Philosophies of Happiness

Appendix 18: Maimonides: Love as an Attribute of Action

I would like to suggest a coda, which I put forth as a tentative suggestion, realizing it may be an extension Maimonides himself did not make. Avicenna speaks of the First Cause sharing love for its own perfection throughout creation; Alfarabi likewise speaks of the First Cause as the subject and object of love. i Maimonides holds back from such language. ii But the seeds are present in his thought for Maimonides’ God being a source of love and loving kindness, when we recognize that both love and loving kindness are equivocal terms, attributed differently to creation and Creator. Maimonides asserts that the heavenly beings delight in God, without bodies; thus it seems that for Maimonides there is a form of intellectual delight.

The activity (energeia) of Aristotle’s God is pleasure, the unimpeded activity of thinking. Maimonides likewise holds that God is fully actual, with no trace of potentiality. For Maimonides, God’s emanation to the world is an act of loving kindness, an attribute of action. iii The flourishing of God’s natural activity is a kind of delight—although in a purely unique and equivocal sense of the term. iv

Hasdai Crescas’ critique of Maimonides’ concept of intellectual pleasure is that pleasure is a function of the entire soul, not just the intellect. Since soul is tied to body, God cannot experience pleasure. For Crescas, happiness comes from the fulfillment of God’s commandments, which involve body and soul as well as mind. Crescas does see the creation of the universe as an overflowing of God’s passionate desire (hesheq), which our love mirrors. v However, we have seen that for Aristotle, God’s pleasure is not a feeling but an unimpeded activity. God has no faculties, dispositions or potentialities; God’s activity is pure thought and God’s energeia is simply the perfection of continuous intellectual energeia.
We have seen that Maimonides is comfortable speaking about God’s overflowing loving kindness (hesed) for the world. If Maimonides does not attribute hesheq or ‘ishq to God, there do exist a few intriguing passages in Maimonides’ Hebrew writings that suggesting that Maimonides is not uncomfortable with the notion that God expresses not only loving kindness, but also love (ahavah) for human beings. In the Laws of Idolatry (Hilkhot Avodah Zarah 1:3), Maimonides recounts the early religious history of humankind, culminating in the patriarchs and Moses: “Out of love and out of keeping the covenant made with Abraham, God sent Moses our Teacher, chief of all the Prophets.”vi Here Maimonides is echoing the Biblical language of Deuteronomy 7:7-8: “Not because you are more numerous than any people did the Lord delight in you and choose you, for you are the least of all the peoples. But because of the Lord's love for you (me-ahavat Hashem etchem) and because He keeps the oath He swore to your forefathers, the Lord took you out with a strong hand and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt.” The fact that Maimonides is echoing Biblical language does not discount his willingness to speak of God’s love, since he prefers to use classical terminology to express his ideas when he can.vii Maimonides could easily conceive of love as an attribute of action, a way that God acts in the world, parallel to bringing into creation that which has no claim or in a greater measure than one deserves, which is the way he defines loving kindness (hesed) as an attribution of God’s actions in the world.viii

An even more intriguing passage is found in his Code of Jewish Law (Mishneh Torah), Laws of Repentance (Hilkhot Teshuvah) 10:3:

What then is the right love? It is a love of God so great, surpassing, abounding and intense that one is bound up, heart and soul, with the love of God and thus ever enthralled by it -- like the lovesick, whose minds are never free of love for the woman by whom they are ceaselessly enthralled, whether sitting down or standing up, eating or drinking. And what is the love that is befitting? One should love God with a great and exceeding love, and an extremely intense love, to the point that one’s soul is bound up with love of God (keshurah be-ahavat Hashem) and one finds oneself continually possessed by the thought, similar to those who are love-sick, whose thoughts are not free of the love of the woman of whom he is enraptured; (as one) who is continuously possessed by the thought of that woman while he sits, while he stands, while he eats and drinks, even more intense should be the love of God in the hearts of those who love Him,
perpetually thinking of Him, as we are commanded “with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might.”

Most fascinating in this passage is the genitive phrase “his soul is bound up in the love of God.” Is this the individual’s love for God, or God’s love for the individual? A soul that is bound or knit up with something implies mutuality. Maimonides had two Biblical sources for this phrase: the love of Jacob for Benjamin, and the love of David and Jonathan. It is hard to imagine such a love not having at least some reciprocal element. At the very least, this love represents a participation and mirroring, as suggested by Guide 3.53-54; one comes to embody in oneself the overflowing loving-kindness with which God created the world. It is also notable that Maimonides does not include the root for love (a-h-v) among the equivocal terms he addresses in the lexical chapters of the Guide – terms whose anthropomorphic character he believed it important to highlight. Perhaps he is not as troubled by the notion of God’s love for the world—God’s activity in the world as a form of love or loving kindness—as we might expect.  

