

# CHABAD LUBAVITCH OF CHAUTAUQUA

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## Maimonides on Ethics – Balance - Week 4 – 2021

1. **CHAPTER III:** THE ancients maintained that the soul, like the body, is subject to good health and illness. The soul's healthful state is that its characteristics and those of its faculties, such traits, by which it constantly does what is good, and performs what is proper, while the illness of the soul is occasioned by its condition, and that of its faculties, which results in its constantly doing wrong, and performing actions that are improper.
2. The science of medicine investigates the health of the body. Now, just as those, who are physically ill, imagine that, on account of their weakened tastes, the sweet is bitter and the bitter is sweet and likewise fancy the wholesome to be unwholesome, and their desire grows stronger, and their enjoyment increases for such things that healthy people have no pleasure [not beneficial] whatsoever and are possibly harmful to them, as dust, coal, very acidic and extremely sour foods, and the like which the healthy will not desire, but loathe and refuse, so those whose souls are ill, that is the bad and the morally perverted, imagine that the bad is good, and that the good is bad. The immoral person, moreover, continually longs for excesses which are really pernicious, but which, on account of the illness of his soul, he considers to be good.
3. Likewise, just as when people, unacquainted with the science of medicine, realize that they are sick, and consult a physician, who tells them what they must do, forbidding them to partake of that which they imagine beneficial, and prescribing for them things which are unpleasant and bitter, in order that their bodies may become healthy, and that they may again choose the good and spurn the bad, so those whose souls become ill should consult the sages, the moral physicians, who will advise them against indulging in those harms which they (the morally ill) think are good, so that they may be healed by that art of which I shall speak in the next chapter, [and through which the moral qualities are restored to their healthy condition.]
4. But, if he who is morally sick be not aware of his illness, imagining that he is well, or, being aware of it, does not seek a remedy, his end will be similar to that of one, who, suffering from bodily ailment, yet continuing to indulge himself, neglects to be cured, and who in consequence surely meets an untimely death.
5. Those who know that they are in a unhealthy state, but nevertheless yield to their inordinate passions, are described in the Truthful Torah which quotes their own words, (Deuteronomy 29:18) "*...that he will bless himself in his heart, saying, "peace will be with me, though I follow my heart's desires, thereby adding the watered upon the thirsty"*". This means that, intending to quench the thirst, it is, on the contrary, intensified.  
He who is ignorant of his illness is spoken of in many places by Solomon, who says, (Proverbs 12:15) "*The way of the fool is straight in his own eyes, but he who hearkens to counsel is wise*". This means that he who listens to the counsel of the sage is wise, for the sage teaches him the way that is actually straight, and not the one that he (the morally ill) erroneously considers to be such. Solomon also says, (Proverbs 14:12) "*There is many a way which seems even before a man; but its ends are ways unto death*". Again, in regard to these who are morally ill, in that they do not know what is injurious from that which is beneficial, he says, (Proverbs 4:19) "*The way of the wicked is like darkness; they do not know against what they stumble*." The art of healing the diseases of the soul will, however, form the subject-matter of the fourth chapter.
6. **CHAPTER IV:** GOOD deeds are such as are equibalanced, maintaining the average between two equally bad extremes, the too much and the too little. Virtues are psychic conditions and dispositions which are mid-way between two reprehensible extremes, one of which is characterized by an exaggeration, the other by a deficiency. Good deeds are the product of these dispositions.
7. To illustrate, abstemiousness is a disposition which adopts a mid-course between inordinate passion and total insensibility to pleasure. Abstemiousness, then, is a proper rule of conduct, and the psychic disposition which gives rise to it is an ethical quality; but inordinate passion, the one extreme [of excess], and total insensibility to enjoyment, the opposite extreme [of deficiency], are both absolutely bad. The psychic dispositions, from which these two extremes, inordinate passion and insensibility, result the one being an exaggeration, the other a deficiency are alike classed among moral imperfections.
8. Likewise, generosity is the average between overly stingy and extravagance; courage, between recklessness and cowardice; dignity, between haughtiness and loutishness [coarse thuggish]; humility, between arrogance and self-abasement; contentedness, between greed and laziness; and a good heart, between meanness and profusion. [Since definite terms do not exist in our language with, which to express these latter qualities, it is necessary to explain their

