"Maimonides and Spinoza on the Knowledge of Good and Evil: A Reappraisal of W.Z. Harvey"

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ABSTRACT:  In an unsung yet excellent paper, W.Z. Harvey set out to explain how both Maimonides and Spinoza have similarly problematic views on the nature of the knowledge of good and evil. In it, he proposed an answer to solving the problem. In the many decades since, debates surrounding this topic have flourished. A recent paper by Joshua Parens, his conclusions mark a distinction between Spinoza and Maimonides that threaten to undermine Harvey’s solution to the problem. I will argue that, although Parens’ distinction forces us to revise Harvey’s contention, Harvey’s argument is still generally valid.

KEYWORDS: Maimonides; Spinoza; Knowledge of Good and Evil; W.Z. Harvey

***Introduction***

A lot of ink has been spilled on the nature of good and evil in Maimonides and Spinoza—both within the scope of each thinkers’ respective philosophy and within the scope of comparative historical philosophy. This short paper is interested in the latter. The 12th-century Sephardic Jewish scholar Moses Maimonides (an exemplar of medieval Aristotelianism) and the 17th-century Jewish pantheist Baruch Spinoza (an exemplar of 17th-century rationalism) share some remarkable epistemological similarities, in spite of their widely different views on religion, politics, and metaphysics.[[1]](#footnote-1) One of these similarities is found in their accounts of the knowledge of good and evil (hereafter KGE[[2]](#footnote-2)). Maimonides and Spinoza both speak of good and evil in two seemingly incommensurable ways in their *magna opera,* *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Maimonides) and the *Ethics* (Spinoza).

In one sense, ‘good and evil’ are both *merely imaginative* notions for Maimonides and Spinoza—that is to say, that which is ‘good’ and that which is ‘evil’ varies across instances and contexts because they are not grounded in reality. The *knowledge* of good and evil we have on these accounts is of an impure form, as it is merely knowledgeof the imagination (which is opposite of knowledge of the intellect). The perfectly rational being, for both Maimonides and Spinoza, has no “true” knowledge of good and evil[[3]](#footnote-3); this is because knowledge of the intellect is knowledge of “necessary truths” and “truth and falsehood”, not of the “apparent truths” of the imagination. So in one sense, KGE in Spinoza and Maimonides exists in only in the imagination.

In another sense, however, Maimonides and Spinoza both suggest a *non-imaginative* sense of that which is “good” or “evil”, and that the knowledge of such seems to be of the rational kind. That which is “good” is either said to be what conforms to our purpose (Maimonides, see *Guide* III, 12-13) or said to be that which aids our *conatus*, or self-preservation (Spinoza, see *Ethics* IVD1-2). That which contradicts our purpose or *conatus* is said to be “evil”. So, in a different sense, KGE in Spinoza and Maimonides exists in the intellect.

We thus have a *prima facie* contradiction in Maimonides and Spinoza: how can KGE regard the intellect if it is knowledge that exists only in an inadequate way via the imagination? In an unsung yet excellent paper[[4]](#footnote-4), W.Z. Harvey attempts to resolve this apparent contradiction, by arguing that the problem can be solved by distinguishing between knowledge ofthe imagination and knowledge *discerned of* the imagination, the latter of which falls within the realm of the intellect.[[5]](#footnote-5) In essence, his argument is that the rational sense of KGE is indeed of the truth-and-falsehood sort for both Maimonides and Spinoza, but that it is knowledge gained by discerning between concepts of the imagination. I.e., Harvey contends that the intellect is “informed by”—or working with concepts that originated in—the imagination, as the intellect gleans knowledge of the truth-and-falsehood sort from concepts of the imagination. This schema thus allows for the intellect to have a species of KGE distinct from the imaginative sort of KGE. This sort of knowledge is teased ut in Maimonides’ and Spinoza’s handling of the ‘practical intellect’ (or *phronesis*).

