

# **The Order of Nature and Moral Luck: Maimonides on Divine Providence**

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Rationalist Jewish thinkers, just because of their rationalism, faced a particular challenge when approaching the problem of evil. On the one hand, they were committed to the idea that the problem *did* have an answer, that the humble skepticism or fideism that closes the Book of Job (“God is so great that we cannot know him” [Job 36:26]) is not the last word on the matter. An explanation can indeed be given for the suffering of the virtuous and the prosperity of the vicious. There are accessible reasons why bad things happen to good people and good things to bad people. It is something we can understand. On the other hand, not even the most convinced rationalist of the medieval period was willing to say that God’s reasons are completely transparent to human understanding, that we can know the deepest secrets of divine wisdom and find therein the theodicean answer we seek.

Another factor is the rationalist’s need to avoid the anthropomorphization of God. Maimonides, Gersonides, and others were all concerned to explain divine providence without resorting to the portrayal of God as a personal agent, one who regards each particular situation in its particularity and engages in the distribution of reward and punishment in a human-like way – fending off dangers from the righteous and hurling thunderbolts upon the vicious.

This overall attitude is well captured by Maimonides’ approach to the problem of evil. He argued, of course, strenuously against the anthropomorphization of God; this is

one of the primary themes of the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Nor did he think that God's wisdom was transparent to finite minds and that the resolution of the problem is to be found in such supreme access. But he did insist that we can understand why bad things happen to good people, and why the distribution of goods and evils, in this world and in the world to come, as unjust as it may appear, is as it is. As I shall show, however, the problem is (and has long been) that it is not quite clear how we are to read his account. In particular, I want to look at what we are supposed to do with one famously puzzling, very odd passage from the *Guide of the Perplexed*, a passage that other commentators have seemed all too willing to write off as not to be taken seriously. I will argue that, in fact, in the passage in question Maimonides means pretty much what he says.

## I

First, some background.

In the *Guide*, Maimonides, like many other medieval thinkers, rejects Manicheanism and argues that evil is not a real and positive being.<sup>i</sup> Whatever is real and caused by God is good. "All evils are privations", he insists, and are constituted by the lack of some goodness or perfection. At one point, in fact, Maimonides seems close to dismissing evil altogether as an illusion due to our anthropocentric way of looking at the world.<sup>ii</sup> Still, he recognizes that no ontological sleight of hand will really make evil as a phenomenon disappear and obviate the need for a theodicy.

With respect to human beings, all evils/privations are grounded in our matter. Our material element is the source of wicked impulses, base desires and ignorance.

Maimonides divides human evil into three categories. First, there are the evils that happen to us in the ordinary course of nature just because, as material beings, we are subject to the elements. Bodily infirmities, injuries, even death itself are unavoidable in our human condition. Second, there are the evils that human beings inflict upon one another: deceit, tyrannical domination, physical harm. Third, there are the evils that an individual brings upon himself through his own action. “This kind is consequent upon all vices”, Maimonides says, and includes intemperate eating and drinking as well as excessive copulation. This species of evil brings harm not only to the body, but to the soul as well, as its moral qualities are affected by the temperament of the body.<sup>iii</sup>

Regardless of whether or not evil is categorized as something real and positive, there can be no denying that these three kinds of evil (whatever their ontological status) occur.

Maimonides’ preferred solution to the problem of evil involves what might be labeled the “consider the whole” strategy. According to this strategy, any concerns about divine justice generated by evil in the world are due to one’s having adopted too narrow a focus—for example, by looking only at certain features of the world and not others. One can therefore alleviate those concerns by broadening one’s perspective and considering more or different aspects of creation. One will then see that the world is, on the whole, good. This strategy can take two forms, depending upon just how one is supposed to broaden one’s perspective and regard the world holistically. One variety asks for a quantitative expansion of vision, the other requires a qualitative reorientation.