content, and tell what the philosophers meant by them. A man is called 'good hearted' whose whole intention is to do good to others by personal service, by money, or advice, and with all his power, but without meanwhile bringing suffering or disgrace upon himself. That is the medium line of conduct. The mean man is one who does not want others to succeed in anything, even though he himself may not thereby suffer any loss, hardship, or injury. That is the one extreme. The profuse man, on the contrary, is one who willingly performs the above-mentioned deeds, in spite of the fact that thereby he brings upon himself great injury, or disgrace, terrible hardship, or considerable loss. That is the other extreme.] Tolerance/patience is the average between anger and insensibility to shame and disgrace; and modesty, between brashness and shamefacedness. [The explanation of these latter terms, gleaned from the sayings of our sages (may their memory be blessed!) seems to be this. In their opinion, a modest man is one who is very bashful, and therefore modesty is the mean. This we gather from their saying, (Ethics of Our Fathers 2:5) "*A shamefaced man cannot learn*". They also assert, (ibid 5:20) "*A modest man is worthy of Paradise*", but they do not say this of a shamefaced man. Therefore, I have thus arranged them.] So it is with the other qualities. One does not necessarily have to use conventional terms for these qualities, if only the ideas are absolutely understood.

9. It often happens, however, that men err as regards these qualities, imagining that one of the extremes is good, and is a virtue. Sometimes, the extreme of the too much is considered noble, as when temerity is made a virtue, and those who recklessly risk their lives are hailed as heroes. Thus, when people see a man, reckless to the highest degree, who runs deliberately into danger, intentionally tempting death, and escaping only by mere chance, they laud such a one to the skies, and say that he is a hero. At other times, the opposite extreme, the too little, is greatly esteemed, and the coward is considered a man of forbearance; the lazy, as being a person of a contented disposition; and he, who by the dullness of his nature is callous to every joy, is praised as a man of moderation (Abstemiousness), [that is, one 'who fears sin']. In like manner, profuse generosity and extreme lavishness (spending) are erroneously extolled as excellent characteristics. This is, however, an absolutely mistaken view, for the really praiseworthy is the medium course of action to which everyone should strive to adhere, always weighing his conduct carefully, so that he may attain the proper medium.
10. Know, moreover, that these moral excellences or defects cannot be acquired, or implanted in the soul, except by means of the frequent repetition of acts resulting from these qualities, which, practiced during a long period of time, accustoms us to them. If these acts performed are good ones, then we shall have gained a virtue; but if they are bad, we shall have acquired a vice. Since, however, no man is born with an innate virtue or vice, as we shall explain in Chapter 8, and, as every one's conduct from childhood up is undoubtedly influenced by the manner of living of his relatives and countrymen, his conduct may be in accord with the rules of moderation; but, then again, it is possible that his acts may incline towards either extreme, as we have demonstrated, in which case, his soul becomes unwell.
11. In such a contingency, it is proper for him to resort to a cure, exactly as he would were his body suffering from an illness. So, just as when the balance of the physical health is disturbed, and we note which way it is tending in order to force it to go in exactly the opposite direction until it shall return to its proper condition, [and, just as when the proper adjustment is reached, we cease this operation, and have recourse to that which will maintain the proper balance,] in exactly the same way must we adjust the moral average.
12. Let us take, for example, the case of a man in whose soul there has developed a disposition [of great stinginess] on account of which he deprives himself [of every comfort in life], and which, by the way, is one of the most detestable of defects, and an immoral act, as we have shown in this chapter. If we wish to cure this sick man, we must not command him merely [to practice] deeds of generosity, for that would be as ineffective as a physician trying to cure a patient consumed by a burning fever by administering mild medicines, which treatment would be ineffective. We must, however, induce him to squander so often, and to repeat his acts of profusion so continuously until that propensity which was the cause of his stinginess has totally disappeared. Then, when he reaches that point where he is about to become a squanderer, we must teach him to moderate his profusion, and tell him to continue with deeds of generosity, and to watch out with due care lest he relapse either into lavishness or extreme stinginess.
13. If, on the other hand, a man is a squanderer, he must be directed to practice strict economy, and to repeat acts of extreme stinginess. It is not necessary, however, for him to perform acts of stinginess as many times as the mean man should those of profusion. This subtle point, which is a canon and secret of the science of medicine, tells us that it is easier for a man of profuse habits to moderate them to generosity, than it is for a miser to become generous. Likewise, it is easier for one who is apathetic to be excited to moderate enjoyment ['fear of sin'], than it is for one, burning with passion, to curb his desires.
14. Consequently, the indulgent man must be made to practice restraint more than the apathetic man should be induced to indulge his passions; and, similarly, the coward requires exposure to danger more frequently than the reckless man should be forced to cowardice. The mean man needs to practice profusion to a greater degree than should be required of the profuse to practice meanness. This is a fundamental principle of the science of curing moral ills, and is worthy of remembrance.