

Maimon and Fichte on the Impossibility of Philosophical Atheism

Maimon i Fichte o niemożliwości filozoficznego ateizmu

YADY OREN

School of Jewish Theology, Universität Potsdam, Germany

yehuda.oren@uni-potsdam.de

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1974-9452>

Abstract: This article investigates the shared position of Salomon Maimon and Johann Gottlieb Fichte on the impossibility of philosophical atheism, despite the historical accusations of atheism directed at both thinkers. The method employed is a close comparative reading of Maimon's *Philosophisches Wörterbuch* (1791) and Fichte's *On the Basis of Our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World* (1799), contextualized within their biographical and cultural backgrounds. The analysis shows that while both thinkers reject traditional proofs for God's existence, they affirm the concept of God as either a logically necessary idea (Maimon) or a moral necessity grounded in practical reason (Fichte). The article concludes that for both philosophers, atheism is not merely false but conceptually self-contradictory, and that this shared stance reflects a post-Kantian transformation of theology from theoretical metaphysics to practical reason.

Keywords: Atheism; post-Kantian philosophy; Jewish-Christian relations

Abstrakt: Artykuł bada wspólne stanowisko Salomona Maimona i Johanna Gottlieba Fichtego w kwestii niemożliwości ateizmu filozoficznego, pomimo historycznych oskarżeń o ateizm skierowanych pod adresem obu myślicieli. Zastosowaną metodą jest dokładna lektura porównawcza dzieła Maimona *Philosophisches Wörterbuch* (1791) oraz Fichtego *O podstawach naszego przekonania o boskim rządzie świata* (1799), w kontekście ich biografii i uwarunkowań kulturowych. Analiza pokazuje, że chociaż obaj myśliciele odrzucają tradycyjne dowody na istnienie Boga, potwierdzają oni koncepcję Boga jako idei logicznie koniecznej (Maimon) lub moralnej konieczności, opartej na praktycznym rozumowaniu

(Fichte). Artykuł kończy się wnioskiem, że dla obu filozofów ateizm jest nie tylko fałszywy, ale także wewnętrznie sprzeczny, a to wspólne stanowisko odzwierciedla postkantowską transformację teologii z metafizyki teoretycznej w praktyczne rozumowanie.

Słowa kluczowe: ateizm; filozofia postkantowska; stosunki żydowsko-chrześcijańskie

The current issue focuses on the intersections between four categories of identity: Polish and German on the one hand, and Jewish and Christian on the other. The topic I would like to discuss concerns the encounter of all four: I refer to two of the most prominent figures of the first generation of post-Kantian philosophy: Maimon, of Jewish-Polish background, and Fichte, of Christian-German background. My concern is less with the background of the two thinkers per se, nor with the relationship between them against the background of early post-Kantian philosophy. Rather, my goal here is to address an issue on which they are surprisingly close, namely their understanding of the concept of God and its denial, namely atheism. More specifically, I aim to show that both argue for the impossibility of philosophical atheism.

For both thinkers, atheism represents a point of tension between their philosophy on the one hand and their biography on the other, between the way they perceived themselves and the way society perceived them. The accusation of atheism had a major impact on the lives of both philosophers. Despite their different backgrounds, Polish-Jewish for Maimon and Christian-German for Fichte, atheism was considered a scarlet letter in both cultures, and a person accused of it became *persona non-grata*.

For Maimon, the charge of atheism made him unacceptable to many in the Jewish community. In his autobiography, he recounts his tensions with the Jewish community and how they did not want him to be a teacher because of his alleged atheism.¹ Moreover, the accusation of atheism accompanied Maimon to his death and even beyond: To his death, according to some sources he was barred outside the cemetery like a heretic. And after his death, along with Spinoza, Maimon is considered “אחר” (other, alien), epikoros, heretic, someone who broke with tradition (Maimon 2018, 208-209, XXVI-XXVII). In terms of biography, Fichte was even more influenced than Maimon from the accusation of atheism. Fichte’s article “On the Basis of Our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World”, which we will discuss later, led to the well-known

¹ In a passage from his Autobiography, Maimon writes: “[...] the parents of these scholars were afraid that my lectures might lead their children astray and shake their faith by promoting independent thinking [...] They were worried – perhaps with good reason – that their children would go from one extreme to the other, from superstition to atheism” (Maimon 2018, 117). In another place he speaks of a professor who “tried to ruin my relationship with this worthy man by denouncing me as an atheist” (Maimon 2018, 230. See also: Melamed 2004).

