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Ariel Krakowski

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MAIMONIDEAN PROVIDENCE & STOICISM

ARIEL KRAKOWSKI

Stoicism, the philosophical school popular in Greek and Roman times, has experienced a resurgence lately.¹ Its influence can be seen in cognitive behavioral therapy and in Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, which emphasizes finding meaning in life in all situations.² More recently, many books, websites, and events have brought the teachings of Stoicism to a popular audience.³

This article explores the practical principles of Stoicism and how they relate to Rambam's discussion of providence and theodicy in the *Guide for the Perplexed*. While Rambam may have differed with the Stoics on many theoretical issues, in their practical approach to life they share many similarities. Comparing them will shed light on each and show how their ideas are more relevant than ever.

Stoic Philosophy

The goal of Stoicism is to live according to nature and reason. The Stoics believed the most important trait people possess is their power of reason. Proper reason shows that one should live virtuously, which will lead to *eudaimonia* (happiness or human flourishing) and *apatheia* (equanimity). To achieve these goals, one must recognize the *Dichotomy of Control*, which is summarized at the beginning of the [Handbook of Epictetus](#):

Some things are in our control and others not. Things in our control are opinion, pursuit, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever are our own actions. Things not in our control are body, property, reputation, command, and, in one word, whatever are not our own actions.

The Stoics believed that external events do not harm a person; only the individual's impressions and interpretations of the events matter. People must learn to accept things beyond their control, and focus on changing things within their control. Once this mindset is achieved, events should no longer cause distress. People often desire unnecessary things and suffer needlessly when their desires aren't fulfilled. Instead, the Stoics preached that

¹ The author would like to thank Tzvi Sinensky, Eliyahu Krakowski, and Mindy Schwartz for their editorial contributions to this article.

² Massimo Pigliucci, "[The best books on Stoicism](#)":

One of the reasons Stoicism came back in modern times is because these 'tricks' are useful. Some of them have been elaborated into fully-fledged psychotherapeutic approaches, such as Viktor Frankl's logotherapy; cognitive behavioural therapy; Albert Ellis' rational emotive behaviour therapy, and others. All of these therapies bear traces of Stoicism. Ellis and Frankl both read the Stoics, and used their ideas as a starting point.

³ As a small indication of its popularity, the subreddit for [Stoicism](#) has over 100,000 subscribers, while the one for [Epicureanism](#) has 7,000. The [number of searches](#) for Stoicism have even overtaken searches for Hedonism recently.

individuals should consciously choose their goals and desires, such that they can achieve *eudaimonia* independently of external circumstances.

Furthermore, the Stoics taught that while people often assign great weight to external trivialities, we ought to counter this tendency by keeping the bigger perspective of existence in mind. The Roman emperor (and practicing Stoic) Marcus Aurelius emphasized this theme throughout his personal diary, *Meditations*, where he urges:

Reflect often on the speed with which all things in being, or coming into being, are carried past and swept away. Existence is like a river in ceaseless flow, its actions a constant succession of change, its causes innumerable in their variety: scarcely anything stands still, even what is most immediate. Reflect too on the yawning gulf of past and future time, in which all things vanish. So in all this it must be folly for anyone to be puffed with ambition, racked in struggle, or indignant at his lot—as if this was anything lasting or likely to trouble him for long.⁴

Finally, the Stoics also emphasized how people could use their reason to achieve their goals. By using one's reason correctly, one may understand external nature and human nature, and live in accordance with them. Proper use of reason enables one to avoid mistakes.⁵ In fact, the Stoics believed that an ideal sage might achieve perfect knowledge of nature, and even predict the future through a form of "rational divination."

Maimonides on Evil and Providence

Rambam is famous for incorporating Aristotelian thought into his philosophy, but he is not usually associated with Stoic philosophy. However, there are numerous points of contact between Stoic philosophy and Rambam's analysis of theodicy and divine providence in his *Guide for the Perplexed*. It is difficult to determine if and how much the Stoics directly influenced Rambam on these issues, since he differs with the Stoics on so many other issues. Yet seeing how such different philosophers came to similar practical conclusions helps to demonstrate the universality of their ideas.

To begin, in addressing the problem of evil, Rambam writes that the world is not as bad as people claim, people aren't as important as they think, and most evil is self-inflicted:

Men frequently think that the evils in the world are more numerous than the good things... For an ignorant man believes that the whole universe only exists for him; as if nothing else required any consideration. If, therefore, anything happens to him contrary to his expectation, he at once concludes that the whole universe is evil. If, however, he would take into consideration the whole universe, form an idea of it, and comprehend what a small portion he is of the Universe, he will find the truth... The whole mankind at present in existence, and a fortiori, every other species of animals, form an infinitesimal portion of the permanent universe... It is of great

⁴ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Martin Hammond (Penguin Classics, 2014): 5:23.

⁵ "According to the Stoics... we can always avoid falling into error if only our reason is sufficiently disciplined." Baltzly, Dirk, "[Stoicism](#)", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

advantage that man should know his station, and not erroneously imagine that the whole universe exists only for him... ([Guide for the Perplexed, 3.12](#))⁶

Rambam, like the Stoics, points out that the evils on which people tend to focus are not so important in grand scheme of the universe. It can be disconcerting to contemplate that the whole Earth and all of humanity are just a speck in the vastness of the universe, but realizing this can help people adopt a more humble perspective toward the vicissitudes of life.

