Until now we have considered an understanding of monotheism based on a radical separation between God and everything else. God is eternal, everything else is created; God is beyond our ability to praise, everything else is within it. Not only does separation create metaphysical problems, it creates a religious problem of immense proportions, for the Bible does not say we should simply recognize the uniqueness of God and be content with our finitude; it says quite clearly that we should strive to emulate God. Thus Leviticus 19:2: “You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy.”

In the hands of philosophers, the commandment to be holy has been taken to mean that we should not only perform certain actions but perform them in order to become like God. In other words, the imitation of God is the ultimate goal of human life. According to Maimonides (GP 1.54, p. 128): “For the utmost virtue of man is to become like unto Him . . . as far as he is able; which means that we should make our actions like unto His, as the sages make clear when interpreting the verse You shall be holy.” Important as it is, this commandment is problematic given Maimonides’ stress on God’s uniqueness. How do you imitate something you cannot comprehend? Can a person or group of people actually fulfill this commandment, or will holiness always be beyond our reach? And if the commandment can be fulfilled, what does it require of us—to perfect our nature as human beings or to set our sights on a level of perfection significantly...
more than human? In general Maimonides’ approach to imitatio Dei is deflationary in the sense that he does not think it imposes an obligation above and beyond the 613 original commandments.\(^3\)

In this chapter I will consider both a medieval and a modern response to these questions. Before getting to specifics, I want to introduce a principle that will guide everything that follows: A commandment that cannot be fulfilled is a contradiction in terms. While the purpose of the commandments is to elevate human behavior, nothing is achieved if the goal is so high that no one can reach it. Thus Moses tells the Israelites at Deuteronomy 30:11–14 that the Law is not too difficult for them, not in heaven, and not beyond the sea; rather it is in their mouths and their hearts so that they may do it. Although this passage has been subject to any number of interpretations, the simple meaning is that the difficulty of fulfilling the law is not a valid excuse for ignoring it: Since the Law can be fulfilled, people are under an obligation to do so. As students of modern philosophy will observe, this principle is nothing but a version of the Kantian dictum that ought implies can.

Here I must add an important qualification. To say that the Law can be fulfilled is not necessarily to say that I can fulfill it on my own. It may be that the effort required to obey the law is so great that it requires a community, a nation, or a nation over an extended period of time. But no matter how one conceives the task, it must be realizable by someone or some group at some date. I say realizable, not realized, because even if the Law is never fulfilled, all we need to maintain its imperative force is the assurance that it can be. As Schwarzschild put it: “For progress to be possible there must be a logical guarantee of the eventual attainability of the goal of the progress.”\(^4\) If the goal is not attainable, if it outstrips even the most generous estimate of human capacity, then so far from providing hope for a better world, religion would only provide despair or what Hegel termed alienation. “God,” as Cohen (RR, 207) tells us, “can assign no task that would be a labor of Sisyphus.” Sisyphus was a tragic hero; unless religion explains how our situation is different from his, it would consign us to the same fate.

**Mystical Union**

One way to interpret imitatio Dei is through the doctrine of mystical union. Simply stated, the doctrine holds that the process of imitating God culminates in a condition where the soul becomes so Godlike that it annihilates its finitude and ceases to understand itself as an entity distinct from God. From a metaphysical standpoint, mystical union
is the reverse of emanation. If all things proceed from God by a series of continuous connections, it is possible to say that in some respect all things reflect the perfection of their source and eventually will return to it. According to Plotinus (EN 5.2.1):

“The One is all things and no one of them”; the source of all things is not all things; and yet it is all things in a transcendental sense—all things, so to speak, having run back to it: or, more correctly, not all as yet are within it, they will be.

In regard to human beings, return to the source is described in the following way (EN 6.9.10):

The man is changed, no longer himself or self-belonging; he is merged with the Supreme, sunken into it, one with it: centre coincides with centre, for centres of circles, even here below, are one when they unite, and two when they separate; and it is in this sense that we now (after the vision) speak of the Supreme as separate. This is why the vision baffles telling; we cannot detach the Supreme to state it; if we have seen something thus detached we have failed of the Supreme which is to be known only as one with ourselves.

Elsewhere (EN 6.9.9) Plotinus claims that the soul, in ecstasy, is “raised to Godhood or, better, knowing its Godhood, all aflame.” Invoking another metaphor, he describes this condition as a pregnancy where the soul is filled with God because “this state is its first and its final [arche kai telos], because from God it comes, its good lies There, and, once turned to God again, it is what it was.” In this way God is both the source of our existence and the end of our spiritual journey.

To the question “How can a finite being lose its finitude?” Plotinus replies that it can lose it because there is a basic kinship or similarity (suggenei) between us and God. Since our existence is derived from God, there has to be some feature of God that we reflect. Holiness can then be understood as a process by which we recognize this similarity and seek to enhance it. This is another way of saying that holiness is a way of making the soul so simple and unified that all awareness of duality between it and God is left behind.

There is, of course, a rich mystical tradition in Judaism. But according to the classical study of Jewish mysticism by Gershom Scholem, the number of Jews who claimed to achieve complete union with God is quite small. In Scholem’s words:

It is only in extremely rare cases that ecstasy signifies actual union with God in which the human individuality abandons itself to the rapture of complete submersion in the divine stream. Even in this ecstatic frame of
mind, the Jewish mystic almost invariably retains a sense of the distance between the Creator and His creature. The latter is joined to the former, and the point where the two meet is of the greatest interest to the mystic, but he does not regard it as constituting anything so extravagant as identity of Creator and creature.

Accordingly Scholem argues that the Hebrew term devekut (adhesion) stands for a “being-with-God” or a union of the divine and human wills but still retains what he calls “a proper sense of the distance, or, if you like, of incommensurateness.” Along the same lines, Salo Baron maintains that even confirmed mystics in the Jewish tradition sought community with God rather than actual union and would have regarded any claims of unity as “execrable blasphemies.”8 Cohen (RR, 164) too regards the idea of union as “unchaste” and insists repeatedly that holiness does not mean loss of finitude.9 In recent years, sweeping generalizations like those of Scholem and Baron have been challenged by Moshe Idel.10 But even if we agree with Idel’s approach and accept the idea that some mystics did believe in union with God, there is no getting around the fact that canonical Judaism does not envision a time when all finitude will be absorbed into a primordial unity and the difference between God and creation will be overcome.

Like Plotinus, Maimonides sees the acquisition of knowledge as an activity that links the mind to what it knows and describes knowledge as a form of union or conjunction (ittišāl).11 This is another way of saying that knowledge occurs when there is an identity between the form that shapes the object and the form that activates our intelligence.12 After stressing that love of God is proportional to knowledge of God, he claims (GP 3.51, pp. 623–24) that Moses and the patriarchs, the most perfect individuals who ever lived, achieved union with God and were kissed by God.13 But it is hardly the case that he has given up the claim that God is separate from and bears no resemblance to the created order. It is still true, for example, that (GP 1.59, p. 139) “none but He Himself can apprehend what He is.” Strictly speaking, the union Maimonides is talking about in these passages is not between humans and God but between humans and the Agent Intellect, which he describes as (GP 3.52, p. 629) “the intellect that overflows toward us and is the bond between us and Him.”14 In Perek Helek (sixth principle) it is the Agent Intellect to which the soul of the prophet clings. For Maimonides, then, the highest achievement for a human being is to have an intellect that contemplates the universe as the lowest of the heavenly intelligences does. Here too contact is at best fleeting and imperfect.
It could be said, therefore, that while Jews sought ecstasy or closeness to God, or imagined themselves sitting at the foot of God, complete loss of human identity cannot help but arouse suspicion. Thus the doctrine of *imitatio Dei* normally begins by accepting finitude and does not ask how to deify human life but rather how to sanctify it. But that raises the same question: How can a finite being imitate something with which it has nothing in common?

**The Medieval Argument: Maimonides on Imitatio Dei**

Although Maimonides does not mention the "*ought implies can*" principle in so many words, it is implied by many of the things he says about human perfection. Our goal is to achieve demonstration *to the extent that it is possible*, to ascertain *to the extent that it is possible* everything that may be ascertained, and to become like God *as far as possible*. Even prophets know God's governance "in whatever way it is possible" (*GP* 3.51, p. 620).

