

Article

# Everything, Everywhere, All at Once: Maimonides on the Afterlife—Updated

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the view of the afterlife that emerges upon a straightforward and literal reading of the works of Maimonides that pre-date his *Guide to the Perplexed*. This view, whether or not it truly reflects the underlying intentions of Maimonides, has a central place in Jewish philosophy to this day. The view has to face a number of well-known objections. I argue that once the background metaphysics and epistemology has been appropriately updated to reflect some of what we have come to know over the intervening centuries, an intriguing eschatology emerges. The result is a conception of the afterlife that is Maimonidean in spirit and which can face down the objections that plagued its intellectual predecessor.

**Keywords:** Maimonides; Gersonides; afterlife; eternity

## 1. Introduction

Maimonides passed away 819 years ago. But even in the years proceeding his death, it was already a matter of controversy as to what sort of afterlife he believed was in store for himself (and others). Josef Stern (forthcoming) recently argued that we should recognize Maimonides as having put forward two competing accounts of the afterlife. The first is the “intellectualist” account to be found in his earlier works (his commentary to the *Mishna*, and his *Mishneh Torah*). The second, the “sceptical” account, was advanced in his later philosophical work, *Guide for the Perplexed*.

According to his later account, as Stern understands it, we can know very little at all about the afterlife, and anything discursive that can be said about it will be purely equivocal and homonymous. The most that can really be said, on this sceptical account, is that “some immutable thing, whatever it is, survives [our] death” (Ibid., p. 1). This paper will focus exclusively on the earlier “intellectualist” account, to be found in works that pre-date the *Guide*.

Despite its focus, this paper is not primarily historical. My aim is, first, to sketch the broad contours of what could be called the official and explicit Maimonidean “intellectualist” account of the afterlife, steering closely to the plain meaning of his words, without getting into weighty questions as to how much of what he said he really meant. That is to say, my first focus is the officially stated position of the pre-*Guide* Maimonides, as that position would be most readily understood by his readers, then and now. This reconstruction is important, even if it deviates widely from the true underlying intentions that academic scholars of Maimonides would seek to discover.<sup>1</sup> It is important because my reconstruction is faithful to how Jews in the pews (so to speak) most likely understand Maimonides’ words, as they are presented in texts (such as his commentary to the *Mishna* and his *Mishneh Torah*) that are still widely studied by the Jewish laity.<sup>2</sup> What is the view that they most likely receive from that study?

Once that ground has been laid, I address a number of philosophical concerns that emerge with the official account. Is the view at all plausible? Even if it is, can it claim to be consistent with the weight of the Jewish tradition that came before Maimonides? Some



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of these concerns can be allayed in straightforward ways that do not deviate from what the Maimonidean texts explicitly lay out. Some of these concerns, by contrast, cannot be allayed unless we are willing to update the background metaphysical and epistemological commitments of our reconstructed Maimonides. What I find interesting about these updates is that, in ways to be defined later, they could claim to be Maimonidean in spirit.

Given that I am working to update the official, explicit account of the earlier Maimonides, rather than to probe into his actual intentions, it should be readily understood that my point is not to establish what Maimonides would say, in response to critics of his official account, if only he were still alive to answer them. The idea is to *update* the official account (whether or not it ever really reflected the underlying beliefs of Maimonides) in ways that could plausibly be described as Maimonidean.

In other words, this paper hopes to make a contribution to Jewish philosophy by taking a view that is readily attributable to Maimonides, in texts that are now central to the Jewish tradition, and updating that view in ways that are distinctively Maimonidean, in order to avoid serious concerns that otherwise undermine this view's potential to serve as part of a live Jewish eschatology. What emerges, I hope, is a distinctive and beautiful conception of the afterlife, consistent with all that is promised by Jewish Scripture, based upon the explicit early account of Maimonides, which can claim to capture the spirit of that view, while escaping its pitfalls.

## 2. Maimonides on the Afterlife, the Messiah, and the Resurrection

When Maimonides describes the afterlife, he does so in terms of a completely disembodied state.

In the world to come, there is no body or physical form, only the souls of the righteous alone, without a body, like the ministering angels. Since there is no physical form, there is neither eating, drinking, nor any of the other bodily functions of this world like sitting, standing, sleeping, death, sadness, laughter, and the like. Thus, the Sages of the previous ages declared: "In the world to come, there is neither eating, drinking, nor sexual relations. Rather, the righteous will sit with their crowns on their heads and delight in the radiance of the Divine Presence" [Tractate Berachot 17a].

(*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance, 8:2)<sup>3</sup>.

Clearly, Maimonides presents this talk of "garlands upon their heads" as a metaphor, since without a body, they will have no heads (*Ibid.*). The agenda that Maimonides explicitly pursues, as he tries to articulate an authoritative characterisation of the Jewish picture of the afterlife, is to wean us off of an embodied model of the world to come. The pleasures that God has in store for us are not physical. They are the intellectual pleasures of the beatific vision. He continues as follows:

Lest you think lightly of this good, imagining that the reward . . . is for him to eat and drink good foods, have intercourse with beautiful forms, wear garments of linen and lace, dwell in ivory palaces, use utensils of gold and silver, or other similar ideas, as conceived by [some of] those foolish and decadent people among the Arabs, [i.e., those] who are flooded with lewdness.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the sages and men of knowledge know that all these matters are vain and empty things, without any purpose. They are only considered of great benefit to us in this world because we possess a body and a physical form. All these matters are the needs of the body. The soul only desires them and lusts for them because of the needs of the body, so that its desires will be fulfilled and its health maintained. In a situation, where there is no body, all of these matters will be nullified.

(*Ibid.*, 8:6)

It is interesting to note that Maimonides here associates a corporeal conception of the world to come with folk-Islam.<sup>5</sup> Augustine and Aquinas, by contrast, associated a corporeal conception of the world to come with *Judaism*—or, at least, with the Hebrew Bible. As

far as they were concerned, the sophisticated picture of a disembodied afterlife was not revealed until the advent of the *New Testament* (see *Summa Theologiae* I, II:91:5, and *Contra Faustum* iv).

Augustine and Aquinas have a point. After all, if you search the Hebrew Bible for its discussion of the world to come, or the day of the Lord, you will see a depiction of the coming of a messianic king, you will hear talk (if you pay very careful attention) of the resurrection of the dead, you will be introduced to a vision of universal justice—but all of this happens here on earth. The notion of a disembodied heaven, for all that the Rabbis of the Talmud may have waxed lyrical about the beatific vision, is conspicuously absent from the Hebrew Bible. And, indeed, there are influential Jewish accounts according to which the eternal life that awaits us is exclusively post-resurrection—an embodied eternal life—ushered in by the coming of the Messiah. Following Nachmanides, and others, Aaron Segal ([forthcoming](#)) adopts just such a view.

