

# A Haskalah story: Kant and Maimon on rational faith

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**Abstract.** In 1789 Salomon Maimon sent Kant, via Markus Herz, the manuscript of his *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy* (Kant, 1999, pp. 291-294). A surprised Kant replied to Herz: “None of my critics understood me as well as Herr Maimon does” (Kant, 1999, pp. 311-315). Kant’s praise of Maimon makes him a singular figure in the *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment. But while the theoretical aspect of Maimon’s criticism of Kant has received increasing attention in recent years, its practical implications remain under-examined. In what follows, I use the notion of rational faith for the purposes of a tentative reconstruction of Maimon’s reading of Kant’s transcendental philosophy that brings together theoretical and practical aspects of the thought of both philosophers. Kant and Maimon shared a project of devising a form of faith that would express rational rather than religious-based morality. Kant argued for a rational moral freedom that is vouched by an infinite intellect that cannot be attributed to humans but more appropriately to God. For Maimon, the answers to the questions *What can I know?* and *What should I do?* involve a cognitive and affective process of striving to expand our finite consciousness. This process is the rational expression of God in us.

**Keywords:** transcendental, lawfulness, rational faith, infinite understanding, affects, morality, consciousness

## 1 Introduction

Kant and Maimon attempted a reconciliation of what we know and what we morally do by conceiving a form of faith that is grounded in rational rather than religious morality. They carried out this project in different ways, which I expound in some detail. The reconciliation was to be achieved through demoting religious faith in its traditional role of justifying morality by reference to God as law-giver. The project was to replace it with a rational form of faith and associated morality that, on the one hand, would be constitutive of the finite human consciousness of things, and, on the other hand, that speaks of a capacity to conceptualise and understand things that is infinite insofar as it is not exhausted by experience.

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I suggest that Kant's idea of an *intellectus archetypus* and Maimon's concept of infinite understanding (*unendlicher Verstand*) are key to this shared project of reconciliation of knowledge and faith. Yet, Kant and Maimon stand for two radically distinct Enlightenment commitments. For while for Maimon human affects make an essential moral demand of rationality, and so are constitutive of rational faith, they have for Kant an important but ultimately ancillary, non-justificatory role in moral life.

## 2 Theoretical point I

The third chapter of the "Transcendental Analytic" in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (hereafter first *Critique*), entitled "Analytic of Principles", opens with the proposition that experience involves *a priori* application of conceptual to spatial-temporal intuitive representations of objects (*KrV*, A 148 / B 188; Kant, 1997, p. 278). The main theoretical *loci* of *a priori* application of concepts to intuitions are two transcendental capacities of the mind: a capacity for transcendental consciousness, and a capacity for synthetic *a priori* judgement. The former is a capacity for having unified consciousness of an object in general *x*, and the latter is a capacity for determining the conceptual properties that *x* must have – its categorical properties – in order to qualify as an object of possible experience (*KrV*, A 95-130 / B 129-168; Kant, 1997, pp. 225-244). The empirical reality of objects itself is a function of this capacity for synthetic *a priori* judgement, which connects conceptual and intuitive representations of objects (*KrV*, A 155-158 / B 194-197; Kant, 1997, pp. 258-260). In the final chapter of the "Analytic of Principles" Kant formulates the central claim of the first *Critique*. To the extent that the conditions for connecting representations of objects belong *a priori* to the human understanding, and that without such connection nothing can become an object of experience for us, it is safe to claim that we have *a priori* knowledge of objects of possible experience (*KrV*, A 235-260 / B 293-315; Kant, 1997, pp. 338-354).

In *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy* Maimon develops a sceptical argument about this claim. If Kant is right, the connections among objects of the human understanding and the connections among objects in nature are determined by the same *a priori* principles. In Kantian language, these connections have a common transcendental lawfulness. Maimon has no difficulty in accepting the existence of a transcendental lawfulness at the level of the understanding. But what grounds are there to ascribe it to the natural objects of our empirical perception (Maimon, 2010, pp. 59-65)? Maimon questions Kant with a Humean *quid facti* interrogation: What evidence is there in empirical perception of *a priori* connections among objects? Taking the example of the Kantian category of causality, Maimon asks: "How do we know from our perception that *b* succeeds *a* that this succession is necessary, whereas the succession of the very same *b* upon *c* (which is equally possible) is accidental?" (*ibid.*, pp. 42-43).