Over the last several decades, there has been a lively debate regarding the role that the imagination plays in relation to the intellect in Maimonides and Spinoza. Influential views include those of Shlomo Pines and Heidi Ravven, who maintain that Maimonides “conflates” or “absorbs” the practical intellect into the imagination, and those of Sara Klein-Braslavy, W.Z. Harvey, and Howard Kreisel, who maintain that the practical intellect indeed plays an independent, distinct (and important!) role in Maimonides’s thought.[[6]](#footnote-6) In a 2006 paper, Joshua Parens defends the latter view against Ravven’s, though his analysis is pertinently different than that of Harvey’s. By the end of Parens’ argument, it seems that Harvey’s answer to the apparent contradictions in Maimonides and Spinoza on KGE doesn’t quite pan out. As Parens states,

“The mind possesses a ruling power in Aristotle, the Stoics, and Maimonides that it does not possess in Spinoza. Thus, Maimonides continues to rely on practical intellect and its ruling power in a way Spinoza does not.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Parens’ argument undercuts Harvey’s argument. According to Parens’ argument, granting the differences between Maimonides and Spinoza’s unique understandings of human psychology (and of necessity), Maimonides’ intellect can be “informed” and shaped by the imagination in a way Spinoza’s cannot. In essence, for Maimonides, the intellect can discern rational KGE by working with the concepts ‘good’ and ‘evil’ as they are formed in the imagination. Spinoza’s intellect doesn’t have this sort of ‘ruling power’ that Maimonides’ has—as such, it seems that Harvey’s approach will work for Maimonides, but it will not work for Spinoza.

I will argue in this short paper that we can grant Parens’ argument without giving up Harvey’s general method for explaining the KGE problem. What I will suggest is that we can modify Harvey’s argument with respect to Spinoza in particular. I will argue that the general approach offered by Harvey is indeed sufficient, but we will need to focus on the details and note subtle differences between the Spinozistic and Maimonidean epistemologies. As it will turn out, KGE as it pertains to the *intellect* in Spinoza is going to be a fundamentally independent sort of knowledge, which is only *correlated* with that of the imagination’s KGE, rather than *informed by* the imagination’s KGE. In other words, the imagination will not have any sort of logical ‘dominion’ over the intellect, as it isn’t responsible for forming the concepts of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ that that concern the intellect’s KGE. Spinoza’s intellect will thus not possess a KGE *simpliciter*, but rather, a knowledge of *conatus* which merely correlates to knowledge of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ in the imagination. In the pages that follow, I will first briefly cover the epistemic problem of KGE in Maimonides and Spinoza, and then gloss on Harvey’s proposal. I will then touch on Parens’ point, and finish with my response.

***The problem of KGE in Maimonides and Spinoza***

As touched upon briefly above, there is a *prima facie* contradiction in Maimonides and Spinoza as it pertains to KGE. In one sense, the KGE is a matter of the imagination. They define ‘good’ as (1) that which either “conforms to our purpose” (or *doesn’t* “conform to our purpose”) (*Guide* III, 12-13), or (2) that which is “useful to, or harmful to, preserving our being,” (*Ethics* IVP8d). What is evil is that which is antithetical to either (1) or (2). Because of this, Maimonides and Spinoza hold that, in this sense, KGE isn’t of the realm of necessity. Since that which is good and that which is evil isn’t of necessity, but of contingency, that which is good and that which is evil will differentiate between individuals, kinds, and contexts; therefore KGE is a knowledge that applies to the imagination rather than the intellect. For Spinoza, this falls under the realm of the *first* kind of knowledge (*opinion vel imaginatio*), which is knowledge as understood through inadequate ideas (so it thus cannot constitute knowledge of truth and falsity). For Maimonides, KGE “belongs to the group of generally known and accepted things, and not to the group of intellectually cognized things” (*Guide* II, 3).

