

Book Review

Salomon Maimon, *Gesamtausgabe*. Band I,1: Aufsätze 1789–1790, ›Versuch über die Transscendentalphilosophie‹. Hg. **Maria Caterina Marinelli and Ives Radrizzani**. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2023, pp. xii + 513, ISBN 978-3-7728-2453-1.

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Twenty years have passed since Frank (2004) declared the work of Salomon Maimon to be a newly discovered and fertile field of philosophical research. What we do not yet know, however, is whether the excellent work that has been carried out in that time represents the initial phase of an exponential growth or a steady, but shallower, linear incline. At the very least, editors Maria Caterina Marinelli and Ives Radrizzani have now completed the laudable task of delivering the initial volume of the first ever critical edition of Maimon's collected works. Considering that he has been poorly and unfairly treated by the history of philosophy, the fact that Maimon now finds his home at Frommann-Holzboog, in the company of both Fichte and Schelling, should come as some comfort to pundits of his philosophical thought. The entire edition is projected as being divided into two series: one for Maimon's German writings, the other for those which he composed in Hebrew. The editorial work of the first volume is outstanding and the editors' stated aim (2023, p. xii), of remaining "exegetically neutral", has been well and truly met. Given that Maimon was wont to deliver novel and unique interpretations of the work of other philosophers, it is highly welcome to see that the editors have successfully resisted the urge to intervene and correct (in accordance with more standard readings), focusing solely on the not unimportant task of providing researchers with the exegetical material they need to draw their own conclusions. The volume collects Maimon's *Versuch über die Transscendentalphilosophie* together with the other texts which he published in German in the brief but productive period between 1789 and 1790 (all but one of which originally appeared in *Berlinisches Journal für Aufklärung*). Though we would, I believe, be justified in challenging what seems to be the generally accepted assumption that *Versuch* represents Maimon's *magnum opus*, it nevertheless functions as the focal point of the collection in question. That aside, however, the shorter texts within the volume are not only historically significant but philosophically potent as well and constitute valuable reading for any and all researchers with an interest in either transcendental philosophy or classical German philosophy.

In the first article, *Probe rabbinischer Philosophie*, Maimon offers a translation of a brief section from the *Mishnah* and of Maimonides' commentary to it. The remainder of the text is dedicated to a consideration of the order of precedence between cognition and thinking, i.e., which presupposes which, before moving on to a short elucidation of the contents of Maimonides' own text. It is an exciting article for a couple of reasons. Firstly, it offers an excellent example of Maimon's approach to the history of philosophy, translation, and the characteristic way in which he is persistently delving behind superficial differences in modes of expression in search of essential points of agreement. By reading Maimonides together with, and through, Kant's critical philosophy, Maimon here reveals his perennial approach to philosophical exegesis: the solutions change, the methods for generating them and the problems they target, remain the same. Secondly, it offers the reader a glimpse of the germ of later thoughts, which Maimon develops in *Versuch einer neuen Logik*, concerning the way in which he understands (1794, p. xxi) general logic as necessarily presupposing transcendental philosophy. That this is happening in the context of Medieval Jewish philosophy makes it all the more compelling reading.

Ueber Wahrheit. Ein Brief des hrn. S. Maimon is an article which is based (ostensibly at least) upon a letter which Maimon sent to Samuel Levy on the topic of truth. A central argument of the text is that it is not the propositions produced by logically consequent thinking themselves which can, strictly speaking, said to be true, rather truth is something which pertains merely to the operation of thinking through which they are brought about. A valuable text in the sense that, by dint of this claim alone, the reader is granted insight into the way in which Maimon is attempting to move away from psychological conceptions of knowledge, where thought depicts or represents an "outside", and to connect contemporary epistemological discussions to Aristotle's concept of *apodeixis* (demonstration) – with which he was familiar by way of Maimonides. The contents of the text itself will later be reproduced in *Versuch* and is the first appearance of the metaphor of money and exchange to which Maimon will return on various occasions and for various purposes.

Was sind Tropen? sees Maimon explicitly engaging with Johann Georg Sulzer on the question of the metaphoric transposition of expressions which takes place within the everyday production and use of language. At stake here is what Maimon calls (2023, p. 39) a "transcendental concept", i.e., the general concept expressed commonly and collectively by both the immaterial and material sense of a term or, what he otherwise refers to (2023, p. 40) as the "transcendental expressions" of this concept. Maimon's general conclusion is that the majority of language use is not tropic or poetic, as Sulzer had argued, but merely prosaic instead. This is his way of saying that the actual, historical transfer of words, from one realm of experience to another, receives its rational justification/scientific explanation, not by an appeal to

the temporal order of this process, but to the logical relationship between the general and its particularizations instead. *Was sind Tropen?* will be re-hashed by Maimon in *Versuch* where, in the section on symbolic cognition, it is employed in emphasizing the way in which the philosophical study of language is inherently enmeshed within the philosophical project itself.

Written in the form of a commentary to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, with the main text itself being nested amongst a series of intratextual, self-reflexive annotations, *Versuch über die Transscendentalphilosophie* has proven a notoriously difficult work to interpret. While it has, thus far at least, been considered as constituting Maimon's *magnum opus*, he has often been accused, even by some of his most ardent supporters, of failing to put forward his own philosophical system. This was an accusation which Maimon himself firmly rejected (1793b, p. 219), and which can be understood as stemming from the conflation of the systematicity of thought with that of its presentation. A large part of the work centers and revolves around the *quid juris?* question and its relationship to the *quaestio facti*. Maimon is not entirely convinced that this knot has been satisfactorily loosened and attempts, what he will later call (Obereit 1792, p. 143), the "*salto mortale*" of reconciling the respective philosophies of Spinoza and Kant. By this he simply means that the *reductio ad impossibile* from which, as far as Maimon is concerned, the deduction of the categories ultimately derives its certainty (i.e., no categories, no experience), would need to resort to the postulation of an infinite intellect if it were ever to bear more than a merely hypothetical necessity. Key to understanding how, despite this fundamentally Kantian theme, Maimon is doing something other than merely elaborating upon the critical philosophy, is paying attention to the way in which he (2023, pp. 104f.) conceives of this question itself as being one and the same as two others: the connection between body and soul and the emergence of the universe from pure intelligence. Maimon was himself well aware (2023, p. 281) that the reduction of one problem to another would not at all be popular, especially not with the "professors", but was not one to judge the worth of his own philosophical thought in accordance with the *status quo*.