Maimon's sceptical question does not incur the basic mistake of ignoring the methodological point of principle of the first *Critique*, namely, that experience provides no insight into the possibility of *a priori* knowledge of objects. The difficulty with countering Maimon's sceptical question is already evidenced in the more established literature on Maimon, e.g. in Freudenthal's and Beiser's contrasting views about Maimon's reading of Kant (Freudenthal, 2003; Beiser, 1987).

What is Maimon's contention with Kant? Maimon accepts that the conceptual categories and intuitions of space and time are *a priori* elements of knowledge of objects. He also agrees that they are *a priori* elements of a formal perception of objects. But what Maimon doubts is Kant's transcendental deduction of the categories. This deduction has the function of answering the *quid juris* question about the logical validity with which categories apply to intuitions (Maimon, 2010, pp. 112-115). Kant claims that the content of a transcendental consciousness is an empirically undetermined object *x*. Such object is the object of

mathematical thought and productive imagination. But surely, Maimon notes, the empirical indeterminacy of objects of mathematical thought and productive imagination reveals a relation of non-reciprocity between the laws of human understanding and the laws of nature. Namely, while the laws of human understanding concern relations among representations of objects only, the laws of nature concern relations among objects in the physical world (*ibid.*, pp. 115-119). This non-reciprocity renders problematic Kant's question on the facts of knowledge, what he calls his *quid facti* question, which calls for the concept of a synthetic *a priori* combination of concepts and intuitions in consciousness.

Maimon accepts Kant's conception of the human understanding as a power to anticipate lawfulness for any realm of objects of which we have consciousness. But this is not to say that we are capable of *a priori* knowledge of how empirical objects can relate to each other. Quite the opposite for Maimon, that is to say that the human understanding is so constituted that, insofar as it has the limited function of knowing only what it is capable of representing *a priori*, it may act as an infinite understanding (*einen unendlichen Verstand*) that strives to conceive as many lawful connections as possible of representations of things (*ibid.*, pp. 130-132). How to describe this striving of the human understanding is Maimon's personal and philosophical passion and mission.

### 3 Rational faith

The Enlightenment search for a reconciliation of principles of knowledge and principles of moral agency took issue with a traditional metaphysical proposition. This was the dogmatic proposition that, while it might be possible to know the necessary formal elements and laws of reality, our empirical and finite make-up is under ever-changing material conditions that prevent us from knowing with practical necessity good from bad, right from wrong, and so what we ought to do. Invariably, considerations on rational versus religious grounds of morality took centre stage. While Kant had Luther in mind in his attempt to reconcile philosophy and revealed religion, Maimon had Moshe ben Maimon, best known as Maimonides, the great Jewish medieval rabbi, philosopher and physician. Maimonides's influence on Maimon is showed in no uncertain terms in his change of surname from ben Joshua to Maimon. Kant's influence came later and made on Maimon a personal impact just as great.

The three founding ideas of human reason for Kant were God, freedom, and immortality of the soul. They are also traditional objects of Abrahamic religions and associated moral principles, and so were the objects of Kant's well-known Christian-based rationality. Kant wanted to keep his claim that all possible objects of human rational knowledge, together with the relations among them, are known in a law-like manner and with a transcendental necessity. But he also wanted to convince the reader that there is a special class of rational objects, whose drive for representation comes not from knowledge, transcendental or empirical, but from practical demands of agency in the world. Kant wanted to radically separate knowledge and faith. This separation enabled his conception of rational faith, that is, of a rational need to attribute reality to moral and religious objects, a reality that neither laws of theoretical reasoning can justify nor experience manifest. So, he warns his reader in the B-Preface to the first *Critique*: "[...] I cannot even **assume God, freedom, and immortality** for the sake of the necessary practical use of my reason unless I simultaneously **deprive** speculative reason of its pretension to extravagant insights [...]. Thus I had to deny **knowledge** in order to make room for **faith**; and the dogmatism of metaphysics, i.e., the prejudice that without criticism reason can make progress in metaphysics, is the true source of all unbelief conflicting with morality [...]" (*KrV*, BXXX; Kant, 1997, p. 117).