In fact, Maimonides' view of the limits of human knowledge applies not only to this life but to the next. According to Maimonides, immortality is a direct consequence of intellectual perfection. In *Perek Helek*, he claims that the ultimate human good is for the soul to be forever involved with God, and he concludes by saying:

> When one becomes fully human, he acquires the nature of a perfect human being; there is no external power to deny his soul eternal life. His soul thus attains the eternal life it has come to know, which is the world to come.

Maimonides tries to establish doctrinal requirements for what it means to be fully human and does not reflect a modern view of religious tolerance. I will have more to say on both issues in the remaining chapters. For the present, it is interesting to note that while we may regard his requirements as a major achievement, it is likely that he regarded them as minimal, for the line from which he derives his position says quite clearly, "*All Israel have a share in the world to come.*"

In other words, Maimonides thought he was saying that a person does not have to be a prophet, sage, or guru to merit salvation; all a person has to do is assent to basic principles about God, prophecy, and providence. The "reward" given to those who merit salvation is also intellectual: They shed the material component of their nature and are able to contemplate the heavenly realm without interrup-
tion. There is some ambiguity about whether we will be able to apprehend things in the next life that were hidden in this one or whether we will merely sustain the most intense level of concentration achieved on earth. But either way, Maimonides denies something many religious thinkers regard as essential: that it is possible to make spiritual or intellectual progress in the next life. Rather than move from lower to higher levels of apprehension, the soul, like the heavenly intelligences, "remains in one and the same state" (GP 3.51, p. 629). Put otherwise, death means that the soul no longer participates in experiences that are transient or terminable. So there is no point after death where we come to know God with perfect clarity or get reabsorbed into God in a mystical experience.

If there is no reabsorption, what becomes of imitatio Dei? The answer is that Maimonides accepts the traditional view but gives it a new twist. In Judaism people are commanded not only to do what God says but, in a deeper sense, to walk in God's ways (Deuteronomy 10:12; 13:5). According to the standard interpretation, to walk in God's ways means to perform actions like those that God performs. Thus Sotah 14a:

What does the text "You shall walk after the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 13:5) mean? . . . The meaning is to follow the attributes of the Holy One . . . as He clothed the naked (Genesis 3:21), so do you clothe the naked; as He visited the sick (Genesis 18:1), so do you visit the sick; as He comforted mourners (Genesis 25:11), so do you comfort mourners; as He buried the dead (Deuteronomy 34:6), so do you bury the dead.

Note, as Kellner does, that this passage contains very little in the way of metaphysics: There is nothing that says that by clothing the naked or visiting the sick, we will shed our mortal nature and become like God. Since he insists that humans and God have nothing in common, why does Maimonides opt for a metaphysical interpretation? Why not say that holiness consists in clothing the naked, visiting the sick, and comforting mourners, and drop the issue of whether there is any respect in which we can become like God? In a nutshell, the reason is that Maimonides accepts enough of the Platonic worldview to regard earthly matter as the source of evil and sees imitatio Dei as a way of freeing ourselves from the ties of matter. We saw that matter acts like a dark veil that prevents us from apprehending immaterial things as they really are and causes all acts of disobedience.

Not only is matter a constant distraction, but it is a cause of moral and intellectual contamination. In Maimonides' opinion, it is filthy, shameful, and humiliating. Insofar as it causes the mind to
think in spatial/temporal terms, it is responsible for idolatry. Not surprisingly, he concludes that \((GP \ 3.8, \ p. \ 433)\) "the commandments and prohibitions of the Law are only intended to quell all the impulses of matter." Thus all the commandments aim at holiness insofar as they get us to control or even to feel shame over the material component of our existence. That is why one does not have to be a guru or a diviner or anything of the sort to be holy; all one has to do is perform the commandments we have.

To control the impulses of matter is to purify the soul and enable it to devote as little attention as possible to bodily functions like the desire for food, drink, or sex. When bodily functions rule, he tells us in another chapter, the longing for speculation is abolished, the body is corrupted, sorrows multiply, and death comes prematurely \((GP \ 3.33, \ p. \ 532)\). Quelling the impulses of matter is therefore a necessary condition for seeking truth and promoting social harmony. The search for truth culminates in the study of physics and metaphysics, the subjects addressed in the \textit{Guide}. The study of physics and metaphysics, in turn, makes one reflect on the spheres, which are composed of heavenly matter, and eventually on God, who is not composed of matter at all.

In this scheme, performing the commandments is not just a way of pleasing God but a way of redirecting human energy and seeking human perfection. For all intents and purposes, holiness is another name for purification, which can be described as the process of loosening one's ties to the earthly realm and focusing on the eternal. In Maimonides' words, true perfection consists in \((GP \ 3.54, \ p. \ 635)\):

\[\ldots \text{the acquisition of the rational virtues—I refer to the conception of the intelligibles, which teach true opinions concerning the divine things. This is in true reality the ultimate end; this is what gives the individual true perfection, a perfection belonging to him alone; and it gives him permanent perdurance; through it man is man.}\]

We saw that as the process of purification reaches its final goal, people turn wholly to God so as to know God's governance of the universe in whatever way possible. In Maimonides' opinion, this condition is marked by loss of interest in bodily functions as well as humility, awe, reverence, and shame before God.

In regard to shame and humility, Maimonides points out that when God first spoke to Moses at the burning bush, Moses hid his face because he was afraid [Exodus 3:6]. By contrast the nobles of Israel tried to look on or apprehend God too quickly [Exodus 24:10–11], with the result that their vision of God contained a material compo-
nent and was therefore imperfect. As for bodily functions, Maimonides reiterates that when Moses was on the mountain with God, he went without food or water for forty days and nights.

In assessing Maimonides' view of human perfection, we should keep in mind that he is not working in the context of a Cartesian epistemology. For Maimonides knowledge is not a matter of clearness and distinctness of representations in the mind but of contact or assimilation between knower and object known. If there is contact, then there must be some type of similarity. As Bahya put it: "The soul is a simple, spiritual entity which inclines to what resembles it among similar spiritual entities and, in accordance with its nature, removes itself from its opposites in gross bodies." It follows that a soul that is still preoccupied with material things cannot approach or comprehend the spiritual entities to which it is naturally disposed and thus cannot achieve holiness.

Behind Maimonides, Bahya, and Plotinus stands Plato. In a famous passage in the Seventh Letter, Plato tells us that knowledge never takes root in an alien nature, so that neither quickness of learning nor a good memory can make someone see something to which his soul is not inclined. To have any hope of receiving the illumination necessary to achieve knowledge of something like justice, the soul must "live with" it and develop an affinity for it. While quickness of learning and a good memory are necessary conditions for illumination, Plato insists they have to be combined with moral qualities like patience, humility, and persistence to allow the soul to gain what it seeks. Without the proper upbringing, the soul may be adept at manipulating words and symbols, but, in Plato's opinion, it will not be accustomed to truth and is likely to be satisfied with the first image suggested to it (Seventh Letter 343c). Overall not only must the soul have the opportunity to think, it must make the decision to turn away from material things and devote itself to the apprehension of spiritual.

The assumption that underlies Plato's view is that contemplation is a form of attachment or association in which the soul clings to the object with which it has established kinship. Sometimes he compares the acquisition of knowledge to initiation in a religious cult, sometimes to entry into a holy shrine. In either case, his metaphors for apprehension all imply some type of symmetry between the knower and the object known. The knower must resemble the object to become attached to it; but in Plato's opinion, it is impossible to become attached to an object without taking on some of its characteristics. To think about eternal beauty or justice is to participate in the eter-
nal order and become beautiful and just oneself. According to *Republic* 500b–d:23

The man whose thoughts are truly directed to real existences, Adiemantus, does not have time to look down upon the affairs of men, and by contending with them to be filled with malice and ill-will. As he looks upon and contemplates things that are ordered and ever the same, that do no wrong to, and are not wronged by, each other, being all in a rational order, he imitates them and tries to become as like them as he can. Or do you think one can consort with things one admires without imitating them in one's own person?—Not possibly.

So the philosopher, who consorts with what is divine and ordered, himself becomes godlike and ordered as far as a man can.

In this respect, Plato's view is an elaboration of the old Greek aphorism "Like knows like." From Plato's perspective, contemplation resembles love in the sense that the soul is naturally disposed to cling to the object of knowledge, occupy itself with it, and pattern its life after it. That is why Plato's epistemology is so well suited to metaphors suggesting ritual purity. Since an unjust soul will never be able to think about justice, it is a waste of time to teach philosophy to someone who is not properly initiated.24 In the Republic, the guardians are not exposed to philosophy until they have completed a rigorous program of music, gymnastics, and mathematics.

