

## Chapter 3

# Freedom and Knowledge in Jewish Philosophy

After all, I am a teacher who—if the subject urges him, if the road is too narrow for him, and if he knows no other way to teach a proven truth except by appealing to one chosen student, even if failing to appeal to ten thousand fools—prefers imparting the truth to this one student. I do not heed the complaints of the greater crowd, and I wish to wrest the one chosen student from his [or her] irresoluteness and show him [or her] the way out of his [or her] perplexity so that he [or she] may become perfect and sound.

MAIMONIDES, *THE GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED*

### External Law and Maimonides's Four Types of Perfectionism

The medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides—known as *RamBam* within the tradition of rabbinic Judaism—concludes his massive *Guide for the Perplexed* with an examination of the role of perfection in similar categories to the ones I offer here: caring for the self, receiving wages for one's work and supporting family members, self-satisfaction and serving others through moral virtue.

Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides) lived from 1138–1204. Born in Spain, Maimonides spent his career teaching and writing in

Egypt and Morocco.<sup>1</sup> He died in Fustat, Egypt.<sup>2</sup> For curious travelers, a tomb bears his name on the western side of the Sea of Galilee in Israel. His 14-volume *Mishneh Torah* provides a systematic commentary on the *Talmud*, and it remains an authoritative and official interpretation of the *Talmud*. The work that I discuss in this chapter, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, provides explanations of Jewish engagements with and responses to Greek philosophy.<sup>3</sup> For me, personally, *The Guide for the Perplexed* has served as a consistent source of wisdom for my questions concerning the vocation of the teacher, thinker, and writer. In my judgment, *The Guide for the Perplexed* ought to serve as a source of wisdom for these perplexing times concerning the nature and purpose of Christian higher education in the twenty-first century.

Why raise deontological questions (see chapter 1) about Murdoch's account of moral perfectionism and then turn toward a medieval Jewish philosopher? I have three reasons for my turn toward Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*. First, Maimonides connects intellectual virtue with rational perfectionism. In Kenneth Seeskin's words, "The reason [intellectual] virtue is the highest perfection is that it pertains to us not as animals or as social beings but as individuals."<sup>4</sup> Seeskin continues by specifying the uniqueness of rational perfectionism: "rational perfection is the only kind that involves the individual as more than a means to something else."<sup>5</sup> Although institutions of higher education do not discourage the status of undergraduate students as "social beings," we do treat students in their individuality—"as individuals." We limit our assumptions about how they are communally formed, what kind of a person they are, where they come from. In other words, professors make judgments on the *individual performance* of undergraduate students—not on their character, their communities, and their social identities. Because of this aspect of

1. According to James A. Diamond, Maimonides was known "as a master of the scientific/philosophical corpus of his day, as evidenced not only by his writings but also by his having risen to a position of official *physician* in the royal court in Egypt" (*Maimonides and the Shaping of the Jewish Canon*, 1).

2. Abraham Joshua Heschel's biography of Maimonides remains a breathtaking and worthwhile read; see Heschel, *Maimonides*.

3. In his recently published book (2014), Diamond goes as far as to say: "His philosophical magnum opus, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, remains the most important and influential synthesis of science and the Jewish tradition" (*Maimonides and the Shaping of the Jewish Canon*, 2–3).

4. Seeskin, *Autonomy in Jewish Philosophy*, 95.

5. *Ibid.*

the relationship between faculty and students, the standards for perfectionism cannot be directed toward their moral formation and social identity—which takes *moral* perfectionism off the table in the undergraduate setting. Undergraduate students are graded and judged by their intellectual abilities *as individuals*, and rational perfectionism becomes a realistic and reasonable standard upon which to hold them.

My second reason for turning toward Maimonides' account of rational perfectionism concerns the role of external law in Maimonides' moral reasoning. While we cannot instill the moral virtues into undergraduate students, we can and should teach them the external law—what Kant calls “the doctrine of right.” Maimonides thought that the external law was available to all, but only those who developed intellectual virtue would obtain knowledge of the law. Surprisingly, Kant and Maimonides agree on the accessibility of the external law; Maimonides comes across as less hopeful, than Kant does, about those who can obtain knowledge of the law.<sup>6</sup> Those of us who serve in Christian institutions of higher education inherit a duty (a) to be more hopeful than Maimonides—to teach and write in ways that allow and encourage our students to obtain knowledge of the external law (obligations, principles, and responsibilities toward other citizens)—and (b) to prove correct Kant's suggestion concerning the accessibility of the external law to all who exercise their rationality. Christian institutions of higher education need to embody and live into these words from Kenneth Seeskin (a scholar of both Maimonides' and Kant's philosophies):

[T]he thrust of Kant's theory [of external law] is clearly democratic. Everyone, not just the intellectual elite, is both subject and sovereign in the kingdom of ends: subject because the law binds categorically, sovereign because no member of the kingdom is subject to the will of another . . . . No special knowledge is needed [knowledge claimed by clerics and Scriptural scholars] . . . because awareness of the law as well as the ability to legislate it for oneself are an integral part of our nature as rational beings.<sup>7</sup>

6. Kenneth Seeskin puts the difference more aggressively: “If Maimonides' concern is that not enough people possess the intellectual acumen needed to understand the law, Kant's is the opposite: that clerics and Scriptural scholars have blocked access to it by introducing extraneous or misleading considerations” (*ibid.*, 116).

7. *Ibid.*

The “kingdom of ends” referenced by Seeskin concerns Kant’s notion that a civilized society treats every individual person as an end-in-themselves, and I further this point by claiming that Christian institutions of higher education need to educate undergraduate students in how to treat themselves—as individuals—as an end. Yes, we should convince our students to treat other persons as ends-in-themselves—and we should allow them to figure out the moral virtues required for them to achieve this imperative. Further, we should encourage our students that each of them ought to treat themselves as individual persons—which involves acts of self-care and recognizing their self as an end and not merely as a means to the demands and wishes of others. Maimonides’ account of rational perfectionism gets us to a similar place that Kant does; Maimonides’ account also includes a theological rationale for why individuals ought to take themselves seriously *as individuals*. I call it a theological rationale because Maimonides considers the role of God as the author of external law.<sup>8</sup> While important for understanding Maimonides’ view of the external law, God’s role in rational perfectionism becomes extremely significant for understanding the relational-based account of rational perfectionism developed in the next section.

There is yet a third reason for my turn toward the wisdom of the Jewish philosopher Maimonides: within Western philosophy, his outline of the four different versions of perfectionism comes to us with great clarity. I take clarity to be a virtue within philosophical thinking and writing. Furthermore, his explanation of moral perfectionism captures some of the aspects of Murdoch’s account of moral perfectionism. Most important, his defense of rational perfectionism over moral perfectionism suggests that rational perfectionism might provide a higher form of perfectionism yet be much more realistic to achieve than moral perfectionism. My goal, at the end of this section, involves demonstrating how

8. Genesis 1 claims that human beings are made in the “image of God,” and the Jewish philosopher Martin Kavka demonstrates how Maimonides connects this biblical phrasing with rational perfectionism: “If image, in the Bible, refers to ‘the true reality of the thing in so far as the latter is that particular being’, then the true reality of humanity is intellect. However, this is veiled by the material shape in which this intellect lies. Intellect is thus the most perfect part of human nature—it is the divine part of human nature—but the language of intellect in Maimonides is a language of action, of intellecting. The intellect is not a thing, as the brain is, because its essence is action: ‘And it has become clear that the very act of every intellect, which act consists in its being intellectually cognizing is identical with the essence of that intellect’. And this is true for both humans and [for] God” (*Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy*, 79).

rational perfectionism becomes a higher form of perfectionism yet much more realistic to achieve than moral perfectionism.

