CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SUMMARY OF MAIMONIDEAN THOUGHT

According to the popular version of Maimonides, God exercises providence over people in the sense that they choose to observe His commandments or to disobey, and He rewards and punishes them accordingly. The philosophical understanding is that divine providence extends to the level of human intellectual understanding, and that this is the fulfillment of divine justice. But we should remember that God measures by His own measure and not by human measure. Therefore we should trust Him and love Him the more in realizing that whatever happens to us is from His hand and we are deserving of it. We saw that the philosophical understanding of this saying is that divine providence is effectuated through the Torah and the vehicle of prophecy. The more perfect is a person’s conduct according to the Torah, ipso facto the more he enjoys providence. The notion of providence refers to being privileged with eternal life on the plane of pure spirituality. In this respect, such a person is to be classed on the same level as the heavenly bodies, whose movement is eternal. That is one way of understanding Maimonides’s counterstatement to Aristotle, that providence does extend “under the lunar sphere.” To be sure, one can say that providence is immanent in a person’s actions and spiritual attainments. This is not “providence” in the same sense that ordinary people think of it, but rather the approach that “the reward for a good deed is the good deed itself,” and the punishment for a sin is the sin and its consequences. But even so, one can see a true judgment at work here, first of all because sin in its primary meaning is submission to sensuality and materiality, and second because if someone gives in to sensuality he transgresses God’s command. The immanent punishment in an action that is against the divine command, is that judgment, which is not the case if we assume that God is not involved in the world, in other words, if we deny the God of the Torah. This is the deeper difference between Maimonides and Aristotle, and this is the reason that Maimonides condemned at the start of the discussion on providence the view of the philosophers that God’s providence does not extend to the terrestrial world.
Moreover, individual providence is expressed in perfected individuals through their prosperity and through their immunity to this-worldly mishaps. This notion is divested of its anthropomorphic character by the interpretation that the prophets are saved by virtue of their intellectual superiority, through which they can predict the future and avoid mishaps. Nevertheless, there remains here an element of the miraculous and supernatural, which is possible on Maimonides’s assumption of creation \textit{ex nihilo}.

Certainly there remains a tension between the popular and philosophical versions of Maimonides’s doctrines. The philosophical version knows no true retributive reward and punishment, but only the good and bad that are immanent in the deeds themselves. Furthermore, Maimonides is not interested in broadcasting this philosophical view to the masses, for most ordinary people will regard it as a denial of individual providence altogether. Still, the Maimonidean view that he presents as an alternative to the popular view is not a purely Aristotelian view, but rather a version of the Torahitic-prophetic view that does not contradict the popular position but complements it.

\textit{The Coherence of the Guide}

If we survey the entire system from our current vantage point, we will see before us a coherent thought structure. Maimonides proved God’s existence on the basis of Aristotelian physics. He proceeded to construct a theory of prophetic knowledge of the divine, which outranks philosophical knowledge. The prophet knows God’s will, and on that basis arrives at the certainty that the world is created. Miracle expresses the directionality of that will in human existence. It comes to establish an ideal ethical-political social order, and thus originated the Torah that was given in the miraculous Sinai event, which is absolute testimony of divine providence.

\textit{The Relation of Philosophy and Religion in Maimonidean Thought}

Maimonides’s system is the most comprehensive and complete attempt to infuse Aristotelian philosophy into the domain of Torah thought. Maimonides’s physics and metaphysics are Aristotelian. His ethics is Aristotelian in its basic ideas, his psychology is Aristotelian, and his politics is Platonic. His theology is Aristotelian up to a certain point. His theory of prophecy is based first of all on Aristotelian epistemology.