories and not by the way of speculation, Job had imagined that the things thought to be happiness,

108 The traditional interpretation of Judaism Maimonides rejects is, however, the normative understanding of rabbinic Judaism.

109 The imagination is a bodily or corporeal faculty. It is a prime instrument of matter in causing man unhappiness. See, *MN*, II, 60; and elsewhere.

110 This is the view attributed to Aristotle by Maimonides. Job takes Aristotle's position after his ignorant, mythological view has failed to explain his suffering.

111 A strong attack by Maimonides on traditional theology. A true knowledge of God, which is not attained through tradition, is what saves Job. True knowledge of God is attained only through metaphysical theology; see *MN*, I, 59, and n. 54, above.

such as health, wealth, and children, are the ultimate goal. For this reason he fell into such perplexity and said such things as he did.¹¹²

III

Having shown that all human suffering is deserved, Maimonides would seem thereby to have accomplished his purpose of vindicating the justice and goodness of God. Yet it is clear that he did not think of his theodicy as complete at this point. He was aware that the concept of conditional individual providence upon which his theodicy rested was severe and unyielding, excluding the masses of ordinary religionists from divine protection and imposing rigorous demands upon the intellectual elite who were included. The harshness of Maimonides' view becomes even more apparent alongside the traditional view of providence with its anthropomorphic structure of miraculous reward available to the uninformed and elite alike for simple obedience to the authority and commandments of an all-merciful God. Maimonides did not ignore the objections to which his position on providence might give rise. On the contrary, he refers to the objections himself, and proceeds to meet them with a reasoned defense explaining how it is that a good and just God can indeed be the ground of a universe in which conditional individual providence is the only divine protection extended to men. However, Maimonides does not deal in systematic fashion either with the objections to his position or the answers he gives. As is often his practice when dealing with esoteric doctrines, he fragmentizes his teaching and intersperses the parts among other discussions throughout the *Moreh*.¹¹³ It will be necessary, therefore, in treating this material to rearrange it in systematic order. We will first present the objections to Maimonides' view, and then turn to his response, which constitutes his ultimate theodicy.¹¹⁴

1) Does not Maimonides' view that conditional individual providence is the only form of providence available to man imply that God is less than omniscient?¹¹⁵ Certainly this concept of providence is entirely consistent with the opinion that God has no knowledge of man.¹¹⁶ For God plays no role in human affairs, according to Maimonides, other than as the general ground who brings into existence and sustains a natural universe. Providence over man is exercised entirely by nature, primarily the Active Intellect. As seen earlier, conditional individual providence is a harsh and demanding system that leaves the masses of men without divine protection. Would a just

112 *MN*, III, 23.

113 See Maimonides' Introduction to the *MN*.

114 The various objections listed are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

115 *MN*, III, 17.

116 *MN*, III, 19.

and good God leave these persons uncared for at the mercy of chance if he were aware of their desperate condition?

2) If God is omniscient, possessing a knowledge of individual men, does not Maimonides' view of human providence imply that God is less than omnipotent? Why would a good and just God abandon humanity to the limited, conditional providence of nature if he had the power to bestow unlimited and absolute care?

3) Does not Maimonides' theory of providence imply that God is the cause of the evils that afflict mankind? According to Maimonides, matter is the source of all human evil, and the fact that man is constituted in part of matter is the reason that only a limited providence reaches him.¹¹⁷ But if this is so, and God, as Maimonides maintains, is the creator and ultimate cause of the entire universe,¹¹⁸ including matter, is He not, therefore, the conscious cause of all human suffering?

4) Why, if God is omnipotent and good, does he use the implicit threat of punishment contained in conditional individual providence to force man to become a spiritual, intellectual being? Why does He not simply give man a disposition whereby he will naturally always do and become that which God wills?¹¹⁹ Does not the fact that God must use the inefficient method of reward and punishment of conditional individual providence show that changing the nature of man is beyond the limits of His power and therefore impossible for Him?

5) If God is perfect, why does providence come to men only through the intellect? Clearly enough, this will limit providence to very few persons.¹²⁰

6) If God is all-good, why are there members of the human species alone, in the sublunar world, able to receive providence? Since providence comes only through the intellect, with which the human species alone is endowed, the individuals of all the other species are by their natures abandoned and left to chance.¹²¹

Maimonides' response to the above objections is based upon an examination of the logic and purposes of the Godhead itself. It is here that he finds the ultimate vindication of God's justice and goodness. As noted earlier, Maimonides' views on providence and theodicy are not treated systematically in the *Moreh*. In the following presentation, therefore, his thoughts have been rearranged from their original places in the *Moreh* to reveal the semi-concealed but orderly processes of his reasoning.