Before explaining Maimonides' four types of perfectionism, it proves useful to first mention the four types of wisdom found two pages before his account of perfectionism. According to Maimonides, the Jewish tradition offers four types of wisdom: (1) biblical wisdom—"the knowledge of those truths which lead to the knowledge of God"; (2) the wisdom of a craftsman—"knowledge of any workmanship"; (3) moral wisdom—"[knowledge] of the acquisition of moral principles"; and (4) logical wisdom—"the notion of cunning and subtlety."<sup>9</sup> Maimonides spends the most energy explaining this fourth kind of wisdom: "It is possible that the Hebrew *hokmah* ('wisdom') expresses the idea of cunning and planning, which may serve in one case as a means of acquiring intellectual perfection, or [even] good moral principles."<sup>10</sup> Overall, Maimonides concludes, that the "attribute *hokmah* ('wisdom') is therefore given to a person that possesses great intellectual faculties, or good moral principles, or skill in art; but also to persons cunning in evil deeds and principles."<sup>11</sup>

I find that these four types of wisdom provide a foundation for what Christian institutions of higher education can promise as the type of wisdom(s) that undergraduate students will develop during their undergraduate education. As professors, we must remain open to the possibility—even if this blatantly contradicts our desires—that our students might turn the logical wisdom we offer to them into "evil deeds." If we try to make our students "moral," in terms of forcing upon them the cultivation of the moral virtues, then that depicts our own issues of control and manipulation more than it does about what remains best for the student. We can offer them the knowledge of external laws—Maimonides calls them "moral principles" in this passage—and moral concepts, and we can work to instill intellectual virtue into their mental habits. What they do with these moral principles and the intellectual virtues remain up to them and their internal convictions. In other words, I can teach what practical reasoning is; I cannot teach them how to employ practical reasoning in their own lives.

Christian institutions of higher education ought to require courses in religious studies and/or theological reasoning in order to expose

9. Maimonides, GP, 393.

10. Maimonides, GP, 394.

11. Maimonides, GP, 394.

undergraduate students to biblical wisdom. Additionally, Christian institutions of higher education ought to require courses in arts and crafts in order to expose undergraduate students to “knowledge of . . . workmanship.” Also, Christian institutions of higher education ought to require courses in ethics in order to expose students to the wisdom developed in different moral traditions— “[knowledge] of the acquisition of moral principles.” We should teach courses in ethics, outlining the details of the moral theories and their applications to personal and social problems. Lastly, Christian institutions of higher education ought to require courses in argumentation, critical thinking, and logic in order to expose students to logical wisdom—to give them the tools for identifying the “cunning and subtlety” of other persons they encounter throughout their lives and to teach them *prudence* as an intellectual virtue. We desire for our students to use this for the sake of the common good or within their own families and religious communities, but we can neither control nor force them to do so. We can supply them with a toolkit full of useful tools, but we cannot walk alongside them throughout their ordinary lives telling them which tool to use and when to use it and where to use it.

Maimonides’ categorization of wisdom eventually leads to his discussion on the four types of perfectionism, and the transition from wisdom to perfection involves the law. Maimonides argues that the law ought to be learned in this order: “we must first learn the truths by tradition, after this we must be taught how to prove them, and then investigate the actions that help to improve man’s ways.”<sup>12</sup> Although my account differs a bit from Maimonides, I agree with him that the “tradition” needs to be both presented and tested—which is a significant part of my vocation as a professor of philosophy in a Christian institution of higher education—“and then investigate the actions” that follow from the parts of tradition that have been presented and tested. Pedagogically, this insight entails outlining the possible actions for students that follow from the arguments, ideas, and theories found within the philosophical tradition—especially in terms of the obligations, principles, and responsibilities required by external law.

According to Maimonides, there are four kinds or types of perfection. He describes and ranks them, saving rational perfectionism for the final type. The first type of perfection involves the external goods of property and wealth. He writes, “The first kind, the lowest, in the acquisition

12. Maimonides, GP, 394.

of which people spend their days, is perfection as regards property; the possession of money, garments, furniture, servants, land, and the like.” From our twenty-first century perspective, many of these possessions are immoral and outdated. However, this is the type of perfectionism that most undergraduate students in the twenty-first century think they ought to seek.

In the mid-2000s in the United States, the housing market came toppling down—and the American economy eventually came with it. By the presidential election of 2008, American citizens forced upon themselves attitudes of desperation and panic. My own professorial career started in 2009, at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, and I immediately sensed the impact of the failing economy on the psyche of my students. The majority of these students were not directly impacted by the economic crisis, but the enormous amount of pressure put on them—by their parents, news media, and society—because of this economic crisis was unhealthy. Traditionally, students who are given the opportunity to study at a liberal arts college approach their undergraduate education as a time to enjoy their studies and “figure out” who they are as individual persons. The undergraduate students who I have taught since 2009 are no longer like this: while I have taught at two very different institutions, the two sets of students feel the same *profound burden* of “getting a job” and “making as much money as possible.” I italicize the phrase *profound burden* because the emotional, mental, and scholastic components of their lives have been determined by poor decisions made by banks, government, and the wealthy; their burden was neither caused by them nor can be rectified by them (at their current age). It would be easy to write the history of the United States—from 2001–2009—into an ancient Greek tragedy, and the “fools” that pay the price are not the same “fools” that created the crisis.

Undergraduate students who make the decision, based upon this profound burden, that property and wealth will be their primary goals are seeking this first type of perfection. Professors should neither blame nor shame these students for their quest for financial perfection but, rather, should teach scholarly (and, sometimes, non-scholarly<sup>13</sup>) material that allows them to recognize that there are other ways to live into their ordinary life—and be “successful” within ordinary life. Maimonides calls this “the lowest” type of perfection, but he actually concludes that this

13. For instance, I often use E. B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web* in lower-level ethics courses to emphasize how friendships might help us avoid our “fate.”

financial-based quest of perfection ought to be considered no perfection at all. How does he come to this conclusion?

Maimonides makes the following argument against financial perfectionism. He claims that there “is no close connection between this possession and its possessor; it is a perfectly imaginary relation[ship].” Because of this lack of connection, the “qualities” contained in the possessions remain both “external” to and “independent” of the possessor; they make no contribution to the “qualities” of the possessor. Maimonides concludes:

The philosophers have shown that he whose sole aim in all his exertions and endeavors is the possession of this kind of perfection, only seeks perfectly imaginary and transient things; and even if these remain his property all his lifetime, they do not give him any perfection.<sup>14</sup>

The key word in this conclusion has to be “sole”: if seeking financial perfection becomes the *only* journey for an individual, then that person does live a life of illusion. What does this conclusion mean for undergraduate students who feel the *profound burden* of the American economic crisis? Professors have a deep obligation to steer these students away from the temptation to seek only financial perfection. Some might argue that this proves we ought to instill the moral virtues into our students, because that is the only way to prevent avoiding this temptation: the virtue of temperance moderates our greed, and the virtue of justice requires us to think in terms of the redistribution of wealth. I disagree with the notion that professors-instilling-moral-virtue will serve undergraduate students in the proper ways. Rather, we ought to encourage undergraduate students to form the intellectual virtue of courage and to look forward to all aspects of their ordinary life—and not the exclusive necessity of making money—involving (1) self-care, (2) satisfaction at work *and* at home, and (3) service to others. Financial perfection remains insufficient for the demands of a healthy ordinary life.

The second type of perfection can be called either formal perfection or physical perfection, and I will refer to it as physical perfection. According to Maimonides,

The second kind is more closely related to man’s body than the first. It includes the perfection of the shape, constitution, and

14. Maimonides, GP, 395.



form of man's body; the utmost evenness of temperaments, and the proper order and strength of his limbs.<sup>15</sup>

Physical perfection is a higher form of perfection than financial perfection because the qualities involved actually belong to the individual person. In college and university settings, this quest for physical perfection manifests itself within collegiate athletics where the label “student-athlete” becomes confused. College athletes mistakenly interpret this label in terms of adjective and noun, where “student” serves as an adjective for their primary identity as “athlete.” The fact of the matter is quite the opposite: the label ought to be interpreted as a priority of identities, where “student” takes priority over “athlete.” The hyphen makes all the difference for the proper interpretation of this phrase: those undergraduate students—who happen also to be college athletes—who see themselves primarily as “athletes,” and secondarily as “students,” find themselves on a quest for physical perfection. In some ways, as Maimonides argues, physical perfection ought to be judged as a higher form of perfection than financial perfection because it becomes more difficult to lose the qualities of “order and strength” involved with physical perfection—which means that, on this Maimonidean view, a student-athlete who graduates college but has no job waiting for him/her ought to be judged as having higher standing in society than a business major who leaves college in order to enter the workforce making a six-digit salary (or more). Now, that's a radical view in the twenty-first century!