It is with this in mind that Maimonides and Spinoza are both led to claim something rather bold—viz., that the perfectly rational person, who is guided solely by reason through the intellect, has *no* KGE.

“Through the intellect man distinguishes between the true and the false. This faculty Adam possessed perfectly and completely. The right and wrong are terms employed in the science of apparent truths (morals), not in that of necessary truths… When Adam was yet in a state of innocence, and was guided solely by reflection and reason… he was not at all able to follow or to understand the principles of apparent truths.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

“From this it follows that if the human mind had only adequate ideas, it would form no notion of [good or] evil… I call him free who is led by reason alone. Therefore, he who is born free, and remains free, has only adequate ideas, and so has no concept of [good and] evil…”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Spinoza and Maimonides use the Genesis story of the primordial Adam as a foil for explaining how the KGE has resulted in our estrangement from pure rationality, resulting in our “giv[ing] way to desires which had their source in [the] imagination and to the gratification of [our] bodily appetites.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Maimonides and Spinoza both, however, paradoxically seem to also imply that KGE is of the *necessary* sort: that it is an object of the intellect, and thus an issue of necessity and “truth and falsehood.” In the proposition immediately prior to the last one just quoted, Spinoza states:

“A free man, that is, one who lives according to the dictate of reason alone, is not led by fear (by P63), but desires the good directly (by P63C), that is (by P24) acts, lives, and preserves his being from the foundation of seeking his own advantage.”

That is, “by a desire arising from reason, we directly follow the good, and indirectly flee the evil.” (IVP63c). This certainly seems to be saying that KGE is knowledge of the *adequate* sort, contrary to what we have just read earlier. Furthermore, notice IVD1-2, where Spinoza defines ‘good’ as that which we “*certainly know* to be useful to us.” If Spinoza has defined the ‘good’ as that which is known with certainty—and that which the free man will pursue—KGE here is no longer, it would seem, an object of the imagination. We thus see the apparent contradiction pertaining to KGE within Spinoza.

Maimonides is plagued with a similar perplexity. According to Maimonides, the perfect man (Adam) had no ability to discern between good and evil, because these concepts are of the imagination alone. How was it, then, that Adam *came to know* of good and evil? Maimonides’ answer is that this knowledge came from the imagination. More importantly, according to Maimonides, this knowledge *transformed* Adam’s intellect from discerning within the realm of truth and falsity to discerning within the realm of good and evil—that of the imagination. As Harvey states it, “Adam followed the desires of his imagination. Imagination thus presents Man with possible ends over and above the rational end.” For Maimonides, then, the imagination came to have a sort of dominion over the intellect, creating the concepts through which the intellect would discern. The KGE is thusly placed within the realm of the intellect as well.

Also attesting to this tension is the fact that, in *Guide* I, 53, Maimonides claims that “The rational faculty subsisting in man… [is one through which he has the knowledge to] govern the city.” He defends this statement by quoting Genesis 3:5, that “…you shall be like God, knowing good and evil.” It therefore is clear that both Maimonides and Spinoza seem to identify KGE as being within both realms of knowledge—the intellect and the imagination—while explicitly stating that the intellect can have no KGE.

***W.Z. Harvey’s Proposed Solution to the Problem***

Harvey proposes a solution to resolve this issue. Interestingly, he claims that the problem in both Maimonides and Spinoza can be solved with a similar method. Harvey first notes that “we seem to be dealing with two separate aspects of ‘knowledge’” in both Spinoza and Maimonides.[[11]](#footnote-11) Since Harvey’s main focus is on Maimonides, we will start there.