Rambam continues his discussion by noting how much really is in our control:

The numerous evils to which individual persons are exposed are due to the defects existing in the persons themselves. We complain and seek relief from our own faults: we suffer from the evils which we, by our own free will, inflict on ourselves and ascribe them to God, who is far from being connected with them! (*Guide*, *ibid.*)

Rambam then divides the evils that befall humankind into three categories:

- Natural evils, such as natural disasters and certain diseases. Rambam says these are relatively uncommon.
- Evils that people perpetrate against one another. Violence committed by individuals is rare. Wars harm more people, Rambam grants, but are still rare if you take the "the whole inhabited part of the earth is taken into consideration."
- Evils that one causes to himself, such as overeating or desiring unnecessary things. Rambam argues that these are by far the most common category.⁷

By spelling out these categories, Rambam is reducing the problem of evil. In his opinion, most of the evils that people suffer are self-inflicted, so they have no complaint against God for causing them. Rambam discusses this third category of evil at length and emphasizes the same principle that the Stoics taught: people are in control of their conditions, and the evil a person suffers is usually what "one causes to himself by his own action."

After pointing out that external evils are a smaller problem than people assume, Rambam turns to discuss the different aspects of providence itself ([3:17](#)). Rambam first discusses and rejects many different opinions on providence:

- Epicurus' view that "there is no providence at all." Rambam claims Aristotle disproved this.
- Aristotle's view that providence operates in the heavens but not for individuals on Earth. Rambam says this goes against the Torah.

⁶ Moses Maimonides, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, translated by M. Friedlaender (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1904).

⁷ This class of evils originates in man's vices, such as excessive desire for eating, drinking, and love; indulgence in these things in undue measure, or in improper manner, or partaking of bad food. This course brings diseases and afflictions upon body and soul alike... Those who are ignorant and perverse in their thought are constantly in trouble and pain, because they cannot get as much of superfluous things as a certain other person possesses. They as a rule expose themselves to great dangers, e.g., by sea-voyage, or service of kings, and all this for the purpose of obtaining that which is superfluous and not necessary... All the difficulties and troubles we meet in this respect are due to the desire for superfluous things: when we seek unnecessary things, we have difficulty even in finding that which is indispensable. For the more we desire to have that which is superfluous, the more we meet with difficulties; our strength and possessions are spent in unnecessary things, and are wanting when required for that which is necessary. (*Guide*, [ibid.](#))

- The opposite extreme, that nothing is due to chance: "each leaf falls according to the divine decree." Rambam says this view contradicts the principle of free will.

Rambam then spells out his own view, namely that providence does not affect the natural events of the world, but can affect the decisions of rational beings and protect them from misfortunes:

divine providence is connected with divine intellectual influence, and the same beings which are benefited by the latter so as to become intellectual, and to comprehend things comprehensible to rational beings, are also under the control of divine providence... It may be by mere chance that a ship goes down with all her contents... but it is not due to chance, according to our view, that in the one instance the men went into the ship... it is due to the will of God, and is in accordance with the justice of His judgments, the method of which our mind is incapable of understanding... ([ibid.](#))

According to many scholars, Rambam is explaining providence as a person using his "practical intellect" to avoid negative circumstances.⁸ For example, a rational person will recognize that the journey overseas may be dangerous, and avoid getting on the boat in the first place. This emphasis on reason corresponds to the Stoic and Aristotelian emphasis on a person using reason to understand what is important and how to attain it. Thus the Maimonidean and Stoic sage are both protected from evils through the power of their reason.

In his discussion of *Job* a few chapters later, Rambam explains providence and happiness as dependent on one's attitude to external events:

As soon as [Job] had acquired a true knowledge of God, he confessed that there is undoubtedly true felicity in the knowledge of God; it is attained by all who acquire that knowledge, and no earthly trouble can disturb it. So long as Job's knowledge of God was based on tradition and communication, and not on research, he believed that such imaginary good as is possessed in health, riches, and children, was the utmost that men can attain... [but later] he abhorred all that he had desired before...

⁸ For example, see Charles Raffel ("Providence as Consequent upon the Intellect: Maimonides' Theory of Providence," Charles M. Raffel, *AJS Review*, Vol. 12, No. 1, Spring 1987):

Considering the specific example of the fate of a passenger on a foundering ship, Maimonides argues that a man's decision to board the ship is not due to chance, but is based on intellect. I take this to mean that the man's decision to board the ship or not is based on considerations and deliberations of the practical intellect, his appraisal of the ship's construction, of dangerous wind currents, the competency of the ship's crew, and given the "great dangers such as arise in sea voyages," the validity of his need to take this voyage. In the general statement in which the intellectual overflow offers guidance over the actions of righteous men, providential care would seem to be subsumed by one's personal deployment of moral intelligence or practical wisdom. This interpretation understands providence to be a direct and natural result of the deliberation of one's own practical intellect.