Although Maimonides defends physical perfection above financial perfection, what does he identify as problematic with physical perfection? He writes:

This kind of perfection must likewise be excluded from forming our chief aim; because it is a perfection of the body, and man does not possess it as a man, but as a living being; he has this property besides in common with the lowest animal; and even if a person possesses the greatest possible strength, he could not be as strong as a mule, much less can he be as strong as a lion or elephant; he, therefore, can at the utmost have strength that might enable him to carry a heavy burden, or break a thick substance, or do similar things, in which there is no great profit for the body.<sup>16</sup>

15. Maimonides, GP, 395.

16. Maimonides, GP, 395.

I agree with one aspect of the argument in this passage, but I also have a strong disagreement with another aspect of the argument. I begin with my disagreement. Maimonides' argument does not warrant the claim that a human being who seeks physical perfection shares an attribute, property, or quality "*with the lowest animal.*"<sup>17</sup> Physical activity and exercise, for the sake of health and toning one's body, are human activities—not animal activities. Human beings who enjoy physical activity and who remain quite disciplined with rigorous exercise and toning are not lowering themselves on the ancient/medieval hierarchy of being; they take pleasure in a very distinct human activity. Because these activities involve pleasure, Aristotle's logic concerning the virtue of temperance applies quite well to physical perfection. Human beings need to moderate their amount of exercise and physical activity: too little of it should be considered as the vice of sloth whereas too much of it should be counted as vanity, injurious, or over-indulgence—the vice depends upon the actual intention of the athlete. If these vices become habits, then a human being who habituates them might look like "the lowest animal." To call it physical *perfection*, however, means that the person seeking physical perfection will avoid the vices of injurious and over-indulgence; the vice of vanity might come with physical perfection without violating the demands of the perfection of the body. Aristotle reasons that a craftsman ought to be proud of the craft that he constructs and produces; in this sense, pride is an earned virtue. We could imagine accounting for physical perfection where vanity becomes a type of pride in how one has constructed his or her own body. The quest for physical perfection does not lower a human being to the status of "the lowest animal."<sup>18</sup>

My agreement with Maimonides' argument in this passage concerns a singular aspect of his conclusion: "he . . . can at the utmost have strength that might enable him to carry a heavy burden."<sup>19</sup> Since the context is

17. Maimonides, GP, 395; emphasis added.

18. Daniel Reffner disagrees with my interpretation of Maimonides on physical perfection. Reffner claims that Maimonides is not necessarily "saying that to seek physical perfection lowers one to the level of the lowest animal but rather the problem is that bodies are not exclusive to humans, for all animals have bodies." Reffner continues, "This is what we have in common with the lowest animals. The problem then is not that the pursuit of physical perfection is a vice but that even a human being with the most strength is still not as strong as mule, elephant, etc" (Daniel Reffner, personal correspondence with the author, [March 29, 2016]). I imagine that Reffner's interpretation gets us closer to the intent of Maimonides' argument.

19. Maimonides, GP, 395.

physical perfection, we interpret Maimonides' claim in the very literal sense of actually carrying a heavy load of objects. Maimonides seems to mean it in this very literal way, but I also think that rigorous exercise and intense athletic training forms courage as an intellectual virtue—which becomes cultivated and habituated in one's mind. For instance, I find that the more I play racquetball—with intensity and vigor—the more stamina I have when needing to think and write about very difficult topics. The demands of racquetball, especially when the two players involved have a similar skill level and the volleys last for 2–3 minutes each time, enforce a sense of endurance and persistence that becomes almost impossible to establish outside of physical activity and exercise. Maimonides' claim—seeking physical perfection allows the “strength that might enable him to carry a heavy burden”—obviously should be validated as a true statement in its literal meaning. I believe it should be validated as an accurate statement in terms of developing the intellectual virtue of courage because endurance and persistence are aspects or ingredients of what is required for courage to be understood as an intellectual virtue.

The third type of perfection is “moral perfection.” According to Maimonides, “The third kind of perfection is more closely connected with man himself than the second perfection. It includes moral perfection, the highest degree of excellency in man's character.”<sup>20</sup> Whereas the second type of perfection involves the appearance or form of the body—hence its optional name as formal perfectionism—this third type of perfection “is more closely connected with man himself” because it concerns the *character* of an individual person. Moral *perfectionism* emphasizes “the highest degree of excellency” in one's character. Maimonides claims, however, that moral perfectionism lacks depth because it requires relationality:

Most of the precepts [in moral perfectionism] aim at producing this perfection; but even this kind is only a preparation for another perfection, and is not sought for its own sake. For all moral principles concern the relation of man to his neighbour; the perfection of man's moral principles . . . is given to man for the benefit of mankind. Imagine a person being alone, and having no connexion whatever with any other person, all his good moral principles are at rest, they are not required, and give man no perfection whatever. These principles are only necessary and useful when man comes into contact with others.<sup>21</sup>

20. Maimonides, GP, 395.

21. Maimonides, GP, 395.

Why should we rely on others in order to obtain our perfection? Maimonides thinks that we should not have to rely on others for achieving our own perfection. Because “moral principles” require relationships with other people, Maimonides reasons that moral perfectionism remains an imperfect type of perfectionism. While moral perfectionism proves a “higher” form of perfection than either financial or physical perfectionism, Maimonides concludes that even moral perfectionism remains insufficient in relation to what deserves our attention in terms of the type of perfection we seek as individual persons.

I borrow two aspects of Maimonides’s account of moral perfectionism, and I challenge one of his primary claims in his account of moral perfectionism. The two aspects I borrow are (a) the emphasis on moral *principles* instead of moral *virtues* and (b) the insight that “being alone . . . give no perfection whatever.”<sup>22</sup> Because of (b), the reader can guess my disagreement with Maimonides’s account of moral perfectionism: *perfectionism must include relationality*. For rational perfectionism to prepare us for ordinary life, then perfectionism must consider the relationships that comprise our ordinary lives. For moral perfectionism to be achieved within one’s adult life (it cannot be achieved as an undergraduate student), then maintaining “excellency in . . . character” necessarily includes the relationships we have—as Maimonides points out. However, these relationships do not make moral perfectionism less important—only less realistic and reasonable.

Maimonides thinks that moral perfectionism ought to be considered achievable in this life, but Iris Murdoch thinks human nature prevents us from achieving perfection in this life. In his account of moral perfectionism, Maimonides upholds both the role of the self and necessity of relationships. Murdoch downplays the role of the self—because moral perfectionism requires one to negate the self—but upholds the necessity of relationships through her understanding of love. These theories of perfectionism are neither realistic nor reasonable because, for both thinkers, we maintain control over our *ethical* selves (Maimonides) or *moral* lives (Murdoch). This is what we need instead: a shift from internal moral virtues to *external moral principles*, a shift from moral virtue to *intellectual virtue*, a shift from moral perfectionism to *rational perfectionism*, a shift from lamenting relationality to *celebrating the relationships found in our*

22. Maimonides, GP, 395.

*ordinary lives*. Maimonides helps us make all of these shifts except for the very last one.

The translator of Maimonides's *A Guide for the Perplexed* interchanges between "intellectual perfection" and "rational perfection" for the phrasing of the fourth type of perfection. Because I am writing about both intellectual virtues and rational perfectionism, I will use the latter phrase exclusively.<sup>23</sup> This decision means that I also need to distinguish between Maimonides's rational perfectionism and the modern philosophical theory known as "rationalism"—because these two theories have no commonality in this book—and will make a strong distinction between these two in the next section (with Hilary Putnam's help!). So, first, what is Maimonides' account of rational perfectionism?