Why should we believe that, in addition to the earthly Kingdom of the Messiah, Judaism holds a promise of a disembodied afterlife? Maimonides answers this question in conversation with the 64th chapter of Isaiah. It seems that he would suggest the following translation of the third verse of that chapter: “And nobody has ever grasped or heard, and no eye has seen, besides you, God, that which will be done for those who wait for Him.” Following the Talmudic sages (tractate Sanhedrin 99a), Maimonides gleans from this verse the notion that all that is described by the prophets is something *other* than the good that awaits the righteous in the very end—since not even the prophets have grasped, heard, or seen, that particular goodness. Accordingly, the Biblical descriptions that we *do* have of the eschaton, which focus only on the Messianic era, do so not because the Messianic era is the ultimate good that awaits us. Rather (and here we can already detect notes of Maimonides’s later, more sceptical account), it is because that ultimate good, which lies beyond this life, and lies even beyond the Messianic era, cannot truly be described at all (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance, 8:7).

The picture of the Messianic era, as described by Maimonides, is unadorned with much miracle or wonder. All the Messianic era seems to be, as presented by Maimonides, is a time in which the Jewish people are no longer subjugated by their enemies or by the sort of worldly concerns that distract people from learning Torah and doing good deeds, thereby attaining a place in heaven. The coming of the Messiah, in other words, will make it easier for people to get into heaven. Why? Because it will usher in a geopolitical situation in which it will be easier to live a life of study, worship, and good deeds. I quote at length:

For these reasons, all Israel, [in particular,] their prophets and their Sages, have yearned for the Messianic age so they can rest from the [oppression of] the gentile kingdoms who do not allow them to occupy themselves with Torah and mitzvot [i.e., religious commandments] properly. They will find rest and increase their knowledge in order to merit the world to come. In that era, knowledge, wisdom, and truth will become abundant. [Isaiah 11:9] states, “The earth will be full of the knowledge of God.” [Jeremiah 31:33] states: “One man will no longer teach his brother, nor a man his colleague. . . [for all will know Me].” And [Ezekiel 36:26] states: “I will take away the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.” [These changes will come about] because the king who will arise from David’s descendants will be a greater master of knowledge than Solomon and a great prophet, close to the level of Moses, our teacher. Therefore, he will teach the entire nation and instruct them in the path of God. All the gentile nations will come to hear him as [Isaiah 2:2] states: “And it shall come to pass in the last days that the mountain of God’s house shall be established at the peak of the mountains. . . [and all the nations shall flow to it].” [Nevertheless,] the ultimate of all reward and the final good which will have no interruption or decrease is the [disembodied, posthumous] life of the world to come.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the Messianic age will [merely] be [life within the context of] this world, with the world following its natural pattern except that sovereignty will return to Israel.

The Sages of the previous generations have already declared [Tractate Sanhedrin 91b]: “There is no difference between the present age and the Messianic era except [the emancipation] from our subjugation to the [gentile] kingdoms.”

(Ibid., 9:2)

This picture of the eschaton includes no reference to the resurrection of the dead. Surely, the resurrection of the dead would be a noteworthy miracle. But, if the Messianic era is an un-miraculous period, in which the world continues to run “according to its natural fashion”, then it is hard to see room for the dead rising out of their graves. Moreover, if the life we have after our death is uninterrupted, as Maimonides promises, then there would seem to be no space, in this picture, for the resurrection (which would seem to constitute an interruption in the flow of our posthumous lives). The accusation was quick to arise: Maimonides rejects the Biblically rooted doctrine of the resurrection of the dead.

In order to rebut this criticism, Maimonides wrote an entire treatise dedicated to the topic, his *Treatise on the Resurrection*. The gist of the explicit content of this treatise can be summed up in three main points: (1) you cannot fairly say that Maimonides *ignored* the doctrine, since he explicitly ruled in his *Laws of Repentance* (3:6) that those who reject the resurrection have no share in the world to come. (2) The resurrection of the dead is something that *will* happen. We know that it will happen because the Bible prophesizes it. If it is going to happen, God must have a good reason for it, but it is still not the *ultimate* reward held in store for the righteous, and that is why it was not important to dwell on it in Maimonides’s characterization of the eschaton and the world to come. (3) The reason that it is so severe a sin to deny that the resurrection will happen is because it amounts to a denial of God’s ability to make it happen. Given God’s promise that it will happen, it is incumbent upon us to believe that it will.

It has been argued that Maimonides did not *really* believe in the resurrection but that he thought it was a harmless enough falsehood for the masses to believe in (perhaps, even, a falsehood that was beneficial or somehow necessary for them to believe in) and that he did not want to risk the political or social damage (to him or to others) of explicitly denying it. He had left enough clues for the enlightened to infer his true position. Let the masses continue to believe in the harmless nonsense of a bodily resurrection.<sup>7</sup>

My intention is not to arbitrate the debate between those who claim that Maimonides only paid lip-service to the resurrection and those who claim that his defence was sincere. At this stage of the game, we are merely seeking to reconstruct the official, explicit account to be found in a straightforward reading of his pre-*Guide* writings. According to that official account, as clarified by his *Treatise* on the topic, the messianic era will be a time of very few open miracles, save for the resurrection of the dead, which *will* happen at some point in that period.<sup>8</sup> Even though it will occur, the resurrection, on this picture, is a side-show: a distraction from the real and eternal good that awaits us in the disembodied state that we are granted, if we are worthy, only while our bodies are dead.

Two main questions emerge about the resurrection, as it factors into the officially stated view of Maimonides. First, Maimonides does not tell us what God’s *reason* for the resurrection will be. What sort of reason *could* there be? Second, he tells us that the disembodied afterlife will be uninterrupted, but would the resurrection not count as an interruption? Before we turn to these questions, we need to put more details on the table.

### 3. The Metaphysics of the Afterlife

Maimonides distinguishes between the *nefesh* and the *neshamah*, which are two Hebrew words often used to describe the soul. As far as Maimonides is concerned, the *neshamah* is something like the life-force that animates the body. The *nefesh* is, according to Maimonides, something else entirely:

The form of this [*nefesh*] is not a combination of the fundamental [physical elements] into which it will ultimately decompose, nor does it come from the *neshamah* so that it would require the *neshamah*, as the *neshamah* requires the

body. Rather, it is from God, from heaven. Therefore, when the matter [of the body], which is a combination of the fundamental [elements], decomposes, and the neshamah ceases to exist—for [the neshamah] exists only together with the body and requires the body for all its deeds—this form [i.e., the *nefesh*] will not be cut off, for this form does not require the neshamah for its deeds. Rather, it knows and comprehends knowledge which is above matter, [it] knows the Creator of all things, and exists forever.

(*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of the Foundations of the Torah, 4:9)

The reward for a life well lived is the chance, granted to a person's immaterial *nefesh*, to gaze eternally on "knowledge which is above matter," and to know its Creator.