Maimonides initially takes up the theodicean challenge by responding to the complaint, “which often occurs to the imagination of the multitude”, that the three species of evil are ubiquitous, that the world created by God is predominantly bad and

“there are more evils in the world than there are good things.” Understood in this way, the problem of evil is a quantitative problem, and thus its solution is to be found in a proper reckoning of the number of good things vs. the number of evil things. “Consider the whole”, on this reading, means look at a greater sampling of the world’s phenomena and you will see that, as a matter of fact, the premise of the complaint is false and the number of good things is greater than the number of evil things. Thus, with respect to the first two species of evil, at least, Maimonides argues that a true accounting reveals that they do not occur as often as the multitude believe. The evils that we suffer because of our material nature “are very few and occur only seldom. For you will find cities existing for thousands of years that have never been flooded or burned. Also, thousands of people are born in perfect health whereas the birth of an infirm human being is an anomaly, or at least ... such an individual is very rare; for they do not form a hundredth or even a thousandth part of those born in good health.” Similarly, with respect to the evils that we inflict upon one another, he argues that while they may be more numerous than those of the first variety, they nonetheless “do not form the majority of occurrences upon the earth taken as a whole”; rather, they become common only in extreme circumstances, such as war.<sup>iv</sup>

While this version of the “consider the whole” strategy could, in theory, afford a reply to the charge that the world created by God is *predominantly* evil and that the bad things outnumber the good, it is ultimately an unsatisfying theodicy. First, it can lead to a potentially unresolvable numbers game, with endless disputes about how many good things there are vs. how many bad things there are, fueled by disagreements about which things are in fact good and which are bad. Second, even if the quantitative approach does

answer the charge that the world is mostly evil, it leaves unanswered the primary question of the problem of evil: Why is there *any* evil at all in a world created by a wise, benevolent and all-powerful God?

The qualitative version of the “consider the whole” strategy is more effective in responding to this challenge. It is not concerned with the relative quantities of good and evil things. Rather, the broadening of perspective demanded is either a kind of utilitarian or aesthetic consideration of the contribution that evils make to the overall goodness of the world, or an acknowledgment of the qualitative (and not merely quantitative) insignificance of the evils that plague human beings. Like Leibniz’s theodicy five-hundred years later, which points to the necessary role that various evils play in making this the best of all possible worlds, Maimonides asks us to look more broadly at the universe as the overall context in which human sin and suffering occur. What we will then see is the “wisdom manifested in that which exists” and “the excellence and the true reality of the whole”, including the contribution that the so-called evils make to it.<sup>v</sup> Moreover, when one moves beyond the narrow confines of human needs and desires and expands one’s vision to take in the spheres of the heavens and the separate intellects related to them, one will recognize that not everything exists for our own sake.<sup>vi</sup> Thus, just because something is evil or inconvenient for a human being, or even for human beings generally, and regardless of how often it occurs, it does not follow that it holds any significance for the overall qualitative determination of the character of the world. Dropping the anthropocentric perspective will relieve the urge to complain that God’s creation is evil, and will do so without the problematic numbers game generated by the quantitative version of the “consider the whole” strategy.

Thus Maimonides' general theodicean strategy. But there is still one question left unanswered by this strategy in both of its versions, namely, the central question of the problem of evil: why do virtuous people sometimes suffer and why do wicked people seem so often to prosper? In order to be satisfied that such phenomena are compatible with divine justice, one wants to know more than simply that such things do not really happen very often, that they are relatively insignificant in the cosmic scheme of things, or that they make some vague and unspecified contribution to the overall goodness of the universe. Even if God is not the cause of such evils, why does he allow them at all? It is in replying to these specific questions around the relationship between virtue and flourishing that Maimonides finally appeals directly to the nature and mechanics of divine providence.<sup>vii</sup>

## II

Maimonides begins his discussion of providence by rejecting four different views on providence.<sup>viii</sup> The Epicurean view is that there is no providence and that everything happens as a result of the random permutations of matter; this, for Maimonides, is a non-starter, since it is inconsistent with demonstrated metaphysical and theological principles. The Aristotelian view is that divine governance extends only to the everlasting and immutable elements of nature. The celestial spheres and their contents, as well as the species of things, are provided by God with what is necessary for their preservation. Individual existents in this sublunar realm, however, are watched over by providence only to the extent that they are provided with certain essential attributes by the species to which they belong. Thus, a human being is endowed with reason and a variety of

instincts, all of which aid his/her preservation, by virtue of his/her participation in the species “human being”. Everything else that happens to a human being that does not flow from the species, however—everything, that is, that does not belong to a person essentially and by virtue of being a human being—is due to chance. While Maimonides for the most part rejects the Aristotelian view, he believes that there is indeed an element of truth to it, one that he will incorporate in his own account.