Maimon was just as committed to the notion of rational faith. With a self-deprecating style of writing that could not contrast more with Kant's, Maimon writes in his

*Autobiography*: “Now, dearest reader!, God, who [...] has sent me to Germany and commanded me to describe for you my life’s story, commands me now to bring to your attention this section [of Maimonides’ *The Guide of the Perplexed*] in which it is made clear how, by means of rational exegesis, faith [*Glaube*] and reason [*Vernunft*] can be reconciled and brought into perfect harmony” (Maimon, 1888, p. 440).

And just as faith in Kant’s practical writings does not mean belief in revealed truths (*Offenbarungsglauben*) but a new variety of faith, namely rational faith, so Maimon too aimed at a reconciliation between reason and faith that may strike the reader as equally odd. As Rosenstock (2014, pp. 288-289) puts it, “Maimon makes it clear that ‘reconciliation’ and ‘harmonization’ of reason and belief did not, in fact, mean giving equal weight to both, but rather ‘freeing the former from the chains imposed upon it by the latter’ and making belief ‘ever more rational’ [*immer vernünftiger*]. Maimon goes on to explain that when he speaks about the ‘harmony between belief and reason’, he means nothing less than ‘the entire replacement of the one through the other’ [*die gänzliche Aufhebung des erstern durch die letzere*]. In a footnote to this passage, Maimon says that by *Glaube* he means to refer to *Offenbarungsglauben* [belief in revealed truths], and most specifically, belief in revelation itself. Maimon’s ‘God-sent’ philosophical mission is, in other words, the replacement [*Aufhebung*] of truths legitimated by an appeal to revelation by truths legitimated through reason alone. If Maimon succeeds [...] revealed beliefs about God [*Offenbarungsglauben*] will have been eliminated in favor of rationally demonstrable knowledge.”

Maimon is a critic of Kant in two inter-related dimensions of rational faith, that is, of a capacity to know and morally act from principles that are unconstrained by experience about things that, like us, are empirically finite. These dimensions concern the influence of affects on moral agency, and the influence on moral action of a critical consciousness of the limits of what we can know. I offer next a brief formulation of each dimension.

## 4 Practical point I

### 4.1 On the influence of affects on moral agency

Kant’s arguments for morality are, as is well known, based on duty and on his view that affects have an ancillary, if important, function of mediating moral values. By contrast, Maimon claims that the affective dimension of agency attracts a subtler analysis of the motives of actions and is therefore central to the rational judgement of actions as moral. David Baumgardt (1963, p. 203) observes that Maimon “remarks that what appears to be mere fulfilment of duty may well be caused by an inclination which is less perceptible to the actor and the observer than that sense of duty; and only therefore may obedience to duty wrongly figure as the one and only motive of the act in question. In this and other ways, Maimon tries to show that, in contrast to Kant, the motive of every action, including the moral one, must be some kind of ‘agreeable feeling’ (*angenehmes Gefühl*)”.

I have noted earlier on that Maimon’s criticism of the “Transcendental Analytic” could appear, at first glance, to incur the basic methodological mistake of attacking Kant for not giving experience the upper hand in our judgements about the reality of objects and their relations. It would be a basic mistake, because Kant’s transcendental idealism constitutes precisely a departure from rationalist empiricism. Maimon understands this very well, and his point is quite the opposite: the transcendental analytic is problematic in that it does not go far enough to distinguish the unbounded mathematical and imaginative dimensions of the human understanding and its empirically constrained rational uses. And again, concerning Maimon’s view on the centrality of affects for agency, in general, and for our rational judgement of morality for actions, in particular, he criticises Kant for confusing duty and