Harvey notes that it is indeed true that Maimonides holds that the free man has no KGE, but also holds that the free man can have KGE after the imagination has “presented him with possible ends over and above the rational end.”[[12]](#footnote-12) It ultimately comes back to Maimonides’ definition of ‘good’—“that which conforms to our purpose”—which allows for us to make this important distinction between the two sorts of KGE. Although the imagination is where the concepts of good and evil arise in Maimonides, Harvey opines, the intellect is capable of “reaching over” into the imaginative realm, and discerning *among* the imaginary concepts and judging *according t*o them. This is what it means to have the “imagination inform the intellect.” “[KGE], therefore, is characteristic of imagination,” Harvey states, “but when man follows his imagination, his intellect is compelled to function in this field as well, not as a free agent but *serving* the imagination.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Thus, we have Maimonides’ two senses of KGE, according to Harvey’s argument:

**MKGE1** - The intellect has KGE insofar as it, acting upon and within the imagination, discerns between the imaginative concepts of good and evil.

**MKGE2 -** The imagination has KGE insofar as it apprehends the concepts imaginatively.

MKGE1 represents, of course, the knowledge of the *practical intellect* in Maimonides, which (as stated before) has been the subject of some debate. MKGE2 represents the imaginative understanding of KGE in Maimonides.

Harvey contends that the same distinction applies to Spinoza. By noting how Spinoza characterizes KGE in the preface of part IV, we can begin to understand Harvey’s reasoning.

“For because we desire to form an idea of a man, as a model of human nature which we may look to, it will be useful for us to retain these *same words* with the meaning I have indicated. In what follows, therefore, I shall understand by good what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature we set before ourselves. By evil…”

It appears that Spinoza’s distinction between ‘good’ here and ‘good’ in the purely imaginative sense is similar to Maimonides’ distinguishing between MKGE1 and MKGE2. Harvey argues that, for Spinoza, the intellect is capable of applying its faculties to discerning between concepts of the imagination.

**SKGE1 -** The intellect has KGE insofar as it, in applying its knowledge of the *conatus* to imaginative thinking, can discern between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ by judging these concepts against the model of an exemplar.

**SKGE2 -** The imagination has KGE insofar as it has an inadequate idea of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ of the first kind of knowledge.

**“**Thus the imagination has [KGE] when it determines an end or *exemplar*, and intelligence has [KGE] when it determines what is useful and what is not useful in attaining that end or corresponding to that *exemplar*,”, Harvey claims. Notice that the concepts in SKGE1 fall within the realm of truth and falsity: the ideal man, of course, is an object of intellect: one who has only adequate ideas. Note, however, that if Harvey’s approach is valid for Spinoza, it is clear that the imagination is still informing the intellect in some sense. Whether this is a valid move for Spinoza, granting the rest of his epistemology, is now the question I want to pursue.

***Parens on the Practical Intellect in Maimonides vs. (Mere) Imagination in Spinoza***

In SKGE1, notice, the intellect is still “reaching over” into, or “being informed by”, the imaginative realm, in that it plays the role of *actively* discerning between imaginative concepts. In order for this to be possible on Spinoza’s account of active thinking, it may seem, these imaginative concepts must be of the third kind of knowledge, that of *adequate* knowledge. But by definition, for Spinoza, these imaginative concepts are inherently *inadequate*. There thus appears to be a problem with Harvey’s account: Spinoza’s brand of epistemology seems to bar him from being able to make this “bridging” move. The intellect cannot grapple with inadequate ideas, by its very nature. To do so would, by definition, force the intellect to cease in its being the intellect.

Harvey’s argument, as it pertains to Maimonides, seems to be mostly noncontroversial (*pace* Ravven, and perhaps Pines); in fact, Parens argues that if this move *weren’t* possible for Maimonides, his account of freedom of the will would entirely crumble at its foundation. Harvey, though indirectly, notes this as well: “Imagination is what enables man to exercise that freedom of choice which is the ability to err, to sin, and to sink to the level of an animal.”[[14]](#footnote-14) With Spinoza, however, Parens suggests that we have completely different situation. Spinoza’s understanding of the will simply *is* to grasp the necessary truths in our world, which happens only via adequate knowledge of the intellect. That is, Spinoza’s account of the will (and thus intellect) is precisely and explicitly *opposed* to the incorporation of the imagination within the intellect—if they were to mix, there would be inadequate ideas in the doxastic nexus. If there are inadequate ideas in the doxastic nexus, then, for Spinoza, this nexus is not constitutive of the intellect.