But what exactly is this *nefesh*? In his *Guide for the Perplexed* (I:70), Maimonides describes the *nefesh* in terms of the intellect. And there is no reason to think that this represents a change of heart. But here, it is important to distinguish the intellect, thought of as (1) the human potential to learn and to assimilate knowledge, from the intellect thought of as (2) that which a person attains by actualising that potential over the course of a life. It is only the second sort of an intellect that, according to Maimonides, survives the death of the body (*Ibid.*).

Maimonides is clearly drawing here from the Aristotelian tradition which, as interpreted by Alexander of Aphrodisias, distinguishes among three types of intellect, which came to be known as (1) the material intellect, (2) the acquired intellect, and (3) the agent/active intellect. The agent/active intellect is often associated with God himself, although Maimonides treats it as one of God's creations (*Guide for the Perplexed*, II:11).

The material intellect is a passive receptacle—the blank intellectual slate with which we are born. As the material intellect receives information that flows to us from the active intellect, we build up a collection of intellectual cognitions, which we call *the acquired intellect*. It is this acquired intellect, which each of us construct throughout our lifetimes, which Maimonides considers to be the immortal *nefesh*. It is this *nefesh* that survives our death and enjoys the ultimate reward held in store for the righteous.

Is this really an afterlife? What survives the death of a person, it seems, is just the abstract propositional content that that person received from the active intellect.<sup>9</sup> But surely, that is just another way of saying that the active intellect, along with all of its propositional content, some of which you once had the pleasure of grasping, is all that really survives. Even if the acquired intellect *does* survive as a distinct entity, alongside the active intellect, the acquired intellect is not *you*. It is just the stuff you learnt. The active intellect—which certainly continues to exist—equally certainly is not you. Is this really an afterlife at all? It does not sound like a personal one. Stern ([forthcoming](#)) quite appropriately dubs it an "afterdeath", rather than an afterlife!

Imagine that two people happened to learn all and only the same things during their lifetimes. What survives of them will be identical: the single set of propositions that they both learnt. At best, what is happening here, is that two people are somehow merging into one, after death. At worst, both of them collapse back into the active intellect after their death, into the grand set of all abstract propositions that any mind ever has learnt or will ever learn. So, either there is no *personal* afterlife on the picture of Maimonides (see, e.g., [Sirat 1985](#), p. 170; [Rudavsky 2010](#), pp. 102–5), or there is not really anything worthy of being called an afterlife at all (see, e.g., [Pines 1979](#)); all that is really surviving is the active intellect into which our acquired intellects all collapse.

If Maimonides *did* believe, along with traditional Rabbinic Judaism, that the disembodied stage of the afterlife is personal, he certainly did not explain, given his philosophical commitments, how that could be. Thankfully, Gersonides dedicates an entire book of his *Wars of the Lord* to working out a theory of the afterlife that coheres with everything Maimonides says, but which also seeks to address, explicitly, what sort of experience is had by the surviving soul, and in what sense the surviving souls can be individuated. Whether or not Maimonides would have endorsed this extension of his view is beside the point.



What matters for our project is that the extension is consistent with the official, explicit position of the early Maimonides.

To grasp what Gersonides adds, we might start off by thinking of an acquired intellect as a set of propositions—the propositions that you have come to know throughout the course of your life. If this is the case, then it is clear that there is going to be overlap between acquired intellects. Some of the propositions that I know are known by other people too. Now, it is very unlikely that any two people know only and exactly the same propositions, such that their acquired intellects will be completely co-extensive. But even if they are, Gersonides thinks that there is more to an acquired intellect than that. An acquired intellect is not *merely* a set of propositions. It is, he says, a “unity”. And thus, he says the following:

One piece of knowledge can be common to Reuben and Simon [and] yet differ in them insofar as the kind of unity differs in them; so that, for example, the unity in the acquired intellect of Reuben differs from the unity in the acquired intellect of Simon.

(*Wars of the Lord* I:13, p. 224)<sup>10</sup>

As Steven Nadler explains, what gives each acquired intellect its unity and identity “is both the amount of knowledge it involves and the content or character of that knowledge—not just its items, but also the way they are connected or synthesized” (Nadler 2001, p. 90). This might be enough to ensure that each surviving intellect is distinct from the others, although Nadler demurs (Ibid., p. 91)—what if two people learnt all the same things, in all the same ways?

Perhaps Nadler worries unfairly. Conceivably, one could build enough into the notion of a “way of learning something” to make it astronomically unlikely, if not altogether impossible, for two people to have learnt all the same things in all the same ways. But certainly, more would need to be said.<sup>11</sup>

Maimonides, like Aristotle before him and Gersonides after him, presents emotions as being connected to the body. This is why Maimonides tells us that there will be neither sadness nor laughter in the world to come (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance, 8:2). But what is common to Maimonides and Gersonides, it seems, is the thought that there is a sort of intellectual *pleasure* that accompanies the cognition of eternal truths, which *is not* grounded in the body, but is—rather—a feature of the life of the intellect itself. The acquired intellect *enjoys* gazing upon the things that it knows. And this enjoyment will only be intensified when it is freed from the body and from the shackles of time. Gersonides explains the following:

We have some idea of this pleasure from the pleasure we derive from the little knowledge we now possess which subdues the animal part of our soul [so that] the intellect is isolated in its activity. This pleasure is not comparable to the other pleasures and has no relation to them at all. All the more so will this pleasure be greater after death; for then all the knowledge that we have acquired in this life will be continuously contemplated and all the things in our minds will be apprehended simultaneously, since after death the obstacle that prevents this kind of cognition, i.e., matter, will have disappeared. . . After death, [the intellect] will apprehend all the knowledge it has acquired during life simultaneously.

(*Wars of the Lord* I:13; pp. 224–25)

Freed from the distractions that come with being embodied and the limitations of the human brain, the soul, after it dies, will get to *enjoy* all of the intellectual riches that it accumulated in its life and to enjoy them in a new, undistracted, harmony of simultaneous cognition.

How, you might wonder, does this picture map onto the notion of a heaven that is granted to the righteous rather than to the merely *knowledgeable*? The answer to that question supposedly lies in the Aristotelian virtue ethics to which Maimonides and Gersonides subscribed. On their view, true wisdom cannot be attained without ethical virtues, and true virtue requires wisdom. The more wisdom you manage to accumulate in your life, the

richer will be your afterlife. And, apparently, this is appropriate since the truly wise are always virtuous, and *vice versa*. The less wisdom that you manage to accumulate, the more impoverished your afterlife will be—and, on this account of virtue—that serves you right!

#### 4. A Critique of the Maimonidean Conception of the Afterlife

Even if Maimonides can individuate each acquired intellect, with the help of Gersonides, such that there is at least and at most one acquired intellect per person, it is still not plausible that any person is identical to their acquired intellect. A person is not a unified set of propositions. That is just not the sort of thing that a person is. It is all very well for such a thing to survive, but that thing would not be me.