moral action. To see this, we only need to read Kant on the influence of affects on moral action. For the purpose of illustration only, I select three passages from the first *Critique*, the *Metaphysics of Morals*, and the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, respectively: “However many natural grounds or sensible stimuli there may be that impel me to **will**, they cannot produce the **ought** but only a willing that is yet far from necessary but rather always conditioned, over against which the ought that reason pronounces sets a measure and goal, indeed, a prohibition and authorization” (*KrV*, A 548 / B576; Kant, 1997, pp. 540-541); “certain actions [...] there arises the concept of a duty, observance or transgression of which is indeed connected with pleasure or displeasure of a distinctive kind (moral *feeling*), although in practical laws of reason we take no account of these feelings (since they have nothing to do with the *basis* of practical laws but only with the subjective *effect* in the mind when our choice is determined by them, which can differ from one subject to another [without [...] detracting from the validity [...] of these laws])” (*MS*, AA 06: 221; Kant, 1996, p. 376); “we have then to explicate the concept of a will that is esteemed in itself and that is good apart from any other purpose [...]. [T]his concept [of will] [...] always takes first place in estimating the **total** worth [my emphasis] of our actions and constitutes the condition of all the rest. In order to do so we shall set before ourselves the concept of **duty** [...]” (*GMS*, AA 04: 397; Kant, 1996, p. 52).

These passages propose a rational capacity for moral action on the grounds alone of our consciousness of the goodness contained *a priori* in the universalisable maxim of our deeds. Maimon’s proposition that our sense of duty may disguise or obscure non-cognised rational motives to act morally could not be stranger to Kantian morality.

#### 4.2 On the influence on moral action of a consciousness of limits to what we can know

In his *Autobiography*, Maimon defines religion as the expression of moral feelings that emerge from a sense that one’s wellbeing and sorrows depend on unknown powers: “*Religion in general* is the expression of gratitude, reverence and the other feelings, which arise from the dependence of our weal and woe on one or more powers unknown to us” (Maimon, 1888, p. 111). To put it simply, moral feelings such as gratitude are a function of our finite human understanding, which is limited in its capacity to know or anticipate life events. This approach to moral feelings opposes Kant’s, for whom the moral value of anything, including the moral value of feelings, is measured in direct relation to their adequacy *a priori* to a consciousness of the goodness contained in the universalisable maxim of one’s action and so of one’s will.

In the opening passage of the Preface to the first edition of *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, for example, Kant states that the ground of morality consists in a rational binding of willing to unconditional laws of knowing. Morality has nothing to do with unknown influences on human action; it neither involves nor precludes a representation of such influences that could possibly give the human will its moral purpose. Nor does morality necessitate or negate anything else that would function as empirical motive to act morally. “So far as morality is based on the conception of the human being as one who is free but who also, just because of that, binds himself through his reason to unconditional laws, it is in need neither of the idea of another being above him in order that he recognize his duty, nor, that he observe it, of an incentive other than the law itself” (*RGV*, AA 06: 3; Kant, 1998, p. 33).

The concept of a rational binding of willing to unconditional laws of knowing is meant by Kant to have a validity that dispenses with two major traditional lines of justification of morality. One appeals to the concept of divine revelation through God’s giving of laws for human co-existence, and the other that appeals to human imperfection under the influence of sensory and sensual motives. From a moral and religious conservative standpoint, it is for our own sins (quite literally) that we may find ourselves in need of a motivation to act morally

that lies outside the unconditional imperative of duty, which we are otherwise able to give ourselves freely as rational beings. There is no doubt about how Kant sees the matter: “At least it is the human being’s own fault if such a need is found in him; but in this case too the need could not be relieved through anything else: for whatever does not originate from himself and his own freedom provides no remedy for a lack of his morality” (*RGV*, AA 06: 3; Kant, 1998, p. 33).