See also David Shatz, "Worship, Corporeality, and Human Perfection: A Reading of *Guide of the Perplexed*, III:51-54," in *The Legacy of Maimonides: Religion, Reason and Community* (ed. by Y. Levy and S. Carmy, Brooklyn, NY: Yashar Books, 2006), 217-262

Steven Nadler, "The Order of Nature and Moral Luck: Maimonides on Divine Providence," in *The Divine Order, the Human Order, and the Order of Nature: Historical Perspectives*. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

On account of this last utterance, which implies true perception, it is said afterwards in reference to him, "for you have not spoken of me the thing that is right, as my servant Job hath." ([3:23](#))

According to Aristotle, health, riches, and children are important to achieving *eudaimonia*. According to the Stoics, these external conditions are irrelevant to achieving *eudaimonia*, and can at most be "preferred indifferents."⁹ Echoing his comments in 3:12, Rambam's position that external conditions are an "imaginary good" aligns with the position of the Stoics. Job's realization of this truth, Rambam contends, is what made Job wise. Or, as Marcus Aurelius said, "If you are pained by any external thing, it is not this thing that disturbs you, but your own judgment about it."¹⁰

Keeping this larger perspective in mind will help one live both with greater equanimity and virtue. For example, people often get angry due to inflating the importance of minor issues. Both Rambam and the Stoics (unlike Aristotle) emphasized the importance of never getting angry, and at most only *displaying* anger when necessary.¹¹ Similarly, Rambam says people wouldn't take revenge if they recognized what was important:

Even though [revenge] is not punished by lashes, it is a very bad trait. Instead, a person should [train himself] to rise above his feelings about all worldly things, for men of understanding consider all these things as vanity and emptiness which are not worth seeking revenge for. (*Mishneh Torah, [Hilkhhot De'ot 7:7](#)*)

By maintaining the proper perspective, one can surmount both the internal and external evils one faces.

Rambam explained providence earlier as a connection to the "divine intellectual influence," and he returns to this theme at the end of the *Guide*:

Those who are perfect in their perception of God, whose mind is never separated from Him, enjoy always the influence of providence. But those who, perfect in their

⁹ "Aristotle takes virtue and its exercise to be the most important constituent in *eudaimonia* but acknowledges also the importance of external goods such as health, wealth, and beauty. By contrast, the Stoics make virtue necessary and sufficient for *eudaimonia* and thus deny the necessity of external goods." (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eudaimonia)

¹⁰ *Meditations*, Chapter 8.

¹¹ For a Stoic treatment of anger, see *On Anger*, by Seneca. Rambam's general approach to personality traits is that one should follow the "golden mean" of Aristotle and not be too far to either extreme. However, when it comes to anger, he sides with the Stoics:

Anger is also an exceptionally bad quality. It is fitting and proper that one move away from it and adopt the opposite extreme. He should school himself not to become angry even when it is fitting to be angry. If he should wish to arouse fear in his children and household - or within the community, if he is a communal leader - and wishes to be angry at them to motivate them to return to the proper path, he should present an angry front to them to punish them, but he should be inwardly calm. He should be like one who acts out the part of an angry man in his wrath, but is not himself angry. (*Mishneh Torah, [Hilkhhot De'ot, 2:3](#)*, trans. by Eliyahu Touger)

knowledge of God, turn their mind sometimes away from God, enjoy the presence of divine providence only when they meditate on God; when their thoughts are engaged in other matters, divine providence departs from them... Those who have their God dwelling in their hearts, are not touched by any evil whatever. ([3:51](#))

According to this passage, the righteous are only protected by providence when they are contemplating God. Bad things can sometimes happen to good people, since their thoughts sometimes turn away from God. But if we have "God dwelling in[our] hearts," we will "attain the influence of the divine intellect, providence is joined to us, and we are guarded against all evils." This version of providence puzzled many rationalist Maimonidean commentators, such as Shmuel Ibn Tibbon¹² and Moshe Narboni, as this apparently miraculous depiction contravenes Rambam's more limited view of miracles elsewhere,¹³ and seems quite different than his depiction of providence in his discussion of *Job*. To resolve this contradiction, Narboni explains that the sage has such a strong connection to God that the physical world becomes irrelevant to him.¹⁴ No miracles are necessary; external events are unimportant to the sage's true essence. This parallels the Stoic depiction of a sage that "is utterly immune to misfortune... virtue is sufficient for happiness."¹⁵

However one understands Rambam's overall view on providence, one point is evident. Providence is not an absolute force from above, but something that depends on the individual, whether through one's rational choices, attitudes, or ability to transcend this world. Accordingly, we may cite Charles Raffel's succinct summary of Rambam's approach to theodicy and divine providence:¹⁶

- 1) In the world of actions and choices, one succeeds or fails in accordance with the successful deployment or neglect of one's practical intellect.
- 2) As a response to probable and predictable results (which one does not desire), the intensity of pain or suffering is not absolute, but relative to one's attitude and ability to maximize or minimize or transcend the particular pain or suffering.

