

The Good Life: Finding Yourself vs. Human Flourishing

1. Rav Saadia Gaon, *Emunot Vede'ot* X:4

Let me, however, first enumerate them and say that there are thirteen principal pursuits [to which men dedicate themselves]; namely, abstinence, eating and drinking, sexual intercourse, eroticism, the accumulation of money, [the begetting of] children, the [material] development of the land, longevity, dominion, the nursing of revenge, [the acquisition of] wisdom, worship, and rest. Each of these will be subjected by me to rational analysis. I shall furthermore note their desirable aspects, set down what should be avoided thereof, and assign to each its appropriate place.

2. Rav Saadia Gaon, *Emunot Vede'ot* X:17

Similarly, a person should not take equally from each of the thirteen attributes, but should take from each category the measure that is fitting according to wisdom and Torah. It has, then, become clear to any reader of this book, as a result of my exposition and elucidation, that whoever believes in the preoccupation with any of the thirteen types [of human endeavor] that have been enumerated is mistaken in his view, not right in it, by reason of the fact that he demands exclusive devotion to the said activity, rejecting the association of any other with it. The consequence is that he deviates from the road leading to his goal and that he fails to attain the object of his desire, as I have previously demonstrated in my comment on the statement of Solomon to the effect that whatever is *one-sided* is *wanting* (Eccles. 1:15). The only proper type of conduct consists of the combination of all these classes of activities.

On the other hand, however, it is not right to select [equal] parts from each of the above-mentioned thirteen categories; one should rather take from each type of activity the suitable proportion, as dictated by science and religious law... When, then, he effects a harmonious blend of all these activities in accordance with our suggestion, he will find approval in both worlds, as Scripture also remarks: *Above all that thou guardest keep thy heart; for out of it are the issues of life* (Prov. 4:23). The pattern of his activities in their harmony, then, comes to resemble the composition of bodies out of the four elements of nature, or every material substance consisting of links that are joined together. Or else they might be compared to medicines, which are usually made up of many ingredients, three drachmas' weight being taken of one item, and a drachma's weight of another, and four daniks of another, and half a drachma of still another, and two daniks of another, and of another a danik and a half, and of still another a danik, and half a danik of the last. It would not be proper, however, to take equal proportions of each.

3. Lenn Goodman, "Saadia Gaon Al Fayyumi," *The History of Islamic Philosophy*,
1247–1250

Saadia's final treatise deals with the good life, which he defines in moral terms. For, he argues, we do not know the reward of the ritual commandments even in this life; still less in the Hereafter. **His moral doctrine is pluralistic and humanistic, based on acceptance of the plurality of our nature and interests. Like Plato, Saadia believes that the good life is the balancing of these interests...**

Using his distinctive inductive method, he elicits the list of interests from Scripture, and from his own insights into human psychology. The interests he discovers are abstinence, eating and drinking, sex, passionate or romantic love, wealth, progeny, agrarian and urban development, longevity, power, vengeance, knowledge, worship and rest. Each of these (even vengeance in its way) is in some sense a good. But none of them, as their devotees might imagine, provides a fulfilling or satisfying life. **To make any one of them the be-all and end-all of our existence is to cheat ourselves of the rest, and examination of the characters and lives of those who follow any one of these to the exclusion of the rest shows us clearly the inadequacy of each without the support and leaven of the rest...**

Food and drink sustain the body and the mind and foster reproduction, but the gourmand is bloated and unhealthy, selfish, foggy-headed and licentious... Progeny perpetuate the world and give solace and joy. One cannot overlook the natalism of the prophets. But offspring are also a hardship and a source of anxiety to their parents; they are not sufficient to give meaning to our existence. Development is useful and satisfying; but taken beyond the needs it is meant to satisfy and made our overriding goal, it distracts one from the intellectual and spiritual and becomes a source of anxiety, compulsiveness and greed...

Power or authority, like the other aims, is not an evil but a good, necessary to the ordering of the world; but, if made all-sufficient, its tendency to promote arrogance and injustice makes it self-destructive and transforms a ruler's ebullience from overconfidence to the terror of the tyrant, the doubts, suspicions and hatred of humanity. Saadia finds allusions to the tyrannical, in Proverbs (12:15 and 18:1, 26:12) and in Isaiah (10:12 -13), where the self-will and arrogance of the proud are shown to be the seeds of their destruction...

