Maimonides borrows from Aristotle:

1. **Practical Philosophy:** Maimonides' practical philosophy begins with *Eight Chapters*, an introduction to his commentary on the tractate *Pirkei Avot* and part of his *Commentary on the Mishnah*.[[5](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/maimonides/notes.html#5)] In concert with Plato and Aristotle, he holds that like the body, the soul can be diseased or healthy. Just as those with sick bodies seek a physician, those with sick souls need to seek the wise rulers, who are physicians of the soul. Not surprisingly major portions of his work attempt to show that Jewish law is based on a thorough understanding of the soul and the conditions needed for its perfection. Chief among them is the attainment of a mean between extremes. In *Eight Chapters* 3, he writes: “The virtues are states of the soul and settled dispositions in the mean between two bad states, one of which is excessive, the other deficient.” Later, in the first book of the *Mishneh Torah* (1, Character Traits, 1.4), he follows up by saying: “The right way is the mean in every one of a person's character traits.”

Like Aristotle, Maimonides recognizes there will be variations from one person to another and that sometimes a person may have to overshoot the mean for therapeutic reasons (*Eight Chapters* 4 and *MT* 1, Character Traits, 2.2). Also like Aristotle, he stresses that virtue is a habit that can only be developed by practice. A wise ruler will therefore prescribe actions and moral habits that must be repeated until they are no longer burdensome and become part of a person's character. If a person develops the wrong habits and goes to excess, the ruler “must follow the same course in treating it as in the medical treatment of bodies,” which is to reestablish equilibrium (“Eight Chapters” 4).

Much has been written on which of these approaches represents Maimonides' real view [Fox, 1990, Davidson, 1987, Schwarzschild, 1990]. Fortunately we do not have to survey all of this literature because the problem arises in the space of a few paragraphs in *MT* 1, Character Traits, 1.4–6. Unlike “Eight Chapters,” where the only justification for overshooting the mean is therapeutic, this passage recognizes that there are times when deviation from the mean represents a higher standard. As Maimonides puts it, a person whose character traits are balanced can be called wise (*hakham*), while a person who goes beyond the mean when circumstances warrant is known as pious (*hasid*):

*Whoever moves away from a haughty heart to the opposite extreme so that he is exceedingly lowly in spirit is called pious; this is the measure of piety. If someone moves only to the mean and is humble, he is called wise; this is the measure of wisdom. The same applies to all the rest of the character traits. The pious of old used to direct their character traits from the middle way toward one of the two extremes; some character traits toward the last extreme, and some toward the first extreme. This is the meaning of “inside the line of the law” [i.e. going beyond the letter of the law].*

*Differences:* Piety then involves going beyond the mean to a higher standard. In this connection Maimonides cites Numbers 12:3, which does not say that Moses was meek but that he was *very* meek.

A similar sentiment is expressed earlier in the *Mishneh Torah* (1, Basic Principles, 4. 12), when Maimonides discusses the need to study physics and metaphysics. He concludes with praise for those who are lowly of spirit:

When a man reflects on these things, studies all these created beings, from the angels and spheres down to human beings and so on, and realizes the divine wisdom manifested in them all, his love for God will increase, his soul will thirst, his very flesh will yearn to love God. He will be filled with fear and trembling, as he becomes conscious of his lowly condition, poverty, and insignificance, and compares himself with any of the great and holy bodies; still more when he compares himself with any one of the pure forms that are incorporeal and have never had association with any corporeal substance. He will then realize that he is a vessel full of shame, dishonor, and reproach, empty and deficient.

It is not that Maimonides has abandoned the idea that nature avoids excess or deficiency but that he seems to be saying the highest level of human excellence sometimes requires an extreme. Thus Moses went without water for forty days and nights when he was alone on the mountain and attained such a high level of concentration that in Maimonides opinion “all the gross faculties in the body ceased to function.” Seen in this light, the highest goal is not practical wisdom in the Aristotelian sense but humility, awe, and shame in the presence of God.

In other places, Maimonides argues that our goal should not be to moderate emotion but to rise above it. We saw that God is not subject to emotion. Maimonides takes this to mean that the ideal state is one in which a person acts in a completely dispassionate way deciding cases on their merit without recourse to feeling. While such a person must still make the appropriate judgment, there will be no character trait or disposition from which it springs. According to *Guide* 1.54:

In the treatise on Character Traits, he admits that there may be times when it is necessary for a person to show anger, but insists that inwardly she should remain completely tranquil.

What happened to balance and the idea of mental health? The answer is that while they are still valuable, they are not ends in themselves. Throughout his rabbinic and philosophic works, Maimonides insists (*MT* 1, Character Traits, 3.1) that it is impossible to love God and achieve the highest levels of concentration if one is sick, undisciplined, or living in fear of bodily harm. But in the end, moral perfection is only a necessary condition for intellectual perfection.

Like Plato, Maimonides believes in the therapeutic effects of philosophy. In the last chapter of the *Guide* (3.54), he claims that philosophy teaches that most of the things to which people direct their lives are “nothing but an effort with a view to something purely imaginary, to a thing that has no permanence.” Just as Job came to see that the things he once valued are unimportant, philosophy teaches us to give up our obsession with money, garments, and land and focus attention on the eternal.

[*http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/maimonides/*](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/maimonides/)

Seeskin, Kenneth, "Maimonides", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2012 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2012/entries/maimonides/>.