Maimonides' account of perfectionism, the fourth type of perfection, emphasizes the intellectual abilities of individual persons and focuses those abilities toward the contemplation of God and establishing proper beliefs about God.<sup>24</sup> Maimonides writes:

The fourth kind of perfection is the true perfection of man; the possession of the highest intellectual faculties; the possession of such notions which lead to true metaphysical opinions as regards God. With this perfection man has obtained his final object; it gives him true human perfection; it remains to him alone; it gives him immortality, and on its account he is called man. Examine the first three kinds of perfection, you will find that, if you possess them, they are not your property, but the property of others; according to the ordinary view, however, they belong to you and to others. But the last kind of perfection is exclusively yours; no one else owns any part of it, "They shall be only thine own, and not strangers' with thee" (Prov. 17). Your aim must therefore be to attain this fourth perfection that is exclusively yours, and you ought not to continue to work and

23. Kenneth Seeskin also interchanges "intellectual perfection" and "rational perfection" in his chapter on Maimonides' moral reasoning (see *Autonomy in Jewish Philosophy*, 90–118).

24. An alternate translation of Maimonides' account of rational perfectionism, which highlights the mandate for establishing proper beliefs about God, reads this way: "[T]rue human perfection . . . consists in the acquisition of the rational virtues—I refer to the conception of intelligibles, which teach true opinions concerning divine things. This is in true reality the ultimate end; this is what gives the individual true perfection, a perfection belonging to him alone; and it gives him permanent prudence" (GP, 395). Martin Kavka offers a helpful analysis of this passage (see *Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy*, 81).

wear yourself for that which belongs to others, whilst neglecting your soul till it has lost entirely its original purity through the dominion of the bodily powers over it.<sup>25</sup>

Maimonides strongly emphasizes how an *individual person* achieves and possesses rational perfectionism. In fact, what makes rational perfectionism higher than all of the other types of perfection concerns how the fourth type remains with the individual alone.

What are some of the features of rational perfectionism, according to Maimonides? For clarity's sake, we can list them:

- “the possession of the highest intellectual faculties”
- “the possession of such notions which lead to true metaphysical opinions [about] God”
- the obtainment of one’s “final object”
- the giving, or granting, of “human immortality”
- the lack of “work and weary” that comes with relationships
- attention to one’s own soul and the ability to contemplate on God

My shift from moral perfectionism to rational perfectionism—in the context of Christian institutions of higher education—relies on some of these tenets but denies others. I defend the claim that rational perfectionism ought to be considered a “higher” form of perfectionism than moral perfectionism because we maintain more control over our intellect and rationality than we do our character and the moral virtues.<sup>26</sup> I take this aspect of control to be what Maimonides means as “exclusively yours” and “no one else owns any part of it.”<sup>27</sup> Our intellect and rationality remain most proximate to the self. If we add an account of perfection to this, then we can strive toward possessing “the highest intellectual

25. Maimonides, GP, 395–396.

26. In Kenneth Seeskin’s words: “The reason rational virtue is the highest perfection is that it pertains to us not as animals or as social beings but as individuals. In other words, rational perfection is the only kind that involves the individual as more than a means to something else” (*Autonomy in Jewish Philosophy*, 95).

27. Seeskin also interprets Maimonides in this way, but he adds: “Although the people who achieve this perfection will experience a kind of delight, it is the kind of that comes with the contemplation of eternal truths and acceptance of the lowliness of one’s position as measured against the vastness of the heavens. There is in it nothing personal, nothing material, and nothing received at someone else’s expense” (Seeskin, *Autonomy in Jewish Philosophy*, 95).

faculties.” *Refusing* to seek rational perfection manifests itself in at least three ways: (a) accepting mediocrity, the status quo, and an unchallenged way of life for oneself as a human being; (b) being taught information, principles, and wisdom and then asking the further question, ‘can you tell me what to do with the information, principles, and wisdom?’; (c) identifying one’s journey in terms of financial, physical, or moral perfectionism without intellectual virtue. Accepting mediocrity, the status quo, and living in unchallenged ways prohibit an individual person from becoming a fully rational human being. Being taught information, principles, and wisdom and then asking the further question, ‘can you tell me what to do with the information, principles, and wisdom?’ provides a kind of *hopefulness* for becoming a fully rational human being, but asking this further question signifies that one expects an authority to do the practical reasoning and their thinking on their behalf. Professors and teachers can provide information about external laws, societal principles, and traditional wisdom; professors and teachers, however, cannot and should not perform the difficult task of practical reasoning—i.e. putting external laws, societal principles, and traditional wisdom to work within the life of the individual—for other persons or undergraduate students. Becoming a rational human being, a rational person, involves taking on the difficult tasks of practical reasoning and thinking. We have covered the limitations and problems mentioned in (c) and why rational perfectionism remains superior to financial, physical, or moral perfectionism. However, I need to add one more point to this: it is actually impossible to cultivate the moral virtues without the intellectual virtues; once one possesses the moral virtues, then the temptation becomes giving up the intellectual virtues—neglecting one’s intellectual virtues. Part of the virtuous life involves considerations about one’s self, and these considerations require the intellectual virtues.

What I deny from Maimonides’ account of rational perfectionism involves his confidence that possessing “such notions . . . lead to true metaphysical opinions [about] God.”<sup>28</sup> This point becomes of the utmost importance, in the twenty-first century (after 2015 CE), for Christian institutions of higher education. It involves making a strong distinction between intellectual virtue and the content of beliefs on the quest for rational perfectionism. I want to label this distinction as a solution to the “Wheaton College problem” because, in 2015, Wheaton College suspended

28. Maimonides, GP, 396.

one of their faculty members—Dr. Larcylia Hawkins—for posting on Facebook that she stands in solidarity with her Muslim friends because they “worship the same God.”<sup>29</sup> The administration of Wheaton College claimed that this Facebook post violated the Statement of Faith that all faculty members sign at Wheaton College. They made this claim, quite publicly, without any public discussion—or any sign of accountability on the administration themselves. Couching it in terms of defending “a high view of Scripture,” but not seeking out a practice or mode of practical reasoning that corresponds with this so-called “high view of Scripture,”<sup>30</sup> Wheaton College and Professor Hawkins eventually settled out of court agreeing that her tenure as a faculty member at Wheaton College ought to come to an end. The administration of Wheaton College failed to do the careful, difficult, and tedious work encouraged by the intellectual virtues and required for achieving rational perfectionism.<sup>31</sup> Instead, they ordered their own “metaphysical opinions about God” over the demands

29. “I stand in religious solidarity with Muslims because they, like me, a Christian, are people of the book. And as Pope Francis stated last week, we worship the same God” (Larcylia Hawkins, Facebook Post, [December 10, 2015]).

30. As I have written elsewhere: “[I]nstead of making a hasty decision that this statement is automatically false—and, hence, falsifiable—the practice of SR [Scriptural Reasoning] reminds us that we need to return to the sacred texts that potentially ground statements such as these. The claim, ‘We worship the same God,’ should be considered an invitation to study the Tanakh, New Testament, and Qur’an together; it does not warrant a knee-jerk reaction of placing a scholar on leave. This is an opportunity for evangelical Christians to show the media and the world what it means to be a ‘people of the book,’ and SR provides the context and proper strategy for doing so without asking evangelical Christians to surrender their theological convictions. In accordance with the ‘high view’ of Scripture found within their ‘Statement of Faith,’ why has the Wheaton administration not turned to a study of Scripture before making their decisions on this issue?” I also add that the arguments “made by the Wheaton administration ought to be judged as a confusion between the logical terms ‘contrary’ and ‘contradiction.’ The professor’s statement ought to be treated as potentially contrary to Wheaton’s ‘Statement of Faith’ but not as absolutely contradictory to that ‘Statement.’ A contrary claim involves clarifying a difference of degree—either further differentiating or bringing two seemingly opposite objects closer together—or raising a question of variation—again to bring further variance or less variance to the object in question. From a logical perspective, the claim under question clearly ought to be treated as contrarian and not contradictory. The decision of the Wheaton administration, however, mistreats it as an absolute contradiction—which confuses the matter and potentially blocks healthy and intelligible argumentation about the claim” (“Introduction”: <http://jsr.shanti.virginia.edu/vol-14-no-2-november-2015-philosophy-and-theology/7126989-2/>).