The third account he rejects is the Asharite theory of providence according to which nothing in the universe is due to chance. Rather, everything is brought about through the will of God. Providence thus extends to every aspect of every event in nature, from the punishment of a sinner to the falling of a leaf from a tree. Maimonides insists that this account is unacceptable because it renders divine law useless, since no human being has any freedom to do or refrain from doing what the law commands or proscribes. It thus makes a mockery of divine justice.

The fourth opinion also states that divine providence watches over all things, but adds that human beings are free in their actions. Moreover, God is responsible for distributing rewards and punishments to all beings not by sheer acts of will (as the Asharite view implies) but through wisdom and justice. Maimonides objects to this view on the ground that it is absurd to extend divine justice beyond the sphere of human agency. Just as the partisans of this view say that when a blameless person suffers, divine justice will provide him/her with a greater reward in the world-to-come, so they must say that when a particular animal is killed it was better for it to be so and it will receive a recompense in the hereafter. “They say in the same way that if this mouse, which has not sinned, is devoured by a cat or a hawk, His wisdom has required this with regard to the

mouse and that the latter will receive compensation in the other world for what has happened to it.”<sup>ix</sup> To Maimonides, this view is “disgraceful”.

Maimonides’ own view is that in this sub-lunar realm the only individuals to which God’s providence extends are human beings. For all other creatures, providence covers only the species and their preservation; everything else is left to chance, *keri* (as the Aristotelian view claims). Moreover, *all* of the events and activities of a human life, without exception, are a matter of divine justice and therefore fall under providence. “I for one believe that in this lowly world . . . divine providence watches only over the individuals belonging to the human species and that in this species alone all the circumstances of the individuals and the good and evil that befall them are consequent upon the deserts, just as it says: ‘For all his ways are judgment’.”<sup>x</sup> Thus, if a ship at sea is sunk by a storm or a hard wind blows a house down, this is due to “pure chance”—or, more properly, the regular but (from the perspective of human expectations) unforeseen and uncontrollable causal order of nature<sup>xi</sup>—no less than the fact that a particular leaf has fallen off a tree at a particular moment. But the fact that certain people had voluntarily gone on board the ship that sunk or had been sitting in the house that was blown down is due not to chance but to “divine will in accordance with the deserts of those people as determined in His judgments.”<sup>xii</sup>

Now one possible, even natural way of conceiving the divine *modus operandi* in providence for Maimonides needs to be ruled out from the start. There are passages in which Maimonides speaks as if God, seeing the virtues and vices of particular human beings, actively and intentionally chooses to reward and punish them as individuals—perhaps in just the way that the multitude think of providence, with God sending a

thunder bolt against one person while snatching another person from the jaws of death (e.g., in the lions' den). To be sure, Maimonides insists that the people are on board the ship because of the "divine will in accordance with the deserts of those people as determined in His judgments", just as he elsewhere notes how the fate met by many people is "due not to neglect and the withdrawal of providence, but was a punishment for those men because they deserved what befell them."<sup>xiii</sup> But it is clear that too literal and anthropomorphic a reading of these passages, with God intervening to save or punish a person as if through a miracle, is ultimately inconsistent with what Maimonides considers the proper conception of God. Such language may thus be only an element of Maimonides' exoteric writing, geared for the unsophisticated and unprepared reader, with the truth hidden (among the contradictions that Maimonides acknowledges he has intentionally inserted into the work) for the more philosophical reader.

Indeed, for Maimonides, God's role in providence is, so to speak, much more passive and naturalistic than a superficial reading of such passages would have us believe. God has put into place a system that is there for individual human beings to take advantage of or not, as they choose. And it is the virtuous—understood as those who pursue intellectual virtue, and not merely moral virtue—who choose to do so, while all others are left without its protection.