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i “Because It, by Its very nature, loves the being of what is caused by It, It desires to manifest Itself. And since the love of the Most Perfect for Its own perfection is the most excellent love, it has as its true object the reception by others of Its manifestation, and this is most properly its reception by those divine souls which have reached the highest degree of assimilation to It. In this way it is possible that they become the object of Its love. This is the meaning of the tradition: God hath said: the servant of such and such a quality loves Me, and I love him. Just as wisdom in general will not allow anything that is precious in some respect to be overlooked, even though it fall short of the peak of excellence, the Absolute Good desires in Its wisdom that things should obtain some of Its gifts, even though the degree in which they will be obtained will not reach perfection.” Avicenna, Treatise on Love (Risala fi’l Ishq), "Trait's mystiques d'Abou Ali al-Hosain b. Abdallah b. Sind ou d'Avicenne III ieme fast., (Leyden, 1894), pp. 1-27, at 26. Translated as “A Treatise on Love by Ibn Sina,” by Emil Fackenheim, Mediaeval Studies, Volume 7 (1945), 208-228, at 228. Alfarabi, Al-Siyasa al-madaniya al-mulaqqab bi-mabadi’ al-mawjudat, ed. Fauzi Najjar, 31-69, pp. 46-47. Translated by Jon McGinnis and David C. Reisman, in Classical Arabic Philosophy: An Anthology of Sources (Cambridge: Hackett, 2007), pp. 90-91; cf. Richard Walzer, Al-Farabi on the Perfect State, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 86-89, 96-97, 345, 352, 361. See also Warren Zev Harvey, “Ishq, Hesheq, Amor Dei Intellectualis,” in Steven Nadler, ed. Spinoza and Medieval Jewish Philosophy (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 96-108.

ii See the astute analysis of Warren Zev Harvey, “Ishq, Hesheq, Amor Dei Intellectualis.” In the Eight Chapters, Maimonides locates human love within the appetitive soul rather than the intellect. Harvey points out that he takes a comparable position in Guide 1.39, “when defining the commandment to
love God "with all thy heart" (Deuteronomy 6:5) He takes "heart" to refer by metonymy to "all the forces of the body." The commandment is fulfilled by directing all one's bodily forces toward the knowledge of God: the knowledge is intellectual, but the love is a bodily passion.” This conflicts with his discussion of intellectual love in Guide 3.51.

iii Guide 3.53; 1.54.

iv On the possible connection between Maimonides’ passionate love for God and Spinoza’s amor dei intellectualis, see Warren Zev Harvey, “‘Ishq, Hesheq, Amor Dei Intellectualis.’” On Spinoza’s amor dei intellectualis, see Spinoza, Ethics V, 32-34.


vi The text continues: “Since Moses prophesied and God chose Israel as an inheritance, He crowned them with commandments, and made know to them the way to worship Him, and what the law regarding those who serve idols and those who err to pursue them is.”

vii This was pointed out to me by Bernard Septimus. Warren Zev Harvey suggested to me that the chapter begins in philosophical language, with Abraham as the subject knowing and loving God as the object. When the passage shifts to Moses, Maimonides imitates Biblical style, in which God comes to the founder of the Jewish people and loves human beings.

viii We have precedence for conceiving of love as an attribute of action in Aristotle. In Nicomachean Ethics 9.8, Aristotle distinguishes between the self-lover whom we rebuke as selfish, in contrast to the genuine self-lover. The genuine self-lover is the one who develops the most sovereign part of him or herself, the thinking part. Aristotle here conceives of love not as a feeling but as a way of treating oneself. To love is to act towards oneself with love by pursuing intellectual virtue and ethical self-mastery.

viii Translation of Bernard Septimus. Translation of Hyamson: What is the love of God that is befitting? It is to love the Eternal with a great and exceeding love, to the point that one’s soul shall be knit up with the love of God (keshura be-ahavat Hashem) and one should be continually enraptured by it, like a love sick individual, whose mind is at no time free from love.

x 1 Samuel 18:1: And it was, as he finished speaking to Saul, that Jonathan's soul had become attached to David's soul, and Jonathan loved him as himself. וַיַּאֲהָבֵהוּ יְהוֹנָתָן כְּנַפְשּׁ
Genesis 44:30-31: And now, when I come to your servant, my father, and the boy is not with us [since] his soul is attached to his (the boy's) soul, it will come to pass, when he sees that the boy is gone, he will die, and your servants will have brought down the hoary head of your servant, our father, in grief to the grave.