Not surprisingly, Maimonides (*GP* 1.18), who is very much a part of the Platonic tradition, regards closeness or touching as a metaphor for apprehension and typically associates apprehension with love or desire.25 In view of his negative theology, a person cannot become like God by sharing an attribute or belonging to the same species. The problem is not that our attributes fall short of God's but that strictly speaking God does not have attributes and cannot be subsumed under a species. Since the difference between God and us is not one of degree, it remains inviolate no matter how spiritual or contemplative we become.

But a person can become like God—or more precisely, like the heavenly realm—in a much weaker sense when earthly matters cease to be important and spiritual or eternal ones predominate. The hope is that once the soul contemplates the vastness of the heavenly realm, it will begin to appreciate the insignificance of earthly matters and feel a sense of awe.26 The culmination of this process occurs when a person becomes so focused on heavenly matters that he or she is "kissed by God" and passes directly into the next world (*GP* 3.51, p. 628). To repeat: Direct contact or union with God is impossible, so that when Maimonides talks about people being kissed by God, he
really has in mind contact with the Agent Intellect. In any case, *imitatio Dei* is a process of purification by which the soul transforms itself from an earth-centered existence to a heaven-centered one. Since our grasp of the heavens is limited, the process is also one in which the soul comes to accept its own insignificance and to abandon any form of self-promotion or self-assertion. At *Guide* 3.11, p. 441, Maimonides assures us that once we reach this point, "enmity and hatred are removed and the inflicting of harm by people on one another is abolished." But a soul that reaches it still does not have perfect apprehension and cannot be a subject of worship in its own right. In the end, all it can be is a human soul that has reached the highest level of perfection available to it.

**Imitatio Dei and Human Perfection**

A modern reader is likely to object that Maimonides' intellectualism goes too far. Not only is total detachment from earthly endeavors not possible from our standpoint, it may not be desirable. What happened to clothing the naked and visiting the sick? Maimonides tempers his intellectualism by saying that prophecy is a two-sided phenomenon involving both the rational and the imaginative faculties. Since the imagination is tied to the material world, the prophet will have not only true opinions on speculative matters but "general directives for the well-being of men in relations with one another" (*GP* 2.36, p. 372). As I will argue in a later chapter, Maimonides believed that political stability is not enough to ensure perfect governance; a leader must also be concerned with people's spiritual needs, which means their worship of an immaterial being.

Though we cannot share an essential attribute with God, according to Maimonides, we can try to imitate God's attributes of action; that is, a ruler can try to show justice and mercy in the appropriate circumstances and see to it that people in need are adequately provided for.27 We saw that while God is called merciful and gracious, these qualities do not spring from internal dispositions. Therefore all we can imitate by being merciful and gracious are actions, not the actor. Maimonides adds that if God does not act on the basis of internal dispositions, we should discipline ourselves so that we do not either. In other words, a ruler should strive to act in a way that eschews passion and emotion and should decide issues solely on the merits of the case. If the ruler shows mercy or vengeance, he should do so not because he *feels* merciful or vengeful but because one person deserves one response while another person deserves another.
This is another way of saying that *imitatio Dei* implies disinterest or, as we might say, impartiality. So while the record of Moses' prophetic activity contains commandments that reinforce speculative judgments about the existence and unity of God, it also contains commandments that set forth a model of behavior and the foundations of a just society.

Overall Maimonides sees human perfection along the following lines. Performance of the commandments cleanses the soul by quelling the impulses of matter and causing it to act in a humble and dispassionate way. Eventually the soul will be motivated to study physics and metaphysics and reflect on the heavenly realm. To the degree that it reflects on the heavenly realm, it establishes contact with the Agent Intellect and participates in the divine overflow.\(^2\) This overflow first reaches the rational faculty of the prophet and then overflows to the imaginative. Once the prophet's faculties are aroused, he turns to God in an act of total devotion. Having achieved this state, the prophet is able to create or oversee a harmonious community just as God, in a manner unknown to us, creates and oversees a harmonious world.\(^2\) In this way Maimonides' conception of the prophet has both a theoretical and practical component and bears an obvious similarity to Plato's philosopher-king.\(^3\)

But even if the comparison with philosopher-kings is valid, problems remain. Though prophecy has a practical component, Maimonides clearly says that the prophet's rational perfection is superior. Hence the claim that even though Moses tended to practical matters, inwardly his heart was turned to God (\(GP\) 3.51, pp. 621-23). In this section of the *Guide* he also claims several times that true prophets apprehend God not with the imagination but with the intellect.\(^3\) This claim implies that while imaginative visions may be needed to communicate with the greater community, for the most part the prophet does not need them and may even shun them.\(^3\) Maimonides' usual claim is that true holiness, the first intention of the Law, is an intellectual perfection and requires an act of apprehension.\(^3\) Unlike moral perfection, intellectual perfection pertains to the agent alone and does not involve the agent with other people (\(GP\) 3.54, p. 635). Finally there is Maimonides' emphatic assertion (\(GP\) 3.27, p. 511) that the ultimate perfection for humans is intellectual and does not involve moral qualities or moral knowledge:

> His [a human being's] ultimate perfection is to become rational in actu, I mean to have an intellect 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. It is clear that to
this ultimate perfection there does not belong either actions or moral qualities and that it consists only of opinions toward which speculation has led and that investigation has rendered compulsory.

To say that human perfection is attainment of an intellect in actu is to say it is an intellect that apprehends theoretical subjects rather than practical. In regard to the latter, Maimonides argues that the distinction between good and bad is based on commonly accepted beliefs rather than truths grasped by the intellect. 34

This evidence has not stopped a group of scholars from maintaining that no matter what Maimonides says about intellectual perfection, the practical dimension of human perfection is still primary. The argument has both a political and a moral version. The political version is to concede that Maimonides regards human perfection as intellectual but to point out that when you take into account all the limits he puts on knowledge, in particular the unknowability of God and the heavenly realm, then, like Kant, he is really defending the practical life over the contemplative. Note, for example, the qualification expressed in the above passage: knowing everything that it is within the capacity of man to know. We saw that at Guide 1.54, p. 128, he says that the utmost virtue is to become like God as far as we are able, "which means that we should make our actions like His." In the same way he concludes the Guide by saying that we should glory in the apprehension of God and in the knowledge of God's attributes of action.

In an influential article, Pines argues that since Maimonides thought metaphysical knowledge is all but impossible, the superiority of the contemplative life "may appear as less than evident."35 If, to use Plato's metaphor, we cannot get very far out of the cave, our only hope of becoming like God is to organize a just and merciful society within it. Along the same lines, Lawrence Berman argues that "just as God acts in the realm of nature, so the philosopher acts in the realm of voluntary things, and it is his duty to found an ideal state and preserve it."36

The ethical version is similar to the political but puts more stress on personal morality than on the founding of an ideal state. Given Maimonides' negative theology, in particular the claim that God does not have an essence, the only thing we can know about God is the attributes of action, which is to say the goodness of God as manifested in the created order. According to Steven Schwarzschild, "Maimonides' exegesis is clear: Humanity's purpose is to 'know' God, but the God who is to be known is knowable only insofar as He practices grace, justice, and righteousness in the world, and to know Him is synony-
mous with imitating these practices." In this connection, it is significant that Maimonides claims in the Parable of the Palace (GP 3.51, p. 620) that the prophets who have entered the ruler's council turn toward God "so as to know His governance"—another reference to attributes of action. Moreover, the very last sentence of the Guide clearly says that after the perfect individual has achieved the highest level of apprehension, she will always have moral qualities in mind "through assimilation to His actions."

Schwarzschild's view is essentially a restatement of Cohen's and is based on the claim that negative theology amounts to a rejection of metaphysics in favor of ethics. "The place of being," in Cohen's (RR, p. 94) words, "is taken by action." For Cohen this means that (RR, p. 96) "holiness becomes morality," which in turn (RR, p. 98) "becomes the embodiment of the thirteen characteristics of God," another reference to the attributes of action. Thus coming to know God is not like trying to identify an unknown chemical in a laboratory. If the prophet tries to know God, it is not to find out what God is but to establish a paradigm for behavior. In this sense, knowledge of God is really a form of devotion to God. From devotion we get the idea of service or worship, which takes us out of the realm of theory and into the realm of practice. Cohen therefore takes Maimonides to mean that negative theology goes hand in hand with the principle of imitatio Dei.