¹² Samuel Ibn Tibbon, the first translator of the *Guide*, wrote to Rambam to ask how to reconcile the above statements on providence. We do not have any reply from Rambam on this issue. The letter was published in Zvi Diesendruck, "Samuel and Moses Ibn Tibbon on Maimonides' Theory of Providence," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 11 (1936).

¹³ Rambam in his commentary to *Avot* ([5:6](#), and *Eight Chapters* [Ch. 8](#)) explains miracles as exceptions pre-programmed into creation, which implies miracles are extremely rare events, as opposed to happening to righteous people regularly (see also *Guide* [2:29](#)). See also his *Treatise on Resurrection* where he says all events should be explained according to nature as much as possible, and only when there's no other possibility should one admit something as a miracle.

¹⁴ *Commentary of Narboni on the Guide for the Perplexed*, [ch. 51](#). Also cited by David Shatz (ibid.)

¹⁵ Baltzly, Dirk, "[Stoicism](#)," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. See also *Wikipedia*, [Sage \(philosophy\)](#).

¹⁶ Raffel, ibid.

- 3) Within the theoretical realm which is intellect, one's own intellect may acquire an immunity from pain and suffering and transcend any and all evils.

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Strikingly, all three points parallel the Stoic approach to life. The Stoics emphasized the power of reason to deal with challenges, the total dependence of *eudaimonia* on an individual's attitude, and the ability of the sage to transcend everything external.

The Contemporary Relevance of Maimonidean Stoicism

In reflecting on how Stoicism extends to the current age, we may begin by noting that Rambam asserted that most evils are self-inflicted in an era when famines, plagues, and wars remained common; in fact, he had to leave both Spain and Morocco to escape persecution from the Almohad invaders.¹⁸ The modern world, particularly in the West, has greatly improved external conditions: life expectancy is up, health has been revolutionized with modern medicine and sanitation, famine and hunger are increasingly rare, income has increased over two-hundredfold, wars and violent crime have decreased, and equality and knowledge have spread.¹⁹ Moderns have used their practical intellect to improve the world in ways previously unimaginable.

Yet despite these improvements, we struggle to find happiness. People in the modern world often struggle with anxiety, depression and addiction; suicide rates²⁰ have risen recently. This seems paradoxical, but regardless of external circumstances, what matters most is one's own perspective and actions. When the struggle to survive is diminished, the internal struggle to find the right "opinion, pursuit, desire [and] aversion" looms larger.

Rambam and the Stoics argued that even very harsh external circumstances should not affect a person's happiness. Even if one isn't willing to go that far, in modern times of prosperity, it is clear that one's own attitude and actions are what is important. As the Mishnah in *Avot* (4:1) states:

¹⁷ Raffle does not take a firm stance on how far this level of providence extends. I think that as much as Rambam explained providence rationally, he still appears to believe in a level of providence that goes beyond Aristotelian explanation. He mentions multiple times how the individual is protected from actual evils befalling him, and emphasizes the difference between his view of providence and Aristotle's. It appears that Rambam understood this divine intellectual influence as a natural outcome of a person reaching a certain intellectual/moral level, similar to how Rambam explains prophecy. Certain individuals at certain times can connect to a divine influence to guide them beyond the usual bounds of nature. This idea may have certain parallels as well with the Stoic idea of "rational divination".

¹⁸ Ben Zion Bokser, [Moses Maimonides](#), *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

¹⁹ These examples are documented by Steven Pinker in his recent book *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*. While some of his claims are controversial, it's clear that material prosperity has increased dramatically in modern times.

²⁰ [nytimes.com/2016/04/22/health/us-suicide-rate-surges-to-a-30-year-high.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/22/health/us-suicide-rate-surges-to-a-30-year-high.html)

Who is wise? One who learns from every man... Who is strong? One who overpowers his inclinations... Who is rich? One who is satisfied with his lot... Who is honorable? One who honors his fellows.

Many people think they will find happiness if only they had more money or fame. Yet as the Mishnah, Rambam and Stoics teach, happiness and meaning can only be found within.

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WHEN RAMBAM MET THE IZHBITSER REBBE:
RESPONSE TO A STRAUSSIAN READING OF *HILKHOT*
TESHUVAH

BEZALEL NAOR

The renowned German Jewish scholar Leo Strauss revolutionized intellectual history when he published in 1952 his book [Persecution and the Art of Writing](#). Strauss made the bold claim that some of our great authors wrote on two levels within the same work. For the masses, they wrote on the exoteric level, but they tucked away another, esoteric level available only to the cognoscenti, and it is the latter level that contains their true opinion. The three paradigms Strauss provided are three of Judaism's greatest thinkers: Judah Halevi, Maimonides, and Spinoza.

A decade later, in 1963, the University of Chicago Press published an [edition](#) of Maimonides' *The Guide of the Perplexed* containing Shlomo Pines' English translation of the Arabic, and a sprawling introductory essay by Strauss, "How To Begin To Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*," employing his hermeneutic. As this edition became the standard English edition of the *Guide*, it certainly contributed to the mainstreaming of Strauss' ideas.

