The title of this review could apply to Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon (c. 1136–1204, also known as Moses Maimonides), the Spanish author of important contributions to Jewish law, philosophy, and medicine who is perhaps best known for *The Guide for the Perplexed*. It describes equally well that archetypal, wise psychologist David Bakan, whose seminal work included early and important contributions that challenged the blind reliance by psychologists on the test of significance (Bakan, 1969); discussed the (at that time) mostly neglected study of the mistreatment of children (Bakan, 1971) and the ideological underpinnings of American psychology (Bakan, 1966); and integrated mythological, psychological, and medical research on pain (Bakan, 1968). He also wrote whimsical essays on such topics as eroticism and knowledge (e.g., Bakan, 1968), most famously developed an influential theory of personality (Bakan, 1966), and showed that despite Freud’s secularism and reluctance to acknowledge any intellectual predecessors, he owed a considerable debt to the Jewish mystical tradition (Bakan, 1958).
In his last years, Bakan focused on the contributions of Maimonides and before his death was working on *Maimonides’ Cure of Souls: Medieval Precursor of Psychoanalysis* in collaboration with the psychoanalyst and eminent author of various books on the psychology of religion, Dan Merkur, and the rabbi David S. Weiss. I should disclose that I had the good fortune of taking a course with David Bakan while I was a graduate student at York University in the 1980s. At that time I did not know of Bakan’s interest in Maimonides’ therapy of souls, but he exemplified that wisdom and caring as he graciously talked to a perplexed non-Jewish Mexican student who was wondering how his interest in psychology could be nurtured by a program that had little to say about the great questions that probably drive most students into psychology in the first place.

Although I could not quite verbalize it myself, from our first meeting Bakan “diagnosed” my academic malaise and let me know that I was not alone in it but should not confuse an academic, soulless activity with more ultimate concerns that might have nothing to do with it. He opened his house and wisdom to me and to many other students, for which I will always be in debt to him. And now to the book itself.

Maimonides was one of the foremost thinkers born or somehow connected to the Islamic reign in most of Spain (Al-Andaluz) that lasted from the 8th century to the 15th. The culture of Al-Andaluz safeguarded the legacy of Aristotle and produced extraordinary thinkers such as Maimonides, Avicenna, and Averroes; the university of Córdoba (probably the highest center of learning at the time); and contributions to philosophy, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, and geography that were far more advanced than those in the other regions of Europe (cf. Burckhardt, 2008).

As Robinson (1981, p. 165) pointed out, later periods have been contemptuous of the Middle Ages despite their extraordinary advances in logic and psychological thought, the integration of rationality and religious thought, and the fact that some episodes of irrational madness and cruelty occurred later (e.g., the epidemic of witch hunts and executions). Throughout much of its existence, Al-Andaluz was, although not perfect, a society in which Muslims, Christians, and Jews coexisted and collaborated peacefully, and in which science and religion did not lock horns, putting to shame our modern times.

*Maimonides’ Cure of Souls* discusses Maimonides’ ideas about how individuals become “perplexed,” or psychologically troubled, partly through a combination of mistaking fantasy for reality and sinfully deciding to become ignorant of reality. The first chapter of the book, “The Will to Illness,” shows how Maimonides, who had a therapeutic practice in addition to being a philosopher, reversed the Socratic notion that ignorance produces evil to state instead that the decision to sin may bring about a willed ignorance of reality and illness; he sought to cure the confusion of reality and fantasy through a prescription of behaviors that went counter to sinful dispositions and through the harmonization of rationality with sacred Jewish texts.

He also prescribed rational meditation and analysis of sacred texts, interpreting what might underlie fantasy and symbolism, rather than taking them literally. For instance, he
rejected a literal interpretation of God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, positing instead that this occurred in a dream. (The abhorrence produced by Yahweh demanding such cruelty continues to be seriously discussed in our times by the Nobel Prize winner José Saramago, 2009.)

Although Maimonides claimed that imagination might confuse and perplex some, he thought that it was also necessary in elucidating reality. This regard of fantasy and imagination as essential for an apprehension of the world is reminiscent of current developmental work on how childhood fantasy sets the stage for adult rational and creative enterprises (Gopnik, 2009).