Maimonides distinguishes between general providence (in Samuel ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation, *hashgahah minit*, or providence of the kind), which is constituted by the species' characteristics oriented to its preservation and is (barring unusual circumstances) provided equally to all members of the species, and individual providence (*hashgahah 'ishit*), which is particularized to individuals and distributed only according

to merits. Both varieties of providence are understood in highly naturalistic and Aristotelian terms. The latter, however, comes into play only in the realm of human agency.

Individual providence, Maimonides says, is a function of the emanation and overflow of knowledge from God through the separate intellects (including, penultimately, the Agent Intellect whose domain is the sublunar realm) to the human intellect. To the extent that a person receives this overflow, he is under the protection of providence.

Divine providence is consequent upon the divine overflow ... providence is consequent upon the intellect and attached to it. For providence can only come from an intelligent being, from One who is an intellect perfect with a supreme perfection, than which there is no higher. Accordingly, everyone with whom something of this overflow is united, will be reached by providence to the extent to which he is reached by the intellect.<sup>xiv</sup>

Individual providence is not an all or nothing affair, but proportionate to the degree to which a person is virtuous—that is, proportionate to the degree to which he has turned toward God, directed his attention to the knowledge flowing from God and thereby perfected his intellect.

When any individual has obtained, because of the disposition of his matter and his training, a greater proportion of this overflow than others, providence will of necessity watch more carefully over him than over others—if, that is to say, providence is, as I have mentioned, consequent upon the intellect. Accordingly,

divine providence does not watch in an equal manner over all the individuals of the human species, but providence is graded as their human perfection is graded.<sup>xv</sup>

In this sense, providence is a reward for (intellectual) virtue and the perfection of our highest faculties. And despite Maimonides' claim that the suffering of many is "due not to neglect and the withdrawal of providence, but was a punishment for those men because they deserved what befell them", it seems clear that it is precisely through approach and withdrawal—that is, the human being's willful approaching to and withdrawing from the overflow—that providence operates. As long as one is actively enjoying the epistemic connection to the divine overflow, one is *ipso facto* protected; providence is watching over—or, better, engaged in—such a person and he is guarded from the vagaries of chance. On the other hand, when one is not attending to God (either because one has never made the effort or because, having achieved the connection, one has temporarily become distracted, perhaps by the pleasures of the senses), one is abandoned to chance and left to one's own devices in the face of the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. The person who is not experiencing the overflow is not enjoying its benefits. He is at the mercy of nature's elements and his well-being is subject to whatever may or may not come his way. Providence is no longer watching over him—not because God is actively punishing him, but because through his own actions he has taken himself outside of the care that providence (the overflow) offers and is now exposed to what chance brings.

With regard to providence watching over excellent men and neglecting the ignorant, it is said: "He will keep the feet of his holy ones, but the wicked shall be put to silence in darkness; for not by strength shall man prevail. It says thereby that the fact that some individuals are preserved from calamities, whereas those

befall others, is due not to their bodily forces and their natural dispositions ... but to their perfection and deficiency, I mean their nearness to or remoteness from God. For this reason, those who are near to Him are exceedingly well protected ... whereas those who are far from Him are given over to whatever may happen to befall them. For there is nothing to protect them against whatever may occur; for they are like one walking in darkness, whose destruction is assured.<sup>xvi</sup>

Those who do not strive for intellectual perfection have no more providential protection than non-human animals. They enjoy only general providence and whatever tools for survival the species confers upon them (as well as everyone else). For such people, there is a great deal of moral luck, in so far as their happiness and well-being, their flourishing, is subject to chance, to circumstances beyond their control.

### III

This brings us, finally, to the problem of what exactly Maimonides has in mind here. There is some ambiguity as to just what *is* the nature of the protection that, according to Maimonides, divine providence provides and *how* it provides it. The key passage I want to focus on—a passage that has long troubled commentators—is in Part III, chapter 51. At one point in this chapter, Maimonides suggests that what the knowledge brought to the human intellect by the divine overflow gives to the righteous person is a way actually to escape the evils around him. Maimonides seems to say here of the intellectually perfected person that he is literally protected from suffering any harm in the world.

