Ethics in Exile: A Comparative Study of Shinran and Maimonides

Dissertation

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Abstract

While interest in Maimonides’ (1136 – 1204) thought and influence remains high among scholars, he has never been placed in a hypothetical conversation with any East Asian thinker. Similarly, Shinran (1173 – 1262) has been compared with some Christian thinkers (i.e. Calvin and lately Heidegger), yet his thought has never been compared with the thought of any Jewish thinker. This dissertation focuses on these two medieval thinkers: Shinran, founder of Japanese True Pure Land Buddhism (Jōdo Shinshū) and Maimonides, Jewish philosopher, rabbi, community leader and physician. This comparison takes into account Shinran’s and Maimonides’ respective exilic conditions and demonstrates that this experience was instrumental in the development of some of their views.

When Maimonides’ views, informed by the Aristotelian privileging of the rational, are juxtaposed with those of Shinran, informed by Eastern tradition embedded in Indian, Chinese and Japanese medieval thought, we are forced to re-examine some of the premises that are often assumed to be universal. This juxtaposition reinforces the universality of the human desire to attain happiness, although understood differently by these two thinkers. Second, this analysis points to the fact that their respective views concerning happiness are embedded in the mechanisms that shaped human character; this is exemplified not only in their thought but also their behavior. and the way their
respective environments of displacement accentuated, attuned and sensitized their
collection of ethics in terms of “otherness.”

This dissertation uses an interdisciplinary approach, building on, rather than
discarding or neglecting, the strengths of a disciplinary model, which allows for
integrating knowledge from philosophy, religious studies and theology. Specific
attention, based on detailed textual analysis, is paid to the following themes: Shinran’s
view on Amida Buddha, his theories of shinjin, nenbutsu, and hakarai and his
conceptualization of ethics; Maimonides’ views on God, human nature, human rationality
and the role of the commandments. Comparing these themes allows us to argue that their
construction of ethics is greatly affected by their views on human nature. This
comparison demonstrates further that their approach to the “other,” based on their view
on human nature, informs their reliance upon normative requirements that reflect
tolerance and acceptance. Finally, it points out that their views on human nature and their
subsequent articulation of a number of concepts are implicitly colored by their respective
experiences of their own exilic conditions. This thematic juxtaposition of their thought
provides a more nuanced understanding of such issues as inclusion and exclusion and
demonstrates that Shinran’s and Maimonides’ thoughts have contemporary relevance
with respect to issues of tolerance and pluralism.
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Ethics in Exile: A Comparative Study of Shinran and Maimonides is an inquiry into the thought of two medieval thinkers: Maimonides (1136-1204) and Shinran (1173-1262). Maimonides was Jewish philosopher, rabbi, community leader and physician, whereas Shinran founded Japanese True Pure Land Buddhism (Jōdo Shinshū). I was initially drawn to this comparison because of their shared interest in human nature. Certain convergences in their thought led me to a number of thought-provoking analogies. First, these convergences alert us to the universality of human desire to attain happiness, although what leads to happiness is understood differently by each thinker. Second, these thinkers’ respective views on human nature generate equally intriguing parallels to the mechanisms that shape human character and form human ethical behavior. Third, Shinran’s and Maimonides’ respective environments of “displacement” accentuated, attuned and sensitized their construction of ethics defined by the treatment of the “other.” Lastly, this juxtaposition demonstrates that Maimonides’ and Shinran’s thought has implications for our contemporary setting, continuing to provide guidance especially in relation to the issues of tolerance and inclusion.

To produce this analysis, I borrow methodologies from a number of scholars to compare Shinran’s and Maimonides’ thought. My work is structured in the following way: My first chapter serves as a brief introduction to Shinran’s biography and thought. I
explain the general concept of Pure Land and Amida Buddha and analyze Shinran’s specific view on Amida Buddha, his theories of shinjin, nenbutsu, and hakarai and his conceptualization of ethics. I demonstrate that Shinran’s articulation of Amida Buddha and his theories of shinjin and nenbutsu eventuate in his ethics of a non-discriminatory compassion. I further propose that Shinran’s ethics, stemming from his view on human nature, is largely informed by his own experience of exilic conditions.

In chapter 2, I provide a rough sketch of Maimonides’ biography, Maimonides’ view on God, human nature, human rationality and on the role of the commandments. I note Maimonides’ ambivalence with respect to the ability of humans to attain perfection and I point out that for Maimonides, human perfection itself is an ambiguous notion. I discuss Maimonides’ view on human solitary pursuits juxtaposed with the need for social and political engagement. Tension between these two pursuits leads to his ambiguous stance with respect to human perfection and happiness. I discuss Maimonides’ high valuation of human rationality and human intellect. For Maimonides, a consistent engagement with the commandments is a means not only to improve individual human conditions but is societal as well. I argue that, just as with Shinran, for whom Amida’s Primal Vow is central, for Maimonides, the commandments assume similar centrality. I demonstrate that Maimonides’ focus on human perfection underscores his construction of ethics. I propose that Maimonides’ views, similarly to those of Shinran, are affected by his conception of human nature and his own experience of exilic conditions. I show that Maimonides’ ethics, in addition to shaping human behavior, is a means for preservation and continuation of Jewish community. I term Maimonides’ ethics as an ethics of
commandments despite his sustained tension and ambiguity in relation to solitary pursuits and the need for a social and political engagement.

In chapter 3, I juxtapose Shinran’s and Maimonides’ views on the question of human nature itself, these views permeate their articulation of their views on humility, repentance, gratitude, and the need either for the commandments or the Primal Vow. Their respective conceptions of human nature foreground their theories of human happiness and human perfection. I conclude this chapter by proposing that Shinran’s and Maimonides’ nuanced and sensitive approach to human nature enhances their appreciation for tolerance and acceptance leading them to be sensitive to human differences.

In chapter 4, I propose that their own positions within their respective communities further sensitized them to the issue of difference. In this chapter I continue providing a thematic comparison of the thought of Shinran and Maimonides focusing on the concept of the “other,” tradition, inclusion and exclusion. I focus on “otherness” as an ever-present dilemma of “us” versus “them” and maintain that labeling one as the “other” is inherently connected to the differentiation between particularist and universalist approaches further materialized in the methods of exclusion. I posit that our understanding of the meaning of tradition is crucial for our understanding of both inclusion and exclusion.

In my concluding chapter, I attend to the theme of exile and demonstrate that Shinran’s and Maimonides’ views are shaped by their exilic conditions. In the end, I argue that this thematic juxtaposition can be further applied for our (re)formulation of a
more nuanced understanding of exclusion, inclusion, and tolerance and invites
(re)evaluation of the concept of pluralism. I maintain that Shinran and Maimonides force
us to rethink historically, culturally, existentially, and phenomenologically about issues
of the continuing critical and social relevance.
Introduction – Comparative Juxtaposition

Introducing introduction

A comparative enterprise is an endeavor that often requires explanation as to why one decides to compare and why does one compare those specific traditions and those specific thinkers. The idea that this justification is needed to some extent may be unwarranted especially if we recognize that much of human action and human thought are assessed in terms of comparison – how can this object, artifact, or idea be assessed or understood when contrasted with a similar object, similar artifact, similar book or a similar topic? And yet, the first question one encounters as one embarks on the comparative path is why did one decide to compare in the first place?

Comparative work raises a number of questions, both methodological and ethical. How do we make sense of a tradition other than our own? The challenge is to make valuable comparisons that highlight both divergences and convergences without essentializing and hence nullifying the differences. The potency of the comparison will be equally decreased if it uses a reductionist approach. Even more problematically, exoticizing other traditions and thinkers of other traditions by distancing them from ourselves, can result in the problematic approach of “otherizing” or vilifying. Any comparison becomes especially vulnerable to this criticism when it addresses disparate
traditions that maintain different meanings for a number of premises. For instance, any comparison between good and evil or the idea of free will and human agency loses its vibrancy and significance if one does not acknowledge different conceptualization of these terms. Recognizing the presence of these different conceptualizations, however, is not to be interpreted as an invitation to abandon any comparison but rather alerts to the need for increased sensitivity to a multiplicity of meanings and the necessity for the contextual and cultural specificity. This increased sensitivity instigates a productive reintroduction of the taken for granted meanings and assumptions. Any ethical inquiry, in turn, becomes enriched rather than hindered by the recognition of “multiplicity, diversity, and contradiction.”¹

My focus

This dissertation focuses on two medieval thinkers: Shinran (1173-1262), founder of Japanese True Pure Land Buddhism (Jōdo Shinshū) and Maimonides (1136-1204), Jewish philosopher, rabbi, community leader and physician. Despite much interest in Maimonides’ thought as well as Islamic and Christian interaction, he has never before been placed in dialogue with any East Asian thinker. Similarly, while Shinran has been compared with some Christian thinkers (i.e., Calvin and lately Heidegger), his thought has not been placed into conversation with any Jewish thinker. The study of these thinkers is important for several reasons especially given their shared interest in and focus on human nature. A careful analysis of Shinran’s and Maimonides’ writing and a subsequent juxtaposition of their contentions reveals some intriguing points of contact. I

propose that the significance of this convergence is especially instructive. It demonstrates that despite being situated in two different traditions their respective views have provocative similarities concerning happiness, the mechanisms that shape human character as exemplified not only in their thought but also their behavior, and the way their respective environments of “displacement” accentuated, attuned and sensitized their construction of ethics in terms of “otherness.” Moreover, I argue that because of their interest, Shinran’s and Maimonides’ thoughts can still guide us in our modern life when it comes to such issues as inclusion, exclusion, tolerance, and pluralism.  

Comparing seemingly “incomparable” traditions challenge our Western ways of thinking. When Maimonides’ views, informed by the Aristotelian privileging of the rational become juxtaposed with the thoughts of Shinran, informed by Eastern tradition embedded in Indian, Chinese and Japanese medieval thought, our “untroubled” conceptualizations become problematized and we are challenged to re-examine some of the premises that we assumed to be understood universally.

**In favor of a comparative approach**

Given my contention that comparison eventuates in the construction of meaning, I briefly turn to the role of comparison within the broader field of religious studies and comparative religious thought. Scholars of religion often contend that studying religion is closely related to constructing meaning. The same argument can be extended to comparing religious thought which adds some additional layers of controversy since in

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2 By the environments of displacement, I mean Maimonides’ exilic conditions after he left Andalusia and Shinran’s exile from Kyoto’s monastic community.

3 I do not suggest, however, that Shinran and Maimonides were themselves pluralists, certainly Maimonides was not.
addition to addressing the concept of religion, it intermingles theological concerns with philosophical in some cases making them close to becoming indistinguishable. This becomes especially onerous when the focus is placed on the thinkers whose thought is colored by philosophical ruminations and yet is extended to theological and religious concerns. This is particularly relevant for both Maimonides and Shinran since neither one of them can be placed merely within one category, be it of a religious thinker or a philosopher. Yet, with any process of constructing meaning, one is faced with the multiplicity of approaches and is often challenged to sift through a number of controversial issues. Within the field of religious studies, nothing has an unambiguous meaning that cannot be contested. When this is layered with the fact that the thinkers under one’s analysis are far from providing the reader with a straightforward interpretation, one’s task becomes even more arduous. How do we interpret one’s thought when even terms themselves can be contested?

Among the many controversies, are those related to the place of the religious studies within the academy, the role of the scholar of religion and the scholar of the comparative religious thought, and the methodology used in this field. The term “religion” itself is also controversial. The difficulty with defining religious phenomena has been cogently articulated by William James:

> Meanwhile the very fact [that the definitions of religion] are so many and so different from one another is enough to prove that the word "religion" cannot stand for any single principle or issue, but is rather a collective name.⁴

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In some cases, providing this definition becomes superfluous. I suspect that it would have been highly unlikely that either Maimonides or Shinran would have been particularly interested in the construction of this term because for both of them, religion does not signify a separate domain and is fully embedded in their respective cultures. And yet, their own approach testifies to William James’ “collective” nature of this phenomenon. The fact that “religion” cannot be easily allocated to a specific domain, brings us to the second controversy.

The elusiveness of the term “religion” contributes to the challenge of delimiting the fields of religious studies and of comparative religious thought, placing it in a precariously liminal position between the domains of the humanities and the social studies. Even the historical point of the origination of comparative studies provokes certain disagreement as well. J. Z. Smith argues that Xenophanes (ca. 570-475 B.C.) provides the earliest example of the approach to comparative religions. This is followed by the writings of Herodotus (484-424 B.C.), termed by J. Z. Smith the "father of history of religions." 5 Already in the fifth century B.C., Herodotus recognized both the value of comparison and the problems stemming from it. In J. Z. Smith’s view, Herodotus defined the criteria for cross-cultural comparisons, namely, a "cultural unity: common descent, common language, common religious practices, common customs, and world view" and introduced the first questionnaire and a "narrative of what one has learned by inquiry." 6 This approach initiated the most common pattern of binary opposition that extends into modernity. This method is often defined as “us” versus

6 Ibid., 73.
"them" and is one that inspired most forms of cultural comparison. In a similar vein, Hananya Goodman argues that comparative work started at least 2,000 years ago. And yet, she points out there remains the general "lack of awareness" of "previous studies" even within the religious studies disciplinary field. Kimberly Patton also attributes the origination of the focus on comparative religions prior to the advent of the comparative religions as a field of study. Specifically, she recollects a sixteen-century theological dispute between two "historically unrelated traditions": Portuguese Catholics and Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhists, who communicated "with apparently picture-perfect understanding."  

Michael Stausberg refers to the Swiss historian of ancient religions Borgeaud (2004) who places the roots of comparative study of religion in antiquity. For Borgeaud the comparative study of religion is directly connected to "the double legacy of non-Christian intellectual history and Christian transformations." In the same article, Stausberg recalls Guy Stroumsa’s argument who proposes that it is precisely the contacts among Christians, Jews and Muslims that prompted the emergence of comparative study

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7 This approach, J.Z. Smith argues, was used since the time of Herodotus who argued that the "younger" Greeks borrowed their customs from the "older" Egyptians hence insisting on Egyptian authenticity because of their "older" status and the lack of need to borrow from other cultures and ultimately advancing ethnic propaganda.


of religion. 11 Samuel Preus, as Stausberg reflects, traces the roots of the field, by primarily focusing on the naturalistic rather than theological modes of inquiry, to the 16th century. Yet, in his subsequent work, Preus recasts his argument to the 17th century and points to the influence, among others, of Spinoza. A similar argument is made by Jan Assmann and Guy Stroumsa. Yet, according to Stausberg, the approach taken by the 17th century scholars has been primarily "confessional, often polemical, almost always explicitly religiously motivated, and deeply immersed in the religious worldview and frames of reference." 12 He maintains that Kurt Rudolph, Samuel Preus, and Robert Segal also connect the origination of comparative work with Enlightenment. J.Z. Smith attributes the origination of the study of religion to the effects of Enlightenment but links it with the scientific thought in general. 13 For J.Z. Smith, who points to the objectivity of the scientific studies in general, the study of religions is similarly objective. This claim of the presumed objectivity is contested by Gregory Alles. Alles recollects Charles H. Long’s challenging the assertion that the history of religions is a "child of Enlightenment" characterized by objectivity and reason and the resultant neutrality. In Alles's terms, this neutrality is "an empty façade." 14

11 It might be worthwhile to note that Sarah Stroumsa, like Guy Stroumsa, views Maimonides in terms of a comparativist. Maimonides' embeddedness within both Jewish and Islamic places him in a perfect position for this role. Stroumsa. Maimonides in His World: Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker.
12 Michael Stausberg, 298.
13 J.Z. Smith in “Adde Parvum Parvo Magnus Acervum Erit” states that Goethe similarly claimed that "natural history is basically comparison" (81) and was the first one to coin the term "morphology". Goethe’s approach, Smith relates, in spite of some claims otherwise, was never evolutionary but rather ahistorical built as "the most complex dialectic between the universal and the particular, between ideal and experience, between idea and appearance, between Being and history" (83).
Comparing: difference or similarity

The implication of Alles’ contention of “an empty façade” alludes to the issue of the lack of objectivity. Any comparative work inherently implies a certain void of objectivity. The issue of objectivity/subjectivity often underscores the importance of one’s focus. The debate extends to the focus in either particulars (differences) or universals (similarities) since this focus often reflects personal preferences of the researcher. Jeppe Sinding Jensen maintains that the abstract generalized conceptions are meaningless outside of a larger "more holistic system or paradigm." \(^{15}\) In his view, the more one knows about the particulars that go into the construction of the universals, the more extensive their usefulness. Hence, generalizations are of a limited use unless they are that can be “‘instanced' in individual and particular cases.” \(^{16}\) J.Z. Smith is among those scholars who strongly privilege difference. He equates difference with uniqueness and writes:

> the 'unique' is an attribute that must be disposed of, especially when linked to some notion of incomparable value, if progress in thinking through the enterprise of comparison is to be made.\(^{17}\)

He explains that when A is considered "unique with respect to B," B is equally unique with respect to A. Thus, he writes, "'uniqueness' is generic and commonplace rather than being some odd point of pride." For J.Z. Smith, the "discourse of 'difference'" becomes a synonym with the comparative method or so-called the comparative enterprise and includes "negotiation, classification and comparison, and, at the same time, avoids too

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 261.
easy a discourse of the 'same'." 18 Simply focusing on "likeness", produces "little of value." 19 J. Z. Smith writes that comparison requires the "acceptance of difference as the grounds of its being interesting, and a methodological manipulation of the difference to achieve some stated cognitive end. The questions of comparison are questions of judgment with respect to difference." 20 In his later writings, J.Z. Smith, borrowing from Ricoeur, argues in favor of this incongruity seeing it as an originator of some provocative deliberations.

William Paden also discusses differences but asserts that differences cannot be noted unless there are the instances that are "similar or shared" 21 and comparative perspective oscillates between "common functions and the contestable differentials of historical specificity and context." 22 In support of his contention, he refers to William James’s assertion that identifying something as a "sacred space" does not "explain away the particulars but provides for careful comparison of their distinctive characteristics." 23 Paden insists that addressing universality does not preclude taking into account particularity. Paden differentiates between an "upward" theoretical approach (focused on cultural differences) and a "downward" theoretical approach (focused on "broader, connective, intrastructural generalizations") and does not dismiss the model that progresses from the particular (different) to the general. Paden states: "Similar function,

18 Ibid., 42.
19 Ibid., 43.
20 Ibid., 47.
22 Ibid., 285.
23 Ibid., 286.
different acts; or similar acts, different functions."  

In his view, an analysis on a level of abstraction results in an enhanced objectivity by providing a welcome "degree of removal." He argues that this "degree of removal" precludes uncritically privileging the position of the insider. Yet, this "degree of removal," still does not rule out the direction of the comparativism since it remains a personal preference that should be negotiated by the comparativist herself. Paden proposes that the construction of meaning which becomes ascertained by a researcher extends beyond the meaning constructed by those who are directly affected by a phenomenon under investigation. In his words, "the validity of the comparative referent and meaningfulness of sorting out differences and similarities lie within the world of the comparativist rather than that of the religious insider."  

This reflects on the impossibility of constructing a purely objective assessment.

Silvia Mancini also reflects on comparativism as being "torn... between [the] two opposing tendencies, universalism and particularism."  

Regardless of its historical roots, based either on the "universalist anthropological model" of Enlightenment or on "historical Romantic particularism," comparativism remains entrenched in the opposing views. This dichotomous relation underlies even the works of those who claim that "historians are not responsible for presenting a philosophical theory of their object of

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24 Ibid., 288.
25 Ibid., 310. In Paden’s opinion, the meaningfulness of some religious phenomenon can go beyond intelligibility for the insiders. Paden uses the example of a crab who does not see its crustaceaness, but the "comparative anatomist does, along with that of over 35,000 other crustacean species" (311). This, Paden argues, implies relevance to a group larger rather than that of the insiders since this focus of the insiders is often inverted and particular.
study.” 27 To avoid philosophical relativism, Mancini proposes a "differential"
comparativism, a move from "the purely theoretical plane to that of the historical and
practical relations.” 28 This differential comparison, she argues, is a comparison between
different particular phenomena positioned into relation with each but *embedded within
"their specific historical and cultural environment." 29 This process, she maintains, also
borrowing from J. Z. Smith, creatively re-describes the meaning of the analyzed
phenomena. In her view, a differential comparison thwarts postmodern criticism by
"breaking with the models of the old humanism rooted in the philosophies of subjectivity
and consciousness.” 30

Jensen reflects on the philosophical meaning of the term "universals" which
stresses similarity or resemblance "in some respect" of compared things (e.g., "each
yellow thing provides an instance of the property of yellowness"). 31 However, there are
the distinctions among "ontological universals" ("the redness of strawberries”);
"epistemological universals" 32 ("strawberries are red for us humans only”); and
"theoretical/methodological universals" (conventions given by humans to meet their
specific purposes "for the sake of reasonable communication"). For Jensen, criticism
leveled against generalizations (especially from the position of ethnographic studies) is
"superficial." He argues that the critique employed by the "particularists and empiricists"
which holds that universalism eventuates in knowing “more and more about less and

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27 Ibid., 284.
28 Ibid., 284.
29 Ibid., 286.
30 Ibid., 292.
31 Jensen, 242
32 As Jensen posits, ontological and epistemological universals are related since both are "products of and
consequential for our dealing with things" (n.8, 242).
less” may be warranted, it nevertheless "may serve the wrong purpose and be based on
the wrong premises." 33 Jensen opines that universals should not be equated with
"eternal" or "the opposite of the history" and asserts that universals "include 'more than
meets the eye' in direct perception or naïve empiricism." 34 In addition, he reminds that
since universals "remain within the limits of language," 35 their applicability is determined
(if not curtailed) by language.

Contrary to those scholars who prefer focus on particulars (differences), Wendy
Doniger vouches for generalizations (similarities). As she elucidates, when focus
becomes very narrow "nothing has enough in common with anything else to be compared
with it even for the purpose of illuminating its distinctiveness." 36 She extends this
argument to humanity as a whole as lacking any "shared base." 37 In Doniger's opinion,
"any discussion of difference must begin with an assumption of sameness." 38 She cites
Dilthey's 39 words that "interpretation would be impossible if expressions of life were
completely strange. It would be unnecessary if nothing strange were in them." 40 [Italics
mine.] Following Dilthey, Doniger, in a highly symbolic language that itself needs to be

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33 Ibid., 239.
34 Ibid., 248. He argues that sharing common ancestry (e.g., Abrahamic religion as the "religion of
Abraham" versus "religion" of Hasidim or Kabbalah) does not imply the absence of some strong
distinctions. The "recurrent features" (commonality), might result in unsubstantiated generalities (e.g.,
Boyer’s stance against universals when he demonstrates confusion between universals and recurrent
features as confusion between processes and their outcomes).
35 Ibid., 250.
37 Ibid., 65.
38 Ibid., 65.
40 Ibid., 65.
unpacked, \textsuperscript{41} likens the assumption of difference to a "Looking-Glass ghetto, forever meeting ourselves walking back in through the cultural door through which we were trying to escape." \textsuperscript{42} She defines the methodological focus on similarity as seeking stability and building "political bridges, to anchor our own society" and warns against "paralyzing reductionism and demeaning essentialism imperative" which, as a result of over-emphasizing difference, makes difference "politically harmful." \textsuperscript{43} Doniger equates extreme universalism (others are like you) with extreme nominalism ("the other may be not human at all"). \textsuperscript{44} Her main premise is that postmodern and postcolonial critiques balance each other’s reductive tendencies and prevent religious scholars, in her words, "from retreating into a paralyzing nominalism." \textsuperscript{45}

While some scholars articulate a strong preference for differences and others equally strongly favor similarities, others do not privilege either one of these positions. For instance, Thomas Kasulis maintains "sympathies with both the universalists and the differentialists" \textsuperscript{46} and argues that either one of those position when taken to the extreme becomes ineffective. He cogently asserts that, "The extreme universalists fail to appreciate how profound cultural difference can be." And he proceeds: "they may confuse this superficial acceptance of foreign terminology with the actual acceptance of

\textsuperscript{41} For instance, it may be interesting to explore why she is using such highly loaded terms as "ghetto" and "escape."
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 65.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 65.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 66.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 72.
\textsuperscript{46} Thomas P. Kasulis, \textit{Intimacy and Integrity: Philosophy and Cultural Difference}. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 6
foreign values." I concur with Thomas Kasulis’ position and maintain that especially in relation to any cultural analysis, if one aims to focus on the analogies and similarities, these similarities can subsume any differences under the guise of similarity. On the other hand, if one’s goal is to highlight primarily the differences, these differences are under the danger of becoming exoticized and similarities reduced to meaningless.

**Reviewing some approaches**

What are some of the specific approaches that the comparativist scholars propose? I am interested in Arvind Sharma’s method of “reciprocal illumination.” Although Sharma is indebted to the works of W. C. Smith whose words he numerously evokes, he does not always fully agree with him. Like Wendy Doniger he refers to Heinrich Zimmer' retelling of the Hasidic tale of Rabbi Eisik which claims that one's faith can be strengthened through the exposition to the "alien tales." However, Sharma departs from Zimmer's conclusion that "one who reveals to us the meaning of our own cryptic message, must be a stranger of another creed and a foreign race." In his opinion, contrary to Zimmer and later Doniger, "a guru, to be a guru" does not have to belong to the alien culture. Although he does not agree "that we come to know ourselves only

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48 Arvind Sharma, *Religious Studies and Comparative Methodology: The Case for Reciprocal Illumination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005). W. C. Smith, according to Sharma, is “too theological” and not only privileges the position of the insiders of a tradition but also uses their position as a “key referent” (70). He recalls W.C. Smith’s statement that one often understands one’s own religion through exposure to the alien tradition. Sharma articulates his own position by citing John Hick’s words that “God is not a phenomenon available for scientific study, but religion is... There can be a history, a phenomenology, a psychology, a sociology, and a comparative study of religion. Hence, religion has become an object of intensive investigation and God perforce identified as an idea that occurs within this complex phenomenon of religion” (53-54).
49 Sharma, 40.
through the other," he does concur with Zimmer (and Doniger for that matter) that "when other traditions guide us" our own tradition becomes illuminated. Conversely, in Sharma’s opinion, reciprocal illumination allows everyone to realize their own treasure. To preempt the criticism that reciprocal illumination sounds more like a "potpourri of results going in so many directions," Sharma states unequivocally that this approach illuminates reciprocally and demonstrates that "apparently different phenomena may also unexpectedly shed similar light." In his words:

> The central idea is in some ways close to that of the earliest phenomenological writings that brought similar phenomena close together. In doing so they had their eye on the category to which they belonged, but reciprocal illumination seeks to see how one datum may shed light on another, or two data on each other, rather than on the common or transcendent category, and further seeks to show that apparently different phenomena may also unexpectedly shed similar light. The word ‘reciprocal’ is not limited to a single set of data; it is primarily reciprocal in the sense that if in one case data from tradition A shed light on B, that in another case data from tradition B may shed light on A.

Reciprocal illumination, Sharma claims, is "a new approach to comparable data in which comparison is not meant to serve some other end, but is used to clarify the items on the comparison themselves."

Lindsay Jones rejects any attempts to renounce comparative work, and, while admitting that some of these criticisms are warranted, refers to Lawrence Sullivan’s statement that "all understanding passes through the travail of comparison, conscious or not." With Marvin Harris, Jones, however, argues for the need to disassociate "the

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50 Sharma, 41.
51 Ibid., 254.
52 Ibid., 254.
53 Ibid., 254.
abuse of comparative method“ from the issue of comparison itself. Jones refers to Sullivan’s contention that in spite of the emphasis placed on "establishing similarities,” the real aim is to "discover, and even to create, firm ground for revealing and evaluating significant differences." 55 Following John B. Carman and like Kasulis, Jones avers that treating comparison as an either/or approach (focusing either on similarities or on differences) is a simplification since sound comparison warrants combination of "contrarieties as well as convergences." 56 Jones argues: "effective comparison -- like productive hermeneutical reflection --... renders phenomena neither identical nor absolutely different." 57 And yet, Jones opines, although admitting that there are some exceptions, that a "sense of sameness, coincidence, affinity, or alluring self-recognition precede (in a couple of different senses) a discernment of differences." 58 He avers that the similarities are enlisted to provoke further interest, but agrees that difference makes comparative analysis "interesting, rewarding, and productive." 59 The final analysis of any "aggressively comparative" method, however, requires the combination of both and thus entails the process of "negotiation of similarity and difference." 60

Jones recalls Marilyn Waldman’s argument against the presupposition that not all phenomena can be compared and that some comparisons are ineffective because they compare "apples and oranges." Instead Waldman contends, as Jones recollects, that no

55 Ibid., 170.
56 Jones parenthetically refers to Edmund Burke’s statement that "wit involves being 'chiefly conversant in tracing resemblances' while judgment is concerned mainly with 'find being differences'” (n. 6, 277). Jones argues: “effective comparison – like productive hermeneutical reflection – ... renders phenomena neither identical nor absolute different” (170). Nonetheless, differences and similarities are not perceived as “equal partners” (171) and relation between them is “buoyant and oscillating.”
57 Ibid., 170.
58 Ibid., 171.
59 Ibid., 171.
60 Ibid., 171.
phenomena are "intrinsically 'incomparable' or 'beyond compare'" and moreover, the "apples and oranges" argument can be equally applicable to all comparisons since "depending on your perspective, all – such juxtapositions, are in this sense, 'unfair comparisons'." 61 Jones, following Waldman, reminds that "there are probably no fully disinterested 'idle comparisons'" but instead, each comparative work is an "interested social act." 62 I concur with Jones’ assertion that although comparisons are not strictly speaking the "discoveries" of something new since they address "apparently pre-existing meanings, meanings that are somehow already 'out there'," they nonetheless produce "new knowledge." 63 Jones thus argues that "comparison is... productive and transformative; it brings into being meanings and insights that had not previously existed." 64 This is particularly relevant to my interests since my focus on both Maimonides and Shinran is not on "discoveries" but rather my aim is to "redescribe" some knowledge and articulate their positions and views in terms applicable to modernity.

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61 Ibid., 172.
62 Ibid., 173.
63 Ibid., 173.
64 Ibid., 173.
My method: Comparative Juxtaposition

In my dissertation, I use an interdisciplinary approach as I see it most conducive to this particular study. Interdisciplinary approach builds on, rather than discards or neglects the strengths of a disciplinary model. It allows for integrating knowledge from disciplines being brought to bear on an issue of one’s focus. In case of my dissertation, these are philosophy, religious studies and theology, which are the disciplines that share similar epistemologies. However, interdisciplinary study does not presupposed absence of tension even in the case of shared epistemologies. Tensions themselves provide a fuller understanding of the explored issues. Working through these tensions and contradictions allow for the construction of a new and enhanced understanding.

To arrive to this comparison, I borrow methodologies from a number of scholars and place Shinran and Maimonides into a hypothetical conversation. Building on Jones’ argument that comparisons produce new knowledge, I maintain that juxtaposing ideas of Shinran and Maimonides eventuates in the construction of meaning. My method of this juxtaposition is placed primarily on ideas of these two thinkers through detailed textual analysis of their explications. The argued ethical implications are the "embodiment" of these ideas as seen in these thinkers’ explicit and in some case implicit articulation of their approaches.

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65 I am inspired by Isaac Asimov’s statement when he argues in favor of interdisciplinarity and states: “the orchard was too large. One could no longer pass through it from end to end –without getting lost and walking in circles, back to one’s starting point” (“View from a Height,” Chemical and Engineering News, 43, 18, 1965, 90). And he continues: “I have never been sorry for my retreat from specialization. To be sure, I can’t wander in detail through all the orchard, any more than anyone else can, no matter how stupidly determined I may be. Life is too short and the mind is too limited. But I can float over the orchard, as if in a balloon” (91). Wendy Brown also warns against “compartmentalized” scholarship. See Wendy Brown, Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).
My aim is to demonstrate that this comparison itself leads to the reformulation of our understanding of certain issues. As a result of the close reading of these works, my initial ambivalence (if not hostility) to the notion of normativity was challenged as the need for normativity assumed an enhanced meaning. As I initially approached this project, despite my attempt to "bracket" my own critical (or more accurately worded, negative) assessment of normativity, I caught myself unable to fully bracket my bias. My reading of both of these thinkers forced me to reevaluate certain ingrained assumptions (without necessarily endorsing these). It led me to conclude that it might be productive to revisit the connection between normativity and such issues as tradition, tolerance, exclusion, inclusion, and pluralistic acceptance of difference. As a result, it made me recognize that a more nuanced interpretation should be applied to the relation between (in)tolerance and pluralism. I maintain that the issues embedded in the thought of the 13th-century thinkers are still relevant to our perception of human nature and to our (co)existence.

Inspired by the work of comparative philosophers, I follow their argument that cultural boundaries are most meaningful when they are addressed against the background of difference. However, neither the differences nor the similarities on their own result in a meaningful comparison. My own approach incorporates a diversity of methods

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66 I have previously viewed normativity only in terms of imposition of norms and rules on human free will and a result, stifling any genuine impulses of doing good on one’s own. I have neglected to consider normativity as a means for preservation of a given community and in terms of guidance for a peaceful (co)existence.
67 I am referring here specifically to the 1984 an international conference in Honolulu, Hawaii of the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy.
which I borrow from a number of scholars and employs both the inductive method
insofar I am comparing the specifics of what Shinran and Maimonides articulate in their
writings, and the deductive method insofar as their arguments are shaped by the specific
issues of my focus (i.e., “otherness,” exile, etc.). Using both approaches limits making
general universalizing claims 69 and increases one’s awareness of “the problems
associated with universalizing contextually defined claims.” 70 I follow Shaner’s
argument in favor of a “contextual middle path,” which allows accounting for
commonalities placed yet within the appropriate context of human life. This contextual
middle path provides for universalizable comparisons since the particular context is not
disregarded and human conditions, including language, religion and tradition are also
taken into account. In addition, this multilayered method follows Derrida’s insistence to
“undo the quest for a single, uniform, hermeneutic theory” 71 and, in Shaner’s terms,
allows for “see[ing] the forest and the trees” 72 hence to appreciate both the particulars
and the universals.

Specific to my methodology, five scholars’ respective approaches serve as the
resources that inform my own approach of a “comparative juxtaposition.” First is Jacob
Neusner’s method of textual analysis. Briefly, Neusner writes that first we seek to find
things familiar to us, followed by “the rule that applies to the unfamiliar thing among the
things compared.” He argues that the unknown is compared to the known:

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69 Shaner refers to Ben-Ami Scharfstein’s words: “If it were not for the perceptual ability to disregard
differences, our experience would never become cumulative. … The question is not whether the differences
exist, because they do, but what we should make of them” (148). Yet, universalized comparison cannot and
should not be fully abandoned.
70 Ibid., 147.
71 Quoted in Shaner, 151.
72 Ibid., 152.
The unknown thing is like something else, and therefore falls under the rule governing the known thing to which it is likened, or it is unlike something else, and therefore falls under the opposite (or, at least another) rule.\textsuperscript{73}

The next step is to discover "the context for interpreting the things compared."\textsuperscript{74} In his view, through comparison we discover "traits that are unique to one thing and therefore also those that are shared among the things compared."\textsuperscript{75} In his view, similarities are the point of departure and allow for finding the differences. Comparison compiles "otherwise discreet and unintelligible data into comprehensive information."\textsuperscript{76} He spells out the process of comparison itself. For him, "Comparison begins with the definition of things that are to be compared."\textsuperscript{77} This means that the comparison starts with understanding the role of the context, or, in his case, "the document at hand." In his view, it is impossible to impart meaning of the work without establishing context, since context establishes perspective on similarities and differences among the things compared.

Neusner writes:

Only when we know the impact of the documentary context upon the materials in a document can we take up an individual item from that document and set it into comparison and contrast with an item drawn out of the some other, also carefully delineated and defined, document. At the point at which we can define the traits distinctive to one documentary context we may ask about traits of an item that occur in other documentary contexts in which that item makes its appearance.\textsuperscript{78}

In Neusner's opinion, lacking the context results in comparing "apples to Australians" as groups that both begin with the letter A. He argues that no difference can be ascertained

\textsuperscript{73} Jacob Neusner, “Toward a Theory of Comparison. The Case of Comparative Midrash,” \textit{Religion} 16 (1986), 271.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 271.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 271.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 271.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 272.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 272-273.
unless we know a "basis for the question of comparison and contrast." He posits that distinctions between compared things must be meaningful to address "what difference a difference makes." In other words, the distinction must make a difference and must tell something significant about things compared. For Neusner, a document itself has to be interrogated so that its "textuality" meets certain requirements. First, he argues, the textuality should be tested against the fact of whether this document served as a "repository of prior sayings and stories."  

For my research, Neusner’s approach is instrumental. The positions of Maimonides and Shinran within their respective traditions ensure Neusner's first requirement. Second, Neusner opines that the document should "exhibit[] a viewpoint, its purpose of authorship distinctive to its framers or collectors and arrangers." Given the authoritative position of both Maimonides and Shinran, his second requirement is also met. Neusner’s statement that "once we know what is unique to a document, we can investigate the traits that characterize all the document’s unique and so definitive materials" targets one of the main goals of my own interest. Neusner’s contention that there should be some presence of a similarity is also met given that both Shinran and Maimonides are deeply interested in human nature and human limitations.

Apropos to my research interests, David Gordon White asks: "How is it that we as 20th century scholars may legitimately tap into the mythology of other people from other times?" In my case, this question should be slightly rephrased from the "mythology" to

79 Ibid., 275.
80 Ibid., 289.
81 Ibid., 289.
82 Ibid., 290.
"texts" in general. White argues that this process of tapping into other people's texts reflects "the cognitive activity of the reader [who] intervenes between the text and its truth content, between the realm of language and being." 83 I maintain that some of the concepts explicated by Neusner are instrumental to this process of “tapping into other people’s texts” and are instructive for my own work as well.

Second, scholars in the Larson and Deutsch’s collection, 84 argue convincingly that the current problem with comparative work is not with parochialism but with the lack of it. In Larson’s view, there is a certain lack of "any loyalty or sense of responsibility to a particular community" 85 which negatively impacts any comparative analyses. His argument in effect complements the postmodern critique about the overemphasis on similarities and universal patterns while overlooking the significance of particulars. This critique also adds another dimension, namely the awareness of the still existing, though perhaps decreasing lately, conceptual distance between Eastern and Western philosophy. The scholars in this collection advocate sensitivity to the overlapping cultural and geographic boundaries among different methodological approaches. This collection once again reinforces the warning raised by Kasulis as I extrapolate: not to mistake similar sounding words for identical meanings. By recognizing different ethico-religious vocabularies and their subsequent viewpoints, we can take care not to subject these terms to merely Western interpretation, falling victim to unwarranted assumptions. The

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84 Gerald James Larson and Eliot Deutsch’s collection resulted from a previously mentioned a 1984 conference on comparative philosophy.
difference in the vocabularies alerts us to the specificity of one’s cultural and religious background and subsequent divergences in terms of personal expression and construction of meaning. Attention to these vocabularies and to this specificity is particularly imperative in the increasingly pluralistic contemporary setting.  

Third, Jones's work is invaluable to my interest and I borrow a number of the approaches articulated by him. Jones’s method includes synchronic, morphological and diachronic, historical modes. Jones’s synchronic mode of comparison, focused on cross-cultural similarities requires employing heuristic and hypothetical devices, avoids essentialism. The supplementation of a synchronic mode by a diachronic concentrates on differences over time. Following Jones, applying a synchronic mode allows for drawing out similarities while recognizing that these might be "wholly without connection" and may need to be re-articulated. Neither similarities nor differences represent an end in themselves.

Fourth, Sharma’s approach of “illumination” allows for "shed[ding] light on one another [religious phenomenon].” Sharma articulates two possible outcomes of reciprocal illumination: "that of one tradition shedding light on another and that of one method doing the same in relation to another.” He differentiates between a "first-order" reciprocal illumination (one's religious experience) and a "second-order" reciprocal illumination (one's religious experience) and a "second-order" reciprocal illumination (one's religious experience) and a "second-order" reciprocal illumination (one's religious experience) and a "second-order" reciprocal illumination (one's religious experience) and a "second-order" reciprocal illumination (one's religious experience) and a "second-order" reciprocal illumination (one's religious experience) and a "second-order"

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86 I echo Marilyn Waldman’s belief in the urgency of cross-cultural interpretation which she envisions in terms of “a moral act, a practical necessity, and an intellectual challenge” (Preface to Prophecy and Power: Muhammad and the Qur’an in the Light of Comparison (London: Equinox, in press). This urgency appears very more acute in the contemporary environment of the increased distrust and skepticism. As I will demonstrate in this dissertation, even such supposedly a simple term as “faith” needs to be carefully unpacked given this term’s cultural and religious specificity.

87 Jones, The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture, 178.

88 Sharma, Religious Studies and Comparative Methodology. The Case for Reciprocal Illumination, ix.

89 Ibid., ix.
illumination (the *study* of religious experience). Sharma’s methodological tool of reciprocal illumination can be illuminating on its own. Deciphering Maimonides’ words sheds the unexpected light on the writings by Shinran and consequently becomes illuminating of his work and vice versa. In other words, the works of both thinkers allow their texts to illuminate each other.

Fifth, given my interest in ethical implications ascertained through the thought of Maimonides and Shinran, Waldman’s and Baum’s work is also important. They argue that among other important notions comparison requires "resolv[ing] paradoxes and explain[ing] social inequities" ⁹⁰ which is imperative to analyzing *any* ethical questions. My focus on social implications of Shinran’s and Maimonides’ thought benefits from taking into account their respective environments and not *dislocating any concepts from their respective contexts* but treating them, in their words "as part of patterns, systems, and situations, not as isolatable elements in a system." ⁹¹ In relation to the analysis of the works of both Maimonides and Shinran, the texts themselves offer various entryways for comparison. My focus is largely placed on the issue of human nature ⁹² and ethical formation as envisioned by Maimonides and Shinran.

Recognizing Maimonides’ and Shinran’s works as “canonical” ⁹³ and yet remembering that their often provocative, nuanced and sometimes controversial

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⁹¹ Ibid., 247.
⁹² Stalnaker defines the issue of human nature the issue that addresses “a family of related but conflicting concerns” (xiv).
⁹³ While Maimonides’ work clearly has been receiving and is still receiving a substantial amount of attention, Shinran’s work is becoming much better known as well and the influence of his thought is continuously gaining prominence.
viewpoints challenged the established positions, I propose to consider their texts as oppositional to the mainstream thought. In other words, by “oppositional,” I do not intend to use their texts as “oppositional” to each other (though in some cases they might be) but rather as the texts that serve to problematize the oft-prevailing views. A quick example of their “oppositional” stance is Maimonides’ view on resurrection and Shinran’s view on the number of the nenbutsu repetitions. As it will be demonstrated, Maimonides’ and Shinran’s works has been at the some juncture met with opposition (i.e., burning of Maimonides’ Guide for Perplexed and the critiques of antinomianism directed against Shinran’s work). Considering these works as “oppositional” allows acknowledging these works’ continual timelessness.

As I am borrowing from the above-discussed scholars and their methodologies, I use these methods as a means of undertaking a juxtaposition of the thought of these two major thinkers. As a result, my own method becomes a “comparative juxtaposition.” My aim is to show how this juxtaposition leads to the production of meaning which become enhanced by this overlay of ideas. In addition, by “removing” these ideas from their respective contexts and placing them into a contemporary conversation, I recognize that certain modern concepts begin to emerge.

Specifically, in chapter 1 and 2 my method is thematic. In my discussion of Maimonides’ and Shinran’s thought, I offer a close reading of their texts and focus on the following themes: Shinran’s view on Amida Buddha, his theories of shinjin, nenbutsu, and hakarai and his conceptualization of ethics; Maimonides’ views on God, human

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94 Waldman used this term in relation to Muhammad’s ability to win over most of his opposition by means of persuasion. My use of this term assumes a different connotation.
nature, human rationality and the role of the commandments. Juxtaposing these themes allows identifying certain patterns and further lines of inquiry. Namely, in my chapters 3 and 4 I built on this juxtaposition. In chapter 3, I demonstrate that their views on a number of issues are affected by their conception of human nature. I argue that their construction of ethics is also greatly affected by their views on human nature. In chapter 4, I propose that this juxtaposition underscores that their approach to the “other.” I demonstrate that their sensibilities based on their view on human nature lead them to entertain their approach to the need (or the absence of such) for normative requirements but also informs their approach to tolerance and acceptance (or the lack of such). I also point out that their views on human nature and their subsequent articulation of a number of concepts are implicitly colored by their respective experiences of their own exilic conditions. In my last chapter, I argue that my thematic juxtaposition of their thought provide a more nuanced understanding of such issues as pluralism and tolerance.

Conclusion

I am influenced by Hippolytus’ statement that “An unapparent connection (harmonia) is stronger than an apparent one” and I propose that method of juxtaposition is the most instrumental for finding these unapparent connections. I propose, however, that the absence of either apparent or unapparent connections is also instructional as it allows us to dig deeper and continue our investigation.

To avoid essentialized comparisons and to minimize overemphasizing certain areas of my own personal interest to the exclusion of other relevant points, I supplement my approach with the ongoing self-reflexive analysis by trying to be aware of my
personal biases. I recognize, however, that personal preferences are often subtle and not always obvious to the one who holds them. My goal is not to compare Judaism and Buddhism in their “totality” but rather to apply a juxtaposed approach in order to analyze a number of specified topics addressed in the writings of Maimonides and Shinran. My aim, invoking Slaten’s sentiment who states that, “The first step in acceptance of a totally alien idea is to attack it. … The only way to resist an alien idea is to ignore it,” 95 is neither to ignore nor to attack an alien idea but gain appreciation by reciprocal illumination of both. No claims are made to any current practices and focus is placed primarily on theory. We remember, however, that theory informs our practice, or in other words, our practices are often the embodiment of our ideas.