## 5 Theoretical point II

Maimon’s deeper point of criticism of Kant’s transcendental philosophy concerns a theoretical assumption that Kant anticipates in the “Transcendental Analytic” with his concept of a transcendental consciousness of objects. We encounter the assumption later on in the first *Critique*, in the “Transcendental Dialectic”. This the assumption that the rational representation of a complete knowledge of the formal conditions of experience of objects must entail a representation of a complete knowledge of the intuitive, spatial and temporal conditions of possibility of experience. However, as Kant himself famously claims, no possible objects of experience can be known through such a rational representation. So, Kant’s transcendental idealism merely ensures knowledge of objects in thought, and not in reality, when he argues that the rational representation of a complete knowledge of intuitive conditions of possibility of experience yields no knowledge of possible objects of experience.

Unless, of course, one argues *contra* Kant that *a priori* intuitions of objects may be better understood as particular instantiations of concepts of objects, rather than content for a transcendental consciousness of an indeterminate object *x*. This is, I propose, Maimon’s view and the reason why he is sceptical of Kant’s *quid juris* question, and, indeed, of Kant’s *quid facti* question also. Here is not the place to discuss Maimon’s transcendental scepticism in detail. My sole purpose is to formulate one important moral-practical implication that he draws from it.

If it is the case (i) that intuitions have an *a priori* function of particularising concepts, and, consequently, (ii) that there can be no conceptual knowledge of objects that is not of a particular spatial-temporal object, the Kantian transcendental demand for a special transcendental act of consciousness for knowledge of possible objects of experience becomes unclear. Knowledge of objects of any kind seems to be more a matter of scale or level of consciousness than of an abstract function of the understanding. By the same epistemological token he is able to claim, as quoted earlier, that actions that appear to follow from duty may well be the result of inclinations and feelings that are less, if at all, perceptible to the agent herself than her own sense of duty is.

Furthermore, if it is the case (iii) that the empirical content of representations is always construed or imagined through intuitions in a process of the finite human consciousness that is nonetheless able to transcend material conditions of knowledge, and so is not merely given in intuition, then no rational knowledge of empirical objects can ever follow from the mere rational representation of a complete knowledge of conceptual conditions of possibility of experience. Reasoning about objects alone cannot produce objects of experience, not because no intuitions are given at this level of abstract thinking, but because no real concepts of objects are available in the first place. Kant would have understood this, had he further considered the nature of what he himself calls concepts of reason. This critical point seems to me to follow from Maimon’s remark in *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy*, that concepts of things generated by the finite human understanding and its associated rational capacities are not concepts of objects just because they function as transcendental rules for representing objects. For Maimon, the concept of an object is but an idea of this finite understanding, or, as he puts it, a limit-concept (*Gränzbegriff*): “The material completeness of a concept, in so far as this completeness cannot be given in intuition, is an idea of the understanding. For

example, the understanding prescribes for itself a rule or condition: that from a given point an infinite number of lines that are equal to one another are to be drawn, from which (through the connection of their endpoints) the concept of the circle is to be produced. The possibility of this rule, and consequently also of this concept itself, can be shown in intuition (through the movement of a line around the given point), and consequently also its formal completeness (unity in the manifold). But its material completeness (of the manifold) cannot be given in intuition, because one can only ever draw a finite number of lines that are equal to one another. It is thus not a concept of the understanding to which an object corresponds, but only an idea of the understanding, which one can ever approach in intuition through the successive addition of such lines, and consequently a limit concept” (Maimon, 2010, pp. 75-76).

## 6 Practical point II

David Baumgardt observes that the task of getting to grips with Maimon’s moral thinking is difficult because Maimon gives more explicit attention to Kant’s theoretical philosophy and did not expound his own ideas on practical philosophy in any systematic way. Nonetheless, Baumgardt (1963, p. 201) observes, Maimon makes some important critical points about Kant’s concept of morality: “In his ethical remarks widely scattered through his essays and books, Maimon permanently circles around Kant’s moral teachings and, piercing here and there a skeptical hole into them, he hits, in fact, major methodological weaknesses of Kant’s ethics. He devotes incomparably more space to the discussion of the *Critique of Pure Reason* than to that of Kant’s ethical writings; and yet, he does not omit observing that ‘to every seeker of truth moral questions are the most important’.”

