

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATURE AND THE TORAH
IN MAIMONIDES' WRITINGS

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Abstract of Doctoral Thesis

In Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, there are explicit parallels between nature and the Torah that may be designated as follows: purposefulness, artfulness and generality.

- 1) **Purposefulness:** Both nature and the Torah reflect God's purposeful action (and both amaze man in their wisdom which he fails to fully comprehend).
- 2) **Artfulness:** Nature provides the needs of all living beings in artful coordination with their level of development, and in parallel fashion the Torah's commandments match the people of Israel's level of development and the habitual practices implanted in them by their cultural and historical environment.
- 3) **Generality:** Both in nature and in the Torah the laws are established in accordance with their general utility "in the majority of cases," without regard for the small number of exceptions.

These characteristics point to the **constraints** placed upon Divine action both in nature and in the Torah. Maimonides maintains that in the material world ends cannot be realized in direct fashion and without the use of means. The need for means in nature implies that they are also indispensable for the governance of human beings, who are an inseparable part of the material world and to whom the same constraints apply. Therefore, the Torah uses a ramified system of means and ends in order to realize its objective.

Despite these parallels that attest to the similarity between nature and the Torah, other passages in the *Guide* imply that there are also differences between them. In contrast to the Torah, nature does not operate on the basis of judgment, but by way of deep instinctual forces. In this context Maimonides says that the similarity between them regarding their manner of governance and operation is in name only. I show that this argument means that the difference between nature and the Torah stems from the fundamental distinction between natural and artificial actions. Being a "political constitution," the Torah falls into the realm of the artificial that operates by way of thought and judgment, as opposed to nature whose actions are implanted in it.

Based on an analysis of the parallels and differences between nature and Torah, it seems that the Torah can be viewed as a "political constitution" that imitates nature and continues its principles of action on the artificial level of human existence both in the means and in the objective. Even though Maimonides has reservations about the idea of "natural law" realized directly in a political constitution, he seems to maintain that the three principles mentioned above are copied from nature to the Torah with changes and adaptations for human nature and the artificial nature of the political constitution.

The main source upon which Maimonides bases this argument is God's revelation to Moses in the cleft of the rock. He interprets this source as a description of Moses' **scientific** recognition of the fundamental processes of nature (physics and biology) and their translation into modes of human governance (politics). These modes of governance are designated the thirteen attributes of mercy. I show that Maimonides divided these thirteen attributes into three groups that reflect the three most fundamental natural processes. According to him, prophecy translated these processes into the terms: lovingkindness, righteousness and justice.

Through an analysis of Maimonides' examples, I found that the term "nature" in this context relates to the natural governance of **animals** (biology), which serves as the foundation for the establishment of the Torah. An examination of this governance clarifies the objective of the fundamental processes of nature, namely, **the perpetuation of the existence of the animal species** (purposefulness). Parallel to this, the objective of the Torah is **the perpetuation of the human existence** of the political collective and the perpetuation of the existence of the individual through the survival of the rational soul. The necessity of using many, artful **means** to achieve this objective in the material world is also clarified (artfulness). And parallel to this, most of the Torah's commandments serve as **means** to achieve this objective. With this understanding it is possible to decipher the complicated teleological structure of the Torah's commandments that Maimonides proposes and to distinguish between direct means ("generally accepted" commandments) and indirect means ("traditional" commandments).

The artfulness in nature finds expression in the way that the means match the natural creature's level of development, and in parallel fashion the Torah matches the commandments to the people of Israel's level of development at the time it was given. The fundamental principle of this artfulness is leading the natural creature to its

objective without its knowing, as is expressed in the forces implanted in the creature through which it is unknowingly activated for the perpetuation of its existence. In parallel manner the Torah activates its subjects to unknowingly realize their ends by way of "necessary beliefs" and by means of reward and punishment that drive them toward proper action.

Nature's action "in the majority of cases" (generality) is also an expression of the constraints placed upon Divine action in the material world. Therefore, it is sometimes necessary to give priority to the perpetuation of the species at the cost of harm to the individual. In parallel fashion, even though the highest end of the Torah is realized by individuals, the urgency of perpetuating the polity necessitates that it be given priority. I show that this principle is applied in two forms; one stems from the incompatibility between **the essence** of the commandment and exceptional people and situations, while the second stems from the imprecise measure of the commandment and relates to the need for collective punishment.

I show that the action of "lovingkindness" reflects natural actions regarding which God can be identified as their "formal cause" and "teleological cause," and hence the purposefulness. "Righteousness" and "justice," on the other hand, reflect Divine action as the "efficient cause" of natural processes. "Righteousness" expresses the implantation of souls in matter (artfulness) and "justice" the mixing of matter ("in the majority of cases"). These two actions are performed through the movement of the sphere and therefore they are a consequence of the "efficient cause." The Torah which is a Divine-political constitution is the fruit of this understanding and it fashions the perfect polity in accordance with the fundamental principles found in nature.

The Torah's commandments can also be divided up, in correspondence to these three qualities, into three categories: commandments meant to perfect the intellect (lovingkindness), to perfect moral qualities (righteousness) and to perfect human actions (justice). It can also be shown that the structure of the commandments appearing in the *Guide of the Perplexed* (III, 35) and the structure of the commandments reflected in the *Mishneh Torah* give expression to this threefold division and highlight the purposefulness that characterizes the Torah in parallel to nature. From here it follows that Maimonides used this correspondence not only in his exegesis of the law of Moses, but also in the shaping of his halakhic enterprise.