Atheism Dispute, which eventually led to Fichte losing his position in Jena and his departure to Berlin.

But despite the charge of atheism, if one examines their own account of atheism, one would find that they not only denied that they themselves were atheists, but also denied the possibility of philosophical atheism altogether. The charge of atheism against the two philosophers comes from the societies in which they lived: for Maimon, from Jewish society, and for Fichte, from Christian society. Both philosophers, for their part, claim to represent Kantian philosophy when they say that, at least from this perspective, philosophical atheism itself is impossible.

I

Maimon's account of atheism can be found in various places in his writings, but the most systematic account of the concept can be found in his *Philosophisches Wörterbuch*, published in 1791. Let's take a look at how Maimon begins the entry on atheism:

Atheist (denier of God): Does this term deserve a place in a philosophical dictionary? Yes, but only to be banished from it forever. For if I show that the concept associated with this word contains something impossible in itself, and that consequently there can be no such thing, then this word, along with words such as 'hypogriph', must be assigned to a fable rather than to philosophy (Maimon 1791, 25).

For Maimon, atheism is a concept that entered philosophy by mistake. Atheism belongs more to fable than to philosophy. How does Maimon explain or justify his claim that atheism is not a philosophical concept? Maimon first distinguishes between the philosophical and the non-philosophical concept of God. Maimon admits that if God is understood in an anthropomorphic way, if He is limited to a certain nation (here he probably alludes to a certain Jewish understanding of God) – then atheism is not only possible, but even necessary. For if God is limited to a particular form or nation, then such a limitation contradicts the infinity, which necessarily included in the concept of God, and so this concept contains a contradiction.

But what about a consistent concept of God that is suitable for philosophical discussion, i.e., God as an infinite being who encompasses all perfections? Can there be no atheism in relation to such a God? Here Maimon distinguishes between two levels of denial: denial of the concept and denial of its reality – a distinction that corresponds to two philosophers of whom Maimon considered himself a follower, Leibniz and Kant. The concept of God as encompass-

ing all perfections – and here Maimon follows Leibniz – is entirely possible, because such a concept contains no contradiction. In other words, the concept itself is logically possible. For this reason Maimon states that “It is therefore impossible for anyone to deny this concept in itself, i.e. to reject it as impossible” (ibid).

But Leibniz went a step further, and like other philosophers such as Anselm, Descartes and Spinoza concluded that if this concept is logically possible – it is necessarily also real. At this point Maimon departs from Leibniz and follows Kant in criticizing the turn from possibility to reality. Similarly to Kant and against Leibniz, Maimon thinks that one cannot infer from logic to reality. The concept must have a corresponding sensible intuition in order to be considered real. This concept is thus problematic – in the Kantian sense, which means it is possible – but its existence is not proved. For Maimon, the turn from Leibnizian dogmatism to Kantian criticism reduces the concept of God from reality to possibility, but as utterly possible, the concept becomes undeniable. Thus atheism, in the sense of denying its possibility, is itself impossible.

But Maimon’s account of atheism does not end with the denial of the possibility of philosophical atheism. He tries to explain that criticism or Kantianism not only reduces the concept of God, but also finds a new place for it. As mentioned above, Maimon had personal experience with the accusations of atheism and wanted to show that criticism offers more than a reduction of the concept of God. For even if the concept is reduced to possibility rather than reality, as mere possibility it has a positive role. Here Maimon relies on the Kantian turn from a constitutive concept to a regulative idea:

Nor can it be said that this system [= Kant’s *Critique*] is harmful [= to religion], because reason, although it cannot demonstrate the objective reality of this concept, nevertheless recognizes its subjective reality as a universally valid idea that is necessary for all its corrections. This idea is therefore, although not of constitutive use, nevertheless of regulative use, in that it holds up before us an ideal of infinite perfection, to which we, by virtue of the nature of reason itself, must always approach (Maimon 1971, 26-27)

Maimon’s defense of the Kantian concept of God is that this philosophy does not end its account with a reduction of the concept of God from reality to possibility; as a possibility, it assigns to this concept a new role: as a regulative idea. Such idea creates an ideal “an ideal of infinite perfection, to which we, by virtue of the nature of reason itself, must always approach” (Maimon 1971, 27).

The concept of God is thus transferred from the realm of theory to that of practice: God is, for practical reason, an ideal of infinite perfection, to which, by the very nature of reason itself, we must always aspire. We will see that this

turn from theory to praxis is further developed by Fichte. But before we move on to Fichte, a note on Maimon's account. In this entry on atheism, Maimon is clearly trying to represent Kant. For Maimon, as we have seen, philosophical atheism is impossible, and therefore a true philosopher cannot be an atheist.