For both the Prussian Protestant Kant and the Polish-Lithuanian Jew Maimon the reconciliation of knowledge and faith is a commitment at once philosophical and personal. The reconciliation was to be achieved through demoting religious faith in its traditional role of justifying morality by reference to God as law-giver, and then replacing it with a form of faith and associated morality that is constitutive to humans as finite rational beings. The crucial task was to discover a necessary purpose or end to the law-like order of things and their relation in nature, an order that accords with our finite consciousness, and so can never be grasped in full or completely, but that, for this very reason, posits the idea of an intellect that conceives that order in ways that are unbounded by experience and that is so infinite. In Kant, this complex proposition unfolds in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* between §77 to the end of the book in §91: “What is at issue is therefore a special character or **our** (human) understanding with regard to the power of judgement in its reflection upon things in nature. But if that is the case, then it must be based on the idea of a possible understanding other than the human one [...]” (*KU*, AA 05: 405; Kant, 2000, p. 275); “[...] it is not at all necessary here to prove that such an *intellectus archetypus* is possible, but only that in the contrast of it with our discursive, image-dependent understanding [...] we are led to that idea (of an *intellectus archetypus*), and that this does not contain any contradiction” (*KU*, AA 05: 408; Kant, 2000, p. 277). As Kant progresses in the third *Critique* from the concept of a natural end to that of a moral end for rational knowledge, his account of infinite understanding takes full centre stage. For Kant, two ideas are constitutive for human rationality: the idea of an infinite understanding, and the idea of freedom as a capacity to determine *a priori* one’s will in accordance with universalisable maxims of action. Through its idea of an infinite understanding, human rationality gives itself the final measure of morality, namely the representation of a creator or high architect of the end or purpose of all being. “The moral law [...] determines for us, and indeed does so *a priori*, a final end [...]. [H]owever [...] the concept of a **practical necessity** of such an end [...] [requires] that we connect our freedom with any other causality than that of nature. [...] [C]onsequently, we

must assume a moral cause of the world (an author of the world) in order to set before ourselves a final end, in accordance with the moral law; and insofar as that final end is necessary, to that extent [...] it is also necessary to assume [...] that there is a God" (*KU*, AA 5: 450; Kant, 2000, pp. 315-316).

## 7 Conclusion

Kant and Maimon shared a project of devising a form of faith that would express rational rather than religious-based morality. But Kant and Maimon carry out this project in different ways. Kant relies on a very specific conception of consciousness, what he calls a transcendental consciousness, on which alone experience of things is possible; then on rational representations of objects of which no experience is possible; and, finally, on an analysis of this rational capacity as the source of a moral freedom that is bound to an infinite understanding or intellect that cannot be attributed to humans but more appropriately to God.

For Maimon the matter can be summarised as follows. From a rational knowledge that things relate to each other in a law-like manner no concept of *a priori* drive to act morally, i.e. from duty, follows. The answers to the questions *What can I know?* and *What should I do?* involve a relentless and largely uncertain cognitive process of particularising ideas into something empirically tangible, and so through the body and affects. Only through this cognitive process are we anchored in the world. This cognitive and affective striving to expand our finite consciousness is the rational expression of God in us. As Rosenstock (2014, p. 294) observes, for Maimon "[t]he infinite task of our limited intellect is to follow in reverse order the steps of the object's creation in the divine mind, not only understanding what the object is (its formal definition or concept), but the manner of its coming into being (its construction, that is, how the form organizes the sensible manifold into a unity). 'Taking his cue from Kant's theory of ideas,' Frederick Beiser explains, Maimon 'suggests that we regard the idea of the infinite understanding, the *intellectus archetypus*, as a regulative ideal, the goal of all inquiry'."

The jury is still out on whether Maimon merely "takes a cue from Kant's theory of ideas" or rather revolutionises it from the ground up.

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