For ages, philosophers have been grappling with the place of morality in society and religion. Are there objective moral standards? Does man have the capacity to judge them? Is morality mandated by God, or is its place outside of religion? Although Maimonides generally addresses questions that are raised by the classical philosophers, in his major philosophical work, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, he deals with the question of morality only very briefly. In his discussion of עקידת יצחק in the *Guide*, the event in Jewish thought most commonly associated with a conflict between a divine command and human morality, רמב''ם does not deal with it as a moral dilemma. Rather, there is a conflict between the word of God and אבר''ם's love for his son. The עקידת was an act “contrary to human feelings,” (*Guide* 3:24) not to human intellect or morals, as we might expect.

The question of whether man has the ability to distinguish between the morally acceptable and reprehensible is rooted in the very nature of moral philosophy. Socrates once questioned Eurythphro on the nature of morality: “Do the gods love piety because it is pious, or is it pious because they love it?” Is morality an objective standard—some type of natural law, presiding over even the divine command - or is it simply a product of God's will?

For רמב''ם, this question is related to the issue of creation. After creating the universe, God looked at the world and pronounced it all good: "את כל אשר עשה והנה טוב מאד וירא אלהי" (*בראשית* א:22). Maimonides learns from this that God created only good. Evil is simply a lack of good, an absence of God’s creation (3:10). This suggests that anything God creates is necessarily good, and there is no objective standard for morals. Had he created evil, we would have termed it good.

Rambam is seemingly inconsistent in his approach to the purpose of creation. Whereas in *Guide* 3:13 he says that the purpose of creation was “in accordance with the will of God,” only eleven chapters later, in 3:24, he claims that “the existence of all things depends on His wisdom”. Note

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1 Quoted by R. Aaron Lichtenstein, *By His Light*, Hoboken, NJ, p. 106
that Maimonides uses the word "will" as opposed to "wisdom". The former connotes an arbitrariness and lack of rational necessity in what God created. The latter implies that there is rationale and design that conceptually preceded the cosmos. God turned to an existing objective standard of "good" in the process of creation.

Maimonides's discussion of the_Encyclopedia� supports the position that he believes God's acts are not random, and that morality is therefore not arbitrary (wisdom, not will). Maimonides attempts to explain every commandment (Guide 3:26), and prove that God commanded us not simply because obedience is a virtue in itself, but because these particular commandments "directly tend to remove injustice or teach good conduct that furthers the well being of society or imparts a truth which ought to be believed either on its own merit or as being indispensable for facilitating the removal of injustice or the teaching of good morals" (Guide 3:28). According to this statement there is good reason for every command, one of them being "the teaching of good morals." Again, Maimonides seems to imply that there is morality independent of God's command.

Maimonides claims that the reason to teach good morals is to produce a "good social state", to provide the ideal social context for people to pursue their own perfection and worship of God (Guide 3:27). Yet, this seems to contradict a statement of Maimonides in Guide 3:31, where he distinguishes between "morals and social conduct." Are morals identical to good social habits, or is morality something beyond social convention? A similar contradiction appears in Maimonides's discussion of human perfection. On the one hand, he explains that "moral principles do not constitute the ultimate aim of man...they are preparations leading to it" (Guide 3:54). In the same chapter, he explains that true perfection involves knowing and imitating God, including imitating His morals. Maimonides has identified morals both as a means and as an end and has, in certain instances, implied that they are mutually exclusive. Maimonides must either be talking about two types of morals and be using one of the famed homonyms he speaks of in the beginning of the Guide (Introduction), or he must mean that morals serve a dual purpose. They have a practical value as a means to helping people reach human perfection, but they are also the end, for knowing God means knowing His morals.

If this is correct, then morals seem to be an objective set of principles established through the joint forces of God's wisdom and will, which function as both a means to and an end of human perfection. The question now becomes how man recognizes these principles. Can he
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perceive them on his own, or must he gather them only from the divine command? Should we try to reconcile those instances where a divine command appears to contradict human morals, or should we choose one over the other?

On this last question, there is no inconsistency within Maimonidean philosophy. As a rationalist, makes it clear that there are no real contradictions between the divine command and human morality. For example, claims that there is no moral dilemma in the command to annihilate the future generations of for a crime committed by their ancestors. This punishment “is not excessive or inadequate, but as distinctly stated, 'according to the fault,’” and is therefore appropriate (Guide 3:41).

In his comprehensive codification of Jewish law, the , Maimonides includes laws on every aspect of life, indicating that the provides answers for moral issues, in addition to ritual ones. In the Guide, explains that the purpose of is to “improve the moral condition of man” (Guide 3:35). This, however, does not rule out the possibility that man has the ability to discern what is morally correct using his own intellect.

states that charity is “kindness prompted by a certain moral conscience in man” which seems to indicate that man has an inborn ability to decide what is morally correct (Guide 3:53). In another place he refers to the “acquisition of moral principles” (Guide 3:54). Both of these passages agree that man can distinguish between good and evil. However, the former connotes an inborn ability to do so, while the latter speaks of an acquired one. It is not clear if moral knowledge is innate or learned.

Again, we must turn to ’s view of creation to understand his position on man and morality. Maimonides maintains that when first created, man had intellect which allowed him to understand necessary truths (i.e. to distinguish between truth and falsehood), but he had no concept of morality (i.e. to distinguish between good and evil), which are merely apparent truths. After he sinned, man was punished by losing a part of his intellectual faculty. This diminished his ability to determine necessary truths. Yet, at the same time, man acquired a new faculty allowing him to perceive the apparent truths of morality (Guide 1:2). Had man remained in his ideal state and not sinned, this moral faculty would not have been required. infers from this that morality is a lower level than speculative truth; it was a punishment for man to receive knowledge of morals in place of the more ideal knowledge of theoretical truth.
Maimonides emphasizes truth over morality in several other instances. He claims that it is “knowledge of truth,” as opposed to knowledge of good, which “removes hatred, quarrels and injury.” He also says that man has the capacity to distinguish between good and evil only if he has “knowledge of truth” (Guide 3:11).

In Guide 3:17, where Maimonides explains how seemingly evil actions can come from a God who performs only good acts. God is acting in a just way which corresponds to truth. Because our vision is blurred by our moral conscience, certain acts that are in accordance with truth and justice appear to us to be morally wrong. This explains why received “knowledge of apparent truths” as a punishment. Sin diminished his ability to see necessary truths, because his knowledge had been blurred by an awareness of morality. Since ’s fall, the human race no longer merits to see things from a purely intellectual standpoint because human desire conquers reason. Moral law is required to suppress man’s instinct to do as his desire dictates. Man essentially punished himself by refusing to adhere to his intellect. Distinguishing between good and evil is not an action of the pure intellect, but in order to behave properly a person needs to be able to distinguish absolute truth from falsehood.

In his great philosophical work, the Guide of the Perplexed, Maimonides is rather ambiguous and brief on the subject of morals. It seems that he believes that morals are an essential part of the Jewish religion, both as a means and an end to perfection. These morals never contradict the . Still, man requires the ability to distinguish on his own between good and evil. Ideally, man should know absolute truth, which would alleviate the need for moral knowledge.