Cohen is right to say that knowledge involves devotion. But it is far from clear that Maimonides understood devotion as purely practical. Certainly there are important passages where he describes negative theology as an achievement in its own right rather than a reason for turning from theory to praxis. It is, after all, Moses' awareness of negation that makes him the wisest and humblest person on earth (GP 1.59, pp. 137–38). The attributes of action are God's concession to Moses, and in a way Maimonides' concession to us. They allow us to make sense of the language of prayer and to set our sights on the proper values. But Maimonides never doubts that the attributes of action are a step removed from God, and therefore mention of them is secondary to the highest tribute and best level of perfection, which is silent contemplation.

The same conclusion arises from Maimonides' claim that even when doing mundane chores, Moses' heart was turned to God. According to Guide 3.51, pp. 621–22, "Excellent men begrudge the times in which they are turned away from Him by other occupations." Perhaps there is a good ethical reason for this: Because such people begrudge the times when they are turned away from God, they
are the only ones who can be trusted not to use that time to advance their own interests. Still, Maimonides describes prophets as people who participate in practical matters "with their limbs only." In the world to come, when we no longer have to worry about interruptions, the only action available to us will be contemplation. In itself contemplation is the highest end; but owing to the necessities of the human condition, it must be accompanied by a practical component as well. So the question of whether the highest end is contemplation or is contemplation plus action depends to a large extent on what standpoint we pick.

Faced with this duality, Guttmann opts for a compromise: While moral virtue is a means to intellectual, once intellectual virtue is achieved, moral virtue takes on a new dimension so that "ethics, though previously subordinate to knowledge, has now become the ultimate meaning and purpose of the knowledge of God." There is no question that Maimonides thinks ethical behavior will take on a deeper meaning as theoretical knowledge increases, or that the latter will spill over into the former, but where is the evidence that ethics will become the ultimate meaning of the knowledge of God?

Aside from the question of standpoint, the reason there is so much confusion on this issue is that when we get to experiences like awe, reverence, and complete devotion to God, the distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge breaks down. According to Kant (CPR, B ix), reason is either theoretical or practical depending on whether it seeks to determine an object or to realize it. The distinction is relevant when the issue is a scientific conception of the world versus our sense of ourselves as free agents. But neither category captures Maimonides' claim that God is reached through ascending spheres of negation. In the first place, the point of negative theology is that God cannot be determined, that when reason tries to subsume God under a genus or locate God in logical space, it runs up against inviolable limits. In the second place, commandment and obligation do not actually put us in touch with God but rather with God's governance of the created order. Strictly speaking, God is not a moral agent, not gracious or merciful, but the infinite and unknowable source from which mercy and graciousness in the world proceed.

To stand in awe of this source is not to have an object or a specific end in view but to confess that all objects and ends that we can fathom fall short, and therefore that the only legitimate response is, like Job, to repent in silence. There are, of course, practical overtones to this experience because it means giving up a self-
centered view of the world and coming to terms with finitude. Thus Maimonides (GP 3.23, p. 493) interprets Job 42:6 ("wherefore I abhor myself and repent . . .") to mean "wherefore I abhor all that I used to desire. . . ." But there is no reason to think that Job's surrender to God is a simple case of determining an object or of emulating a paradigm. It is instead a limiting experience beyond the reach of metaphysical or ethical categories as we normally understand them. To the degree that it culminates in silence, it is neither the acquisition of discursive knowledge nor a way of interacting with other people.

What is it? We can call it a form of contemplation, but this description is incomplete, because Maimonides also understands it as a form of devotion. It is not the contemplation of propositions, because all propositions distort the simplicity of God. Though it does not involve other people directly, Maimonides never doubts that it will overflow into a life of humility, spiritual purity, and concern for the welfare of others. Cleariy it is hard to say where the theoretical component begins and the practical component ends. Cohen is wrong to describe negative theology as the rejection of metaphysics for ethics, because in Maimonides' mind metaphysics gets closer to God than anything else. Certainly there is nothing in the Guide claiming that will rather than thought is the medium through which we achieve the highest perfection. But it would be equally wrong to say that negative theology represents the rejection of ethics for metaphysics, because even metaphysics falls short. In fact, it is the rejection of everything other than God, which is to say everything other than what is beyond all attempts at classification. It is, then, a special kind of contemplation, devotion, and rejection in one experience. Though it is not the governing of a society or the doing of good deeds, it invariably leads to them. Though it is not the sharing of an attribute with God, it is as heaven-like or heaven-centered as we can become.

So far from minimizing the difference between God and humans, Maimonides' understanding of imitatio Dei reinforces it. In his treatment of people like Moses, Job, or Rabbi Akiva, he never tires of pointing out that even the heroic few have to respect limits. To use a term that Hegel employs in reference to Kant, the fundamental principle in Maimonides' philosophy is "the absoluteness of finitude." Unless this principle is accepted, either God would be mundaneized or humans deified. In either case, holiness in the sense of feeling awe and shame before God would be impossible.

As usual, Maimonides' conclusion has a sobering effect. Like Plato's philosopher-kings, the perfect individual has to juggle the de-
sire to contemplate God’s transcendence with the need to tend to the affairs of a community. Though the former is primary, the second is still necessary. Even in moments of contemplation, the perfect individual does not get an answer to every question, pursues a goal most people not only cannot achieve but have difficulty understanding, and receives no material reward other than an occasional flash of insight. There is a joy that comes with this life, but it is the joy of intense devotion rather than ecstatic celebration. In the words of Alfred Ivry, the few people who achieve perfection in Maimonides’ sense “are not granted any traditional panaceas: No personal after-life awaits the philosopher, no significant immortality: no punishments, but no rewards as usually conceived.”44 As I will argue in a later chapter, the whole issue of reward and punishment ceases to matter.

While this condition may be difficult to achieve, and by Maimonides’ own admission (GP 3.51, p. 624) is beyond his reach, there is nothing in his description that makes it impossible in principle. Since prophecy is the natural perfection of the human species, it cannot involve powers humans do not have. Accordingly human life is not spent chasing a goal systematically beyond our reach. If we cannot know what God is, perfection consists in understanding why we cannot and in giving up the desire to find out. If, as Maimonides tells us, reason has a place where it stops, then the search for perfection has a place where it stops as well. In short, “ought implies can” remains true even at the highest levels of human excellence.45

**From the Medieval Argument to the Modern**

By the eighteenth century the medieval position crumbled in two important respects. The theory of cognition that regarded knowledge as union or conjunction between knower and object known was abandoned in favor of one that emphasizes the way in which the mind organizes and interprets the information at its disposal. Physics ceased to concern itself with matter and form and took up the question of how microscopic particles or fluids interact with one another. More important for my purpose, the idea of a metaphysical realm from which we receive emanations was replaced with a natural realm governed by the same scientific laws that apply on earth. With the rejection of heavenly intelligences came the rejection of the last vestige of intermediaries.

But there is still an important point of similarity: Both Maimonides and the quintessential modern thinker Immanuel Kant believe in a transcendent God. If transcendence cannot be interpreted in
terms of matter and form, or spheres and intelligences, there has to be another way to account for it. According to Kant, the solution is to shift the focus of theology from the theoretical realm to the practical. While reason in its theoretical capacity cannot prove the existence of God, in its practical capacity it cannot help but assume it. In fact, Kant argues that even if the traditional arguments for God's existence were valid, they would prove too little because what the religious believer wants is not a necessary being or first cause but a moral exemplar. He therefore concludes that the only content we can ascribe to our idea of God is moral \((\text{CPR, A818/B846})\): “It was the moral ideas that gave rise to that concept of the divine Being which we now hold to be correct—and we so regard it not because speculative reason convinces us of its correctness, but because it completely harmonizes with the moral principles of reason.”