In *Ueber Wahrheit. Schreiben des Herrn Maimon an Herrn Tiefttrunk*, Maimon goes in direct dialog with Johann Heinrich Tiefttrunk, who had replied to, and disagreed with certain claims contained within, his earlier article on truth. The text moves rapidly through a range of topics which recur frequently in Maimon's work: logical *contra* metaphysical truth, the subjective necessity of synthetic judgments, the difference between logical objects and objects of logic, the need for a criterion whereby difference can be recognized, the importance of examples. The article then goes on to close with a brief discussion of the relationship of synonymy which Maimon believes (2023, p. 242) to hold between the concepts of *the good* and *the true*. The main argument is that while the former may relate specifically to actions and the

latter to objects (of thought), they are synonymous insofar as it is the correspondence between particular (maxim/particular judgment) and universal (moral law/general judgment) which is essential to both. The good is good, as far as Maimon is concerned, precisely because it is true. This line of reasoning not only summarizes his understanding of Kant's moral philosophy but will also become central to the further development of his own in later years.

In *Baco und Kant* Maimon takes the opportunity to interpret Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum* against the backdrop of Kant's critical project. On the one hand, the article functions as an invaluable tool for our interpretation of Maimon's understanding of transcendental philosophy – and of its relationship to empirical psychology. This it does by clarifying for the reader the way in which he chooses, here at least, to read Kant's brisk dismissal of Humean skepticism as being merely methodological in nature. Whereas Bacon proposes a system of scientific study, according to Maimon (2023, p. 355), by disregarding the question of the absolute universality of the concepts required for its legitimate operation, Kant seeks to explain the very possibility of this apriority by simply bracketing the question as to whether it is, in reality, possible or not. This central claim brings to light another fascinating aspect of the article, in that it exemplifies an *aporia* so fundamental to all of Maimon's work: the question concerning philosophical thought's ultimate (im)practicality. Bacon's philosophy is fruitful but lacks certainty, Kant's is necessary and universal but cannot be put to any use. The persuasiveness of the brief sketch Maimon offers of his own solution, which he refers to (2023, p. 365) as an "improved Lebinizism", and which he links to the concept of *anamnesis*, each reader is left to judge for themselves.

Ueber die Weltseele (Entelechia universi) represents Maimon's attempt to reinvigorate and renew the concept of the world soul by way of a reading of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's *Bildungstrieb*. As such, it is stimulating reading in terms of tracing the (unacknowledged) lineage leading to Schelling. Equally interesting, is the way in which Maimon here utilizes Leibniz to offer something like a sanitized "Spinozism" more palatable to his contemporary audience. Rather than resorting to a literal optimism, by positing a rational will responsible for determining the course of the universe from the outside, and in this sense a subtle kind of anthropomorphism, or a fatalism, which denies all rational order to the universe at all, the world soul (i.e. teleological course of nature) functions, in this article, as a middle path between the two. As such, it is essential reading for not only making sense of Maimon's conception of God and of the purposefulness of nature, but of his unique method of producing novel philosophical thought through the re-interpretation of others as well.

In *Ankündigung* Maimon makes known his plan to edit and publish a new philosophical periodical, but it is a document that works equally well as an

expression of Maimon's general disappointment with the supposedly enlightened society which he had sacrificed so much to be part of. While the projected periodical never came to fruition as such, there are striking similarities between the plan here related and the way in which Maimon will later describe (1793a/2019, p. 271/p. 238) his *Philosophisches Wörterbuch* as he briefly recounts his motivations behind its composition in his autobiography.

Antwort des Hrn. Maimon auf voriges Schreiben is a short article, written in the form of a letter, in which Maimon attempts to satisfy the demands made by Johann Andreas Riem, one of the editors of *Berlinisches Journal für Aufklärung*, that he clarify the general plan of *Versuch* as well as declare his philosophical allegiances (i.e., is Maimon a Kantian or not?). It is a text which is perhaps most valuable for its presentation of Maimon's unique understanding of the concept of the *thing in itself* and the way in which he connects it here (2023, p. 421) to the "general antinomy of thinking as such". Although he will not employ this phrase again, this antinomy, and the idea of infinite progression which adheres to it, is so central to all of Maimon's work. Finite, human thinking forever approaches, though never reaches, the ideal of a purely rational faculty – to which nothing is given, and everything thought.

The volume concludes with an appendix in which various texts of contextual importance are presented. These consist of three epistolary articles: two from Tiefertunk which engage with Maimon's own articles concerning truth, and the one by Riem to which *Antwort des Hrn. Maimon auf voriges Schreiben* functioned as a reply.

For much of the two hundred odd years since his death, Maimon has been judged by many as being little more than an interpreter of Kant – often a poor one at that. This enduring prejudice has undoubtedly been one of the reasons that a critical edition of his work has not appeared sooner. Now that it has arrived, however, I join the editors (2023, p. vii) in hoping that this first volume, together with those yet to come, will help change this ill-informed estimation of his work and that Maimon may be fairly judged on his merits as a philosopher in his own right.

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