31. Concerning Maimonides’ account of rational perfectionism, Kenneth Seeskin argues that proper rationality requires “awe, shame, and humility” (*Autonomy in Jewish Philosophy*, 92).



of rational perfectionism; they prioritized the content of their theological beliefs above the intellectual virtues—especially the intellectual virtues of courage and hope. In this case, the content of their beliefs led them to act with the vice of recklessness and encouraged Christians to despair about both Muslims and university professors. Some members of the news media focused on how Wheaton disparaged university professors, but the media did not focus on how Wheaton’s administration encouraged despair about Muslims. If Christians and Muslims do not worship the same God, then Wheaton’s administration’s claim requires the following logical inference: “Christians worship the true God, Muslims worship a false God.” How can a university make such a claim and possess such knowledge? Current Roman Catholic doctrine, cited by Professor Hawkins, corrects the despair encouraged by Wheaton’s presentation of the content of their beliefs.<sup>32</sup>

Christian institutions of higher education need to reverse the order and priorities chosen by Wheaton’s administration: the careful, difficult, and tedious work encouraged by the intellectual virtues takes precedence over establishing, organizing, and publicizing the content of their beliefs; the requirements for achieving rational perfection ought to be viewed as more important than proclaiming “metaphysical opinions [about] God”—especially when those proclamations get directed toward someone within the community who demonstrates both courage and hope as intellectual virtues.

The other aspect of Maimonides’ view of rational perfectionism that troubles me concerns the relation between these two features: the lack of “work and weary” that comes with relationships & attention to one’s own soul and the ability to contemplate on God.<sup>33</sup> Maimonides seems to treat these as a disjunction: *either* we continue in the “work and weary” that comes with relationships *or* we attend to our own soul and contemplation on God.<sup>34</sup> I deem this a false binary as a logical argument, and I also

32. For some needed wisdom on the relationship between the Papacy and Protestantism, especially as it pertains to doctrinal questions, see D. Stephen Long’s “In Need of a Pope?": <http://religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3208>

33. Although I agree with most of his analysis on Maimonides’ account of perfectionism, I disagree with Martin Kavka when he concludes: “the intellectual perfection at which an individual aims will involve worldly acts . . . , [and] our aim at intellectual perfection to the best of our capacity must also be performed in acts [that are] situated within . . . social, political, and moral context[s]” (*Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy*, 83).

34. Logically, Maimonides’ argument seems to be (R = relationships; SC = self-care;

find it inaccurate and untrue in terms of ordinary life for the twenty-first century. The reasons for this come about through my interpretation of twentieth century Jewish philosophy—in particular, the account of perfectionism defended by Hilary Putnam in *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life*.<sup>35</sup>

### From A Guide for the Perplexed to Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life

Hilary Putnam, now of blessed memory (1926–2016), made his name writing in the style of analytic philosophy on topics ranging from the philosophy of mathematics to the varieties of metaphysical realism. Putnam spent the majority of his teaching career at Harvard University, and he published at least fifteen books. He wrote *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life* after his retirement from Harvard University, which begins with an autobiographical description of his journey from secularism to Judaism.<sup>36</sup> Although raised in a Jewish household, Putnam’s vocation as philosopher led him away from Judaism for quite some time.<sup>37</sup> When his son became the proper age for a bar mitzvah, Putnam sought out rabbis in the Cambridge, Massachusetts area. Rabbi Gold agreed to do the bar mitzvah on the conditions that Hilary and his wife (Ruth Anna Putnam is also a well-known and established philosopher) attend services for a year and that their son study Judaism.<sup>38</sup> Putnam writes, “Long before the year was over, the Jewish services and Jewish prayers had become an essential part of our lives, and Rabbi Gold continues to be our teacher and our friend to this day.”<sup>39</sup> Comfortably identifying as a “Conservative Jew,” Putnam retired from his teaching duties at Harvard University and wrote *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life* in order to bring together and make sense of his “philosophical self” and his “religious self.” Putnam died on March 13th, 2016 (during the time that I was finalizing this chapter).

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CG = contemplating on God): R v (SC & CG).

35. Putnam mentions Maimonides but does not engage with his work in (see *JPGL*, 55–58); I remain convinced that Putnam’s title serves as a deliberate echo of Maimonides’ work.

36. See Putnam, *JPGL*, 1–8.

37. See Putnam, *JPGL*, 1–2.

38. See Putnam, *JPGL*, 2.

39. Putnam, *JPGL*, 2.

In *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life*, Putnam explains the moral reasoning of three twentieth century philosophers:<sup>40</sup> Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929), Martin Buber (1878–1965), and Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995).<sup>41</sup> Among the public, Buber certainly is the most well-known of these three thinkers; among philosophers, Levinas would be the most well-known. Rosenzweig died young, but his writings have made a huge impact within Jewish ethics in the past 20 years.

My claim in this section is two-fold: (a) Putnam’s interpretations of the perfectionist thread that he pulls through these three thinkers offers us an account of perfectionism that avoids the problems found within the accounts of Maimonides and Murdoch; (b) Putnam misidentifies his account of perfectionism as “moral perfectionism,” and I demonstrate that the perfectionist thread that he pulls through these three thinkers ought to be considered the most promising version of perfectionism outlined in this chapter. Importantly, Putnam’s account of perfectionism directs us toward the relationship between twentieth century Jewish philosophy and the version of perfectionism found within the transcendentalist philosophies of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Stanley Cavell. In sum: I approach Putnam’s *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life* as picking up from the very end of Maimonides’ *A Guide for the Perplexed* where he outlines the four types of perfectionism,<sup>42</sup> and I read Putnam’s *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life* as a strong defense of rational perfectionism—which

40. Putnam writes, “[A] friend recently asked me whether this book would be ‘for a general audience.’ The answer is that this book is an attempt to help the general reader, especially the general reader who will go on and read one or more of these thinkers, to understand the strange concepts and terms that appear in their works, and to avoid common mistakes in reading them. In that sense, it is emphatically ‘for a general reader.’ But the books of a Buber, a Rosenzweig, and a Levinas are difficult matters. So a more qualified reply would be: it is for a general reader who is motivated and willing to struggle with difficult . . . ideas” (Putnam, *JPGL*, 8). I feel the same way about my own book: it is for a general reader who wants to go on to read some of the authors with whom I engage in deep conversations about freedom, knowledge, courage, and hope. I draw implications about Christian institutions of higher education from these conversations, and readers are welcomed to challenge those implications.

41. In his review of Putnam’s book, Eric Jacobson writes: “These reflections, despite the title and a picturesque sunset on the jacket, offer much less a ‘guide to life’ than an introduction to the *Lebensphilosophie* of Rosenzweig, Buber, and Levinas. This is not a self-help book. It is a search for a *living philosophy* [a philosophy about ordinary life]” (“Modern Jewish Thought and Theology,” 410).

42. Although not in relation to Maimonides’ four types of perfection, Putnam writes on Maimonides’ theological reasoning in his essay called “On Negative Theology,” 407–22.

allows for the category of the self, encourages perfectionism among and within human relationships, and reconfigures the God-human relationship in ways that avoid the reduction of our theological thinking to merely the content of our beliefs. Putnam also brings Jewish Philosophy in conversation with American Transcendentalism, and I continue that conversation—and the resulting connections—in the present book.