We saw that in its practical capacity, reason seeks not to determine an object but to realize an end. But it is important to note that the ends that reason establishes are not generalizations from experience. In its present form, human behavior is depressing and disappointing. If all we could strive for were success as measured by human standards, we would set our sights too low and capitulate to evil.\(^{46}\) The crux of Kant's position is that reason establishes norms of behavior independent of existing conditions. Thus Kant's philosophy is based on a fundamental distinction between \textit{is} and \textit{ought}. According to \textit{Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals} \((\text{pp. 407–8})\), “The question at issue is not whether this or that happened but that reason of itself and independently of all experience commands that it ought to happen.”

Once we make the shift from a metaphysical conception of God to a moral conception, we do not confront a heavenly order and an earthly one, but the world with all its problems and the ideals to which it falls short.\(^{47}\) In this way, reason presents us with a task: not only to know the world but to improve it. The task would make no sense unless we were outraged by the injustices we see and able to conceive of better alternatives. Without indignation we would compromise our principles; without a vision of something better, we would be lulled into a false sense of complacency. The upshot is that human perfection is no longer the gaining of knowledge but the transformation of the will from a pleasure-seeking life to a life based on principles with universal application.

In keeping with this approach, Cohen is highly critical of any attempt to argue, with Hegel, that the real is the rational or that the gap between reality and ideality has been closed.\(^{48}\) According to clas-
sical Jewish teaching, the messiah has not come and therefore the world, though redeemable, is not yet redeemed.49 Not surprisingly, Cohen argues that morality is future oriented: Because present conditions fall short of the ideal, morality requires a time when injustices can be corrected and sins atoned for. Cohen finds the origin of the idea of futurity in the prophets, who taught that history does not have to repeat itself, because a sinful Israel can repent and alter its ways. Thus Ezekiel (18:31) implores us to cast away our sins and get a new heart and a new spirit.

The gap between reality and ideality allows Kant and Cohen to put as much distance between God and humans as Maimonides did. Like Maimonides, they stress the imperfect nature of human existence and the importance of awe, humility, and reverence. God, whose will is completely rational, is the ideal against which every person is judged and from which every person must seek forgiveness. In an important passage in the Critique of Practical Reason (p. 123), Kant argues that the ideal established by the moral law is not only distant but "infinitely remote." As for mystical union, he terms it a monstrosity (CPrR, pp. 120–21).

Unless moral perfection is infinitely remote, in Kant's terms, it would be "completely degraded from its holiness, by being made out as lenient (indulgent) and thus compliant to our convenience, or its call and its demands are strained to an unattainable destination . . . and are lost in fanatical theosophical dreams which completely contradict our knowledge of ourselves."50 In other words, if perfection became too accessible, then either (1) it would be too easy and no longer worthy of respect, or (2) we would flatter ourselves to suppose that we had achieved it.

The problem is that while Maimonides can say that holiness is the recognition of God's infinite distance and the awe and humility that result from it, Kant and Cohen cannot say the same thing about the moral law. For if ought implies can, then by saying that the moral law is obligatory, Kant and Cohen are committed to saying that it can be fulfilled. If it is capable of being fulfilled, then we must be capable of closing the gap that separates reality from ideality. It may be that it has not been closed before and that we are a long way from closing it now. Nevertheless, it cannot be unbridgeable in principle or else we will be back to Sisyphus. In sum, the shift from metaphysical to moral separation carries with it a very different assessment of human capacity. That assessment raises important questions for how we interpret the commandment to be holy.
The Modern Argument: Kant and Cohen on Self-Sanctification

Following Maimonides, Cohen connects the commandment to be holy at Leviticus 19:2 with a similar command expressed at Leviticus 11:44: "Sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy; for I am holy." Although he was the product of a different tradition, Kant too interprets sanctification as a process of becoming like God *(RWL, pp. 60–61)*:52

The law says: "Be ye holy [in the conduct of your lives] even as your Father in Heaven is holy." This is the ideal of the Son of God which is set up before us as our model. But the distance separating the good which we ought to effect in ourselves from the evil when we advance is infinite, and the act itself, of conforming our course of life to the holiness of the law, is impossible of execution in any given time.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason* (p. 122) he claims that sanctification is "the supreme condition of the highest good." Needless to say, Kant and Cohen both assume that the ground and final end of religious law is the moral law, which can be expressed as obedience to the idea of law as such. According to Kant, holiness is therefore complete fitness of the will to the moral law: in short, doing the law for its own sake with no taint of selfishness.

For Kant, too, holiness is connected with purity. In God, the will always acts for the sake of principle and is not tempted by sensuous motives. Thus God's good will is completely a priori. But in beings made up of a sensuous and an intellectual component, even the most noble motives are corrupted by the presence of self-love. Though Maimonides does not envision a reduction of all commandments to one imperative, he does insist that obedience to commandments be disinterested and that rulers try to show justice or mercy without responding to feelings or dispositions. All three thinkers agree that it is not just the performance of commandments that makes one holy but the performance of commandments in a principled or impartial way. They also agree that selfless behavior is not accidental but requires cultivation of the rational part of our nature, what Kant *(RWL, p. 43)* calls a transformation of a person's "cast of mind." Finally all agree that people need rituals and religious institutions to make this transformation possible.

The problem is that according to Kant, purity of purpose cannot be achieved by a rational agent in the world of sense, so that on any
given occasion it is impossible to bring the *is* into complete conformity with the *ought*. In *Religion within the Limits* (p. 32) he argues that the reason a sensuous being cannot achieve holiness is not, as Maimonides thought, that matter is inherently corrupting, but that there is in all people a propensity to evil that Kant terms “a perversity of the heart.” In other words, the culprit is not the fact that we have a body, or that we are constantly exposed to evil in the world around us, or even that we are predisposed by nature to act one way rather than another. Kant’s point is that since we are responsible for the evil we do, the source of that evil cannot lie in something over which we have no control. Rather the source is that our will (Willkür) chooses of its own to subordinate noble motives to ignoble ones (*RWL*, p. 17): “When we say, then, Man is by nature good, or, Man is by nature evil, this means only that there is in him an ultimate ground... of the adoption of good maxims or of evil maxims.” Although this ground is universal in the sense that “evil can be predicated of man as a species,” Kant still wants to hold that the problem is the way we choose to act rather than something we inherit (*RWL*, p. 36): “In the search for the rational origin of evil actions, every such action must be regarded as though the individual had fallen into it directly from a state of innocence.” So humanity constantly falls short of the goals it sets for itself even though there is no external force compelling it to do so.

The problem is that the failure to adopt good maxims runs so deep that it is “rooted in humanity itself” and therefore cannot be corrected by human powers. If it cannot be corrected by human powers, then, Kant reasons, it cannot be corrected in finite time. But if purity of purpose is an obligation, it must be attainable; and if it is attainable, the perversity of the human heart must be correctable in some way. The only way out of the dilemma is to conclude that purity of purpose is not attainable *in this life*, from which it follows that the soul must be able to survive the death of the body. Simply put, one life is not enough to fulfill the commandment to be holy. And if one life is not enough, neither is a finite number of lives. If Kant is right, complete moral improvement requires infinite time, which means that the soul must be immortal. Yet even infinite time may not be enough. Maimonides believed in immortality but claimed that when the soul gets to the next world, it will remain in one and the same state. By contrast, Kant says not only that the soul will live forever but that it must be capable of making endless progress toward its goal.
Like Kant, Cohen (RR, p. 204) agrees that God presents humanity with the task of self-sanctification and that this task makes sense only if it is infinite: "Like ethics, religion too must always be concerned only with tasks which, as such, are infinite and therefore require infinite solutions." Thus the commandment to be holy can have no time limit. In Cohen's words (RR, p. 305): "Self-purification remains an infinite task for the individual; it cannot have its termination in death."

Behind the thought of Kant and Cohen is the belief that we cannot degrade the moral law by putting it within the reach of finite agents. Kant therefore insists on obedience to a command that is "stern, unindulgent, truly commanding, and really not just ideally possible." To think that one has achieved it is surely presumptuous. As Allen Wood points out, Kant thinks morality is defined by reason prior to any resolve on our part so that it is characteristic of our nature never to be satisfied with what is temporal.56 Along these lines, Kant quotes Romans 3:9: "They are all under sin—there is none righteous (in the spirit of the law), no, not one," while Cohen quotes Ecclesiastes 7:20: "Surely there is not a righteous person on earth who does good and never sins."