95 Slaten in Waldman and Baum.
Chapter 1: Shinran: Amida Buddha and Ethics of Compassion

Introduction

This chapter serves as a brief introduction to Shinran’s biography and his thought. This introduction, followed by a similar explication of Maimonides’ thought (in chapter 2) frames my subsequent discussion of a number of juxtaposed themes. To appreciate Shinran’s radical re-interpretation of the Pure Land thought, this chapter addresses the influence on his thought of the so-called “Seven Patriarchs.” In order to contextualize this discussion, I first address the general concept of the Pure Land and Amida Buddha. I then focus on a number of issues including Shinran’s view on Amida Buddha, his theories of shinjin, nenbutsu, and hakarai, and his conceptualization of ethics. I demonstrate that Shinran’s articulation of Amida Buddha and his theories of shinjin and nenbutsu eventuated in his conceptualization of ethics defined, following Thomas Kasulis, as an ethics of compassion. I extend this definition to the term ethics of a non-discriminatory compassion and propose that Shinran’s conceptualization of ethics stems from his view on human nature and is largely informed by his own experience of exilic conditions. 96

96 In my discussion of exile in relation to Shinran, I focus on Shinran’s displacement from his monastic community. My discussion of exile is not related to theological or metaphysical exile from God as it is traditionally used in the Jewish thought. In my subsequent discussion of exile in relation to Maimonides (chapter 2), I am also not using exile in relation to the exile from God.
Biographical trajectory and Shinran’s writings

Shinran (1173-1262), born as Hino Arinori, was a son of a once aristocratic family which eventually fell from political favor. The course of Shinran’s life directly affected the development of his thought. His own religious and exilic experience made him look deeply into human nature and its perceived evilness. Shinran’s life is often analyzed through the lens of four distinct periods. Except for his childhood, he lived during the Kamakura period (1185-1132) during which the warrior clans gained control of society. The first period of Shinran’s life falls between 1181 and 1201 during which Shinran at the early age of nine became a Tendai monk and studied on Mount Hiei. The second period, between 1201 and 1207, ended dramatically when in 1207 his mentor Hōnen (1133-1212) and his disciples, including Shinran, were exiled from the capital. The third period, 1207 to 1245 was the period of Shinran’s exile during which he lived in Echigo and the general Kantō region, breaking the monastic tradition, by marrying and raising a family. His exilic condition made Shinran cognizant of the perils of life. During

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99 The Heian period (794-1185) which was dominated by the court in Kyoto.
100 The Kamakura period (1185-1132) and represented the crisis of the age, so called “degenerative age,” also called mappa, discussed in this chapter as well.
101 Hōnen, discussed in a more detail of the subsequent part of this chapter, was the founder of the Jōdo or “Pure Land” school of Buddhism. Hōnen’s life spanned two periods: the Heian Period (794-1185) and the Kamakura period (1185-1132). Hōnen established the popular independent movement of Pure Land teaching, advocating belief in the power of the Amida’s Vow and the recitation of Amida’s name as the sole means for birth in Amida Buddha’s Pure Land. Hōnen’s teaching was non-orthodox since it did not include the established battery of Tendai Buddhist practices. His focus was on the common people previously left out from Buddhist practices. Shinran turned to Hōnen’s practice in 1201 and became separated from him in 1207. He extols his mentors in his Hymns on Pure Land Masters.
this period, Shinran started self-consciously exploring human nature with all its passions and instincts and began questioning the traditional Tendai principle that held that to attain enlightenment requires forgoing the “life of passion.” 102 He became more appreciative of the non-dualistic principle which did not view the religious life and lay life as two separate realms but also came to the realization of his own inability to attain enlightenment by the traditional Tendai principle of accumulating merits through one’s own efforts. He not only recognized the inadequacy of this reliance of self power (jiriki) but also perceived it as being fruitless. Instead, Shinran turned to other power (tariki), the Power of Amida’s Primal Vow which he defined as power “free from any form of calculation.” 103

In 1211 the exilic ban was lifted from both Hōnen and Shinran. While Hōnen returned to the monkhood, Shinran choose not to return but instead moved with his family to Kantō where he began writing his opus commonly called in Japanese Kyōgyōshinshō (Teaching, Practice, Faith, and Realization). In Kyōgyōshinshō, which he completed in 1224, Shinran provided not only a systematic exposition of the various Pure Land texts but also his own interpretation of Pure Land tradition. Shinran’s life in Kantō was very productive and he acquired multiple followers. Yet, in 1235 he returned to Kyoto where he spent the rest of his life. During the period from 1235 to 1262 Shinran continued teaching and explicating his ideas in various writings as well as in correspondence with his disciples. This correspondence carries specific significance by

allowing a glimpse of Shinran’s own personality. It demonstrates Shinran’s commitment to the teachings of the Pure Land and his desire to prevent it from being wrongly accused of any antinomian charges. Shinran died in 1262 with the name of Amida Buddha as the last words on his lips.

**From Buddha to Amida**

But who was this Amida Buddha? When observing the trajectory of the idea of “Buddha,” one finds a continuous path from the historical figure of Shakyamuni Gautama to an abstract conception of a Buddha culminating in Amida Buddha. From the Indian historical environment of the 5th BCE was born the idea of human compassion exemplified by Shakyamuni Gautama who, in response to his own surroundings, broke away from the prevailing Vedic views on human nature and human suffering. Gautama recognized through his own life experience and his subsequent wanderings that human unhappiness is a consequence of human attachment. He held that any attachment to any fixed notions, including the notions of permanence and the perception of self as a fixed and steady entity possessing its own independent substantiality, results in human inability to attain enlightenment. This recognition led Shakyamuni Gautama to teach his followers the notion of non-attachment to any fixed concepts and the recognition of impermanence and interdependence. He refrained, however, from any metaphysical and ontological musings, considering them irrelevant and not conducive to the elimination of human suffering (the world of Samsāra) and attainment of happiness (Nirvāna, enlightenment). Hence the notion of compassion was central to Buddhist thought from its inception, originally tied to this actual, corporeal human being – Shakyamuni Gautama.
From Early Buddhism to Mahāyāna Buddhism - Nāgārjuna’s and Vasubandhu’s influence

The worldview of early Buddhism became unacceptable to some of its followers because it limited enlightenment to the monastic community rather than extending it to all sentient beings. Consequently, a new tradition was born – Mahāyāna Buddhism. It focused on the altruistic aim of assisting the spiritual development of all sentient beings. This led to a distinctive notion of the Bodhisattva: a person characterized by altruism, compassion, and desire to assist all sentient beings in their pursuit for enlightenment. Consequently, the connection to the Buddha as the historical figure slowly started to reduce in significance. Nāgārjuna (c. 150–250 C.E.), the most renowned Mādhyamika School sage, was one of the thinkers who affected this further development of the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition’s thought by making his focus more philosophical and less grounded in a specific historical figure. Nāgārjuna’s aim was to undercut the assumption that the human mind is capable of resolving metaphysical and epistemological paradoxes. In fact, he conceived of paradoxes as inherent to human thought and to human life. For him, compassion, as for Shakyamuni, served an ultimate aim of alleviating human suffering, but he aimed to break down the dichotomous thinking that erroneously perceives the world of suffering (Samsāra) as being distinct and separate from the world of enlightenment (Nirvāṇa). As a result, Mahāyāna, viewed the samsaric world as ontologically identical with the world of enlightenment (Nirvāṇa). Deluded humans fail to recognize that to destroy dichotomous thinking, one must move beyond fixed
categories and accept the non-substantiality of the self. While this was already argued by Shakyamuni, Nāgārjuna enhanced this recognition by pointing to the limits of the rationalistic, dualistic thinking, which failed to take into account the interdependence and interchangeability of Nirvāṇa and Samsāra.

Nāgārjuna differentiated between the two types of truths: conventional and ultimate. The human propensity is to be limited to the realm of conventional truth. He held that deluded people take conventional truth to be absolute, erroneously considering things as having independent existence (substantiality). In contrast, ultimate truth recognizes the absence of any reality possessing an independent, intrinsic existence. Consistent with his rejection of any absolutes, he argued that these two types of truth are also interdependent. While this thought reflected the traditional Buddhist concept of interdependence, Nāgārjuna enhanced it by proposing the further deconstruction (or maybe even destruction) of all absolutes.

Nāgārjuna thought paved the way to the Yogācāra tradition’s thinkers such as Vasubandhu (4th or 5th century CE) and his brother Asanga (c. 300-370 CE) whose conceptions of Buddha were no longer tied to the historical, corporeal Buddha alone. These Yogācāra thinkers advanced the premise, which posited the existence of the Buddha on three distinct levels, each having its own form of body. The three bodies (Trikāya) are: Dharmakāya (the Dharma-body of the Buddha as the highest, cosmic body), Sambhogakāya (as celestial bodies known through meditation and devotional practices), and nirmānakāya (as the physical and corporeal bodies appearing historically in this world as enlightened human beings).
The cosmic Buddha as a non-corporeal being (*Dharmakāya*), represented the ontological ground for celestial and historical Buddhas. Therefore, a Buddha’s significance was no longer delimited by his physical presence but rather focused on his *Dharmakāya* (Dharma-Body): the body of his teachings, the ultimate truth, as abstract conception of a Buddha whose main characteristic remained the universal functioning of compassion throughout the cosmos. Mahāyāna’s conceptualization of the multiple planes of existence allowed for the acceptance of various buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the various parts of numberless universes. This led to the conceptualization of the countless buddha-fields or buddha-lands. Any pure land as a land of perfection is constructed in contrast with our own world of suffering (*Sahā*) and is characterized by its purity and lack of defilement and ignorance. This purity is always an outcome of the merit accumulated during Bodhisattvas’ practice of attaining enlightenment with their aim centered on the ultimate enlightenment of *all* sentient beings. In another words, the bodhisattvic practice of accumulating merit is done for the benefit of others. How does the idea of the bodhisattvic practice contribute to the conceptualization of Amida Buddha?

**Amida Buddha, the Buddha of Immeasurable Light and Immeasurable Life**

As the conceptualization of celestial Buddhas attained prominence, while not changing the importance of the historical Buddha as the origin of teaching, Amida Buddha -- the Buddha of Immeasurable Light and Immeasurable Life -- gained eminence. Amida Buddha is also the *Tathāgata of Unhindered Light*. *Tathāgata* means "one who
comes to us from the world of reality-as-is and whose sole purpose is the illumination of our darkness and its transformation.”

Amida Buddha’s definition in terms of “immeasurable light,” reflects the Buddhist understanding of light as a symbol of wisdom. This symbol of wisdom foreshadows one’s ability to overcome delusory perceptions and allows one to see things as they really are. Defining Amida in terms of light goes back to Indian tradition. Within the Mahāyāna tradition, light is directly connected to enlightenment. Enlightenment is universally described as “void” or “empty” (shūnyatā) implying it being empty of previously mentioned substantiability. Indian thought maintains that there exists darkness defined in terms of ignorance and spiritual blindness (avidya). Attaining enlightenment is attaining light hence gaining wisdom to see things as they really are, in their “suchness,” a synonym for reality as it appears to the enlightened ones. Defining Amida in terms of “Immeasurable Life” signifies that Amida Buddha exists “beyond our conceptual framework of time” and hence possesses the ability to manifest himself at any moment.

Recalling the distinction between cosmic buddha and celestial buddhas, Amida Buddha, the Buddha of the Western paradise became the “celestial personification of perfect wisdom-compassion.” Although Amida Buddha was defined as presiding over

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104 Taitetsu Unno, *River of Fire, River of Water: An Introduction to the Pure Land Tradition of Shin Buddhism.* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 54. In Japan during the Heian period (794-1195), the concept of many Buddhas including the understanding of a Buddha in terms of a celestial or a cosmic being, was perhaps easily integrated into people’s lives and perceptions. This was due to the fact that to some extent there was no sharp distinction (especially on the folk level) between Buddhas and various kami. So spirituality was not limited to empirically verifiable realities. Thus, the historical buddha would not necessarily seem more concrete or real than an immaterial celestial being.

the Western Paradise, his pure land needs to be understood as spiritual rather than physical. Whether this land is perceived in terms of an actual physical locale depends on the perception of a particular believer. These multiple interpretations allow conceiving of Amida Buddha as a personalized form of a skillful means (upaya, hōben) which aids others’ spiritual development according to their individual, personal needs.

In addition to the relationship between the historical Buddha and any celestial Buddhas, the relationship between Amida Buddha (a celestial buddha) and the esoteric cosmic Buddha Dainichi is also significant. For Japanese Shingon Buddhism, the cosmic Buddha Dainichi encompasses the whole universe. According to Kakuban (1095-1143), Amida Buddha and Dainichi were inseparable. While for the celestial Buddhas, a pure land emanates from a particular Buddha, according to Kakuban, the entire cosmos represents an embodiment of Buddha, “everything is the expressive activity of the cosmic Buddha, Dainichi.” So, regardless of the form of Mahāyāna Buddhist teaching, enlightened reality already exists, but human delusory thinking prevents humans from realizing it. For Kakuban, all the buddhas including Amida Buddha “emanate from and are grounded in Dainichi. … [so that] each Buddha also contains or is Dainichi in some way.” What is important for our purpose is to remember that while Amida is one of the myriad buddhas throughout the cosmos, his significance is in his non-discriminative commitment to liberate all beings.

107 Ibid.
For Shinran’s mentor Hōnen, the separate existence of both, Shakyamuni and Amida, is unnecessary since they are interdependent. For Hōnen, Amida is predicated upon the existence of Shakyamuni. For Shinran, however, this relationship is asymmetrical and he privileges Amida. For Shinran, the historical existence of Shakyamuni is of a rather limited significance, understood as the “manifestation of Amida, perhaps one among countless others.” This is because for Shinran, the key point is that wisdom-compassion underlies all enlightened existence, even the existence of Shakyamuni. In essence, Shinran maintains that Amida is the primordial Buddha who is beyond time. This brings us to the question of the origins of Amida Buddha.

Origins of Amida Buddha

We know of Amida through the sutras supposedly preached by Shakyamuni, but this does not answer the ontological question of the source of this Amida Buddha. The Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life, one of the foundational sacred texts of the Pure Land tradition, recalls the story of Amida Buddha. As with the Mahāyāna Buddhism in general, the Pure Land tradition envisions each land representing the expression of a particular Buddha’s wisdom-compassion. In the Larger Sutra Shakyamuni told his followers the story of the Bodhisattva Hōzō (Sanskrit: Dharmākara). The narrative maintains that a certain king became so enthralled by the notions of compassion that he abandoned his throne and made vows as a Bodhisattva. This Bodhisattva, while able to attain his own enlightenment, felt a strong sense of compassion for those who, despite their persistent efforts, failed to achieve enlightenment. Hence, he vowed to hold back his own

108 Hirota, Draft.
enlightenment until *all* sentient beings attain enlightenment. As he was examining the many pure lands, he vowed to establish a land specifically designated for those who are unable to attain enlightenment by using their power or efforts. To seal his commitment, he undertook a series of the forty-eight vows, which spelled out both the conditions of Pure Land and the way to be reborn there. As he fulfilled his vows he became the Buddha called Amida.

The Dharmākara and hence Amida Buddha omits any reference to the conventional understanding of time. It does not say when events occurred. Therefore, the notion of timelessness and the idea of an abstract place of “residence” (Pure Land) allows for a broader application of Amida as a universal principle of compassion. Here we should note a distinction between Amida-in-Itself (the formlessness of pure light) and Amida-for-Us (as a celestial personage). The previously discussed Amida's nature as Infinite Light is a consequence of his fulfillment of the twelfth vow, which maintains that there will be “no place in the universe which would not be illuminated by his light.” While the above mentioned Amida-in-Itself is formless and as a Dharma-nature cosmic body is incomprehensible to human mind and indescribable in words, Amida-for-Us is a contextually expedient body adapted to our human needs (*upaya*, *hōben*). As such, Amida is an agency outside of “me.” It is an “other power.” Yet, the enlightened standpoint is itself egoless, so the self-other distinction between Amida and me (or us) dissolves. The ethical implication is that the person of true entrusting becomes “a carrier or even embodiment of Amida's compassion.” 109 In other words, if Amida is the epitome

of ethics as expressed through his compassion, those embraced by the Power of Amida’s compassionate vow assume ethical standing as well. This non-discriminatory compassion later came to be perceived as the embrace of evil doers alongside those who possess human goodness. So, the conventional distinction between traditionally conceived notions of “good” and “bad” change in significance. This radical re-interpretation of this distinction is essential for our further exploration of Shinran’s conceptualization of human nature and role of Amida Buddha in relation to it.

As mentioned, Shinran’s direct exposure to the Pure Land teaching was through his mentor Hōnen. Yet, the history of the Pure Land tradition goes back much further and Shinran acknowledges the influence of the so-called “seven patriarchs.”

**Shinran and Seven Patriarchs**

While, as it will be demonstrated, Shinran exhibits a number of highly original ideas, his thought was affected by the ideas of the “patriarchs” of the Pure Land tradition as originally designated by his teacher, Hōnen. I have already mentioned Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu, to whom Shinran and Hōnen refer to as the Indian “patriarchs.” Shinran’s Chinese patriarchs start with Tanluan (pronounced “Donran” in Japan, 476-542), a well-established Daoist scholar influenced by Indian Buddhist teachings. Being cognizant of the tribulation of the age of mappō, he maintains the need for a clear differentiation between the “easy” practice (as a reliance on the power of Amida Buddha’s vows) and the “difficult” practice (as a reliance on one’s own power). To draw this differentiation, Tanluan becomes the first one to articulate the difference between jiriki (self-power) and

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110 See note 94.
tariki (other power). Yet, while Tanluan distinguished between the self-power and the other-power, he did not proclaim the other power as the only way to achieve rebirth.

Daochuo (Jap: Dōshaku, 562-645), the second of Shinran’s Chinese patriarchs, agreed with Nāgārjuna and Danluan in dividing all the teachings of the Buddha into two categories: the path of sages (difficult path) and the path of the Pure Land (easy path). Similar to Danluan, he connects the age of mappō to the need for an “easy” path practice.

Another of Shinran’s Chinese patriarchs is Shandao (Jap: Zendo, 613-681). He argued for ten soundings or voicings (as invocations of Amida’s name) rather than ten thoughts. (The nen of nenbutsu ordinarily means “holding in mind” so Shandao was deliberately shifting the traditional emphasis.) Shandao also emphasized repentance and considered all men (including himself) to be evil. However, as it was in the case of Danluan, Shandao continued to assign the substantial role to self-power despite holding that because of the human evilness the only appropriate practice is one of other power (tariki). Genshin (942-1017) was Shinran’s first Japanese born patriarch of the Pure Land tradition. Genshin aimed to popularize the Pure Land Buddhism teachings by blending its monastic elements with elements suited for lay people.

The true redefinition of the nenbutsu practice started with Genshin’s disciple Hōnen (1133-1212). It is then that the emphasis became placed on salvation through nenbutsu with everything else left to Amida’s saving grace. Hōnen was greatly influenced by Shandao who, following Vasubandhu, maintained that in order to be reborn in the Pure Land, the recitation should always be accompanied by one’s mental state characterized by the three minds: the sincere mind (shijōshin), the profound mind
(jinshin), and the mind that transfers all merit towards rebirth in the Pure Land (ekōhotsuganshin). For Hōnen, these three mental states became identical with the recitation itself. Hence reciting the name of Amida Buddha meant assuming the state of the three minds. Recognizing that at the age of the mappō, humans are incapable to attain enlightenment on their own, Hōnen consolidated all religious practice into the act of reciting Amida Buddha’s name. Since man cannot predict the moment of his death, Hōnen favored continuous recitation and connected recitation to one’s death. He recommended as many recitations as possible since for him, while it is true that one recitation or ten will equally bring about rebirth, its frequency increased the merit that one can accrue and ensure the rebirth in the Pure Land. Hōnen linked nenbutsu to gaining spiritual merit and claimed that when one recites the nenbutsu, all of one’s negative karmic actions, however heavy, are expunged, an approach that was later rejected by Shinran. Although Hōnen elevated the practice of recitation to an unprecedented level, he did not fully abandon the traditional Buddhist practice embedded in the principle of the self-power (jiriki) since, as mentioned, he still conceived the practice of recitation as a merit-producing act.

Two of the concepts addressed by all seven “patriarchs” assumed a special prominence for Shinran, namely, the Amida Buddha name, or more specifically, the recitation of his name, or practice of the nenbutsu, and the differentiation between self-power (jiriki) and other power (tariki). These concepts led Shinran to define shinjin in a dramatically new and unorthodox way. Shinjin is a concept that defies definition and
while it is often translated as “faith,” this definition is imprecise. Although none of translations is fully accurate, perhaps the closest to its meaning is the “the entrusting mindful heart.” The concept of trust, as we will see is significant to Shinran’s thought as it relates to entrusting oneself to the Amida’s Primal Vow as well.

The Primal Vow

In our previous discussion, I stated that that the moment of compassion experienced by Hōzō led him to the series of forty-eight vows. For Shinran, the most significant was the eighteenth vow since it exemplified Hōzō’s commitment to save all sentient beings. This vow reads:

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings throughout the ten quarters, realizing sincere mind, joyful faith, and aspiration for birth in my land and thinking of me (i.e., saying my name) up to ten times, do not attain birth, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment. [E]xcluded are those who commit the five transgressions and slander the true dharma.  

As this vow testifies, Hōzō’s (Dharmākara’s) commitment was to respond to human needs, especially of those in distress and experiencing spiritual crises. The significance of the eighteenth vow is in Hōzō’s assurance to help those human beings who are characterized by their human weaknesses and insufficiencies. In other words, as

111 Translating it this way results in “overemphasiz[ing] the theistic appearance of Shinshū doctrine” (Thomas Kasulis, Book Review of Letters of Shinran: A Translation of Mattōshō. Ed. Yoshifumi Ueda. Volume I: Shin Buddhist Translation Series. (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1978). Philosophy East and West, 31:2 (1981). Instead, Kasulis proposes to keep in mind that shinjin also refers to “makoto no kokoro” translated as “the true heart” but he does not suggest using this term either because it would result in “stretching the point.” Yoshifumi Ueda points that translating shinjin as “faith” overlooks the fact that shinjin stresses the “oneness of Buddha and man, or man becoming a Buddha.” In most cases, however, shinjin is translated as “true entrusting” or faith.

I will discuss in the subsequent part of this chapter, Amida does not discriminate between good and evil and humans do not become embraced by Amida because of their meritorious deeds but precisely because of the absence of them. While all the Bodhisattvas’ vows served the same purpose, namely, to compassionately alleviate human suffering and to assist humanity’s most vital spiritual needs, Amida’s emphasis is placed on those who exhibit human defilement. As mentioned, this non-discriminatory compassion later becomes misconstrued in terms of antinomianism and the bodhisattvic emphasis on compassion as the embrace of evil-doers.

**Shinran’s practice of the nenbutsu**

As already noted, for Shinran, Amida’s name itself carries extreme significance. In fact, the uniqueness of Amida Buddha is precisely in how his name enters the human realm at the fundamental level of language. When his name is uttered – *namu-amida-butsu* (the *nenbutsu*), humans take refuge in him. The *Nenbutsu* is Amida’s means for humans to know him and take refuge in him. Amida’s seventeenth vow posits that his name is praised by *all* buddhas and Bodhisattvas. That attests to Amida’s power and hence his ability to extend his compassion to *all* sentient beings and save all sentient beings by means of his name. By manifesting himself through his name, Amida assumes presence in human life for those who heard it and become embraced by him. Yet, we are to remember that in accord with the focus on the other-power (*tariki*) – emphasized by both Hōnen and Shinran -- the name of Amida Buddha is “not a human instrument for
calling and identifying the Buddha but is given to Amida to manifest himself and bring beings to awareness.”

The saying of nenbutsu for Shinran is not a means to the end since one attains the assurance of the rebirth in the Pure Land as soon as one with shinjin becomes embraced by Amida’s Vow. Contrary to the thinkers before him including Hōnen, Shinran claims that nenbutsu is not a practice but rather a sign that one’s rebirth in the Pure Land is already settled. Hence it is sometimes framed as a point of non-retrogression. Uttering nenbutsu is not equated with asking for something (i.e., a traditionally conceived prayer) but rather is the expression of gratitude. Attaining the entrusting mindful heart (shinjin) is cojoined with the utterance of nenbutsu as this sign of gratitude. In other words, shinjin and nenbutsu cannot be conceived independently of each other. In Shinran’s view, nenbutsu does not represent human practice but Amida’s expression through the person and “there is no nenbutsu separate from shinjin, nor is the one moment of shinjin separate from the one moment of nenbutsu” (Mattōshō, 538).

As for Hōnen and Shinran’s Chinese predecessors, Shinran’s conceptualization of nenbutsu was affected by the mappō environment and the recognition of human limitations. Similar to some of his predecessors, Shinran’s conception of shinjin is closely linked to his rejection of the path of sages (“difficult” path) because of its reliance on the self-power (jiriki). While, as noted, the rejection of self-power did not originate either with Hōnen or with Shinran, for him, contrary to his predecessors, the moment of shinjin takes place as one recognizes one’s own limitations. In other words, the realization of

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113 Hirota, Draft
shinjin is connected by Shinran to the realization of one’s being a fool (bonbu): “In the realization of shinjin one becomes a foolish being (bonbu) for the first time in that one awakens to one’s true nature, but simultaneously one attains Buddhahood.” 114 This spontaneous moment of entrusting oneself to Amida ruptures one’s attachment to one’s ego. This is especially significant since for Shinran: any sense of a discrete self is problematic because of its inherent egoism and self-serving focus.

Shinran’s theories of shinjin

The concept of shinjin becomes redefined by Shinran as well. As we noted already, Hōnen already redefined Buddhist practice and his thought influenced Shinran’s further redefinition of the Pure Land practice. Shinran’s redefinition, however, advanced a more radical transformation and completely reinterpreted the meaning of both terms: nenbutsu and shinjin. Having already considered the former, I now turn our focus on shinjin. I already mentioned that defining shinjin in terms of “faith” is imprecise. For Shinran, shinjin is directly linked to the “entrusting mindful heart” or “entrusting mind” and is associated with ichinen (one-thought-moment) and the notion of jinen (naturalness). In “Notes On Once-Calling and Many-Calling,” Shinran articulates the one-thought-moment as “the time at its ultimate limit, where the realization of shinjin takes place.” 115

Shinran’s explication of shinjin is directly linked not only to his view on tariki (other-power) but also to his approach to human rationality. What is most significant for Shinran is human over-emphasis on their self-sufficiency and self-power (jiriki). Shinran

problematizes both by showing that this reliance on self-power often does not result in human attainment of enlightenment. To reiterate, the practice of *nenbutsu* removes this focus on self-reliance and places it on the gratitude for Amida Buddha’s compassion exemplified in the Primal Vow. Shinran’s re-conceptualization of this reliance on self-power endorses the practice of *nenbutsu* as an exhibition of human humility and turn to *tariki*. This focus on human insufficiencies is precisely what brings Shinran to Amida and makes him look very closely on human nature itself. Yet, for Shinran, while the distinction between self-power (*jiriki*) and other power (*tariki*) is highly significant, it further leads to his re-conceptualization of the use of human rational thinking or, human rationalization of their actions (*hakarai*). In Shinran’s opinion, the focus on a discrete substantial self contributes to activating blind passions, already argued by Sakyumuni as an obstacle to attaining enlightenment. Shinran emphasizes that enlightenment can occur only when there is absolutely no reliance on the ego. Since Shinran connects one’s ego with the rational calculations focused on the attainment of one’s goals, he is skeptical of the notion of *hakarai* – calculative rationalization of one’s actions. *Hakarai* exemplifies in his view human propensity for finding justifications for any actions. It inherently implies that doing “good” always includes ulterior motives. Consequently, Shinran adamantly mistrusts the rational power to calculate morality. For him, morality always correlates with compassion. In his opinion, calculative rationalization of one’s actions never produces a compassionate response. Focusing on reward (and by extension on any merit-producing actions), in Shinran’s eyes, is always self-serving.
We already noted that Shinran re-evaluates the practice of earning spiritual merit. For Hōnen, the practice of nenbutsu produces merit, Shinran rejects this interpretation since focusing on merit relates, in his assessment, to hakarai, calculated rationality. Moreover, for Shinran this approach was antithetical to the Buddhist notion of compassion. Since shinjin, in Shinran’s eyes, is the exemplification of the great compassion, it cannot occur when one engages in hakarai. In “Notes on ‘Essentials of Faith Alone’” Shinran states:

This shinjin is the aspiration to bring all beings to the attainment of supreme Nirvāṇa; it is the heart of great love and great compassion. This shinjin is Buddha-nature and Buddha-nature is Tathāgata. To realize this shinjin is to rejoice and be glad. People who rejoice and are glad are called ‘people equal to the Buddhas.’

In addition, by this statement, Shinran reverses the traditionally conceived order and holds that shinjin takes place after Amida already embraced the practitioner. By rejecting the self-power, Shinran embraces the power of Amida’s Primal Vow as is the path of total trust in other power as a theory in which one no longer depends on there being a discrete self, an ‘I’, or ego.

For Shinran, the shinjin-nenbutsu dynamic is a personal and existential process. Therefore no one can explain or ensure how someone else can experience the working of Amida’s Vow. He does not claim that what he is experiencing is universally applicable. His relation with Amida is internal and Amida’s physical presence (or absence of such) plays no significance. By refusing to advocate his own approach, Shinran reinforces the notion that shinjin cannot involve any rational calculations (hakarai). Moreover, if

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shinjin is not a natural process, it becomes imbued with hakarai as a process of seeking enlightenment through the process of “the self-centered cost-benefit analysis of our actions.”  

As it becomes apparent, while Shinran arrived at his approach largely through his exposure to Hōnen’s thought, it is also evident that he greatly diverged from Hōnen by further distancing the attainment of enlightenment from the means of self-power. By doing so Shinran imbued both the notion of shinjin and the practice of nenbutsu with different philosophical connotations as well. This is especially evident when one takes into account Shinran’s rejection of the death-bed recitations still endorsed by Hōnen. In addition, Shinran in effect “dehistorized” tradition. Namely, by interpreting shinjin as the “one-thought moment” (ichinen), Shinran articulated the notion of “transcending crosswise” (ōchō) which denotes the other-power as a sudden and spontaneous attainment of shinjin. In other words, for Shinran, Amida’s Vow retains its relevance regardless of a specific period in history. Further, the moment of shinjin is not, in Shinran’s view, reserved for any special event in life. To limit the moment of shinjin to the moment of death, for example, would remove its inherent naturalness and spontaneity. In other words, the moment of shinjin is a continuously transpiring event. Shinran re-interprets the conceptualization of mappō itself as well, holding it to be not a historical period but rather a “general characterization of a universal weakness in human

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117 Kasulis, Engaging Japanese Philosophy (draft).
118 Ibid. (draft).
nature.” 119 In these terms, like Amida’s Primal Vow, mappō is an ongoing existential process.

Claiming that shinjin is non-discriminatory and everyone can be potentially embraced by Amida’s Primal Vow (and especially those humans who are characterized by human weaknesses) led Shinran to be accused of antinomianism and he was charged with claims that his approach ignored the norm of morality. This allegation, however, neglects to recognize the central premise of Shinran’s assessment of Amida’s Vow which holds that this vow is not extended to those who remain entrenched in their egotistic pursuits and do not recognize their weaknesses. As mentioned, Shinran connects evil actions to human ego and mistrusts rational calculations applied to one’s behavior including one’s moral actions. For Shinran, shinjin breaks down this tendency by dissolving the ego and hence no new evil responses are generated and no new karmic residue becomes accumulated. He articulates his approach to evil doings by stating that “Even that person who has been inclined to steal will naturally undergo a change of heart if he comes to say the nenbutsu aspiring for the land of bliss” (Mattōshō, 547). To argue against any interpretations that accuse him of endorsing amoral (or even immoral) behavior Shinran states: “You must not do what should not be done, think what should not be thought, or say what should not be said, thinking that you can be born in the Pure Land regardless” (Mattōshō, 550). For Shinran, as Amida works through humans, these humans become moral. Nonetheless, his approached provoked (and is still provoking) a certain degree of controversy.

119 Ibid. (draft).
Shinran - on Human Nature

Shinran’s articulation of the concepts discussed above informs his view on human nature. Ordinary people continue to cling to permanence and are unable to rise beyond dichotomous thought. Shakyamuni, Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu, and Asanga had already argued that. For Shinran their explanation was inadequate, however, because it was not fully addressing what it means to be a human being. So he turned to Amida Buddha in his quest for a compassionate response. Of course, Shinran’s thought was firmly embedded in Buddhism in general and Mahāyāna in particular and he continued the trajectory started by Hōnen in addressing other-power (tariki) and self-power (jiriki). Yet, Shinran’s understanding of human nature affected his interpretation of Amida Buddha and resulted in a radical re-interpretation of a number of Pure Land assumptions, including those of Hōnen. Shinran’s Amida Buddha was in effect a corrective to Shakyamuni’s views because, despite recognizing human limitations (the propensity to delusory attachments), Shakyamuni held to the Noble Eightfold Path, a path of self-control, discipline, and ultimately self-power. In Shinran’s understanding of human nature, self-power (jiriki) is a spiritually bankrupt idea. In Shinran’s view, one attains enlightenment only by relinquishing the self. This abnegation of the self-power can only result from the recognition of one’s own weaknesses and evilness. This occurs as a consequence of one’s submission to the other-power (tariki), that is, by turning to the power of Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow. This process resituates human agency.

This focus on human insufficiency largely shaped Shinran’s concept of Amida Buddha as the cosmic presence of undiscriminating compassion. Our discussion above
foregrounds Shinran’s conception of the basis of an ethics of egoless, anti-rationalistic spontaneity and responsiveness as exemplified by Amida Buddha. Shinran’s approach problematizes the traditional valorization of human agency that in his view remains situated within the boundaries of egotistic self-centeredness. By becoming embraced by Amida Buddha, human agency becomes relocated within his domain and humans both attain and embody the compassion that characterizes Amida Buddha.

**Shinran’s ethics**

I already alluded to the fact that Shinran’s ethics does not easily fit within any pre-existing models. Given the situatedness of Shinran’s ethics within the conceptual scheme of bodhisattvic practices characterized by compassion, and, specifically for Shinran, the practice of Amida Buddha, I follow Kasulis’ definition of an *ethics of compassion*.\(^{120}\) I propose that Shinran’s ethics of compassion is *an ethics of a non-discriminative compassion*. Given this focus, fitting Shinran’s ethics within the existing models of Western ethics proves futile. But why is this the case and what specifically makes Shinran’s view unable to fit the Western models? To address this question, I turn to a very brief review of the general ways ethics is categorized in most Western traditions of philosophical ethics. My aim is to underscore the fact, that as mentioned above, Shinran’s view does not readily fit into any of these categories and needs to be categorized in its own unique way.

\(^{120}\) Ibid. (draft).
A short review: A juxtaposition of Western and Buddhist Ethics

Recalling that ethics is a philosophical study of moral behavior, I note Mircea Eliade’s definition of it as “the correct view of actions, dispositions, attitudes, virtues, and ways of life that characterize an ideal person in society.”

Turning first to Western ethical theories, I observe that they are often described in terms of descriptive ethics and normative (prescriptive) ethics. Descriptive ethics describes what is right or wrong; hence the emphasis is placed on what is thought of as being right (ethical) or wrong (unethical). Normative ethics, in turn, prescribes what needs to be done or thought in order for something to be good or bad. Normative ethics includes three major approaches: virtue ethics (largely associated with Aristotle and focused on moral character); deontological ethics (largely based on Kant’s moral law and focused on duties or rules); and consequentialist ethics (with utilitarianism as its major representative). Normative ethics consists of two parts: the theory of value (theory of the good) and theory of obligation (theory of the right). Whereas theory of value does not directly answer the question of how one should or should not act, the theory of obligation delimits what is wrong, right, obligatory, permissible, or forbidden. Theories of obligation are differentiated between axiological theories of obligation (based on motives) and deontological theories of obligation (based on duties). Theories of obligation do not typically hold the goodness of outcome to be relevant. In other words, usually the emphasis is placed on the goodness of the intentions rather than the goodness of the outcome.

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Western ethical systems are also sometimes affected by Aristotelian concepts and hence described in terms of virtue ethics. In Aristotle’s account of the virtues, the process of becoming a particular kind of person plays a vital role. As a result, Aristotle’s virtue ethics is sometimes defined as teleological. An orientation toward bringing about a certain goal can be seen as a teleological link between the theory of right and the theory of value. For virtue ethics, the focus is on moral character, but human reasoning and choice (free will) remain central. While good intentions are imperative, virtuous actions are directly linked to attaining necessary knowledge of what is beneficial and harmful and are connected to taking the most objective viewpoint. Hence, virtue ethics specifically recognizes the value of moral education not as “the inculcation of rules but as the training of character.” 122

Drawing on the conceptualization of virtue ethics as ethics that imply learning from a virtuous person which entail “sensitive receptivity, engaged attentiveness, awareness of what one moral moment, as well as awareness of what we can become,” 123 I follow John Ross Carter’s exposition and propose an analogy between Buddhist ethics and virtue ethics. This proposition is built on Carter’s suggestion that if we observe traditionally conceived virtue ethics as being aided by the particular zero-level focus (intuitive awareness), it results in an “intuitional particularistic virtue ethics.” 124 This intuitional particularistic ethics approximates Buddhist ethics. According to this scenario, in relation to Shinran’s conceptualization of ethics, shinjin becomes equated with “zero-

124 Ibid., 280.
level immediate consciousness” and yet, as Carter admits, shinjin cannot be easily subjected to ethical analysis. In line with Shinran’s thought, Carter points that the person of shinjin does not turn to any rational calculations (hakarai) in order to determine how to behave since the presence of shinjin indicates a spontaneous presence of compassion. However, this intuitional particularism in Buddhist ethics, according to Carter, relies not only on high self-awareness but also on “having the capacity of analyzing the situation at hand” 125 which seems to go against Shinran’s rejection of hakarai. If we accept that virtue ethics is also linked to teleological ethics by connecting virtue to the perfection of human nature as a final purpose (telos), the analogy between Western virtue ethics and Shinran’s ethics seems to collapse to an even larger extent.

Shinran’s ethics is equally irreconcilable with deontological ethics due to the latter’s emphasis on duties or obligations and human rationality. For Kant, the most important prerequisite of human morality relates to its dependence upon self-governing reason and human free will. Perhaps in line with Shinran’s thought, deontological ethics argues that the goodness of the consequences of an action does not guarantee the rightness of the action. Yet, as we recall, according to deontological ethics, humans are conceived as highly rational beings interested in their own well-being. In this scenario, rationalism again undoubtedly assumes an imperative place. Here again, Shinran’s focus on the Other power and his skepticism related to any rational calculations (hakarai) makes his thought incompatible with deontology in general and Kant’s moral philosophy in particular. Recalling that for Shinran, intentions rather than consequences are central to

125 Ibid., 283.
the interpretation of the concept of *akunin* ("evil persons" that is, people bound up by the karmic consequences of previously committed evil actions) and humans can never fully extinguish their connection to selfish inclinations, human intentions can never be pure. This means that it is impossible to assess what makes the agent good, making Shinran’s position appear to be “almost diametrically opposed to Kant’s stress on moral duties.”\(^{126}\)

For Shinran, if a person does something to satisfy his own ego, then he can longer be considered genuinely ethical. Kasulis reminds us that Shinran’s ethical theory is an “agent morality” theory but there is only one indisputably good agent – Amida.

So, Buddhist ethics in general and Shinran’s ethics in particular do not fit neatly into any of the definitions mentioned above, even when adjusted to the notion of “intuitional particularism.” Can we instead see Shinran’s ethics as being comparable to the approaches utilized by secular legal systems? A secular legal system operates according to external legal rules, but like the first Buddhist approach, it involves relativity. That is, legal rules differ from one society to the next and are continuously adjusted according to specific historical demands and changes. The most extreme example of the changeability of the legal rules is exhibited during the time when any country is in a state of war. Moreover, the external legal rules are always supplemented and aided by internal moral principles. Yet, those moral principles are also not absolute either and, in addition to their changeability, they differ among ethnic groups and geographic locales. Moral principles are also generally connected to human conscience. Because conscience relies on one’s own judgment and since humans have a tendency to

privilege their own conclusions, moral principles are often relative as well. In a very approximate sense I propose that elements of Buddhist ethics may seem to resonate with the ways secular legal system functions. Yet, a secular legal system operates on the principle of precedent and does not create a new law for each individual case. Hence, its flexibility is limited.

**Is Buddhist Ethics Shinran’s ethics?**

Buddhist ethics are often equated with the *Vinaya* codes (the social moral code for monastics, but often also extended to lay people). However, viewing Buddhist ethics through the lens of *Vinaya* codes still does not fully correspond to Shinran’s ethics of compassion. The moral principles implicit in the Eightfold Path are of great importance to Buddhist ethics. Yet following the rules articulated in the moral precepts alone is inadequate since one’s actions cannot be separated from right intentions. While early Buddhist sources focus on cultivating correct dispositions and habits, they do not recommend conforming to external rules of morality (as contrasted with external legal laws, such as the rules of the monastery). Rather, moral conduct was always connected to internalized beliefs and values. While Shinran by no means discards these precepts, his own tribulations as a Tendai monk as well as his incessant self-reflections brought him to recognize that full adherence to moral precepts is not always feasible. Aristotle admitted that the cultivation of the right virtues is a very difficult task since it involves “counteract[ing] negative dispositions (or vices) such as pride and selfishness.”

Aristotle thought it is possible to overcome such dispositions, but Shinran did not. For Shinran, human reliance on one’s own efforts (jiriki) does not result in the cultivation of the right virtues because any conscious effort is ego-driven effort. Who is it that can choose to be egoless? I cannot chose to be I-less.

Any ethical system either explicitly or implicitly addresses the concepts of good and evil. In Buddhism, there are two ways of looking at the concept of good and evil. One approach urges the elimination of evil and cultivation of good, whereas the other holds that as a result of enlightenment the need to distinguish good and evil as a prerequisite to action is transcended. According to the first view, evil is defined as “the ten unskillful acts” which include killing, stealing, committing adultery, lying, uttering unkind words, uttering words that lead to hate and hostility, engaging in idle talk, greed, anger, and ignorance. The general Mahāyāna tradition adds additionally “five grave offenses”: murdering one’s father, murdering one’s mother, murdering an arhat, causing harm to the Buddha’s body, and creating disturbance in the monastic order. The Mahāyāna tradition questions whether one is capable of attaining enlightenment if one is committing these offenses. The second view, by contrast, is predicated upon the Buddha’s postulate that those who have awakened have moved beyond traditional conceptualization of good and evil. The concept of good and evil, as it will be shown later in this chapter, plays a key role in Shinran’s thought, yet he radically reinterprets how to conceptualize these notions.

Before turning directly to Shinran’s own words, I recall that the Mahāyāna tradition holds neither a “fixed agent acting ethically” nor a “fixed set of behaviors that
can be described as ethical.”

The central mandate of the Buddhist ethical life is to be aware of human interdependency and act with compassion. As a result, Buddhist ethics is a highly dynamic process. Yet, while Buddhism undoubtedly represents a highly ethical way of thinking, it cannot be considered a prescriptive system.

**Shinran’s ethics of compassion**

As we have already observed, Shinran follows the traditional trend of Buddhist thought and does not prescribe any specific ethical activities. For him, ethics is inseparable from the compassion exemplified by Amida’s Primal Vow. Shinran’s understanding of the unconditional, all-inclusive vision of Amida’s compassion is informed by his understanding of his own nature and his own karmically formed ego-ridden passions. Only by not focusing on oneself, does one become open to the world of others, the enhanced recognition of human interconnectedness. As discussed, for Shinran, while it is commendable to seek goodness, proclaiming oneself good or even thinking of oneself as good, is hakarai. Its rational calculations produce self-deception and lead to egocentric self-righteousness.

We have noted that Shinran does not stress human agency. For Shinran, all compassionate actions are consequences of Amida’s work. It allows Shinran to insist that since Amida is egoless, he can engage in the distinction-making of hakarai. According to Shinran, only Amida knows what is truly good and what is truly evil and reminds us that because Bodhisattva Dharmākara has become Amida Buddha, the notion of good and evil “transcend[ed] all bounds” (*Mattōshō*, 526). Amida, he further states, acts “without

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differentiation between people good and bad, and regardless of one’s having a heart of blind passions, all beings are certain to attain birth” (Mattôshô, 526). In other words, this ability to differentiate between good and evil rests solely with Amida.

Building on the Bodhisattva’s promise of returning (ekô) to help all sentient beings attain enlightenment, Shinran takes Amida’s ekô as the core of his ethical understanding. While the term ekô appears in the eighteenth vow of the Larger Sutra as well as in a number of other sutras, Shinran stresses ekô as the expression of Amida’s compassion directly linked to the concept of other power. Shinran’s Amida is internalized and introspective and relates to one’s recognition of one’s own shortcomings. For Shinran, in order to help others attain enlightenment, those who realize shinjin are Bodhisattvas that live simultaneously in two worlds: the world of Sahâ (the world of painful life and death) and in the Pure Land. As they practice shamatha (calming the mind) and Vipashyanâ (attaining insight or correct perception), their mind becomes full of compassion since “the mind that aspires to attain buddhahood is the mind that saves all sentient beings” and in effect, there is no longer any distinction between “their own attaining of buddhahood and their saving of other.” 130

By utilizing this indiscriminative embrace of all beings, Shinran introduces the idea of "akunin-shôki" which holds that anyone, regardless of his wickedness, would be saved by the compassion of the Buddha Amida: "Even the good person attains birth in the Pure Land, how much more so the person of evil karma" (Tannishô, vi). In Tannishô iii Shinran articulates most fully his unique understanding of good and evil and argues that

“being conscious of doing good, [one] lacks the thought of entrusting the self completely to Other Power.” That, in turn, prevents one’s attainment of birth in the Pure Land. Here he restates: ‘[t]he Primal Vow was established out of deep compassion for us who cannot be freed from the bondage of birth-and-death through any religious practice, due to the abundance of our blind passions.” [Italics mine.]

Shinran considers the question of human character in relation to karma and karmic conditions. For him, many human wrongdoings could be attributable to the karmic conditions more than to the exercise of human agency. For instance, he holds that an event as trivial as meeting someone is the result of karmic conditions. Consequently, Shinran posits that whether one engages in evil doings or abstains from doing evil does not necessarily derive from one’s own vice or virtue. He writes: "We do not kill, not because our thoughts are good but because we do not have the karma to kill even a single person," but on the other hand, "even though we do not want to injure anyone we may be led to kill a hundred or a thousand people" (Tannishō, xiii, 21-22). The evil person, the one driven by evil karma, is conceived contrary to the conventional understanding. The evil person is conceived, as the one “who is led to true entrusting by Other power, is the person who attains birth in the Pure Land” (Tannishō, iii, 6). It is this presence of evil that activates Amida’s compassion. Shinran writes, "leave everything good and evil to the working of the karma and single-heartedly entrust yourself to the Primal Vow" (Tannishō, xiii, 23).

This does not at all mean that Shinran approves of immorality. Shinran does not disregard the conventional conceptions of good and evil. He writes that all beings have
“been evil and defiled, completely lacking the mind of purity, they have been false and
deceitful” (Kyōgyōshinshō, 95). He notes how hard it is “to put an end to our evil nature”
but argues that while all beings “have been false and deceitful, completely lacking the
mind of truth and reality,” it is only Amida who “brought to fulfillment the perfect,
unhindered, inconceivable, indescribable and inexplicable supreme virtues” (95).

Cognizant of human limitations, he maintains that humans possess some inherent features
of evilness. He posits that while people cannot assess "the depth of karmic evil," they
also cannot fully comprehend "the height of Tathāgata benevolence" (Tannishō,
Epilogue, 33). He does not exclude himself from this critique and admits his own
limitations by stating that since he is “absolutely incapable of any religious practice, hell
is my only home” (Tannishō, ii, 5). While the practice of nenbutsu is the only practice
that is suitable for him, Shinran does not advocate this practice but states that “whether
you accept the nenbutsu, entrusting yourself to it, or reject it, that is your own decision”
(Tannishō, ii, 5).

For Shinran, human actions based on self-power are false and he argues that
“[e]xtremely difficult is it to put an end to our evil nature; the mind is like a venomous
snake or scorpion” (Hymns of the Dharma Ages, #96, 421).

With mind full of malice and cunning,
Like snakes and scorpions,
We cannot accomplish good act through self-power;
And unless we entrust ourselves to Amida’s directing of virtue,
We will end without knowing shame or self-reproach (#99, 422)

Both shame and self-reproach take a central place in Shinran’s thought. He articulates
shame and self-reproach by maintaining that shame is important to “not committing
further evil oneself; self-reproach means not leading others to commit evil. Shame is to be abased within oneself, self-reproach is to express this outwardly, toward others” (Kyōgyōshinshō, iii, 131).