In fact, if the afterlife really is given to sets of propositions, rather than to people, it remains something of a mystery as to how pleasure really gets into the picture. Is a set of propositions, however it might be unified, the sort of thing that can *enjoy* itself? And, even if it can enjoy itself, why should I think that my own posthumous survival consists in that set enjoying itself, since I am not, nor could I ever be, a set of propositions?

Furthermore, given an Aristotelian epistemology, all that we really know for sure is general and universal. The particular facts that you accumulate, such as the knowledge of your name, and the name of the capital of Brazil, for example, do not really count as knowledge for an Aristotelian, since these are not general facts that can be known for certain by *a priori* deduction from first principles. So, on the Maimonidean–Gersonidean view, your acquired intellect does not even carry your personal memories with it, into the afterlife, even if it does get, depending upon how much wisdom you accumulated while alive, to experience an uninterrupted intellectual joy. It only takes its “knowledge” with it. This gives us even more reason to think that what is surviving is not us! We will remember nothing that made our lives distinctive.

Maimonides, we have seen, is able to tie his conception of the afterlife to his belief in just reward for the righteous, but only by tying ethical and intellectual excellence together so tightly that he leaves no room for the possibility of the simple righteousness of an uneducated saint. Must we deny that such people exist, or, if they do, must we deny that they go to heaven?

When we add all of these concerns to the two that we have already mentioned regarding the resurrection, the list of worries amounts to the following five concerns:

1. His officially stated view leaves us with no idea as to why there should be a bodily resurrection.
2. His officially stated view, that the disembodied afterlife is without interruption, makes it difficult to see how there could be a resurrection at all, unless—of course—the disembodied afterlife has to wait until our second, post-resurrection, death. But, if that is the case, what happens to our soul between our first death and the resurrection?
3. It is not easy, on his officially stated view, to individuate every posthumous person (even if, for Gersonides, it is very unlikely, it is still not technically *impossible* that two people would know all and only the same things, in all and only the same ways, and therefore merge into one person in the afterlife).
4. What survives, on his view, being a set of propositions with no particular memories, is not really us.
5. His view is inherently elitist, making no room for any significant afterlife for simple, uneducated, saints. This may not have bothered Maimonides, but it is likely to bother others. It is likely to bother any of his readers who are emersed in the Jewish tradition. It certainly bothers me!

In what follows, I advocate an update to Maimonides’s conception of the human soul, and I argue that this update, in a very tangible way, stays true to the spirit of Maimonides. With this update in place, we will be able to escape from problems 3, 4, and 5, but will give rise to two new problems—problems 6 and 7. Thankfully, problems 6 and 7 can be solved alongside problems 1 and 2, with details of the officially stated Maimonidean account that were there before I updated it.

## 5. Maimonides Updated

Maimonides maintains that theological conclusions—to the extent that they can be drawn at all—can only be derived using at least some empirical premises. He writes (*Guide for the Perplexed*, I.71) the following:

I have already told you that nothing exists except God and this universe, and that there is no other evidence for His Existence but this universe in its entirety and in its several parts. Consequently the universe must be examined as it is: the propositions must be derived from those properties of the universe which are clearly perceived, and hence you must know its visible form and its nature. Then only will you find in the universe evidence for the existence of a being not included therein.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, Maimonides was convinced that Aristotelian physics gives us an excellent description of the fundamental principles governing empirical phenomena in the sublunary realm:

I hold that the theory of Aristotle is undoubtedly correct as far as the things are concerned which exist between the sphere of the moon and the centre of the earth. Only an ignorant person rejects it, or a person with preconceived opinions of his own. . . which lead him to ignore clear facts.

(*Guide for the Perplexed*: II.22; see also II.24)

And thus, we have the rough outlines of a Maimonidean methodology for philosophical theology:

1. If theological knowledge is possible, it must be attained via knowledge of the natural world.
2. Only an ignoramus or a dishonest apologist would disregard the clear and certain findings of Aristotelian science, regarding the sublunary world.

Maimonides was not committed to the second of these principles because the findings of Aristotelian science are *a priori* and indubitable. On the contrary, it was never a mark of ignorance, or religious extremism, to disregard particular teachings of Aristotle, *per se*. Rather, the Aristotelian way of thinking was, in the days of Maimonides, the consensus among all educated people with whom he was in contact. A consensus of experts is worthy of respect. To discard such a consensus, without weighty evidence on your side, would—indeed—be the sign of ignorance or extremism. Accordingly, today, one might think that the appropriate way to do justice to a Maimonidean methodology would be to adopt the following update to principle 2.

- 2\*. Only an ignoramus or a dishonest apologist would disregard the clear and certain findings of contemporary science.<sup>13</sup>

These two planks of a Maimonidean methodology for philosophical theology need to be balanced out by a third.

According to Maimonides, Jewish history gives the Jew reason to believe in the existence of the God who revealed himself to them in a national theophany at Sinai (see *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of the Foundations of the Torah, 8:1–3). So, we *do* know something about God even before we come to engage in the sciences. Indeed, traditional Judaism believes that God reveals a great deal about himself through our canonical texts. It also believes that those texts have to be viewed through the prism of the Rabbinic tradition. The Maimonidean places a premium upon science because she recognises that the philosophical truths embedded in the Jewish tradition might be deeply buried, such that our knowledge of the natural world should take a *lead* in guiding our interpretation of Jewish tradition. But the tradition itself will also play some role in guiding our interpretation of scientific data (see *Guide* II:25).

In short, Sinai teaches us that God exists, and that he wills for us to obey his commands. But science will take the lead in telling us how to understand the revelation, including what to take literally and what to relate to allegorically. We have to give weight, in light of



Sinai, to the various and varied Jewish sources (containing as they do, buried wisdom), on the one hand, but we must let science lead our interpretation of those sources, on the other hand. Accordingly, the third plank of our methodology can be formulated as follows:

3. We have an antecedent knowledge that God exists. Descriptive and discursive knowledge of God, by contrast, and to the extent that it is possible, can only be achieved if we allow the sciences to take the lead in our interpretation of the texts of the evolving and ongoing Jewish tradition.

This three-part Maimonidean methodology gives great deference to contemporary science. Since our science is different than the science of Maimonides, some parts of the picture of the afterlife that we have sketched will have to change. In light of those changes, we will arrive at a conception of the afterlife that escapes from three of the five problems that we have identified. Here are the changes that we must make.

First, the hard and fast distinction that Aristotelians draw between the intellect and the emotions is no longer sustainable, given what we are reliably told by psychologists and cognitive scientists about the emotions and the role that they play in our intellectual life (See for example [Damasio 1994, 2003](#); [Schwarz 2012](#); [Helm 2009](#)). If there is no longer good reason to draw such a distinction, then there is no longer good reason to think that an intellectual life can survive without an emotional life. To be clear, the emerging consensus is not merely that emotionality plays an important role in human cognition, for this would be a merely contingent fact about how humans reason. The emerging consensus is that emotionality plays an *essential* role in any conceivable system of cognition capable of overcoming some of the intellectual obstacles that humans navigate with the help of emotions (See for example [Prinz 2004](#)) and that any hard-and-fast distinction between all emotional and all cognitive states is unsustainable (see for example [LeDoux and Brown 2017](#)).