The problem arises from the fact that our intuitions are pulled in two directions. The first direction is moral radicalism, the view that we should not compromise in defining perfection. The commandment that asks us to sanctify ourselves and be holy was not meant as a justification for lowered standards but just the opposite: to have no standard except God. The second direction is Platonism, the view that the world of sense is a crude imitation of the ideal world. Surely we would be skeptical of anyone who claimed that she had in fact fulfilled the commandment and succeeded in becoming holy. When we put the two together with the "ought implies can" principle, we get the conclusion that the process of becoming holy requires infinite time and infinite progress in that time.

There is, of course, an illicit move in this argument. From the fact that I cannot become holy in this life, it does not follow that I need infinite time in another one. This point is complicated by the fact that Kant does not—indeed cannot—tell us what moral progress in a disembodied state is like. Why, for example, can I not achieve holiness the moment I shed my sensuous nature and become a spiritual being? If I have become a purely spiritual being, why do I need infinite time to rid myself of the contamination that arises from physical desire and self-love? Worse, if time is a form of intuition
that characterizes our experience of phenomena, how can it apply to life in the next world at all? A standard reply is that Kant is not claiming that we have theoretical knowledge of the next life, only that the idea of immortality is possible and morality requires it. Although it is natural for us to conceive of this progression in a temporal fashion, it is no more temporal than the expansion of a mathematical function. But even if this response is right, the same question arises: What meaning can we give to moral progress that does not involve time? Ultimately Kant would have to fall back on the claim that our existence in the next life is mysterious so that all we can do is suppose that some form of moral improvement could occur. In Kant's words \( RWL, \) p. 149: "We know nothing of the future, and we ought not to seek to know more than what is rationally bound up with the incentives of morality and their end."

Note, however, that as Kant presents it, the "ought implies can" principle appears to have two forms. According to the strong form, if moral purity is commanded, it must be attainable. If I ought to act for the sake of duty, it must be possible for me to so act without any taint of self-love. According to the weak form, if moral purity is commanded, then all that is possible are successive approximations to it. In other words, the weak form says that all I can be obliged to do is strive for the ideal, not reach it. The ambiguity arises from the fact that Kant conceives of possibility in two ways: what is possible in itself and what is possible as a historical reality. While there is nothing in the moral law that renders it impossible in the first sense, the perversity of the heart renders it impossible in the second. "The act," Kant tells us \( RWL, \) p. 60, "is always (not eternally, but at each instant of time) defective." Therefore complete conformity with the holiness of the law is "impossible of execution in any given time." So no matter how hard we try to achieve moral purity, there will always be more progress to make. If so, then progress toward the ideal is all that can be commanded.

In the Critique of Practical Reason \( \text{pp. 32–33} \), Kant puts the point this way:

This holiness of will is, however, a practical ideal which must necessarily serve as a model which all finite rational beings must strive toward even though they cannot reach it. The pure moral law, which is itself for this reason called holy, constantly and rightly holds it before their eyes. The utmost that finite practical reason can accomplish is to make sure of the unending progress of its maxims toward this model and of the constancy of the finite rational being in making continuous progress.
This is virtue, and, as a naturally acquired faculty, it can never be perfect, because assurance in such a case never becomes apodictic certainty, and as a mere opinion it is very dangerous.

The question of how we can know if we have acted for a completely noble motive is another issue. In the Metaphysics of Morals (p. 446) Kant enlarges on the issue of moral striving by invoking the distinction between perfect and imperfect obligation:

It is man's duty to **strive** for this perfection, but not to **reach** it (in this life), and his compliance with this duty can, accordingly, consist only in continual progress. Hence, while this duty is indeed narrow and perfect **with regard to** its object . . . with regard to the subject it is only a wide and imperfect duty to himself.

It follows that all I can be expected to have is the disposition to moral perfection, not perfection itself. Cohen too (RR, p. 212) remarks that "I remain man, and therefore I remain a sinner, I therefore am in constant need of God, as the One who forgives sin."

In view of the persistence of sin, the weak or imperfect form of the "ought implies can" principle is the only one Kant and Cohen can accept. As Lewis White Beck argues, "We are told to seek the Kingdom of God, not to settle in it."

Let us suppose, then, that I have made the decision to seek God's Kingdom but, because of the perversity of my heart, I continue to sin. Kant goes on to say that God will see in my pursuit of holiness a firm disposition (Gesinnung) to achieve it, and this disposition is all that is needed to fulfill the commandment to be holy. Kant therefore takes refuge in the hope that divine grace will close the gap between disposition and deed (RWL, p. 70): "What in our earthly life . . . is ever only a becoming . . . should be credited to us exactly as if we were already in full possession of it." In other words, God will see that while in my earthly life I remain a sinner, my change of heart has made me into a new person "in the eyes of a divine judge for whom this disposition takes the place of action" (RWL, p. 68). So God will credit me for the moral self I have decided to become rather than the empirical and imperfect self I still am.

Along similar lines, Cohen (RR, pp. 204–5) argues that since the commandment to be holy is directed to us rather than to God, anything we achieve must be "the lot of man." But it cannot be the lot of man to overcome finitude and establish union with God. Nor, as we saw, can God assign a task that amounts to a labor of Sisyphus. Cohen rejects the idea that salvation can be understood as a gift in
which God miraculously takes away our sin. It is instead the outcome of a process that we must initiate by confessing sin and asking for God’s forgiveness. Accordingly ([RR, p. 206]): “Man himself must cast off his sin.” As with Kant, sin can be cast off only if we have a complete change of heart; unfortunately it is impossible to know when or if such a change has occurred. Thus Cohen’s claim that man himself must cast off sin continues: “but whether his deed succeeds, whether it leads to the goal, this he cannot know.”

Still, Cohen continues, we can hardly be indifferent to the question of our success. Unless we had reason to believe that redemption is possible, there would be no reason to repent. This means that we must look to God as the one who guarantees the success of repentance, who looks upon our sin as inadvertent and grants expiation. If so, repentance is the key to self-sanctification, or as Cohen puts it ([RR, p. 205]), repentance “is” self-sanctification. With each act of repentance, God grants us a new lease on life and therefore “a new way of life.” To be sure, the need for repentance never ends. In Cohen’s words ([RR, pp. 230–31): “Redemption is to be thought of only for one moment’s duration. Only for one moment, which may be followed by moments of sin!” But unlike Sisyphus, we can hope that God responds to our confession so that our efforts are not in vain. In sum, acceptance of the task of self-sanctification is the goal; to try to change one’s heart in an honest and sincere way is to succeed in becoming holy.

Here too we have a weak form of “ought implies can.” The goal is not to achieve perfection in the sense of actually fulfilling the moral law (with all that implies) but to pursue it, confess one’s failure, and try a second time. Again from Cohen ([RR, p. 207), “Self-sanctification must arrive at its infinite conclusion in the forgiveness of sin by God.” So Kant and Cohen invoke grace or forgiveness to do what endless progress cannot. While the ultimate goal is still infinite, it is an infinity we can reach with God’s help. Either we are credited with success or we are allowed to succeed by admitting that we have fallen short and will make a good-faith effort to rededicate ourselves.

According to Henry Allison, the difficulty is that the need for infinite time arose in the first place because our disposition to pursue holiness falls short of holiness itself: Motives generated by self-love contaminate motives based on principle. Therefore any attempt to identify holiness with the pursuit of holiness begs the question. If all that is required to achieve holiness is either (1) a firm disposition and the grace of God, or (2) sincere repentance and continual forgiveness by God, there is no need for infinite time. Assuming God is respon-
sive, either can be achieved by a person here and now. By contrast, if infinite time is needed, then our pursuit of holiness must fall short of its goal, in which case it cannot be identical with the goal.

Aside from the issue of infinite time, there is the more troubling issue of responsibility. Suppose I decide to renounce my evil ways and embark on the task of self-sanctification. Repentance is genuine only if I have a real change of heart. Since I can be deceived about my motives, only God can know whether my heart is pure. But now we face a problem. If I am really sincere, then the process is complete and there is nothing God can add to what I have accomplished on my own. All God can do is provide encouragement and be certain that my heart is in the right place. If, on the other hand, I am not sincere, then grace or forgiveness would give me something I do not deserve. If I do not deserve them, then my newly found status as a saved soul is not something for which I can take credit and does not constitute progress in the task of sanctifying myself. In Kant’s words (RWL, p. 179): “That which is to be accredited to us as morally good conduct must take place not through foreign influence but solely through the best possible use of our own power.” Or again (RWL, p. 40): “Man himself must make or have made himself into whatever, in a moral sense . . . he is or is to become.” How, then, can God’s grace affect my standing? Near the end of Religion (p. 134), Kant calls atonement a mystery.