In Mattōshō 16, 19 and 20 he urges people to cast off their bad deeds. These letters often take a more prescriptive tone and complicate our understanding of Shinran’s writing. In fact, Shinran seems to hold a somewhat prescriptive position when he states: "One must seek to cast off the evil of this world and to cease doing wretched deeds; this is what it means to reject the world and to live the nenbutsu" (Mattōshō, 16, 547). While still taking into consideration the karmic conditions, Shinran argues that it will be difficult for the person to attain birth in the Pure Land if this is "the person who purposely thinks and does what he or she should not, saying that it is permissible because of the Buddha's wondrous Vow to save the foolish being." For Shinran this is a person who "does not truly desire to reject the world, nor does such a one consciously feel himself a being of karmic evil" (Mattōshō, 19, 550). Shinran argues that our being foolish beings does not justify committing evil. Not only does Shinran urge us to cast off one’s our own evil doings but also to stay away from those who still remain entangled with their blind passions and slander the Dharma by showing disrespect to their teachers or parents.

Shinran’s conception of akunin shoku reflects a profound level of self-reflection on both human evil and compassion. As a consequence of Amida’s compassion, the judgmental approach of people to all others decreases since humans come to see their own defilement. As a result, transcending the dichotomous attachment to the inflexible conceptions of good and evil and recognizing the infeasibility of absolute human
perfection, enhances our appreciation of human interconnectedness. The claim of antinomianism can be better repudiated when one is reading Shinran’s writings in conjunction with the above mentioned letters. In his letters Shinran becomes more normative than in his other writings in which he claims to be only able to respond for himself.

But what exactly is this evil that Shinran urges us to cast off? Consistent with Buddhist thought in general, Shinran identifies human evilness in terms of passions and desires which lead one to greed, anger, hate and ignorance and failure to recognize the laws of causation. Turning again to his letters, I note that in Mattōshō # 19 he also writes: “Human beings are such that, maddened by the passions of greed, we desire to possess; maddened by passions of anger, we hate that which should not be hated, seeking to go against the law of cause of effect; led astray by the passions of ignorance, we do what should not even be thought” (Mattōshō, 19, 550). In Shinran’s view, people who demonstrate any of these qualities “cannot attain birth in the next life” (Mattōshō, 19, 551). Shinran compares one’s ability to hear the Vow to being awakened from being drunk “with the wine of ignorance” (Mattōshō, 20, 553). Those who continue functioning in terms of ignorance and blind passions provoke sorrow in Shinran but excusing them is similar to “offering more wine before the person had become sober or urging him to take even more poison before the poison has abated” (Mattōshō, 20, 553). Practicing nenbutsu, which involves a compassionate response to all sentient beings, in contrast, is equated with “cast[ing] off the evil in themselves” (Mattōshō, 20, 553) since hearing the
Name occurs simultaneously with becoming aware of one’s own karmic evil. [Italics mine.]

Moral actions in Shinran’s view correlate with shinjin rather than with a rigid moral code. Ethics thus becomes a form of human responsiveness and, as such, allows one to take into account the specificity of any given situation. Human compassion cannot be perceived as independent of Amida’s Vow. Shinran writes:

Shakyamuni, Amida, and the Buddhas in ten quarters, all with the same mind, are no more apart from sentient beings of the nenbutsu than shadows from things. Hence it is that Shakyamuni rejoices in the person of shinjin, saying, “They are my true companions” (Mattōshō, 2, 526).

In sum, for Shinran, the relationship between morality and human actions is that of the expression of compassion as a result of shinjin. Prescribing specific moral actions that fit all situations and maintaining that these actions exhibit one’s ethics contradicts Shinran’s notion of spontaneous embrace of human beings by Amida and the resulting human behavior being that of Amida himself. Consequently, any labels of good and evil become meaningless. For Shinran, the attainment of enlightenment results from an “involuntary existential leap” (shinjin) and as such cannot be defined either in terms of intentional actions or as “rationally controllable.” This means that Shinran’s ethics cannot be defined in terms of teleological (virtue) ethics. The fact that his ethics is non-prescriptive -- “non-teleological and non-virtuous”-- in the eyes of Western ethicists is problematic precisely because they theorize ethics as being connected to prescribed moral actions and a resulting moral behavior. Yet, practical ethics can be dysteleological given that moral actions represent a changing process formulated situationally. Dysteleological

131 Lewis, “Teleological ‘Virtue’ or Mere Religious ‘Character.’”
ethics seem to move closer to Shinran’s perceptions since in that model, “[t]he moral agent … does morality rather than cognitively maps out a rigid ethical system, and the action itself always involved a skillful balancing of psycho/social tensions and conflicts.”

As a result, this highly contingent model can be seen as viewing the ideal qualities of Jōdo Shinshū consciousness as incorporating notions central to Shinran’s thought such as “simplicity, an unselfconscious frugality, gratitude, worrilessness, joy, naturalness, disinvestment in personal ego, and concern for others.”

Shinran’s approach remains highly idiosyncratic because of his rejection of human rationality (or, at least, of its overemphasis) and self-power. In addition, in his interpretation, human agency assumes a form different from the one traditionally conceived in the West. While one might argue that Shinran rejects the notion of human agency altogether, this assumption is incorrect since Shinran calls for an intense self-reflexivity and posits that Amida’s embrace is predicated upon one’s recognition of one’s own limitations. In addition, it is futile to place Shinran’s ethics squarely within the domain of either universalistic or particularistic approach. Despite the fact that Amida’s Vow is extended indiscriminately to all human beings, Shinran claims no knowledge of how this embrace takes place for others and what exactly they experience as a result of this embrace. For Shinran, ethics is inseparable from compassion and in this sense he remains consistent with Buddhist ethics at large. Rather than claiming to have a set range of moral norms that are inflexibly applied to each and every situation, Shinran’s ethics of compassion allows for a compassionate response according to each situation. After all, as

132 Ibid., n. 40, 157.
133 Ibid., 150.
we observed, even the legal system, to some degree, operates according to some principles of contextualization.

Shinran’s flexibility, however, is not to be equated with antinomianism or with a total disregard for ethical norms. The uniqueness of Shinran’s ethics should not be overlooked: his articulation of the power of Amida’s Vow and his rejection of self-power (jiriki). We should keep in mind that Shinran implicitly (and in some cases explicitly) calls humans to refute their egotistical attachments and often arrogant overestimation of their own power. Nonetheless, we must be mindful of the fact that Shinran’s ethics is decidedly self-reflexive and highly personal.

**Conclusion – Shinran’s ethics of a non-discriminatory compassion**

In sum, I maintain that none of the Western definitions of ethics is fully applicable to Shinran. Yet, if we conceive of virtue ethics as non-prescriptive, Shinran’s ethics does have some resonance with that approach since human happiness is central to Shinran’s conceptualizations. Perhaps the closest to his ethics of compassion is the conceptualization of the legal secular rules with the build-in system of relativity, but even that comparison is only analogical because of Shinran’s problematization of human rationality and his emphasis on the notion of compassion as related to other power. We should keep in mind that Shinran refrains from imposing any moral claims on others and holds that moral claims cannot be fulfilled by relying on self-power (jiriki). However, I propose that Shinran’s ethics of compassion would have not attained this radical form of non-discriminative compassion if Shinran would have not experienced life in the exilic conditions. Living in exile made him even more attuned to the intricacies of human
conditions and the limitations they place on humans’ own efforts and their power to bring one to enlightenment. I do not, however, claim that this exilic experience is singularly responsible for his endorsement of other power, since, as we observed, Shinran started questioning this concept even prior to being exiled. What I do want to propose is that this experience accentuated his recognition of the fruitlessness of self-power and eventuated in the ethics of non-discriminative compassion.
Chapter 2: Maimonides: The Commandments and Human Perfection

Introduction

This chapter provides a rough sketch of Maimonides’ biography and focuses on a number of issues touching upon Maimonides’ view on God, human nature, human rationality and on the role of the commandments. I demonstrate that, contrary to Shinran who shows a highly skeptical assessment of human rationality, Maimonides views human rationality in terms of human intellect and values it very highly and his focus on human perfection underscores his construction of ethics. I note that Maimonides views a consistent engagement with the commandments as a means to improve human conditions. Whereas for Shinran, Amida’s Primal Vow is central, for Maimonides it is the commandments that assume a similar centrality. Despite Maimonides’ sustained tension and ambiguity between one’s solitary pursuits and the need for the social and political engagement, I term Maimonides’ ethics as *an ethics of commandments*. In addition, I propose that Maimonides’ views, similarly to those of Shinran, are affected by his conception of human nature and are informed by his own experience of exilic conditions. I turn, to my discussion of exile in the last and concluding chapter of this dissertation.

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134 In my discussion of exile in relation to Maimonides, I focus on Maimonides’ displacement from the land of his birth. My discussion of exile does not relate to the metaphysical and theological exile from God.
Biographical trajectory and Maimonides’ writings

Maimonides (1136-1204), born in Cordova, Spain in his lifetime crossed continents and encountered a number of Mediterranean influences— from European Muslim Spain to Morocco then to Palestine and ending in Egypt. Maimonides’ life can be delimited by four periods: the Andalusian period (1136 – 1148); the Almohadian period (1148 – 1165); the period of the wandering (1165 – 1171) including a short stay in Christian Spain; and the life under Ayyubids (1171 – 1204). His life in Andalusia is especially significant to Maimonides’ construction of self-identity since even in his diasporic life he referred to himself as an Andalusian.

At the time of his birth, Cordova, the capital of Andalusia (Muslim Spain) was ruled by a moderate Almoravids caliphate. During that time Jews and Christians were given the status of dhimmis - the protected minorities - and were able to combine their secular and religious interests without any fear of persecution. This relatively safe Andalusian environment fell apart in 1148 when fundamentalist Almohad (Sunni) movement replaced the rule of the Almoravids. This change initiated Maimonides’ second life period when non-Islamic communities lost their protected status. The third period in Maimonides’ life is marked by his family’s wanderings when Maimonides and

However, in this chapter I only aim to foreshadow the forthcoming discussion on exile to which I turn my full attention in my last and concluding chapter.


136 Kraemer also breaks Maimonides’ life into four periods though he does not connect these with the specific Islamic schools of legal thought but only with the geographic locations which testifies again to his largely diasporic state of existence. Kraemer states the following dates and locations: 1138-1158 Spain; 1158 – 1162 Fez, Morocco; 1162-1163 Acre, Palestine; 1163 – 1201? Fustat, Egypt. The concepts of diaspora and exile are mentioned throughout these chapters with a focused attention devoted to these issues in chapter 5.

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his family, after rootless life around the Christian-controlled Spain, left Spain and finally settled in Fatimid Egypt, controlled by Isma’i’li Shi’ites. The fourth period and final period of his life was spent in Egypt which in 1171 was conquered by the Ayyubids (Sunnis, the followers of the Ash’arite Kalam). Maimonides lived under their rule until his death in 1204.

Maimonides’ life under different Islamic regimes and their different schools of legal thought influenced both, his thought and his writing. In some cases, these influences led him either to embrace the “potentially suspect sources,” such as those of Greek and Muslim philosophers; or to strongly argue against the Kalam theologians. As a result, scholars argue that Maimonides exercised an eclectic approach and his legal methodology reflects his deep immersion in the Almohad society and its law (fiqh). Scholars propose that even though Maimonides is often described as an Aristotelian philosopher, his Aristotelianism is colored by this immersion in the Islamic philosophy since his reading of Aristotle is arguably done through the eyes of an Arabic Aristotelianism which blended Platonic political philosophy, Plotinian metaphysics and Aristotelian logic and physics.

Maimonides’ corpus of writing includes The Commentary on the Mishnah, The Mishneh Torah, the Guide for the Perplexed, his medical works, and his various treatises

137 Just to mention a few, Maimonides was influenced by al-Farabi and some of the thought of Avicenna as will be discussed in the subsequent part of this chapter.
138 Kalam is the Islamic theology that attempts to present Islamic teachings in a rationalistic way, a scholar of Kalam is referred to as a mutakallim.
139 Almohads based their jurisprudence on a transformed version of Maliki law which aimed to restore Islam to its original, uncorrupted meaning and played an equally important part in Maimonides’ thinking as well. The philosophy of the Almohad movement and its founder Ibn Tumart focused on the sources of jurisprudence (the Qur’an and Sunnah) rather than any legal precedents. As a result, Ibn Tumart admitted no plurality of legal explanations or schools. We will later discuss Maimonides’ mirroring of the Almohad’s legal approach in his Mishneh Torah.
and letters. Maimonides began his *Commentary on the Mishnah* while still living in Fez, but it was published in Egypt in 1168. This commentary was Maimonides’ preliminary work, preceding the composition of *The Mishneh Torah* (1168-1178) (Repetition of the Torah), which is Maimonides’ major work alongside his philosophical opus entitled *The Guide for the Perplexed*. Yet, while Maimonides is often viewed through philosophical lens, his role was not limited to that of a philosopher or even a rabbinic scholar. In 1171, shortly after Saladin became sultan over Egypt, Maimonides became “Head of the Jews.” As Head of the Jews, Maimonides had the highest judicial authority appointing chief judges, having broad communal responsibilities, and functioning as respondent to legal inquiries from Jewish communities in Egypt and elsewhere. In addition to his judicial authority, he served as a physician applying his knowledge of human physical well-being.

*The Mishneh Torah (MT)*, written in a way that one can easily memorize the laws, became an irreplaceable document for Jews living in diaspora. One of Maimonides’ main aims was to unify theory (the philosophy) and praxis (the Law). The *Mishneh Torah* was Maimonides’ summary of the entire body of Jewish Law and was the result of his desire to replace the scattered and fragmented oral law with a single concise and comprehensive treatise. The *MT* testifies to Maimonides’ astute recognition of the shift of the Jewish

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140 Maimonides worked on the *Commentary to the Mishnah* from 1145 to 1168. The *Mishnah* is the compendium of Jewish law compiled by Rabbi Judah the Prince (ha-Nasi). In his *Commentary*, Maimonides strives to present each *Mishnah* (rule) in light of the interpretations that had been given by the Talmud. Because the Talmud records conflicting explanations of the *Mishnah*, Maimonides took upon himself to determine which of these explanations are authoritative. This mirrors, at least to some extent, Ibn Tumart’s approach mentioned above.
world from the “Judaeo-Arabic Mediterranean” to the Hebrew-speaking Jewish world of Christian Europe and the need to address the diasporic communities.

**Maimonides’ articulation of philosophy in relation to Jewish philosophy**

The *Guide of the Perplexed (GP)*, written entirely in Egypt between 1185 and 1190, is Maimonides’ major philosophical work. The term “perplexed” connotes those who hesitate between the conflicting claims of philosophy and religion. Maimonides sought to help those “perplexed” to integrate religion and philosophy: to achieve a full knowledge of philosophical truths without giving up the observance of religious commandments.  

In *GP* I: 71 Maimonides spells out the components of his own philosophy in relation to the Jewish heritage, both biblical and Talmudic. Being well-versed in Islamic philosophy and theology, Maimonides positions himself against the approach exercised by the Islamic theologians. Recalling Shinran’s skepticism with rational thought as a means to advance and justify one’s egotistical inclinations, Maimonides’ rejection of imagination and sense perception is informative. One of his major objections is the Mutakallimun articulation of imagination since, in his view, they mistaken imagination for intellect: “follow the imagination and call it intellect” (*GP* I: 71, 179). Instead Maimonides argues for a “demonstrative method as to which there is no disagreement in any respect” (*GP* I: 71, 182).  

Maimonides’ skeptical approach to imagination testifies to Aristotle’s influence. Yet, Maimonides straddles between

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142 Raphael Jospe, *Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2009) argues that this work was never intended by Maimonides to be read by the masses since for the observant Jews unfamiliar with philosophy this work can only produce confusion and endanger their beliefs. In his view, Maimonides focused in the philosophers and aimed to “justify Judaism to philosophy.”  

143 For instance, as TM Rudavsky demonstrates, Maimonides disagrees with the Kalam theologians’ method of the proof of God’s existence which he sees as being “circular.” See Rudavsky (2010), pp.49-50.
Aristotelian skepticism\textsuperscript{144} and a more positive outlook on the imagination. Imagination more closely relates to sense perception than to abstract thinking.\textsuperscript{145} Maimonides links imagination to “the evil impulse” (\textit{GP} 2:12, 280) since it can result in perceiving Separate Intellect (angels) as having bodies and describing them in anthropomorphic terms.\textsuperscript{146} He exhibits a slightly less skeptical approach when he discusses imagination and prophecy. In that discussion, Maimonides relates imagination to the political reason as an important component of prophecy.

Despite his arguments against Islamic theologians and specifically \textit{Kalam} theologians, Maimonides is more concerned that \textit{Kalam} views appear in the Jewish circles, namely among the views of some Gaonim and the Karaites. This testifies to Maimonides’ concern with the preservation of Jewish community and its adherence to the commandments further explicated by the Mishnaic sources. It also points to Maimonides’ concern with the decreased ability to exercise rational thought.\textsuperscript{147} Stroumsa\textsuperscript{148} argues that Maimonides’ aim was to alert that “Jewish mutakallimun” were the imitators of Muslim

\textsuperscript{144} Aristotle in \textit{On the Soul (De Anima)} writes: “Imagination remains in the organs of sense and resemble sensations, animals in their actions are largely guided by them, some (i.e. the brutes) because of the non-existence in them of thought, others (i.e. men) because of the temporary eclipse in them of thought by feeling or disease or sleep” (429a5-8). “Imagination can be false” (428a17).

\textsuperscript{145} Maimonides states that all of the five sense perceptions are a “deficiency from the standpoint of apprehension” (104). According to Maimonides, imagination is inherently corrupted by its association with human animal appetites and it “perceives nothing except bodies or properties belonging to bodies” (GP, II: 29, 337). Imagination is a mental faculty which “retains the impressions of the senses, combining them chiefly to form images” (GP, I: 70, 173).

\textsuperscript{146} As we will see in my subsequent discussion on God, anthropomorphic descriptions are particularly problematic for Maimonides.

\textsuperscript{147} As we will see, Maimonides, with a certain caveat, argues for the inherent reason for every commandment. Hence adherence to the law and rational thought are in conjunction rather than in disagreement with each other.

Kalam whose goal was to similarly manipulate the ignorant masses and prevent them from using their rational faculties.

**Maimonides’ View on God**

Maimonides’ view on God is central to our understanding of his thought because it directly relates to his rejection of idolatry as an ethically imperfect human condition. It is imperative for Maimonides to establish a firm understanding of God’s incorporeality since viewing God in the corporeal terms testifies to idolatry and a lower level of human ethical development. The correct belief is incongruent with an anthropomorphic image of God which holds God possessing both body and psychic life and emotions assuming as a result the erroneous conceptualization of reward and punishment. By reiterating the importance of impressing upon everyone the concept of incorporeality, Maimonides affirms God’s unity since having a body means having form and matter and hence divisible and subject to affects. Recalling Shinran’s conception of Amida Buddha as a highly relational and hence an affect-driven being, Maimonides’ view on God appears directly contrary to that of Shinran. For Maimonides, “[A]ffection is a change” and God “is not touched by change. He is not like unto any things of those that are other than He nor is He comprehended together with one of these things in any definition whatever” (GP I: 35, 81). Further, multiplicity leads to the grave misconception of many

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149 Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, Idolatry, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1992) maintain that for Maimonides, the very representation of God in anthropomorphic terms is idolatry. Maimonides is concerned with “substitution error” which moves from viewing stars or any other objects as the intermediaries of God to becoming the objects of worship on their own.

150 The anthropomorphic image of God is of course consistently reminiscent of any idolatrous images. See Halbertal and Margalit’s discussion, 109.
gods and introduces the notion of comparability hence relative perfection. According to Maimonides, God is absolutely perfect. Multiplicity also vitiates God’s self-sufficiency. God’s uniqueness also adds to God’s lack of relationality. In the Guide I: 35, Maimonides argues for God’s absolute uniqueness and His incorporeality. Here he insists that

there is absolutely no likeness in any respect whatever between Him and the things created by Him; that His existence has no likeness to theirs; nor His life to the life of those among them who are alive; nor His knowledge to have any similarity to those who are endowed with knowledge (80).

Similarly to Shinran, who never discusses Amida’s attributes, Maimonides’ God is discussed in terms of His actions. God’s incompatibility with humans, leads Maimonides to state God’s attributes represent God’s actions rather than His qualities (GP I: 51). For Maimonides, God “performs actions resembling the actions that in us proceed from moral qualities” (GP I: 54, 124). [Italics mine.] The actions proceeding from humans (i.e., charity, learning, etc.) are the result of these humans experiencing “a certain affection and compassion, and this is the meaning of [God’s] mercy” (GP I: 54, 125). Here Maimonides draws a distinction and reiterates that compassion and affection felt by humans (their perceived experience of God’s grace) cannot be attributed to God since God does not experience affection.¹⁵¹ In Maimonides’ view, God’s actions can be analogous to the actions of a strict father¹⁵² who retains a strong intellectual differentiation between himself and his child and hence retains an unsurpassable distance. This type of a relationship does not produce reciprocity since, while God brings humans

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¹⁵¹ Since God represents perfection and, given that affection is a privation, since it relates to change as well, God cannot be discussed in terms of affection. See GP I: 55.
¹⁵² This “strict parent” model is contrary to Shinran’s relationality model.
into existence and governs them, humans do not have any claims upon God. When the circumstances require, God exhibits not only His grace but also His jealousy, anger, and wrath. These actions do not result from any passions experienced by God but are the outcome necessitated by the actions of those who transgress and deserve to be punished.

Maimonides states that there are six positive and four negative commandments of the Torah starting with the principle commandments of “I am the Lord thy God” (Exodus 20:2) and “Thou shall no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). These principle commandments are directly related to the positive commandment to love and fear God. Maimonides refers to love of God in terms of human contemplation of God’s works.

Contrary to Shinran’s view on Amida Buddha, Maimonides’ love of God is inseparable from the fear of God. Recognition of God’s perfection leads to the recognition of human imperfection since man is “capable only of a little knowledge in the presence of perfect knowledge” (BN, 4). God’s intelligence, incomparable to human intelligence, confirms God’s unity by functioning as a self-recognizing entity:

The Holy One recognizes His own verity and knows it as it really is, and does not know it with an intelligence outside Himself as [humans] do; for [humans] and [human] intelligence are not one. But the Blessed Creator, He and His understanding and existence are one, in every aspect of His unity” (BN, 6).

Given that God can only be discussed in equivocal terms leads Maimonides to his doctrine of negation which builds on the premise that human can only know what God is NOT. 153 But how are humans to understand God if they are urged to think of God only

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153 Halbertal and Margalit remind us that while in the first part if the GP Maimonides argues for the existence of “non-metaphorical” language free from speaking of God in corporeal terms, in the second part of the GP, he “disqualifies language in general from being able to describe God by any positive attributes” (57). They maintain that Maimonides went beyond Hegel’s distinction between religious discourse in
on the basis of the negation and any concept of relationality is rejected? Here we are once again reminded about the absence of relationality since Maimonides’ negative theology not only negates God’s corporeality but also denies “His having a likeness to created things and of His being subject to affections” (81). [Italics mine.].

Kenneth Seeskin summarizes Maimonides’ conception of God under the rubric of “demythologizing” rabbinic Judaism by “depersonalizing” the Jewish conception of God. He argues that Maimonides did so by advancing, as discussed, a strictly incorporeal conception of God, equating God’s will with God’s wisdom, limiting God’s freedom to God’s knowledge. Maimonides’ “depersonalized” God has no resemblance to any gods of idolaters but also is quite contrary to Shinran’s Amida Buddha. Maimonides’ view on God relates directly to his rejection of idolatry.

**Maimonides’ view on idolatry**

Maimonides’ insistence on God’s incorporeality is central to human ethical development and idolatry represents for him the state of ethical imperfection.  

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154 Kenneth Seeskin, *Maimonides, A Guide for Today’s Perplexed* (Springfield: Behrman House, 1991). Howard Kreisel, *Maimonides’ Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law, and the Human Ideal*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999) also raises the question of “depersonalization” when he asks how can this Wholly Other God be “imitated” by human beings. On page 128 he enumerates the paradoxical conception of God by stating that for Maimonides, God is simple and unfathomable One to whom no positive attribute maybe ascribed (*GP* I: 56 – 60); is defined as “Self-Intellecting Intellect” (I: 68); whose essence is identical with His Wisdom and Will (I: 69); Wholly transcendent and not dependent upon any other existent nor even related to any other existent (I: 52) – as our discussion of God’s “unrelatedness” intimates; and yet, is the “Cause – efficient, formal, and final – of all existence” (I: 69).

155 Given the fact that Maimonides does not argues against God’s omniscience, perhaps this should be termed as God’s election of a “non-involvement.”

156 I follow David Shatz’s definition when he uses ethics and morality interchangeably yet acknowledges that “morality involves more than governing oneself according to the right norms of interpersonal conduct but it also involves governing one’s impulses” (David Shatz, *Jewish Thought in Dialogue: Essays on Thinkers, Theologies and Moral Theories* (Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2009). I also concur with
According to Maimonides, God realized that the Israelites, embedded in the pagan environment, cannot abandon idolatry instantaneously and as a result, some of the commandments (i.e., the sacrifice of the animals) served as the intermediary steps as did the anthropomorphic verses of the Torah. Maimonides views paganism as a preliminary stage in any developed ethical religious system. The first intention of the Law, Maimonides states, was to put an end to idolatry since it represented “unhealthy opinions” and “crazy notions” (GP III: 29, 518). Maimonides differentiates between the elimination of idolatry as the “first divine intention” and the ethical improvement of the individuals and the just governance of society as the “second divine intention.” This second intention represents a qualitatively higher intention (see GP 3.27, 3.29, and 3.32).

For Maimonides, idolatry is connected to cognitive internalization and any inappropriate beliefs had to be eradicated. In GP I: 50 Maimonides states that “belief is not the notion that is uttered, but the notion that is represented in the soul when it has been averred of it that it is in fact just as it has been represented” (111). [My italics.] Belief represents an inner (mental) state and one’s internalized belief is demonstrated in one’s actions. The idea of habituation plays an important role in Maimonides’ thought and he maintains that procurement of correct opinions builds the foundation for the correct actions. In Laws of Idolatry chapter 2, Maimonides emphasizes controlling one’s

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Hava Tirosh-Samuelson’s definition of ethics when she states that “the science of ethics concerns the cultivation of character through the acquisition of virtues. See Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, “Virtue and Happiness” in The Cambridge History of Jewish Philosophy: From Antiquity through Seventeenth Century, eds. Steven Nadler and T.M. Rudavsky, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 707. Ethics and morality hence address both, control of one’s behavior and related to it cultivation of ones’ virtues.

157 Maimonides writes that “procuring of correct opinions” is the first aim – the welfare of the soul – which is “indubitably greater in nobility” (GP III: 27, 510). Procuring of correct opinions reflects the aim of the Torah since the Law largely consists of “the effacement of these [wrong] opinions from the minds and of these [idolatrous] monuments from existence” (GP III: 29, 521).
thoughts. \(^{158}\) One’s mental state appears as important, if not even more important than one’s physical acts. The focus on the importance of the mental acts is stressed in the *GP* as well, specifically in III: 8 when Maimonides expands on the Talmudic expression that “thoughts about sin are worse than the sin” (434).

Law (the commandments) is central for instilling correct opinions and subsequent proper actions. In the *Mishneh Torah, Treatise Four, Idolatry*, Maimonides lists fifty-one commandments, forty-nine negative and two positive. Maimonides insists that turning to idolatry means turning away from the Torah. Recalling Maimonides’ high valuation of rational thought and discomfort with imagination, when he implicitly connects idolatry to imagination, it also becomes connected to human intellectual limitations. Law becomes especially important in cases when one is led astray by these “imaginings” and is unable to internalize properly the appropriate Jewish beliefs. This inability to internalize the appropriate beliefs can be detrimental to societal functioning. Law is essential for establishing the framework for this successful functioning. \(^{159}\) Society’s successful functioning hence is directly related to the procurement of correct opinions (habituation).

**Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles of Faith**

Given the fact that humans might be prone to subscribing to the wrong opinions, certain aspects of belief cannot be left to chance but require a categorical exposition. This recognition led Maimonides to composing his *Pereq Heleq* (Sanhedrin Chapter 10) which

\(^{158}\) In *Mishneh Torah, The Book of Knowledge*, ed. Moses Hyamson (Jerusalem: Boys Town, Jerusalem Publishers, 1965), Maimonides states: “do not be led astray by the *fancies of your mind*” (67b).

\(^{159}\) Kreisel maintains that precisely because Moses’ governance was framed in commands rather than just teachings, he was superior to Abraham. Kreisel states: “Laws governing a polity are far more efficacious than the teachings of an individual for molding the beliefs of society, even when the teachings are bolstered by additional activities” (33). Abraham’s smashing of the idols was a less successful pedagogical tool then the application of law.
he concluded with the Thirteen Principles of Faith.\textsuperscript{160} Given human propensity for some reward or assurance, linking these beliefs to immortality assumes special urgency.

Neglecting these principles becomes connected to the loss of personal immortality, an issue not devoid of controversy. This possibility of not attaining immortality\textsuperscript{161} can be seen as a strong stimulus to abide by the espoused principles of faith.

In the introduction to \textit{Pereq Heleq}, Maimonides articulates his view on the hierarchy of human ability to interpret complex ideas. By identifying the three types of interpretations of the words of the sages in the Midrash and three groups of people, Maimonides reaffirms his conviction in the superiority of intellectual comprehension. Maimonides’ third group, while the smallest elite group, is the group that Maimonides favors for their ability to recognize the hidden wisdom and the concealed meaning. This group is characterized by their propensity for rational thought. Maimonides states: “if you belong to the third group, when you encounter a word of the sages which seems to conflict with reason, you will pause, consider it, and realize that this utterance must be a riddle or a parable.”\textsuperscript{162}

\textsuperscript{160} Kreisel maintains that Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles of Faith attempt to inculcate the philosophic view of God’s incorporeality. He points that of 13 principles, the first four focus precisely on that issue. The fact that these principles assumed the form of a dogma was an unusual occurrence for the Jewish tradition. Maimonides’ attempt to formulate these basic principles of Judaism in such a form produced an attack by subsequent Jewish thinkers. Yet, we need to remember that much of Maimonides’ work was met by his rabbinic contemporaries with such words as “It’s Greek to me!” See Menachem Kellner, “Introduction,” \textit{Jewish History}, 18 (2004).

\textsuperscript{161} Given Maimonides’ rather ambiguous stance on the issue of resurrection, it is hard to say affirmatively whether he meant bodily immortality or referred primarily to his veiled approach to immortality of the soul (spiritual) immortality only.

\textsuperscript{162} Isadore Twersky, \textit{A Maimonides Reader}, (Springfield: Behrman House, 1971), 410
In this work, Maimonides draws the differentiation between physical and spiritual delights.\textsuperscript{163} Ostensibly, Maimonides favors spiritual delights when he says that “… the delights of the spiritual world [are] unknown in this material world. Spiritual delight does not come within our experience at all… they come to us only after great searching.”\textsuperscript{164} But then he adds: “spiritual delights are eternal” and in this material world we can attain only “inferior and discontinuous delights”\textsuperscript{165} hence he draws a sharp distinction between material and spiritual delights. This aforementioned possibility of not attaining immortality is consistent with Maimonides’ view that in some cases humans are to be subjected to fear of punishment.\textsuperscript{166} This fear of punishment leads to Maimonides’ view on resurrection.

\textbf{Maimonides’ view on resurrection}

Human intellectual limitations results in their perception of reward and punishment in rather concrete terms. Resurrection is one of the issues directly related to human understanding of reward and punishment. Maimonides devotes considerable attention to the question of resurrection in three works: \textit{Pereq Heleq Mishneh Torah}, \textit{Laws of Repentance}, and \textit{Treatise on Resurrection}.\textsuperscript{167} As mentioned, Maimonides concludes his \textit{Pereq Heleq} with the thirteen principles of faith which explicitly mentions

\textsuperscript{163} Maimonides explains: “Know that just as the blind man cannot image color, as deaf person cannot experience sounds, and as the eunuch cannot feel sexual desire, so bodies cannot attain spiritual delights.” And he states that “we enjoy only bodily pleasures which come to us through physical senses, such as the pleasure of eating, drinking, or sexual intercourse. Other levels of delight are not present to our experience” (Twersky, 410).

\textsuperscript{164} Twersky, \textit{A Maimonides Reader}, 410.

\textsuperscript{165} Ibid., 410.

\textsuperscript{166} Here Maimonides is consistent with his endorsement of human free will because humans can choose not to abide and yet to be aware of the consequences.

\textsuperscript{167} His discussion of resurrection is minimal in the \textit{GP}, yet some implicit discussion does exist there as well as it will be discussed in this chapter.
the issue of the resurrection. Maimonides vision of resurrection, however, carries certain political undertones and resembles his vision of a just human society.

Maimonides consistently differentiates among the concepts of the world to come (ha-olam ha-ba), the Garden of Eden (gan eden), the days of the Messiah, and the resurrection of the dead. Maimonides “demythologizes” these terms. According to Maimonides, the Garden of Eden is in a specific geographic location albeit not yet identified by geographers and hence is not synonymous with the hereafter. Maimonides treats the Messianic times in the naturalistic terms as well arguing that the concept of the Messianic times relates to a specific historical period set yet in the future. While the theme of the resurrection itself cannot be as easily demythologized, Maimonides limits the resurrection of the dead to the Messianic period and never claims that the resurrection will last for eternity. By not maintaining any ontological distinction between this world and the world-to-come (ha-olam ha-ba), he refers to the Talmudic statement that “There is no difference between this world and the days of the Messiah, except for (the elimination of) subjugation to the (wicked) kingdoms.” The difference is in the fact that the world-to-come is ruled by the principles of justice. Ostensibly, Maimonides does not uphold the modern concept of equality as he recognizes that the powerful and the weak, and the rich and the poor, will remain differentiated. However, he maintains that whereas human labor will become less exhausting and less demanding, the benefits from this labor will become more significant and more substantial. Maimonides posits

168 Stroumsa, *Maimonides in His World*, 158.
170 Maimonides’ vision of the world-to-come resonates with the discussed in the previous chapter Shinran’s view on the Pure Land, minus the obedience to the Mosaic Law.
that such words as “in the future, the Land of Israel will yield fine bread and woolen garments” do not mean that there will no longer be any need for labor, but that this labor will become more easily manageable. But what will be different for the Israelites? They will become “redeemed from the subjugation to the wicked kingdom, which hinders [them] from acquiring all the virtues.” 171 Maimonides’ vision is one of world peace since the benefits will be extended to all nations. The Israelites will no longer be subjugated and the “nation shall not lift up sword against nation.” 172 His vision of the world-to-come is dressed in terms of moral and virtuous sophistication which is inseparable from his position on Law: “The entire Law of Moses will be obeyed, without weariness, worry, or oppression.” 173

The issue of resurrection itself is not so straight-forward and in the Laws of Kings, Maimonides stipulates that the messiah will not perform miracles or resurrect the dead: “Do not suppose that the messianic king needs to give signs, perform miracles, and make new things happen in the world, or resurrect the dead and do similar things.” 174 Isaiah’s expression that “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid” is “a metaphor and a riddle.” 175 Maimonides recognizes that there still will be the wicked but “Israel will live in security with the wicked men of the world.” 176 He envisions tolerance by saying that “All of them will return to the true religion, and will

171 Weiss and Butterworth, Ethical Writings of Maimonides, 166.
172 Ibid., 166.
173 Ibid., 167.
174 Ibid., 172.
175 Ibid., 174.
176 Ibid., 174.
neither rob nor destroy, but will eat what is in abundance at ease with Israel.” 177 The world-to-come is couched in terms of the world of knowledge and high tolerance and one will “pursue the virtues and avoid the vices” to be “distinguished from the beasts.” 178 Yet, resurrection is perceived by the masses as the ultimate reward and Maimonides reluctantly accepts this view recognizing that humans always seek to be rewarded or avoid to be punished. Therefore, he admits that “in order that the masses stay faithful and do the commandments, it was permitted to tell them that they might hope for a reward and warn them against transgressions out of fear of punishment.” 179 For Maimonides, to obey the commandments out of fear of punishment and hope for reward is acceptable since following the commandments “strengthens and habituates” the masses’ loyalty to what the Torah requires.180

Maimonides is not interested in providing the descriptions of punishment. In *Pereq Heleq* he avoids any depiction of punishment in general or hell in particular but instead focuses on reward. In the *Laws Concerning Repentance*, Maimonides reiterates reward in terms of the commandments, whereas punishment is presented as being cut off from this world. Reward is directly connected to following the commandments, since God “removes from us, everything preventing us from following [the Torah] – such as sickness, war, hunger, and so forth.” 181 Studying the Torah and following the commandments produces a twofold outcome: God blesses one with good things and keeps away the curses and as one becomes wise, he attains merit for the world-to-come.

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177 Ibid., 174.
178 Ibid., 167.
180 Ibid., 407.
181 Weiss and Butterworth, *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, 169.
Maimonides states: “[God] will benefit you with a world that is totally good and lengthen your days in a world whose length does not end.” 182 Intellectual perfection leads to one’s permanence as Maimonides states: “When a man achieves perfection, he is in the class of the man who is not hampered by any obstacle that will prevent his soul from remaining permanently with its knowledge.” 183

GP III: 27 can be understood as an implicit discussion of the concept of resurrection since here Maimonides states that the Mosaic Law in its entirety brings the Jewish people both perfection of the soul and perfections of the body which will result in the world’s “perpetual preservation” (512). Perpetual preservation, however, is reserved only for the world and human preservation is limited rather than perpetual since humans’ “corporeal preservation” will last “for a certain duration.” In GP III: 51 Maimonides argues that human preservation results from human welfare in terms of political association. Human happiness (or their state of felicity) depends on the soul’s perfection and is independent of “the genus of bodily pleasures” (628). Human physical state (body/matter) assumes the eventual state of physical demise and ultimately death. Yet, in some instances, an old age can ensure intellectual perfection and Maimonides states: “The result is that when a perfect man is stricken with years and approaches death, this apprehension [of intelligibles] increases very powerfully…” (627). Maimonides continues to define the hereafter in terms of a non-corporeal, intellectual pleasure. 184

182 Ibid., 170.
183 Ibid., 167-168.
184 Yet, given Maimonides’ view on human limitations, scholars still debate whether Maimonides did truly believe in the possibility of human perfection in terms of attainment of metaphysical knowledge. While some scholars (e.g., Pines) argue that Maimonides followed al-Farabi and conceived of human happiness in terms of political and civic happiness, others (e.g., Davidson) argue to the contrary. In his “Maimonides on
As we already noted, Maimonides’ God does not experience affect. If this is the fact, how does God affect the notion of reward and punishment? Punishment is again couched in intellectual terms. While Maimonides does not appear interested in eternal punishment, he nonetheless implicitly excludes those who do not attain knowledge and do not actualize their intelligence. This can be likened to eternal punishment since it implies that nothing will survive after death and will fall into the abyss given Maimonides’ view that matter is corruptible and is subject to disappearance.\textsuperscript{185}

Maimonides invokes the Biblical concept of \textit{karet} – being cut off. To reiterate, Maimonides’ immortality seems to be consistently linked to intellectual perfection. We recall that even in his Thirteen Principles it is those Jews who have some knowledge of intellectual truths that are part of the world-to-come. In sum, Maimonides presents immortality in strictly abstract terms of the survival of the intellect. Theological difficulty remains as to his treatment of those who did not attain this perfection making their treatment dangerously close to the treatment of the wicked and evil.

Maimonides’ view expressed in \textit{Pereq Heleq} is consistent with his statement in \textit{GP I: 42} when he addresses the word “living” and, evoking Deut. 22:7, discusses the world-to-come in strictly incorporeal terms. Consistent with his focus on intellectual perfection is his lack of any significant interest whether or not the physical body becomes

\textsuperscript{185} See my discussion on matter and form below. See also my discussion on Maimonides’ interpretation of the story of the fall which also sheds a significant light on his view on form (body) and matter (soul).
resurrected. When forced to clarify his views, he insists that he never doubted that the resurrection of the dead but invokes here the concept of faith. Placing this concept in the category of faith means relegating it to “not-to-be-discussed rationally” argument. The controversy around this issue becomes even more complicated when one recalls Maimonides position of a community leader and a ruler of halachic decisions, yet this issue cannot be understood without taking into account Maimonides’ view on matter (body) and form (soul).

**Maimonides’ view on human nature: the body and the soul**

Maimonides’ conception of humans results from his view of human psycho-physical constitution. Since there is no counterpart that deals with the issue of the body and the soul in the Jewish tradition, Maimonides follows the Aristotelian model but gives it a specifically Jewish “twist.” He follows Aristotle’s articulation of the soul’s five faculties (nutritive, sentient, imaginative, appetitive, and rational) and strongly asserts that despite the soul’s five faculties, it is a “single soul.” The soul, he argues, possesses moral habits and in order to cultivate these virtues, the soul should be treated similarly to the way how a physician cures the body. While the physician needs to know all the parts of the body, the “physician of the soul” should similarly be well aware of all the faculties of the soul. The most important faculty of the soul is *rational* and while other parts of the soul are “like matter,” “the intellect is [soul’s] form.” Despite the absence of any analog of the philosophical definition of the soul in the Jewish tradition, Maimonides

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186 Stroumsa, *Maimonides in His World*, 182.
187 “Eight Chapters” in *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, 61.
188 Ibid., 64.
bridges the two by referring to Solomon’s statement that “Indeed, without knowledge a soul is not good.” By invoking this statement, he connects the intellect (rational part of the soul) to the overall human perfection and implicitly links Greek philosophy’s focus on the attainment of intellectual knowledge with a similar focus within the Jewish tradition.

We already observed that Maimonides acknowledges human limitations. In GP I: 34 Maimonides proposes that to achieve human perfection requires “to train [oneself] at first in the art of logic, then in the mathematical sciences according to the proper order, then in the natural sciences, and after that in the divine sciences” (75). His statement that certain matters are “only for a few solitary individuals of a very special sort, not for the multitude” (79) [Italics mine] is ostensibly elitist. Yet, while acknowledging that there are matters beyond human comprehension, Maimonides warns that pushing beyond these limits can result in apostasy.

**Maimonides on Ethics**

How do Maimonides’ views on human nature and human body and soul affect his construction of ethics? My attempts to address Maimonides’ articulation of ethics, made me realize that his conception of ethics encompasses a large variety of issues, some of which are contradictory. Prior to addressing Maimonides’ view on ethics, I turn to his

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189 Ibid., 64.
190 Elisha Aher is presented as an archetype of a heretic. In GP I: 32 he is painted as an Aristotelian philosopher who erroneously maintains the eternity of the world and is a person of great erudition and learning who wishes to know things that are beyond human apprehension and ends up speaking inappropriately about the deity.
191 As mentioned, I follow Shatz’s and Tirosh-Samuelson’s definitions.
interpretation of the story of the fall which foreshadows his view on human nature, human rationality, human perfection and the place of ethics.

It is significant that Maimonides addresses the story of the fall in his second chapter of the Guide since it demonstrates the centrality of this story to his further articulation of human perfection. In GP I: 2 Maimonides differentiates between truth and falsity and between “good” and “bad.” Maimonides posits that to distinguish between good and evil requires intellect but he claims that ethics is beyond the purview of the intellect but rather belongs to social conventions. He turns to the story of the fall and argues that Adam, the archetype of a perfect solitary individual, lost his intellectual perfection after succumbing to his corporeal desires (experiencing the pulls of matter). As the epitome of a rational man, he discusses a pre-fall Adam as capable of differentiating between the truth and falsehood and hence capable of theoretical perfection. As a solitary man he is seen as situated perfectly to pursue the life of contemplation. However, Adam possesses theoretical wisdom as well since God gave him a command. These two wisdoms comprise a unity, which initially has not been torn by the conflicting demands and desires. In a nutshell, a pre-fall Adam, “made in the image of God,” exemplifies a being closest to God because of his resemblance of God to the highest degree possible. This resemblance of God, though, relates to God’s intellect only.  

But what role do matter and form play in the story of the fall? In Maimonides’ view, the fall initiates Adam’s entrance into the world of the material desires and

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192 As noted, the ultimate human perfection is described in the Guide as attaining this closeness to God by developing the Acquired intellect which, as a consequence of one’s attainment of the highest intellectual abilities, becomes cojoined with the Active (Divine) intellect.
interrupts his quest for intellectual perfection via solitary contemplation. As a result, Adam becomes concerned with the issues related to values ("generally accepted opinions" – good and evil\(^{193}\)) rather than the truth.\(^{194}\) The fall, according to Maimonides, distorts man’s true nature previously aimed purely at the theoretical pursuits.\(^{195}\) This distortion produces a continual tension as to what truly amounts to the ideal life of man. It is only after the fall that issues of moral perfection assume importance.\(^{196}\)

\(^{193}\) Kreisel (1999) reminds that the "generally accepted" opinions relate to the universally evil actions. The evilness of these actions can be inferred hence the prohibitions against these are "intellected commandments" (69). The revelatory laws are also rational but these cannot be mandated to be known by reason. The distinction between the universal laws mandated by reason and the revelatory laws speak to the heart of the Jewish tradition. The "generally accepted" moral opinions, however, is a different issue. The distinction between fine and bad is not cognizable by the intellect.

\(^{194}\) The distinction between values and truth is framed in the Aristotelian differentiation between reasoning (theory, facts, truth, and falsity). Theory in this differentiation relates to "the realm of fact in which one see whether one opinion is valid and another invalid" (Lawrence Berman, “Maimonides on the Fall of Man,” \textit{AJS Review}, 50, 1980, 9). Action, in turn, relates to the sphere of subjective and as such is secondary to theory. Kreisel (1999) argues that Maimonides is following here Avicenna’s differentiation between “good” as related to \textit{praxis} and “true” as related to \textit{theoria}, hence "good" is term relevant to ethics, and "true" to sciences, metaphysics and the pursuit of the knowledge of the intelligibles. This, however, does not dispute the Aristotelian influence which highlights human free will. Kreisel writes: “The human will is the cornerstone in the Aristotelian tradition upon which the distinction between ‘good’ and ‘truth’ rest, but not because of the subjectivity in the desires of the will. ‘Good’ is different from ‘truth’ in that it designates something about which \textit{knowledge alone is insufficient}” (97). [Italics mine.] In line with his privileging of \textit{theoria}, existence is perceived by Maimonides in terms of “good,” whereas knowledge in terms of “truth.”

\(^{195}\) In the \textit{Commentary to Mishnah Avot}, Maimonides comments that the phrases “the empty man” and “the ignorant man” relate to the former as “one who does not have either wisdom or (moral) attributes,” and the latter as “one who does not have intellectual virtues but has some moral virtues” (Arthur David, Moses Maimonides: The Commentary to Mishnah Aboth, New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1968, 33). Therefore, morality is not predicated of one’s intellect. In the \textit{Commentary to Mishnah Avot}, Maimonides expands on the “empty” man as one who is “as if he is devoid of the good and of the evil” (David, 102). He elaborates on his definition of “ignorant” man as well and states that “ignorant” man is “beneficial for the general welfare and for the communities of states, since he has moral virtues through which his society and himself are benefited” (David, 103). The moral virtues here assume a clear utilitarian value.