It therefore seems that Harvey’s approach won’t work for resolving the KGE problem for Spinoza. As Parens states,

“[For Spinoza,] mind possesses power only when desire is at a loss. Although some version of acceptance can be found in Aristotle, the Stoics, Spinoza, and Maimonides for that matter, that does not mean that all understand the underlying psychology or, as Spinoza might put it, “mechanisms” in the same way. Mind possesses a ruling power in Aristotle, the Stoics, and Maimonides that it does not possess in Spinoza. Thus, Maimonides continues to rely on practical intellect and its ruling power in a way that Spinoza does not.”

To summarize this response, then, it seems that SKGE1 is impossible for Spinoza, because the intellect cannot cross over to mingle among inadequate ideas. Assuming this is the case, which I take it to be, can we vindicate Harvey’s approach to solving the KGE problem in Spinoza?

***A Reappraisal of W.Z. Harvey and SKGE1***

I think we can, but we need to redefine SKGE1 so that it is only a KGE *de dicto*. That is, I want to suggest that we can simply refer to Spinoza’s “KGE” in the intellect as, paradoxically, something other than KGE. I’d like to suggest that the intellect in Spinoza only has knowledge of *conatus*, which simply *happens* to correlate to what we might as well call ‘good’ and ‘evil’ in relation to a model of the perfectly rational human.

This may, at first glance, just sound like a cheap semantic trick. But the distinction is substantive: if we grant that the intellect can have no active interplay with imaginative ideas in Spinoza (which we might take to be the case, granting Parens’ suggestion above), then there *is* no such substantive KGE problem as described above. Rather, there is just a confusion based off of Spinoza’s poor choice of words. This suggestion is further substantive because it marks a crucial difference between Maimonides and Spinoza that hasn’t been fully appreciated in the past (e.g., in Harvey’s or Klein-Braslavy’s thought). I am therefore suggesting that Harvey’s solution to the problem can be properly mended if we fully detach SKGE1 from the imagination into an independent sort of knowledge that does not interplay with inadequate ideas. Keeping the imaginative sense of KGE in Spinoza (SKGE2) untouched, then, here is my proposal for the other sense in which Spinoza refers to KGE.

**SKGE1.1** - The intellect has KGE insofar as it has knowledge of the *conatus*, particularly as it pertains to one’s either becoming more or less like the rational exemplar.

SKGE1.1, a knowledge which merely correlates to that which could be said to be ‘good’ or ‘evil’ of an exemplar, is thus not a knowledge of the concepts ‘good’ and ‘evil’ *simpliciter.* As such, it is not actively interacting within the realm of inadequate ideas. If Spinoza’s two senses of KGE are SKGE1.1 and SKGE2, then the apparent problem for Spinoza, as discussed at the beginning of this paper, isn’t in fact a problem.

I think looking closely at Spinoza’s terminology in the relevant passages can illuminate this suggestion. Let’s note some lines from the introduction to part IV of the *Ethics*, which help illustrate my point:

“But though [SKGE2] is so, we must still retain these words. For because we desire to form an idea of man, a model of human nature which we may look to, it will be useful to us to retain these same words with the meaning I have indicated. In what follows, therefore, I shall understand by good what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature we set before ourselves.”

Firstly, it is understandable to think that Harvey’s interpretation can be meshed with this bit of text, and how it might not be a reason to reject his proposal in preference of mine. The key here is Spinoza’s use of *desire* (*cupimus*) in the phrase ‘we desire to form an idea of man’ (“*Nam quia ideam hominis… quod intueamur, formare cupimus*”). Thinkers such as Harvey seem to have taken this to suggest that there may be some sort of ‘bridging’ of the intellect into the imagination, resulting in SKGE1. This is because, among many of the passions and affects Spinoza discusses, desire is one that is discussed heavily as being an exemplary passion. Passions, unlike actions, arise from inadequate knowledge in Spinoza, and are thus not proper affects of the intellect. As such, it may seem like the intellect is being guided by a specific passion *of its own, conatus-focused kind*.This reading gives us exactly what Harvey suggests in SKGE1.