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 the thing that necessarily brings about providence and deliverance from the sea of chance consists in that intellectual overflow ... A human individual's being abandoned to chance so that he is permitted to be devoured like the beasts is his being separated from God. If, however, his God is within him, no evil at all will befall him ... If you should happen to pass on your way a widely extended field of battle and even if one thousand were killed to your left and ten thousand to your right, no evil at all would befall you.<sup>xvii</sup>

This is a very extraordinary claim for Maimonides, or anyone, to make. It seems to suggest that the virtuous person can truly escape from the vicissitudes of fortune that affect all beings in this world—to become, in effect, immune from the forces of nature that govern all events and affect the well-being of all creatures and that make life a chancey thing. Can Maimonides really mean this?

This question has been asked by many of Maimonides' readers. It was the subject of a letter from Samuel ibn Tibbon, the first Hebrew translator of the *Guide*, to Maimonides in 1199, and it has bedeviled his most recent commentators. Speculation has ranged from those who suggest that Maimonides must see such extreme divine protection as involving constant miracles from God to ward off evils from the virtuous, to those who argue that the stated imperviousness to external harm comes through the

perfection of the intellect because in achieving such perfection we become more like disembodied celestial beings, pure intelligences, and are thus untouched by the physical harms brought by terrestrial events.<sup>xviii</sup>

Most scholars rightly reject such suggestions as inconsistent with Maimonides' overall approach to these topics, and especially the naturalistic tenor of his account of providence. They have therefore concluded, as Charles Touati has, by saying “no”, Maimonides does not really mean what he says in III.51. Even the virtuous person cannot eliminate or even greatly reduce chance or luck in the external circumstances his or her life. Some of those arrows flying through the field of battle are bound to fall on him. Touati insists that “it is evident that we should not take literally” what Maimonides says here about the safety of a person caught in the midst of battle.<sup>xix</sup>

Touati and others argue for another reading, one which renders III.51 consistent with Maimonides' other statements on providence. On this reading (which Samuel ibn Tibbon finds naturally suggested in *Guide* III.23<sup>xx</sup>), the person who attends to God will not literally escape the evils that naturally come his way—especially the physical evils of the first kind and the moral evils of the second kind, which tend to be due to circumstances well beyond one's control—but he will nonetheless be less troubled by them. The virtuous person's mind is fixated on the true and lasting good—knowledge of God—and he becomes immune to the lure of mutable goods and inured to the travails of his body. He has achieved a lasting state of spiritual well-being and happiness, one that is not subject to the vagaries of chance or moral luck.

Maimonides says that this is the condition of Job at the end of the story. In his first speech, as Maimonides reads it, Job adopts the Aristotelian view: God is not

watching over individuals, and is causing suffering for no good reason at all, “because of his contempt for the human species and abandonment of it.”<sup>xxi</sup> After God has spoken, however, Job achieves a state of understanding: “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.”<sup>xxii</sup> It is not that the good person experiences no loss or harm in his life; after all, Job lost practically everything. Rather, consumed with his bond with God and possessing true happiness, he cares less about those losses. He may see evils in his lifetime, but they will not constitute an “affliction” for him. Or, to put it another way, if by ‘evil’ we mean “true evils”—those that harm the soul—then in this sense no (true) evil will touch the virtuous person. He may lose every material and worldly good that he owns, but his possession of the true good is untouched. The lesson Maimonides sees here is a rather Socratic and Stoic one.

This reading offered by Touati, based on Maimonides’ interpretation of Job, is certainly one we can attribute to Maimonides, and makes good sense of much of what the *Guide* has to say in several places about providence and evil (particularly III.23). However, I want to suggest that we should not be so quick to dismiss the first reading of III.51 and write off the passages in which it appears merely as metaphorical biblical exegesis (as Touati says) or simply a matter of the “incoherencies” that Maimonides puts in the *Guide* for his esoteric purposes. But neither do I think that, in order to make sense of III.51, there is any need to introduce divine miracles or human beings becoming like disembodied celestial beings. That is, I think that Maimonides does indeed believe that the virtuous person can diminish the degree to which chance affects his overall well-

being and reduce the role of moral luck in the external circumstances of this life—not simply because the virtuous person does not recognize the things brought by chance as real goods or evils, but also because such a person, unlike the non-virtuous person, can exercise greater control over the events in which they engage and over the things that happen to them.