\(^{196}\) Seeing nakedness, for instance, requires an additional contemplation only in the case when one is unable to control one’s corporeal desires, hence is in the imperfect state controlled by the imagination. Failure to curtail one’s desire, in turn, jeopardizes the attainment of intellectual perfection. Nakedness for a solitary man presents no reason for any additional contemplation.
However, this rendering of the story of the fall is interpreted in a variety of ways. For instance, Schwarzschild, \(^{197}\) contra my read, argues that it is a misconception to view Maimonides’ description of a pre-fall Adam as possessing purely intellectual knowledge. In his interpretation, man was endowed with morality prior to the fall and it is after the fall that morality became inferior to reason. \(^{198}\) For him, morality was and remained to be primary and man only partially lost his intellectual bond with God which can be re-instated through the re-acquisition of this bond through the means of philosophical contemplation. Regardless of the primacy of morality over intellect or vice versa, Adam is presented as the most perfect man with the intellect resembling this of God. But how did Adam, from this perfect, incorruptible man become transformed into a corrupted man? Whose fault is it? The story of Eve and the serpent, despite Maimonides’ omission in this chapter is instructive. Here again we note Maimonides’ disdain for imagination which is now dressed in the form of a serpent. In line with Plato’s disgust with the corporeal and his valorization of form, Eve exemplifies matter. Eve’s form becomes corrupted. The serpent, in turn, represents imagination unencumbered by reason hence running amok. Imagination-driven matter convolutes one’s rational ability and distorts one’s intellect. A verse from Job is also instructive since Maimonides argues again that man departed from his original perfect state of contemplation when, becoming corrupted


\(^{198}\) We have to be careful here though as to how we understand “morality.” Kreisel (1999) maintains that Maimonides’ interpretation of the story of the Fall is influenced by Avicenna’s view that “the generally accepted opinions in the sphere of morality belong to human qua social creatures. The very need for ‘generally accepted opinions,’ not only the content of these opinions, reflects the imperfect human condition” (74). Moral judgments, according to Maimonides, entail value judgments regarding various corporeal activities. Here again the imagination plays its devious role of retracting the individual from the pleasures of the pure intellect to the sensual pleasures.
by the desires of the flesh, he is no longer satisfied by the ascetic life style. This chapter also clearly highlights Maimonides’ uneasiness with the role of matter which runs through the Guide consistently and subtly underlines Maimonides’ favoring of humility exemplified through asceticism.

As mentioned, the material considerations interrupt the solitary. The need for social interaction and a subsequent strive for material rewards emerge upon Adam’s entrance into the material world. Social interactions, in turn, produce the need for political governance. Political duties, inherently connected to the material concerns, are a result of a necessity rather than of a choice. Ideally, the Torah, through the commandments, should have eliminated the need for a separate political leadership by providing the directions and control over human life. Closely following the Torah should prevent humans from evildoing and allow them to engage freely in metaphysical speculation and the contemplation of the truth. However, this is not always the case. Matter can easily prevent one from solitary contemplation and wreak a havoc breeding a number of significant problems. In this equation, the body (matter) obstructs one from attaining this perfection. This approach is consistent with Maimonides’ general discussion of the body in the Guide.

Maimonides’ view on ethics and Jewish sources

Maimonides articulates human nature in terms of the Aristotelian model but complements it with own interpretation. Similarly to the absence of the writings on the issue of the body and the soul, the Bible and rabbinic works do not have a separate set of writings devoted to ethics. Maimonides addresses ethics in the three of his works: Eight
Chapters  (EC) 199 which is a part of the Commentary on the Mishnah; Hilkhot De’ot (Laws Concerning the Character Traits) which is a part of the Mishneh Torah Code (Code); and some chapters in the Guide for the Perplexed. To underscore the absence of the conflict between the Jewish tradition and the philosophical tradition, in Eight Chapters, Maimonides interprets some of the Biblical quotes in light of philosophy. For instance, Greek philosophy views human wrongdoings as a result of a disease of the soul -- negative traits in human character leading to the inappropriate acts. These negative traits can be conceived in terms of the need for character education. To demonstrate the similar need for character training, in EC chapter 3 Maimonides recalls Solomon’s statement that “the way of the fool is straight in his eyes, but he who listens to the counsel is wise.” 200 In chapter 7 Maimonides builds further on the implications for the need of character training by referring to the quote that “Only your sins have separated you from God.” 201 While this quotation does not directly refer to the philosophical conceptualization of the “diseased soul,” training of the soul can be viewed in terms of “curing” it. Next, philosophy argues for self-reflexivity. This approach can be contrasted with the sages’ similarly urging everyone to reflect on their behavior: “Everyone who appraises his paths merits and sees the salvation of the Holy one, blessed be He. As it is

199 Mishnah Avot is the next to the last tractate of Seder Nezikin, the fourth order of the Mishnah. The five chapters of Avot articulate the Rabbinic principle of proper conduct and as such differ from the other tractates by focusing on ethical conduct. The Eight Chapters serve as an introduction to the Commentary on Mishnah Avot. In the Commentary to Mishnah Avot Maimonides applies to the teachings of the sages the same system as he outlines in Eight Chapters. In both instances, he advocates moderation and yet the pious man’s behavior departs from the moderate approach and leans toward the extreme especially in relation to pride where Maimonides advocates humbleness of spirit.
200 Weiss and Butterworth, 66
201 Ibid., 81
said: ‘And to him who sets his ways aright will I show the salvation of God.’

In both cases, a difficulty, if not an impossibility, of sustaining a constant level of moral behavior is acknowledged. Philosophy perceives humans as oscillating between noble and base actions and inclinations. As an analog, Maimonides refers to Solomon’s statement that “There is no man who is just upon the earth, who does only good and does not sin.”

However, performance of good deeds leads to a sense of satisfaction and happiness. This is acknowledged by both philosophy and the Jewish tradition. Scripture maintains that only “the soul of the wicked desires evil” but the righteous seek justice and delight in it.

By recalling these specific statements, Maimonides aligns the philosophical perceptions of morality with that of the Jewish tradition.

According to Maimonides, all of the aforementioned issues have an overriding principle that is shared by philosophy and the Jewish tradition, namely, human free will. The biblical quotes selected by Maimonides related to the issues of wrongdoing, self-reflexivity, and morality eloquently allude to the fact that all is governed by human free choice. Maimonides implicitly argues that “there is no doubt is that all of man’s actions are given over to him. If he wishes to act he does so, and if he does not wish to act he does not; there is no compulsion whatsoever upon him.”

Free will implies, however, consequences upon one’s actions. Disobeying the Biblical injunction that states “see I

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202 Ibid., 74.
203 Ibid., 73.
204 Ibid., 79.
205 Ibid., 85.
have set before this day life and good, death and evil… choose life,”

But how do the commandments relate to moral virtues and what does this connection tell us about human nature? Can the commandments eradicate (or overcome) all (or any) evil inclinations? The commandments are discussed in terms of training and in *Eight Chapters* and also in *Laws of Repentance* Maimonides argues that training can overcome bad character traits. Yet in *GP* I: 34 he seems to maintain that training can have only *limited* effect and states explicitly that the rational virtues that lead to the ultimate human perfection cannot be attained without the development of the moral virtues. If training cannot guarantee moral virtues and yet the ultimate human perfection cannot be attained without moral virtues, how attainable is the ultimate human perfection? The question of human rational activity as the source of ethical perfection remains ambiguous as well. Given Maimonides’ skepticism about the role of matter, what role does matter play in this quandary? Can human rationality serve as a tool to overcome evil inclinations - a consequence of matter? In *GP* III: 12 corporeal pleasures are presented as the source of evil. In his *Treatise on Logic* chapter 14, Maimonides states that “Man’s governance of himself consists in making his soul acquire the virtuous moral habits and cease to have the vicious moral habits, if any have been formed.”

How does Maimonides’ view on human nature reflect on his conception of human morality? Maimonides strictly differentiates between the moral virtues and the rational virtues. Following Aristotle, morality for Maimonides belongs to the aforementioned

206 Ibid., 85.
207 Ibid., 160.
*appetitive* part of the soul related to “the power by which a man desires, or is repulsed by, a certain thing” and the sentient part – taste, smell, sight, hearing, and touch – being the “servant” of the appetitive part. 208 Man, Maimonides argues, should direct all his actions on knowledge of God “in so far as that lies within man’s power.” 209 To acquire this knowledge of God, however, requires developing first a healthy body and a healthy soul: “the purpose of [one’s] body’s health is that the soul find its instruments healthy and sound in order that it can be directed toward the [divine] sciences and toward acquiring the moral and rational virtues, so that [man] might arrive at that goal.” 210 While with this statement Maimonides continues prioritizing knowledge of God as the ultimate purpose, moral and rational virtues play the role of the stepping-stones to this goal. Moral actions are ascertained as “correct opinions with regard to God” and cannot be attained without a Law (*GP* II: 40, 384). Therefore, the Law is indisputable as the means to acquiring moral and rational virtues.

Given that Maimonides asserts that knowledge of God is the *ultimate* perfection, what *conditions* are most beneficial to achieve this ultimate aim? Maimonides demonstrates certain ambivalence between the endorsement of an extreme devotion or piety and a more moderate approach. In *EC* chapter 5 Maimonides, presents *solitude and contemplation* as most conducive to the ultimate goal of knowledge of God: “If a man sets this notion (i.e., knowledge of God) as his goal, he will discontinue many of his actions and generally diminish his conversations.” 211 By invoking Deut. 6:5: “And you

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208 Ibid., 63.
209 Ibid., 75.
210 Ibid., 75.
211 Ibid., 77.
shall love the Lord your God withal your heart and with all your soul,” 212 he maintains that humans should undertake only those actions that lead to this ultimate aim. This position implies extreme devotion, and yet in EC Maimonides argues that the middle way (the doctrine of the mean) is the position most natural to humans. In his words, “it is necessary to aim at the mean in actions and not depart from it toward one of the two extremes.” 213 In EC chapter 4 he discusses the virtues of the soul in terms of the mean (e.g., “moderation is the moral habit between lust and insensitivity to pleasure” 214 ).

In the GP Maimonides places his focus on the soul in relation to human as a social and political being. In GP III: 27, he links soul with the concept of the political man while arguing for the inseparability of the soul and the body. In his discussion of human perfection, Maimonides makes a distinction related to the purposes of these perfections and their applicability either to the elite (the welfare of the soul) or to the multitude (the welfare of the body). Maimonides argues that while man has two perfections, there is a qualitative distinction between them. A first perfection pertains to the perfection of the body and Maimonides avers that before the bodily needs are addressed, the perfection of the soul cannot be attained. However, it is the perfection of the soul that is an ultimate perfection. One cannot lead a solitary existence and achieve the perfection of the body. The latter entails having a shelter, food and other necessities that ensure one’s proper physical functioning. These can only be attained through man’s political association, since man’s nature, following Aristotle, is political (GP III: 27,

212 Ibid., 78.
213 Ibid., 73.
214 Ibid., 67.
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511). This distinction itself carries certain political undertones. Maimonides maintains here that the welfare of the body is focused on the well-being of the state and serves the improvement of human life achieved through first “the abolition of [humans’] wronging each other” and is “useful for life in society so that the affairs of the city may be ordered” (GP III: 27, 510). This again is largely done through the recourse to the Law.

In his articulation, welfare of the body pertains to the multitude, whereas the perfection of the soul relates to the capable individual’s ultimate perfection. In Maimonides’ view, only when the first perfection is out of the way, one can strive for the ultimate perfection: “to become rational in actu” or “to have an intellect in actu” (GP III: 27, 511). Perfection of the welfare of the soul is geared toward formation of correct opinions “corresponding to [human] respective capacity” (GP III: 27, 510). The welfare of the soul presents a qualitatively higher purpose and is unrelated to any moral qualities.

**Maimonides’ on piety or moderation - solitary or political individual?**

Maimonides’ discussion of human perfection and morality oscillates between his focus on solitary pursuits and the need for social and political engagement. Correlated to this is his tension between endorsement of extreme piety and his rejection of it. In the *Commentary to Mishnah Avot*, Chapter 5: VII Maimonides defines as a “wise” man someone who possesses the perfected both moral and intellectual virtues. He then contrasts him with a “saintly” man defined as someone who similarly holds the heightened moral virtues but in this case, these virtues “incline a bit toward an

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215 Piety is also connected to the body itself. In the *Commentary to Mishnah Avot* 4, IV, Maimonides reflects on the Rabbinic statement that arrogance is the sin and expounds on the saying that one is to “[b]e exceedingly humble in spirit for the expectation of man is the worm, meaning to say, you are required to compel your soul so that pride will be removed from it through your contemplating the future of the body, that is becoming worm” (David, 70). This is also consistent with Maimonides’ view on the resurrection.
The term “saintly” man is used interchangeably with the term “hasid” precisely because of this “increase (beyond the mean).” Maimonides, in accord with his view that in some cases moral vices might be necessary, argues “For the exaggeration in a matter would be termed ‘hasid’, whether that exaggeration would be in the good or in the evil.” [Italics mine.] 217

The wise man has seven virtues: four moral virtues and three intellectual virtues. The moral virtues relate to one’s humility and exhibit such qualities as not speaking before someone who is greater in wisdom; not interrupting; and being capable of admitting lack of knowledge. These qualities do not seem to have a direct relation to any ethical dilemmas but rather reflect one’s ability to be respectful and willing to accommodate the needs of others. The intellectual virtues, in turn, relate to one’s rational ability to skillfully present one’s opinion; not being easily swayed by the arguments of the others; and being able to question and to respond skillfully to the questioning of others. These intellectual virtues reflect the “extraordinary wisdom” and represent the proper way of learning exemplified in ability to determine “what is proper to be given precedence,… [and] what is proper to postpone.” 218 These virtues undoubtedly highlight one’s rational thinking. Maimonides does not provide a similar discussion of the “saintly” man. Yet, in chapter 5: X, he does reflect on the Rabbinic distinction between a saintly man and a wicked man. He states again that “the saintly man is one who will increase in the good deeds, meaning that he will incline a bit toward one of the two extremes” [Italics

216 David, Moses Maimonides. The Commentary to Mishnah Aboth, 104.
217 David points that the word “hesed” is used in both meanings: as something honorable (i.e., Gen. 40:14) or as a euphemism for something impious (i.e., Leviticus 20:17). See his note 70, p. 157.
218 David, 105.
mine], while the wicked man is the one who is leaning toward the other extreme.\textsuperscript{219} The saintly man is further described as one who is slow to any feelings of anger as contrasted with the wicked man characterized by vice or anger.

To recall, in the \textit{EC}, Maimonides places his focus largely on the doctrine of the mean. In order to circumvent any controversy related to piety, Maimonides treats the doctrine of the mean as a corrective for any excessive approach. The doctrine of the mean serves to balance the Jewish view on morality which favors extreme piety with the Greek approach of moderation, and bridges the Jewish tradition with Greek philosophy. Precisely because of his aim to unite these two traditions, Maimonides defines a pious man (\textit{hasid}) as a virtuous man. While, as discussed, in general, the pious man in the Jewish tradition is conceived of as someone who goes \textit{beyond} the necessary by the letter of the law, here Maimonides defines a pious man in terms of moderation and argues that he “weigh[s] all his actions with a view to this mean.”\textsuperscript{220} He maintains that the principle of moderation aims to preserve equilibrium and “when the body gets out of equilibrium, we look to which side it inclines in becoming unbalanced, and then oppose it with its contrary until it returns to equilibrium.”\textsuperscript{221} This equilibrium is similar to the previously discussed bodily equilibrium: when the soul becomes “sick,” its treatment “must follow the same course in treating it as in the medical treatment for bodies.”\textsuperscript{222}

But how exactly does piety relate to the body and the soul? In the \textit{GP} III: 12, Maimonides argues that the temperament of the body affects the moral qualities of the

\textsuperscript{219} Ibid., 108.
\textsuperscript{220} Weiss and Butterworth, 68.
\textsuperscript{221} Ibid., 68.
\textsuperscript{222} Ibid., 68.
soul. By positing that the necessities of the body are not limitless but rather the body needs, as stated in Gen. 28:20 “‘bread to eat, and raiment to put on’ without any luxury” (GP III: 12, 446), Maimonides subtly argues in favor of asceticism. A pious man’s necessities are rather negligible since the body, according to a hasid, requires a bare minimum for its sustenance. It is safe to say that a hasid cares very little about being a political man since the care of the body (welfare of the body) is not his prerogative.

**Maimonides on solitary man vs. political man**

The observed tension in Maimonides’ assessment for the proper place for the individual, leads to the question: can one lead solitary pursuit if the human needs cannot be met outside of the social and political environment? Moreover, what conditions are most conducive to a political leader? While discussing a political leader, Maimonides reiterates his skepticism for passions, which he ties to the appetitive faculty of the soul. He argues that a secular, political leader should never “let loose the reins of anger nor let passion gain mastery over him” (GP I: 54, 126). Yet, Maimonides offers an astute political comment arguing that in some cases mercy and grace and similarly anger and wrath do have a place and should be exercised for utilitarian reasons, “not out of mere compassion and pity, but in accordance with what is fitting” (126). The perception of hard-heartedness or vengeance are in some cases the actions needed for a greater good, yet, “it behooves that acts of mercy, forgiveness, pity, and commiseration should proceed from the governor of a city to a much greater extent than acts of retaliation” (127). If grace and mercy are the actions dissociated from God’s affections but represent human phenomenon, then acts of anger, vengeance, and jealousy similarly originate and are
carried forward by humans. Human governance is a pinnacle of all these actions resulting more often than not from an uncontrollable, unbridled human passion. Human passions can become detrimental when humans are placed in conditions that cannot be fully controlled by them.

Ostensibly, many of Maimonides’ writings exhibit a clear tension between the ethical character traits needed for the individual’s own perfection and the traits applicable to the social context. In both, his *Eight Chapters* and the *Mishneh Torah* Maimonides treats the ethical character traits as necessary to individual’s own perfection. These works demonstrate no contradiction between developing moral traits relevant to the solitary individual and the same traits applicable within any social context. Yet a certain tension continues to exist especially in his statements in the *GP*. Before addressing Maimonides’ statements related the ethical character traits needed for individual’s perfection and the traits applicable to the social context, I turn to the acknowledged influence of Aristotle on Maimonides’ conceptualization of ethics. To do so, I will briefly contrast how ethics is described in Maimonides’ *Eight Chapters* and Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*.

One of the significant divergences between these two respective approaches relates to the portrayal of man’s perfection and the approach to contemplation. While *EC* portrays man’s perfections in terms of a solitary individual, in *N. E.* man is described as a political man. The explanation of why political nature of man is downplayed in *EC* can be garnered from Maimonides’ statement in *Logic*, chapter 14. Here Maimonides argues that while in the past people were governed according to the *nomoi* – human made laws, “[i]n these times all that – I mean, the regimes and the nomoi - has been dispensed with,
and people are governed by divine commands.” 223 The Torah replaces the need for the nomoi and ideally should play the role of a political “leader” as well. 224 We note also that in Logic, chapter 14 Maimonides outlines his definition of divine science and divides it into two parts. One part focuses on “the investigation of every being which is neither a body nor a power in the body” 225 which includes Separate intellects (angels). The second part focuses on “the very remote causes for everything which all other sciences encompass.” 226 These investigations are done through the use of logic which on its own is not a science but a tool for investigation.

Another rather significant difference between Maimonides’ approach to ethics and that of Aristotle relates to their respective views on practical wisdom. For Aristotle, practical wisdom is one of the human natural excellences and is needed for people to make choices (N. E. 1145a4-9). For Aristotle, excellence is "a state concerned with choice, lying in a mean relative to us, being determined by reason" (1106b36). The observance of the commandments, to the contrary, is not a matter of choice. The philosophers’ emphasis is placed on the moral virtues related to the state of the soul, whereas the rabbinic focus is on the observance of the commandments. Maimonides, contrary to Aristotle, does not define practical wisdom as a virtue. Instead, he consistently favors theoretical virtues belonging to the soul’s rational power. This difference again can be explained in terms of their respective view on the political man. In this case, the Law is central to this distinction: the authority of the Law precludes the

223 Weiss and Butterworth, 160.
224 While the discussion of the prophets exhibits certain political connotations, yet as a whole, Maimonides does not appear to make any claims that can place his EC into the domain of a political writing.
225 Ibid., 159.
226 Ibid., 159-160.
need for the practical wisdom exemplified in the deliberation. The Jewish people are not expected to be deliberating and selecting *which* specific commandments to follow since the observance of the commandments is mandatory. There is also no need to determine the level of their observance, hence the use of the doctrine of the mean is inappropriate to this case (i.e., one cannot apply the doctrine of the mean to the level of the observance of the law of kashrut). In fact, deliberations can be detrimental to one’s level of observance. Experience, often a part of the practical intellect, also does not contribute to the observance of the Law – one cannot determine through one’s experience *which* laws to follow and *which* to disregard. In short, the practical reason plays no part in the observance of the Law. The Law is already determined to be rational and practical and no additional deliberation regarding this matter is necessary.

Yet, deliberation is favored by Maimonides in relation to the theoretical knowledge (*theoria*). In Maimonides’ view, the theoretical knowledge (the soul’s rational part) ensures human perfection. As it will be noted in my discussion of the prophets, Maimonides never discusses prophets’ practical wisdom but rather focuses on their rational knowledge.

**Maimonides on Prophets – political men?**

In the *Eight Chapters*, Maimonides discusses morality as a *preparation* for prophecy and presents it in terms of devoting oneself to the pursuit of knowledge of God. Previously observed tension between solitary pursuits and the need for the social and political engagement continues in Maimonides’ discussion of prophecy. In *EC*, the prophetic way of life is presented as a solitary quest for knowledge of God and the
prophecy is not discussed in terms of prophets’ legislative power. In his discussion of prophets, Maimonides clearly privileges Moses. In *Pereq Heleq*, Maimonides focuses on Moses’ perfection as a receiver and a transmitter of Divine Law, whereas in *Eight Chapters* he underscores the utmost level of human intellectual perfection and its limitations. Further, in the *GP*, Moses combines the skills of a solitary individual with the skills of a rule-maker and attains proximity to Aristotle’s political man. In the Torah and *Mishnah*, the portrayal of the prophets also assumes some strong political connotations. In *Commentary on the Mishnah, Introduction to Seder Zeraim* Maimonides spells out how one’s status as a prophet can be substantiated by describing a prophet as someone who is “a man of learning, integrity [or/and faith], temperance, wisdom, and pleasant traits.” Maimonides points to the political role of a prophet by stating that a prophet *can* issue ordinance, but “under no circumstances can one add to or delete from a [Torah] precept through prophecy. … This is because no (new) Torah was given after the first prophet [Moses].” Whereas the pre-fall Adam exemplifies the prototype of a solitary man, Moses is the prototype of a perfect political man whose perfection is exemplified in his prophetic gift. In the *GP I: 54*, Moses is described as one who achieved the highest level of human perfection. Yet, in *Hilkhot De’ot*, Moses is presented in terms of extreme humility as “‘very humble’ and not merely humble” (*H. De’ot, 31*).

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227 Moses can be discussed in relation to “emulating” God but of course not His attributes but His actions. Hence perfect leadership can be linked to *imitatio Dei*. See Lawrence Berman’s works especially his “The Ethical Views of Maimonides with the Context of Islamicate Civilizations” in *Perspectives on Maimonides: Philosophical and Historical Studies*, ed. Joel Kraemer, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).


229 Ibid., 62.
Moses’ humbleness is predicated on his awareness of God as the lawgiver and the ultimate judge. Given this multilayered portrayal, Moses represents both, a solitary man and a political man. His ability for contemplation leading to apprehension of God and a high level of humility testifies to his propensity for solitary activities and yet, his highly developed prophetic skills are making him a perfect political leader.

In the *Commentary to Mishnah Avot*, Maimonides discusses prophecy from a slightly different angle. Here both virtues – intellectual virtue and moral virtue - are presented as necessary for the attainment of prophecy. Intellectual virtues are not portrayed as necessary for the moral behavior. Intellectual virtues can demonstrate immorally since even a “wicked man” might possess intellectual virtues and yet might exercise them for evil deeds.\(^{230}\) In addition, the interpretation of *what* constitutes moral virtues might not be unanimous producing additional controversy since one can “possess intellectual virtues and moral virtues with which he will cause harm [to others].”\(^{231}\) In fact, it might be very seldom that there is a man in whom intellectual and moral virtues are in the perfect *balance*, and if this man exists, the philosopher’s term him “the godlike man.”\(^{232}\) Maimonides, in accord with his theory of prophecy, defines this man as a “messenger of the Lord.”\(^{233}\) This “messenger of God” is someone who possesses a perfect *combination* of intellectual and moral virtues.

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\(^{230}\) David, *Moses Maimonides*, 112.

\(^{231}\) Ibid., 112.

\(^{232}\) Here Maimonides is referring to Aristotle’s *N. E.*

\(^{233}\) David, 113.
Given that Moses in the eyes of Maimonides exemplifies the perfect man, can we infer that the perfect man is the political man? In GP II: 40 Maimonides acknowledges that humans are not only social creatures who merely depend on each other for survival, but also, following Aristotle, are political creatures ruled by law. Law remains central in his articulation of the successful survival of any human society. Rule of law implies the presence of a ruler who perfects that society by “gaug[ing] the actions of the individuals, perfecting that which is deficient and reducing that which is excessive” (GP II: 40, 382). Maimonides directly links a ruler to ethical considerations by further stating that a ruler “prescribes actions and moral habits” (GP II: 40, 382). Some of the statements made by Maimonides complicate drawing an affirmative conclusion that the perfect man is the political man especially given his tension in relation to solitude and social engagement. To address further this aporia, I turn once again to the interplay between piety and law.

**Piety and Law**

I already noted tension in Maimonides’ approach to piety (and a hasid) and his articulation of the centrality of the Law. But what is the *relationship* between piety and the Law? What role does the law play for a hasid? And how does piety reflect on man as a political being? While being a political man is not a prerogative for a hasid, and unless we always connect piety with solitude, piety does not prevent one from being a political (or at least a social) man. Piety does not necessitate distance from one’s community. How

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Moses’ perfection is predicated of the notion of “emanation” or “overflow” from Deity (see GP II: 11-12 and specific to prophecy see GP II: 36). Ultimate perfection hence is linked to the overflow. Kreisel proposes that those who possess this “overflowing” perfection are compelled, despite their possible preference for solitude, to “perfect others in accordance with the level of one’s own perfection” (Kreisel, 1999, 135). In other words, this might not even be a choice on their part but strong urgency.
cogent is the relationship between piety and the philosophical ethics articulated through the adherence to the Law? Remembering that for a pious man God is the ultimate lawgiver, is Maimonides able to avoid successfully the controversy between the philosophical view on the rational part of the soul with its tendency to deliberation and piety’s disdains for this approach? Regarding the soul, we recall that the mean (which in itself can be seen as a part of deliberation) determines what is good for the soul (the state of equilibrium). The commandments, to the contrary, expect leaning toward the extreme. While the mean focuses on the individual, the commandments promote the communal rather than merely an individual focus. What does this quandary tell us about the relationship between the mean and the commandments and hence between the commandments and the soul? To bridge the two and to circumvent the tension, Maimonides interprets the commandments from both the social/political and from the individual viewpoint. In other words, when the Torah commands something, it includes both the social and the individual value. In EC, Maimonides interprets the commandments as being good for the soul (i.e., generosity benefits the poor – the community as a whole and the soul of the one who is generous – the individual). Specifically, in EC chapter 4 Maimonides argues that the perfect Law perfects people since the commandments are “a discipline for the powers of the soul.” We know from his discussion that one’s soul can succumb to evil inclinations generated by matter. How is Maimonides dealing with these inclinations and what role does the Law play here?

235 Weiss and Butterworth, 70.
236 Ibid., 72.
Human nature and the commandments

Prior to turning directly to the question of the role of the commandments, I briefly review Maimonides’ distinction between the man-made laws (a nomos) and the divine law keeping in mind that expecting humans to follow a man-made law has different implications than the expectation of the observance of divinely ordained commands. In GP II: 40 Maimonides identifies law as divine by its ends and utility and posits that divine law, which, despite being attentive of “the soundness of the circumstances pertaining to the body,” places focus on “the soundness of belief” in order to “inculcate correct opinions with regard to God” (GP II: 40, 384). Maimonides states: “You must know that this guidance comes from Him, may He be exalted, and this Law is divine” (GP II: 40, 384). Contrary to the nomos, divine law is predicated of the belief in God. And yet, divine law should be communicated in the manner similar to the nomos. Therefore, it can only be delivered by the most perfect individuals. Maimonides asserts that God placed “the faculty of the ruling” in certain individuals, namely, “the prophet or the bringers of the nomos” for whom “this guidance comes from Him, may He be exalted, and that the Law is divine” (GP II: 40, 384).

With the divinity of the Law established in GP II: 39-40, Maimonides discusses the purpose of the commandments throughout GP III: 25 to III: 49. In GP III: 25 Maimonides elucidates the four kinds of actions: vain, futile, frivolous, and good or excellent. The latter kind of actions results in attainment of noble end and is related to

237 Man-made laws can be the laws promulgated by a tyrant or a dictator interested only in advancing his power and securing his own interests.

238 Kreisel (1999) points to the direct relation between the imagination and the Divine Law: “only a prophecy in which the imagination is absent from its theoretical component, however, could serve as the foundation of a law which deserves to be labeled divine” (81).
acts of divine legislation. Maimonides argues that all commandments have reasons and purpose. In *GP* III: 35, Maimonides divides the commandments into fourteen classes and then further separates these commandments into two larger groups: transgression between man and his fellow man and transgressions between man and God” (538). The latter differentiation demonstrates that in Maimonides’ view, some of the commandments are specific to the social/political, while the others relate to metaphysical. In *GP* II: 39 Maimonides addresses the divine Law aimed at the individual perfection. Recalling his view on the welfare of the body contrasted with the welfare of the soul, ostensibly the commandments related to the metaphysical pertain to the individual perfection.

This still does not answer the question of why should humans abide by the commandments? Obedience to the commandments is human demonstration of their love for God but also testify to their fear of God. In *GP* III: 44, Maimonides states that the commandments are “the constant commemoration of God, the love of Him and the fear of Him.” He again reminds us that a number of the commandments serve the purpose of instilling “useful opinions” (574). In *Laws of the Principles of the Torah*, Maimonides addresses specifically the commandments focused on love for God and on his awesomeness. He reminds us that human apprehension of the intelligibles produces in humans fear of God born out of their recognition of their own inferiority and imperfection. Only when one is obeying God out of love and without any expectations of a reward, is human perfection exemplified.

But how do the moral issues relate to one’s individual perfection? In *GP* III: 27 Maimonides is explicit in holding morality inferior to the rational perfection which
exemplifies, as previously noted, the ultimate perfection. To resolve this quandary, some scholars argue that Maimonides differentiates between ethics known by intellect and ethics resulted from the generally accepted opinion, hence maintains two types of ethics: rational and conventional.\textsuperscript{239} This differentiation allows taking into account different circumstances and is in line with Maimonides’ view that most people cannot achieve intellectual perfection. When viewing ethics’ primary goal in terms of the well-being of humans (the generally accepted opinions ethics), the improved conditions can potentially lead to attaining intellectual perfection. Yet, for the most people, the doctrine of the mean is the most suitable approach, therefore, the Law, which governs society-at-large rather than focuses on the exceptional individuals, is framed from the standpoint of the mean.

Do these improved human conditions always lead to human moral perfection? Further, does moral perfection result in the subsequent intellectual perfection? The response to this question is complicated by Maimonides’ view that immorality is the result of the underdeveloped rational faculty. This still leaves the question as what comes first, the perfection of the rationality or the perfection of the morality, unresolved. For instance, Kreisel argues that for Maimonides human moral perfection is the \textit{means} to the final, ultimate perfection which is indisputably intellectual perfection.\textsuperscript{240} He posits that for Maimonides ethics relates to the faculty of the soul since the body dissipates upon its

\textsuperscript{239} Howard Kreisel, “Individual Perfection vs. Communal Welfare and the Problem of Contradictions in Maimonides’ Approach to Ethics,” \textit{Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research}, 58 (1992), maintains that prophetic morality and conventional morality are quite similar except for the ultimate aim. While the Divine Law includes many of the conventional moral opinions, the \textit{nomoi’s} aim never reaches beyond one’s corporeal well-being, whereas the Divine Law aims to promote the ultimate intellectual perfection exemplified in attaining knowledge of God.

\textsuperscript{240} Kreisel, “Individual Perfection vs. Communal Welfare.” See also Kreisel (1999), \textit{Maimonides’ Political Thought}. There he argues that Maimonides harmonizes intellectual and political perfection and yet he reminds that for Maimonides, “God’s essence is intellect.” Kreisel adds: “\textit{To the degree} that humans engage in intellection, they approach divinity” (131). [Italics mine.]
disintegration as the result of death. Contra Kreisel, Schwarzschild\textsuperscript{241} contends that for Maimonides practical ethics is primary. He argues that given Maimonides’ view on God, the ultimate aim is to attain knowledge of God’s actions (i.e., loving-kindness, justice, and righteousness) rather than his incomprehensible to humans’ metaphysical essence. Given that this second goal is unattainable, Schwarzschild interprets Maimonides’ ultimate aim as being unrelated to the pursuit of purely theoretical, metaphysical truths. However, Schwarzschild’s interpretation seems to overlook the significance of Maimonides’ words that “the moral habits are useful to all people in their mutual dealings – that all this is not to be compared with this ultimate end and does not equal it, being but preparations made for the sake of this end. For Maimonides, the ultimate perfection is “neither the perfection of health nor the perfection of moral habits” (\textit{GP} III: 54, 636). [Italics mine.]. Perhaps this reflects on the ideal vs. real state of the affairs since in \textit{GP} III: 51, Maimonides states that, “mostly this [perfection] is achieved in solitude and isolation” (\textit{GP} III:51, 621).

**Human perfection: \textit{Guide: III: 51 and III: 54}**

The discussion above underscores Maimonides’ struggle with the tension grounded in the perceived ideal of human perfection. To further demonstrate this tension, in \textit{GP} III: 54 Maimonides describes the four kinds of human perfection: perfection of possessions, perfection of the moral virtues and acquisition and exercise of the rational virtues. It is the acquisition and exercise of the rational virtues that Maimonides values the most. Wisdom related to apprehension of God remains superior to the possession of

\textsuperscript{241} Schwarzschild, Moral Radicalism and ‘Middlingness.’
the material goods and the performance of the commandments. Maimonides cites *Genesis Rabbah* xxxv which states that “Neither things desirable nor things thou canst desire are to be compared into her, but let that glorifieth glory in this, that he understands and knoweth Me” (637). And yet, he further complicates these words by adding that upon achieving this apprehension, one “will always have in view loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment, through assimilation to his actions” (638). These words resonate with his assertion in *GP* II: 37 that “from that individual’s perfection there is something left over that suffices to make other perfect” (374-375). These statements allow us to infer that individual perfection can work as a *stimulant* for the growth of the communal perfection.

But what about Maimonides’ assertion that taking care of others at the expense of neglecting one’s own soul has terrible repercussions? He maintains that a distraction from intellectual cognition makes one a subject to “the evils of this world” which is “proportionate to the duration of the period of distraction” (*GP* III: 51, 625). How to resolve this quandary? This becomes even more onerous when we recall that Maimonides contends that his conclusion of the *Guide* is spelled out in the chapter 51 rather than in his last chapter 54. What chapter reflects his genuine view of human potentialities? Does the placement of his chapter III: 54 as the last chapter represent Maimonides’ attempt to conceal his true opinion? If this is the case, why is Maimonides concealing something ostensibly non-controversial? One could agree that the intellectual aim presented in terms of a theoretical activity rather than the endorsement of a wholly devotional worship would be perceived as more problematic in the eyes of his critics. The controversy might,
however, relate to Maimonides’ prioritization of the intellectual knowledge. Does intellectual knowledge cancel the need for the commandments especially for those who lack understanding that every commandment has its reason? Is his insistence on intellectual pursuits a subtle attack against blind faith: “If, however, you have apprehended God and His actions in accordance with what is required by the intellect, you should afterwards engage in totally devoting yourself to Him…” (III: 51, 620)? What is the true meaning of this statement?

Yet, not all scholars see any controversy in the placement of these chapters. For instance, Frank contends that GP III: 54 is a true representation of Maimonides’ position and in fact is the refutation that Maimonides connects human perfection to a life of contemplation. He argues that Maimonides’ assertion that knowledge of God comes through one’s knowledge of God’s deeds represents his true conviction. However, this position seems to overlook that for Maimonides, the apprehension of God can take place “in a measure corresponding to [human] capacity” (638). This statement returns us the full circle to the question as to who is capable of attaining this apprehension. We should also keep in mind that this capability should be coupled with one’s inclination. In other words, one is to be both inclined and but also capable of emulating God’s actions.

242 Though, at some point, Maimonides argues that understanding the precise reason for each commandment might have an adverse effect which does not cancel his insistence that all commandments do have reasons.


244 The notion of “emulating” or “imitating” God’s actions deserves a separate discussion. Here we just mention that God’s ways are to be understood figuratively since for Maimonides, to “imitate” God means “perfecting one’s character traits and ethical activity” (Kreisel, 1999, 129). For instance, in the Mishneh Torah, Laws of Megillah, Maimonides rules in favor of gifts to the poor rather than the meals and presents to friends: “No joy is greater and more glorious than the joy of gladdening the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widows, and the strangers. He who gladdens the hearts of these unhappy people imitates God” (Philip Birnbaum, trans., Mishneh Torah: Maimonides).
So how should we interpret Maimonides’ conclusion related to human perfection? What is his purpose for stating that III: 51 is his final chapter and yet concluding with III: 54? In III: 54 Maimonides states again that one’s perfection is achieved “in a measure corresponding to [human] capacity” (638). This might be his allusion to the fact that for some humans matter might not be an obstacle for attaining the ultimate perfection. In III: 51 Maimonides discusses Moses and the Patriarchs who appear to transcend the limits imposed by matter. And yet, while Moses and the Patriarchs attained perfection, Maimonides undermines their uniqueness when in III: 51 he states that Aaron and Miriam also died in the pleasure of this apprehension of the intelligibles due to the intensity of their passionate love by experiencing “salvation from death” and the “condition of enduring permanence” (628). Ostensibly, the key ideas addressed in III: 54 do not line up with the key ideas in III: 51. In III: 51 Maimonides links the constant contemplations over God (emptying oneself) to providence.\textsuperscript{245} Elsewhere, however, Maimonides argues that apprehension of God is a very rare thing. Notwithstanding human ability to attain this perfection and hence God’s protection, Maimonides harkens back to the notion of free will and places responsibility on humans. For Maimonides, to maintain the bond with God remains to be a matter of choice and humans are “the agents who produce this separation” (626).

\textit{Code of law and Ethics}, (Spencertown: Hebrew Publishing, 1974, 109) [Italics mine.] Another example of “emulating” God or being “Godlike” can be observed in Mishneh Torah, Food Defilement 16: 12 where a “godlike” man is described as someone who “separates himself from the rest of the people without either touching them or eating and drinking with them. Abstinence leads to physical purity from evil doings; physical purity leads to spiritual holiness; and spiritual holiness leads to being godlike” (Birnbaum, 199-200).

\textsuperscript{245} This is another instance of Maimonides’ ambivalence related to solitary pursuits and social engagement.
The concluding chapters address the commandments in a slightly different vein. While III: 25 – 49 focus on the observance of the Law as it pertains to the multitude (and the inculcation of previously mentioned “useful opinions”), III: 51 emphasize the exceptional individuals. Recalling the famous Parable of the Palace discussed in III: 51, Maimonides stipulates that only the ones who engage on speculations really enter the “antechambers” – attain apprehension of the intelligibles and hence enter the “inner court.” This is the only group that achieves human perfection. Attaining this perfection cancels the need for any material sustenance: “For his intellect attained such strength that all gross faculties in the body ceased to function” (620). Apprehending God results in total devotion:

If, however, you have apprehended God and His acts in accordance with what is required by the intellect, you should afterwards engage in totally devoting oneself to Him, endeavor to come closer to Him, and strengthen the bond between you and Him – that is, the intellect” (620).

The words applied to this group bring to mind a pious man. Maimonides connects devotion with apprehension of God by saying that “love is proportionate to apprehension” (621) which can be interpreted as the absence of a genuine sincerity in all other cases. And yet, Maimonides complicates again by reminding us that God’s apprehension refers to “intellectual apprehension, not to imagination; for thought concerning imaginings is not called knowledge” (621).

The issue of solitude underscores this discussion. Here again, apprehension and love of God occur in solitary isolation: “every excellent man stays frequently in solitude and does not meet anyone unless it is necessary” (GP III: 51, 621). Solitude allows for the strongest bond since one’s thoughts are totally devoted to God and are emptied of
anything else. Following the commandments and automatically undertaking any practices of worship nullify any existent bond because of the resulted distraction. But how does one engage in daily activities? Maimonides tries to remedy this problematic contention by stating that for those whose consciousness is empty of anything but God “the intellect is wholly turned toward Him” and even when one goes about one’s mundane activities, “I sleep, but my heart waketh; it is the voice of my beloved that knocketh…” (GP III: 51, 623). And what about Moses’ political actions which inherently require daily bodily activities? Do these activities disrupt Moses’ concentration and remove his focus from God? Here, contrary to the other instances, Maimonides makes a concession and argues that Moses is a human individual who, through his apprehension of the true realities and his joy in what he apprehended, achieves a state in which he talks with people and is occupied with his bodily necessities while his intellect is wholly turned toward Him … while outwardly he is with people…(623).

In other words, Moses’ uniqueness allows him to be engaged in performing outward activities and yet retain a complete inner concentration on God. Maimonides argues implicitly that there might be some individuals whose true self, similarly to that of Moses and the Prophets, is purely intellectual. But what happens when one becomes solely devoted to intellectual activities has no other aspirations? Can this devotion result in neglecting performing commandments since some of them require bodily actions? Shatz proposes that Maimonides circumvents this tension by stating that bodily movements do not always necessitate the lack of intellectual focus. He suggests that the commandments enhance intellectual focus.

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Shatz, “Maimonides’ Moral Theory.” See also his “Worship, Corporeality, and Human Perfection.”
This discussion still did not answer the question as to why Maimonides changed his focus in III: 54 from that in III: 51. Shatz contends that the aim was to counter the antinomian charges stemming from the focus on the intellectual perfection. Does the Law that serves to ensure human morality become obsolete if one attains this perfection? Already in III: 34 Maimonides states that the Law is not “dependent on changes in the circumstances of the individuals and of the times… governance of the Law ought to be absolute and universal, including everyone” (534-535) and “the Law ought not to be dependent on time and place” (535). Is ultimate perfection in the form of apprehension of God possible without moral perfection ensured by the adherence to the commandments? In a number of cases Maimonides implies that the attainment of intellectual apprehension presents no difficulty, whereas in many other cases he regards matter as an impediment that inherently prevents this attainment. For instance, in GP I: 49 and III: 9, he presents this attainment as being impossible: “Matter is a strong veil preventing the apprehension of that which is separate from matter as it truly is … whenever our intellect aspires to apprehend the deity or one of the intellects, there subsists this great veil interposed between the two… we are separated by a veil from God…” (436-437). The corporeal nature is strongly articulated in III: 8 through III: 12: “All passing-away and corruption or deficiency are due solely to matter” (431). Maimonides is explicit about the connection between matter and sin:

every living being dies and becomes ill solely because of its matter and not because of its form. All man’s acts of disobedience and sins are consequent upon his matter, whereas all his virtues are consequent upon his form (431).
In this case, matter is presented as a strong imperative for following the commandments on the one hand and as an obstacle to attaining intellectual perfection on the other hand. Without following the commandments, humans can become perpetually swept by their evil inclinations. The fact that Maimonides devoted twenty-five chapters to the commandments, testifies to his intense desire to deal with human corporeality and human predicaments which can impede one’s attainment of human perfection. Throughout his discussions the distinction between the moral perfection and the intellectual (rational) perfection remains obscure and debatable. The possibility of attaining perfection continues to be elusive and yet both, the centrality of the law and his interest in human nature, are undeniable.

We should be cognizant of another ethical dilemma as well, termed by Schwarzschild as a double-tiered meta ethics,” – the morality of the mean aimed for the vulgar (masses) and the morality of imitation Dei, a prerogative of the elite. The second type of ethics in effect stipulates the “class ethics” which presents a problem in terms of Jewish egalitarianism. Preservation of the elite and the preservation of the political leadership are imperative to the survival of the nation. Perhaps this dilemma relates to the inherent controversy prevalent in Maimonides’ diasporic existence, which might be dictating his choices and the manner of the exposition of his thoughts. How does one articulate his thoughts in the environment that might not be exceptionally friendly to any assertions of the preservations of Jewish tradition? I proposed in the previous chapter

247 Schwarzschild proposes that this problem relates only to the GP. In his opinion, in the Mishneh Torah Maimonides does not articulate his own opinion but merely clarifies halakhic claims. In his view, in the MT, Maimonides is “confronted with the ideological necessity of, as it were, having to universalize his elitist ethics of saintly imitatio so that it will encompass and absorb his populist ethics of the mean” (13).
that Shinran’s ethics, defined as an ethics of a non-discriminatory compassion, is a result of his concern with human predicament and is affected by his own exilic condition. I suggest here that Maimonides’ ethics is also affected by his focus on human dilemmas and such issues as solitary pursuits and engagement in the social and political. I intend to demonstrate that Maimonides’ construction of ethics is similarly affected by his own exilic conditions. Recalling his strong endorsement of the solitary pursuits and returning for the last time the dilemma of the “last” chapter of the Guide, I am asking the question: Would Maimonides have finished the Guide for the Perplexed with a chapter 51 had he not been exiled? However, before turning to the impact of exile, I provide a juxtaposition of Maimonides’ and Shinran’s views on the issue on which they share a central interest – human nature.
Chapter 3: Shinran’s and Maimonides’ Views Juxtaposed: Human Nature

Introduction

In chapters 1 and 2, I argued that Shinran’s and Maimonides’ views are greatly affected by their conceptions of human nature. This focus itself, however, is not unique to just these two thinkers. The uniqueness of their approach lies in how this focus informs the construction of their respective approaches to ethics. To understand their ethics better, in this chapter I turn to the question of human nature itself. Their views on human nature permeate their articulation of a number of issues including their views on humility, repentance, the need for the commandments or the Primal Vow. As I hope to demonstrate, Maimonides’ view on humility and repentance leads us to his discussion of rationality, personal responsibility and human agency. This is contrary to Shinran, for whom humility and repentance are linked to the rejection of self-power (jiriki). Further, Shinran’s and Maimonides’ approaches to these issues foreshadow their views on human destiny as seen through human agency for one and through karma for the other. These views are further extended to their conceptualization of human evilness. I note that for both of them human happiness or human perfection is imperative. Shinran’s and Maimonides’ views on human nature foreground their conceptions of human happiness and human perfection. I conclude this chapter by proposing that Shinran’s and
Maimonides’ nuanced and sensitive approach to human nature enhances their appreciation for tolerance and acceptance, leading them to be sensitive to human differences.