1) God does nothing purposelessly; all his action aims at an end. That is to say, God's action is not the result of blind will, but the purposeful efforts of

117 *MN*, III, 8.

118 *MN*, III, 13.

119 *MN*, III, 32; and cf. II, 25.

120 *MN*, III, 17.

121 *Ibid.*

his wisdom or reason.¹²² Since God's will and wisdom are one,¹²³ God's action may be said to be the result of his will, which is rational.

2) God himself, or his nature, provides all his purposes. He does not act for the sake of any being outside himself. His action has the sole end of satisfying his own nature.¹²⁴

3) A limit on God's action is that he cannot do that which is impossible.¹²⁵ He can, however, do everything possible within the boundaries of the impossible. Among the actions impossible for God to perform are: to bring into existence a being equal to himself; to annihilate himself, to make himself into body; or to change in any way.¹²⁶

4) God's action is never frustrated, futile, or in vain. He always accomplishes the purposes he intends to bring about.¹²⁷ This is the case even though he cannot do the impossible. The reason is that God wills only that which is possible.¹²⁸

5) God does nothing trivial, his action is always important, serving some significant or useful end.¹²⁹ Since God's own nature provides him with all his purposes,¹³⁰ what is important will be determined by God's own values, not by those of other beings.

6) God's action may also be said to be good, for good actions are those that aim at excellent ends, which are necessary or useful, and which accomplish those ends.¹³¹ The various points so far enumerated are summarized by Maimonides in the following passage.

Whatever God desires to do is necessarily accomplished; there is no obstacle that can prevent the execution of his will. The object of his will is only that which is possible, and of the things possible only that which his wisdom requires.¹³²

7) Inasmuch as God's action is purposeful and the result of his wisdom, it is rational, and theoretically, at least, intelligible to other minds.

8) God is the creator of the universe.¹³³ On the basis of the points previously laid down, two conclusions may be drawn regarding the creation.

122 *MN*, III, 25.

123 God is an absolute unity; cf. *MN*, I, 18, 50 ff. In this discussion any language attributing multiplicity to God is simply due to verbal convenience on the part of the author.

124 *MN*, III, 25.

125 *MN*, III, 15; and II, 19.

126 *MN*, III, 15.

127 *MN*, III, 25.

128 *Ibid.*

129 *Ibid.*

130 Item 2, above.

131 *MN*, III, 25.

132 *Ibid.*, (tr. primarily by M. Friedländer).

133 *MN*, II, 13 ff.

a) Since the creation of the universe was God's action, and his action has for its sole purpose the satisfaction of his own nature, the universe was not created for its own sake. Rather it is a by-product of God's will acting solely to serve the purposes of his nature alone.¹³⁴

b) Since the creation of the universe and sustaining it in its present form are both God's action, and inasmuch as no obstacle exists that can prevent God's action from accomplishing its purpose, the universe as it now exists is the way God wishes it to be.

9) As stated earlier, God's action is the result of his rational will and intelligible to other minds. Inasmuch as the creation of the universe is God's action, it must therefore be a rational act whose reasons and purposes can be understood. Although man is generally incapable of understanding the reasons and purposes of God, he is capable of apprehending to some degree certain principles that may be taken as providing a rational ground for God's action of creating the universe.¹³⁵ Two of these principles are of significant value for theodicy: the principle of supreme perfection; and the principle of supreme goodness.

a) The principle of supreme perfection is based on the notion that an entity that is perfect in a certain way can either possess that perfection to a degree that is limited to itself, or it can provide another entity with the perfection as well. The greater the ability of a being to bestow its perfection upon others, the greater is the degree to which it possesses that perfection.¹³⁶ Supreme perfection is the ability to impart perfection to others in the highest degree possible.

b) The principle of supreme goodness is based on the proposition that existence per se is good. Accordingly, the greater the number and diversity of existents there are, the more there is that is good. Accordingly, the supreme good is to bring into existence the greatest number and variety of existents that is possible.¹³⁷

On the basis of the above presentation Maimonides is able to respond to the objections enumerated earlier that might be raised against his contention that man receives justice and all human sufferings are deserved. In essence, his response is this: the purpose of God in creating the universe was not for the

134 Also involved in this proposition is the principle that higher beings do not act to serve lower beings; cf. *MN*, II, 11.