Second, we no longer tend to think of knowledge acquisition as the reception of overflow from the active intellect. Advances in neurology, psychology, cognitive science, linguistics, and more make a wholly naturalised account of knowledge acquisition plausible, an account that would have more explanatory power than talk of overflow from an active intellect.

Third, few epistemologists today would say that only *a priori* knowledge counts as knowledge. Perhaps epistemology does not progress in the way that the natural sciences do, but—in light of the second plank of our Maimonidean methodology—we might think that a consensus of experts, whatever the subject matter of their expertise, is not to be lightly dismissed. Those who study knowledge today do not tend to restrict their study to the *a priori*.

You might think that a philosophy that gives great deference to the natural sciences of today would lean towards physicalism. That would then make it very difficult to speak of a disembodied afterlife at all. But the weight of the Jewish tradition, and its talk of souls, will exert some pressure on any thinker committed to our Maimonidean methodology. Of course, if physicalism were conclusively proven, then the Maimonidean would be compelled to reinterpret the tradition accordingly. But where no conclusive proofs can be found, the weight that our Maimonidean methodology gives to the sciences is defeasible. If the weight of the *tradition* stands squarely behind a disembodied afterlife, then a contemporary Maimonidean need not capitulate to the physicalist without a fight.

Having said that, if, in the face of contemporary science, there is any philosophically respectable suggestion, according to which some important part of us is *immaterial*, the likelihood is that we would be looking at something distinctly Cartesian. Descartes had good reason to think that the immaterial component of a human being—if such a thing exists—is the seat not just of our intellect, but of our consciousness. Indeed, it is the alleged failure of physicalism to account for *consciousness* that has given Cartesian dualism a fresh lease of life in contemporary times (see [Kripke 1980](#); [Chalmers 1995](#)). And thus, for the Maimonidean, looking to find an intellectually respectable avenue, in today's scientific and philosophical climate, that allows for a disembodied afterlife, some sort of Cartesian

dualism might suggest itself. This would allow us to relate to each person's soul as a unique immaterial substance with its own haecceity.

Perhaps, then, the following picture, given these post-Maimonidean developments, captures the spirit of the original (official) picture, without neglecting what we have come to know (or believe) in the past 800 years or so. We are Cartesian souls, characterised by distinctive personalities, sensibilities, and emotional landscapes. While embodied, our brains provide us with an interface for accumulating and accessing experiences of the world, knowledge, and memories. When we die, we no longer have a body with which to accumulate new embodied experiences. Instead, the embodied experiences that we had when alive continue to shape the contours of our personality and inner lives in our afterlives.

Given the naturalised epistemology motivated above, in which knowledge is accumulated via embodied experiences and interactions, we at least have reason to fear that, after we die, having lost our bodies, we can no longer accumulate any new knowledge.<sup>14</sup> It is plausible to think that we would not be able to interact with others if we were bereft of our bodies, which tend to function as the interface between us and our surroundings. But, what we *might* be able to do, is to gaze upon all of the things we have learnt—not just the conclusions of *a priori* syllogisms, but every particular item of knowledge—and every experience we have had and reflect upon them.

Our ability to access memories, in this state, will no longer be hampered by the limitations of our brains, at any particular point in time, and we will be able to experience all of our life's episodes, and all that we have learnt, accessing all of our memories and knowledge, and beholding it all at once, bathed—perhaps—in a new light.

This update to the Maimonidean picture helps us to escape from problems 3, 4, and 5. According to problem 3, it is not easy, based on the Maimonidean view, to individuate every posthumous person. Once the view is updated, however, that problem goes away. Posthumous persons do not all collapse into one another or into the active intellect. They are numerically distinct souls, thought of as immaterial substances.

According to problem 4, what survives is not really us. Once updated, that problem disappears. The updated view encodes a more plausible account as to who and what we are. We are not the things we know. We are minds that think, feel, remember, and experience.

Finally, once the view has been updated, it loses its elitist tinge since there is no need, on the updated account, for cognitive excellence in order to enjoy a rich and pleasant afterlife. The afterlife on offer will be more pleasant to the extent that the life that preceded it was a life well-lived, irrespective of a person's intellectual capabilities. To the extent that a person's life was shameful and regrettable, then the afterlife to follow will be one of an eternal cringe-inducing recollection of a life that was put to bad use. This all puts pay to problem 5.

## 6. The Emergence of Problems 6 and 7

Our updated account has helped us to escape from problems 3, 4, and 5. Unfortunately, new problems emerge. Let us call the first of these problems, problem 6. The problem is this: there is good reason to think that the afterlife we have sketched would eventually become excruciatingly boring.

Some have argued that immortality, of *whatever* sort, would eventually become tiresome. If the afterlife had no end, on this view, we would become painfully bored and/or drained of all energy and motivation (see for example [Williams 1973](#); [Kagan 2012](#); [May 2009](#)). But these worries tend to be brushed aside by members of the Abrahamic religions. The promise of eternal bliss, granted to the righteous, is a central feature of these religions, and those who yearn to cleave to God do not tend to imagine that the pleasure, honour, and thrill of so doing would ever grow old. And yet, one might worry that the particular version of immortality promised by our updated Maimonides is particularly vulnerable to the problem of boredom.

John Martin Fischer and Benjamin Mitchell-Yellin write the following:

It is frankly bizarre to suppose that humans will ever get to the point where all the novels, or all the interesting novels, or all the novels worth writing will have been written. Or imagine that you set out to read and appreciate novels. Perhaps you are ambitious, and knowing that you are immortal, you set out to read and appreciate all the interesting novels that have ever been written. Let us suppose that somehow a complete list of these novels is generated at the time you undertake this project. Of course, it will take a long time to get through the list—so long that it is plausible to suppose that a new list, reflecting the interesting novels at the time of completion of the original list, will contain many new entries. Again, why suppose that there will not be new interesting novels emerging over time, and why think that there will ever be a time when there are no new such novels to read?

(Fischer and Mitchell-Yellin 2014, p. 358)

But if the only novels you can read in heaven are the ones you read while you were alive, then the threat of boredom is a much less bizarre supposition. They ask the following:

Could you imagine saying, “I have loved many, many people. At this point I have gotten what there is to get out of love. Is not there anything new?” This again would seem to be off the mark and inappropriately reductionistic. It leaves out the “particularity” and wonderful magic of love—its ineffable or perhaps irreducible experiential qualities. And it is not at all evident that love—either new love or old love—would lose its beauty and transformative, uplifting power in an immortal life.