“Buddhist” Shinran and “Jewish” Maimonides – in favor of particularism

Despite some universal patterns that characterize every human being (i.e., need for food, shelter, and social interactions), certain patterns are specific to culture and tradition. Religious and philosophical thought is similarly embedded in a particular culture although in some cases some of the cultural distinctions might appear miniscule. Disregarding these distinctions might result in an essentialism. Reducing the distinctions within a particular culture to a uniform descriptor would also be erroneous since it will result in overlooking certain idiosyncratic and yet important divergences and subsequent influences exerted by any specific thinkers. Both Shinran and Maimonides are the perfect examples who, while being deeply embedded in their respective cultures, should not be simply taken as the prototypes of either their respective cultures or religious traditions. Pegging Shinran under the broad definition of “Buddhism” would hardly do him justice. Shinran’s appreciation and situatedness within the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition and within the Pure Land tradition colors the unique specificity of his thought. Yet, his own uniqueness shines through his radical reformulation of certain concepts of the Pure Land thought. Similarly, classifying Maimonides as a great Jewish thinker is accurate but while this description acknowledges his immense contribution and his indisputable influence on the Jewish thought and tradition, it can similarly overlook his idiosyncratic uniqueness when he becomes classified under this general descriptor. It is their unique
specificity that informs our comparative discussion of their views on human nature. The
comparison between the views of Shinran and Maimonides is foregrounded in their
respective views on human nature. But what is this “human being”? 

**On Human nature – what is a “human being”?**

For both of these thinkers, the issue of human nature is central and inseparable
from their views on human behavior and human morality. But what exactly is inquired
when human nature is studied and why is it necessary to study human beings separately
from other animals? Human nature relates to the human body and human spirit, the
human ability to think rationally and to make sound decisions, which in turn are
connected to human choice (or the absence of such) in exercising free will. Human
decisions and human choices, in turn, exhibit the human inclination toward good and evil,
as well as the understanding of their difference. Human choices ultimately demonstrate
humans as agents of moral actions.  

Already in primitive times “man” (a term which was associated then with the
“male”) was considered “the human being par excellence.”  

In the Western tradition, turning for a moment to the Old Testament, we note that humans are defined in terms of
being only a “little less than divine” which implies human excellence. But how this
excellence is defined by various thinkers differs. It diverges for Shinran and Maimonides

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248 Human freedom and human excellence for some thinkers are correlated terms. For instance, for Sartre,
human excellence is inseparable from human responsibility and is not determined by society or anything
else as his famous expression testifies: “Man is condemned to be free.” While Maimonides embraces the
concept of free will, he does not subscribe to the view of human total independence from his or her society.
His view on human freedom is also much more nuanced as it will be discussed in this chapter.
250 “what is man that You have mindful of him, mortal man that You have taken note of him, that You have
made him little less than divine, and adorned him with glory and majesty” (*Tanakh*, Psalm 8, 5, p. 1115)
as well. A German linguist Franz Boop traced the word “man” to its Latin root “mens” (“mind” and “remember”) hence pointing to the significance of human intellect in the definition of the concept of human being. On the other hand, the Hebrew word “adam” as the first man derives from the word “adama” (“earth”). This reminds us of a close relation to the nature and points to the intricate connection between the soul (mind and intellect) and the body.

**Human Nature: Body and Soul – Shinran and Maimonides**

Human nature cannot be viewed independently of human body. The human body plays an equally central role for both Shinran and Maimonides, but it is understood in very different terms. Shinran does not differentiate between body and soul. As a result, and in line with the Buddhist concept of interrelatedness and interdependence at the core of which is the principle of the five *skandhas*, 251 Shinran never envisions one’s body as a hindrance to one’s well-being (rather the total being is implicated in relation to one’s limitations). In contrast, Maimonides’ view on human body is framed in a dichotomous differentiation between the body and the soul. Recalling our discussion in chapter 2, Maimonides follows Aristotle’s articulation of the soul’s five faculties (nutritive, sentient, imaginative, appetitive, and rational) and yet he strongly asserts that despite the soul’s five faculties, it is a “single soul” (EC, 61). The soul, he argues, possesses moral habits and in order to cultivate these virtues, the soul should be treated similar to how a

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251 *Skandhas* or the five constituents of human existence stress intention and volition (*cetanā*), which in turn presupposes a degree of freedom and the possibility of self-restraint. For Shinran, however, karma is still effectively hinders this presupposed freedom.
physician cures the body. While the physician needs to know all the parts of the body, the “physician of the soul” should similarly be well aware of all the faculties of the soul.

Since Maimonides adopts an Aristotelian rather than Platonic conception of the human soul, it is the attainment of (intellectual) knowledge that makes one fully (perfectly) human. Maimonides refers to the nature of human intellection already in his earlier writings. Specifically, in the Eight Chapters he states that the soul is “like matter, and the intellect its form. If it does not attain its form, the existence of its capacity to receive this form is for nought and is, as it were, futile.” 253 In other words, if the soul does not actualize itself, it remains a perishable matter. Similarly, in Pereq Heleq, Maimonides argues that “the crowns on the heads” in the Talmudic statement that “In the world to come there is no eating, drinking, washing, anointing, or sexual intercourse; but the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads enjoying the radiance of the Divine Presence” 254 testify to “the immortality of the soul being in firm possession of the [philosophical] Idea.” 255 Hence, one achieves immortality as one attains philosophical knowledge. This of course does not have an analogy in Shinran’s thinking who for one does not see human perfection and subsequent human happiness in terms of one’s intellect. Moreover, in line with the Mahāyāna thought, human intellect is never viewed by Shinran as a separate, distinct entity.

252 According to Platonic conception of the soul, humans attain their soul in “complete” form and whatever humans learn is in effect the process of recollection because this knowledge pre-existed prior to the period of the collaboration with the body (birth of this particular human). See for instance Phaedo, p. 55, 60 and Meno.
253 Weiss and Butterworth, 64.
254 Twersky, A Maimonides Reader, 411.
255 Ibid., 412.
Maimonides’ view on human nature derives from his exegesis of the story of the fall. I already discussed it in my chapter 2 and here I only reiterate that for Maimonides, this story is a clear demonstration that human nature is adversely affected by matter. As we recall, in GP I: 2 Maimonides argues that Adam loses his intellectual perfection after experiencing the pulls of matter. A pre-fall Adam, free from any bodily temptations exemplifies a perfect human being “made in the image of God” 256 For Maimonides, as we noted, human nature encumbered by the material desires loses its pristine sense of perfection. Matter takes humans further away from contemplation and ultimately reduces one’s chance for perfection understood in terms of intellectual perfection.

Shinran also recognizes human imperfections. In fact, Maimonides’ rendition of the story of the fall moves him closer to Shinran’s conception of human weakness. Shinran is acutely aware of the pull of desires and human propensity for attachments and wishes for permanence but this recognition leads him to the abnegation of the self-power (jiriki) and the submission to the other power (tariki). The ultimate resolution of this recognition though is not calculated by these humans and is not a result of human free will or human agency. The submission to the other power moves the center of agency from humans to Amida and results in Amida’s Primal Vow embrace. 257 As I argue throughout these chapters, Maimonides’ emphasis placed on the commandments, which guide humans to a more perfected state, is analogous to the role played by Shinran’s

256 The ultimate human perfection is described in the Guide as attaining this closeness to God by developing the Acquired intellect, which, as a consequence of one’s attainment of the highest intellectual abilities, becomes cojoined with the Active (Divine) intellect.
257 In short, we recall that the Primal Vow (18th out of 48 vows) is the central vow taken by Dharmākara (Bodhisattva Hōzō), who vowed to hold back his own enlightenment until all sentient being will attain enlightenment.
Primal Vow. Yet, as I demonstrate, Maimonides, contrary to Shinran, never advocates relinquishing one’s own responsibility. For Maimonides, who valorizes human rationality, one’s inability to restrain one’s own limitations produces a sense of shame and blame. Humans, in Maimonides’ eyes, are endowed with free will and everything, including their commitment to observe the commandments is a demonstration of their own choice. In Shinran’s terms, Maimonides speaks in terms of self-power (jiriki) and his view on human agency does not allow the abnegation of this self-power. However, I argue that despite their highly divergent view on human agency, their recognition of human limitations implicitly leads them to consider similar mechanisms for ensuring humans happiness. This is not to say, of course, that the issue of human happiness itself is the same for these two thinkers.

I already noted that Shinran’s ethics of a non-discriminatory compassion recognizes, but exercises no judgment on, human imperfections and informs his approach to other humans. Yet his approach to other human beings is predicated on his self-reflexivity. In other words, Shinran’s view on human weaknesses and imperfections is contingent upon his view of his own inadequacies. In the Notes on Once-Calling and Many-Calling (Mattōshō) Shinran writes: “Truly know, therefore, that without any differentiation between people good and bad, and regardless of one’s having a heart of blind passions, all beings are certain to attain birth [in the Pure Land]” (526).

**Human happiness and human (im)perfection**

While Maimonides’ shares the view that humans have weaknesses and imperfections, contrary to Shinran, Maimonides views human happiness as human
intellectual perfection. Shinran’s skepticism of human rationality extends to his skepticism of intellectualism. For Maimonides, “the conception of intelligibles which teach true opinions concerning the divine things” is what “gives [man] permanent perduration; through it man is man” (GP III: 54, 635). However, as discussed in chapter 2, Maimonides recognizes that humans are endowed with different capacities, which curtail or in some cases preclude their chance to attain perfection. Whereas for Maimonides, humans attain different levels of perfection and happiness according to their innate but also realized potentialities, for Shinran, human intellectual capacities, either potential or realized, carry no significance in relation to their chance for attaining happiness by being born in the Pure Land.

Ostensibly, Shinran’s and Maimonides’ share a similar final aim - the attainment of human happiness. As noted, for Shinran this final goal is expressed in terms of the attainment of enlightenment via rebirth in the Pure Land. For Maimonides, it is articulated in terms of the achievement of human perfection, which results in the attainment of the knowledge of God and ultimately the immortality of human soul. Shinran and Maimonides recognize the presence of human imperfections and hence their views on human imperfections converge yet the role that humans themselves can play to affect these imperfections differ. As a result, they diverge in their views on the means to attain happiness and perfection. For Maimonides, the “mechanism” for the attainment of human perfection includes an endorsement for normativity, articulated in terms of recourse to the Law. For Shinran, in turn, it is a path of relinquishing self-power (jiriki) experienced as a spontaneous and uncalculated embrace by the Primal Vow of Amida.
Buddha. But what relation, if any, is there between Maimonides’ endorsement of *normativity* and his general view on human nature? Similarly, how does Shinran see this uncalculated turn from self-power (*jiriki*) to Amida Buddha’s compassionate embrace? What do these actions tell us about human nature and human inclinations? Shinran and Maimonides endorse different “mechanisms” as the roadmaps to the final destination: human happiness (Shinran) versus human perfection (Maimonides). Yet, there are certain traits in human nature that they consider similarly important for this process to be successful, namely, human humility and the ability to feel repentance.

**Human nature: Humility**

Shinran’s focus on human limitations and human selflessness informs his view on humility. For Maimonides, it is his recognition of human inadequacies on the one hand and God’s greatness on the other hand that results in his conceptualization of humility. Moreover, Maimonides’ view is also affected by his articulation of asceticism. As discussed in chapter two, Maimonides usually favors moderation, but in some cases he favors a more extreme approach toward humility. Those cases involve a therapy for curing an extreme tendency in one’s behavior. In some cases Maimonides’ endorsement of asceticism might reflect his own desire for the withdrawal from worldly activities. However, Maimonides never explicitly articulates this wish as contempt for the world. Maimonides’ own activities, as a jurist and a physician, clearly testify to his active engagement with, rather than a withdrawal from, this world. Presumably, Maimonides’ desire is for a more sustained engagement in philosophical and ethical self-reflection,

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258 There is no indication in his ethical writings that Maimonides advocates an extreme humility or asceticism as a *permanent* approach. The norm is still moderation.
which increases one’s intellectual and religious sensibility. This appreciation of self-reflection and solitary contemplation parallels Shinran’s appreciation of quite meditation and self-reflexivity. Thus, both thinkers advocate the humble reflection on oneself and the world. In addition, both exhibit a certain reluctance to be considered “leaders.” Yet, as it will be discussed next, Maimonides’ exilic conditions intensified his desire to be socially and politically active as a means for preserving his own community and placed a higher self-demand for his active involvement in the life and functioning of his community.

**Human nature: Repentance and Free will – unlikely partners?**

As discussed, Shinran’s and Maimonides’ views on human nature and human imperfections inform their articulation of humility and repentance. As we observed, for Shinran, humility and repentance stem from his self-reflexivity and certain self-abdication. For Maimonides, in turn, it is a result of his recognition not only of God’s greatness but also, like Shinran, of human inadequacy. How do these views reflect on their articulation of repentance? For Maimonides, repentance is inseparable from free will. His view on free will is linked to rationality. Because of humans’ ability to think rationally, they are capable of making rational choices. As a result, human rationality entails human responsibility. Maimonides envisions free will as an inherent attribute of human nature. This free will, Maimonides argues, is given to humans by God. The human ability to reason and exercise free will was *willed* by God on humans. Without

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259 This might also reflect his contention related to the issue of immortality.

260 Pines and Altmann argue, however, that Maimonides is a determinist. Since free will is given to humans by God, God already knows what humans will choose to do. This does not, however, refute Maimonides’ high valuation of rationality. Cf. Charles H. Manekin, ed, *Freedom and Moral Responsibility: General and Jewish Perspectives*, Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 1997.
free will, there is no intrinsic value to following commandments. The issue of reward and punishment also becomes mute. Deuteronomy 30:19-20 is often seen as a scriptural evidence for freedom of will since these verses signify the significance of choice.  

Free will is extended to repentance: while humans have a propensity to sin, they are also endowed with a capacity to be self-reflective. Repentance is translated into an act of reformation or transformation. For both of them, repentance encompasses the sense of humility as the recognition of one’s wrong-doings and inadequacies. In the Laws of Repentance, Maimonides writes:

Know then that everything takes place according to His pleasure, notwithstanding that our acts are in our power. How so? Just as it was pleasure of the Creator that fire and air ascend, earth and water descend and the sphere shall revolve in a circle, and all other things in the Universe shall exist in their special ways which He desired, so it was His pleasure that man should have liberty of will, and all his acts should be left to his discretion; that nothing shall coerce him or draw him to aught, but that, of himself and by the exercise of his own mind which God had given him, he should do whatever it is in a man’s power to do (87b).

These verses testify to God’s desire for humans to have free will.

While for Maimonides, this self-reflection and the subsequent repentance are free-willed, for Shinran, self-reflection is also central to the notion of transformation and yet is intricately connected to the embrace by the Primal Vow. For both of them, repentance encompasses the sense of humility as the recognition of one’s wrong-doings.

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261 “I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life – if you and your offspring will live – by loving the Lord your God, heeding His commands, and holding fast to Him.”

262 M.S. Stern defines repentance as “a process of conversion whereby a man corrects his past errors, assures the discontinuation of like action, and strives for future abstention from negatively valued behavior.” For Maimonides, it is a “positive act of behavior” and “a process by which man draws ever closer to God” (Al-Ghazali, Maimonides, and Ibn Pakuda on Repentance: A Comparative Approach,” Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 47, 4: 589-607.

263 Or “semi”-free willed if we accept the view that God willed humans to have this free will? If we take this position, then Maimonides moves even closer to Shinran’s view on the Primal Vow, which is given to these people rather than these people electing to accept it.

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and inadequacies. For Shinran this recognition does not, however, lead to the sense of shame.

Still, what exactly is relation between free will and repentance? Shinran’s position on free will can be extrapolated from his theory of human evilness. For him, human evilness is a result of karmic conditions exaggerated by the age of defilement exhibited in the state of mappō. Neither human intelligence nor reason can change any unfavorable human conditions (either internal or external). Free will carries no potency and it is only other power (tariki) that can release one from life’s evilness and bring one the sense of enlightenment and experience of happiness. Relying on one’s own power (jiriki) is fruitless and is nothing but a sign of human hubris. I already noted that Shinran’s concepts stem from his self-reflexivity. Shinran never makes any claims that his views are universally applicable. But how exactly does Shinran view himself? I turn now once again to Shinran’s articulation of human nature as seen through his self-reflexive lens.

**Human nature: through the lens of Shinran’s bonbu**

Shinran’s introspective sensitivities lead him to reflect on his own nature. By contrast, Maimonides left no notes in which he discusses himself. Some of Shinran’s views on human nature can be inferred from his particular reflections on himself. For instance, in *Hymns of the Dharma-Ages*, Shinran writes that he, as everyone else, is prone to desire fame and profit, and he does not “know right and wrong and cannot distinguish

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264 I am indebted to Thomas Kasulis who reminded me that in the West free will is the opposite of being completely conditioned. For Asian, especially Japanese Buddhists, there is no such hard and fast distinction. As he states, “’self-effort’ and ’dependence on power of the other’ is not the Western free will vs. determinism distinction.”

265 In the Jewish tradition, personal diaries and self-reflexive notes are much less common. The personal views are usually ascertained through the personal correspondence. In Shinran’s case personal correspondence is also quite informative especially as he tries to counter the charge of antinomianism.
false and true” (429). In Kyōgyōshinshō, he likewise laments that he is “sinking in an immense ocean of desires and attachments” (125). Shinran’s view on human nature can be summarized by his term “bonbu,” a foolish being, which he freely applies to himself. In relation to human weakness, Shinran follows the idea of Hōnen exemplified in the notion of “akunin-shōki” (“the wicked person as the true opportunity”). The notion of akunin-shōki is directly related to Shinran’s view on compassion and happiness since he maintains that anyone, regardless of his wickedness and weakness, would be saved by the compassion of Amida Buddha’s vow: “Even the good person is born in the Pure Land, so without question is the person who is evil.” 266 This notion is also linked to Shinran’s conceptualization of Jōdo Shinshū practice as it relates to Amida Buddha’s embrace. Specifically, rooted in the notion of akunin-shōki is Shinran’s endorsement of “once-calling” (single invocation) of Amida’s name. By endorsing “once-calling,” Shinran holds that even a single invocation results in being embraced by the Primal Vow including those who committed either the Five Evil acts or the Ten Evil acts. 267 This statement exemplifies Shinran’s forgiving attitude toward human weaknesses, but also testifies to his view that humans are incapable of self-improvement. If humans are incapable of self-improvement, what affects their destiny?

266 CWS, 663.
267 The Five evil acts include killing one’s mother, killing one’s father, killing an arhat, causing serious dissension in the monastic community, and profanity. The Ten evil acts include willfully taking life, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, profanity, slander, foolish chatter, greed, anger, and heretical ideas. It might be important to note that those who slander the right dharma cannot attain birth. See http://www.shinranworks.com/majorexpositions/kgssIII-119_123.htm
Human Nature: *Karma vs. Innate abilities*

Shinran’s view that humans are incapable of self-improvement is predicated on his view about karma and karmic evil. When addressing the issue of human nature and human destiny, the significance of karma in Shinran’s thought becomes rather apparent. As noted, ostensibly, Shinran and Maimonides view human destiny in very different terms. For Shinran, karmic evil incompasitates humans and impedes their ability to realize Buddhahood. Shinran views karma from the angle of karmic evil (*zaigō*) and past karma (*shukugō*) with both testifying to the “impossibility of transcendence.” In his discussion of karma, Shinran recollects the story according to which one abstains from killing because of karma’s lack of “the capacity for evil within” (*Tannishō*, 13, 21). In other words, it is not one’s good character or moral values or the adherence to any moral teachings that determine one’s actions but “[w]e do not kill, not because our thoughts are good but because we do not have the karma to kill even a single person.” In the same vein, “even though we do not want to injure anyone, we may be led [by karma] to kill a hundred or a thousand people” (*Tannishō*, 13, 21-22). For Shinran, thinking of oneself as lacking evilness and possessing true compassion constitutes a misconception. He states: “In this life no matter how much pity and sympathy we may feel for others, it is impossible to help another as we truly wish; thus our compassion is inconsistent and limited” (*Tannishō*, 4, 7). With these statements, Shinran demonstrates that this unlimited capacity for love and compassion resides with Amida Buddha.

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Karma, however, plays an implicitly positive role as well since for Shinran karma is significant as an expression of religious awakening (shinjin). Shinran writes: “if one comes to be in accord with spontaneous working of the Vow (jinen), one will awaken to the benevolence of the Buddha and of one’s teachers” (Tannishō, 6, 664). Jinen stops the accumulation of any new karma and, as one lives the life of this spontaneous, uncalculated compassion, one’s karmic residue no longer plays a dire significance. The person who realizes shinjin “opens up the great path of unobstructed freedom.” (Tannishō, 7, 10). For Shinran, good acts possess no efficacy and he states: “for those who entrust themselves to the Primal Vow, no good acts are required” (CSW, 661). It is shinjin that provides humans with freedom and happiness which are understood in terms of great love and great compassion rather than as an exhibition of one’s egocentric will. Human innate abilities are irrelevant from Shinran’s point of view as they only testify to human obsession with one’s own ego. In line with the general Buddhist, Shinran argues for selflessness. He complicates this concept even more by arguing against any rationally calculated approach to good actions, considering those to be self-serving. Recalling our discussion on Maimonides’ view on human rationality, it becomes quite apparent that for both of them rationality is quite important. While Maimonides’ encourages its application, Shinran equally discourages its use. This difference harks back to their view on human nature and their conception of the self. In addition, and also contrary to Shinran, Maimonides believes human destiny cannot be seen independent of free will and human rationality.
Human nature: Free will and the commandments

We already observed that for Maimonides, following the commandments is predicated upon human free choice.\footnote{This issue might be a bit more complex since there are arguments that in fact Maimonides never clearly spelled out whether he speaks in terms of free will or free actions. As Stern (in C. Manekin and M. Kellner, \textit{Freedom and Moral Responsibility}, 1997) reminds us, even animals are free to act. Further, some argue (i.e., Pines and Altmann) that Maimonides was in fact a pre-determinist and human choice was already decided by God. Stern problematizes this view. For the sake of my argument, I do not wish to get into the intricacies of this differentiation between free will and free action.} Adherence and obedience do not contradict his view on rationality. Yet, as the previously mentioned verses of Deuteronomy 30:19-20 testify, for Judaism in general and for Maimonides in particular, free will is \textit{embedded} in the notion of covenant. In Maimonides’ view, knowledge attained through understanding of the reasons defines the \textit{exercise} of free will. In addition, the capacity for exercising reason differentiates one’s approach from following a dogmatic approach defined by blind obedience. Here Maimonides appears less interested in endorsing humility, especially if humility is seen as blind obedience. He views individual excellence as resulting from the exercise of reason rather than from the adherence to the demands espoused by any authority. Authority is often viewed by Maimonides with skepticism as he is reluctant to abide by any notion of coercion. Attaining knowledge through reason is a direct exhibition of one’s agency.\footnote{David Hartman in \textit{Maimonides: Torah and the Philosophical Quest} (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1977) contends that for Maimonides, “Arguments from authority – which appear in the guise of demonstrative reason – are strong obstacles to the development of a world view which attempts to develop individual spiritual excellence – based upon reason – within a traditional religious society” (also quoted in Jacobs, 2010, 130.)} He further links free will to human morality. The existence of free will testifies to human moral accountability.

For Maimonides, the relationship between free will and the Law is fundamental. We recall that in the \textit{Eight Chapters} Maimonides writes: “If man’s actions are done under
compulsion, the commandments and prohibitions of the Law would be nullified and they would be absolutely in vain, since man would have no choice in what he does. ... Reward and punishment would also be sheer injustice” (EC, 84-85). Even if human actions are given to them by God, humans are free to act according to their own use of reason. In a direct and unflinching support of free will Maimonides affirms that: “... there is no doubt that all of man’s actions are given over to him. If he wishes to act he does so, and if he does not wish to act he does not; there is no compulsion whatsoever upon him” (85). To further illustrate Maimonides’ contention, I turn to his “Laws of Repentance” where he writes:

Free will is bestowed on every human being. If one desires to turn towards the good way and be righteous, he has the power to do so. If one wishes to turn towards the evil way and be wicked, he is at liberty to do so. And thus is it written in the Torah, ‘Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil’ (Gen. 3:22) – which means that the human species had become unique in the world – there being no other species like it in the following respect, namely, that man, of himself and by the exercise of his own intelligence and reason, knows what is good and what is evil, and there is none who can prevent him from doing that which is good or which is evil (V:1, 86b).

These words demonstrate that Maimonides views human rationality as intricately connected to free will and hence directly accounting for moral responsibility.

We already observed that for Shinran and Maimonides rationality affects human destiny and human choices: for Shinran, human destiny is expressed in terms of karma, whereas for Maimonides in terms of personal responsibility and human agency. The issue of rationality brings us to these thinkers’ perception of evil.²⁷¹ Their views on evil

²⁷¹ We do need to be cognizant, however, that their respective understanding of evil itself diverges as well. On Shinran, see discussion in Chapter 1. Recall that in Buddhist terms, evil and goodness are thought in terms of “skillful” and “unskillful” acts (kushala and akushala). Note also that while the term “evil” has
inform their articulation of who deserves to attain happiness. It is important to recall Shinran’s provocative statement that, “Even the good person is born in the Pure Land, so without question is the person who is evil person.” For Maimonides, evil is counteracted by human intellect and its ability to properly reason and follow the Law. For Shinran, as I noted in chapter 1, reason plays a rather cunning role since it can be skillfully applied to justify any human inclinations, including evil ones.

How does Shinran’s view on free will relate to the human impact on the world? We recall that for Shinran, reliance on one’s own power (jiriki) demonstrates human arrogance. Further, aiming to alter the world to our own liking would be an even larger sign of human hubris. This is contrary to Maimonides’ argument that, while humans cannot radically alter the way of the world with its inherent problems and hardships, as humans perfect themselves, the world becomes gradually improved as well. Human perfection is a result of human free will, the choice to follow the Law and “shape the life according to God’s wisdom as reflected in the Law.” The Law extends beyond the focus on the individual human being to the society at large. Is the ultimate aim of following the Law to produce human pleasure and happiness? How do Maimonides and Shinran conceive of pleasure and happiness?

some moral and ethical implications, its primary significance is religious as an inability to practice any religious acts and bring oneself to the attainment of Buddhahood (see CSW, II, 184).


273 Maimonides’ view is much closer to the approach articulated by Psalm I: “the teaching of the Lord is his delight”(Tanakh, Psalm 1, 1109).

Human happiness, repentance, gratitude and Law – how do they all relate?

Pleasure is a component of human happiness. For Maimonides, pleasure is often thought in terms of intellectual pleasure. For him, free will and rationality are gateways to pleasure since the knowledge of the reasons behind the commandments leads one to experience elation, a delight of the intellect. His concept of pleasure is similar to Aristotle’s articulation “for to each activity there is a proper pleasure” (1175b26) and intellectual activity provides one the highest pleasures (1177a15). For Maimonides, pleasure is “the activity of understanding” and his exegesis of Deuteronomy 4:6 serves to prove the centrality of the reason as a basic commitment. This is connected to realism since “[k]nowledge of God and an understanding of the Law are the fundamental ways in which a person is engaged to reality.” This “realism” is distinguished from the illusory perceptions in idolatry. As we recall from our previous discussion, idolatry for Maimonides is “a false source of normativity and intelligibility.” Maimonides understands pleasure as any pursuit to attain knowledge of God and to perfect oneself. Here again, this perfection of oneself occurs through the exercise of free will. God’s foreknowledge does not necessitate pre-determined human actions and humans are free to choose their own actions while also recognizing the possibility of both reward and punishment. Yet, in addition to the conjunction between (intellectual) pleasure and free will, a similar link is extended to repentance.

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275 Ibid., 27.
276 “Observe them faithfully, for that will be proof of your wisdom and discernment to other people, who are hearing of all these laws will say, ‘Surely, that great nation is a wise and discerning people” (Deut. 4:6)
279 This of course is in direct contradiction to the view that pre-determinism.
One cannot experience full pleasure understood in both Maimonides’ and Shinran’s terms if one becomes self-conceited and narcissistic. Repentance reflects one’s sense of gratitude. For Maimonides, as humility increases with human understanding and an appreciation of God’s greatness, there is a corresponding sense of human deficiency. Yet, human free will is an antidote that allows rectifying, at least to a certain degree, this human deficiency. This rectification produces in humans a sense of humble gratitude. For Maimonides, the sense of gratitude implicitly relates to free will and ultimately to humans’ own accomplishment. For Shinran, to the contrary, this opportunity for the rectification of human deficiency is unrelated to the Western idea of free will. For him, human transformation is directly linked to the abolition of self-power (jiriki) and being embraced by Other power (tariki) resulting from the Primal Vow. To reiterate: for Shinran, it is Amida Buddha who leads to human transformation and ultimately happiness. If we accept the proposition that the Law also focuses on human perfection and, given that Maimonides recognizes that humans have different abilities for this perfection, the Law can be approximated to the Buddhist concept of skillful means (upāya or hōben), with perhaps a stricter expectation of adherence.

**Repentance: compassion, shame and blame and …Law**

Returning once again to repentance, we note that for Shinran, given his self-reflexive view on human weakness, the notions of forgiveness and compassion are imperative. The capacity for forgiveness is grounded in the recognition that no human being is fully immune from sinful actions. Subjecting one to shame and blame testifies to one’s inability to exercise compassion and forgiveness and in effect misunderstanding
human nature. In addition, shame and blame contradict the Buddhist view of compassion as embedded in interrelatedness. As such, it does not differentiate between self and others and to shame others is indistinguishable from experiencing self-reproach.

Maimonides holds a somewhat similar position on exercising blame. In *Laws Concerning Character* traits he recalls *Mishnah* Avot III, 14: “Whoever puts his fellow man to shame in public has no portion in the world-to-come.” 280 In addition, for Maimonides, forgiveness is a sign of piety. Maimonides insists that, “Even if one had been much vexed and grievously wronged, he is not to avenge nor bear a grudge. Forgiveness is natural to the seed of Israel, characteristic of their upright heart.” 281 Ostensibly, in Maimonides’ assessment, perfect repentance represents one’s sense of penitence. This feeling of sorrow and regret echoes Shinran’s conception of compassion. Resonating with Shinran’s concept of jinen and the calculations to merely benefit oneself, for Maimonides repentance becomes ineffective if one “confesses in words and has not in his heart resolved to forsake his sin.” 282 For Shinran, likewise, there is no value in a repentance empty of sincere spontaneity of jinen and foregrounded in rational calculations (hakarai). Despite the similarities in their respective views, we should not minimize the fact that for Maimonides, there is always a direct recourse to the Law, the provider of guidance. This recourse to the Law reminds us that Maimonides’ approach still favors rationality, embedded in the Law itself.

280 Weiss and Butterworth, 49.
281 Hyamson, 83b.
282 Ibid., 83b.
And yet, while the Law provides the guidance, the efficacy of repentance remains dependent upon human free will as it relates to both wrong-doer’s efforts to repent and the capacity of the wronged one’s to forgive. Compassionate forgiveness ensures harmonious social relation; and so the Law incites one to rebuke the offender but also to encourage repentance and apology. Following Leviticus 19:18,\textsuperscript{283} keeping a grudge or harboring vengeance are discouraged as detrimental to social harmony. As we noted, not only individual but also communal vengeance is perceived as detrimental to social harmony. We are reminded that both, individual-based social harmony and societal social harmony are predicated on following the Law. But beyond ensuring social harmony, according to Maimonides’ exegesis, the Psalm 19:8 testifies that the Law restores the soul. Most honorable and desirable reflection placed on the apprehension of the intelligibles, which makes “man qua man”: “the most certain and nobles of which being the apprehension, in as far as this is possible, of the deity, of the angels, and of His other works” (432-433). For Shinran, as it is already quite apparent, this unlimited capacity for forgiveness and compassion ultimately resides with Amida Buddha and is one Amida’s main and most significant characteristics.

Ostensibly, Maimonides, like Shinran, recognizes that every human individual has iniquities but, contrary to Shinran, he considers humans capable of self-improvement on their own. I argue that Maimonides, despite his recognition of different human abilities, nonetheless views humans more favorably than Shinran since he considers them capable of merits. When the scale tips towards merits, for Maimonides, “One whose merits

\textsuperscript{283}Thou shalt not take vengeance.
exceed the iniquities is righteous.” 284 Yet, these merits are attained by human use of their rational faculties.

**Rationality, Law, and Normativity**

Even if Maimonides’ perception of humans is more favorable than that of Shinran, humans are always expected to act rationally to be viewed in this more positive light. The Jewish conception of rationality in general and that of Maimonides in particular is framed in a philosophical realism, 285 which in turn dresses Judaism’s conception of normativity in terms of realism as well. We recall that Maimonides aimed to reconcile faith 286 and reason, or the “religious *vita activa* with the philosophical *vita contemplative*.” This reconciliation implies a smooth relationship between reflection and action, a focus on individual perfection and on engagement in social endeavors. As both, a jurist (interested in observing the law) and a philosopher (interested in the rational principle, the moral standards, and intellectual objective), Maimonides aims to meet the demands of both reflection and action. For Maimonides, these two objectives are inseparable since the Jewish law (*Halakhah*) leads from “thought to habit, from belief to character, from intelligence to will, and vice versa.” 287 Study of the Law assumes for Maimonides intellectual character and he stresses “the ongoing reciprocity between religious-ethical behavior and intellectual perfection” or “Talmudic and philosophical

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284 Hyamson, III, 83b. Maimonides applies the same logic to the country: “If the merits of all its inhabitants exceed their iniquities, the country is righteous” (III, 83b).
286 Luc Ferry defines faith as “thought’s assent to realities that it does not perceive. … reality thus constitutes a truth that is hidden and currently inaccessible to our thought” (Luc Ferry, *What Is the Good Life?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, 215). It can be noted that Maimonides argues that in some cases and for some people this “hidden” truth can become transparent.
study.” Law stripped of intellectualization ("deintellectualized," "externalized," and "despiritualized") is in his eyes problematic as it becomes just a means to enforce prescribed actions.

Rationality of the Law is extended to rationality of sciences. According to Maimonides, there is a junction between the Law as a part of divine science and natural sciences. In the Introduction to the GP, Maimonides articulates the inherent rationality of the Law and the reciprocity between divine sciences and natural science. Maimonides writes:

Do you not see the following fact? God, may His mention be exalted, wished us to be perfected and the state of our societies to be improved by His laws regarding actions. Now this can come about only after the adoption of intellectual beliefs, the first of which being His apprehension, may He be exalted, according to our capacity. This, in its turn, cannot come about except through divine science, and this divine science cannot become actual except after a study of natural science (GP, 8-9).

As mentioned, human rationality seeks to ascertain the need for the reason for all the commandments. The notion that all the commandments have reasons allows humans to see their inherent value. In addition to their intellectual value, the commandments have a distinctly utilitarian value as well. Maimonides states:

Every commandment from among these six hundred and thirteen commandments exists either with a view to communicating a correct opinion, or to putting an end to an unhealthy opinion, or to communicating a rule of justice, or to warding off an injustice, or to endowing men with noble moral quality, or to warning them against an evil moral quality (GP III: 31, 524).

Recalling Shinran’s view on human limitations, his skepticism about rationality, and his understanding of Amida Buddha’s functioning, we can infer that for him, normative

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288 Twersky, 360.
requirements will be futile since humans will be able to “rationalize” themselves out of following the prescribed norms. Instead for Shinran, all of these functions are performed by Amida Buddha. Humans become endowed with spiritual and moral perfection that flows to them from the embrace of Amida Buddha.

For Maimonides, analogous to Shinran’s perception of the human inability to cognitively comprehend Amida Buddha as Amida-in-itself, some commandments might never be understood by some humans. However, Maimonides contends that, “You will never cease discovering the clear and evident manifestation of justice in the commandments of this Law, if you consider them carefully.” And yet, he adds: “However, our intellects are incapable of apprehending the perfection of everything that He has made and the justice of everything He has commanded. We only apprehend the justice of some of His commandments” (605). This can be equally applicable to Shinran’s conceptualization of human apprehension of Amida Buddha – it is Amida Buddha’s compassion rather than Amida himself that is apprehended by humans.

Ostensibly, Shinran does not aim to find any reasons for Amida Buddha’s actions beyond Amida’s compassion. Maimonides, in turn, aims to articulate specific reasons for the commandments. In GP III: 49 he explicates these reasons and links reason (purpose) to goodness and excellence. In GP III: 25 Maimonides connects human intellect (excellence) and God’s excellence and states that, “A man endowed with intellect is incapable of saying that any action of God is vain, futile, or frivolous.289 … All His

289 To recall: a vain action is an action without any resolution; a futile action is an action that does not have any specific aim; and a frivolous action is an action that is aimed at something insignificant or useless. Frivolous actions are most demeaning and to assign those to God would constitute blasphemous action since everything that God does has a purpose.
actions are good and excellent” (503). For Shinran, the human intellect is unrelated to Amida’s excellence. The excellence of God, for Maimonides, is exhibited is the excellence of the commandments which aim to perfect humans by delivering them from any wrong opinions and instilling in them “the correct belief: namely, that there is a deity who is the Creator of all this; that it is He who ought to be worshipped and loved and feared” (GP III: 29, 518). No parallel can be drawn here to Shinran’s thought for a number of reasons, including Shinran’s absence of any focus on any normative (ought) requirements. Perhaps because of this absence of any emphasis on normativity, Shinran does not articulate any fear of Amida Buddha comparable to Maimonides’ fear of God. Therefore, the concept of reward and punishment also is not easily translatable into the terms that will carry equal significance for both of them.

   To reiterate: for Maimonides, all the commandments have reasons and only human inability (either intellectual failing or fatigue) prevents ascertaining these reasons. All laws either teach true beliefs and instill moral values or attain the same aim through the observance to the commandments. For Maimonides, there is a direct link between knowledge (wisdom) and rationalism in which law is its culmination: “one who knows the whole of the Law in its true reality is called wise in two respects: in respect of the rational virtues comprised in the Law and in respect of the moral virtues included in it” (GP III:54, 633). As seen from this statement, Maimonides directly links rational knowledge with morality. This link is absent in Shinran. The commandments can be understood “through [the] study of the doctrines, opinions, practices, and cult of the

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290. To recall, those commandments whose utility is clear to the multitude are called mispatim (judgments), whereas those whose meaning is hidden from the multitude are called hukkim (statutes).
Sabians” (GP III: 29, 518) since “the foundation of the whole of our Law and the pivot around which it turns, consists in the effacement of these opinion from the minds and of these monuments from existence” (521). Here again, we cannot draw any parallel to Shinran’s thought since this line of thinking is pertinent to monotheistic religions only.

The reasonableness of the law Maimonides is defending is not something with which Shinran need contend. This need to defend the law stems from the Christian perception presenting the law as oppressive and being an obstacle for human excellence rather than a means to attain it. To respond to these arguments against the Law, Maimonides contends that when the Law is contrasted with the ancient practices, specifically these of the idolaters, it becomes perfectly obvious that the Law is much more conducive to human happiness. To illustrate he refers to the worship of the stars as making “the earth … populated and the soil fertile” (GP II: 30, 522), an erroneous link between agriculture and the stars. The ignorance of the idolaters led them to endorse such useless practices as “play[ing] on musical instruments before the statues during festivals” (522-523). Instead, the abandonment of these futile practices and “the adoption of the worship of God,” Maimonides writes, will result in “rainfall, the fertility of the land, good circumstances, health of the body, and length of life” (523). But the Law serves higher purposes as well since it “lighten[s] the great and oppressive burdens, the toil and the fatigue” (GP III: 49, 612). In another words, Maimonides would be hard pressed to

For instance, Justin Martyr wrote that “Christians would observe the Law if they did not know why it is instituted,” namely, out of sin and hardness of heart (Dialogue with Typho, http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/justinmartyr-dialoguetyro.html, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/01282.html ). Similarly, Samuel al-Maghribi, upon converting from Judaism into Islam wrote a polemic entitled Silencing the Jews in which he presented the Jews as hypocritical and corrupt and distorting the message of Allah.
see any of the commandments as being oppressive or counteractive to the attainment of human perfection and hence human happiness. For him, the Law assures both physical and emotional well-being. Even purity requirements, which are most severely criticized, are not perceived by Maimonides as harsh. In response to the accusation that purity requirements are excessive, Maimonides posits that the Law requires no demanding tasks such as monastic life and pilgrimage. The Law presents no physical burden and if there are some emotional demands, they serve to achieve the perfection of man. Any emotional demands serve to test one’s sincerity and determination: “as for those who deem that its burdens are grievous, heavy, and difficult to bear – all of this is due to an error in considering them” (GP II: 39, 380). For Maimonides, the difficulty of the Law should never be measured against “the wicked, vile, morally corrupt” but instead “should be considered with reference to the man who is perfect among the people. For it is the aim of this Law that everyone should be such a man” (381). Since observing the Law leads to perfection, the demands and the limitations placed by the Law are a small price to pay to accomplish this noble goal. It appears that in regards to the normative requirements, Maimonides and Shinran seem to disagree on the onset: as we recall, Shinran finds following the Tendai precepts demanding and hardly rewarding and not leading to enlightenment, whereas Maimonides finds following the similar demands (in the form of the Law) highly rewarding.

I would be remiss to overlook the moral imperatives of the commandments. For instance, turning to Maimonides’ approach to holidays, we observe that these commandments underscore the fact that holiday observance does not only amount to any
particular individual’s experience of his own joy, but points to the duty to care for the less fortunate: to feed the stranger, the orphan, the widow, and the poor. A telling example is the holiday of Purim when attention is placed on the hapless rather than on bestowing gifts on one’s own family members. While this focus certainly did not originate with Maimonides but is rather articulated by the Talmud, Maimonides dresses it in an eloquently structured and comprehensive form enhanced by the increased ethical sensitivity. In short, the laws of charity highlight the theme of kindness and righteousness. The acts of “loving thy neighbor as thyself” (Lev. 19:18), visiting the sick, comforting the mourners, and treating strangers well all constitute compassion. The acts of charity as all other laws (between man and man and between man and God) are focused on enhancing human perfection. Given the Buddhist concept of interrelatedness, which in effect resembles the “butterfly effect,” the individual action affects more than a particular individual involved in that action. For Shinran, the concept of human interrelatedness replaces the need for prescribed actions since one’s suffering has a ripple effect on many.

**Rationality: Love and Practice**

Human capacity for love and goodness is a central component of compassion. Inability to experience love prevents one from exercising compassion. For Maimonides, rationality remains significant in the interplay between the Law and love, particularly the love of God. For Maimonides, Law is “both cause and consequence, catalyst and crystallization, of the cognitive goal, just as it is both stimulus and sequel to love of
Ostensibly, love of God remains disconnected from affect and connected to reason and rationality by being described in terms of intellectual love. This approach clearly differs from Shinran’s skepticism of intellectualism. Moreover, although there are similarities with Shinran’s approach, insofar as it implies a sense of humility, Maimonides nonetheless differs from Shinran by couching love in cognitive terms. Yet, Maimonides’ use of reason does not intend to “aggrandize” man and pit him against God but rather represents, once again, “an expression of love, desiring to bring man closer to God via knowledge.” Once again, we should not minimize that for Shinran, humans are transformed as a result of Amida’s love and compassion and, contrary to Maimonides, this compassion has no relation to human intellectual capacities.

While affect plays a central role for Shinran, we note that in *GP I: 39* Maimonides maintains that “heart” is an equivocal term which refers to thought, opinion, will, and intellect. The scriptural phrase: “And you shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart” (Deut. 6:5) implies cognitive and intellectual love of God. Yet, the love of God fosters extreme dedication and “intense yearning for, and consuming love of, God” (363). This intense yearning is perfectly compatible with Maimonides’ view on humility. The culmination of this intense dedication and consuming love is exemplified in the story of Abraham and Isaac. The love of God is supplemented by the fear of God. In *GP III: 29* Maimonides contends that God is to be loved and feared” (*GP, 518*). In his placing some emphasis on the fear of God, Maimonides differs from Shinran’s approach to Amida

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293 We recall here Maimonides’ skepticism of imagination and any emotional responses. We also should keep in mind that God is not perceived by Maimonides’ in terms of traditionally understood relationality predicated upon human emotions.
294 Ibid., 370.
who, as mentioned is never discussed in terms of fear. Fearing Amida would be antithetical to the Buddhist conception of bodhisattvic compassion.

Maimonides is less interested in emphasizing the fear of God but he consistently connects becoming fully rational to the fulfillment of the commandment for love of God. In *GP* III: 54 he states that after one attains the apprehension of God, “[t]he way of life of such an individual… will always have in view loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment, through assimilation to His actions” (638). For him, apprehending God leads one to loving-kindness of his fellow human beings. This is analogous to Shinran’s conceptualization of Amida Buddha, since for him, as one becomes embraced by Amida Buddha, one assumes some of his characteristics, including loving-kindness or compassion. The difference of course will be in the fact that Shinran does not expect rationalistic apprehension of Amida Buddha and this preparatory, or preliminary normative step is absent in his thought. Ostensibly, for Maimonides human transformation is linked with human adherence to the commandments (normative requirements). For Shinran, human transformation is never based on the adherence to the internally imposed norms but rather is inseparable from the attainment of *shinjin*. We recall that this transformation happens because *shinjin*:

- is the source of enlightenment, the mother of virtues; It nurtures all forms of goodness…Shinjin harbors no defiled thoughts. It is pure, eradicating all arrogance; it is the root of reverence and the foremost treasure of the dharma-store. It is the land of purity, holding all practices within itself. 

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*CWS*, 100.
One becomes transformed as one becomes embraced by the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha. However, we should be remiss to ignore that for Maimonides, normativity involves more than perfunctory performance. In *GP* III: 51 he states that if you pray merely by your lips while facing a wall, and at the same time think about your buying and selling; or if you read the Torah with your tongue while your heart is set upon the building of your habitation and does not consider what you read, and similarly in all cases in which you perform a commandment merely with your limbs... without reflecting upon the meaning of that action or upon Him from the commandment proceeds or upon the end action, you should think that you have achieved the end. Rather you will then be similar to those of whom it is said: Thou art near in their mouth and far from their veins (*Jer.* 12:2) (622).

This statement is reminiscent of Shinran’s focus on *jinen* rather than on merely performing any actions, including the recitation of *nenbutsu*.

**Nenbutsu and prayers**

At this juncture, it might be important to contrast Shinran’s approach to *nenbutsu* with Maimonides’ approach to prayers. While Shinran does not differentiate between the need for a numerous recitation of *nenbutsu* or a singular invocation, Maimonides, takes an even more radical approach. In *GP* I: 59 Maimonides links prayers with “an absolute denial of faith” when “[i]n these prayers and sermons [the truly ignorant] predicate of God qualitative attributions that, of predicated of a human individual would designate a deficiency in [God]” (141). By conceiving of a prayer as requiring instead “intention, attention, and inwardness” (*Tefillah*, iv, 15-19), Maimonides’ conception of prayer assumes some resemblance to Shinran’s approach.

It is imperative not to connect *nenbutsu* to human practice and hence to human behavior since *nenbutsu* is never “performed out of one’s own design” (*Tannishō*, 665). And yet, perhaps paradoxically, *nenbutsu* does have something to say about human
nature, namely human humility, since it originates from one’s recognition of one’s own insufficiency and weakness. We recall that for Shinran, “the person of shinjin acts in accord with his nature and circumstances, manifesting the working of compassion in the occurrences and interactions of ordinary life.” Given Maimonides’ approach to prayers according to which any prayer empty of true intention is empty of meaning, we recognize that for both of them, unreflective performance loses its intrinsic meaning. The distinction remains that for Maimonides, any reflective performance is spelled out in terms of cognitive rationalism, whereas for Shinran, is colored by affective undertones.

