



APIQOROS

THE LAST ESSAYS OF SALOMON MAIMON

Timothy Sean Quinn

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF
MY DEAR FRIEND AND COLLEAGUE

Robert Aaron Rethy

(1949–2008)

השיבנו ונשובה

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ix
-----------------------	----

ABBREVIATIONS	xi
---------------------	----

PART I

INTRODUCTION: "WE ARE ALL EPICUREANS"	1
---	---

Maimon's Life and Works	1
-------------------------------	---

The Last Essays: Commentary.....	21
----------------------------------	----

Maimon's Legacy.....	49
----------------------	----

PART II:

THE LAST ESSAYS

Notes on the Translation.....	59
-------------------------------	----

"On the Ultimate Grounds of Morality"	63
---	----

"The Great Personage"	75
-----------------------------	----

"Explanation of a Well-Known Anthropological Phenomenon"	93
--	----

"The Moral Skeptic"	99
---------------------------	----

"Letters to Herr Peina"	113
-------------------------------	-----

POSTHUMOUS WRITINGS

"Sophistic of the Human Heart"	123
--------------------------------------	-----

"Origin of Moral Good and Evil"	129
---------------------------------------	-----

"The Origin of Human Folly"	131
-----------------------------------	-----

"On the Emotions in General"	137
------------------------------------	-----

APPENDIX

"On Salomon Maimon and his Final Hours"	141
---	-----

BIBLIOGRAPHY	145
--------------------	-----

INDEX	151
-------------	-----

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ABBREVIATIONS

AA	[<i>Akademie Ausgabe</i>] Kant, Immanuel. <i>Gesammelte Schriften</i> , Königlich Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften. Berlin: Reimer, 1900–.
<i>Attempt</i>	Maimon, Salomon. Translated by Timothy S. Quinn. “Salomon Maimon’s ‘ <i>Attempt at a New Presentation of the Principle of Morality and a New Deduction of its Reality</i> ’” (<i>Attempt</i>) <i>British Journal for the History of Philosophy</i> 27:1 (2018): 155–82.
BM	<i>Berlinische Monatsschrift</i> (cited by volume and page)
ETP	Maimon, Salomon. <i>Essay On Transcendental Philosophy</i> . Translated by Nick Midgley, Henry Somers-Hall, Alistair Welchman and Merten Reglitz. New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 2010.
GW	Maimon, Salomon. <i>Gesammelte Werke</i> , 8 volumes. Edited by Valerio Verra. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1965–1976 (cited by volume and page).
<i>Groundwork</i>	Kant, Immanuel. <i>Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals</i> . Translated and edited by Mary Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
KU	Maimon, Salomon. <i>Kritische Untersuchungen</i> (<i>Critical Investigations</i>), GW VII.

PART I

INTRODUCTION: “WE ARE ALL EPICUREANS”



MAIMON'S LIFE AND WORKS

When Moses Mendelssohn, Salomon Maimon's erstwhile patron, scolded him for his dissolute and aimless life, Maimon countered: “We are all Epicureans.”¹

Maimon's riposte harbors a complex nesting of judgments and accusations, concerning himself and concerning the cultural situation in which this studied *apiqoros* found himself at the close of the eighteenth century. In the first place, the remark is a verdict on philosophical morality. As Maimon explains: “Moralists can give us merely the *rules of prudence, or of using the appropriate means to achieve a given end*. But they cannot prescribe the *ends themselves*.”² There is, then, no firm basis for Mendelssohn's judgment against Maimon. But Maimon's explanation is also an instance of rhetorical sleight of hand, at one and the same time a self-effacing admission of his own hedonism and an accusation against Mendelssohn and his circle: in spite of their cultural refinement and moral probity, they were all, in the last analysis, Epicureans. However, as an accusation, “Epicurean” has another, deeper resonance for thinkers of the Haskalah.

1. Salomon Maimon, *Autobiography*, trans. Paul Reitter (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 13:208; *Gesammelte Werke* (GW), Valerio Verra, ed. (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1965–1976), vol. I, 1–588.

2. *Autobiography*, 209.

To be *apigoros*, Epicurean, is to be a heretic. Mendelssohn and his circle, on the other hand, had striven to draw together German Enlightenment with Jewish thought, to make Jewish thought — and hence Jews — acceptable to Europeans, while still maintaining their Jewishness. Maimon, however, proved to be unacceptable to *them*, owing to his combination of heretical opinion — he was an open supporter of Spinoza — with crude *shtetl* manners. In the judgment of Marcus Herz, a friend of Kant's who was to be both a friend and antagonist of Maimon, Maimon was at first impression a *redendes Tier* — a "talking animal," entertaining but less than human.³ Confronted by the condescension of the enlightened *berlinischer* Haskalah, Maimon's riposte stings both culturally and philosophically. We may note that the chapter of Maimon's *Autobiography* in which this story arises is titled: "My Initial Aversion to Belles Lettres."

But Maimon also found himself equally on the margins of the traditional Judaism of his youth, which he judged in its worst instances to foster superstition and fanatical prejudices. Two events from his life illustrate this story. In the first, during his initial visit to Berlin, Maimon arrives at the Rosenthaler Gate bearing a copy of *More Nevukhim*, Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, along with an original commentary that he intended to publish. Revealing himself to a rabbi "who had gotten a sense of [his] ideas and plans," Maimon was forbidden entrance into the Jewish quarter. He comments:

Orthodox Jews regard [the study of science] as dangerous, potentially harmful to both religion and good morals. They were convinced that I was especially at risk, being one of those Polish rabbis who, rescued by a happy accident from the slavery of superstition and perceiving the light of reason, have suddenly cast off their chains.

Yet, Maimon explains, these rabbis have a point:

This is a well-founded fear... Such rabbis are like people who have long been starving and then happen upon a table decked out with

3. We may note the persistence of this judgment in Heinrich Graetz's characterization of Maimon: "He rose from the thickest cloud of Polish ignorance to pure philosophical knowledge, attaining this height by his unaided efforts, but owing to his skepticism, he fell prey to shocking errors." See Graetz, *History of the Jews*, trans. Bella Lowry and Phillip Bloch, vol. 5 (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1956), 407.