

A Brief Rebuttal of “Rambam the Aristotelian”

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In discussing the intellectual legacy of Maimonides, it is crucial to distinguish between his use of Aristotelian philosophy and the assertion that he was an Aristotelian in essence. I aim to briefly elucidate that Maimonides was not Aristotelian but rather a seeker of Truth (with a capital T), using the best intellectual resources available in his time to understand and represent reality as accurately as possible.

The misconception that Maimonides was Aristotelian often stems from a superficial understanding of his works and the intellectual milieu of his time. Indeed, Aristotle’s influence on Maimonides is undeniable. However, the crux of the matter lies not in the influence but in how Maimonides utilised this influence. Aristotle was not the “source” of wisdom for Maimonides; rather, his works represented the most sophisticated understanding of the natural world and metaphysics available during Maimonides’ lifetime. It is pivotal to understand that in the medieval intellectual landscape, the distinction between philosophy and science was not as pronounced as it is today. Philosophy encompassed natural sciences, metaphysics, and logic; it was the science of the time.

Maimonides’ approach was not to adopt Aristotelian philosophy wholesale but to critically engage with it, extracting what he perceived as congruent with the truths of reality and Torah. This methodology is evident in his use of the Arabic term ‘*burhan*’ meaning ‘proof’ or ‘evidence’. Maimonides was in constant search for any ‘*burhan*’ that Aristotle (or others) brought to the table — for a concrete, rational understanding of reality. This pursuit is a far cry from a blind allegiance to Aristotelian doctrine.

To better understand Maimonides’ intellectual stance, one might consider the analogy of contemporary Rabbis acknowledging the realities of evolution or gravity. Labelling these scholars as “Darwinian” or “Newtonian” simply because they recognise the evidential truth of these theories would be superficial and misleading. Similarly, labelling Maimonides as “Aristotelian” overlooks the depth and nuance of his intellectual endeavour. He did not view Aristotle’s ideas as inherently “Aristotelian” but rather as human discoveries of universal truths, with Aristotle being the discoverer, not the ultimate source.

Maimonides’ true *modus operandi* was to align human understanding towards the chief objective of ‘knowing God’. Since Torah and God are interchangeable with ‘Truth’ itself, his goal was to approximate Truth as accurately as possible using the best tools and scholars of his time. This approach is evident throughout many of his works, where he strives to not only communicate the *old* Jewish ideas through the *new* language of his time but to also reinterpret his understanding of Torah in alignment with newly discovered Truths. This was not for the sake of anything other than the stated aim of achieving an understanding of the Divine.

Furthermore, Maimonides’ methodological rigor and critical engagement with worldly sources highlight his role as a truth seeker. Like many within our Rabbinic tradition, he was not content with mere doctrinal conformity or philosophical allegiance. Instead, he embarked on a complex, nuanced journey to discern truth from falsehood, reality from illusion, employing Aristotelian or other thought where it served this purpose and deviating from it when it did not align with empirical observations. Therefore, to depict Maimonides as merely an Aristotelian philosopher does not do justice to the depth and breadth of his intellectual enterprise. He was, above all, a truth seeker, using the intellectual resources of his time as a means to an end—the end being a deeper understanding of reality, in order to know the Creator. His legacy is a testament to the timeless endeavour of seeking the best that human knowledge has to offer in each generation, for the sake of the very eternity of our distinct Torah.

“Eternity of the Torah cannot be perceived as a mere dogma to be maintained by the fiat of faith and confession. It is a demand and a challenge to discover the significance of the Berit (Covenant) within the specific context of the present historical situation. This dynamic concept of the Eternity of the Torah finds expression in a form of Religious Humanism that is peculiar to the Sepharadi tradition. The distinctness of the Sepharadi tradition rests on its ability to adapt the key symbols of the general culture to the specific context of Judaism.” – Rabbi Dr Jose Faur