135 The reconciliation of Maimonides' negative theology with the apparent knowledge of God implicit here is properly the subject of a separate study. Generally, the qualities attributed to God here can be understood as action attributes; cf. *MN*, I, 52.

136 *MN*, II, 11.

137 *MN*, III, 25. The principle is stated this way: "... what is primarily intended ... (is) bringing into existence everything whose existence is possible, existence being undoubtedly a good." Cf. A.O. Lovejoy's discussion of the principle of plenitude in *The Great Chain of Being*, (New York, 1960), p. 52.

sake of the universe, but to satisfy certain rational principles inherent in his own nature. Two of these principles we may assume to have knowledge of: the principles of supreme perfection and goodness. By virtue of the principle of supreme perfection, God brought the universe into existence.

A thing perfect in a certain way is either perfect only in itself, without being able to communicate that perfection to another being, or it is so perfect that it is capable of imparting perfection to another being. A person may possess wealth sufficient for his own wants without being able to spare anything for another, or he may have wealth enough to benefit also other people, or even to enrich them to such an extent as would enable them to give part of their property to others. In the same manner the creative act of the Almighty in giving existence to pure Intelligences endows the first of them with the power of giving existence to another, and so on, down to the Active Intellect, the lowest of the purely spiritual beings. Besides producing other Intelligences, each Intelligence gives existence to one of the spheres, from the highest down to the lowest, which is the sphere of the moon. After the latter follows this transient world, i.e., the *materia prima*, and all that has been formed of it. In this manner the elements receive certain properties from each sphere and a succession of genesis and destruction is produced.¹³⁸

By reason of the principle of supreme goodness, God produced all the existence he could,¹³⁹ and then, in imparting his perfection to the Intelligences and the spheres, he gave them from his goodness the desire to produce all the numbers and varieties of existents they could.

It is for this reason that matter was created.¹⁴⁰ Following the notion that existence per se is good, and that every being that can exist, therefore, should exist, matter was brought into existence. For matter, as a kind of existence, is itself therefore good, and in addition, it is only through matter that the entire sublunar world of beings can attain existence.¹⁴¹

His acts are all perfectly good. He only produces existence and all existence is good ... Even the existence of this inferior matter, whose mode of being is to be associated with privation, source of death and all

138 *MN*, II, 11 (tr. primarily by M. Friedländer).

139 This would be the first Intelligence, which, of necessity, is inferior to God since it is impossible for God to create a being equal to himself.

140 We are not told Maimonides' opinion on how it was created. It appears in the lunar sphere; *MN*, I, 72. See n. 142, below.

141 I.e., the fact that matter by virtue of the privation associated with it brings about the death of the old is good because it also causes the birth of the new. Moreover, matter allows all the individuals who can exist to exist.

evils, is also good in view of the fact that it provides for the perpetuation of generation and the continuous and successive order of being.¹⁴²

In his interpretation of Job as a parable on theodicy, Maimonides finds the concealed, esoteric meaning of the parable teaches this view of the creation of matter.¹⁴³

It is as if [Scripture] said to you: 'Meditate and reflect on this parable, grasp its meaning, and see what the true opinion is.' Then it mentions that the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord and that Satan came in the midst of their crowd and multitude. For it does not say, The sons of God and Satan came to present themselves before the Lord, which would have meant that all of them were there because of an identical relation, but says: 'The sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also among them.' This form of speech is only used with regard to one who has come without having been for his own sake the intended object or having been sought for his own sake, but came in the midst of those who came when those whose presence was the intended purpose presented themselves.¹⁴⁴ Then it mentions that this Satan roamed and went all over the earth, thus there is no relationship whatever between him and the upper world, in which there is no road for him.¹⁴⁵ This is the meaning of its sayings: 'From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it.' Thus his going to and fro and his roaming take place on the earth.

Then it mentions that this righteous and perfect man was delivered into the hands of this Satan and that all the calamities that befell him with respect to his fortune, his children, and his body, were caused by

142 *MN*, III, 10 (tr. primarily by S. Munk and S. Pines). Attributing the creation of matter directly to God is a mere figure of speech, since we know he only creates the first Intelligence directly. It appears likely that for Maimonides either the Active Intellect or the lunar sphere creates or is the source of matter. However, God, as the ground of being, is ultimately responsible for everything in the universe, so the existence of matter must be shown to be good to vindicate God's own goodness.