It is interesting that Kant would not necessarily agree. In specific, he refers to at least one concrete example of a philosopher who allegedly was an atheist, namely, Spinoza. In his *Critique of the Power of Judgement* Kant writes:

We can therefore assume a righteous man (such as Spinoza, for example) who firmly believes that there is no God, and (because it comes down to the same conclusion with regard to the object of morality) no future life either (KU, AA 5:453).

Maimon, for his part, would not agree with this characterization of Spinoza. In places where Maimon refers to Spinoza, he thinks of him as a pantheist, and so if Spinoza denies anything, it is the world and not God. Maimon therefore refers to Spinoza as an a-cosmist rather than an a-theist.² We will now turn to Fichte's account of atheism.

II

The text in which Fichte denies the possibility of philosophical atheism is, paradoxically, the text that led Fichte to be accused of atheism. I am thus referring to the text "On the Basis of Our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World", published in 1799, which ultimately led to his dismissal from the University of Jena and his departure for Berlin.

Fichte begins the text by explaining why establishing our belief in God through proofs is the wrong way to achieve faith. In doing so, Fichte follows Kant who, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, showed the failure of traditional proofs for the existence of God. But here Fichte explains the problem of proofs from a different perspective. He does not aim to show why proofs are unsuccessful, but why they are not even *required*.

A demonstration or proof, according to Fichte, is a process in which the demonstrated concept is reached only as a *result* of a logical deduction. Faith in God, however, is already present in mankind *before* any proof. The philosophers who demand a proof, had this concept prior to any proof. Fichte says:

² "It is hard to fathom how Spinoza's system could have been made out to be atheistic, since the two systems are diametrically opposed. The atheist system denies the existence of God; Spinoza's denies the existence of the world. Thus, it should really be called acosmic" (Maimon 2018, 64).

What has so far almost universally driven people away from this point of view is [...] that people have seemed to assume that through these demonstrations, faith in God should first be brought into humanity and demonstrated to it. Poor philosophy! If such [faith] is not already present within man, I should at least like to know only where your representatives, who are surely only human beings themselves, get what they want to give us through the power of their proofs? – It is not so. Philosophy can only explain facts, and by no means produce any itself; except that it produces itself as a fact (GA I/5 348).

The concept of God, according to Fichte, does not need demonstrations, because it is necessarily contained in human consciousness. If this concept required demonstrations, how would we ever get to such a concept? In other words, why would we ever ask for a demonstration if we do not have that concept in the first place? Faith in God is not something that needs to be demonstrated. Rather, it is a fact that exists in humanity and needs to be clarified. The role of the philosopher is not to make people believe in God, but to explain to them why they *already* believe in God. More strongly, the philosopher should be able to explain why the concept of God is a *necessary* concept that cannot be denied, and why the denial of this belief – atheism – is impossible because it involves a self-contradiction.

To explain belief in God, Fichte contrasts two possibilities: either this belief comes from the sensible world, from nature, from experience, or it comes from the world beyond the senses. With the latter expression, Fichte does not mean a spiritual world of angels or non-sensible entities. Rather, Fichte is referring to the realm of morality, since morality and freedom do not come from the sensible world, but are only fulfilled in it.

Now Fichte examines each of the alternatives: Can we derive our belief in God from the sensible world of nature, from experience? Fichte alludes in the text to two earlier attempts to establish our faith in God on deductions from nature. The first is something like the cosmological proof of God's existence, i.e., to demonstrate that the world must have a first cause. But such a proof has already been refuted by Kant. Another option is Spinozism, which does not deduce God from nature, but identifies God with nature. But then, according to Fichte, God is reduced to the level of nature in the sense that God is denied freedom. Such a God does not correspond to the Godhood that our original faith, the original fact, had.

If the option of understanding our belief in God from the sensible world, from nature, is denied, we are left with the other option: the supersensible world. The concepts of freedom and morality are better suited to explain the concept of God. Indeed, we understand God to be free – even the most free. In the same way, we understand God to be good – the ultimate good. We

understand God to be beyond sensibility, independent of nature, and capable of making the whole world good. All of these qualities belong not to the realm of nature, the Not-I, but to the realm of morality – to the I as it precedes nature, to the supersensible world of ethics. These do not belong to the world as it is, but as it *ought* to be. The role of philosophy is to explain why such a concept of God is necessary.

