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Intellectual and Moral Virtues According to Rambam

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Rambam famously believed in a highly intellectual view of the good life. He states in several places that personal immortality depends upon cognitive achievements. He argues that Jews throughout the centuries longed for the messianic era because that time period's freedom from both political fighting and economic needs enables the peace of mind necessary for more profound intellectual understanding. As we shall see, a number of Rambam texts suggest that progress of the mind represents the true purpose of mankind.

Of course, this intellectual emphasis raises the question of the role played by other aspects of life we usually consider highly valuable. Does Rambam not grant significant value to moral character traits and actions? Is the true goal of life not dependent on performance of *mizvot*? Such conclusions would obviously be somewhat radical from a traditional religious perspective.

This essay will not examine the significance of the broad world of *mizvot* in Rambam's worldview but focus more narrowly on moral qualities. Rambam contends that the moral virtues are important and he understands their importance in a number of different ways. Sometimes, moral and intellectual qualities jointly enable religious achievements such as in the case of prophecy. On other occasions, moral virtues are a crucial prerequisite for intellectual success. Finally, Rambam has a model in which integration of the moral and intellectual aspects of a person reflect the true goal of religious man.

Rambam addresses the prerequisites for prophecy in his three major works, *Perush al haMishnah* (*Shemoneh Perakim* 7) *Mishneh Torah* (*Yesodei haTorah* 7:1), and

*Moreh Nevukhim* (2:32). In all three, he writes that only those with both intellectual and moral perfections are candidates for prophecy. Here we have a model in which these two important areas of human endeavor work together towards a religious goal (although that goal may itself be intellectual).

To bolster his position, Rambam offers an important reading of a Talmudic citation. The Talmud (*Nedarim* 38a) states that prophecy falls only upon a person who is wise, strong, wealthy, and tall. Although the need for physical prowess or material wealth in this context seems quite surprising, the ensuing Talmudic give-and-take implies that these criteria are meant in the literal sense. The gemara brings proof texts to illustrate that Moshe, the paradigmatic prophet, was strong, tall, and rich. R. Yosef Albo (*Sefer haIkkarim* 3: 12) provides an explanation for the necessity of these mundane qualities. The prophet must impact on a wide populace and prophets with these admittedly surface accomplishments will have more influence on many.

Despite the Talmudic support for a literal reading of this gemara, Rambam refuses to understand it at face value. Utilizing the well known teaching of Ben Zoma (*Avot* 4:1), Rambam explains that “wealthy” refers to people satisfied with what they have and “strong” refers to those who have conquered their inclination. Apparently, Rambam thought it inconceivable that prophecy could depend on such shallow things as money and muscles. The gemara also mentions wisdom as a crucial quality so according to Rambam, this gemara highlights intellectual and ethical success as the road leading toward prophecy.

In *Shemoneh Perakim*, Rambam writes of barriers that hinder the clarity of the prophetic message. Character flaws such as excessive anger, cruelty, fear or sensuousness represent such barriers. Some individual traits are so central that their absence alone renders prophecy impossible. Others hinder a fuller prophetic experience but do not prevent it altogether. Rambam does differentiate between intellectual and moral virtues in that the prophet must perfect all of the former and only most of the latter. Nonetheless, this still coheres with our first model of two types of traits that work together to produce prophecy.

In the second model, Rambam clearly marks intellectual achievement as the final goal but writes of ethical excellence as a crucial primary step. In *Moreh Nevukihm* (3:27), Rambam writes that the *mizvot* of the Torah aim toward both the welfare of the body and the welfare of the soul. The former must come first chronologically but the latter is the true goal of existence. We begin with welfare of the body because a person can not achieve intellectual understanding when distracted by hunger or temperature. Citing the Aristotelian maxim, “man is a political animal,” Rambam writes of human interdependence in the striving to attain basic material needs. The Torah must set up a society where people behave decently and provide for everyone’s needs so that the resulting material comfort can enable metaphysical contemplation.

A different passage suggests another reason why ethical traits must precede intellectual success. Rambam explains (*Moreh Nevukhim* 1:34) why the philosophically wise do not simply teach everybody all the philosophical truths. He mentions various difficulties inherent in such an attempt such as the complexity of the subject matter and the academic limitations of the students. His fourth reason for not teaching the masses is their lack of ethical character. Someone constantly getting angry or overwhelmed by desire will not have the peace of mind needed to truly arrive at a deeper understanding. Ethical qualities are not only a means of generating a just society that provides material needs. Even the individual who lacks nothing on the material plane will find it impossible to philosophize or theologize when bad character traits keep getting in the way of the research.