I reiterate here that for Maimonides, observance of the Law is always coupled with “commitment and insight, should in short, be congruent with one’s mind and heart” (Twersky) which clearly resembles Shinran’s claim that shinjin is inseparable from jinen. Shinran of course goes a step further and views rationalizations as a setback rather, contrary to Maimonides, as a prerequisite for Amida Buddha’s embrace. Yet, it appears that in some extreme cases Maimonides’ approach moves closer to that of Shinran: silent acceptance especially in the cases of adversity. The thought behind this silent acceptance is different for each of them though. For Maimonides, this might be a temporary setback, perhaps needed for the reasons of survival; for Shinran, it is a welcome condition.

**Obscurity in Maimonides’ writing - when reasons for the commandments are obscured**

Thus far I argued that Maimonides claims that there are reasons for every commandment and yet I also alluded that in some cases these reasons remain obscure.

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296 Ueda, 120.
297 This is especially important in relation to my subsequent discussion of exile.
How does Maimonides propose to address the conundrum? What does he propose to do when in some cases these reasons do remain ambiguous and imperceptible? Moreover, how should one respond to the assertion that in some cases searching for the reasons results in the increased confusion? In another words, what should we make out of the following statement:

all those who occupy themselves with finding causes for something of these [hidden] particulars are stricken with a prolonged madness in the course of which they do not put an end to incongruity but rather increase the number of incongruities” (GP III: 26, 509)? [Italics mine.]

I turn here to Twersky (1980) explication who quotes from Sefer ham-Miswot:

"Our Sages learned from this that if men knew the reasons for all the commandments; they would find ways to disobey them.\textsuperscript{298} For if a man so perfect (as Solomon) wrongly supposed that his action (in taking many wives) would in no wise lead him into transgression, how much more would the weak-minded multitude (if they knew the reasons for the commandments) be led to disregard them, arguing thus: He forbade this, and ordered that, only for such-and-such reason; so we will carefully avoid the sin to prevent that from which this commandment was laid down, but will not be particular about the commandment itself; and this would destroy the very basis of religion. For this reason the Exalted One has withheld the reasons (392)."

Here Twersky aims to illustrate that Maimonides’ approach is firmly embedded within Jewish tradition. This quote maintains that in some cases the reasons for the commandments are not only obscure but should remain withheld. Not withholding the reason in this case is problematic because it could lead to “philosophic antinomianism” – the substitution of the ultimate goal for the normative performance.\textsuperscript{299} The absence of the normative performance will be detrimental to the preservation of the community. Besides

\textsuperscript{298} Here I am indebted to Thomas Kasulis once again, he pointed out that the “reasoning out of doing the commandments,” is reminiscent of Shinran’s argument that hakarai serves as a loop-hole to justify one’s actions (or in this case, inactions).

\textsuperscript{299} Twersky (1980) explains: “The philosophic approach posits that the actual deed becomes superfluous for the individual who understands the ultimate meaning of the commandments” (Note 91, p. 393).
philosophic antinomianism disregarding normativity can result in agnostic and skeptical antinomianism when one disregards the commandments lacking the adequate knowledge of these and deeming them worthless. In another words, one might decide that the reason given for these commandments are not compelling enough for one to follow them. Maimonides is concerned that this type of an inference can lead to antinomianism. This brings forth another convergence in Shinran’s and Maimonides,’ approaches, namely, their discomfort with the claims of an antinomianism. Underlying motivations of course remain divergent since Maimonides aims to preserve one’s commitment to the commandments intricately connected to the Jewish tradition, while Shinran does not directly verbalize any need to be committed to any specific ethnic-religious group. In addition, while Maimonides is greatly concerned with any theological errors, Shinran does not appear to have similar concerns. Shinran is, however, uncomfortable with any perception that the Pure Land thought promotes the amoral (or even immoral) approach.

Given the above, how does one reconcile Maimonides’ assertion that in some cases there is a need to withhold the meaning of some commandments and his insistence that one’s ultimate perfection is “to become rational in actu, … this would consist in his knowing everything concerning all the beings that it is within the capacity of man to know in accordance with his ultimate perfection” (GP III: 27, 511)? Returning to our discussion related to the cases when the reasons for the commandments cannot be ascertained, I speculate that perhaps Maimonides’ approach to the secrets of the law can

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300 We recall that Shinran insists that “You should not do what should not be done, think what should not be thought, or say what should not be said, thinking that you can be born in the Pure Land regardless of it” (CWS, 550) and “One must seek to cast off the evil of this world and to cease doing wretched deeds..” (CWS, 547).
be better understood through our recourse to his approach to the secrets of the Torah. In the introduction to the *GP*, Maimonides refers to the Sages’ expression that “the internal meaning of the *words of the Torah* is a *pearl* whereas the external meaning of all parables is worth *nothing*” (11). In Maimonides’ words, this parable means that “a man who let drop a pearl in his house,” is not even aware any longer of its presence despite the fact that it remains there. He writes: “…it is impossible for [this man] to derive any benefit from it until, as it has been mentioned, he lights a lamp – an act to which an understanding of the meaning of the parable corresponds” (11). For Maimonides, the internal meaning is comparable to gold, whereas the external meaning is limited to silver. The external meaning carries certain utilitarian value (i.e., addresses the welfare of human societies), while the internal meaning addresses “beliefs concerned with the truth as it is” (12).

As it becomes apparent from our discussion above, for Maimonides, lacking understanding of the reasons for the commandments, certainly does not cancel the need to follow them regardless. In his *Eight Chapters*, Maimonides refers to the Talmudic expression that states that if there are laws that “were not written down, they would deserve to be written down.” ³⁰¹ As already noted, Maimonides is highly cognizant that the reasons for the same commandments can be understood differently by various people. Maimonides argues, however, that moral requirements “cannot be known by

³⁰¹ Weiss and Butterworth, 80.
demonstration” and the absence of demonstrative value should not be equated with the absence of rational justification.

The purpose for withholding the meaning for the commandments in some cases might be strictly utilitarian: to ensure the continual survival of one’s community. As it will be discussed in the subsequent chapter, it is rather apparent that for Maimonides, survival of the Jewish community (in both civic and religious sense is of a great importance.) Shinran, to the contrary, does not directly articulate similar concerns. Perhaps this is one of the reasons, in addition to Shinran’s more individualized focus, of why normative requirements do not factor in his thought. As we recall, Shinran repeatedly claims that he cannot adduce what others should be doing or what is best for the others. Hence, he can neither insist nor even recommend how others should behave or observe any specific practices. Even the approach to the nenbutsu is highly individualized even as to its frequency. Given that for Shinran everything originates out of jinen, Maimonides’ concern for understanding reasons in order to adhere to the commandments does not translate well into Shinran’s thought since he is not interested in normative prescriptions. Maimonides’ focus on the preservation of his own religious community also is not analogous with Shinran’s view. I propose that Maimonides’ concerns with normativity in relation to community are predicated upon his exposure to a hostile environment and his life in exile.

302 Jacobs, 31.
303 And I refer her to a geographic, spatial and temporal exile rather than theological or metaphysical. It seems to me rather significant that upon the death of his brother, in his letter to Japhet, Maimonides lamented: “Now every joy has been dimmed. He has departed to his eternal life and left me confounded in a strange land” (“Letter to Japhet ben Eliahu,” p.73 in Letters of Maimonides. Translated and edited with introduction and notes by Leon D. Stitskin, Yeshiva University Press, New York, 1977.) Joel L Kraemer
Obscurity in Shinran’s writing

We recall that in some cases, including the discussion on the reasons for the Law, Maimonides’ writing can be enigmatic and obscure. Maimonides’ writing has various aims and focuses on different audiences. It also demonstrates that Maimonides utilized different writing styles. I argued that Maimonides’ writing is deeply embedded in his tradition and in some instances he used the style most conducive to his specific goal. How can these issues be assessed in relation to Shinran’s writing? My discussion of the “Seven patriarchs” demonstrates Shinran’s high reverence for the Buddhist tradition. However, in some cases Shinran’s citations of the Chinese texts appear not only inaccurate but also altered. Rather than dismissing these perceived “inaccuracies” or glossing over this critique, Shinran’s work is best read according to its “internal logic.”

First, it had to be recognized that this internal logic has no analogy to the traditional Western philosophical discourse which is framed in the mode of logical argumentation. Contrary to Maimonides’ high valuation of rationality exhibited even in his approach to writing, the internal logic that is more appropriate to reading Shinran’s work implies shifting away from privileging rational thought and grounding the interpretation in the

reminds us of Maimonides’ allusion to the biblical Moses also a stranger in a foreign land (cf. Kraemer’s chapter 14 in Maimonides, The Life and World of One of Civilization’s Greatest Minds, Doubleday, New York, 2008). The land where he lived most of this life remained “foreign” since he might have felt the need for the preservation of the Jewish community perhaps even more acutely. The preservation of this community is indisputably linked to the normative requirements. I concur with Pierre Hadot (2002) who argues that philosophical thought is not a disembodied theoretical knowledge but rather reflects the choice of life. He states: “Philosophical discourse, then, originates in a choice of life and an existential option – not vice versa” (3). He also argues that “[t]here can never be a philosophy or philosophers outside a group, a community…” (3).

304 See chapter 1.
306 Soderman, 192.
principles of argumentation characteristic to classical Buddhist literature. His deep understanding of a non-rational approach to human behavior is demonstrated in his writing style as well. Shinran follows a “rhythmic shift back and forth between parallel and non-parallel prose” employed by classical Buddhist literature. This style is unfamiliar to most Western readers and hence perceived as chaotic, incoherent, difficult, or enigmatic. And yet, this approach possesses fluidity and coherence and the seemingly discrete cycles are linked to each other on a number of levels acknowledging the influence of the predecessors. Similarly, we can argue that the “non-rational” human behavior possesses similar fluidity and coherence perhaps unrecognizable to any (untrained) Western eye.

Although taking into account this internal logic allows us to appreciate better the complexity of Kyōgyōshinshō and its multivariate structure, we are still left with the question of its intended audience. Contrary to my observations related to Maimonides’ intended aim and audience, Shinran did not have such discrete the intended audiences and his writing represents his “personal practice [rather] than a vessel of instruction for others.” Shinran, contrary to Maimonides, does not seem to express any need to concern himself with political leadership and his writings do not indicate the same tension between solitary pursuits and social and political pursuits. As a result, Shinran’s writing is a solitary practice as a “participation [in] Buddhist practice” framed in the

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307 Soderman, 193.
308 Soderman writes: “the East Asian hermeneutical method of building nets of meaning by rewriting and transforming existent systems rather than by dismantling the systems to analyze their constituent parts” (196-197).
309 Soderman, 202.
310 Ibid., 202.
form of meditation on the most important Buddhist sutras. Although Shinran builds on these sutras, he creatively reinterprets and rewrites them. However, and here I do not propose to draw any parallel to Maimonides’ work despite his acknowledgment of the Rabbinic and Talmudic ideas, Shinran “does not write [these interpretations] as an individual named Shinran … as a product of his Pure Land lineage and through the texts of this lineage” but rather it is “Amida Buddha himself, who is writing.” 311 No analogy can be drawn here because this approach is heavily influenced by a specific Japanese medieval style of textual interpretation. 312 Whereas Maimonides’ presumed elitism is often observed, Shinran’s interpretation of the Buddhist sutras can also point to certain elitism. This type of interpretation is predicated upon one’s knowledge of texts prior to one reversing or reinterpreting these texts. 313 Given the above, Shinran’s work, contrary to that of Maimonides, was not intended for his disciples. 314 Recognizing these different approaches, including the intended audience, allows us contrasting Shinran’s personal focus, with the focus on social and political issues that is easily discernable in Maimonides’ writing. Whereas Shinran’s writing shows no traceable concerns to the issues of social and political significance, it does not mean that this significance is absent. 315

311 Ibid., 203.
312 So-called “kanjin-style interpretation,” Soderman, 203.
313 Hence Soderman makes an argument that Shinran’s intended audience cannot be any uneducated simple people since they will lack the capacity to appreciate the underlining meaning of his reflections and interpretations. I do not mean to propose, however, that all Maimonides does is re-record the works done before him. His work also contains a creative re-interpretation. He is certainly not just a scribe!
314 Which partially explains his claim of not having any disciples especially if we exclude the purpose for his writing, some of his other works, including his letters.
315 Yet, we should still take into account his letters and his other writings before we conclude that his intentions had been solely introspective.
Rationality: Revelation and normativity

Returning to our discussion of the Law, we recall that Maimonides argues that the Law’s inherent value and significance is predicated on the fact that this Law is divine and “this guidance comes from Him, may He be exalted, and that this Law is divine” (GP II: 40, 384). The source of the Law affirms the purposefulness of the commandments.

Revelation itself, according to Maimonides, possesses inherent intelligibility; the Torah is the guide for perfection. Revelation is not perceived as a closed-ended event but is a rather continual transmission and hence a life-long process of rational examination and articulation of the Law. Hence, revelation itself is a rational process of study which enhances human abilities. Ethical thought as a part of this revelation is also rational. Revelation builds the framework for covenantal relations preservation of which is based on following the commandments. As a result, the concept of normativity assumes centrality for the continual communal survival as well.

Insofar as normativity is a means of observing the norms (commandments) coupled with understanding of the meaning of these norms, the notion of rationality is indisputable. The fact that humans are created in God’s image, similarly presupposes human rationality. Normativity, however, appears to be highly specialized; hence the details of the practice are particularized (attached to the tradition). But is Maimonides’ approach to normativity absolute? In other words, are the reasons themselves for the laws absolute? Or does the law allow for multiple interpretations? While in most cases

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316 According to Jacobs (2010), this “particularism of revelation and tradition and the claims of objective validity grounded in reason are materials for exploring highly important and persistent issues concerning morality” (17).
Maimonides does not seem to favor multiple interpretations, claiming him to be an
absolutist nonetheless would be inaccurate. For instance, in *GP III: 29* he states that his
study of the Sabians led him to ascertain the reasons for certain laws with certainty. Yet,
in some cases, Maimonides is less definitive in his assessment and he admits that in some
cases he “followed conjecture and supposition. But the texts … together with the
speculative premises that I possess showed me that things are indubitably so-and-so. Yet
it is possible that they are different.”\(^{317}\) In these rare moments of self-doubt, Maimonides
moves much closer to Shinran than he usually positions himself.

Since the concept of normativity is inapplicable for Shinran, I cannot argue for a
direct analogy and, yet, there are some interesting lines of convergence. For instance, we
should recall that Shinran, following his mentor Hōnen, was accused of promulgating an
unorthodox approach to Buddhist practice. In his case, contrary to Maimonides who aims
to affirm the tradition, Shinran in effect argues against the tradition. While Shinran and
Maimonides choose diametrically different approaches, Shinran was “de-frocked” and
sent into exile because of his unorthodox approach and eventually, even if unwillingly,\(^{318}\)
established a large following despite his claims that he does not have any students of his
own.\(^{319}\) Having large following at least implicitly indicates that Shinran had a certain
personal investment in the preservation of his tradition.

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\(^{317}\) Twersky, 1980, n. 121, p. 403

\(^{318}\) I say “unwillingly” because Shinran never claimed himself to have any followers and even to be
anyone’s mentor and yet he was engaged in the extensive correspondence – addition to his more formal
writings – in which he aimed to clarify his thought related to the practice of Jōdo Shinshū. In this respect at
least, the claim to having no followers is to be taken with a grain of salt.

\(^{319}\) Again, if we turn to Shinran’s letters, this claim cannot be substantiated as well because in these letters
Shinran aimed to explicate his teachings especially in relation to the accusation of antinomianism.
The normativity of the commandments, as discussed, is predicated upon being ordained by God. Both the idea of any mandated actions and of these actions as being ordained by God do not have any parallel in Shinran’s thought. Yet, there is an interesting analogy in their respective approaches. For Maimonides, commandments serve as the antithesis of, and antidote to vanity, folly, and futility, or mechanical and compulsively repetitive behavior. As noted, laws, according to Maimonides, serve to prevent thoughtless and mechanical behavior and instill moral purity and integrity. Rituals themselves provide a constant reminder of God’s existence. Fasting and prayer, for instance, especially in time of crisis and adversity are a means of impressing upon the individual the providential design of all elements and reminding him of his absolute dependence on God. Shinran is equally dismissive of mechanical and compulsively repetitive behavior. What serves the similar role for Shinran as the commandments do for Maimonides? In line with Buddhist tradition in general, one’s mindfulness (self-reflection) serves a similar function. Most significant though, it is the embrace by the Primal Vow that rejects the emphasis on the vain and insignificant. Recalling Maimonides approach to the study of the Torah, it is clear that for him this study is distinguished from the preoccupation with the transitory and vain. For Shinran, the practice of the nenbutsu similarly represents distancing oneself from transient and illusory.

Recognizing Maimonides’ concern with the preservation of the Jewish community and his valorization of intellectual pursuits, I note that Maimonides’ approach to normativity has some bearing on the issue of conversion to Judaism as well. Here
Maimonides insists that participation in the rituals should be coupled with the theoretical and theological knowledge and understanding of the meaning of these rituals. In another words, a potential convert should not only observe the commandments but be able to articulate the premises behind the rituals he observes. It is mentioned throughout this chapter, for Maimonides, intellectual achievement raises the level and intention of one’s conduct. For Maimonides, normativity becomes inseparable from contemplation and intellectual knowledge. Normativity and intellectual pursuits equally contribute not only to human intellectual but also to ethical perfection. In Shinran’s terms, praxis becomes inseparable from doxy. In this interaction between normative requirements and human actions, free will is not negated but in most cases creatively co-exists through the process of attaining the meaning of the commandments. For Shinran, as we recall, free will is insignificant since in the moment of the embrace by the Primal Vow, one’s free will is co-joined with the will of Amida Buddha. As noted, Amida Buddha’s embrace relocates human agency to Amida Buddha. Seen through the Western lens, this transfer might appear problematic if perceiving Amida Buddha’s embrace as one’s submission to other power. This also points to the fact that, despite Shinran’s endorsement of other power and his supposed total rejection of self-power, being embraced by the Primal Vow does involve a certain act, albeit an act of submission, which implies the use of self-power. Arguing that Shinran *fully* rejects the notion of free will might, therefore, be an

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320 This is because normative requirements include large components of moral concepts. Twersky writes: “The Patriarchs and Moses are also shown to be exemplars of philosophical and practical distinction; they exhibit social activism together with nearness to God achieved by sustained contemplation. Neither their knowledge nor their love of God turned them into recluses” (Twersky, 1980, 512).
oversimplification. Shinran appears well aware of human nature and human inclinations and his volitional turn to Amida Buddha is the consequence of this acute awareness.

Conclusion

The significance of Shinran’s and Maimonides’ thought is grounded in their understanding of human nature. And their subsequent articulation of different means to attain human perfection and happiness is informed by this understanding. As seen from the discussion above, their contemplation on human happiness and human perfection led them to reflect on a variety of other issues. Shinran’s and Maimonides’ approaches to attain human happiness result in Shinran’s focus on the Primal Vow and Maimonides’ emphasis on the commandments. Yet, their approaches are nuanced and complicated and take into account human complexity itself.

Shinran’s and Maimonides’ explications are idiosyncratic to these two thinkers and are affected not only by their personal views but also by their respective traditions and cultural environments. Maimonides’ endorsement of rationality cannot, however, be traced so easily to the Jewish tradition, but as I discussed in my chapter 2, reflects his desire to reconcile fully religious and philosophical thought. Even faith itself for Maimonides attains “rationalistic” connotations as he aims to place his definition of faith in terms of reason. Placing these articulations within his own tradition is imperative for Maimonides. While Shinran does not demonstrate the same tension, his definition of faith is also not as easily translatable as it reflects his focus on the affective component: trust but also his emphasis on mindfulness. This focus on mindfulness and contemplation is discernable in the thought of both of these thinkers.
Shinran’s and Maimonides’ views on human nature and their acute awareness of human weaknesses, as well as human aspirations, place them in a perfect position to appreciate the need for tolerance, acceptance, and appreciation of human difference.
Chapter 4: Juxtaposing Further: Shinran, Maimonides and the “Other”

Introduction

In my previous chapter I proposed that Shinran’s and Maimonides’ views on human nature affect their perception on the means of attaining human perfection and human happiness. I argued that their interest in human nature increased their sensitivity to the ordeals of human beings and affected their appreciation of human difference. The idea of human difference lends itself to the realization of human “otherness.” I propose that their own positions within their respective communities further sensitized them to the issue of difference. In this chapter I continue providing a thematic comparison of the thought of Shinran and Maimonides focusing, among other themes, on such issues as the concept of the “other,” tradition, inclusion and exclusion. While juxtaposing these themes I am mindful of not falling into the trap of the shortcomings of either reductionism or essentialism.

I focus on the conceptualization of “otherness” as an ever-present dilemma of “us” versus “them” and maintain that labeling one as the “other” is inherently connected to the differentiation between particularist and universalist approaches \(^321\) further

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321 I use these terms to indicate the following: a particularistic approach is an approach that underscores commitment to a particular group, places its emphasis on value of devotion to friends, family, and a specific community; whereas an universalistic approach is an approach that exhibits a concern for the welfare of strangers, and commitment to some general principles and concerns for general goods. Revelation at Sinai can be a case in point as to whether this revelation was aimed only for the Jewish
materialized in the methods of exclusion. I posit that our understanding of the meaning of tradition is crucial to our understanding of both inclusion and exclusion. I recognize, however, that the meaning and significance of the term “tradition” itself might have multiple meanings. I point out that for Buddhism and Judaism in general, and for Shinran and Maimonides in particular, the meaning of tradition carries different significance. I aim to problematize our approach to particularist claims and propose that particularism does not only serve as the means to preserve a given community, but also advances the idea of pluralism.

I start with a general discussion of the meaning of the term “tradition,” further connecting tradition with the concept of the “other.” I then move to the discussion of natural law, which I juxtapose with the Buddhist conception of law of nature and the law of karma. I follow with the discussion of Maimonides’ approach to divine law and the issue of normativity in relation to the preservation of one’s tradition. I ask the degree to which the issue of preserving one’s tradition and the conceptualization of “otherness” informs the thought of these two thinkers. I conclude by revisiting the connection between normativity and such issues as tradition, tolerance, exclusion and difference. I then focus on the issue of “otherness” seen through the eyes of Shinran and Maimonides. My goal is articulate a more nuanced interpretation applied to the relation between (in)tolerance and pluralism as interpreted from the thought of these two thinkers.
Shinran and Maimonides as modern thinkers

Given the embeddedness of human knowledge and human ideas within their respective cultures and traditions, to reconstruct the meaning attached to these ideas requires taking into account the views held by these specific communities. For instance, when analyzing such terms as “good” and “evil,” it is important to be attuned to the fact that in some traditions “good” and “evil” reside within the communal and relational rather than merely individual. 322 Specific to Shinran, as we noted in chapter 3, Shinran’s statement as to who attains birth in the Pure Land already problematizes our traditional understanding of “good” and “evil.” When his assertion that “Even the good person is born in the Pure Land, so without question the person who is evil” is viewed through our Western “lens,” the meaning of this statement alludes to the endorsement of immorality (hence multiple claims of antinomianism). Yet this assessment overlooks what goes into the construction of the term “evil” itself.323 Maimonides’ conceptualization of “good” and “evil” in turn appears similarly nuanced and reflects not only his approach to transcendence but also his understanding of contextualized human relations. Recognizing

322 Cf. Karen McCarthy Brown, Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn (Berkley and Los-Angeles: University of California Press, 1991. Brown argues that for Vodou morality is defined in very different terms and according to Vodou, a moral person is the one who lives “in tune with her or his character, a character defined by the spirits that said to love this person” (241).
323 I point, however, that in Jewish tradition this approach is manifold as well. For instance, in one of the late-Rabbinic Midrashim, a picture is drawn of the righteous in Paradise listening to God's discourse in the Torah and reciting the end of the Kaddish (mourner’s prayer): "May His great name be blessed and sanctified in all eternity" and the wicked in hell respond by saying "Amen." After hearing these words, the Midrash tells, God turns to the ministering angels and asks them “Who are those out of hell cry Amen?” The angels respond that those are apostates and sinners who despite their unspeakable pain cannot help joining in the benediction of Thy holiness. Then God says unto angels: "Take them away and bring them out of their damnation" and opens the gates of paradise letting the sinners out of hell. The reference here is made to Isaiah 26.2: "Open ye gates that the righteous nation that keepth faithfulness may enter”. (Alexander Altmann, Tolerance and the Jewish Tradition, The Council of Christians and Jews, London, 1957, p. 14).
a multiplicity of conceptualizations and interpretations becomes an incitement to revisit our construction of meaning and subsequently challenges our taken for granted conclusions.

Our construction of meaning is always preconditioned by our own cultural embeddedness and contemporary standing. My review of the works of these two pre-modern thinkers led me to notice a certain modern streak in their thought. For instance, Maimonides’ rationalization of the Law can be extended to the contemporary concept of secularization. By defining secularization as a result of rationalization and cause-and-effect thought, Maimonides appears to be a precursor to secularization because of his strong emphasis on the same notions that went into the construction of the principle of secularization. However, when I note “modern streaks” in their thought, I recognize that this does not mean that this concept or any other “modern” sounding concepts articulated by either Shinran or Maimonides has ever been thought or defined in any of these terms. My use of these terms is a mere extrapolation originating from my analysis of their thought which, however, points to the timelessness and the continual relevance of their thought. My analysis of their thought makes me especially cognizant that certain issues never lost their urgencies.

324 Bryan A. Wilson defines secularization as a process where the rational and systematic coordination of empirical knowledge leads to the advancement of science. This process is characterized by the development of empirical inquiry, detached observation and experimentation and the organization of ordered, general concepts. While Maimonides is not following this precise trajectory in this approach, he can be seen as attempting to follow it rather closely, especially if we do not overlook that he lived in the 13th century! Brian A. Wilson, 1987 Encyclopedia of Religion, Second Edition, pp. 8214-8220
Traditions and the “Other”

Ostensibly, comparing any seemingly “incomparable” traditions challenges our inherently Western conceptualization and yet productively enhances our understanding and appreciation. Specific to our juxtaposition of the views espoused by Shinran with those of Maimonides,’ I note that while Shinran’s views are steeped in a more experiential approach of Eastern tradition embedded in Indian, Chinese and Japanese medieval thought, Maimonides’ views are informed by the Aristotelian privileging of the rational.

Regardless of this embeddedness, any reference to the outsider/insider dichotomy overlaps with the issue of tradition. Tradition, at least implicitly, affects the construction of the “other”: the one who becomes excluded. When exploring the conceptualization of “otherness,” as the ever-present dilemma of “us” versus “them,” the question of how we objectify the other immediately resurfaces. This objectification of “Otherness” brings us to the differentiation between particularist and universalist approaches. Before turning to either one of these approaches, it is important to take note that the meaning and the significance of the term “tradition” itself are different for different thinkers. For Judaism in general and for Maimonides in particular, the issue of one’s tradition cannot be considered without addressing the issue of normativity, which is inseparable from the approach to the revealed law. The principle of normativity is linked to the particularist approach. At the core of the particularistic claim lies the concept of normativity as the adherence to the Law. Those who view normativity as a defining element of the Jewish tradition would be hard pressed to accept the universalistic definition, if it does not
incorporate the adherence to the norms (Law/Code) as the focal point of the Jewish tradition. And yet, those who embrace universalist view claim that particularists’ tendencies represent “deviation from the normative teachings of the faith.” In other words, for them, normativity itself argues against particularism (e.g., Hermann Cohen, Steven Schwarzschild). While this view is held by liberal interpreters of Judaism, those who adhere to the strict orthodox approach or especially ultra-orthodox position, perceive this interpretation as a merely dishonorable desire to accommodate to the modern world and to discredit tradition. However, reducing Judaism to either one of these positions is non-productive. Regardless of the approach one endorses and despite the fact that these different approaches articulate the concept of inclusion and exclusion differently, they nonetheless serve as a means for the preservation of a given tradition.

While this preservation of tradition and the focus on ensuring human perfection is indisputably significant for Maimonides, Shinran, to the contrary, views tradition in relation to the legacy of his intellectual predecessors rather than in terms of the preservation of a people and even less so in terms of ensuring human perfection. For Shinran, humans - regardless of their traditions - are equally encumbered by karmic evil. As I discussed in chapter 3, his approach is informed by his view on human nature. He questions the means to improve humans and human condition via the recourse to rationalism and is not interested in improving human condition specific to a given community. In comparison, Maimonides can perhaps be termed as a “culture-specific”

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idealistic who aims to preserve the Jewish community but also to improve human condition through improving human character.

Given that Shinran, contrary to Maimonides, does not seem to focus on this issue of preservation (of a given tradition), normativity for him is extraneous. Personal relation with Amida is primary and does not carry any political connotations or political meaning but points to rather experiential and personalized significance. While divine law plays a central role in Maimonides’ thought, for Shinran, it is shinjin and Amida’s agency that play a somewhat similar role. Whereas divine law cannot be factored in Shinran’s thought, but, as discussed in chapter 3, karma plays a significant role, these two approaches can be productively juxtaposed. Prior to turning to the law of karma, I propose that understanding natural law can foreshadow our understanding of the law of karma. Hence I first turn to natural law.

Natural law: Noahide law, Maimonides and what about Shinran?

The very first effort to draw a connection to natural law can be observed in relation to the articulation of Noahide laws. The seven Noahide laws are considered by rabbinic tradition to be the minimal requirement applicable to all humans (Sanh. 56-60; Yad, Melakhim, 8:10, 10:12).\(^\text{326}\) Genesis 9 specifies these laws and identifies those to whom these laws apply (Gen 9:18-19). The Tosefta, a second-century rabbinic text, contains a universal moral code based on God’s words to Noah’s offspring following the flood. Given that there were no Jews at Noah’s time, this teaching was aimed for the

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guidance of all people. The presence of this rabbinic discussion focused on the Noahide laws points to a recognition by the rabbis of the existence of moral order prior to revelation.\(^{327}\) Maimonides offers his own reading on this discussion and provides a certain qualitative distinction:

A heathen who accepts the seven commandments and observes them scrupulously is a ‘righteous heathen,’ and will have a portion in the world to come, provided that he accepts them and performs them because the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded them in the Law and made known through Moses our Teacher that the observance thereof had been enjoined upon the descendants of Noah even before the Law was given. But if this observance thereof is based upon a reasoned conclusion\(^{328}\) he is not deemed a resident alien, or one of the pious of the Gentiles, but one of their wise men.\(^{329}\)

Thus, in Maimonides’ view, the use of natural reason (rather than the adherence to the commandments) cannot result in religious merit and reward in the form of the afterlife. As discussed, Shinran is similarly skeptical of a reasoned conclusion but does not connect it to any notions of reward and punishment. While Maimonides does not dispute any presence of natural morality and the application of reason to ascertain the proper way of behavior, nevertheless the outcome of this behavior is qualitatively different when one acts according to divinely ordained command. Natural law, defined in terms of human capacity to reason is hence a “kind of minimal natural morality, given

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\(^{328}\) Here the definition of natural law fits perfectly if we recall that according to Cicero, natural law is connected with “right reason in agreement with Nature” and is universal. Newman quotes Cicero’s statement in *De Republica* III that, “There will not be different laws at Rome and at Athens, or different laws now and in the future, but one eternal and unchangeable law will be valid for all nations and for all times.”

\(^{329}\) Isadore Twersky, 1972, 221. See also Milton R. Konvitz’s discussion in “Natural Law and Judaism: The Case of Maimonides,” *Judaism* 45 (Winter 1996), 1, 29-45.
to humankind at the time of their creation and linked to the needs and purposes common to all people.”

As seen from the discussion above, the argument for natural law can be supported by turning to the admission that Noah and Job were deemed righteous before God’s revelation. Yet, it is important to stress that the acceptance of natural law does not negate the importance of the role of the commandments and the intricate connection to the notion of reward and punishment. Noahide laws are a perfect example of the universal laws since they were universally binding even before their acceptance by any particular gentile. According to Maimonides, these laws, in addition to being divinely revealed, are also traditional and rational. And yet, these laws, as discussed, are viewed by Maimonides as inadequate when they are simply accepted according to one’s reasoning. However, some scholars maintain that their inadequacy is not equated with their lack of legal status but rather relates to being theologically inadequate when they are treated as sufficient on their own without recourse to the commandments. Recalling the significance placed by Maimonides on “habituation” and inner attitude discussed in chapter 3, it becomes clear that for Maimonides, while their legal validity is not reduced since they only focus on external actions and do not prescribe an “inner attitude,” they

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**References**


331 E.g., David Novak as discussed below.

332 David Novak in *Judaism: An Historical and Constructive Study of the Noahide Laws*, (Lewistown: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983) argues that following the Noahide laws out of rational conclusion do not invalidate this action – or the laws – since, as consistent with Rabbinic view, that they do not require “religious intention” (kavannah). He argues that their insufficiency should be regarded only in theological terms. Moreover, he argues that for Maimonides, rational conclusion can have a number of forms therefore “the insufficiency of ‘rational conclusion’ might very well be that it insufficiently reasons about the deeper meaning of the Noahide laws” (278). For Novak, Maimonides is not claiming that the reason and revelation are mutually exclusive but he rather rejects “a certain type of non-theological reasoning as being too
are inadequate. Regardless their legal validity and their possible inadequacy, Noahide laws, and natural law by extension, carry a different connotation as we think in terms of the particularity of the covenantal relationships.

I mentioned before that the significance of the law for Maimonides could be productively contrasted with that of Shinran’s approach to Amida Buddha. I do not, however, propose that Shinran’s articulation of the “relationship” with Amida Buddha as a similar “covenantal” relationship as there are no specified obligations and expectations placed on one embraced by Amida Buddha. Experience of shinjin is the result of self-awareness rather than normative expectation. The realization of shinjin can be attained in a briefest instant of time and the process of a person’s transformation begins immediately. The significance of shinjin will be overlooked if its transformative effect on a person is not highlighted. This transformation’s significance is in the enhanced sense of compassion. The moment of nenbutsu is the moment of a “new center of personal identity” as the start of “a person of shinjin.” And yet, while I do not suggest any resemblance of covenantal relations understood in terms of adherence to the Law, I do propose certain interesting converge with Jewish tradition. I argue that shinjin overlaps with the Jewish concept of kavannah. If we think of shinjin in terms of religious intention (kavannah) and recall that kavannah is a mindset characterized by concentration and superficial to grasp the rational meaning of divine law” (278). The rational meaning of divine law, Novak maintains, is in its theocentric nature since the reason that these commandments were given in the first place to “bring man to one supreme good – knowledge of God” (279).


334 H. Elchanan Blumenthal refers to kavannah as “directed intention.” He reminds that Maimonides, though his approach was not agreed upon by the later codifiers, stated that without kavannah one’s prayer is nullified and one is to pray again. According to Maimonides, “[t]rue kavannah implies freedom from all
intent, then we recognize that similarly to the state of shinjin, the state of kavannah requires man’s “true, real, and sincere heart and mind.” I do not propose, however, that these two terms are identical. Wary of reductionism, I recognize that making this claim will result in reducing the meaning of shinjin to our Western classification. Yet I do wish to point out that when Shinran’s relationship with Amida Buddha is juxtaposed with Maimonides’ approach to the Law, their similar focus on intention and sincerity becomes highlighted.

Maimonides, as seen from our discussion above, does not disregard natural law but finds it inadequate. How can we envision Shinran’s response to the relation between law and nature?

**Nature and Karma - Buddhist Conception**

I argued before that the term “tradition” could be understood differently depending on the specific culture. The term “nature” appears like a straight-forward term. But how is nature understood in Buddhism? The concept of “nature,” which at the first glance is presumed to be understood similarly in all traditions, carries a different meaning for Buddhism. Nature (or natural world) according to Buddhist thought represents “[t]he natural world of living beings is a moral order and this moral order functions in a physical setting.” Physical setting, in turn, refers to the cosmos as “the abode of beings” which includes human and non-human being. Nature, however, constitutes only part of this cosmos rather than the cosmos in toto since it includes “a huge number of

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335 CWS, 206.
world systems, and which is immense in time and space and eternally manifests and dissolves.”  According to karma, rebirth is a result of karma and refers to intentional acts performed in this and the past lives. Mahāyāna though altered this conception of the natural world by breaking the dualism between Samsāra (the endless circle of suffering and rebirth) and Nirvāṇa (the attainment of happiness in the form of enlightenment). It might be interesting to note in passing that the previous focus on attaining Nirvāṇa deemed any emphasis on maintaining the nature as irrelevant since the aim was to “destroy attachment to the world.” However, given the general Buddhist focus on not injuring any living beings, and while the natural world “had no ultimate status,” the natural world was treated with “ethical restraint and friendliness.”

*Karma*, in turn, is one of these words that became a part of popular culture but its meaning is often misunderstood or perhaps reduced to the minimal. The root of the word “karma” is “action” intricately connected to one’s intention for this action. Correspondingly, good and bad karma relate to an intention or volition with which the act is done. However, Buddhism recognizes that in additional to the volitional aspect of karma, unconscious factors (i.e., life instinct, pleasure seeking instinct, etc.) as well as sensory contacts which produce desire in the individuals also affect karma. The Buddha

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337 Ibid., 381.
338 Ibid., 389.
339 Ibid., 389.
340 We recall that etymologically *karma* comes from the Sanskrit root ‘kr’ which means ‘to act.’ Other terms that are also synonymous with *karma* are *vidhi* (to enjoin, to be inseparable), and *adrsta* (the invisible, unseen power). In theistic philosophical systems, where God is postulated as the governor of the universe, one more term is used – *daivam*. In some cases these terms are used according to their specific meaning with *karma* as an umbrella term that unifies all three. Cf. S. S. Rama Rao Rappu, ed, *Dimensions of Karma*, (Columbia: South Asia Books, 1987).
taught that all actions that a person can perform, actions of the body, actions of speech and actions of the mind, produce karmic effects. These actions can relate to both inner mental states (unobservable) or to physical exhibitions (observable). Actions are judged as “good” or “evil” because of their positive or negative effect on the moral agent. However, as mentioned, these actions cannot be defined in terms of good and evil without their association with the mental state or volition (cetanā). An action cannot be karmically significant if there was no intention behind it. Actions motivated by greed, hate and confusion produce evil behavior. To avoid producing any evil karma one is to refrain from any craving. A person’s actions can appear as morally good and yet can result in the accumulation of evil karma. For instance, donating money for a good cause (morally good action) in order to gain some benefits (craving for a reward) will result in evil karma. On the other hand, when one is physically forced or coerced to perform a demeritorious deed but harbors no evil intentions of his or her own, no evil karma will be created. However, the goal is not to accumulate any karma, which can only be achieved in the case of total detachment, emancipation from any desires and craving. This is exceptionally challenging since even unconscious motives (i.e., the desire to extend one’s life and to avoid death; the wish to maximize pleasure and evade pain) influence creation of karma. In the Buddha’s view, these desires result from one’s ignorance, namely, an erroneous view of the nature and value of life. For the Buddha, only a complete detachment and selfless behavior that renounces all self-centered behavior can lead to enlightenment (Nirvāṇa).
As tradition evolved and also as a consequence of being removed from the land of its origin, the concept of *karma* also continued to evolve. The Mahāyāna’s non-dualistic approach that broke the separation between Samsāra and Nirvāṇa removed this absence of the concern for the natural world since taking care of the world and the attainment of Nirvāṇa coincided. However, most significant Mahāyāna’s contribution was in maintaining that “all sentient beings are or have Buddha-essence or Buddha-nature, a spiritual element which is naturally pure.”\(^{341}\) We recall that for Shinran, who became disillusioned with the Tendai tradition, the aim for a complete detachment and renunciation was unattainable. In addition, in his view, the creation of the evil *karma* is considerably more predominant than any creation of the good *karma*.

While Shinran might have accepted the previously mentioned Mahāyāna’s postulate, his thought nonetheless remains firmly connected to karmic impediments that in effect limit this presumed attainment of Buddhahood. For Shinran, this attainment of Buddhahood is inconceivable without the embrace by the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha. And yet even here Shinran avoids making any definitive claims. Despite Shinran’s full affirmation of the practice of the *nenbutsu*, he states: “I really do not know whether the *nenbutsu* may be the case for my birth in the Pure Land, or the act that shall condemn me to hell.”\(^{342}\) For Shinran, law of nature is played out in the law of *karma*. Whereas the law of *karma* plays an irrefutably significant role in Shinran’s thought, for Maimonides’, as noted, this role is played by divine law, which serves also the role central to the preservation of the Jewish community. The law of *karma* does not carry similar

\(^{341}\) Ibid., 387.

\(^{342}\) *Tannishō*, II, 5.
connotations and cannot be explicitly connected to the idea of community’s preservation. The similarity between divine law and the law of *karma* lies only in the significance attributed to these notions by Maimonides and Shinran respectively.

**Law: Heretics and the preservation of tradition**

The idea of the preservation of a community can be predicated upon the threat that this community experiences or experienced in the past. Any community life is largely circumscribed by this particular community’s cultural and religious memories, as well as symbols and emblems. Boundaries between any particular community and any other community (or communities) serve to keep these symbols intact and hence to preserve the tradition. Most religious communities, which aim to protect and preserve their values, adopt an “attitude of segregation.” These attitudes of segregation to some extent are spelled out in the religious law. For Maimonides duties of religion are articulated in the Law.

The “other” in Maimonides’ view jeopardizes community’s integrity. Maimonides’ articulation of the “other” is exemplified in his approach to heresy. In Maimonides’ view, the heretic presents a real threat to the religious integrity of the community. The Karaites represent the sort of heretic seen as this “quintessential” other. Maimonides’ most extensive articulation of the “other” is in his *Laws of*

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344 A Jewish movement characterized by their rejection of the Talmudic tradition and their demand to return to Scripture only.

345 His approach to Karaites, however, changed many years after he settled in Egypt and his initial approach closely mimicked the approach exercised by his predecessors in Spain. His subsequent view on the Karaites lost the extreme harshness as he came to the realization that the force of events can play a powerful role and lead people to commit errors for which cannot be always held guilty. Cf., Maimonides’ *Epistle to*
Repentance where he lists everyone who is to be denied a share in the world-to-come. He articulates the highest reward for the fulfillment of the commandments in terms of the world-to-come and punishment in terms of being cut off the community and perishing. In his chapter III: 6 Maimonides stipulates everyone who is not to be granted the reward. He starts with heretics and epicureans, followed by those who deny the Torah, the resurrection of the dead or the coming of the Redeemer; then apostates; those who cause a multitude to sin, and those who secede from the ways of community. Maimonides provides a specific definition for each of these categories placing a strong emphasis on those whose actions are detrimental to the religious and physical integrity of the Jewish community. He defines a heretic the one who reject the transcendent God; an Epicurean the one who, among other things, denies the prophecy of Moses; an apostate the one who violates the precepts of the Torah; the one who separates himself from the community.

One’s voluntary separation from the community is similarly disdained by Maimonides, as in his eyes it undermines this community’s unity. The following statement underscores his trepidation:

One who separates himself from the community, even if he does not commit a transgression but only holds aloof from the congregation of Israel, does not fulfill religious precepts in common with his people, shows himself indifferent when they are in distress, does not observe their fast, but goes his own way, as if he were one of the gentiles, and did not belong to the Jewish people.  

_Yemen_ where he urges the Jews to learn the arts of survival and presents himself “at his most democratic” (Ralph Lerner, _Maimonides’ Empire of Light: Popular Enlightenment in an Age of Belief_, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000, 16).

346 See Hyamson, 84b.

347 Ibid., 85a.
For Maimonides, belonging to a community obliges one to act toward his fellow members with love and compassion. Maimonides’ disfavors one’s detachment from one’s community.

Ostensibly, the aim to preserve the integrity of the Jewish community leads Maimonides to sanction an indisputably harsh treatment of the heretics and the informers.\(^{348}\) As noted, those who hold heretical views are perceived by Maimonides as a threat to the community. As a result, the punishment endorsed by Maimonides is even more unforgiving than articulated by the Talmud. Maimonides’ identification of heretical beliefs as lacking moral sophistication, leads him not to recoil from encouraging force as a means of preventing the Israelites from reversing to any idolatrous practices. He justifies his arguments for more severe repercussions by turning to Biblical rather than Talmudic sources. His insistence on punishment does not have the support of a specific normative source since the Mishnah does not advocate punishment beyond the rejection of the acceptance of one into the realm of the world-to-come, yet Maimonides, as mentioned, proposes this person to be cut off the community. He reverts to the Biblical texts, namely Numbers 30:15 \(^{349}\) and Deuteronomy 20:16, 18 advocating the eradication of the Canaanite inhabitants by contending that this is necessary in order to deter others

\(^{348}\) Informers are defined as someone who “delivers a coreligionist into the power of a heathen, who will put him to death or assault him; and one who delivers the property of a coreligionist to a heathen or to a despot, who is like a heathen” (Hyamson, 85a).

\(^{349}\) “But the person, be he citizen or stranger who act acts defiantly [with upraised hand] reviles the Lord; that person shall be cut of from his people” (Tanakh, 233).
For Maimonides, the betrayal of one’s community deserves punishment in this life since he perceives this betrayal to be perilous for the whole community.

Yet, Maimonides’ an indisputably harsh treatment of heretics – often placed under the rubric of “Maimonidean intolerance” - cannot be analyzed irrespective of his immediate environment. While some scholars argue that his line of attack of heretics closely mirrors the intolerance of the Almohads, others contend that it is problematic to consider Maimonides’ approach as being influenced by a religious grouping to which Maimonides himself did not belong. Instead, Maimonides’ position should be viewed in light of a general position espoused by Islamic philosophers. Does Maimonides’ concern merely relate to preserving monotheism? If this is the case, why is he placing a rather extensive focus on the Jewish community and the Jewish tradition where the sister monotheistic religions especially Islam (and to some degree Christianity – if we bracket the Trinitarian aspects) also ensure the same focus? As seen from the discussion above, in addition to the preservation of theological purity, Maimonides’ concern is placed on the preservation of the Jewish community and the Jewish tradition per se. And yet, this focal

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350 Gerald Blijstein in “The ‘Other’ in Maimonidean Law,” points that the same approach, which he terms “preventive,” was utilized by Islam since unbelief was seen more than a “denial of truth but a threat to the community of the faithful” (note 23, p. 191). Blijstein argues that for Maimonides a Jew can never “detach oneself from the community” (178) even when he becomes a heretic or an informer and that is precisely why Maimonides posits that the “Jewish heretics” should be treated “with greater enmity than are gentiles” (note 25, p. 192).

351 Blijstein argues that Maimonides interprets the one who acts defiantly as “the ideological transgressor” (181). See also Halbertal and Margalit’s Idolatry and especially chapter 8 “Idolatry and Political Authority,” pp. 214-235. They similarly maintain that “idolatry is a challenge to God’s exclusive position as King, and the sin represents a crisis in a political system” (222). Likewise, Blijstein states that “the essence of idolatry is ideological, the concrete action is merely expressive of the true sin, which is spiritual” (Blijstein, 181).
point is indissoluble from the focus on the preservation of monotheism itself. \(^{352}\) Ralph Lerner writes that for Maimonides,

> [t]he election of the Jews has nothing to do with their virtues or deserts, but rather with the merits of their forefathers in first recognizing and submitting themselves to the living God. Thus the continuing distinction of the Jews is an act of divine grace, a grace that manifests itself in an act of supreme legislation. It is those laws, rules, and statutes that constitute the Jews as a virtuous or preeminent community. \(^{353}\)

Whether this focus is to be considered exclusivist and intolerant will be addressed in the subsequent parts of this chapter. Here I merely maintain that this exclusion should be contextualized in relation to Maimonides’ aim for the community’s preservation and the notion of a perceived threat of a cessation of existence should be kept in mind.