Although I shall not argue this point here, it is Maimonides’s view in the *Guide* that the divine emanation or overflow in which the virtuous person with a perfected intellect (whether he be a philosopher—that is, one engaged in speculation—or a prophet) participates involves theoretical knowledge, both “natural science” and “divine science”. “For it is this measure of the overflow of the divine intellect that makes the prophets speak, guides the action of righteous men, and perfects the knowledge of excellent ones with regard to what they know.”<sup>xxiii</sup> It thus includes knowledge about the cosmos, and especially about the order of things in this sublunary realm. It is, in fact, a reflection of the creator’s own knowledge of his creation, and especially the most general aspects of it, emanating down through the separate intellects that govern each of the celestial spheres. The overflow thus carries information about nature and its laws—among other things, just the kind of understanding that allows an individual to successfully navigate his way around the obstacles to his flourishing that the world regularly presents. Thus, a person who has perfected his intellect in the proper way will not just care less about what might be lost on a ship at sea, but he will also know not to get on the doomed ship in the first place (e.g., because he knows a storm is coming or sees that the ship is poorly constructed or badly captained).

Perhaps, as Touati says, we should not take the relevant passage *too* literally—after all, everyone is bound to get a scratch or bruise now and then, even the virtuous person and even while (maybe especially while) he is attending to the divine overflow. But, contrary to Touati, I do think that Maimonides basically means what he says here: the person enjoying divine providence through the overflow will have greater control over what happens to him and not just over his responses to it. A person with a deep knowledge of nature will have extraordinarily accurate predictive power, and thus will know what the course of nature typically brings in certain circumstances. He will rarely be taken by surprise, and thus in the worldly conditions of his life moral luck will be reduced to an absolute minimum.<sup>xxiv</sup>

I admit that what I am suggesting makes Maimonides' view of providence out to be a very naturalistic and reductive one: the more you know about nature, the better off you are in navigating your way through life. But that is precisely what I think Maimonides is up to here.

Let me note that my reading differs from that of Moshe ibn Tibbon, Samuel's son, when he insists that for Maimonides the advantage gained by the intellectually perfected person in avoiding the harms that come in this world is a matter of astrologically informed divination.<sup>xxv</sup> The problem with Moshe's reading is not that he has Maimonides saying that providence involves a kind of magic, in the pejorative sense; astrology in this period was regarded as a legitimate form of empirical science, not a mystical and magical enterprise.<sup>xxvi</sup> Rather, the problem is that Moshe apparently has Maimonides' virtuous person's attention directed at the heavens, not the world around him. More importantly, as I understand Moshe's interpretation, the virtuous person sees

particular evil events as they approach through a kind of immediate, non-discursive insight: divination, not ratiocination.

In this respect, a similar reading of III.51 has recently been suggested by Herbert Davidson, who views Maimonides as saying that the virtuous person “receives intimations directing him away from ill-fated ships, unstable roofs, and similar dangers”.<sup>xxvii</sup> If Davidson (and Moshe ibn Tibbon) means that what the virtuous person knows is best expressed by a categorical proposition of the form “X is about to happen”, if the virtuous person is supposed to have a sudden, ad hoc realization about an impending event, then this does not seem to capture the essence of Maimonides’ account. Rather, what the virtuous person, intellectually perfected through the knowledge communicated by the Agent Intellect—including knowledge of the laws of nature—understands is better expressed by a hypothetical proposition: “If X happens, then Y happens”, or “If I do X, then Y will happen”. Providential protection comes not by some immediate, divinely (or celestially) provided insight that such and such is about to occur, but rather results from a kind of intellectual reasoning about the order of nature, a reasoning grounded in an understanding of the principles of the cosmos and leading to a predictive and practical conclusion.

