

# The Philosophy of Maimonides

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Mondays, 3:30-5:20, LC 203

Office Hours (C107): Mondays, 5:30-6:30pm (or by appointment)

## Description:

Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) is widely considered to be the greatest of the medieval Jewish philosophers, and he often seems to be the most 'modern' of them in spirit. He was strongly influenced by his Islamic predecessors, and influenced subsequent Christian scholasticism in turn. This course will provide an introduction to his philosophical system. We will focus principally on Maimonides' philosophical magnum opus, *The Guide for the Perplexed*. But rather than following the purposefully chaotic sequence of the book, we will attempt to reconstruct Maimonides' thought systematically. We will begin with his radically non-anthropomorphic conception of God; think about what kind of relation such a God could have with the world; move through Maimonides' understanding of the nature of man and the ends of life; and finally look at the ways in which he took ethics, religion, and politics, to be structured to the fulfillment of those ends. As a whole, this system constitutes a powerful religious philosophy, with interestingly naturalistic overtones. By means of guided discussion we will try to clarify what Maimonides' position is on each of these key issues, consider their philosophical and religious significance, and explore and critique his arguments for them.

In the final two sessions of the semester we will change our perspective, and – using Leo Strauss (1899-1973) and Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1903-1994) as instructive case studies – we will think about what it might mean to be a contemporary Maimonidean.

## Readings:

Our principal text will be Maimonides' *Guide*, a copy of which you should own. If you have not studied philosophy before, I recommend the translation by M Friedländer entitled *The Guide for the Perplexed*, which exists in many editions (and which can even be downloaded for free from: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/maimonides/guide>). If you have some experience in reading philosophical texts, I recommend the translation by Shlomo Pines entitled *The Guide of the Perplexed*, published in two volumes by The University of Chicago Press. The Friedländer translation is more immediately readable, but the Pines translation is more accurate.

Each week the reading will have two core parts: the first part will usually be from *The Guide* (sometimes supplemented by sections of Maimonides' other writings); and the second part will usually be a response to Maimonides' position by another philosopher from the Jewish or Western philosophical canons. By looking at Maimonides' positions alongside alternatives we will get a better understanding of the nuances of his arguments and of what is at stake in his claims. I will usually assign a total of about 40-60 pages of reading per week.

If there is less reading, it is because it is difficult – and you should read it particular carefully, and more than once... I will post the readings as PDFs under 'Resources' on Classes\*v2.

In addition, you may find TM Rudavsky's *Maimonides* (Wiley Blackwell, Chichester, 2010) to be a helpful guide along the way, which you can dip into should you need to.

**Provisional summary of assignments and grading:**

20% – for participation in the class discussions and in office hours

30% – for short written reflections on the week's reading – in preparation for the class discussion – to be e-mailed to me by the evening before the relevant seminar each week. (These should only take about 20 minutes).

50% – for a final paper: 5,000 words, on a topic to be agreed with me; due at the end of the reading period.

## Syllabus

### PART I: INTRODUCTION

**Seminar 1** – Mon Jan 13<sup>th</sup>

**Philosophy, perplexity, and esotericism**

Why philosophise? And once you're philosophising why 'hide' your findings?

### PART II: GOD

**Seminar 2** – Fri Jan 17<sup>th</sup> (moved forward from Mon Jan 20<sup>th</sup>, due to MLK Jr Day)

**Proofs of God's existence**

Does the world point beyond itself? And if so, to what does it point?

Martin Luther King Jr Day – Mon Jan 20<sup>th</sup> – No class

**Seminar 3** – Mon Jan 27<sup>th</sup>

**'Negative' theology**

God is so radically 'other' that all we can say of God is what God is not...

**Seminar 4** – Mon Feb 3<sup>rd</sup>

**'Positive' theology**

(And yet here are a whole load of things that God is...)

### **PART III: BETWEEN GOD AND MAN**

**Seminar 5** – Mon Feb 10<sup>th</sup>

**Creation**

How exactly is God related to the existence of the world?

**Seminar 6** – Mon Feb 17<sup>th</sup>

**Prophecy**

How are we to make sense of a God who communicates?

**Seminar 7** – Mon Feb 24<sup>th</sup>

**Providence**

How are we to make sense of a God who is involved?

### **PART IV: MAN**

**Seminar 8** – Mon Mar 3<sup>rd</sup>

**Politics and Law**

How should we organise our societies in order to attain the highest good?

Spring Break – March 8<sup>th</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup>

**Seminar 9** – Mon Mar 24<sup>th</sup>

**Ethics**

How should each of us live in order to attain the highest good?

**Seminar 10** – Mon Mar 31<sup>st</sup>

**Immortality**

Can we retain the highest good forever?

**Seminar 11** – Mon Apr 7<sup>th</sup>

**The Human Ideal**

Contemplation? or ethics? or both? or neither? What is going on!?

### **PART V: THE POSSIBILITY OF CONTEMPORARY MAIMONIDEANISMS?**

**Seminar 12** – Mon Apr 14<sup>th</sup> (Passover begins 7:12pm)

**Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1903-1994): a modern Maimonidean?**

What might a Maimonidean solution look like in a contemporary setting?

**Seminar 13** – Mon Apr 28<sup>th</sup> (delayed one week due to Passover)

**Jerusalem and Athens, Jerusalem or Athens?**

Is there a fundamental tension, and how can it be responded to today?