#### Rationality (Knowledge) and Responsibility (Freedom)

Putnam's thread of perfectionism begins with an argument about rationality and responsibility, which correspond with the concepts knowledge and freedom respectively. *Knowledge includes rational skills, and freedom involves responsibility.* These two need to be brought together. Putnam argues that we “are *responsible* for what we have thought and done in the past, responsible *now*, intellectually and practically, and that is what makes us *thinkers*, rational agents in a world at all.”<sup>43</sup> In Putnam's account, responsibility becomes a key component to rationality: an agent who refuses to take responsibility for their past actions and thoughts, as well as their current actions and thoughts, lacks rationality. This point relates to the question of rational perfectionism, in the context of Christian institutions of higher education, in the sense that faculty members and professors ought to give undergraduate students information but also teach them what it means to take responsibility for the arguments and claims that they offer. *Responsibility ought to be understood as an obligation that necessarily accompanies rationality, not a virtue that may or may not add to rationality.* Responsibility includes both the positive and the negative: positively, professors should encourage undergraduate students to take credit and be proud of good arguments, claims, and ideas that they put forward; negatively, professors need to create the space and time for undergraduate students to admit their failures, identify mistakes made, and learn to move on from their mishaps. If the mishaps are repeated, then professors need to maintain an intense amount of patience directed toward that particular student and continue with the process outlined here; professors cannot and should not critique the *character* of an undergraduate student—even amidst obvious patterns of repeated mistakes—but only his or her particular actions and words.<sup>44</sup>

43. Putnam, JPGL, 25.

44. I first learned a version of this from my studies relating to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's

## From Knowledge to Acknowledgement

The next part of the thread of perfectionism concerns Franz Rosenzweig's philosophical theology, which helps us understand the promise of rational perfectionism and the pitfalls of theological rationalism. Rosenzweig calls into question both philosophical and theological rationalism, and helps us understand how Maimonides' account of rational perfectionism—with his emphasis on the content of our beliefs—entails a type of theological rationalism. For Rosenzweig, our intellectual task in relation to God involves neither proving God's existence nor properly organizing our knowledge about God's attributes; rather, in Putnam's words, "our task [is] to acknowledge God"<sup>45</sup> but "acknowledging is not a matter of knowledge."<sup>46</sup> Rational perfectionism does not require—indeed, it ought to discourage!—the constant need to possess the notions that "lead to true metaphysical opinions [about] God."<sup>47</sup> The more that we try to concretize the content of our beliefs about God, the more we fail to *acknowledge* God's presence. We tend to prioritize God's identity over God's presence, and the question of God's identity distracts us from acknowledging God's presence.<sup>48</sup> Rational perfectionism keeps our mind

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philosophical theology. Bonhoeffer writes, "[I]n my thoughts I can consider another person to be stupid, ugly, incompetent, corrupt, or alternatively to be clever or full of character; but it is something quite different whether I am justified in speaking this, what causes me to do so, and to whom I express it. Undoubtedly, a justification for speaking emerges from an office that has been bestowed upon me. Parents can scold or praise their child, but in contrast the child is justified in doing neither toward his or her parents. A similar relation exists between teacher and students, although the rights of the teacher in regard to the [student] are more limited than those of the father. *Thus the teacher, in criticizing or praising the student, is necessarily confined to [making judgments on] certain particular mistakes or accomplishments, while . . . broad judgments as to character fall not to the teacher but to the parents.* The justification for speech always lies within the boundaries of the concrete office . . . . If these boundaries are crossed, the word becomes intrusive, arrogant, and—whether scolding or praising—harmful. [Unfortunately, there] are persons who feel themselves called to 'tell the truth,' as they put it, to everyone who crosses their path" ("What Does It Mean to Tell the Truth?" 756; emphasis added). I take this as my primary rule for my role in the professorial office but, of course, fail to live up to it.

45. Putnam, JPGL, 26.

46. Putnam, JPGL, 27.

47. Maimonides, GP, 395.

48. Within Christian theology, I understand this to be a difference between sacramentalism and scholasticism: sacramental theology emphasizes God's presence whereas scholastic theology focuses on God's attributes and identity.

in check to acknowledge God's presence in the proper ways, without the rationalist need to know *what* God is before acknowledging *that* God is with us.<sup>49</sup>

#### Rational Perfectionism, Relational Knowledge, and Responsible Freedom

Another aspect of the perfectionist thread pulled by Putnam leads us to a critique of the anti-relationality found within Maimonides' rational perfectionism. Rosenzweig develops a notion he calls "speaking-thinking":

In the old philosophy, 'thinking' means thinking for no one else and speaking to no one else . . . . But 'speaking' means speaking to some one and thinking for some one. And this some one is always a quite definite some one, and he has not merely ears . . . but also a mouth.<sup>50</sup>

Putnam explains that what "Rosenzweig means by this is that . . . a speaker does not know in advance what he will say—or, indeed, he will say anything."<sup>51</sup> One of the defining features of what I have been calling philosophical rationalism involves the tendency to "know in advance" what one will say in a relational setting.<sup>52</sup> This tendency prioritizes one's own voice over the voice of the conversation-partner and turns our interlocutors into "ears" without a "mouth."<sup>53</sup> Philosophical rationalism becomes a real temptation in the twenty-first century because thinking and writing have developed into very un-disciplined practices where the loudest and most provocative voices are considered to be the standards for thinking and writing. As faculty members and professors, we have an obligation to

49. Putnam labels this tendency "the absurdity of metaphysics" (see JPGL, 18–22). Putnam has a well-established career of sifting through the good from the bad in terms of metaphysics and metaphysical theories—which means that Putnam remains careful not to throw out the good metaphysical baby with the bad metaphysical bathwater in his calling this tendency "the absurdity of metaphysics."

50. Franz Rosenzweig, "The New Thinking," 200; quoted in Putnam, JPGL, 31–32.

51. Putnam, JPGL, 32.

52. Rosenzweig writes: "Speech is bound by time and nourished by time and it neither can nor wants to abandon this element. It does not know in advance just where it will end. It takes its cues from others. In fact, it lives by virtue of another's life, whether that other is the one who listens to a story, answers in the course of a dialogue, or joins in a chorus" ("The New Thinking," 199).

53. Here, I recommend a shift from Emerson's "*Man-Thinking*," in "The American Scholar," to Rosenzweig's "speaking-thinking" in "The New Thinking."

our undergraduate students to encourage disciplined thinking and writing and to discourage the temptation toward high-volume provocation. We ought to treat our students as having both “ears” and “mouth”—not because they have earned a position of authority on any given subject matter—but more so to model the kinds of intellectual engagements they ought to have on their quest for rational perfectionism. Professors should not have pre-packaged answers for the questions of their students but, rather, ask more questions concerning the reasons for their particular questions.<sup>54</sup> Against Maimonides’s claim that rational perfectionism requires the avoidance of the “work and weary” that comes with relationships, we need academic practices that model “speaking-thinking” and promote the quest for rational perfectionism within undergraduate life.<sup>55</sup>

What strikes me about Rosenzweig’s notion of “speaking-thinking,” in the context of a Christian institution of higher education, is how it relates to the Christian prayer “not my will but Thy will be done.” If we transfer this prayer from a theological communicative act to an everyday communicative action, we could understand Rosenzweig’s notion of “speaking-thinking” in these terms: “not my voice but thy voice be heard.” The lower-case “thy” offers it as an address to our family, friends, and neighbors. What a powerful performance of communicative action for undergraduate students to learn!

Emmanuel Levinas’s ethics makes three contributions to the emphasis on relationality in Putnam’s rational perfectionism. Putnam points out that, according to “Levinas’s phenomenology, not to have entered the ethical life, not to be ‘obsessed’ by the ‘height of the other,’ is to be trapped within one’s own ego. Without ethics one cannot even enter into

54. Rosenzweig distinguishes his notion of “speaking-thinking” from the style of Plato’s dialogues: “This is why the great majority of [Plato’s] dialogues are so tedious. In actual conversations something happens” (“The New Thinking,” 199). Putnam defends Rosenzweig’s criticism of Plato’s dialogues: “Rosenzweig daringly criticizes Plato’s dialogues because in them ‘the thinker [Socrates] knows his thoughts in advance’ . . . and . . . only raising the objections the author thought of himself” (JPGL, 32).

55. Rosenzweig’s emphasis on relationality also comes about through his critique of what he calls “the Metaethical man.” Maimonides’ rational perfectionism certainly falls prey to Rosenzweig’s critique of “the Metaethical man.” Putnam explains Rosenzweig’s critique in terms of how “we are all . . . in danger of relapsing into the position of metaethical man—suffer[ing] from a kind of confinement in himself.” Putnam adds that, according to Rosenzweig, this “tragedy . . . threatens everyone, the tragedy of being completely enclosed in oneself” (JPGL, 47).

the *world*.”<sup>56</sup> In order to achieve “the ‘height of the other,’” rational perfectionism requires the following aspects of relationality.