This reading is not without warrant. Consider, for example *Ethics* IVP15, which states that

“A desire [*cupiditas*] which arises from a true knowledge of good and evil can be extinguished or restrained by many other desires which arise from affects by which we are tormented.”

Here Spinoza seems to be clearly offering a case where KGE is indeed found in the intellect, and is moreover an affect (cf. IVP15d). Furthermore, it seems to suggest that this sort of KGE is of a purer kind than that which rises from within the imagination. This all sounds perfectly consonant, even supportive, of Harvey’s understanding of SKGE1.

Alas, I think Spinoza’s lack of carefully-chosen nomenclature is to blame, however. Note the demonstration from IVP18:

“Desire [*cupiditas*] is the very essence of man (by Def. Aff. I), that is (by IIIP7), a striving [*conatus*] by which a man strives to preserve in his being.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Spinoza is, I believe, using desire in completely different senses, depending on the context. Here he clearly equates ‘desire’ as literally the *conatus,* *simpliciter*. (He said in the introduction that “it will be useful” to use the same words for different purposes: I, for one, have no idea why he would suppose such a thing to be the case!)

If ‘desire’ in the passage from the introduction to part IV simply means an impulse, or drive, that naturally flows from our *conatus*, (which is certainly a consistent reading, granting IVP18), then our judging ourselves (in the intellect) against a rational exemplar is an entirely rational practice, which pertains only to adequate ideas and ‘true knowledge’. This, in effect, is the sort of KGE that SKGE1.1 depicts.

If my argument holds any water, then it can be said that Harvey’s general approach to solving the apparent KGE contradiction in Spinoza and Maimonides can be vindicated, even after the subtle yet powerful objection that Parens raises. While Maimonides and Spinoza have an incredibly similar epistemic problem—that of the seeming contradiction due to their usage of two opposing senses of KGE—it is quite evident that Harvey’s approach to resolving the issue works for Maimonides, but not for Spinoza. Swapping SKGE1 with SKGE1.1, however, gets us around the problem for Spinoza, as there is no resulting doxastic fraternizing between the intellect and the imagination.

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1. See Parens (2012) for an excellent handling on the fundamental differences between Spinoza and Maimonides. Although his book is primarily intended to argue in opposition to the readings of Wolfson, Pines, Harvey, Ravven (et al.), it nonetheless gives an excellent and evenhanded sketch and survey of the abundant literature of this debate. A classic, noteworthy handling on a reading opposed to Parens’ is Harvey (1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This will be most easily read as ‘*the* knowledge of good and evil’ throughout the paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, e.g., *Ethics* IIP40-42 & IVP68 and *Guide* I, 2. In this paper I will be using the classic Friedländer translation of the *Guide* and the Curley translation of the *Ethics.* A note on my citation usage as well: *Guide* II, 14 represents part two, chapter 14 of Maimonides’ *Guide*; *Ethics* IVP68s represents part four, proposition sixty-eight scholium of Spinoza’s *Ethics*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Harvey, W.Z. (1979). In this paper I will be referencing the 1989 English translation by Yoel Lerner. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. up It may be worth noting that Harvey does not use this terminology. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Pines (1990), Ravven (2001), Klein-Braslavy (1987), Harvey (1979), and Kreisel (1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Pines (2006), p. 241 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Guide* I, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ethics* IVP64c & IVP68d. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Guide* I, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Harvey (1989), p. 143 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Ibid.*, emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Ibid*., p. 142 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. I have added the Latin terms in the brackets. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)