Some of the middle chapters in the book give examples of how Maimonides interpreted some passages in the Old Testament; although his efforts struck me at times as convoluted and far-fetched, they also reminded me of some of Freud’s own hermeneutic somersaults. Like Freud, Maimonides also was a therapist, and the authors of *Maimonides’ Cure of Souls* propose that, beyond philosophical analysis, he used supportive and behavioral techniques on a clientele that likely consisted of high-functioning neurotics, at least some of them with obsessive tendencies.

He also proposed that religious experiences that are not properly understood could produce psychological maladjustments, an idea that has been resurrected in our times under the name of *spiritual emergency* (e.g., Grof & Grof, 1989). Maimonides and Freud also shared the notion that some knowledge should be imparted only individually and personally, as happens in the training of psychoanalysts and some other therapists.

Freud’s avowed atheism and claims for psychoanalysis as a modern, secular science have been discussed (Gay, 1989), but the authors of *Maimonides’ Cure of Souls* make a good case in the last chapter of the book, “Convergence of Maimonides and Freud,” that Maimonides’ work had been very important to a number of people whom Freud came in contact with and that it pervaded much of the cultural milieu in which Freud moved. This chapter is likely to be the biggest draw for historians of psychology and psychoanalysis.

Following Eco’s (2005) discussion of the chains of influence between writers, it would be difficult to refute that Freud was influenced by Maimonides’ thought, even if it happened only through what Eco called the “universe of the encyclopedia” or the general culture of the time. For Freud, this would have included the thought of Maimonides filtered through the kabbalah (a Jewish tradition that holds that the “real” meaning of a text is hidden and must be unveiled), Renaissance esotericism, and German Romanticism (p. 137).

The parallels between the work of Maimonides and Freud include a discussion of unusual thoughts, sexual fantasies, and their related associations, and the central place of sexuality in human existence; the mental “work” that goes into the creation of dreams and prophecies; unconscious mental processes; and the existence of a latent meaning underneath a manifest content. It is also telling that Maimonides deliberated on the psychological aspects of what we nowadays would call somatoform disorders (which Freud examined under the rubric of *hysteria*) and how sin is the decision to intentionally produce
unawareness of reality. Although couched in psychoanalytic terms, Freud’s early discussion of repression suggested that it may begin as a conscious decision to deny reality that later becomes automatized and less conscious (e.g., Freud, 1896/1962).

Both Maimonides and Freud wrestled with the role of fantasy and reality—in the generation of prophecy in the case of the former and in the dynamics of neuroticism in the case of the latter. That this tension was not fully resolved, at least in the case of Freud, can be seen in the criticism that he minimized actual sexual abuse (“seduction”) to prioritize instead childhood fantasy (e.g., Masson, 1984).

There were also, of course, some differences in their thought: Maimonides was a profoundly religious person; Freud was an atheist. Whereas the Freudian unconscious was mostly a cauldron of instinctual urges, for Maimonides it included the active intellect, a notion derived from Aristotelian thought of a generative force that is probably close to the self-actualization idea of humanistic personality theory (Monte, 1991).

Maimonides’ Cure of Souls recovers lost strands in Western thought, including the integration of intellectualism and a religious perspective, and the mystical and esoteric traditions that probably nurtured Freudian thought. Some of the middle chapters in the book may be difficult to follow for those not versed in Jewish thought and tradition, but the book as a whole should appeal to those who want a better understanding of the roots of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy in general.

This book also illustrates how rationalism and a concern with ultimate meanings are not necessarily mutually exclusive but may help each other avoid the sterility so often found in ready-made solutions, whether “material” or “spiritual” (Cardeña, in press). It should appeal not only to those interested in the intellectual history of psychology but also to those concerned with the humanistic bases of psychology, science, and spirituality.

David Bakan championed the rational mysticism strain that he elucidated in Maimonides and found in such scientists as Newton, Leibniz, Planck, and Einstein, among others (Bakan, 1969). He derided the anti-intellectual strands underlying much of U.S. culture and present in secular and religious fundamentalisms of all stripes.

He exemplified not only a mind that pondered on the deep questions of existence while simultaneously developing expertise in technical aspects of statistics, but one that was also pregnant (to use a term he would have liked) with love and concern for his fellow brethren. At the end of his life and in bad health himself, he accompanied his wife Mildred to a home for the elderly so he could help take care of her, thus illustrating an idea that he had himself referenced, “the Law of Love and the Law of Reason are quite one” (Peirce, 1958, p. 332).

References