First, the task of ethics involves “describing the fundamental obligation to the other.”<sup>57</sup> In a Christian institution of higher education, in the twenty-first century, this ought to be regarded as a rule for teaching. We cannot instill the moral virtues of charity and justice into undergraduate students, but we can pattern our own speech in ways that clearly communicate and describe “the fundamental obligation to the other.” Putnam’s word, “describing,” puts us in the right direction: “the fundamental obligation to the other” is not a *prescription* but a *description*. This is part and parcel of what it means to be a rational human being in the twenty-first century: citizens meet their “fundamental obligation[s] to the other.” The most fundamental obligation that we have, as human beings, ought to be directed toward “the other.”

Secondly, which aspect of the other? Following the biblical understanding of *hineni*, we have an “*obligation to make ourselves available to the neediness...and especially the suffering . . . of the other person*.”<sup>58</sup> *Hineni* means “Here I am,” and Levinas interchanges “Here I am, without reservation” (Abraham) with “Here I am! Send me” (Isaiah).<sup>59</sup> Putnam further explains this point: “the closer I come to another by all ordinary standards of closeness . . . , the more I am required to be aware of my distance from grasping the other’s essential reality, and the more I am required to respect that distance.”<sup>60</sup> Grasping the requirements of this obligation and learning to respect the distance between the I-Other does not mandate *moral* perfectionism, but it does require rational perfectionism because “this fundamental obligation is a ‘perfectionist’ one, not a code of behavior.”<sup>61</sup> The verbs *grasp* and *learn* better represent the “Here I am, without reservation” and “Here I am! Send me” than any moral descriptions do. Furthermore, to make the response “to the neediness . . . and especially the suffering . . . of the other person” about an opportunity to exercise our own moral virtues tempts us toward a kind of self-righteousness. The representative dash between I-Other should not

56. Putnam, JPGL, 96.

57. Putnam, JPGL, 73.

58. Putnam, JPGL, 74.

59. See Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 146 & 198–99.

60. Putnam, JPGL, 75.

61. Putnam, JPGL, 75.



be mitigated by the moral virtues possessed by the “I” but should be grasped and then respected by the intellectual capacities of the “I.” The Levinasian problem with *moral* perfectionism is that it makes ordinary life *about* ourselves, our good intentions, and the righteous actions that we perform;<sup>62</sup> Levinasian ethics, however, needs an account of *rational perfectionism* because intellectual work must be processed in order to properly fulfill our “fundamental obligation to the other.”<sup>63</sup>

After we comprehend that our fundamental obligation ought to be directed toward the Other and grasp and respect the distance between the I-Other, then (thirdly) rational perfectionism requires us to treat the Other on their terms—and never strictly on your own terms.<sup>64</sup> In Putnam’s words: “*the other person is an independent reality and not in any way your [own] construction.*”<sup>65</sup> This aspect of rational perfectionism applies in both ways: you should not treat others on your own terms, and you should expect others to treat you on your terms.<sup>66</sup> However, you can control only one of these! The more technical argument for how to treat

62. See Michael L. Morgan’s *Discovering Levinas*, 277–83. Morgan raises the question, “Is Levinas a moral perfectionist?”—a question which he affirms and negates. He affirms it by saying, “My claim is that Levinas . . . does take the perfect self to be ideal and exemplary, at once a condition for social life and also an ideal for it—even if the ideal is equally accessible—or, better, inaccessible—to all” (*Discovering Levinas*, 279). He negates the claim that Levinas is a perfectionist on the standards of Stanley Cavell’s account of perfectionism: “Cavell’s perfectionism operates explicitly at a different level than [Levinas’s] interests . . . . If Levinas is a perfectionist, sensitivity for the other’s suffering precedes all else; justice is . . . primary [in contrast from one’s own moral perfection], and it [justice] is determinative in one way or another for all of life—moral and political” (*Discovering Levinas*, 279). Although I am unable to engage with his arguments in this book, I highly recommend reading Morgan’s *Discovering Levinas*.

63. Putnam argues that the essential human truths found within the Old Testament, when interpreting with a Levinasian lens, include the following: “(1) that every human being should experience him/herself as *commanded* to be available to the neediness, the suffering, the vulnerability of the other person . . . . (2) One can—indeed, one must—*know* that this is commanded of one without a philosophical account of how it is possible” (JPGL, 86).

64. While explaining Levinas’s ethics, I find it easier to use the pronouns “they,” “their,” “you,” and “your.” Levinas’s theory tends to resist formalization, which makes using the scholarly pronoun “one” quite difficult and grammatically incorrect.

65. Putnam, JPGL, 78.

66. In PHIL 227: Logic, I teach students to attend to the arguments of others on the terms of the argument—and not on the terms that we bring to the argument. In this sense, modern logic can be understood as a toolkit full of different kinds of tools in order to become better and more engaged listeners. I believe this encourages intellectual virtue, and I desire for it to lead to moral virtue in their ordinary lives.

others on their terms involves reflections on the categories of asymmetry and sameness; Putnam explains, “*ethics is based on obligation to the other, not on any empirical or metaphysical ‘sameness’ between myself and the other . . . this fundamental obligation is asymmetrical.*”<sup>67</sup> Philosophically, the category of asymmetry tends to mean an imbalance of power: treating the other, on the terms of the other, requires giving up one’s own intellectual power. Furthermore, the category of “sameness” means that we tend to engage with those people who are like us in some way—like us in terms of appearance (“empirical . . . ‘sameness’”) or in terms of the content of our beliefs (“metaphysical ‘sameness’”).<sup>68</sup> The quest for rational perfectionism requires at least two steps from us: (a) to engage with others who are both alike and different from us, and (b) to engage with others on their terms without requiring them to submit to your expectations or projections of them.<sup>69</sup>

### **The Link between American Transcendentalism and Jewish Philosophy**

The only definition Putnam gives of perfectionism comes in his chapter on Martin Buber’s philosophy.<sup>70</sup> Putnam claims that his version of perfectionism combines the American Transcendentalism of Stanley Cavell and Ralph Waldo Emerson with the Jewish philosophical insights of Buber, Levinas, and Rosenzweig.<sup>71</sup> Putnam writes, “the great Jewish philosophers . . . , particularly Buber, Cohen, Levinas, and Rosenzweig

67. Putnam, JPGL, 81; emphasis in original.

68. For further reflections on the problems of focusing on the content of our beliefs and “metaphysical ‘sameness,’” see my “Can Christian Theologians Reason Post-Metaphysically?” chapter 3.

69. Connecting points two and three, Mark Zelcer brings clarity to Putnam’s interpretation of Levinas’s ethics: “When Levinas says (famously) that the saying precedes the said, he means that the obligation is to make myself present (In Hebrew, to announce *hineni*) to the other, and this precedes any formulation of the obligation. A genuine ethical relation to another presupposes that you realize that the other person is an independent reality and not in any way your construction or your own experience” (“Putnam on Metaphysics, Religion, and Ethics,” 429).

70. See Putnam, JPGL, 55–67.

71. As we will learn in the course of this book: although Cavell borrows and builds from Immanuel Kant’s and Friedrich Nietzsche’s moral theories, Cavell’s perfectionism is properly described as “Emersonian.”

. . . , [were] moral perfectionist in this [Emersonian] sense.”<sup>72</sup> Focusing in on Buber’s philosophy, Putnam continues, “The famous ‘I-Thou’ in Buber is a relation Buber believes is *demande*d of us, and without which no system of moral rules and no institution can have any real value.”<sup>73</sup> How does this perfectionist aspect of Buber’s “I-Thou” philosophy apply to Christian institutions of higher education? The “real value” of a Christian institution of higher education ought to be found in how well it provides a setting where (a) God’s presence transforms human relationships and (b) these transformed human relationships lead to the habituation of healthy relationships in ordinary life.