143 It is interesting to note that Maimonides has no qualms about clearly describing the creation of matter (in *MN*, III, 10,) which he finds a secret in the parable of Job. The *Moreh*, then, is meant to explain the esoteric meaning of Scripture, and frequently does so in more than subtle hints.

144 Satan is generally understood to represent privation, which is an aspect of matter rather than matter itself; cf. Munk, *op. cit.*, III, 165, n. 1. However, this would then make matter one of the "sons of God." It might be better if Satan were understood as a composite symbol representing matter and privation. At times standing for one, the other, or even both, depending upon which meaning fits better the sense of the parable. Understood as matter—privation here, Satan comes as an incidental result of the creation of the Intelligences and spheres, the sons of God, who are the "intended objects" of creation.

145 There is no primary matter in the superlunar world. The stuff of which the bodies of the spheres are made is quintessence. Primary matter is restricted to the sublunar world of earth; cf. *MN*, I, 72.

Satan.¹⁴⁶ After having made this supposition it begins to set down speeches of people engaged in speculation with regard to this occurrence . . . Job and his friends, thought that God had done it Himself and not through the intermediary of Satan. The most marvellous and extraordinary thing about this story is the fact that knowledge is not attributed in it to Job.¹⁴⁷ . . . The statement [of Scripture] referring to the sons of God says in the two passages: 'To present themselves before the Lord.' Satan, however, though he came among their crowd and multitude a first and a second time, is not said in the first passage to present himself. In the second passage, however, it says: 'And Satan came also among them to present himself before the Lord.' Understand this notion and consider how extraordinary it is, and see how these notions came to me through something similar to prophetic revelation. For the meaning of the words, to present themselves before the Lord, is that they exist as subject to His order in what He wills.¹⁴⁸ . . . It is consequently manifest that the status of the sons of God and that of Satan in what exists are not identical. For the sons of God are more permanent and lasting, while [Satan] also has a certain portion, below them in what exists.¹⁴⁹

Furthermore one of the marvels of this parable consists in the fact that when it mentions that Satan roams especially over the earth and accomplishes certain actions, it also makes clear that he is forbidden to gain domination over the soul, that he has been given dominion over all terrestrial things, but that he is kept away by a barrier from the soul. This is the meaning of its saying: 'Only spare his soul.' I have already explained to you that in our language the term soul is equivocal and that it is applied to the thing that remains of man after death; this is the thing over which Satan has no dominion.¹⁵⁰

Having reconciled the creation of matter with the goodness of God, we come now to the human condition. The critical point is that man was not created for his own sake but to serve God's purpose. Man exists to satisfy the demand of the principle of supreme goodness inherent in God's nature — a principle imparted as well to the Intelligences and the spheres — that inasmuch as existence is good per se, everything that can possibly exist should

146 All change, regarding material possessions or death, is the result of matter, i.e., Satan.

147 I.e., Job and his friends did not understand scientific cosmology and natural processes. They thought human affairs were managed directly and supernaturally by God.

148 The sons of God, i.e., the spheres and the Intelligences, as well as matter, all exist because the Godhead wishes them to.

149 The individuals of the heavens, the sons of God, enjoy eternal life, but the individuals constituted of matter perish.

150 *MN*, III, 22 (tr. primarily by Pines). The soul represents the acquired intellect, which, as has been explained, is absolutely separate from matter and the body. Satan, or matter, consequently, cannot affect the acquired intellect. It can neither cause suffering to a person enjoying the mode of consciousness of the acquired intellect, or cause the acquired intellect to perish.

exist.¹⁵¹ What this means is that God is supremely good if his act of creation brings into existence everything that can possibly exist, and God is deficient in goodness if it does not. Accordingly, man's existence will show God to be deficient in goodness only if it demonstrates that God does not bring into existence everything that can possibly exist. The mere fact that human existence is accompanied with suffering and misery is irrelevant and in no way diminishes the goodness of God, because his goodness is determined by the number and diversity of beings he produces, not by the quality or happiness of these beings. Thus, as it turns out, it is precisely the fact that human existence is imperfect and accompanied with suffering that proves the goodness of God. For human suffering derives from the fact that man is a being composed of matter as well as form, and this combination is exactly what enables him to fill a place in the order of being that otherwise would be left vacant. Form endows the human species with intellect, which distinguishes it from all other sublunar species, and matter gives its members body, which sets them apart from the individuals of the superlunar world.¹⁵² Consequently, the combination of form and matter give man a uniqueness that enables him to fill a special place in the order of being that no other existent can. But man possesses this uniqueness only because he is constituted of matter, the source of all suffering, evil, and death. If he were constituted solely of form and intellect, he would be an Intelligence and enjoy assured eternal felicity, but the unique place he occupies in being would then be left vacant, and God's supreme goodness would be disproved.