Morality, as we have seen, does not come from experience. Nothing in nature tells us what our moral duty is, or how we should behave in the world. Moral duty precedes our sensible perception, and in this sense it is supersensible. The question now is how this supersensible world of ethics relates to the sensible world of nature. Fichte's answer is: morality becomes the goal of nature. Morality gives us a portrait of how the world and nature ought to be. In a formulation that has become famous, Fichte argues that for morality the world is the material of our duty ("Unsre Welt ist das versinnlichte Materiale unsrer Pflicht" GA I/5 352). The unreasonable nature becomes the aim of reason; the aim is to make nature reasonable, morally good. In Fichte's terminology of 1794: the not-I should become an I. This is, thus, the relationship between the pure supersensible I – and the world. How do we come from here to the concept of God?

We have seen that morality gives us duty, how we ought to act. But as finite beings we can only be responsible for how we act, but not for the results of our actions. The results are beyond our control. Here comes the role of belief in God. As finite beings, we cannot be responsible for the outcome of our actions. But without assuming that a good deed will lead to a good result, the good deed itself would be in danger of not being good. The whole distinction between good and evil might collapse, and with it the whole possibility of morality. To avoid this, we, as finite beings who are only responsible for the act, have to assume a non-finite being who is responsible for the outcome of the good deed. This would ensure that a good deed would lead to a good result. This brings us to the concept of God.

The role of belief in God is to ensure that the result of the good deed will be good. For Fichte, a world that is entirely moral as a result of our moral actions is itself the concept of God. As noted above, our understanding of God as free, moral, beyond nature, and capable of making the world good—all of these qualities come from understanding God as the ideal of a world that is perfectly good in accordance with moral duty. If this is the concept of God, we can understand what atheism would be, as Fichte states:

The true atheism, the genuine lack of faith and godlessness, consists in pondering the consequences of one's actions and not wanting to obey the voice of one's conscience until one believes one can foresee the good outcome. In doing so, one

elevates one's own advice above God's advice and makes oneself into a god. He who would do evil that good may come of it is a godless man. In a moral world government good can never come of evil, and as surely as you believe in the former, it is impossible for you to think of the latter. – You must not lie, even if the world should fall to pieces over it (GA I/5 253).

To deny our belief in God is to deny that a good deed leads to a good result, which in turn undermines the possibility of morality itself. But since morality is an undeniable fact, a denial of the concept of God is also a denial of our own self, and thus leads to self-contradiction.

III

We have seen that despite being accused of atheism, both Maimon and Fichte deny that philosophical atheism is possible. What the two post-Kantian philosophers have in common is the turn from theory to practice, from God as a theoretical concept in need of proof, to God as the moral goal of the world. Both philosophers agree that God as such has a positive role.

The difference between Maimon and Fichte, I believe, lies in the relationship between theory and practice. For Maimon, who, like Kant, distinguishes between the two, atheism is impossible because the theoretical concept of God is perfectly possible, although we cannot know whether it is actual. For Fichte, on the other hand, the concept is not only perfectly possible, but in the realm of morality, it is even a necessary concept. This step is made possible for Fichte by his unification of theory and practice.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Fichte, Johann Gottlieb. 1962–2012. *Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, edited by Reinhard Lauth et al. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1908. “*Kritik der Urteilskraft*.” In: *Gesammelte Schriften*, herausgegeben von der Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Band 5, 165–485. Berlin: Georg Reimer.
- Maimon, Salomon. 1791. *Philosophisches Wörterbuch, oder, Beleuchtung der wichtigsten Gegenstände der Philosophie: in alphabetischer Ordnung. Erstes Stück*. Vol. 1. JF Unger.
- Maimon, Solomon. 2018. *The Autobiography of Solomon Maimon: The Complete Translation*, edited by Yitzhak Y. Melamed and Abraham P. Socher, translated by Paul Reitter. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Melamed, Yitzhak Y. 2004. “Salomon Maimon and the Rise of Spinozism in German Idealism.” *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 42(1): 67–96.

YADY OREN is teaching Jewish philosophy at the School of Jewish Theology at the University of Potsdam. He earned his Ph.D. from Bar-Ilan University for his dissertation on Plotinus and Fichte. He has published works on the history of philosophy and Jewish philosophy from late antiquity to the 20th century. His publications focus on philosophers such as Plotinus, Spinoza, Kant, Maimon, Fichte, Hegel, Hermann Cohen, and Rav Kook. Dr. Oren is currently working on a habilitation project at the University of Potsdam concerning Kant's "Thing in Itself".