My readers ought to notice how the word “moral” never enters into Putnam’s definition of perfectionism:

Such a philosopher is ‘perfectionist’ because she or he always describes the commitment we ought to have in ways that seem impossibly demanding; but such a philosopher is also a realist, because s/he realizes that it is only by keeping an ‘impossible’ demand in view that one can strive for one’s ‘unattained but attainable self’.<sup>74</sup>

This passage from Putnam serves as the closest definition I offer for perfectionism in this book,<sup>75</sup> and I believe that it serves us better if we understand it as a definition for rational perfectionism—instead of moral perfectionism. Finding and maintaining balance between perfectionism and realism requires distinct rational abilities. Knowing how to develop, preserve, and stabilize care for oneself *and* fulfilling our obligations and

72. Putnam, JPGL, 59. On Hermann Cohen’s version of perfectionism, see Daniel Weiss’s *Paradox and the Prophets*, 140–214.

73. Putnam, JPGL, 59–60. Putnam adds, “For Levinas, there is a different ‘I-Thou’ relation . . . , and for Rosenzweig . . . , there is a complex system of such relations to man, to the world, and to God. But one cannot understand any of these relations without understanding this ‘perfectionist’ dimension” (Putnam, JPGL, 60).

74. Putnam, JPGL, 59, 72.

75. In a lecture, which is now published, Putnam offers another definition of perfectionism: “The idea . . . is that moral perfectionism is neither a moral defect, as some see it (‘Don’t be such a perfectionist!’), nor a perverse aestheticizing of morality . . . (in the case of Nietzsche). Moral perfectionism, as [Stanley] Cavell presents it, is not a ‘thesis’ that could be part of moral theory; it is rather a whole dimension of the moral life which . . . ‘places tremendous burdens on personal relationships and on the transforming of oneself and one’s society’” (“12 Philosophers—and Their Influence on Me,” 112). In American transcendentalist terms, “a whole dimension of the moral life” concerns the *conditions* for ordinary life.

responsibilities toward others—especially doing so on their terms, as Levinas teaches us to do—also requires distinct rational abilities.

Stanley Cavell supplies a very similar definition of perfectionism,<sup>76</sup> but the adjective he prefers is “Emersonian Perfectionism.”<sup>77</sup> Emerson seems to be the first to use the phrase “unattained but attainable self,”<sup>78</sup> and he uses this phrase in order to draw a contrast from the human tendency to “honor the rich”—which we tend to do “because they [the wealthy] have externally the freedom, power, and grace [that] we feel to be proper to . . . us.”<sup>79</sup> We honor them because we envy them. Instead of admiring “the rich” and seeking wealth for ourselves, “the wise man . . . describes himself to each man his own ideal . . . , his unattained but attainable self.”<sup>80</sup> While Putnam rightly identifies the link between Cavell’s Transcendentalist account of perfection—“Emersonian Perfectionism”—and the version of perfectionism he develops based on the work of twentieth century Jewish philosophers, we should also name the similarity between Emerson’s and Maimonides’ recognition of the human temptation for financial perfectionism and their shared recommendation for rational perfectionism. Maimonides labels his own account as rational perfectionism, and I infer Emerson’s recommendation of rational

76. Except for using the phrase “moral perfectionism” Paola Marrati properly describes Cavell’s account of perfectionism as “the truth of the self”: “moral perfectionism is not an ethics or a moral doctrine in the strict sense of the term. It does not offer a theory on the nature of the good or the right; it does not advance universal or contextual principles of conduct and even less sets up a list of virtues or norms to evaluate what ‘a good life’ is or should be. In this regard it is not an alternative to other moral philosophies; in particular, it is not an alternative to either utilitarianism with its teleological concept of the ‘good’ or to Kantianism with its deontological emphasis on the ‘right’: moral perfectionism does not take sides on the question as to whether morality deals essentially with the consequences of our actions or with the intentions that guide them. But if perfectionism is not a doctrine it is because it is essentially an attitude of thinking, one that Cavell often describes as the Socratic or romantic quest for the ‘truth of the self’” (“The Ordinary Life of Democracy,” 397). Marrati repeats the phrase “moral perfectionism,” but why call “moral perfectionism” at all if Cavell’s perfectionism refuses to fit into a moral theory?

77. See Cavell, *CHU*, 49–55. Putnam’s definition captures the realist aspect better than Cavell’s discussion does. This is why I borrow from and build off Putnam’s definition in this book.

78. Emerson, *DS*, 21.

79. Emerson, *DS*, 21.

80. Emerson, *DS*, 21.

perfectionism from my understanding of his phrase the “unattained but attainable self.”<sup>81</sup>

Putnam’s definition remains close to—but improves upon—Murdoch’s definition of perfectionism: moral perfectionism names the attempt to describe our ethical life in a way that seems impossibly demanding but maintains a *hopeful realism* by keeping this impossible demand in view for the sole purpose of continually striving toward the Good. What are the differences between Murdoch’s and Putnam’s emphases in their definitions? Iris Murdoch specifies the ethical life in her account of moral perfectionism whereas Putnam uses the broader language of “the commitments we have.” Murdoch asserts a strong metaphysical doctrine of the Good as the goal, or *telos*, of her account of moral perfectionism whereas Putnam makes the ultimate goal “the self.” Finally, Putnam gives us a language to talk about our “attainable” or ideal self vs. our “unattainable” or ordinary self whereas Murdoch offers no reflections at all on the self but places us in relationships with others—through the virtue of love—and requires our intent focus on the Good.

According to Putnam, the questions addressed with his version of perfectionism include the following: “Am I living as I am supposed to live?; ‘Is my life something more than vanity, or worse, mere conformity?’; ‘Am I making the best effort I can to reach . . . my unattained but attainable self?’”<sup>82</sup> Although Putnam continually labels this as “moral perfectionism,” the reflective and serious answers given to these questions are not necessarily about one’s moral virtues. On the contrary, the answers require rational deliberation—a deliberation that takes into account how one understands the obligations, principles, and responsibilities toward others: conformity might occur whilst the moral virtues are being exercised quite perfectly, without a hitch.<sup>83</sup> Identifying the condi-

81. Although he does not use the phrase rational perfectionism in his biography of Emerson, Robert Richardson’s interpretation of Emerson’s DS—located in Richardson’s chapter entitled “The Attainable Self”—puts us in the vicinity of what I mean by rational perfectionism: “The lecture series [that contains DS] . . . shows Emerson’s increasing preference for process over results” & “Emerson comes back to his own enterprise, to the work of the writer in the present age, to the perception that ‘utterance is a place enough’ and to the importance of adequate primary expression for the project that is closest to each young or still-growing person in his audience, that is, the drive to reach his or her own ‘unattained but attainable self’” (*Emerson*, 307–11).

82. Putnam, JPGL, 59.

83. Putnam gets it right when he says that what the perfectionists “tell us is that if conformity is all that one’s allegiance comes to, then even the best principles are

tions for conformity require a strong mind that seeks rational perfection alongside or even prior to moral perfection.

My point, in this specific chapter, involves demonstrating how rational perfectionism remains more realistic and reasonable for Christian institutions of higher education to promise to undergraduate students. I am not against answering Putnam's questions in moral ways ("Am I living as I am supposed to live?"; 'Is my life something more than vanity, or worse, mere conformity?'; 'Am I making the best effort I can to reach . . . my unattained but attainable self?"), but I find it unrealistic for institutions of higher education to teach moral formation alongside moral theory.<sup>84</sup> Colleges and universities are set-up to press students in terms of their *intellectual* virtues and vices, as well as to encourage and motivate students to seek *rational* perfectionism for themselves. Yes, moral virtues—and, perhaps, moral perfectionism—might follow from this within one's own ordinary life; the college setting, however, remains an improper place for such promises to be made.<sup>85</sup>

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*useless*" (Putnam, JPGL, 59).

84. I think that institutions of higher education ought to teach moral theories but not moral formation.

85. This line of reasoning is not intended as negative but follows from what I labeled as my pagan view of the family and my extremely high view of the church: for non-Christians, moral formation takes place in the context of familial relations; for Christians, moral formation takes place in the context of the church.