Knowledge is, of course, a good. But Saadia, like Rāzī, believes that even the quest for knowledge can be excessive; pursued to the exclusion of all else, our appetite for knowledge would ruin our health and even dull our mind. Worship is fitting, as an expression of our gratitude to God for the gift of existence; but, taken as an exclusive goal, it is as self-undermining as the pursuit of knowledge (which would bring to an end all knowledge if the avid scholar did not stop to propagate his kind). Saadia takes particular aim at the pietists who idealize leaving one's fate in God's hands as a display of their absolute trust, a theme well established among Christian, Muslim and Jewish pietists. True, one should acknowledge God's infiniteness, but that requires the recognition that God acts through human efforts, which may

therefore not be abandoned in quietist zeal. Even the choice of a life of worship is an act, not a submission; and the notion that one does God's will by a life of study, worship and contemplation alone neglects those obligations which can be fulfilled only in the world for example the commandment to keep just weights and measures. For what meaning can honest dealing have in one who eschews all social engagement and economic activity? Full observance of God's commands requires life in the world. So, while the pietists' aspirations may be noble, their neglect of their God-given bodies and of their offspring is not to be condoned.

4. **Rambam, *Moreh Nevukhim* III:54**

The ancient and the modern philosophers have made it clear that the perfections to be found in man consist of **four** species. The **first** and the most defective, but with a view to which the people of the earth spend their lives, is the perfection of possessions — that is, of what belongs to the individual in the manner of money, garments, tools, slaves, land, and other things of this kind. A man's being a great king also belongs to this species of perfection. Between this perfection and the individual himself there is no union whatever; there is only a certain relation, and most of the pleasure taken in the relation is purely imaginary. I refer to one's saying: This is my house; this is my slave; this money is mine; these are my soldiers. For if he considers his own individual self, he will find that all this is outside his self and that each of these possessions subsists as it is by itself. Therefore when the relation referred to has been abolished, there is no difference between an individual who has been a great king and the most contemptible of men, though nothing may have changed in any of the things that were attributed to him. The philosophers have explained that the endeavor and the efforts directed by man toward this kind of perfection are nothing but an effort with a view to something purely imaginary, to a thing that has no permanence. And even if these possessions should remain with him permanently during the whole of his life, he would by no means thereby achieve perfection in his self.

The **second** species has a greater connection than the first with the individual's self, being the perfection of the bodily constitution and shape. I refer to that individual's temperament being most harmonious, his limbs well proportioned and strong as they ought to be. Neither should this species of perfection be taken as an end, for it is a corporeal perfection and does not belong to man qua man, but qua animal; for man has this in common with the lowest animals. Moreover even if the strength of a human individual reached its greatest maximum, it would not attain the strength of a strong mule, and still less the strength of a lion or an elephant. The end of this perfection consists, as we have mentioned, in man's transporting a heavy burden or breaking a thick bone and in other things of this kind, from which no great utility for the body may be derived. Utility for the soul is absent from this species of perfection.

The **third** species is a perfection that to a greater extent than the second species subsists in the individual's self. This is the perfection of the moral virtues. It consists in the individual's moral habits having attained their ultimate excellence. Most of the *commandments* serve no other end

than the attainment of this species of perfection. But this species of perfection is likewise a preparation for something else and not an end in itself. For all moral habits are concerned with what occurs between a human individual and someone else. This perfection regarding moral habits is, as it were, only the disposition to be useful to people; consequently it is an instrument for someone else. For if you suppose a human individual is alone, acting on no one, you will find that all his moral virtues are in vain and without employment and unneeded, and that they do not perfect the individual in anything; for he only needs them and they again become useful to him in regard to someone else.

The **fourth** species is the true human perfection; it consists in the acquisition of the rational virtues — I refer to the conception of intelligibles, which teach true opinions concerning the divine things. This is in true reality the ultimate end; this is what gives the individual true perfection, a perfection belonging to him alone; and it gives him permanent perdurance; through it man is man. If you consider each of the three perfections mentioned before, you will find that they pertain to others than you, not to you, even though, according to the generally accepted opinion, they inevitably pertain both to you and to others. This ultimate perfection, however, pertains to you alone, no one else being associated in it with you in any way: *They shall be only thine own, and so on*. Therefore you ought to desire to achieve this thing, which will remain permanently with you, and not weary and trouble yourself for the sake of others, O you who neglect your own soul so that its whiteness has turned into blackness through the corporeal faculties having gained dominion over it — as is said in the beginning of the poetical parables that have been coined for these notions; it says: *My mother's sons were incensed against me; they made me keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept*. It says on this very same subject: *Lest thou give thy splendor unto others, and thy years unto the cruel...*

[But let him that glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who exercises loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, says the Lord. (Yirmiyahu 9:23)]

It is clear that **the perfection of man that may truly be gloried in** is the one acquired by him who has achieved, in a measure corresponding to his capacity, apprehension of Him, may He be exalted, and who knows His providence extending over His creatures as manifested in the act of bringing them into being and in their governance as it is. The way of life of such an individual, after he has achieved this apprehension, will always have in view *loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment*, through assimilation to His actions, may He be exalted, just as we have explained several times in this Treatise.