**Universalist and Particularist Traditions Redefined**

I have argued that exclusivism and inclusivism have some direct relation to the notions of particularistic and universalistic claims. Thus far, however, I mentioned the terms “particularist” and “exclusivist” in passing but these terms warrant some additional discussion given that they often carry specific historical and ideological connotations.

The simple distinction between these two terms might be counterproductive. Particularist is often defined as “the opposite of proselytizing mission.” \(^{354}\) Hence particularist claim is generally associated with the absence of missionary actions, whereas universalist, to the contrary, is characterized by missionary activity in terms of conversion of the outsiders to a given faith. Further, nationalism is often used interchangeably with particularism and

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\(^{352}\) Lerner maintains that for Maimonides, the other monotheistic religions are “lifeless copies” and one should not be “befuddled by the superficial resemblances” (20).

\(^{353}\) Ibid., 16.

exclusivism. However, a more nuanced definition of particularism recognizes the presence of various connotations of this term.

The definition of the term “universalist” has a number of interpretations as well. For instance, Michael S. Kogan states that "From its inception, Israelite faith has been characterized by a balance between particularist and universalist themes." 355 He refers to Abraham as “the father of a great nation" who, while centering on a particular Holy Land, was carrying a universal meaning of that nation: "In you all the peoples of the earth shall be blessed: (Gen 12:3). Further, “Rabbinic Judaism designed its specific understanding of universalism in the second and third centuries as it dealt with the issue of remaining Jewish in a hostile world.” 356 The term universalist in that context was applicable to both Christianity and Judaism yet in application to Judaism it required a caveat of “a specific understanding of universalist” because it could not be interpreted outside of the Christian framework. 357 In the monotheistic context, the term universalist often denotes the relationship between Jews and Gentiles and has specific bearing on the inclusion (or exclusion) in the world to come. From the Rabbinic position, to be called “universalistic” means that a religious pattern of thought recognizes outsiders as good enough for the coming kingdom. According to this definition, universalistic religion does not have a “universal” mission. Yet, the fact that some outsiders are not recognized as acceptable for the world to come, still leaves the door open for a particularistic definition. Given this criterion, Christianity can also be defined as particularistic since it does not allow for

355 Michael S. Kogan, 105.
356 Ibid., 57-58.
357 Runesson states: “If other [than Christianity] patterns of thought are to be called universalistic, they have to be defined from the horizon of Christianity” (59).
salvation outside its own religion. However, seeing universalist and particularist as merely opposing forces overlooks the existent tension between these two conceptions.

To get a fuller understanding of these terms requires recognizing their complex nature. There are three aspects that are important to consider: an ethnic aspect, the aspect of salvation, and missionary aspect. Each of these aspects has some subcategories as well. For instance, an ethnic aspect can be closed-ethnic religion which accepts no converts, open-ethnic religion that accepts converts and non-ethnic religion that places no emphasis on any ethnic considerations. The aspect of salvation is also multilayered as it includes salvation-inclusive religion that maintains the possibility of salvation for people of other faiths with focused placed primarily on ethical rather than theological concerns; and salvation-exclusive religion where “the borders of a religion are the borders of salvation.” Missionary aspect is divided into three categories: proselytizing mission focused on bringing into the fold outsiders through a certain rite; ethical-religious mission aimed to make people change their lifestyle, based, however, on the ethical code of that particular religion; and inward mission with the goal to make individuals or groups to comply with certain aspects of that religion. Ostensibly though, the only true universalistic religion is a religion that stands outside any ethical, salvation and missionary efforts and exhibits acceptance and tolerance towards outsiders regardless of their ethnicity and belief system.

Turning to the Biblical account of the universalist claim, the story of the Tower of Babel represents a transition from universalist to particularist. Universalist claim here is

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358 Runesson, 63.
presented as possessing danger of imposing a “man-made uniformity” constricted by the absence of freedom of speech and dissent. The Tower of Babel is interpreted by some scholars as an example of “the first totalitarianism.” 359 The universalist claim is interpreted as exerting a demand for uniformity with a high potential of being further manipulated into a regime of totalitarianism with communism and fascism as the pinnacles of such regime. In short, Babel is “the symbol of the sacrifice of the individual to the state.” 360

Whereas the story of Babel might be interpreted as a warning against universalistic claims, a particularist claim can be supported by turning to the Mishnah. A Mishnah states that while God makes everyone in His image, they all come out as being different. 361 The compassionate society is one that welcomes diversity which at its core implies difference. The idea of difference can be traced to Genesis 9 when God established the covenant with humans, namely the rainbow. Aristotle’s critique of Plato’s Republic follows the lines of the same critique. Aristotle articulates his endorsement of diversity when he states: “The nature of a state is to be a plurality… So that we ought not to attain this greatest unity even if we could, for it would be the destruction of the state.” 362 He provides his critical assessment of the unity by stating:

For this is a point at which a state may attain such a degree of unity as to be no longer a state, or at which, without actually ceasing to exist, it will become an

360 Ibid., 78.
361 “For if a man mints many coins from one mould, they are all alike, but the Holy One, blessed be He, fashioned all men in the mould of the first man, and not one resembles the other,” Sanhedrin Folio 38a. http://www.come-and-hear.com/sanhedrin/sanhedrin_38.html
inferior state, like harmony passing into unison, or rhythm which has been reduced to a single toot.  

Jewish endorsement of the particulars as apparent from the Biblical quotes goes against Plato’s assertion that truth exists only in the “form,” the universal. The Platonic message of the universal is engrained in the Western consciousness and as a result, universal is often perceived in a qualitatively preferred light. The Aristotelian critique though foreshadowed in the Jewish tradition, is sometimes met with skepticism. The Torah’s trajectory, contrary to Plato’s Republic progresses from the universal to the particular starting with the initial covenant applicable to all people and moving to the Mosaic covenant specific to the Jewish people. However, Jewish tradition is a combination of universality and particularity. Some argue that mere universalism “cannot tolerate the otherness of the other” and leads to the “imperialism of the rationalistic mind.”  

The notion of universalist claims, extended to the idea of multiculturalism also becomes implicated in the same inability to see humans for their individual, unique qualities; this yields “a new tribalism” which becomes a “cacophony of conflict ethnic and religious ghettos with no overarching conception of the common good.” Universalist claims overlook that humans are the amalgamation of commonalities and differences.

**Particularism and the Law**

Ostensibly, the distinction between universalistic and particularistic claims is convoluted and, as a result, often hastily assessed. Judaism is generally assigned to the

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364 Sacks, 86.
365 Ibid., 86.
particularist sphere.\textsuperscript{366} While assessing Judaism in these terms might be accurate, it lacks a nuanced interpretation. When particularism is viewed in terms of normativity, the issue becomes even more muddled. At the core of the particularist claim lies the concept of normativity as the adherence to the Law. Those who view normativity as a defining element of the Jewish tradition would be hard pressed to accept the universalist definition if it does not maintain that holding the adherence to the norms (Law/Code) is the focal point of the Jewish tradition. And yet, those who embrace the universalist view, claim that particularists’ tendencies represent “deviation from the normative teachings of the faith.” \textsuperscript{367} In another words, for them, normativity itself argues against particularism (e.g., Hermann Cohen, Steven Schwarzschild). While this view is held by liberal interpreters of Judaism, those who adhere to the strict orthodox or especially ultra-orthodox position, perceive this interpretation as a merely dishonorable desire to accommodate to the modern world.

As already noted, the Jewish tradition, however, cannot be reduced to either universalist or particularist definition but rather demonstrates the tension between these positions. This tension can be illustrated through the recourse to the Biblical as well as the Mishnaic texts. For instance, to illustrate, when we contrast the verses of Amos 3:2\textsuperscript{368}

\begin{quote}
\textit{You alone have I singled out
Of all the families of the earth –
That is why I call you to account
For all your iniquities."
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{366} Regardless the discussion above which argues that this distinction is rather meager and Christianity can equally be seen as a particularistic religion, we recognize that the overwhelming assessment of Judaism does allocate it to the particularistic sphere.
\textsuperscript{368} Amos 3:2 states:
“\textit{You alone have I singled out
Of all the families of the earth –
That is why I call you to account
For all your iniquities."
\textsuperscript{1018-1019}
with Amos 9:7, \textsuperscript{369} we note this tension. Amos 3:2 articulates the insistence on God’s special care for the Jewish people, whereas the same prophet in Amos 9:7 rebukes the Jews for not taking care of others amongst them. A similar tension exists within a single verse. For instance, Deut. 10:18-19 is often read as a support for Jewish universalism since these verses urge us to love the stranger (\textit{ger}) and give him food and clothes by reminding the Jews that they themselves were “strangers” (\textit{gerim}) in the Land of Israel. Maimonides, however, in his “Laws of Moral Qualities,” VI.4 interprets this claim as applicable to proselytes only. Hence, the same verse carries both univeralist connotations (applicability to all) and particularist connotations (applicability only to converts to Judaism). The texts themselves clearly do not carry either approach but their interpretations point to this double-tiered explanation. The Biblical verses often express the tension, claiming both the unity of humankind and the commonality between Jew and Gentile, and the disparity between Jew and Gentile; hence either God’s embrace of all humans or God’s unique interest in and love for the Jews.

I am cognizant of my attempts to approximate the modern era notions with the strictly modern (if not post-modern). I aim, however, to demonstrate that the notions of inclusion or exclusion (couched in terms of universalist and particularist claims) have been already relevant in the pre-modern era as they are today. Given this caveat, I note

\textsuperscript{369} Amos 9:7 states:

“To Me, O Israelites, you are
Just like the Ethiopians —
Declares the Lord.
True, I brought Israel up
From the Land of Egypt,
But also the Philistines from Caphtor
And the Arameans from Kir.” Tanakh, p. 1030
that the Jewish universalist claim is often defined in terms of a cosmos being created for all humans; Jews as being obligated to love the aliens (rather than only converts); all humans being made in God’s image; and the Messianic era being the era of the preoccupation of the world with the knowledge of God (rather than the preoccupation of the Jewish people only). Following this definition, when Maimonides had to choose between different elements of the Jewish tradition, he “consistently chose the universalist as opposed to particularist option.”

And again, I remind that I am using a slightly different definition of universalist claims, one that applies to the theistic and more so monotheistic religions. When this definition becomes extended to any non-theistic and polytheistic traditions, it crumbles and moves closer to a particularistic claim.

In contemporary terms, it might be important to recall Michael Walzer’s argument that the Jews assumed place and standing in American society largely because of their strong internal organizational life, a concept clearly envisioned by Maimonides. Walzer writes: “Culture requires social space, institutional settings, for its enactment and reproduction.” This was undoubtedly conceived by Maimonides when he placed his emphasis on the Law; it is through the Law that tradition and culture are preserved and it is through social space and institutional setting that the Law is safeguarded. The relationship between the Law and the preservation of religious and cultural tradition is

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372 Ibid., 93.
373 It is actually not really accurate to differentiate between “religious” and “cultural” because for Judaism, similar to Islam, these two are not separate entities. This distinction in fact a response to Christian
based for Maimonides on mutual dependence. Walzer writes: “Cultures don’t survive in people’s heads; they need bounded spaces and organized activities of this kind.” 374

Turning to Shinran and recognizing his embeddedness in Buddhist tradition, a slightly different definition of the same term becomes applicable. Shinran’s universalism is in accord with the character of Buddhism throughout its history. 375 It can be exemplified by his words when he contends that the nenbutsu is never designed to focus on the particulars including one’s immediate family:

As for me, Shinran, I have never said the nenbutsu even once for the repose of my departed father and mother. For all sentient beings, without exception, have been our parents and brother in the course of countless lives in the many states of existence. On attaining Buddhahood after this present life, we can save every one of them. 376

Not focusing on his own parents does not, however, cancel filial piety that indisputably informed Shinran’s love and respect for his own parents. The emphasis placed on all sentient beings indicates the applicability of universalist definition to his thought as well as Buddhist emphasis as a whole.

**Shinran and Maimonides: The “Other”**

How does the distinction between particularist and universalist claims relate to one’s approach to the “other”? Given the discussion above, I propose that Shinran’s approach aligns with the appreciation of the “other” as someone excluded and undervalued. While in Shinran’s case, his exposure to the “other” begins with his own conceptualization of the separate realms of sacred and mundane. For Shinran, this distinction will also be inaccurate.

374 Walzer, 93.
376 Ibid., 184, 279. Nenbutsu-29.
exile as an expulsion from the monastic community when he himself became this “other,” he nonetheless, contrary to Maimonides, remained situated among people of his own culture and yet of a different status. It should be noted that Shinran elected to remain this “other” even after the end of his exile. His focus on Amida Buddha’s Eighteenth Vow exemplifies his empathy for the “other.” The absence of differentiation between the clergy and the laity served as a means of social critique because it argued against social and religious hierarchy and meritocracy. This becomes especially obvious when we recall the “appeal of Jōdo Shinshū to peasants trying to establish their independence from the feudal aristocracy and the old estate system.” In comparison, I propose that Maimonides’ concept of the “otherness” is informed by the different circumstances and conditions. Contrary to Shinran, he is not the “other” within his own tradition (as is Shinran given his status of a defrocked monk), but is surrounded by those who view him, his community and its tradition as the “other.” However, Maimonides’ situation is more complex. He himself is in the position of the “other” as being situated in an environment hostile to Judaism. In addition, he also concerned, as discussed, about the “other” from within (i.e., heretic) which can also jeopardize his community’s survival. In addition, some of Maimonides’ own works in some cases attain the status of “otherness” under the watchful eye of his community’s religious leaders (i.e. his views on resurrection) which some very slight resemblance to the above mentioned position of Shinran as a defrocked

monk. To meaningfully juxtapose the views of Shinran with those of Maimonides, I concentrate on Maimonides’ embeddedness within the hostile environment. In this scenario, Maimonides’ focus, contrary to Shinran’s, is to protect this “other” as perceived by the outsiders and to ensure the preservation of the community and its tradition. Given the intricacies of their positions, both Shinran and Maimonides are highly sensitive to the needs and concerns of these “others” although from the different perspective and, as a result, they espouse different aims.

Drawing on Shinran’s delineation of other power (jiriki), we observe another possible conceptualization of “otherness.” In this case this “otherness” is articulated as “Other-than-self” 378 which sensitizes oneself to the issue of self-focused calculation (hakarai) aimed to benefit oneself only. The sensitivity to self-focus serves as a transformative encounter that enhances the appreciation of the “other.” In more accurate terms, the “other” is no longer perceived as a separate entity but rather enters into the (inter)relationship with the self and one’s understanding of the self becomes “illumined by a pervasive light of otherness.” 379 What I am not sure though is how does one ensure that this interrelationship does not result in a reduction of one subject to the other? How does one’s uniqueness remain intact? How can this relationship be translated in terms of preserving a human cultural peculiarity and distinctiveness often framed in a given culture’s idiosyncratic particularity?

379 Ibid., 220.
What informed Maimonides’ conceptualization of the “other”? Prior to extrapolating Maimonides’ conception of the “other,” we recall once again that Maimonides views of humans as beings created in the image of God follows Aristotelian definition of humanity. We once again note Aristotle’s statement that “he who exercises intellect and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state and most dear to gods.” 380 As discussed, for Maimonides, intellectual perfection is a means to attain happiness. Yet, the emphasis placed on intellectual perfection does not imply any differentiation between any peoples and does not state that this perfection is attainable only by the Jewish people.

Maimonides’ position on the “other” brings us back to his messianic vision. In Laws of Kings XX: 4 Maimonides paints the picture of the messianic world that “shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord.” 381 Scholars disagree as to whether Maimonides implies that any ontological distinction between Jews and Gentiles will continue in the messianic era. However, as we recall, Maimonides is ambiguous in his explication of the messianic era. He alternates between favoring the Jewish people as the sole and rightful inhabitants of the messianic era and providing for an equal inclusion of the Gentiles. Regardless, for Maimonides, the messianic era is the era of dat ha-emet (the true religion). The definition of the true religion is equally ambiguous and Maimonides is inconsistent in his application of this term as well. For instance, in the Letter to R. Obadiah the Proselyte, he uses it in terms of the religion of Abraham, whereas in his Letter on Astrology, he refers to the true religion as “the religion of Moses.” 382 In GP III:

380 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, x, 8, 1179a23-24..
381 Weiss and Butterworth, 176.
382 See Lerner, p. 183. Kellner delineates among “the Torah of Noah” which includes neither the affirmation of God’s existence nor obligation of worshipping God; “the Torah of Abraham” which includes
Maimonides, however, does not at all differentiate between a Jew and a Gentile when he discusses the great evils that humans inflict upon themselves and upon others. Here he sounds like Shinran when he argues that these evils are a result of human ignorance, but, contrary to Shinran, he continues couching ignorance in terms of a “privation of knowledge.”

As we discussed, the messianic conditions when “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb,” will only occur as a result of humans “refrain[ing] from doing any harm to themselves and to others.” While here Maimonides does not distinguish among any particular religions, some scholars argue that the messianic era for Maimonides is the era of the “Torah of Moses” hence the distinction between the Jews and the Gentiles becoming obsolete. For instance, Kellner interprets Maimonides as a “religious pluralist” and yet he recognizes that Maimonides envision truth as “unchanging, absolute and universal.” Nonetheless, Kellner argues that Maimonides’ universalism is based on his postulate that “all humans will worship God from a stance of complete religious equality by the time that the messianic era reaches its fruition.” As he explains, Maimonides

\[\text{GP III: 11, 440.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., p. 441.}\]
\[\text{Chaim Rapoport disagrees with Kellner’s assertion that a messianic era is envisioned by Maimonides as an era when all of humanity will embrace Judaism. He argues that for Maimonides, the term dat ha-emet does not mean the “Torah of Moses,” but rather the “Torah of Noah” and implies only the belief in one God and the observance of the seven Noahide commandments. Rapoport does not interpret Maimonides’ vision of the messianic era as moving beyond the proposition of peaceful co-existence between “wicked nations” and the Jewish people. See appendix to Kellner, 2009.}\]
\[\text{Menachem Kellner, ‘Maimonides’ ‘True Religion’: For Jews or All Humanity, Meorot, A Forum of Modern Orthodox Discourse 7:1 (2008).}\]
\[\text{Ibid., 16.}\]
arrives to this position through viewing humans as rational animals. It is this rationality\(^{388}\) that leads humans to this religiously pluralistic universal position.\(^{389}\) Kellner’s definition of Maimonides’ universalism is articulated in the following way: “Gentiles admit that the Torah is true and its commandments are divine.” \(^{390}\) To support his explanation of Maimonides’ view as universalist, Kellner points that for Maimonides, “Jewish ethnicity is accidental, not essential to Judaism,” hence ethnicity per se is irrelevant in relation to the one “true religion.” [Italics mine.] Maimonides explicates this accidental approach to one’s ethnicity in his \textit{Letter to Obadiah the Proselyte} when he states: “…whoever adopts Judaism… is counted among the disciples of Abraham”\(^{391}\) and “Do not consider your origin as inferior.” \(^{392}\) Does this mean that if no ontological distinction will be preserved, the concept of the “other” will no longer be relevant? How does this match our understanding of Maimonides’ life and some of his other articulations of the importance of the preservation of one’s tradition?

I return here for a moment to Maimonides’ environment and recall that, as discussed the Almohads invaded Andalusia in 1145 and by 1160 had begun rather

\(^{388}\) Rational thought itself can, however, be problematized when it is extensively valorized. We can refer to such historic figures, for instance, as Marquise de Sade who can hardly be considered irrational but whose name is often equated with “sadistic” inclinations. It might be interesting to note that Simone de Beauvoir in her essay entitled “Must We Burn Sade?” published in 1951 did not focus on his misogyny but rather on his little regard for others. Raymond Queneau went even further and in his criticism of Sade argued that “the concentration camps of Hitler and Stalin [were] prefigured by his ideas.” (John Phillips, \textit{The Marquis De Sade. A Very Short Introduction}, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). We don’t need to refer to the classic modern example of Nazis who prided themselves of their highly developed rational thinking. Even closer to our contemporary environment, we cannot claim that suicide bombers lack rationality, it might be quite to the contrary. Shinran’s skepticism of rationality seems to be quite appropriate.

\(^{389}\) Kellner quotes from Treatise on Logic: “Rationality we call man’s difference, because it divides and differentiates the human species from others; and this rationality, i.e. the faculty by which ideas are formed, constitutes the essence of man” (16).

\(^{390}\) Ibid., p. 20 Gentiles accepting the truth of the Torah does not sound as religions pluralism but rather as Judaism presented as universal religion.

\(^{391}\) Twersky, 1972, 475.

\(^{392}\) Ibid., 476.
actively persecute the Jews. The Almohads’ treatment of the Jews made a strong impression on them and it was compared to the “prophecy of Jeremiah 15.2.” 393 The main aim of the Almohads was to force the Jews to convert. However, even after the conversion, the Jews remained the “others” and had to prove their sincerity by teaching the Qur’an to their children. Inevitably, knowledge of this treatment, even if not experienced on his own, made an impact on Maimonides’ thought. This realization of the hardships and the experience of “otherness” shed light on some of his own harshness to the ones who aim undermining Judaism but also present an additional incentive that prompted Maimonides’ active involvement in the Jewish communal and religious life.

What can we infer from Shinran’s readings as to how his approach to the “other” informed his views on social and political engagement?

The Sinner and the Saint

Rather than immediately turning to Shinran, I focus here on the Pure Land movement itself. How does the Pure Land movement, but more specifically, Jōdo Shinshū movement view the “other”? At its onset, Jōdo Shinshū movement became critical of some of the existent Buddhist groups as well as Shinto groups for their focus on attaining worldly benefits. The most drastic contribution of Shinran and by extension Jōdo Shinshū movement, however, is in its focus on “the ordinary sinner” (bonbu394) which has no analogy to Maimonides’ thought since Maimonides maintains that all humans are endowed with the potentiality (though not all of them realize it to the full


394 We recall that for Shinran all of us are foolish beings because they are “full of ignorance and blind passion. Our desires are countless, and anger, wrath, jealousy, and envy are overwhelming, arising without pause; to the very last moment of life they do not cease, or disappear, or exhaust themselves” (CWS, 488).
extent). The lack of qualitative differentiation between the clergy and the laity led to the similar absence of differentiation between the “sinner” and the “saint.” Buddhist scholars acknowledge a deep distrust of any attempt to reduce Buddhism to mere moralism; hence they reject normative ethics which is generally articulated in the dualistic vein of “good” and “evil.” Instead, some of them propose to view Buddhist ethics in terms of deconstruction of this dichotomy. This position is extended to the post-modern critique of certain religious approaches. I suggest that Shinran fits into this classification of reformers who exercised the independence from the monastic law (Vinaya) by his personal rejection of the monastic law of celibacy and also by his discontent for clergy and laity differentiation. Shinran’s creative reinterpretation of the Pure Land tradition places him firmly in this category of reformers. However, it is important not to confuse his non-adherence to the monastic law with the rejection of Buddhist sense of morality. I highlight, as discussed, that in Shinran’s case, this sense of morality is intricately connected to the ramifications stemming from the law of karma. Further, Shinran’s rejection of the monastic rules represents an “archi-ethical” 395 “ethics of tension” 396 seen in his criticism of the corrupt monks and a high reverence for the common people with whom he shared his life as a result of his exile. His respect for the common people remained unwavering after the exilic restrictions were lifted and Shinran elected not to return to the monkhood.

395 Ibid., 42 Kopf discusses this in relation to Dogen, yet it seems that Dogen follows the trajectory established by the thinkers before him including Shinran hence this terms is equally applicable to Shinran himself as well.
396 Ibid., 41.
Given his position and his thought ascertained through his writings, can Shinran be termed a “postmodern saint”? Edith Wyschogrod proposes that a “postmodern saint” is someone who exhibits a “differential altruism” and whose life is driven by “countercultural and counter-conceptual” undertones informed by an indiscriminative love of others. These postmodern saints challenge ordinary (generally dualistic) morality and focus on the liberation of all sentient beings regardless of their traditionally defined moral qualities. Given this criterion, I propose that Shinran fits the definition of a postmodern saint. I further propose that this term can be part of the amalgamation of a more traditional term “reformer.” The term “postmodern saint” cannot, however, be as easily applied to Maimonides because, as discussed, his explication of his thoughts were curtailed by his concern for the survival of his community. Advancing a more radical approach could have jeopardized not only his own status and survival but also the safety of the whole community. Perhaps for Maimonides, the definition of the pre-modern saint is more appropriate. This will follow Wyschogrod’s conceptualization of the pre-modern saints as the ones who, contrary to the postmodern saints, reinforce (or at least do not challenge) the prevailing moral and social status quo. And yet, Maimonides/ nuanced thought allows for seeing him as both a traditionalist and a reformer who aims to highlight subtly different approaches. To assign to Maimonides the definition of either a post- or a pre-modern saint might appear problematic given his commitment to the principles of normativity. I challenge, however, the definition of normativity as

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397 Ibid., 46. Wyschogrod’s “postmodernity” is not related to the specific time period but rather to the kind of morality one espouses. See Edith Wyschogrod, Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).
398 Recall our discussion in relation to silence and humility.
399 Recall again our discussion about the controversy over the resurrection issue.
“negative ethics” described as the denial of human nature. This definition overlooks cultural specificity and historical situatedness and undermines the positive aspects of normativity as a means of preservation of one’s cultural and religious “Otherness.” Articulating normativity as a denial of human nature is also inaccurate especially for a community steeped in a principle of kehillah. Additionally, conceiving of normativity as a system that attributes the system of the good “without the self” (in the law) fails again to notice cultural specificity and uniqueness of each individual culture. For Shinran, despite his rejection of normativity, the good resides “without” which is articulated as an attribute of normativity. In Shinran’s view, it is only when one is embraced by Amida Buddha that one assumes this goodness “within” which in effect remains the goodness of Amida Buddha and I argue that the good resides “without” as well. Once again, we recall that Shinran reverses the understanding of agency when he explicates that even the recitation of nenbutsu is not a person’s invocation of Amida Buddha (human agency) but is Amida Buddha’s call to human beings (Amida’s agency). In sum, both Maimonides and Shinran challenge the traditional definition of normativity with its positive and negative undertones and problematize our traditional conceptualization of both the definitions of the “other” and the concerns with the “otherness.”

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400 See Kopf, 49 as he discusses Nishida’s An Inquiry into the Good.
401 Ibid., 49.
402 Dennis Hirota, “Shinran in the Light of Heidegger. Rethinking the Concept of Shinjin,” states that “the practitioner’s nenbutsu is itself Amida’s own fulfilled act of practice” (218) which results in the practitioner’s shinjin.
Pluralism Redefined

In the introduction to this chapter, I proposed that such terms as pluralism and relativism are strictly modern inventions and neither Maimonides nor Shinran could be defined in these terms. Notwithstanding, I also suggested that these terms can be instrumental in our articulation of the relationship between particularist and universalist claims. I aim to problematize the traditional perception that holds universalism associated with the idea of pluralism and engenders it with a strictly positive connotation especially when compared with particularism. I note that ascribing religious pluralism in strictly positive terms indicates lack of critical scrutiny. Religious pluralism is often defined in direct relation to relativism. Relativism is generally articulated in relation to the relevance to a particular person or a group hence assuming absence of any absolute value applicable to all. Religious pluralism, as mentioned, is often associated with the notion of tolerance implying acceptance of the co-existence of various religious groups.

Tolerance itself is a loaded term and might need to be further problematized and the question of whether tolerance in actuality results in the concept of respect should be

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403 The term “pluralism” has a number of definitions ranging from sounding almost identical to relativism to fully rejecting the connection between these two concepts. In some cases, pluralism is linked to the system of values. For instance, a Russian-British philosopher Sir Isaiah Berlin (1909 – 1997) defined pluralism as the system which recognizes that "genuine values are many and often in conflict with each other." These values themselves are human creations. Value conflict represents an intrinsic part of human existence and cannot be resolved. To overcome the conflict between values means to abandon values themselves. Pluralism is based on the fact that there are many choices and hence a multiplicity of decisions. An opposite of pluralism, according to Berlin, is monism which he considers to be a fallacy. Monism is also equated with "the Platonic ideal" (based on the thought of Plato). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Joshua Cherniss and Henry Hardy, 201
explored more carefully as well. I propose that even such a concept as religious segregation should be subjected to a more nuanced interpretation. For the Jewish communities, originally, one of the aims of social segregation was to strengthen the tendency among Jews to rely as much as possible on each in order to build strong social cohesion and independence. The concept of self-sufficiency was precipitated by the adverse conditions of exile and displacement. Self-sufficiency is one of the instruments of self-preservation and is especially imperative at the time of adversity. However, religious segregation itself can be interpreted as representing an element of pluralistic thought since inherently it includes the recognition of equal standing among other monotheistic religions. Considering religious segregation in alternative terms of pluralism problematizes any uncritical use of this term.

For my purposes, I adopt Menachem Kellner’s extrapolation when he states: “By ‘religious pluralism’ I understand the normative (as opposed to simply descriptive) claim that different religions make equally correct truth-claims that are equally acceptable.” Given this definition, I maintain that it becomes apparent that when truth and moral values are relative to the persons or groups holding them, no conflict arises and religious pluralism is highly plausible. Raphael Jospe proposes that at its core religious pluralism demonstrates that “religious exclusivism is incompatible with God’s universal

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404 Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1961) writes that Jews were prohibited from fraternizing with the Gentiles. The rules of segregation were quite elaborate. However, he writes that “the Gentile, far from being kept at arm’s length, was in fact incorporated into the Jewish household. On the other hand, it was also observed that, since the servant was of a lower social status, contact with him would have the same dangerously attractive influence as would intercourse between Jews and Gentiles of equal standing” (42). [Italics mine.]

However, the presumed universal goodness of God is a fallacy since it overlooks multiple instances of violence described in the Hebrew Bible and other Holy books as well as violence exhibited in religious history itself. I argue that religious pluralism might be a significantly less plausible option than Jospe proposes and its core overlooks any proper conceptualization of respect.

If one religion (i.e. Judaism) teaches that its Scriptural source (i.e. the Torah) teaches the truth, how do we account for truth-claims made by other religions? According to Judah Halevi, Jewish people have been chosen by God to receive the Torah, hence their “choseness” is antecedent to the event of revelation. Maimonides, contrary to Halevi, holds that it was the giving of the Torah that is to be viewed as the starting point of Jewish “choseness” (and we should not forget that this “choseness” is viewed in terms of responsibilities rather than privileges). The concept of supercession, in turn, transfers the notion of “choseness” from Jewish people to Christians and further to Muslims further complicating the conception of truth as well. To look at the concept of truth through the lens of pluralism leads Ralph Jospe to differentiate between spiritual exclusivity and spiritual inclusivity. He contends that spiritual exclusivity, as a result of maintaining that only one’s own religion possesses “the Truth,” results in proselytizing efforts defined as “ritual inclusivity.” This ritual inclusivity exemplifies the focus on conversion steeped in the desire to share this truth with the larger number of the possible adherents. The recognition that other religions also possess truth, albeit in a different, perhaps even incompatible to the ways of this given religion form, results in spiritual

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406 Ibid., 1.
inclusivity. Jospe equates spiritual inclusivity with spiritual pluralism. Spiritual inclusivity/spiritual pluralism, contrary to spiritual exclusivity, results in ritual exclusivity and lacks of any interest in proselytizing and recruiting new members. Spiritual pluralism considers other religions approaches and religious practices as legitimate as one’s own. In other words, religious pluralism becomes defined as “ritual exclusivity” or, we venture to add, ritual *indifference* to other religions.

Which of these two approaches treats the “other” with the sense of inclusivity void of any notion of vilification? I turn for a moment to monotheistic religions and ask the question as to how these religions address the will of God. I follow again Kellner’s line of questioning: “[D]oes the Torah reflect the will of God now as it did before the advent of Jesus and revelation of the Koran?” The question of good and evil, or of human sinfulness also cannot be answered conclusively from the position of all three religions without producing some type of a disagreement. The incompatibility of religious views becomes even more pronounced when polytheistic and non-theistic religions are thrown into this mix. Can the belief in one God be equated to the belief of no God or a multiplicity of gods? Limiting for the moment our focus on monotheistic religions, I turn my attention to the claim of religious perennialism which argues that all religions are very similar since they all aim for the same final goal. This view reduces the significance of the paths to this goal contending that only final outcome is significant and in many cases in effect Westernizes, or even Christianizes, all religions to one common denominator. Regardless of the path taken, we are still left with the question as to

407 Ibid., 3.
whether one can simultaneously accept a number of religious truths. Religious relativism allows one to accept one’s own truth alongside the truths of other religions by viewing these “other truths” as strictly applicable to these other religions. Kellner argues, and I concur, that this type of acceptance is no longer about the religious truth but rather about life choices. Jospe, in turn, as Kellner relates, accepts that pluralism does entail some degree of relativism but he asserts that this relativism is of epistemological rather than moral nature. In Jospe’s articulation, explicated by Kellner, moral relativism can be dangerous, but epistemological relativism sounds as a close cousin of religious pluralism. Kellner reminds that in Jospe’s terms, religious pluralism refers to “diverse understanding of God” exhibited in “extremely personal and subjective questions between the individual and God (bein adam la-maqom).”

Using Jospe’s definition of religious pluralism allows conceiving Shinran as a religious pluralist. I ask, however, whether Shinran would have been willing to reject the inherent value of Amida Buddha as an epitome of ethical compassion and how this would affected the conceptualization of shinjin. I argue that endorsing a pluralistic view would have presented a break in Shinran’s system of thought. Given that Shinran conceives of Amida Buddha in terms of light and life, can we picture him portraying Amida Buddha as darkness and death? While I recognize that Shinran does not articulate his thought in any dualistic terms, nonetheless it is unlikely that he could have endorsed an idea that is directly contradictory to the traditional descriptions of Amida Buddha imagery. While the absence of moral relativism in relation to religious pluralism might be accurate since most religious traditions adhere to moral standards, the premise of an extremely
subjective relationship between the adherents of any faith and God is problematic, especially for Maimonides but perhaps not as much for Shinran. In relation to monotheistic religions, focusing on the individual and subjective relations between humans and God overlooks viewing Judaism, Christianity and Islam “as bodies of doctrine and practice.” This approach also neglects the inherently communal nature of these religions (especially of Judaism and Islam).

Following the religious pluralism’s premise of viewing all religions as possessing equal truth-value represents the intrinsically disrespectful nature. In its core this postulate suggests that if people hold these religious claims to be true only for themselves, they do not hold their religious claims seriously. Even more problematically, this implies that they view others as not holding their religious claims seriously. This approach exemplifies “a one-way street sort of pluralism” when one is “recognizing the truth of other faith-claims, while not insisting on similar treatment of his own.”

**Conclusion**

Endorsing Kellner’s definition of religious pluralism raises the question as to why one would even want to hold to a specific tradition. If all religions are just the different paths to the same truth, should humans even be viewed in terms of their cultural and religious uniqueness? Perhaps humans represent a homogenous, indistinguishable mass. And to what religion should all these people ultimately belong? In the Western world, at least up until recently, the logical choice would have been Christianity. Reducing all religions to one would perhaps ideally solve the problem of the vilified “other,” but will it

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408 Kellner, 6.
409 Kellner, 7.
really? What will happen to those who refuse to be defined by the majority religion, whatever this majority religion becomes identified and defined. In addition, recalling the famous expression of Emil Fackenheim who maintained that “remaining Jewish is not a morally neutral act” [Italics mine], points to the fact that not remaining Jewish is allowing the evil to triumph by destroying a peoplehood (much desired by Nazi Germany). To remain committed to one’s own religion of birth or choice is to remain the “other,” and alert the world that people are unique and their differences are what make the world beautiful.

Further, perhaps focusing on the definition of pluralism provided by Isaiah Berlin, I propose that pluralism itself calls for a productive re-interpretation of religious coexistence without canceling the need for the preservation of a particular tradition and any forced assimilation. Yet, regardless of the definition we endorse, I suggest that Shinran, given his appreciation and respect for people different than himself, would have argued in favor of preserving the “Otherness” viewed with respect and compassion. I concur with Kellner who states: “… almost all actual human beings (as opposed to philosophical abstractions) both want and need to mediate their human identity through the prism of some particular national or cultural identity.” In this discussion, I am returning the full circle to particularism arguing, however, that particularity should not be viewed in terms of exclusivity or rejection of the “other.” I contend that, quite to the contrary, particularity should prevent the vilification of the “other” and lessen viewing the world in terms of “us” vs. “them.” On my own interpretation, I propose that both Shinran and

410 Ibid., 11.
Maimonides would have endorsed this position. I also argue that their respective views on particularity became affected by their experience of exile. I turn to this question in our last and concluding chapter.
Chapter 5: Ethics in exile: Liminality Juxtaposed

Introduction

When tracing the thought of both Maimonides and Shinran, we can see how the displacement from their respective communities influenced their thought. I already noted that for both of these thinkers, this displacement – be it from the Andalusian Jewish community for Maimonides or the monk community of Kyoto for Shinran -- resulted in a more nuanced and tolerant approach to their fellow co-religionists and the “other.” To understand the ethical theories of these thinkers, we must take into account the distinctive social circumstances in which they arose. In previous chapters, I already indicated my interest in the connection between their thought and their exilic conditions, noting that my discussion of exile does not relate to the theological exile from God but rather to the concept of geographic and social displacement from their community. Nonetheless, in some cases these theological concerns cannot be totally neglected. My goal in this chapter is to demonstrate that most of the issues discussed in my previous chapters, were shaped by the specific conditions of Shinran’s and Maimonides’ lives and to propose a more nuanced read of their thought in relation to the issues of pluralism and tolerance.
A hybrid identity

The condition of exile defines one’s diasporic existence and affects one’s identity formation. Etymologically the term “diaspora” derives from the Greek term *diasperien* that connotes the idea of being scattered, dispersed and displaced. Diasporic identity encapsulates an awareness of minority status. The conditions of displacement often entail the *soul searching* or *self-reflection*, exhibited in Shinran’s thought. Living in these conditions engenders one with “double (and even plural) identifications that are constitutive of hybrid forms of identity.” For Maimonides, this “hybrid identity” was a result, to some degree, of belonging to the multiple communities: his own Jewish community and the Islamic community in which he was situated. For Shinran, his identity was re-invented when after being expelled from the monastic community, he entered the community of the common people and started his own family.

For Maimonides the political conditions of exile differed. For Jews, the conditions of exile did not allow the political control of a state; one could only control one’s own community. I use the term “community” to indicate the idea of relationality but also, as discussed in chapter 4, to point to the opposition of one community to others. I have already discussed the idea of exclusivity that is connected to the concept of the boundary,

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411 *Diasperien* is composed of –*dia*, “across” and –*sperien*, “to sow or scatter seeds.” Historically this term is connected to “displaced communities of people who have been dislocated from their native homeland through the movement of migration, immigration, or exile.” (Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur, “Nation, Migration, Globalization: Points of Contention in Diaspora Studies,” 1 in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003). This term was first used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures intended for the Hellenic Jewish communities in Alexandria (circa 3rd century BCE) to describe the Jews living in exile from the homeland in Palestine. I do not attempt to emphasize this fact since the term “diaspora” also denotes “traveling” and “wandering,” it can be applied to the Buddhist tradition of wandering monks as well. For a discussion on exile from God, cf., Yitzhak E. Baer, *Galut* (NY: Schocken Books, 1947).

412 Ibid., 5.
which encapsulates the identity of any given community and makes that community distinct from other communities. Yet, I concur with Boyarins who maintains that Jewish diasporic culture, in its best circumstances, i.e., Muslim Spain, allows for “a complex continuation of Jewish cultural creativity and identity.” This contention can be illustrated through Maimonides’ ability to be “simultaneously the vehicle of the preservation of traditions and of the mixing of cultures.”413 As an “in-between” status, the cultural space situates one on both sides of the boundary. This creative mixture of culture has its own price but also attunes one to the inadequacies and imperfections of human life and human functioning. In Shinran’s case, the “diasporic identity” lay in his asserting that he was “neither monk nor a layperson. His “diasporic” identity exposed him to the hardships and perseverance of the common people and heightened his appreciation of their perilous lives. For Shinran, the sense of exile carries a meaning of re-evaluating life in his new capacity as a lay person and reinventing one’s own identity in a setting characterized by a different set of the rules.

For the Jewish community, the boundary was largely demarcated by the law and the requirement to adhere to the commandments. For Maimonides, however, the existence of the legal boundaries does not necessarily translate into strict relational boundaries given his embeddedness within the Islamic community. Maimonides did not erect any impenetrable boundaries between his existence as a Jewish leader and an Islamic thinker. To ignore Maimonides’ position as an Islamic thinker is to disregard his

involvement in the cultural world of Medieval Islam. Maimonides’ existence would have been intolerable if he would have completely isolated himself from the Islamic community. What testifies to his “hybrid identity” is that despite Maimonides’ commitment to maintaining the commandments, the Muslim world was more than “a mere background to the life of the Jewish community.” Rather, it represented “the larger frame of which the Jewish community was an integral part.” This ability to integrate various influences further testifies to his intellectual versatility. In addition, even before his exile, Maimonides’ life was embedded in the Islamic culture of the Muslim Spain (Andalusia) which then, however, was characterized by a peaceful co-existence of Muslims, Jews, and Christians. Perhaps his ability to adapt to a new environment was developed prior to his final exile in Egypt since his life under Islamic dominance made him well aware of a certain inherent duplicity. And yet, this ability to adjust does not negate his sense of displacement from the land of his birth and nostalgia for the familiar images. I view Maimonides’ diasporic existence in terms of a displacement from the familiar place of his birth and childhood.

While Shinran’s exilic life did not have a similar liminal duality it did sensitize him to the ways the monastic communities were often insensitive to the laity. Shinran’s

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414 Sarah Stroumsa, 2.
415 Ibid., 2.
416 We should, however, not over-romanticize this time and recognize that the religious nature of the Islamic state prevents the formation of secular types of communal life and leaves no space for civil society. Islamic supremacy does not allow anyone but Muslims to be conceived of in terms of fully equal participants in public affairs. Anyone but a Muslim man was considered inferior.
417 Joel L. Kraemer, Maimonides: The Life and World of One of Civilization’s Greatest Minds (New York: Doubleday, 2008), proposes that for Maimonides, this life of duplicity, however, was not only a means for his personal survival but also served as an encouragement for serving and advancing noble causes for the sake of the Jewish community. In some cases, these causes could not be advanced implicitly and Maimonides utilized his famous esoteric style of argumentation.
ability to utilize his past experience and to integrate new knowledge resulted in his increased sense of compassion devoid of any judgment of how others should lead their lives. Shinran’s experience of this displacement from the monastic community did not result, however, in dislocation from Japanese tradition and culture at large. Despite both Shinran’s and Maimonides’ distance or proximity to their respective communities and traditions, their traditions play an indisputable significance for their thought.

**Shinran’s View of Buddhist History**

One’s character and thought are products of one’s environment. Hence, before turning to Shinran’s view on tradition, I touch upon Japanese tradition itself to recognize its influence on Shinran’s thought. It is important to note that early Japanese thinkers were characterized by their ability to syncretize the outside influences of Confucianism and Buddhism by adapting them to their own specific cultural factors; the indigenous tradition of Shinto. Unlike the Jewish tradition in general and Maimonides in particular, the amalgamated Japanese tradition largely stressed immanence rather than transcendence. This focus on immanence stems from Shinto’s concept of *kami* – sacred presence – according to which “the sacred permeates the everyday life.”

Japanese thought in general and that of Shinran in particular are characterized by a contextual pragmatism rather than universal principles. Further, traditional Japanese thought, and on this point Shinran is typical, does not treat reason without acknowledging the significant impact of affect. This contrasts with Maimonides’s rather negative evaluation

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http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/G100

419 We recall that Maimonides believed in the ultimate universality of the commandments, whereas Shinran never claimed knowing what might or might not be best for others.
of emotions and the previously discussed views on imagination. Lastly, unlike the Jewish tradition, the Japanese context does not hold texts to be the ultimate authority, but rather just one component of authority.

In discussing cultural background, I would be remiss not to point out that Shinran’s introspective focus follows a trajectory among Japanese thinkers. We first recall that Shinran’s (and Hōnen’s) first monastic community was Tendai Buddhism. Tendai Buddhism was founded by Saichō (767-822) who was a competitor of Kūkai, (774-835) the founder of the Shingon tradition known for its esoterism and its focus on the Buddha called Dainichi.⁴²⁰ Tendai Buddhism combined elements of both esoteric⁴²¹ and exoteric Buddhism. Buddhism became deeply ingrained into Japanese society, during the Heian period (794-1185) via the support of the aristocrats and clergy. With the advent of the Kamakura period (1185-1333) much devastation and suffering occurred.⁴²² Hōnen and Shinran, both trained as Tendai monks, responded to this decline with their interpretation of the human condition, offering their own Pure Land solution.

Hōnen proposed a radical redefinition of Buddhist practice by removing the focus on austere meditation and on viewing a buddha as a strict parent who rewards only when his expectations are met. Instead his emphasis was placed on a buddha as a mentor intimately involved in the life of a believer, providing this believer with an unconditional

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⁴²⁰ See chapter 1 for my discussion of the Buddha Dainichi and his influence on Shinran’s thought.  
⁴²² During the Kamakura period, the scholarly communities of Buddhist monks suffered a decline since its focus on the educated elite failed to address social concerns. The first shogunate (military) government was established in 1192 and the Japanese warriors rather than the court nobles took control of government. In addition to many social and cultural changes, a number of natural disasters, such as typhoons, epidemics, fires, and earthquakes also took place.
love and support. However, unlike Shinran, Hōnen remained a Tendai monk and strictly followed the monastic precepts, except he never differentiated in his teaching practices between the monks and the lay people, men and women, and the aristocrats and common folk. This lack of differentiation was perceived as a challenge to the traditional Buddhist institution since it ultimately ensured everyone’s access to the sacred. It was seen as a “religious democratization.” Shinran further radicalized this approach while arriving at a “very traditional Buddhist solution: the emptying of self as a gateway to truth and freedom.” This was a result of a double-tiered recognition: first, that the means to liberation lies in nenbutsu and second, the futility of self-power. This recognition also led him to acknowledge an “evil” dimension to everyone in the world. This karmic “evil” is defined as “suffering and awareness of suffering.” We recall that for Shinran, Amida Buddha focuses on those who have the greatest karmic troubles and anyone embraced by the Primal Vow attains salvation.

I have argued that tradition influences one’s thought but exactly how does Shinran conceive of Buddhist tradition? Shinran’s view on tradition is verbalized in his following words: “How joyous I am, Gutoku Shinran, disciple of Shakyamuni! Rare is it to come upon the sacred scriptures from the westward land of India and the commentaries of the masters of China and Japan, but now I have been able to encounter them.” These words articulate Shinran’s gratitude to, and embeddedness in, the Buddhist tradition.