Accordingly, it is not because God is lacking omniscience or omnipotence that man is left to the demanding and limited care of conditional individual providence. It is due to the fact that owing to God's wisdom and goodness man is necessarily constituted of matter. The question of omniscience is irrelevant. Whether or not God knows of man's misery, man must of necessity suffer owing to his necessary nature as a material existent. Similarly, God's omnipotence is not the issue, for even an omnipotent being cannot do the impossible.¹⁵³ Thus, it is impossible for man to be a unique existent who alone fills a place in the order of being without his being constituted of matter, and it is equally impossible for a sentient being made of matter not to undergo pain and death, the fate of material beings.¹⁵⁴ It is true that God could have created man a different way,¹⁵⁵ but then he would not be man, and God would only have to create another being identical with him to fill his

151 Even human beings who possess a perfection have an inherent need to share it, particularly prophets and thinkers; cf. *MN*, II, 37; and II, 29.

152 The bodies of the spheres are not constituted of primary matter, which enables them to be eternal although individuals; see above n. 145.

153 *MN*, III, 15.

154 *MN*, III, 12.

155 *MN*, III, 32.

place in being. Nothing good, of course, would be accomplished by this. For the same reason God does not will to transform man, once having created him, into a being who by his nature would automatically realize the purpose of the Law (Torah).¹⁵⁶ Such a being would have to be an intellect separate from matter like the Intelligences, but these already exist, whereas the place of man in being can be filled by the human species alone.

The existence of the human and other species of the sublunar world is determined not only by the principle of supreme goodness, but by the principle of supreme perfection as well. God's supreme goodness requires him to produce a universe in which everything possible can exist, his supreme perfection, on the other hand, requires his act of creation to impart to other beings, necessarily inferior to himself, the power themselves to create. The corollary of the principle of supreme perfection is that there must be entities that are created by these inferior beings, and which, of necessity, will reflect their low origin. Mankind and the other species of the sublunar world are instances of such inferior creation. The sublunar world and its species are created by nature, or forces emanating from the Active Intellect and the spheres; the former is the lowest of the Intelligences and the latter are themselves constituted of body.¹⁵⁷ Hence it is because God is supremely perfect that man and the other species of the sublunar world receive their respective forms of providence from inferior beings.¹⁵⁸ Thus the answer to the question why man is left to the limited providence of nature alone is simply that God's perfection requires it, and therefore, the divine wisdom wills it. Man alone, of the species produced by the inferior creation of nature, is endowed with intellect; the others possess only body and bodily instincts. Since the principle of supreme goodness requires that everything possible exist, the fact that such lowly species are created is good, for they fill the places in the order of being for non-intellectual entities that would otherwise be left vacant. However, individuals of these species without intellect can receive no providence and are left entirely to chance. For providence requires conscious, purposeful thinking, which can come from the intellect alone.¹⁵⁹ Consequently, the very condition that qualifies these lower species for existence, the absence of intellect, makes it impossible for them to receive individual providence. Since existence per se is good, even the existence of individuals left to chance is good, whereas their non-existence is without value, and furthermore, would disprove the goodness of God.

156 *Ibid.*, cf. *MN*, II, 25.

157 See above, p. 7.

158 I.e., because God out of his supreme perfection gave to the Active Intellect and the spheres the power to create and preserve man and the sublunar world, the latter are governed by the lowest ranking beings in the heavens.

159 *MN*, III, 17. See my "Maimonides' Concept of Mosaic Prophecy" *op. cit.*, pp. 358 ff., for Maimonides' view of the way in which Moses, the supreme human intellect, contributes further natural providence over man through the Law (Torah).

Maimonides has thus vindicated the justice and goodness of God. His task was a difficult one owing to two different, if not opposing, ideas in his theological system. On one hand he believes the universe was created by a free act of God, on the other he maintains nature alone exercises providence over man. Inasmuch as God is ultimately responsible for the existence of the universe, Maimonides must show providence governs human existence and justice prevails in human affairs, or God's goodness is refuted. Yet reality would seem to indicate that nature does not govern human existence with a rational, ordered and just system of reward and punishment. The central problem of Maimonides' theodicy, then, is to vindicate the justice and goodness of nature.