Forty years after the appearance of Strauss' seminal work, another Maimonidean scholar, Bezalel Safran, offered an application of Strauss' method to Maimonides' halakhic work, *Mishneh Torah*. Safran's article, "Maimonides on Free Will, Determinism and Esotericism,"²¹ attempts to demonstrate that not only in the philosophic work, *Guide of the Perplexed*, did Maimonides write for two very different audiences, but in the *Commentary to the Mishnah* and in *Mishneh Torah* as well.²² The departure point for the discussion is the perhaps enigmatic passage in *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Teshuvah* [Laws of Return] 6:4, which dwells on King David's guilt-ridden spiritual struggle with sin. The paragraph reads (in Safran's translation):

And concerning this matter the righteous ones and the prophets ask in their prayer from God to aid them on the Way of Truth, as David had said (Psalms 86:21), "Teach me Your Way, O God, I shall walk in Your Truth," that is to say, let not my sins prevent me [from attaining] the Way of Truth, through which I will know Your way and the unity of Your name. And also that which [David] said (Psalms 51:14), "And a generous spirit will support me," that is to say, let my spirit do its desire, and let not my sins cause me to be prevented from repentance; rather, may freedom of the will be in my hand [may it be within my grasp to do repentance] until I return [to the

²¹ Published in [Porat Yosef: Studies Presented to Rabbi Dr. Joseph Safran](#), ed. Bezalel Safran and Eliyahu Safran (Hoboken, New Jersey: Ktav, 1992), pp. 111-128.

²² Actually, Strauss had already extended his method to *Mishneh Torah*. See L. Strauss, "Notes on Maimonides' *Book of Knowledge*," in [Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom G. Scholem](#) (Jerusalem, 1967), pp. 269-283. Safran credits Prof. Arthur Hyman with reminding him of this article, "a pioneering mode of esoteric reading of *Mishneh Torah*" (Safran, p. 127, n. 27).

Way of Truth] and shall understand and know the Way of Truth. And in this way [are to be interpreted] all that resemble these verses.²³

Safran argues that this paragraph flies in the face of the preceding paragraph. Whereas what precedes forcefully argues for free will, this paragraph—when decoded by utilizing Straussian cryptology—sends the exact opposite message of determinism. But again, this true opinion of Maimonides is privileged information reserved for the elite, of which there were very few, even among Maimonides' rabbinic peers.²⁴

Safran puzzles over the fact that three times in the single paragraph of *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 6:4 Maimonides repeats the term “*derekh ha-emet*” (the Way of Truth). For Safran, this is more than just a *terminus technicus*; this is the proverbial smoking gun. “The Way of Truth” is a term loaded with esoteric significance.

After noting the term's earlier appearance in *Hilkhot Avodah Zarah* 1:3, Safran traces it back to its biblical root in Genesis 24:48, where Abraham's servant Eliezer expresses gratitude to God “who guided me on a Way of Truth (*derekh emet*) to take the daughter of my master's brother for his son.”²⁵ And just as in the context of Rebekah's marriage to Isaac, the gist is clearly deterministic, so too in Maimonides' lexicon, the “Way of Truth” harbors an esoteric truth, whereby the patina of man's free will is peeled away to reveal the reality of divine preordination.

This is the secret message that Safran has unpacked from the passage in *Hilkhot Teshuvah*: King David was praying for some sort of epiphany by which there would be revealed to him that his sin with Bathsheba was in reality engineered from Above, and that he was, so to speak, merely a pawn on a divine chessboard.²⁶

²³ Safran, p. 112.

²⁴ After positing that the two *halakhot* (*Hil. Teshuvah* 6:3 and 6:4) are contradictory (a supposition that I reject), Safran chalks up the contradiction to Maimonides' “seventh cause” in the Introduction to *The Guide of the Perplexed*: “In speaking about very obscure matters it is necessary to conceal some parts and to disclose others... In such cases the vulgar must in no way be aware of the contradiction; the author accordingly uses some device to conceal it by all means” (Pines ed., p. 18). Maimonides goes on to say: “Divergences that are to be found in this Treatise are due to the fifth cause and the seventh” (*ibid.*, p. 20).

²⁵ Though nowhere in the story (Genesis 24) is the servant of Abraham named “Eliezer,” I follow Maimonides' lead in *Hilkhot Avodah Zarah* 11:4 where the protagonist of the story is referred to as “*Eliezer 'eved Avraham*” (“Eliezer servant of Abraham”).

²⁶ See *Avodah Zarah* 4b-5a. Rashi (*ibid.*, s.v. *lomar lekha*) writes: “It was the decree of the King” (“*Gezeirat melekh hi*”). Quoted by Safran, p. 124, n. 17.

Safran's reading of the *halakhah* in Maimonides is most reminiscent of a passage in the writings of Rabbi Zadok Hakohen [Rabinowitz] of Lublin: “The main Return (*Teshuvah*) is [not accomplished] until the Lord will enlighten his eyes, [whereby] the sins become merits, which is to say, that he will recognize and understand that whatever sin he committed was also the will of the Lord, blessed be He...” (*Zidkat ha-Zaddik* [Lublin, 1913], par. 40 [6a]). Rabbi Zadok was the eminent disciple of Rabbi Mordecai Joseph Leiner of Izbica (author of [Mei ha-Shilo'ah](#)).