(Ibid., p. 360)

I quite agree. I would cherish an infinitely long time with my wife. But if the only conversations I would be able to have with her were word for word identical with conversations I had already had, and if I could have no new experiences with her, and could not even share with her the new insights I had gained by reflecting upon our shared experiences, the picture very quickly becomes less desirable.

On the Maimonidean account, *without* any update, what survives our death is simply not the sort of thing that could experience boredom; indeed, it is hard to understand the claim that it could even experience the pleasure that it has been promised, let alone any boredom. But once the update has been made, and what survives is recognizably us, but no longer able to accrue new embodied experiences, and forced forever to contemplate the experiences we had while alive, the spectre of excruciating boredom and frustration becomes more and more salient. This is problem 6.<sup>15</sup>

Problem 7 is easy to state. The afterlife we have sketched is unfair to people who have, through no fault of their own, lived miserable lives. To be sentenced to eternally relive a life that was full of pain and suffering, through no fault of your own, is to add insult to injury. This model of an afterlife will only exacerbate the injustices that were all too prevalent in life itself. And why is it fair that those among the wicked, who prospered in this life, will get to enjoy, eternally, the replay of the joyous lives that they wickedly led? The picture is no longer elitist, but it is still deeply unfair.

Thankfully, I think that an often underappreciated element of the original Maimonidean picture has the power to solve problem 6 and 7, alongside the two problems that we have not yet addressed, problems 1 and 2.

## 7. Solving Problems 1, 2, 6, and 7

I think it is clear that Maimonides himself would have thought of his afterlife as falling outside of time. Time, based on the classical Aristotelian conception of it, is the measure of physical change. Nothing physical occurs in the Maimonidean afterlife. Accordingly, everything that the *nefesh* experiences there, it experiences simultaneously, in one eternal present. This is what Gersonides seems to be describing when he talks of our apprehending

all of the knowledge that we have acquired during our lives “simultaneously” (*Wars of the Lord* I:13, p. 225).

The timelessness of our disembodied afterlife helps us to escape the worry of boredom. Every moment of your life will be present to you in your afterlife, but your afterlife experience itself will not be extended in time. Boredom only occurs when experiences *are* extended in time. Boredom therefore *cannot* occur in a Maimonidean afterlife.

What about loneliness? Well, the loneliness of the picture will be mitigated to the extent that every experience of any other person, every cherished moment had with your beloved, every experience of God, will be constantly *present* to you in the afterlife, allowing you to see new depths in each such encounter. Problem 6 disappears.

Moreover, it is the timelessness of the Maimonidean afterlife (especially in its updated, but even in its original, form) that allows Maimonides’s official account to give the resurrection a central role and to escape from problems 1 and 2.

Boethius says that time is to eternity as a circle is to its centre point. Let us then think of the timeline as a circle with a small gap at the top, to mark where the beginning and end of time occur, as in Figure 1. The basic idea here is that, although different events in time can be different distances from one another, God’s eternal present is like the centre of the circle. This entails that any two events in time, however far apart they may be from each other along the circumference of the circle, are equally close, or present, to God.

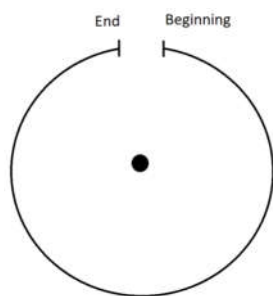


Figure 1.

To grasp the eternal nature of a Maimonidean afterlife, we can repurpose this diagram. Let the line of the circle represent your own personal history, with your birth at the beginning and your death at the end. The middle of the circle represents your afterlife. Every moment of your history is equally present to you in the eternal present of your afterlife.

There is a sense, of course, in which this afterlife is not *after* anything or *before* anything. It does not occur in *time*. “Afterlife” is just a figure of speech. Your embodied life is *ontologically* prior to your afterlife, since your afterlife gives you a new perspective on the events of your life. But your embodied life is not *chronologically* prior to your afterlife.

Now we can feather into this picture a commitment to the resurrection of the dead, without it constituting an interruption to your afterlife. Think of your life as comprised of two acts, separated by a temporal gap. Your afterlife still lies at the centre of the circle, such that each moment of each act of your life is equally present to you there, as in Figure 2.

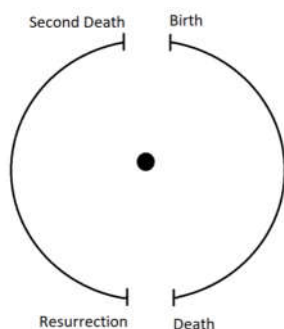


Figure 2.

The gap between your death and your resurrection constitutes a gap in your life, but it is no gap in your afterlife. Your afterlife cannot be interrupted, since it is not extended in time. That puts problem 2 to bed. What is more, we can start to tell a compelling story as to why God would promise us a resurrection, thereby responding to problem 1.

Rabbi Josef Albo attributes to Maimonides the view that the afterlife of the righteous is improved in virtue of the time they spend on earth after the resurrection.<sup>16</sup> And of course, it *would* be (especially on our updated account). The experiences had in act 2 of our lives—our post-resurrection lives—occur in a geopolitical context free from war, hunger, and injustice. Think of the great emotional, spiritual, and intellectual experiences that we could accumulate in such circumstances. Right now, so to speak, our souls, in their eternal present, are already enjoying those times that lie ahead (and even based on the original Maimonidean picture, our souls are—at least—enjoying the intellectual fruits of their post resurrection *studies*, even if they are not enjoying the much richer, emotional, and psychological fruit available on the updated picture).

God did not start creation with the coming of the Messiah, because the Messianic period, which we will enjoy after the resurrection, will be all the sweeter for being the collective achievement of the Jewish people, and of mankind as a whole, the apex of a long, complex, and ultimately triumphant, history. We have given the time-period of the resurrection an integral role to play. Problem 1 evaporates.

What about problem 7? Well, the role that is played, in this picture, by the resurrection, can help to alleviate that concern. We can hope that whatever pain and suffering was endured by a righteous person, in act 1 of their lives, will be more than outweighed by the wonderful experiences of act 2, which were made possible by our collective pre-messianic actions and travails. When looked at as a whole, from the perspective of eternity, we can hope that the combination of acts 1 and 2, of any righteous life, will be wonderful things to behold.

This is especially so if you add in the belief that the sins of the repentant and the suffering of the righteous will somehow be erased from history, such that they will not be present at all to our souls in heaven (see [Lebens and Goldschmidt 2017](#)). Moreover, to the extent that the wicked do not get to enjoy the full extent of the goods that are shared in act 2 of our lives, their eternal afterlives will pale in comparison to the afterlives of the righteous, however pleasurable the first acts of their lives may or may not have been. They will eternally rue the fact that they were not better behaved in act 1 so as to have a better act 2. In a sense, problems 1 and 7 are answered together. It is precisely the role that the resurrection plays in justifying the distribution of afterlife pleasure that makes it an essential part of the picture.