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425 Ibid., 239.
426 Ibid., 239.
Soga Ryōjin\(^{428}\) provides a creative interpretation of Shinran’s view on history when he argues that for Shinran, the history of Jōdo Shinshū is inseparable from the history of Buddhism at large. Yet, it is framed within the context of the Primal Vow. This interpretation reverses the traditional view that Buddhism is simply a doctrine realized and preached by Shakyamuni. Soga Ryōjin writes that for Shinran, “Buddhism is the doctrine directed at the attainment of Buddhahood\(^{429}\) and the most important part of this doctrine is *what exactly makes one a Buddha*. Shinran does not view Buddhism as starting with the Buddha and contends that Buddhist history both transcends time and is “caught in the flow of time.” \(^{430}\)

Shinran treats Buddhist history as it is articulated in the *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life*, what Shinran considers to be the central teaching of Buddhism. In Shinran’s view, the *Larger Sutra* lays out how Shakyamuni appeared in this world, how he expounded his teachings, and how, after attaining his own enlightenment, placed his focus on the enlightenment of all other living beings. The discussion of the legend of Amida’s Primal Vow in the *Larger Sutra* explicates the history of Buddhism. Rather than viewing the history of Buddhism as originating with Shakyamuni, Shinran places its origins in Amida Buddha. Thus, for Shinran, Amida Buddha represents an ancestral connection to all humanity. \(^{431}\) While Shinran does not dispute that at certain times

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\(^{428}\) Soga Ryōjin (1875-1971) was highly influential on modern Jōdo Shinshū thinking. His views brought him into some conflict with more conservative interpreters of Jōdo Shinshū, but his influence was ultimately reasserted.

\(^{429}\) Soga Ryōjin, “Shinran’s View of Buddhist History” in *An Anthology of Modern Shin Buddhist Writings*, (Kyoto: Otani University, Shin Buddhist Comprehensive Research Institute, 2001), 62.

\(^{430}\) Ibid., 63.

\(^{431}\) Soga Ryōjin writes: “The Buddha called Amida is ultimately the ancestor that embraces Sakyamuni. Amida Buddha is also the ancestor of people throughout history” (p. 73). By positing that Sakyamuni
various other Buddhas appeared (and disappeared), they all became “unified in the
history of Amida’s eternal Vow.” Shinran’s view of history, unlike that of
Maimonides, is non-materialistic: it is not connected to a specific historic event. It is also
non-linear in terms of the past-present-future since none of the terms related to historical
time carry any significance on their own. In sum, for Shinran, Buddhist history starts with
the nenbutsu and continues through the Larger Sutra to Shakyamuni who is the
embodiment of Amida Buddha and is directly linked to all ancestors. This history does
not have a set beginning and any of the different historic periods are nothing more than
“occasions and moments” during which “the Great Spirit of Buddhism has continued as
one pure whole, and has gradually developed in depth.”

For Shinran, “the totality of Buddhist history is ‘Namu Amida Butsu’ regardless of when these words were recited the very first time. Amida Buddha in
Shinran’s eyes represents the collective ancestor of all Japanese people and the nenbutsu
does not only “flow[] through the history” but also “constitutes the unity of history.”

For Shinran, nenbutsu is trans-historical and as one recites these words, one participates

Buddha is the invention of Amida Buddha, Soga Ryōjin is a “re-mythologizing” rather than a “de-
mythologizing” of the Pure Land tradition (Heisig, Kasulis, and Maraldo, eds., Japanese Philosophy: A
Sourcebook, 240).
432 Ibid., 73.
433 We should keep in mind, as discussed in the chapter 1 that according to Shinran, nenbutsu cannot be
considered genuine unless it is devoid of will and intention. During the practice of nenbutsu one empties oneself not only from one’s ego but also from all categories, even morality. This means that “the proper
religious practice of nenbutsu is imbued with a transcendent power beyond us and any act we may do”
(Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook, 253) is “not a form of practice because it is not done by the practitioner’s own design” (p. 253) and it is not a moral act either.
434 Soga Ryōjin, 77.
435 Ibid., 79.
436 Ibid., 80.
in “the making of that nenbutsu history.” 437 The nenbutsu tradition in effect negates history, making its practice at the present time similar to the practice “in the initial moment wherein Dharmākara Bodhisattva made his Vow.” 438 This approach is analogous to the Jewish conception of the ongoing process of revelation, which extends the need to adhere to the Law into the present. Both traditions have a specific, particular event that makes a significant impact on these traditions and yet both of these traditions can be seen as trans-historical since that respective event continues its relevance throughout historical time.

I previously proposed that Shinran’s references to the Seven Patriarchs aim to elucidate an uninterrupted line of Buddhist tradition. To demonstrate that the history of the nenbutsu relates to the Seven Patriarchs of the three countries, Shinran provides numerous quotes from the commentaries of these patriarchs. Yet, he juxtaposes some of the sources and in some cases deliberately attributes the words of one patriarch to the other. For instance, when he attributes the words of Vasubandhu to Tanluan, his goal is to display the continual transmission as “the very spirit of Vasubandhu has been transmitted to Tanluan.” 439 Shinran exemplifies his view on Buddhist history by considering the Seventeenth Vow 440 as its core principle because of this Vow’s commitment to ensure enlightenment for all sentient beings.

437 Ibid., 80.
438 Ibid., 80.
439 Ibid., 78.
440 The Seventeenth Vow is the Vow that all the Buddhas say the Name and it maintains the following: “If, when I attain Buddhahood. The countless Buddhas throughout the world in the ten quarters do not all praise and say my Name, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment” (CWS, 13).
While Shinran specifically refers to the Seven patriarchs, this number is expandable to innumerable others since “[t]he patriarchs stand as representatives of these masses.” While I had already acknowledged Shinran’s great indebtedness to his master and mentor Hōnen, I note that Shinran departs from Hōnen’s articulation of certain terms and ideas. For instance, Shinran does not use the terms “good” and “evil” to relate to people’s actions. While Hōnen and Shinran use the same terms, the meaning of these words is different for them; “Hōnen speaks from his standpoint as a guide of other people; Shinran, on the other hand, simply bares his own self-realization, and then waits for people of the same conviction to come forward.” Their approach to *karma* slightly differs as well. The self-awareness of one’s “evilness,” we recall, is precisely what opens one to Dharmākara and hence the Primal Vow. Soga Ryōjin proposes that for Shinran, true consciousness of karma implies the recognition that all sentient beings are linked “by blood” with and responsible for one another.

Despite my argument in favor of particularism, I maintain that both Shinran and Maimonides are in effect universalists. Yet by “universalism” I mean here all-inclusive acceptance. While Shinran’s universalism is predicated upon the Buddha’s Vow of universal acceptance (without differentiation between “good” and “bad”), Maimonides’ universalism is based on the authority of the commandments (law). Maimonides’ universalism remains, however, prescriptive since it retains the moral requirements

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441 Soga Ryōjin, 79.
442 *Soga Ryōjin on Past Karma: Two Selections from Lectures on the Tannishō*, 86
443 In Maimonides’ terms, *karma* can be once again approximated to one’s natural inclinations which are dealt with by recourse to the commandments. Here again, Amida’s Primal Vow and the Law are analogous since “evil” people – though understood in different terms – are the prime subjects of the Primal Vow and the certain aspects of the law. I do not, however, want to diminish Maimonides’ focus on one’s self-power in terms of personal responsibility absent in Shinran’s thought.
stipulated by the commandments. On one hand, when considering the need to preserve tradition under the circumstances of exile, I characterize Maimonides in terms of particularism. On the other hand, by extending Shinran’s concept of responsibility beyond his own community, I aim to apply it to the conditions of exile.

**Exile and Tradition Revisited**

The concept of exile carries a very different meaning for the Jewish and Japanese traditions. Since the destruction of the Second Temple the Jews had a long tradition of moving from place to place, carrying along a religious identity displaced from their homeland. The Japanese, in turn, have never experienced a similar type of displacement and have not undergone this experience of wandering from one country to another. Therefore, they have been less concerned with preserving a specific religious mode in foreign lands. Yet, both Shinran and Maimonides did personally experience a life of exile even if it is to be understood in the different terms. For Shinran, exile meant becoming defrocked and returning to secular life. In this process of being stripped on his ordination, Shinran’s identity had to undergo a change since he has lost his religious name and was given new name as a layman. This removal from his monastic environment exposed Shinran to a new dimension of human existence in a new capacity and a new name. In Maimonides’ case, in turn, the conditions of exile also required for

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444 In Shinran’s case, this exile continued to be a self-imposed in isolated provinces after his exile was formally lifted and he was pardoned, cf., Yoshifumi Ueda and Dennis Hirota, *Shinran. An Introduction to His Thought*, (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center,1989).

445 While the authorities came up with a lay name for him, Shinran gave himself his own name – Gutoku – “foolish/shaven” or “stubble-haired” which he used for the rest of his life. This term was used to describe the hair of monks who allowed their hair to grow longer than appropriate but showed no signs of repentance. This name indicates Shinran’s disdain for hypocritical pretense for wisdom but also point to his self-reflexivity. While he refused to be labeled by the state as a defrocked monk, he acknowledged his own nature as “irremediably given to self-centeredness and wrong-doing” (Ueda and Hirota, 34).
him to re-invent his own identity while similarly exposing him to a new environment. In both cases, exile provided them with the views on the fundamental nature of human existence under difficult and changing circumstances.

In my discussion above, I argued that Maimonides favors a universalist approach yet I maintain that he is a “limited universalist” since his universalism is delimited by revelation. In other words, while his vision of the world-to-come is all-inclusive, the Jewish effort to preserve the particularistic dimensions of Jewish culture and religion serves to preserve Jewish heritage in general. I also proposed that this particularistic approach can be viewed as setting a precedent for what in the modern and post-modern lexicon is termed as cultural and religious pluralism. The Japanese culture in which

446 In relation to his views on the world-to-come that Maimonides is a universalist since the world-to-come in his view is not limited to Jews only. Yet, as we recall, his universalism is limited since in the end he envisions everyone accepting the Torah.

447 There is a variety of definitions of religious pluralism. For pluralists, there may be differences in rituals and beliefs among groups, but on the most important issues, there is great similarity. Most religions, they claim, stress love for God, and have a form of the Golden Rule. (Joshua Cherniss and Henry Hardy, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2010). The golden rule is best interpreted as saying: “Treat others only as you consent to being treated in the same situation.” A Russian-British philosopher Sir Isaiah Berlin (1909 – 1997), in turn, defined pluralism as the system which recognizes that “genuine values are many and often in conflict with each other.” These values themselves are human creations. Value conflict represents an intrinsic part of human existence. These value conflicts cannot be resolved. To overcome the conflict between values is to abandon value itself. Pluralism is based on the fact that there are many choices and hence a multiplicity of decisions. Paul F. Knitter in *The Myth of Religious Superiority. Multifaith Exploration* proposes that pluralism implies diversity. I argue that diversity and the acceptance of difference is a condition of pluralism.
Shinran was embedded can also be characterized by its particular uniqueness derived initially from its geographic separation. As an island-nation physically detached from the continent, the Japanese people at times had a strong sense of cultural and social independence. Although Japan adopted much of the Chinese culture, it also held steadily to aspects of its indigenous culture such as Shinto. Overtime, it incorporated in its heritage both Buddhism and Confucianism as well as indigenous sensibilities of Shinto. Not circumscribed by the limitations (and the inherent contradictions) imposed by monotheistic religions, Japan was able to implement a pluralistic intertwining of elements of Chinese Buddhism, Confucianism and its indigenous culture without losing the distinctiveness of each. This pluralism became part of Japan’s distinctive tradition.

While the Japanese and Jewish traditions epitomize faithfulness to their respective cultures, the need to preserve the Jewish tradition was colored by its history of persecution. From the time of the loss of their native land and their separation from the central institution of the Temple, Jewish survival depended on the caprice of local rulers. Subjected to discrimination, persecution, expulsion, and massacre, the Jewish people developed a keen sensitivity to danger. Law played the central role in counteracting these uncertainties and tribulations. The Japanese people, to the contrary, enjoyed the security of their homeland and were spared similar persecution and subsequent displacement. The Japanese people were safe from foreign intrusions and domination up to 1945. Typically lacking sharp ethnic and religious divisions, the symbolic stability of a single imperial dynasty through history gave the national life of Japan a sense of continuity but also
instilled a sense of conformity. The imperial family played a religious role that no other family could ever play. Shinran was acutely aware of some of the injustices of the political system. His awareness of the plight of ordinary people became especially pronounced as a result of his exile and his exposure to the lives of the common folks (e.g., farmers, etc.). Shinran’s exposure to the ordinary people’s morality made him even more aware of the monks’ corruption.

Shinran’s reform of Buddhist practice started, however, prior to his exile and originated with Hōnen’s thought. It was already Hōnen who exhibited an anti-elitist

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448 An interesting parallel is drawn by Ben-Ami Shillony in his *The Jews and The Japanese. The Successful Outsiders* (New Clarendon: Tuttle Publishing, 1991). He argues that there is certain resemblance between the “phantom power and hollow courtly rituals of the Japanese emperors” and certain elements of the Jewish tradition that can similarly appear anachronistic and lacking any significance after the loss of the Jewish land. Namely, he refers to the equally “phantom existence of Jewish agricultural laws” (42). The importance of holding to these ostensive anachronisms which presume a merely symbolic meaning, points, however, to both Jewish and Japanese respect to and commemoration of their respective antiquity. It also serves to maintain a national force to preserve a system of values and symbols. He states that “[b]oth the imperial family of Japan and the Jewish Halakhah enhanced national consolidation. To be a Japanese meant not only to be a native of one country, Japan, but also to be a subject of the emperor. To be a Jew meant … to be subject to the laws of the Torah and the Talmud” (43).

449 We should note that the ordinary people’s plight made them more aware of the limits of self-power (*jiriki*) and a wider embrace by Other power (*tariki*).

450 One of the testaments to Shinran’s own lack of hypocrisy and, in the words of Thomas Kasulis, being “in exile from the Buddhist establishment.” can be seen in the story “On the Issaikyō compilation project.” It is known that Buddhist monks were not allowed to eat meat and fish. To follow this precept and still eat the disallowed food led some of them to temporarily defrock themselves – to take off their Buddhist *kashāya* while helping themselves to the fish and poultry dishes. Shinran, however, would take his place among the commoners and eat this food without taking this step. When asked why he does not remove his frock, it never occurred to him to point to these monks’ hypocrisy as he never thought in terms of judging others and simply replied: “because my heart is identical to those of the ordinary worldly masses, I eat things like this. Ah, if only this massive urge to eat were instead translated into the work of liberating these living things. Although I bear the title of Shaku-shi (an ordained disciple of Sakyamuni) it is of little consequence; with my wisdom naught and my merits none, what I can possibly do to save these sentient beings? In this regard there is this *kashāya* I wear, the holy vestment symbolic of the liberation of all buddhas in the triple world. When I don this vestment while eating, through the use of this meritorious *kashāya* it exerts its influence of the vow’s intent to save living beings, and thus I wear while I eat. When you believe that invisible forces watch over us, there is no need to be concerned over *how we appear in the eyes of others*, however utterly shameless and unconscionable we appear in the eyes of others” (Bloom, 2007, 23). [Italics mine.]
approach by recognizing the plight of the common people.\textsuperscript{451} Hōnen’s teaching attracted both the aristocrats, including the imperial family and the common people. However, as his teaching of the \textit{nembutsu} spread throughout the country, old temples at Mt. Hiei and in Nara tried to prevent the further dissemination of this practice. Already in 1204 \textsuperscript{452} the priests of Mt. Hiei appealed to the chief abbot to abolish the \textit{nembutsu}. Hōnen then produced a document in which he committed “not to speak ill of other sects, their teachings and followers; not to behave improperly; and not to teach wrong teachings that the masters (Shakyamuni and Hōnen) had not presented.”\textsuperscript{453} This pacified Mt. Hiei priests only for a short time and in 1205 they re-ignited their efforts. In 1207 the priests in Nara demanded to cease the \textit{nembutsu} practice.\textsuperscript{454} As a result, the priests who conducted the \textit{nembutsu} service were sentenced to death and Hōnen was exiled from Kyoto. In his exile, Hōnen, contrary to Shinran, showed some missionary zeal: “My exile is the expression of Imperial courtesy, because otherwise I could not bring the teaching of the \textit{nembutsu} to the people who have never had the opportunity to meet me and listen to me directly.”\textsuperscript{455} Hōnen’s exile lasted until 1211 after which when he returned to Kyoto. He remained a monk for the rest of his life. Unlike Hōnen, Shinran’s exile turned him away from monasticism and increased his inward focus. It also further sensitized him to the hardships present in the human condition.

\textsuperscript{451} Hōnen’s reformative approach of Buddhist practice was in his rejection of the aspiration for enlightenment via any means other than the mere vocalization of Amida Buddha’s name.  
\textsuperscript{452} Hōnen founded Jōdo Shu in 1175. Shinran became a disciple of Hōnen in 1201 at the age of 29. A certain level of persecution of Hōnen’s tradition started very soon after Shinran became his disciple.  
\textsuperscript{454} This attack stemmed from the conversion into the monasticism of the two ladies in-waiting of the ex-Emperor Gotoba. See Sho-On Hattori, 13.  
\textsuperscript{455} Ibid., 13.
Much of Shinran’s work was also written in exile. Shinran’s work was “shaped by his experiences of exile, marriage and human relations.” ⁴⁵⁶ We recall that Shinran was in exile for over twenty years starting from 1207. When Hōnen was pardoned in 1211, Shinran chose to remain in the countryside. He returned to Kyoto in his early sixties but he finished Kyōgyōshinshō in 1224 when he was 51.⁴⁵⁷ Shinran did not have to contend with political matters like those of Maimonides and he did not experience the issue of inclusion or exclusion to a similar degree.

**Back to Maimonides and the Almohads**

I return here for a moment to Maimonides’ Almohad environment. As previously discussed, the Almohads’ treatment of the Jews made a strong impression on them and it was compared to the “prophecy of Jer. 15.2.”⁴⁵⁸ We recall that the main aim of the Almohads was to force the Jews to convert. However, even after the conversion, the Jews remained the “others” and had to prove their sincerity by teaching the Qur’an to their children. Some information on the treatment of the Jews can be gleaned from a letter by Maymun b. Yusuf, father of Maimonides when in 1160 he wrote: “Overwhelmed with humiliation, blamed and despised, the seeds of captivity surround us and we are submerged in its depth.”⁴⁵⁹ Maimonides’ approach to conversion as a response to these intolerable conditions is discussed in his Igeret ha-Shemad (extant only in a later Hebrew translation). In this letter he privileges human life and survival when he states that if

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⁴⁵⁷ There is some disagreement about the exact date. See CWS, Vol. II, 12. Nonetheless, it is rather obvious that this work was a product of his thought germinating during his exile.


⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 119.
general persecution and transgression is public, the Jew “must die rather than transgress; but not if these two conditions do not exist.” In case when the intent of the Gentile is to violate the Jewish law only for the benefit of the Gentile, the Jew should transgress rather than die. The only case in which the Jew should die rather than transgress is when he is under the condition of being forced to violate the commandments that prohibit idolatry, adultery and murder. Maimonides demonstrates here a universalist approach, holding on to the precepts that are relevant to the adherents of all monotheistic religions.

It is important to acknowledge that Maimonides makes a clear distinction between the matters of the heart (inner feelings) and the outer exhibitions (actions one is required to perform in order to survive). He advises to “confess (the [Islamic] creed) rather than die, ‘but not to remain in the dominion of that ruler.’” When this Jew transgresses, he should do it to the smallest extent possible. For instance, if a Jew transgresses the Sabbath, he “should (at least) not carry that which is forbidden [by the Jewish Law] to carry.” Yet, we should keep in mind that Maimonides’ main commitment is to his religion and he advises “to leave these places and go to a place where one is able to establish his religious law and fulfill his Torah without duress and fear; and leave (if necessary) his home and children and all his possessions.”

As argued throughout this paper, for Maimonides, following the Law takes precedence over the family as well which is contrary to Shinran’s approach. Maimonides concludes the *Igeret ha-Shemad* by stating that since the “world is great and wide,” one
who does not leave “but remains under the persecution, must consider himself as desecrator of the name of God – not willfully, but almost so.”\textsuperscript{464} A person without his own religious tradition sounds incomplete in Maimonides’ iteration. The commitment is specific and particular; otherwise, it becomes a transgression.

**Exile and retention of cultural identity**

Regardless of Maimonides’ and Shinran’s choices (or absence of such) and the longevity of their exiles, no issue of human existence was unaffected by their experience of exile. I propose, though, that Maimonides’ exile had perhaps a larger effect on his subsequent thought. A prolonged exile has a stronger impact on human character and behavior, requiring adjustment, accommodation, and in many cases a creative application and interpretation of certain requirements. As discussed, for Jews, the concept of “election” (being chosen by God) was instrumental in relation to retaining the individual Jews as a part of the community. To prevent losing its members through alienation or conversion, the Jewish community initiated its members into the tradition early through the conceptual framework of Jewish tenets via study of the Torah but also through participation in Jewish festivals and everyday religious activities, therefore combined conceptual (intellectual) with experiential (affective). Participation in Jewish festivals aimed to preserve the link to the historical events but also played the function of social segregation. One of the aims of social segregation was to strengthen the tendency to rely on each other rather than on any outside assistance.

\textsuperscript{464} Ibid., 121.
Tradition aimed to remain conservative and to resist substantial change. Tradition’s conservativism itself served as an aim to retain historic identity and a continuous link to the past. Maimonides similarly tried to retain his community’s historical identity and its links to the past, even though his own work was situated in the conditions of exile. We recall once again that for the Jewish tradition, covenant and “chosenness” are intertwined: being “chosen” results from the commitment to keep divine commandments and the Mosaic covenant (Ex. 19:5-6). Yet, we should keep in mind that Maimonides de-emphasized the concept of “chosenness” and highlighted the universality of the Torah. Regardless of this de-emphasis, the real function of the Halakhah was to balance any new requirements stemming from the displacement with the preservation of this historic identity. The connection to communal life was anchored to the past, but in light of the present need not to be swallowed by the surrounding alien social and religious traditions. The Halakhah regulated this connection but also ensured the details of the separation from other religious communities and traditions. Since Jews did not possess any political power of their own, they sought only the protection of the rulers and hence favored public order by recognizing that any disturbance would result in detrimental consequences. Seeking the protection of the rulers did not contradict Talmudic law since the third-century Talmudic sage Samuel asserts “Dina de-

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465 The covenantal relationship is expressed on Israel’s part by performing the acts that God requires of it. The concepts from the “world of law” are important to keep in mind: the concept of “servant” (Lev. 25:55) and the concept of a “patrimony, heritage” (Deut. 4:20-22; Deut. 4:37; 15:4; 19:10; 20:16; 24:3; 25:19; 26:1). In other words, “God’s gift of love, freedom, and land come with strings attached. See Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Biblical Voices on Choseness” 24, in Covenant and Choseness in Judaism and Mormonism, ed. by Raphael Jospe, Thuman G. Madsen, and Seth Ward (Cranbury:Associated University Press, 2001).
malekhutha dina” (“the law of the state is law”). 466 This dictum ensured the political allegiance of the Jews and their acceptance of financial obligations to the state (i.e., taxes). The subjugated position, it was assumed, would end with the advent of the messianic age. In general, any relationships among Jews were subject to Talmudic law, whereas capital offenses and any relationships between Jews and non-Jews were subject to state law (non-Jewish authorities). This arrangement created a complex system of law and jurisdiction. In some cases, the system presented difficulties because it challenged adherence of the Jewish community to its own legal system.

The aim to adhere to Talmudic law was a means to preserve an integral part of Jewish heritage, even when complete adherence was not feasible. This inability for a complete devotion to the law necessitated certain creative re-interpretations and when some elements of alien origin entered the system of Jewish law, they became creatively integrated as “part and parcel of the system.” 467 Maimonides was acutely aware of the necessities originated from these conditions of exile. Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah was in effect a means to sustain one’s existence in exile. Putting Mishneh Torah into language accessible to everyone made it a mechanism central to the construction of a viable diaspora. Maimonides seems to have wanted to put the Talmud’s elliptic style of overlapping arguments into a comprehensible codex and functional tool. 468

466 Katz, 48.
467 Ibid., 54.
468 In modern times, Levinas was interested in precisely the same idea. He felt that it is necessary to reinvigorate the study and subsequently the place of the Talmud in the lives of the Jewish people. He aimed to “translate” its metaphors into the concepts that are relevant to Western thought and life. Cf. Irwin Wall, “Remaking Jewish Identity in France” in Diasporas and Exiles: Varieties of Jewish Identity, ed. by Howard Wettstein, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).
Law largely regulated the life of the Jewish community in all respects. The adherence to law affects even the idea of martyrdom because the moral duty is to “sanctify the Holy Name.”

Maimonides gave his typically nuanced interpretation about sacrificing one’s life rather than transgressing the main precepts of the Torah or renouncing fidelity to the Jewish religion. As previously discussed, such acts were based on the rational prescription of “limiting both the duty to follow the requirements of the tradition and the permissibility of martyrdom to the minimum prescribed in the source.”

I argue that Maimonides’ exilic experience elevated his sense of tolerance to others since he recognized the constant need to scrutinize and analyze the Jewish approach. Perhaps Maimonides demonstrates a certain leniency in relation to martyrdom regarding Christianity and Islam as historical extensions of Judaism and envisioning a messianic era, including the universal acceptance of Judaism. Yet, we should not minimize the fact that for Maimonides, both Christianity and Islam (especially Christianity) represented a false dissemination of ideas through improper practices. For example, Maimonides articulated the need for the biblical laws to avoid idolatry, a moral deficiency exemplified by the Sabians. Yet, it worth stressing again that Maimonides ruled that all the righteous, not just Jews, have a place in the world-to-come. Maimonides considered the “righteous” to be those who observed the commandments because they were divinely revealed, not because they followed from human reasoning.

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469 Sanhendrin, 74a “one must incur martyrdom rather than transgress even a minor precept.”
470 Katz, 84.
471 Katz also maintains that Maimonides defines “righteous” or “hasid” as anyone to whom applies the Seven Noahide commandments.
Hence, Maimonides excluded those outside revealed religion in his vision of the world-to-come. Those who are “righteous” by their use of reasoning without revelation are termed by Maimonides as merely “wise.” While he does not necessarily treat this term negatively, he remains monotheistically exclusivistic concerning the world-to-come. Yet, to expect more of a 13th century thinker would be unrealistic. Maimonides’ approach, his exclusion of non-monotheistic religions notwithstanding, demonstrates his heightened sense of tolerance. His approach to martyrdom also attests to his sensitivity to the immediacy of a situation and exemplifies the nuance in his thought.

**Tradition and Inclusion**

Indisputably, the notion of inclusion/exclusion plays a prominent role in monotheistic religions. For the Jewish tradition, inclusion was based on one’s observance of the Law or on one’s belonging to a revealed religion. In Buddhism, when considering who was presumed capable of attaining enlightenment, the concept of “inclusion” becomes more complicated. While Maimonides’ thought remained grounded in rationalism, Shinran’s dismissed such rationalism as a part of his skepticism about intellectualism. This skepticism reflects Hōnen’s influence on Shinran’s thought. Shinran continued Hōnen’s stress on simplified teachings accessible to everyone, even the illiterate. Those who were initially seen as incapable of reaching enlightenment and perceived as evil or “karmically defiled” were given an opportunity for enlightenment.

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473 Enlightenment was impossible not only for anyone whose profession required killing, e.g., fishermen, hunters, warriors, but also women had to be reborn as men before they could attain enlightenment.
While Hōnen claimed to continue the lineage started by the patriarchs and framed his teaching with the Pure Land sutras, no one prior to him included all the disenfranchised and disadvantaged. Shinran, driven by his sense of compassion elevated by his exilic conditions, carried Hōnen’s teachings to an even more general acceptance of the disenfranchised and disadvantaged. Whereas Hōnen aimed to establish a tradition (or reform the existing one) he, unlike Shinran, was exiled but never de-frocked. Unlike Maimonides who does not trace his intellectual lineage to any specific teachers, Shinran articulates his indebtedness to Hōnen by stating:

Our teacher Genku [Hōnen] appeared  
Through the power of Light and Wisdom,  
And revealing the true Pure Land way,  
He taught the selected Primal Vow.

Though Shan-dao and Genshin urged all to enter the true Pure Land way,  
If our teacher Genku had not spread it among us  
On these isolated islands in this defiled age,  
How could we ever have awakened to it?  

And yet, despite this influence, Shinran’s approach was more introspective and personalized. Notwithstanding Shinran’s introspective nature and his personalized approach to the practice, his thought provides a certain trajectory for social and political implications.

474 Shinran, while following Hōnen’s teachings, drastically re-interpreted his thought. In fact, initially many did not consider Shinran as a true successor of Hōnen. It is only in 1921 Shinran was firmly confirmed as his successor because of the letters of Shinran’s wife Eshin-ni. These letters were discovered in the Nishi Hongwanji storehouse in Kyoto (Fitzgerald, n. 19, p. xxix).

475 Aristotle, rather than his predecessors belonging to the Jewish tradition, is implicitly mentioned more often than anyone else.

476 CWS, 387
Thus far my discussion related to Shinran largely described his approach as one of introspection, rather than social and political action. We need to bear in mind, however, that Shinran reverses the concept of human agency when he maintains that the recitation of the nenbutsu is not the person’s invocation of Amida Buddha (human agency) but is Amida Buddha’s call to human beings (Amida’s agency). Shinran’s delineation of attaining shinjin is a similarly radical reinterpretation of trusting faith since it does not result from personal deliberation and contrivance. Despite Shinran’s radical reinterpretation of human agency, he was not totally removed from any social and political concerns. Shinran’s largest contribution is in “locat[ing] the roots of the violence and the inhumanity of social relations in the individual’s construction of false views of the self.” This opens a venue for constructive social critique. Yet, it still would be misleading to argue that Shinran’s intended focus is on social and political concerns, or, in our terms, a specific community. Rather, in line with the general Buddhist approach, ethical concerns are centered on individuals rather than the transformation of the social structures.

Likewise, Shinran does not aim to “save” the world by “repairing” or

477 “… [t]he command of the Primal Vow calling to and summoning us” (CWS I: 38)
479 Kenko Futaba in his “Shinran and Human Dignity: Opening An Historic Horizon,” argues to the contrary. According to Futaba, Shinran’s teaching was focused on freeing the people who “suffered from the exploitation of the political-religious government that justified the use of force to achieve their ends” (57). In his read, Shinran’s definition of “evil” persons describes “[t]hose who did not give up the harvest of their labor to the authorities” (55). In Futaba’s interpretation, Shinran does sound like a political and social reformer. http://www.shin-ibs.edu/documents/pwj-new/new4/06Futaba.pdf . See also this article in Bloom, ed., Living in Amida’s Universal Vow, pp. 161-171. Mark T. Unno, in “Shin Buddhist Thought in Modern Japan,” makes a similar claim listing a number of people who were influenced by Shinran’s thought and claimed his work to be politically and socially conscientious. Tanabe Hajime (1885-1962) was among those philosophers who adopted Shinran’s thought. In some cases, including Tanabe, Shinran’s line of thought was adopted in combination with socialist and Marxist-Leninist discourse (e.g., Kinoshita Naoe, 1869-1937; Kamei Katsuichiro, 1906-1966; Miki Kiyoshi, 1897-1945).
“transforming” it but rather his implicit focus is on to overcome this life’s problems from within since the world itself is “fundamentally unsaveable.”

This focus on the individual rather than on social transformation contrasts with Maimonides’ thought. Maimonides’ emphasis on the social and political can be explained in terms of the covenantal (obligatory and promissory) relationships typifying Judaism. It is important to keep in mind that these covenantal relationships reflect on the specificity of the concept of kehillah or kahal (community). In this type of relationship, God’s judgment is placed at the level of the whole community rather than the individual. In addition, the Jewish tradition maintains a prophetic orientation. The concept of the Bodhisattva at its core has a similar concern with the well-being of all human beings. For instance, during the Viet Nam War, some Vietnamese monks, following the Bodhisattva vow, self-immolated themselves out of protest for the war. In Buddhism suicide is understood to bring about negative karma. In contrast with a martyrdom model, which offers spiritual rewards, these monks accepted personal spiritual harm out of their concern for others. However, this sort of Bodhisattva action has not been typical for Jōdo Shinshū. By contrast, the Jewish prophetic tradition considers the prophets to have certain attributes of political and social leaders who, largely as the messengers of God,

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480 Ibid., note 12, p. 64. Yet, this individual transformation from within is complicated by Shinran’s emphasis on karmic evil.
481 Kehillah is characterized by “collective responsibility for taxes and ecclesiastic privileges, and the corporate organization of society in general. …The ancient traditions of Jewish group life [have been] expressed in a variety of institutions; most powerful of these was the halakhah, the firm rule of religious law. … The kehillah retained its links with the Jews in the Diaspora as a whole through its adherence to tradition and law and shared messianic hope.” Encyclopaedia Judaica, Second Edition, Volume 5, p. 102
482 I am indebted to Thomas Kasulis for reminding me about these occurrences.
call into question any political structure that they perceive as becoming removed from God’s intentions. 483

**Religious Ethics Revisited**

Returning to the concept of ethics, I reiterate that the Jewish approach to religious ethics, unlike that of Buddhism, is shaped by external and historical factors. For Maimonides, the conditions of exile resulted in some additional concerns related to the preservation of the community and its tradition. Maimonides’ own life history made him acutely aware of the limitations and tribulations of life in exile. Living in the diaspora required a heightened sensitivity to the issue of survival so that one does not become swallowed by the surrounding alien culture. Shinran’s exile did not result in the diasporic conditions of a similar nature. Shinran’s exile did not result in the expulsion from his own people and his own tradition. In fact, recalling his objections to the Tendai practices, it can be argued that he aimed to transform the prevailing tradition. Even within the Pure Land tradition and despite his acknowledged debt to the so-called seven patriarchs and a high reverence of his beloved mentor Hōnen, Shinran remained implicitly committed to a further transformation of the practice of this tradition. His take on the adherence to a tradition can be viewed as being diametrically opposed to that of Maimonides. Yet, his implicit aim to transform the tradition does resemble in some ways Maimonides’ service to his fellow practitioners. Shinran’s Pure Land tradition became increasingly focused on

483 For instance, the Prophet Amos 5:21-24 specifically argues that God desires justice and righteousness rather than human rituals and celebrations: I loathe, I spurn your festivals, I am not appeased by your solemn assemblies. If you offer Me burnt offering – or your metal offerings – I will not accept them; I will pay no heed to your gifts of fatlings. Spare Me the sound of your hymns, And let Me not hear the music of your lutes. But let justice well up like water, Righteousness like an unfailing stream.” *Tanakh*, 1025.

484 I say “implicit” keeping in mind Shinran’s contention that his practice of Jōdo Shinshū is “his” only, claiming to have no followers or students.
the common people. It can be argued that there is a social justice theme implicit in his rejection of any qualitative differentiation between monks and laity, his focus on the “easy practice” (recitation of nenbutsu without any stipulation of the number of repetitions) and his emphasis on Amida’s embrace of all human being regardless of their qualities. And yet, it would be misleading to claim that his concern for his fellow men resulted in a direct call for any reformation of the political structure.

To argue that Shinran had a communal focus is to ignore his repeated assertion that he can neither dictate nor even suggest what is best for others. Shinran simply was not a community leader like Maimonides. The absence of his communal focus, however, should not be equated with the absence of ethical concerns. The claim that Other-power philosophy divests one from any self-responsibility and leads one to antinomianism is incorrect. The label antinomianism is often predicated upon Shinran’s view on the evil person and is termed as “licensed evil.”

As previously discussed, Shinran was acutely aware of this criticism and tried to dispel these allegations in a number of his letters. It might be important to note that the Jōdo Shinshū movement itself had a “liberating role in the history of Japan.”

Thus far I have treated ethics and religion as a unit and have linked religious inclinations, at least implicitly, with social implications. Yet, this might be overlooking an argument that religion and ethics belong to the two distinct domains. Kiyozawa

486 Fredericks, 56.
Manshi argues that precise point.\textsuperscript{487} He distinguishes between worldly truth (ethics and morality) and absolute truth (shinjin or religious truth). Yet, despite this differentiation, he argues that worldly truth flows from absolute truth and when shinjin becomes definite, “moral practice will be natural and inevitable.”\textsuperscript{488} Further, with the realization of shinjin attains the benefit of “transforming evil into good.”\textsuperscript{489} Contrary to Maimonides, for whom religious teachings have a largely educative and prescriptive value, Kiyozawa builds on Shinran’s thought by maintaining that this benefit occurs naturally and is unrelated to any prescriptive expectations. What is most important for our purposes is Kiyozawa’s argument that for Shinran humans are incapable of following some moral principles. This incapacity creates a state of anxiety in these humans and makes them turn to religion. This failure of moral perfection relates, as previously discussed, to one’s “karmic design.” When worldly truth makes one aware of the inevitability of one’s moral deficiency, it results in their turn to tariki and “the great pacified mind,”\textsuperscript{490} a mind that is no longer tortured with the agony of “should I and must I” questions. To assume the possibility of this pacified mind is to cease one’s fear that one can never attain enlightenment.\textsuperscript{491} Hence, the Buddhist worldly truth does not compel people to uphold moral standards: to focus on the societal benefits and morality of the nation is not the


\textsuperscript{488} Ibid., 24.

\textsuperscript{489} Ibid., 25.

\textsuperscript{490} Ibid., 27.

\textsuperscript{491} Kiyozawa writes: “In one there are tears cried in fear and intense anger at never being forgiven, while in the other there are tears which come from being touched by the depth of compassion and mercy (in the Buddha) which encompasses us anywhere, anytime” (30).
same as a teaching of religion.\footnote{Kiyozawa argues that while morality is a humanistic teaching, Buddhist worldly truth is a specifically Buddhist teaching. Morality, he contends, “has nothing to do with the way of Buddhas” (32).} Kiyozawa differentiates between religious advocates and humanists (whom he terms “moralists”). He then proposes that “if each of them works to his full capacity, then each will contribute his own meritorious services to the state and society.” \footnote{Ibid., 34.} In other words, regardless of the perceived differentiation and separation, religion and morality do make a social contribution. This social contribution, especially in relation to Shinran’s thought applied to the practice of Jōdo Shinshū, but it plays itself out differently from Maimonides’ thought. Maimonides’ expectations of humans remain more rigid and prescriptive, whereas Shinran in effect places no externally imposed expectations at all. Maimonides’ expectations are shaped by the conditions of exile characterized by a more hostile environment than that of Shinran. For Maimonides, moral slippage might be assessed in a considerably harsher manner because of the fear of the dissolution of one’s community.

**Ethics in Exile**

For Judaism, the question of retaining one’s religious and ethnic identity has arisen since Biblical times. The Babylonian exile demonstrates both the hardships of survival in the conditions of displacement but also provides a number of factors, which influenced a successful resistance to the pressures of assimilation and preservation of one’s religious and cultural identity. Many of these factors came from within the community itself, particularly the traditions of ritual and purity. For instance, the prophet Ezekiel focused on ritual as a means to sustain social cohesion and communal survival.
When Ezekiel directly and explicitly addresses the crisis of exile, he takes the first steps towards a Judaism in which the rituals of the destroyed temple become “the centerpiece of an ethical system.” As Mary Douglas demonstrates, rituals are not independent of ethics since ritual does not signify “empty conformity.” She also reminds us that “it is impossible to have social relations without symbolic acts.” In later times, Maimonides places an equally significant emphasis on the commandments, which similarly enable the destroyed temple to retain its symbolic meaning and serve as a focus for the community’s ethical system. Shared rituals provide group cohesion by enabling the community members to exercise the commitment to each other in sustaining these rituals. Mein argues that “religious rituals, in particular, serve to confirm the connection between a group’s religion and moral vision, and [group’s] understanding of the world around them.” This connection is especially important in the conditions of exile. Ezekiel is highly critical of idolatry which he perceives as a major moral sin. For Ezekiel, the sin of idolatry led to all other sins. We recall that Maimonides had similar disdain for idolatry.

Another of Ezekiel’s concerns also found in Maimonides’ thought is that of purity within the conditions of exile. This is because it directly relates to the preservation and maintenance of a distinctively Jewish community. As mentioned, for Ezekiel as for Maimonides later, purity is the means to preserve the community by preserving its

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497 Mein, 139.
498 Robert Wuthnow also insists on the significance of rituals and proposes that as group’s social uncertainty increases, the rituals serve to reinforce the bond especially when there is a threat to this group’s continual existence. *Cf.*, Robert Wuthnow, *Means and Moral Order: Explorations in Cultural Analysis*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987).
boundaries. The language of purity can be understood metaphorically to express ethical rather than ritual categories. Human cleanliness can be understood in terms of moral cleanliness. Hence, purity does not serve only ritualistic purpose but moves beyond it to the ethical. Moral cleanliness is also linked with one’s adherence to the commandments. Shinran does not share Maimonides’ concerns related to the preservation of rituals and does not claim the need to maintain any specific communal rituals. He also does not appear to be concerned with the preservation of ethnic identity. Since his exile never placed him outside of his own culture, he was not exposed to similar tensions. In fact, contrary to Maimonides, Shinran’s experience of exile distanced him even further from any interest in any forms of institutionalized religion. His religious practice is strictly personalized and his relations with Amida Buddha are not translatable to any specific pattern that can be transmitted to his followers. He has no recourse to any religious law to sustain his highly individualized practice. However, while Maimonides recognizes the human need for assistance through this recourse to the law and maintains the centrality of the law, Shinran similarly acknowledges human weakness and imperfection by his recourse to tariki.

The ethics of exile becomes especially important in relation to the position of a people politically and socially underrepresented; political issues then become intricately connected to social justice and ethics. Maimonides, as a leader of the Jewish community and a liaison between this community and the Muslim rulers was more than acutely aware of the intricacies involved in this setting. His struggle between solitary pursuits and contemplation and the need to be involved in the social and political life exemplify
his acute awareness of this dynamic. Although Shinran does not share Maimonides’ concerns for rituals and purity, he is like Maimonides in being acutely aware of the political repercussions of challenging the prevailing religious system. In sum, despite the differences, their exiles resulted in an increased ethical sensitivity exhibited by their compassionate approach based in an enhanced appreciation of the human condition and the need to re-evaluate the how and why of human existence. We find this re-revaluation in Maimonides’ response to conversion and martyrdom and in Shinran’s non-judgmental acceptance of human imperfection. Their respective ethical approaches stemmed from their own personal struggles and the need to re-invent and re-think their approach to life and to others around them. The need to treat others ethically is inherently linked to the need to allow others to enjoy decent human conditions. Tolerance and acceptance are central to such an ethical approach. Despite their differences, Maimonides’ and Shinran’s tolerance and acceptance of the “other” both arose from not only their intellectual musings but also their need to contend with these issues personally.

I argue that Maimonides is an exclusivist when his views and position are decontextualized. When the need for the preservation of one’s tradition is taken into account, this definition is problematized and ascribing to Maimonides this term becomes less convincing. I also maintain that Maimonides, torn between his desire for solitary pursuits and contemplation and his concerns for the preservation of Jewish community, felt the need to be socially and politically engaged to ensure the community’s ethically grounded functioning and preservation. For Shinran, by contrast, tradition is exhibited in
his reverence for the seven patriarchs starting with the Buddha (Shakyamuni) himself as further exemplified in the following words:

If Amida’s Primal Vow is true, Shakyamuni’s teaching cannot be false. If the Buddha’s teaching is true, Shan-dao’s commentaries cannot be false. If Shan-dao’s commentaries are true, how can Hōnen’s words be empty of meaning? 499

With these words, Shinran reaffirm the validity of Hōnen’s words but also the continual link to the origins of Buddhism and Buddha’s thoughts.

Recalling once again our discussion about assigning different meaning to the same term, I reiterate that the notion of “tradition” is understood differently by these two thinkers. Neither Shinran nor Maimonides aimed to start a new tradition; however, Shinran did not feel the need to insist on this tradition’s survival in precisely the same terms as it is exemplified in Maimonides’ approach. Shinran, unlike Maimonides, does not aim to build or sustain either a peoplehood or even a group of followers. 500 He does not aim to make any universally applicable claims. His relation with Amida Buddha is strictly individualized and particularized.

Shinran’s indebtedness to a tradition exemplified in his reverence of the Seven Patriarchs can be seen more in terms of his indebtedness and gratitude to his mentor Hōnen. His claim of his gratefulness to the seven patriarchs is a result of Hōnen’s establishment of this lineage. Prior to Hōnen, the precise link between the Pure Land and Mahāyāna Buddhism had not been articulated. Hōnen starts the tradition. In effect, Shinran’s indebtedness to the seven patriarchs exemplifies his gratitude to Hōnen.

499 Tannishō, 5.

500 Though, this can be argued since he did spend considerable time writing letters and responding to the questions about his teaching. However, one can argue that his aim was not on establishing any following but on ensuring that his teachings are not misinterpreted and used to justify any immoral acts.
Hōnen’s building this lineage and articulating the tradition, however, can be traced back to his exile. As for Maimonides for whom exile played a central role that reinforced his desire to maintain the tradition, for Hōnen the exile reinforced the need to articulate his thought and, in the modern terms, to institutionalize the tradition. The adverse conditions of displacement served for Hōnen as an impetus to articulate and legitimize his views. Tracing his ideas back to the seven patriarchs authenticated this tradition to a greater extent. Shinran followed the same trajectory by following in the steps of his mentor. Ostensibly, the meaning of tradition differs for Shinran and Maimonides. Similarly to a personalized relation with Amida Buddha, Shinran’s approach to tradition is also highly personalized with Hōnen in effect being the personification of this tradition. Maimonides’ approach to tradition, as discussed, has a much stronger focus on communal and social concerns without a specific reference to any individual thinkers whose thought he aims to preserve.

**Conclusion**

As this discussion demonstrates, none of the concepts articulated by Shinran and Maimonides can be viewed outside their respective traditions. When their thought becomes decontextualized, it looses its vibrancy and nuance and results in some hastily drawn overgeneralizations and simplifications. Placing their thought into their respective environments recaptures an intricacy of their approaches and reestablishes their timelessness. Contextualizing their thought and recognizing the influence of their liminal status highlights the relevance of their thought on a number of points, including such issues as tolerance and inclusion. My aim was not to determine whether or not either one
of them (or both) should be defined as particularists or universalists but to problematize
the use of these terms and to demonstrate the embeddedness of certain concept. Even
more importantly, I want to underscore the relevance and timelessness of their thought.
My hope is that this juxtaposition can make our understanding and application of such
concepts as pluralism and tolerance more nuanced. I recognize, however, that this work is
only the tip of the iceberg, but I believe that by juxtaposing the views of these two
thinkers embedded in two vastly different traditions, underscores both human
commonalities and human uniqueness.

And a final “disclosure”:

Any scholarly writing, despite the possible claims otherwise, always represents
that particular scholar’s point of view. Even when one is recording something as benign
as one’s biography, it is always based on that particular scholar’s reconstruction of that
biographical data. Any reflections on such thoughts assume an even more complicated
stance. Yet, neither the reconstruction of one’s biography nor the reflections on one’s
thought should be confused with falsification. Rather, it is an acknowledgment of a
selective focus based on the scholar’s interests. For instance, even recording data related
to Shinran’s and Maimonides’ biography is to some degree an arbitrary process since
emphasis can be placed on certain periods of their life to highlight and underscore
specific elements in their thought. Keeping this in mind, my focus was on the issues that
interest me the most, namely, Shinran’s and Maimonides’ conception of human nature in
general, the role of the law, and the impact of exile on their thought. Hence, when sifting
through the biographical information, I was more attuned to noticing any moments in
their biography and their writings that shed light on these particular notions.
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