For a discussion of Rabbi Zadok's determinism as well as that of Rav Kook, see my article, “*Zedonot Na'asot ke-Zakhuyot' be-Mishnato shel Harav Kook*” (“Sins Become as Merits' in the Philosophy of Rav Kook”), in *Ofer*

The author of the article finds confirmation for his theory that in truth Maimonides subscribes to determinism, in a self-declaredly esoteric passage in the earlier *Commentary to the Mishnah, Rosh Hashanah* 1:2. There, Maimonides writes concerning the judgment meted out to earth's inhabitants on the New Year:

The exoteric aspect of this Mishnaic statement is spelled out as you will see. The esoteric dimension, however, its meaning is indubitably very difficult.²⁷

There too, Safran assumes that Maimonides alludes to his deterministic theory, in direct opposition to what he writes elsewhere in his *Commentary to the Mishnah*. The entire final chapter of the [Shemonah Perakim/Eight Chapters](#), Maimonides' introduction to *Avot*, champions man's free will.

By the time Safran concludes his study of Maimonides, the reader is nudged to the realization that Maimonides' true opinion is not so far removed from (though not identical with) the philosophy of Rabbi Mordecai Joseph Leiner (the Rebbe of Izbica), famously typecast by Joseph Weiss as "religious determinism."²⁸

Let us attempt to deconstruct Safran's argument and offer a counter-interpretation of the Maimonidean texts.

First, while in principle I do not find objectionable Safran's method of searching for biblical precedent to Maimonides' lexicology, I do find it highly unlikely that a term as generic and sweeping as "the Way of Truth" must be reduced to the rather unique situation of Eliezer's experience in searching for a spouse to suit Isaac.²⁹

ha-Ayyalim: Sefer Zikaron le-ha-Kadosh Ofer Eliyahu Cohen, ed. Dani Kokhav (Koch) (Jerusalem, 1994), pp. 299-312.

²⁷ Safran's English translation (pp. 119-120), based on Kapah's Hebrew translation from the Arabic, in his edition of *Mishnah 'im Peirush Rabbeinu Moshe ben Maimon* (Jerusalem, 1965).

²⁸ See Safran, p. 125, n. 21. In that same endnote, "another great determinist, Hasdai Crescas" is referenced.

²⁹ When I read Rabbi Abraham Maimonides' commentary to the story of Abraham's servant and Rebekah, at first blush it seemed to confirm Safran's contention that "the Way of Truth" is at the very least a *terminus technicus* in the Maimonidean lexicon of both father and son. In his commentary to Genesis 24:7, s.v. *malakho*, Rabbi Abraham Maimonides writes:

Praised be the one who has guided us in the Way of Truth (*be-derekh ha-emet*) to every correct and fine reason, whose end is beyond our intellect, by opening [for us] a gate to what is written in the Torah. (*Peirush Rabbeinu Avraham ben ha-Rambam 'al Bereishit u-Shemot*, ed. Wiesenberg [London: L. Honig & Sons, 1958], p. 54)

One who reads the Hebrew translation might think that Rabbi Abraham Maimonides embedded the Hebrew words "*be-derekh ha-emet*" in his Judeo-Arabic statement (especially because of its close proximity to Abraham's servant's utterance some verses later). However, if one consults the Judeo-Arabic (provided in that edition), one is in for a surprise. The phrase "in the Way of Truth" simply does not occur! In the Judeo-Arabic (f.14r. of the Oxford ms.; p. 55 of the London edition) the phrase reads tout court: "Praised be the one who has guided us to every correct, fine reason..."

Besides the impracticality of subordinating every occurrence of the term “the Way of Truth” in Maimonides’ *oeuvre* to Eliezer’s narrative,³⁰ it just so happens that Maimonides penned a responsum in which he disabuses the questioner of the notion that marriages are divinely preordained. The upshot of Maimonides’ response is that in general, matches are not made in heaven but on earth; only in isolated instances is there divine orchestration. (Though one may wish to argue that in Maimonides’ estimation his addressee, Obadiah the Proselyte, was not worthy of being privy to Maimonides’ true opinion on the matter, the effusive praise that Maimonides heaps upon his correspondent would seem to indicate otherwise.)

So germane is this responsum to our discussion that it bears reproduction here (in my translation):

Question: Regarding [the statement] “All is in the hands of heaven except for the fear of heaven.”³¹

Answer: Regarding that which you said, that all of mankind’s deeds are not decreed beforehand by the Creator. That is the impeccable truth, and therefore reward is given if one goes on a good way, and punishment is exacted if one goes on a bad way. All mankind’s deeds come under the rubric of “fear of heaven,” for in the final analysis, all mankind’s deeds produce either [fulfillment of] a commandment or a sin. When the Rabbis, of blessed memory, said, “All is in the hands of heaven,” [they were referring to] the natural order of the world, such as species of trees and wildlife, and the science of the heavenly spheres, and the angels. We have already expanded on this subject in the commentary to Tractate *Avot*,³² and brought proofs. Also at the beginning of the magnum opus which we composed of all the commandments.³³

This was confirmed for me by my dear friend Rabbi Moshe Maimon, who is in the process of preparing for publication a new Hebrew translation of Abraham Maimonides’ commentary to the Pentateuch. (The Oxford manuscript, Huntington 166, is a unicum.)