#### IV

Even if it is granted that I have offered a plausible and preferable reading of III.51, one that makes sense of that’s passage’s *prima facie* extreme and implausible claim about providential protection without resorting to miracles or disembodied intellects, there still remains the problem of a tension between the two aspects of

Maimonides' theory of providence that I have examined. What really bothered Samuel and Moshe ibn Tibbon (and Touati<sup>xxviii</sup>) is how to reconcile the more stoic element suggested by Maimonides's discussion of Job (and especially III.23) with the account presented in III.51.<sup>xxix</sup>

My suggested reconciliation is as follows: The intellectual condition of the virtuous person actually does two things. First, it guides him successfully through the world with minimal harm. Second, it makes him indifferent to whatever harms or evils he does happen to encounter despite the protection provided by providence. To put it another way, there are two means to reducing the role of luck in one's life and pursuit of happiness: controlling things in the world around you, and controlling your responses to them. The ancient Stoics advocated only the latter; Maimonides believes that both strategies are available to the sage.<sup>xxx</sup>

Notice that on neither aspect does providence consist in the active and willful intervention of God in human affairs; it is not that God chooses in particular to reward the person who has united himself to the overflow. Rather, quite naturalistically, the knowledge acquired by the virtuous person through the overflow affords him an advantage in the world. "The overflow of the divine intellect ... guides the actions of righteous men, and perfects the knowledge of excellent men with regard to what they know."<sup>xxxi</sup>

Returning, finally, to the problem of evil: why then do innocent people suffer? Maimonides' response is that, in essence, they do not. If a person suffers misfortune, it is because he deserves it.<sup>xxxii</sup> If a virtuous person suffers, it is, regardless of appearances, because he has done something that has taken him outside the protection of providence, if

only for a short time. The bond to God and the overflow can be broken, by a lapse in attention or redirection of the mind to lesser things.

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 overflow.

When the bond with the overflow is broken, the virtuous person is no better off than the wicked person. They are both on their own, abandoned to the world, come what may.

Yet an impediment may prevent from some time [the overflow] reaching the excellent and good man in question, or again it was not obtained at all by such and such imperfect and wicked man, and therefore the chance occurrences that befell them happened.

Full responsibility for the disconnection from the divine overflow lies with the individual, not God: "It is clear that we are the cause of this 'hiding of the face', and we are the agents who produce this separation."<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Similarly, the prosperity of the wicked person is not a true flourishing, since this person is not enjoying the highest good, intellectual perfection. Moreover, the prosperity that has come his way is totally undeserved and does not represent a reward from God for anything he has done. Rather, being unprotected and at the mercy of nature, it so

happens that chance has brought some apparently fine things his way. But his possession and enjoyment of them is equally subject to fortune, and certain to be short-lived.

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## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> For a general discussion of Maimonides on the problem of evil, see Leaman 1995, chapter 4.

<sup>ii</sup> *Guide* III.12, Maimonides 1963, pp. 442-3.

<sup>iii</sup> *Guide* III.12, Maimonides 1963, pp. 443-5.

<sup>iv</sup> *Guide* III.12, Maimonides 1963, p. 444.

<sup>v</sup> *Guide* III.12, Maimonides 1963, p. 446.

<sup>vi</sup> *Guide* III.13, Maimonides 1963, p. 455.

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<sup>vii</sup> The literature on Maimonides on providence is vast. But for particularly useful discussions, see Touati 1990; Reines 1972; Nuriel 1980; Raffel 1987; and Nehorai 1988.

<sup>viii</sup> He actually considers five views before presenting what he calls his own. But it has been argued by many commentators that Maimonides' view is substantially identical with the fifth view — “the opinion of our law”, the view of Torah — and constitutes only a more sophisticated, philosophical understanding of it; see Touati 1990, pp. 149-50.

<sup>ix</sup> *Guide* III.17, Maimonides 1963, p. 468.

<sup>x</sup> *Guide* III.17, Maimonides 1963, p. 471.

<sup>xi</sup> The events are not a matter of “chance” in the sense of being uncaused and random. The sinking of the ship or the blowing down of the house is no less determined by nature's causal order than any other event. Chance enters into the picture only from the perspective of human plans. What is a matter of “chance” or “accident” is the fact that these events are uncontrollable, unforeseen, unfortunate and inconvenient with respect to human endeavors, as well as unrelated to human deserts.

<sup>xii</sup> *Guide* III.17, Maimonides 1963, p. 472.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Guide* III.17, Maimonides 1963, p. 473.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Guide* III.17, Maimonides 1963, pp. 471-2, 474.

<sup>xv</sup> *Guide* III.18, Maimonides 1963, p. 475.

<sup>xvi</sup> *Guide* III.18, Maimonides 1963, pp. 475-6.