Rambam finds these preconditions to philosophical study in a gemara from *Massekhet Hagigah* (13a). The gemara says that we teach the chapter headings of the “Divine chariot” only to a person who is the head of the court and whose heart worries internally. The former alludes to intellectual preparation, the latter to the humility that is also crucial. Again, we have character training as the requisite work before the deepest philosophical enterprise.

Until this point, we have seen Rambam portraying ethical traits as valuable but not as the ultimate goal of religious man. The true goal is cognitive, but ethical

perfections help create the good society and the quality individuals and thereby enable the final goal. We turn to one final passage that starts off along the same lines as what we have seen thus far but then veers of into a totally different direction.

Among his other impressive qualities, Rambam was a master at ending books off with a flourish. Many of the fourteen books of the *Mishneh Torah* end with masterpieces of Jewish thought. The final halakha in *Sefer Kinyan* explains why a good Jewish would treat non –Jewish slaves with kindness and compassion. The final halakha in *Sefer Shoftim* explains why Jews long for the messianic era. Rambam probably tries to create the same effect in his *Moreh Nevukhim* as the final chapter brings the book to a close with a marvelous crescendo.

In this final chapter (3:54), Rambam surveys different views as to the goal of human life. He quickly rejects wealth as the goal for it is only the means to other ends. He easily dispatches with physical prowess as those qualities are not unique to humanity. In fact, the animal kingdom often outperforms us in feats of speed and strength. Even though he states that most *mizvot* in the Torah promote ethical characteristics, Rambam rejects ethics as the goal as they are still only the means to the true goal. After all, ethical excellence is only relevant in interpersonal contexts but not when people are alone. Rambam concludes that people should strive for intellectual comprehension – the true goal of mankind and the item that enables immortality.

I believe that one could argue with Rambam and state that issues of character remain very relevant even when a person sits alone on a deserted island. However, let us work with Rambam's position. Rambam cites some famous verses in *Yirmiyahu* (9:22-23) to illustrate his position. Yirmiyahu instructs us that the wise, the powerful and the wealthy should not glorify themselves for such accomplishments. Earlier in this final chapter of *Moreh Nevukhim*, Rambam argues that "*hakham*" can refer to ethical wisdom. If we apply this interpretation to the citation from Yirmiyahu, then the prophet warns us against the same three goals Rambam identified as mistaken notions of the ultimate human purpose.

What accomplishments are worthy of glory? According to Yirmiyahu, God states that “the one who understands and knows Me” can take pride in authentic achievement. Thus, the two verses from Yirmiyahu support Rambam’s position perfectly. Instead of striving after lesser goals, the noblest individuals dedicate their energies toward cognitive success.

Had Rambam stopped here, the message would be quite clear. Human flourishing resides solely in intellectual achievement and issues of ethics and character only serve as helpful means to an intellectual end. Yet Rambam does not stop here and neither does the prophet. Yirmiyahu extols the one who “understands and knows Me that I am the Lord who exercises benevolence, justice and righteousness in the earth for these are the things I desire, said the Lord.” The intellectual vision somehow returns to the realm of the ethical.

Two aspects of Rambam’s thought enable us to understand the point. Rambam believes that humans can not understand God’s essence but they can understand His attributes as manifest in His actions in the world. Moshe cannot see God’s face or understand His essence. He can hear the message of the thirteen attributes of compassion that reflect God’s actions in creating and sustaining our world. This reflects the pinnacle of human understanding. Secondly, Rambam emphasizes the *mizvah* to emulate God’s attributes. To the degree that we understand God, we would want to emulate Him by engaging in acts of benevolence and righteousness.

Rambam’s downplaying of the significance of ethics refers only to an ethics not rooted in *imitatio Dei*. The ethics that stem from the need to emulate God remain very much a part of mankind’s final purpose. A combination of ethical and intellectual excellence fulfills the call of the prophet Yirmiyahu and of Rambam himself.

The festival of Shavuot inspires many to thoughts of greater achievements in Torah. Possibly, some of us think of these achievements in purely intellectual terms. Rambam reminds us that we can not ignore the attempt to become people of sterling character, either as the necessary prerequisite to cognitive progress or, as in the final

chapter of the Guide, as part of our very understanding of the Master of the universe.  
Authentic comprehension of the merciful God must invariably make us want to act with  
mercy.