Evidently, the translator (according to the introduction of the publisher, Rabbi Solomon Sasoon, the Book of Genesis was translated by Hakham Yosef ben Salah Dori, and the Book of Exodus by Rabbi Efraim Yehudah Wiesenberg), took the literary license of adding the flourish “*be-derekh ha-emet*” (the Way of Truth) to Rabbi Abraham Maimonides’ statement of gratitude, perhaps in emulation of Abraham’s servant’s peroration a few verses later.

³⁰ Unnoted by Safran, the term “*derekh ha-emet*” (“the Way of Truth”) occurs also in *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 4:2.

³¹ *Berakhot* 33b, *Megillah* 25a, *Niddah* 16b.

³² Maimonides’ Introduction to Tractate *Avot*, *Shemonah Perakim* (*Eight Chapters*), chap. 8; and *Avot* 1:13 (Kaph ed., p. 271), 3:18, 19 (Kaph ed., pp. 284-285), 4:28 (Kaph ed., p. 295).

³³ While the editor Joshua Blau is certainly correct that the reference is to *Mishneh Torah* and not [Sefer ha-Mitzvot](#), he mistakenly directs the reader to the beginning of *Hilkhot De’ot*, while the proper address is chapters 5-6 of *Hilkhot Teshuvah*. See Yitzhak Shilat (Greenspan), *Igrot ha-Rambam*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1995), p. 236, n. 15.

Whoever leaves behind the things we explained, that are constructed upon the foundations of the world, and sets out to seek in a *haggadah* or *midrash*, or in the words of one of the Geonim, of blessed memory, a single word that would refute our words, words of knowledge and understanding—is committing suicide, and what he has wreaked to himself is sufficient [punishment].

This [saying] that your Rabbi quoted to you, “[A heavenly voice goes out, saying:] ‘The daughter of so-and-so [is destined to be wed] to so-and-so.’”³⁴ If it applies universally to all, and is to be taken literally, then why does it state in the Torah, “[Who is the man who has betrothed a woman and not married her? Let him go and return to his house,] lest he die in battle and another man marry her?”³⁵ Is there in the world a rational person who would entertain doubt in this matter after what is written in the Torah? Rather it is worthy for one who is understanding and whose heart is prepared to adopt the Way of Truth (*derekh ha-emet*),³⁶ that he make this matter explicit in the Torah the fundament and the foundation, so that the building not collapse and the tent-peg not come loose. And if one finds a verse in the Prophets or a maxim of the Rabbis, of blessed memory, that assails this fundament and tears down this premise, let one seek out with the mind’s eye until one has understood the words of the prophet or the sage. If their words are found compatible with that made explicit in the Torah, good! And if not, let one say that: “I do not know the words of this prophet or this sage. They are esoteric and not literal.”

That which the sage said, “The daughter of so-and-so [is destined to be wed] to so-and-so,” refers to the way of reward or the way of punishment. If this man or this woman performed a commandment for which the proper reward is a harmonious marriage, then the Holy One, blessed be He, matches them together. And by the same token, if their due punishment is an acrimonious marriage, He matches them. This is akin to the saying of the Rabbis, of blessed memory: “If there be but one *mamzer* (male bastard) at one end of the world, and but one *mamzeret* (female bastard) at the other end of the world, the Holy One, blessed be He, brings them together and

³⁴ *Sotah* 2a; *Mo’ed Katan* 18b.

³⁵ Deuteronomy 20:7. In the final chapter of *Shemonah Perakim* (Kaph ed., p. 262), Maimonides marshals a different proof that marrying a certain woman cannot be divinely ordained but must rather be a matter of choice: Marriage is a *mitzvah* and God does not preordain that one perform a commandment. Cf. *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, positive commandment 213; *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Ishut* 1:1-2; and Abraham Maimonides’ responsum in *Birkat Avraham*, ed. Baer Goldberg (Lyck, 1859), no. 44. (However, Rabbeinu Asher disagrees with Maimonides. For Rabbeinu Asher, only procreation [*periyah u-reviyah*] is a *mitzvah*; marriage per se is not a *mitzvah*. See Rabbeinu Asher, *Ketubot* 1:12 [*Ketubot* 7b].)

³⁶ Yitzhak Shilat is convinced that unlike the vast majority of Maimonides’ responsa which were penned in Arabic, the responsa to Obadiah the Proselyte were written in Hebrew. Assuming that Shilat is correct in his pronouncement, and the term “*derekh ha-emet*” in our responsum is Maimonides’ own language and not a translation, we are certainly justified in making capital of the expression. Clearly, within the context of the responsum, “the Way of Truth” lies on the side of free will and not on the side of causality. See Yitzhak Shilat, *Igrot ha-Rambam*, vol. 1, p. 231.

matches them.”³⁷ This does not apply universally to all, rather to those deserving of reward or punishment, as is just in the eyes of God.