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<sup>xvii</sup> *Guide* III.51, Maimonides 1963, pp. 625-7.

<sup>xviii</sup> Samuel ibn Tibbon considers the first reading, grounded in miracles, only to conclude that it is inconsistent with Maimonides' view on the order of nature; in the end, he decides that it is unclear how Maimonides should be read here. Moshe Narboni argues for the second reading of the chapter. See Diesendruck 1936 for a summary of these views and the text of Samuel ibn Tibbon's letter in which he discusses *Guide* III.51. Among more recent commentators, Raffel (1987) believes that Maimonides, in order to be making a plausible claim, should be interpreted in III.51 as redefining the locus of personal identity from the mind/body (or form/matter) composite to the intellect alone. The "I" that is untouched by the evils of this world is not the embodied human being (who obviously cannot escape all physical harms), but the intellect itself; a virtuous person, when he perfects his intellect, thereby transcends the physical world and consequently is not touched by its evils. "If the physical body, then, is not the 'I' which escapes these evils, who or what is? Maimonides' shift on the nature of human identity, consummated in the Job account, prepares the reader to appreciate the hero of chapter 51, who is immune from any and all evils, not as a superhuman being, but as that which is essentially human, the intellect. The intellect emerges as the true self which survives all, and chapter 51 can be understood consistently as an allegory of the individual intellect's attempt at transcendence and conjunction with God. This final section of the theory describes not just providence for an individual through the intellect, but providence through the intellect for the intellect" (p. 69). My reading differs from Raffel's in that I believe that Maimonides does not in fact shift the meaning of selfhood, and that III.51 is about the whole human being who, through the perfection of the intellect, minimizes the

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extent to which he is subject to physical harms and moral luck.

<sup>xxix</sup> Touati 1990, p. 198.

<sup>xxx</sup> See the text and analysis in Diesendruck 1936 and the discussion in Raffel 1987 and Ravitzky 1981. Samuel ibn Tibbon, however, does not see this as a possible reading of III.51 itself, and in fact is worried that III.23 is in tension with III.51.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Maimonides identifies each of the speakers in the Book of Job with one of the philosophical views on providence (excepting the Epicurean view): Job = Aristotelian theory, Elphaz = Torah theory, Bildad = Mutazilite theory, Zophar = Asharite theory, and Elihu = Maimonidean theory; see *Guide* III.23. For a discussion of Maimonides' reading of Job, see Eisen 2004, chapter 3.

<sup>xxxii</sup> *Guide* III.23, Maimonides 1963, pp. 492-3.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> *Guide* III.18, Maimonides 1963, p. 475.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Interestingly, Samuel ibn Tibbon does also consider this as a possible reading of Maimonides' account, only to reject it in the end. He suggests that the virtuous individual will foresee and anticipate any evil that "the human intellect perceives during the mind's contemplation so that it enables him to guard himself from all possible evils, natural, accidental and moral and thus be saved from [them]" (Diesendruck 1936, p. 359; translation from Raffel 1987, p. 33). According to Raffel, Samuel proposes "a kind of rational divination" at work here. Samuel decides, however, that this ultimately cannot be what Maimonides means, since such rational insight would not (as Maimonides says) protect an individual from "all evils", especially those brought by nature and those perpetrated by other humans, but only self-inflicted ones.

<sup>xxxv</sup> See the second text in Diesendruck 1936.

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<sup>xxvi</sup> My thanks to James Robinson for clarifying this point for me.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Davidson 2005, p. 375.

<sup>xxviii</sup> And many others; for example, Guttman 1973, p. 502.

<sup>xxix</sup> See Touati 1990. There are other ambiguities and tensions in Maimonides's account; see, for example, Curley 2002.

<sup>xxx</sup> Raffel (1987) appears to offer a similar solution when he distinguishes in Maimonides between "providence as consequent upon the practical intellect" and "providence as consequent upon the theoretical intellect" (p. 60).

<sup>xxxi</sup> *Guide* III.18, Maimonides 1963, p. 475.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Maimonides thus rejects the suggestion that a truly virtuous person might experience undeserved suffering as part of a "trial"; see *Guide* III.24.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> *Guide* III.51, Maimonides 1963, pp. 625-6.