Not surprisingly, Cohen (RR, p. 207) raises the same question: “Is not the entire element of forgiveness through God external to the idea of self-sanctification?” Eliminating God as redeemer, as Cohen recognizes, would cause “the main scaffolding of religious knowledge” to collapse. Thus whether we can succeed by our own efforts or not, it must be the case that only God can forgive sin, for without forgiveness “God’s being could not be conceived as understandable.” Perhaps so, but this does not really answer the question. If I am worthy of being forgiven, God is only responding to what I have accomplished on my own; if I am not worthy, God cannot credit me with self-sanctification.

Holiness and Human Capacity

Having looked at a medieval and a modern account of imitatio Dei, I want to argue that for all its shortcomings, the medieval one is closer to the truth. In the first place, it is not saddled with the idea of moral improvement in a disembodied state. From Maimonides’ perspective, there is no unfinished business to be completed in the next life. In the second place, it is not saddled with the idea that the goal of human life
is always beyond our reach. For Maimonides God remains infinitely remote and incomprehensible. For that reason, it is fruitless to imagine ourselves uniting with God or sharing an attribute. According to a rabbinic commentary on Leviticus 11:44, the commandment “Sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I am holy” means that God’s holiness is higher than anything we can achieve. Maimonides’ point is that if we cannot achieve it, we should not set it up as a goal: If an admission of ignorance followed by awe and humility are all we can achieve, then they are all that can be commanded.

To return to Deuteronomy 30, the commandments are not too difficult for us nor too far away. They were given not to angels but to ordinary human beings. As Maimonides stresses, the commandments are not a timeless abstraction; they were given with the details of the human situation in mind, including the fact that people cannot loosen the ties of matter overnight. While it may require effort to fulfill the commandments, it cannot require effort that is in principle beyond us. By fulfillment I do not mean merely doing the required action but doing it with the proper intention or for the proper motive. In other words, everything that is needed to satisfy the commandments is within our capacity. This means that it is within our capacity to get ourselves to the point where we worship God in a completely disinterested fashion. If this understanding is right, then sin, though pervasive, is not inevitable. According to a famous rabbinic text (Bekhorot 60b), the soul God has breathed into us is pure. Even if we put special emphasis on the commandment to repent, it must still be true that genuine repentance is possible in this life. If the commandments can be fulfilled, there is no need to rely on an external source to close the gap between disposition and deed.

Kant’s conception of an infinitely remote goal requiring endless progress is based on an effort to explicate the doctrine of original sin. The perversity of the heart is therefore his response to the claim (Romans 5:12) that “in Adam all have sinned.” Kant does not take the phrase literally as signifying that one person’s transgression is passed to another, because doing so would imply that we are not responsible for what we do. Nor does he take it to mean that evil is present in us by nature. As we saw, every evil act must be viewed as if we had just fallen from a state of innocence. But in his opinion, each of us keeps falling and will continue to fall for the rest of our lives. So while we are responsible for our moral failings, it remains true that failure is inevitable. It could be said therefore that Kant agrees with the doctrine of original sin to the extent that he does not think we can overcome the propensity to evil by
our own power. Eventually we need the grace of God to do what human striving cannot.

Cohen repudiates the doctrine of original sin on the grounds that guilt cannot be inherited and that it is monstrous to suppose that God, who is sanctified by righteousness, would put a predisposition to evil in the human heart. For Cohen the human heart is pure, but because of the weakness of the human condition, we will continue to sin and therefore will continue to need God's forgiveness. "The forgiveness of sins," as Cohen (RR, p. 209) insists, "becomes the special and most appropriate function of God's goodness." If we did not seek forgiveness, and were not assured that God would grant it, we would never be able to relieve the burden of guilt and would be left with a life of despair. Thus Cohen concludes, "The entire monotheistic worship is based on forgiveness of sin." The reason for this conclusion is that like Kant, Cohen thinks that while we are responsible for our failings, it is inevitable that we will fail.

From a Jewish perspective, Adam's sin brought death, toil, and fatigue into the world, but death, as Urbach points out, is typically seen as part of the natural order, not a punishment or evil decree. On the basis of Genesis 8:21 ("for the yetzer [impulse] of man's heart is evil from his youth"), it could be said that Judaism does recognize an evil impulse or inclination that presents obstacles to human progress. Certainly the accounts of lust, murder, incest, and rape in the Bible dispel any notion that Judaism has an overly optimistic assessment of human behavior. Along the same lines, Genesis 4:7 maintains that like a wild animal, sin crouches at the door, and its urge is for us. But an evil impulse is a long way from Kant's perversity of the heart. In the first place, the evil impulse, though formidable, can be overcome by human power. After saying that sin crouches at the door, the text of Genesis goes on to say, "Yet you can be its master." Second, the evil impulse is not radically or irredeemably evil. According to one rabbinic text, without the evil impulse, no one would build a house, marry, have children, or engage in commerce. According to another, a group of rabbis set out to destroy the evil impulse but learned that if they did so completely, the world would die. The idea seems to be that while the evil impulse can create havoc if left unchecked, it is within our power to control it or redirect its energy to worthwhile ends. This does not mean that everyone will succeed in controlling it, only that in principle nothing prevents us from doing so. As Saadia (BBO, pp. 217–18) claims, the probability of a person's achieving perfection may be quite low, but it must be possible or else God would not have prescribed it.
There are also rabbinic texts that express pessimism about human behavior or suggest that for all intents and purposes everyone is a sinner. But these texts can be matched by others that imply that it is possible to die in as pure a state as one had at birth. Whichever set one wishes to emphasize, the fact remains that there is no official doctrine of inherited sin or of the need for supernatural power to overcome it. It is true that the prayer book for the Day of Atonement constantly speaks as if we are throwing ourselves on God's mercy and begging for forgiveness, but we saw that this kind of language does not have to be taken literally.

For Maimonides the crux of monotheism is not forgiveness of sin but the overcoming of idolatry. As any student of Jewish philosophy knows, Book 1 of the Mishneh Torah contains a long section on repentance. But aside from issues pertaining to the place and proper manner of repentance, the main purpose of this section is to stress that we are responsible for our actions and that the ultimate goal of human life is disinterested love of God. In keeping with Jewish tradition, he claims that the level attained by penitents is higher than that of those who have never sinned, because the former require greater effort to subdue their passions. He also claims that Israel must repent in order to be redeemed. But there is nothing to suggest that repentance is the primary way we relate to God or that it requires infinite time or superhuman effort to complete. In fact, he argues that while not every sage achieved the highest level of perfection, at least one person—Abraham—did achieve it.

With the rabbinic tradition in mind, Maimonides does say that God answers our requests for forgiveness immediately and goes from hating us to loving us. I will argue in the last chapter that while there is a kernel of truth to this claim, it should not be taken literally either. In both the Mishneh Torah and the Guide he emphasizes that God is outside of time and that neither humans nor anything else have it in their power to change God. So God's mercy or graciousness is not a response to us as much as a permanent feature of God's governance of the world. The reason God is called merciful or gracious is the original act of creation in which "He ... brings into existence and governs beings that have no claim upon Him with respect to being brought into existence and being governed." In this scheme, every benefit we receive from God, including the gift of reason and the giving of the Torah, is an instance of graciousness. Graciousness, then, is directed to all of creation or to human beings in general, not to me personally. Beyond creation and the giving of Law, there are no emotions, special gifts, or guarantees of success that we can call on or
benefit from. If Israel is redeemed, it will be because Israel changes its ways and decides to seek God.

We do not have to accept all the details of Maimonides' intellectualism to see what he is getting at. Holiness involves gaining a perspective broad enough to recognize God's mercy and graciousness in the world around us and to realize that even they do not fully capture God's perfection. The problem is not that the persistence of sin puts holiness out of reach, but that even if we manage to achieve holiness and feel awe and humility before God, because of our nature as sensuous beings we cannot help but become fatigued or distracted. Like love, intense conversation, or Sabbath observance, contemplation cannot go on forever. Though it may give us a taste of the world to come, it cannot be a permanent feature of human existence in this world. Put otherwise, the problem is not whether anyone has or ever will go through life without violating a commandment—something we will never be in a position to know—but whether the pervasive nature of sin puts us in a position from which we cannot liberate ourselves. Kant's answer is yes (RWL, p. 66): "SIN... brings with it endless violations of the law and so infinite guilt." But Kant's position rests on a peculiar feature: Despite the fact that there is nothing to interfere with our will, and no predisposition to evil, it is nonetheless assured that even the best person will continue to subvert the moral law and fall from innocence. From Maimonides' perspective, there is no such difficulty: Liberation from sin, though difficult, is always possible.