All these matters are built upon what we explained in the *Commentary to the Mishnah, Avot*, as you understood. You are a great wise man and you have an understanding heart by which you understood the things and knew the straight way.

Moses ben Maimon, of blessed memory³⁸

It would be difficult to imagine that Maimonides was posturing in this responsum, while truly subscribing to a determinist philosophy. The responsum is a forthright presentation of Maimonides’ firm belief in free will as opposed to predestination. It sums up what has been elucidated previously in the *Commentary to the Mishnah* and *Mishneh Torah*. As for the recipient’s intellectual acumen, Maimonides closes by saying: “You are a great wise man and you have an understanding heart by which you understood the things and knew the straight way.”

And then there is the passage in the *Commentary to the Mishnah, Rosh Hashanah*, which alludes to some esoterica. Safran believes that the allusion is to a theory of determinism. However, it is much more likely that the issue at stake is not determinism versus free will, but rather general divine supervision (*hashgahah kelalit*) versus individual divine supervision (*hashgahah peratit*).³⁹

The verse from *Psalms* 33:15 adduced by the Mishnah, “Who forms together their heart, Who understands all their deeds,” follows on the heels of the previous verse: “From the place of His habitation He supervised (*hishgiah*) all the inhabitants of the earth.” And our own verse of *Psalms* 33:15 is quoted by Maimonides in the *Guide* III, 17 in his discussion of this very issue of individual divine providence (see Pines ed., p. 472).

One might counter that unlike the doctrine of determinism, there is nothing esoteric about the doctrine of *hashgahah peratit* or individual providence. Not so fast! What Maimonides dispenses in the very next chapter of the *Guide* (III, 18) eminently qualifies as “esoterica.” I am referring to Maimonides’ belief that there are degrees of providence commensurate with how intently one focuses one’s mind on the divine. Those whose intellects are riveted to the divine merit more divine supervision; those easily distracted receive less divine attention. How do I know that Maimonides considers this topic esoteric? He says so explicitly:

A most extraordinary speculation has occurred to me just now through which doubts may be dispelled and *divine secrets*⁴⁰ revealed. We have already explained in the

³⁷ *Yerushalmi Kiddushin* 3:12; *Genesis Rabbah* 65:2.

³⁸ *Teshuvot ha-Rambam*, ed. Joshua Blau, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mekitzei Nirdamim, 1960), no. 436 (pp. 714-716).

³⁹ See Rabbi Yom Tov Lipmann Heller, *Tosefot Yom Tov* to *Rosh Hashanah* 1:2, and Rabbi Samuel Edels, *Hiddushei Aggadot, Rosh Hashanah* 18a, s.v. *ke-ma’alot Beit Horon*.

⁴⁰ The Hebrew translators (Ibn Tibbon, Kapah, Schwarz) render this: “*sodot elohiyim*.”

chapters concerning providence⁴¹ 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. 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.⁴²

Let us summarize our findings.

Safran suggests that the paragraph in *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 6:4 possesses an esoteric meaning: David is aspiring to a level of esoteric knowledge, to an epiphany, whereby it will be revealed to him that his misdeeds were movements in a divine symphony. But it is possible that there is nothing esoteric about this paragraph at all. David prays that on account of his grievous misdeeds he not be barred from the Way of Return (*Teshuvah*), as were some of the most vile miscreants in human history discussed in the previous *halakhah* (the prime example being the Pharaoh of the Exodus). This is the straightforward reading of the *halakhah*.

Whatever “the Way of Truth” signifies for Maimonides, we shall not find the answer in the peroration of Eliezer servant of Abraham. Maimonides’ opening categorical statement—“Free will is bestowed on every human being. If one desires to turn towards the good way and be righteous, he is at liberty to do so; and if one wishes to turn towards the evil way and be wicked, he is at liberty to do so.”⁴³—was never intended as a useful, provisional belief to be discarded upon attaining philosophic maturity. And it is well-nigh inconceivable that Maimonides—like later the Izhbitser Rebbe—was a religious determinist.

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⁴¹ *Guide* III, chaps. 17 and 18.

⁴² Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* III, 51 (Pines ed., pp. 624-625). Various commentators of the *Guide* grapple with the problem of why the rehashing of this doctrine in chapter 51 is considered by Maimonides more wonderful than its earlier presentation in the “*Pirkei ha-Hashgahah*” (i.e., chapters 17-18). See, e.g., Kapah’s translation of *Moreh ha-Nevukhim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1977), p. 408, n. 75.

One notes with interest that Nahmanides, the great medieval representative of the kabbalistic tradition, quotes approvingly this novel doctrine of the *Guide*. See Nahmanides’ commentary to Job 36:7; in *Kitvei Rabbeinu Moshe ben Nahman*, ed. C.B. Chavel (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1968), vol. 1, pp. 108-109; and in the new *Sefer Iyov ‘im Peirush ha-Ramban*, ed. Yehudah Leib Friedman (Israel: Feldheim, 2018), pp. 451-458.

⁴³ Maimonides, *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 5:1 (Moses Hyamson translation).