MAIMONIDES, THE SOUL AND THE CLASSICAL TRADITION

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Philosophy represents itself as a timeless search for truth, but in fact during different historical periods particular issues and debates became very popular at the expense of other issues and debates. Philosophy is just as much a matter of fashion as other cultural artefacts, and during medieval Jewish philosophy one of the prime areas of debate was over the nature of the soul. This debate was actually very much taken over from Islamic philosophy that formed the warp and woof of its Jewish equivalent. and the major figure here is undoubtedly Moses Maimonides. He was particularly close to one of his Islamic predecessors, al-Fārābī, and especially so on this topic, and the development of the discussion is both interesting and at the same time raises important issues that it fails to resolve.

The role of the soul in Islamic philosophy is itself highly controversial. The Qur’an has a robust notion of both the soul and the afterlife, unlike the Jewish bible, yet most philosophers sought to restrict the role of the soul in a variety of ways, stemming from their application of philosophical techniques to the notion. Aristotle had quite radically described the soul as the form of the body, and the implication of that is that when the body is no more in existence, the soul has nothing to inform, and so evaporates. Plato of course has a more robust notion of the soul as an independent being, operating apart from the body with no problem, indeed, with fewer problems than when embodied. Aristotle’s more restricted view of the soul was constructed no doubt to respond to the sorts of arguments that Plato had produced. Aristotle’s rather gnomic remarks on the mind at De anima III, 5 (430a 10–23) in turn stimulated huge debates in subsequent philosophy, and were the source of a considerable architectonic within Neoplatonic thought. A particularly heated debate arose around the notion of the active intellect, and this has much to do with the issue of whether our

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ability to think abstractly is part of us, or something separate from us that can affect us, and that we can approach. Our material intellect is certainly part of us, but in so far as we can think abstractly, in terms of generalizations and universals. That sort of thought looks like it is independent of us, since although we may be having it, it has a structure and content that is independent of us. If I put two apples in my bag and later on add a third, and then at the end of the day count the apples, what makes them add up to three is not a reflection on my experience, but on something formal about numbers and what they mean, an abstract reasoning process that works independently of my experience of apples in bags. If I discover only two apples at the end of the day I shall suspect that one has dropped out, not that my grasp of the laws of mathematics are at issue. If I think that the apples issue is only a matter of experience then I have seriously misunderstood the situation, like someone staring at a number and trying to make it something else. It is because of this that many philosophers argued that whatever was behind our ability to think abstractly had to be something independent of us, albeit something with which we could get in touch. In Neoplatonic thought a whole range of spheres and planets were identified with different levels of thought and were linked with us by having an effect on us, albeit certainly not in a straightforwardly causal manner. Although the cosmology seems to us today to be fanciful, it does represent nicely that way in which our faculty for thought both seems to be part of us physically, since we are the thinkers, yet also separate from us, since the issues of what thought is and whether it is valid or not are independent of us.

A number of interesting technical issues arose with respect to the soul, and one was how advanced our thinking can actually get. What are the bounds of thought? A limitation on our thinking that the mystics in both Islam and Judaism fought against was the idea that our thought could only get as high as the active intellect, the realm of abstract thought, sometimes identified with the moon. This would obviously seriously interfere with our contemplation of God, for instance, and we would be restricted to thinking in the way that God thinks, to a certain degree. It also then looks like the only valuable form of thought is abstract thought, the sort of thought valued by philosophers and scientists, and this seems to cut out a lot of people who might be leading good and honourable lives, yet whose thought is limited to a rather mundane level of social and religious performance. This seems problematic from a religious perspective, and not only from such a perspective. It seems