It will be objected that if the disposition does not fall short of the deed, we run the risk that people will come forward, proclaim themselves holy, and start to gloat. Throughout his writings Kant warns of the danger of having people flatter themselves about the nobility of their behavior. Aside from the fact that holiness is impossible without humility, this objection can be answered by pointing out that nothing requires us to understand human striving in an all-or-nothing fashion. In other words, there is nothing that says that once a commandment is fulfilled, it can be forgotten. Answering the call of God is not like being elected to the Hall of Fame. In general the fact that you fulfill a commandment today does not mean you are relieved of the obligation to fulfill it tomorrow. As Kant says, virtue can never settle down in peace and quiet. That is why no matter how much perfection we achieve, as long as we are in this life, there is always more work to be done.

So the task is infinite not in the sense that it is too difficult for us to achieve, but in the sense that there is no point at which we are
justified in relaxing our efforts. In this vein Kant claims that virtue is always in progress yet always starts from the beginning. But it is not true, as Kant goes on to say, that in this life virtue is unattainable so that all we can hope for are finite approximations to it. It is always beginning, because whether we have achieved our goal or failed, we still have to strive to become holy in the days ahead.

**Holiness as Rationality**

What, then, is holiness? I have already remarked that the meaning of the Hebrew word *kadosh* is separation. As Gerhard von Rad pointed out, the holy may be understood as “the great stranger in the human world.” So the most obvious way to interpret Leviticus 19:2 is in terms of separation or even isolation. But *separation* is a vague term. For much of Jewish history, it meant that Israel should separate itself from the other nations of the earth and from actions that bring defilement. Thus Abraham is commanded to leave the home of his father and set out for a new land. But again one must ask: What kind of separation is intended? Should Abraham’s journey be taken literally or metaphorically? Does Judaism see itself as standing outside of culture, as Hegel thought, or as playing an important role within it?

To philosophers in the rationalist tradition, separation is not a matter of geography or genetics but of intellectual vision. Reason is needed to reject ignorance and superstition and accept the first two commandments, which Maimonides considers the essence of the religion. Maimonides emphasizes, however, that the human tendency to think in material terms and therefore violate the first two commandments is universal and can be overcome only by a lifetime of study and practice. While Jews may inherit a body of knowledge that reveals the folly of this material thinking, in Maimonides’ opinion they do not constitute a separate species and do not acquire a leg up on the rest of humanity by virtue of their birth. By the same token, physics and metaphysics are available to the people of every nation, a fact Maimonides could scarcely deny given the enormous debt he owed to Aristotle, Ptolemy, Alfarabi, and Avicenna. There is even some evidence that he recognizes the possibility of gentile prophets. Recall that the differences between things in the created order pale into insignificance compared with the overwhelming difference between the created order and God. Since God does not have a race, gender, or social function, we are encouraged to see that these divisions are not ultimate and to hope for the day when all people are
able to look beyond them. Just as Israel is asked to love a God who is separate, it is asked to love the stranger or non-Israelite, who is separate as well.\(^8\) Note that when Maimonides describes human perfection at the end of the *Guide* (3.54, p. 635), he does so in a way that avoids any hint of parochialism: “Through it [true opinions concerning divine things] man is man.”

Whether we think of intellectual vision in terms of Job repenting before God or of Kant’s transformation of a person’s cast of mind (RWL, p. 43) is not important at this point; the issue is whether we can separate that part of ourselves that is time-bound and pleasure-seeking from that part that is capable of looking at the world from a higher, broader perspective. It is this sense of separation that is captured in Bahya’s claim that because the intellect is a spiritual entity, it is a stranger to the material realm.\(^8\) In the present context, being rational does not mean being cool or apathetic. Though it may involve disengagement from material concerns, rationality does not lead to withdrawal into oneself but rather to greater involvement with spiritual matters. Looked at another way, rationality implies that one can achieve enough objectivity to approach God in selfless fashion, forsaking personal demands or any hope of material reward. It is true that Kant and Cohen speak of holiness as the sanctification of the self, but it is well to remember that they are talking about the noumenal self, the one free from sensuous input and capable of acting for the sake of duty.

It could be said, therefore, that reason in the sense here intended is not satisfied with anything partial or particular, which is to say anything finite. Rather than a faculty that comes to the aid of desire by calculating the most efficient means for realizing an end, these thinkers conceive of it as a motivating force of its own, what they characterize as a love or longing for perfection.\(^9\) Maimonides is hardly alone in comparing the knowledge of God to romantic attachment.\(^9\) All agree that nothing perfect is ever given to sense, which is why it is dangerous to rely on the imagination in thinking about God. Along these lines, Kant, following Plato and mimicking Bahya, speaks of reason’s “spiritual flight” from the material world.\(^9\) This is, I suggest, an appropriate way to interpret Abraham’s spiritual flight from Ur and the Israelites’ spiritual flight from Egypt.

In the last analysis, the thinkers I have examined all believe that *imitatio Dei* requires a rational awakening. We can quarrel over the superiority of theoretical to practical reason, but if my interpretation of Maimonides is right, the differences between them become harder to identify as we approach the highest levels of human awareness. By
the same token, we can reject Maimonides' belief in a heavenly intelligence that serves as a bond between God and humans and we can question his conception of a spiritual leader who begrudges time spent with other people. His description of prophecy is not only extreme but speculative. At Guide 3.51, p. 624, he says that he cannot provide guidance for how to achieve it.\(^9\) Perhaps he is thinking of the prisoner who escapes from Plato's cave or the forty days and nights Moses was on the mountain. In either case, we know that his own life was divided among community leadership, a prolific literary career, and a demanding medical practice.\(^9\) In fact, he claims in a famous letter to Samuel ibn Tibbon that he often pushed himself to the point of exhaustion.

In view of these difficulties, it would be better to say that human perfection is reached when a person sees God's mercy extending over all of creation so that it is impossible to deal with anything without being reminded of God.\(^9\) It may be true that such a person renounces everything other than God, but in this context renouncing something does not mean holding it in contempt. Maimonides was well aware that Jewish Law asks one to honor parents, love the stranger, heal the sick, and comfort mourners. And he was also aware that God looked over the entire created order and saw that it was good. Though he sometimes speaks of bodily functions in a contemptuous manner, his real point is that the prophet will view everything other than God not as a self-subsistent entity but as further evidence of the beauty of God's governance of nature (\(GP\) 3.51, p. 620). In other words, everything other than God exists by the grace of God and thus cannot satisfy reason's quest for perfection. That is why the prophets are in God's presence even when they are involved in day-to-day activities.

If Maimonides is right, the prophet will be exceedingly humble and treat every recipient of God's grace with tenderness and compassion. What she will not do is look upon a recipient of God's grace as worthy of worship. When it comes to worship, she will follow Isaiah in viewing the nations of the earth, the cedars of Lebanon, and the beasts of the field as nothing \textit{compared with God}. But that does not mean that they have no value in their own right. Such is Maimonides' understanding of holiness.

That what passes for reason can be arrogant, cruel, chauvinistic, and dogmatic no one will deny. But the same can be said of holiness or religious commitment in general: Efforts that begin as an attempt to sanctify life have resulted in torture, bigotry, and fanaticism. It does not follow, however, that the goal of sanctifying life has to be given up. The claim that the rationalist thinkers have on our atten-
tion is that if holiness is possible, and the commandment expressed at Leviticus 19:2 can be fulfilled, then rationality in their sense must be possible as well. This means that it must be possible for reason not only to establish the truth of propositions but to motivate and give meaning to worship of the heart. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Maimonides says early in *Guide* (1.2, p. 23) that reason is the image of God in us. Given the context, this remark can mean only that we become holy to the degree that we embody rationality with all the consequences that follow from it, including the fact that reason must recognize its own limits. In this way, rationality is not just a virtue but a sacred obligation.