This picture also gives a new sense to the claim that, right now, we can experience a taste of eternity,<sup>17</sup> since right now, some part of us is doing just that, in its own eternal present, and—to the extent that we lived a good life—that part of us is enjoying what it is experiencing.

By updating the Maimonidean picture, we have freed it from outmoded assumptions and from various problems concerning the justice of the picture, as well as the extent to which it was able to individuate distinct afterlives. What is more, the thing that survives, on this picture, is plausibly identical to you, since it is a thinking, feeling, being that thinks it is you, and remembers being you.<sup>18</sup> If we are worthy, then our lives will have a wonderful second act, which will justify and/or overwhelmingly outweigh whatever pain and suffering we experience in the first act of our lives. Moreover, from its vantage point in eternity, our disembodied souls get to experience each and every episode of this glorious life, and each and every interaction with those we love, as eternally present. If the picture is coherent, then it constitutes an attractive picture of what the promise of the Jewish afterlife might hold in store.



## 8. A Disclaimer about Coherence

I finished the previous section with a conditional claim. I said that *if* the picture is coherent, then it constitutes an attractive model for the afterlife. The reason for this note of uncertainty is that the entire picture, in order to escape from the problems that would otherwise beset it, requires us to have an afterlife experience that transcends time. This feature of the account was indigenous to Maimonides. It was no part of my update. But I do worry about whether it is coherent.

Charles Hamblin puts the point well. A red book on my table can, in my experience, “turn green for half a second or half a century but it cannot turn green durationlessly and instantaneously at the stroke of twelve, remaining red at all times earlier and later” (Hamblin 1971, p. 128).<sup>19</sup> To experience the book’s greenness, it will have to appear to be green for some stretch of time. A durationless phenomenal experience is inconceivable to me, which leads me to fear that the Maimonidean conception of the afterlife, with its notion of a timeless experience, may well be incoherent.<sup>20</sup>

But perhaps the problem here is down to a certain ambiguity. We must distinguish between (1) the temporal extension of the *content* of a phenomenal experience and (2) how long that experience takes to have. These two measurements can come apart. For example, you could have a dream in which seventy years goes by, and there is a sense in which the content of this phenomenal experience has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and traces the passage of seventy years, even though it took you much less time to actually dream the dream. You were only asleep for a few hours. What Hamblin’s thought-experiment motivates is the claim that the *content* of a phenomenal experience must exhibit duration. But all that is required to make sense of our Maimonidean afterlife is the claim that one can have an experience in no time at all—whatever the content of that experience may be and however long the passage of time *represented* by that content may be.

Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann have tried to make sense of the seemingly widespread medieval view, according to which God experiences “the complete possession all at once of illimitable life” (Boethius 1973, p. 422.5). As Stump and Kretzmann understand this phrase, it would be wrong to think of God’s phenomenal experience as durationless. On the contrary, God is aware of which events in history precede which other events—which are earlier and which are later. Instead, we should think that God’s experience involves “infinite duration, beginningless as well as endless,” and yet, we should recognize, that because God’s life is not spread out in time, and because God does not suffer change or temporal flow, God experiences each moment of this infinite duration, “all at once” (Stump and Kretzmann 1981, p. 433).

What does this mean? It seems that three claims are being made. First, God has an experience that does not take him any time to have (since God is outside of time). Second, the experience has content that represents the entire passage of our timeline. Third, even though God, as he looks down at the entire timeline, sees multiple events, and even though he sees them laid out in succession, with some earlier than others, he takes in every one of these events all at once. The all-at-onceness of this experience might suggest that he sees a sort of deep unity that makes sense of all of the discrete events, bringing them together into a coherent whole of some sort. Be that as it may, for our purposes, what matters about the all-at-onceness is just that all of the various events in the timeline that God sees are co-present to him. He sees them, ordered in their proper succession, and he sees this procession of events in, so to speak, one glance.

The fact that I cannot know what infinite duration all at once would feel like is no more surprising than the fact that I cannot know what it would feel like to possess the echo-location of a bat. And, we should not forget that Isaiah, according to Maimonides, has told us that the afterlife is not such that we can properly picture it. And yet, I find myself asking, could something really be called an *experience* if it took no time at all?

Thankfully, I have found that there are (at least) two ways to think oneself into the possibility of such experiences.

Neuroscientists have discovered that the human brain can process an image to which the eyes were only exposed for 13 milliseconds (Potter et al. 2014).<sup>21</sup> But if our brains were more powerful, surely we could do it in 12 milliseconds, and 11 milliseconds if more powerful still. But what if our brains were infinitely powerful? Who is to say that there is a limit as to how short the temporal extension of an experience has to be, if only there was no limit on the power of the brain? And if there *is* no limit, who is to say that there needs to be temporal extension at all, for an experience to occur, if only we were not hampered by our limited neurological machinery?<sup>22</sup>

My second way in is as follows: consider the notion of the specious present. When you visually experience motion, you experience more, it seems, than a series of instantaneous, static images. When experiencing something in motion, it seems as if what is present to the mind has an earlier and a later. And thus, what we call the specious present is an interval of time long enough for that which is earlier to be distinguished from that which is later, though short enough that we can say that both are directly present to consciousness. But how long, in objectively measurable time, is the specious present?

Well, as with the shortest amount of time necessary for processing a single image, this will differ from brain to brain. Perhaps some people have a longer specious present than others. Some people, for example, can hold a whole melody in their head, at once. Others only a few notes. Perhaps what makes humans different from God, *vis-à-vis* time, is that for God, the entire span of history is just one long specious present. It is not that it is happening quicker for God. It is that God's specious present is all-inclusive. Perhaps that is all it means for infinite duration to be experienced all at once. It does not mean that all things seem to be happening simultaneously for God. Rather, and as Olla Solomyak describes it, "Events experienced within a single specious present are experienced together . . . but as successive, occurring over the duration that they do" (Solomyak 2021, p. 421).<sup>23</sup>

To summarise, I am not certain that we can talk meaningfully of experience outside of, or beyond, time. Our conception of the afterlife also seems to rely upon a B-theoretic metaphysics of time, such that all moments of time are available for their eternal observers to observe, which adds metaphysical controversy to epistemological difficulty. But, greater minds than mine have thought it coherent (from Boethius and Maimonides to Stump and Kretzmann). Furthermore, we have seen two methods for thinking ourselves into agreeing with those greater minds.

If we ramp up to infinity the speed at which a mind processes experiences, and ramp up equally the length of the specious present of that mind, we arrive at one experience, outside of time, that experiences all times co-presently, but it experiences them in their succession. According to our updated Maimonidean account, we experience our own temporal extension in just this way from the perspective of the afterlife. There, we experience everything, everywhere, in our pre- and post-resurrection lives, all at once.

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## Notes

- 1 For an excellent example of such historical scholarship, one could do no better than (Stern, forthcoming), although other examples will be cited later in this paper.
- 2 This is especially true of his *Mishneh Torah*, of which many observant Jews have a custom of studying either one or three chapters a day. By contrast, the *Guide to the Perplexed* tends to be studied only by particularly intellectually inclined Jewish laypeople and by some similarly inclined Rabbis and educators, alongside academics.
- 3 In this paper, I use the translation of Eliyahu Touger, with a few amendments of my own. His translation is available at [https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh\\_Torah,\\_Repentance?tab=contents](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah,_Repentance?tab=contents) (accessed on 12 December 2023).
- 4 Here I have slightly tampered with Eliyahu Touger's translation to bring it closer to the original Hebrew. Touger's translation makes it sound as if Maimonides thinks that Arabs in general have the view that he is criticising and that they all therefore answer to the offensive description he formulates for those who hold it. First of all, Maimonides would have been well aware of the intra-Muslim debates among Ibn Sina, al-Ghazali, and ibn Rushd, about the nature of the afterlife (indeed, some of these thinkers may have been "the men of knowledge" to whom he goes on to refer); he would have been well aware that his own view is an intellectual descendant of the view of various Islamic philosophers; and—as a friend, colleague, and beneficiary of many Muslim intellectuals, politicians, and patrons—there is no way that he had a negative view of Muslims or Arabs in general. He is, instead, criticising what he takes to be a prevalent view in the folk-Islam of his day, a view that emerges based on a flat-footed reading of certain passages of the Quran.
- 5 see note 4 above.
- 6 I have slightly tampered with Touger's translation here, because his translation loses the crucial point that is clear in the original, that the reward of heaven is without interruption.
- 7 For an example of this sort of reading of Maimonides, see (Kirschner 1981); see also the discussion in (Stern, forthcoming, pp. 2–3), for a reductive account of Maimonides's account of the resurrection.
- 8 Admittedly, Maimonides does not (to the best of my knowledge) specify when the resurrection will happen. Nevertheless, Rabbi Albo assumes (*Sefer Haikarim*, Treaties 4, chapter 30) that, according to Maimonides, it occurs in the messianic age. That fact might already be enough to justify my endorsement of the same assumption, since I am interested less in Maimonides than in how Maimonides has been traditionally received. Moreover, Rabbi Albo's assumption seems justified by the fact that the resurrection in general Jewish folk-theology belongs to Jewish eschatology. Thus, the default assumption would be that the resurrection, if it occurs at all, occurs in the eschaton. The fact that Maimonides does not specify a time for its occurrence is, therefore, what justifies reliance upon the default assumption.
- 9 I call it "abstract" propositional content because, as will become clear later, the content in question is all *a priori*. It does not include empirical data from the senses or memories of particular moments in one's life. The content in question is perfectly general, *a priori* truths, like the truths of mathematics and metaphysics.
- 10 In this paper, I use Seymour Feldman's translation, (Gersonides 1984).
- 11 There is another worry that can be levelled against this entire strategy for preserving commitment to an individuated afterlife within the contours of a Maimonidean philosophy, as pointed out to me by an anonymous referee. In his *Laws of the Foundations of the Torah* (chapter 2), Maimonides discusses angels. He makes it clear that angels are forms that differ in what they know (law 8). But he still asks, at law 5, how they can be differentiated one from the other, since they have no body. Maimonides answers this question, differentiating the angels in virtue of the unique place that each one occupies in a chain of ontological dependence. As my anonymous reviewer concludes, "From here we see that difference in what is known is not a principle of individuation. . . From this it should follow that there is no possibility in distinguishing after death between Simon and Levi. Their disparate knowledge does not distinguish between them and there is no difference in their ontological position." This is a brilliant objection to the Gersonides strategy. A full response would require a paper of its own but let me sketch two possible avenues that one might pursue. Firstly, perhaps angels are not defined by what they know, which is why their knowledge cannot be what differentiates them. Posthumous souls, by contrast, are defined by what they know. This might allow for knowledge to differentiate them, even as forms without bodies. Secondly, perhaps some sorts of knowledge are more basic, ontologically, than others, and thus one might be able to establish a chain of ontological dependence across which souls would stratify, akin to the dependence relations that differentiate Maimonides' angels. Both responses would raise many concerns of their own. Thankfully, my updated Maimonides, with his commitment to Cartesian souls as substances, each with their own haecceity, will have an easier time differentiating posthumous souls, and so the problem Gersonides has to face will not pose a challenge to the view I ultimately present in this paper.
- 12 Throughout this paper, I use the translation of Michael Friedländer, (Maimonides 2000).

- 13 There may be different ways to articulate an authentically Maimonidean methodology for contemporary times. For further discussion of this topic, see (Lebens 2022).
- 14 In fact, you might worry that we have no reason to believe that a Cartesian soul, if such a thing exists, can really survive outside of a body at all. I have argued elsewhere, however, that the Cartesian does have reason, at least to presume, that her soul continues to exist even after the demise of her body (Lebens 2020).
- 15 An anonymous reviewer objects, “In an afterlife one’s consciousness may be so full of the available vision (whatever it might be) as not to have any thought [or perhaps to have any room for any thought] that could create boredom.” Shelly Kagan explores such a hypothesis about the afterlife, but worries that if the first-order experience of the afterlife is just so pleasurable or overwhelming as to make it impossible to have second-order thoughts about it, such as “this feels the same as it did yesterday,” then we would likely have lost much of what makes us distinctive as individual beings (Kagan 2012, pp. 241–43).
- 16 *Sefer Haikarim*, Treaties 4, chapter 30.
- 17 The Jewish sources for this claim are explored by (Segal, forthcoming).
- 18 Scott Davison put it to me (in correspondence) that this timeless being still could not be a person, since persons are essentially enduring or perdurant beings. To the extent that I too worry about the coherence of a timeless experience, I am upfront about sharing Davison’s concern (which I develop in the final section of this paper). But, since every experience had in the afterlife is tied up to, in some sense or other, the embodied experiences that that soul had in time, and since there do not need to be any phenomenal states, on this picture, whose internal content is durationless, I think that the worry is somewhat ameliorated.
- 19 I gleaned this source from (Zimmerman 2001).
- 20 This may be what has motivated thinkers from Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae*, Suppl. Q. 84, Art.3, Repl. Ob. 5) to Polkinghorne (2003, p. 14) to insist on some sort of temporal extension even to the disembodied periods of the afterlife.
- 21 This is much faster than the previous figure that neuroscientists had measured of 100 milliseconds.
- 22 An anonymous reviewer raises the concern that experience “involves the presence of the object of the experience and the experiential registration of that.” The reviewer assumes that this essential aspect of experience requires duration. That does not seem right to me. Why can the presence of the object and its registration not happen simultaneously? If a foot instantaneously appeared on a sandy beach, would there not appear, equally instantaneously, a footprint beneath it?
- 23 A similar thought was arrived at independently by Ariel Meirav (in work in progress).

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