As the title suggests, Diana Lobel’s sensitive study focuses on the quest or the search for meaning as a value in and of itself rather than the end result of any investigation into the ultimate goals of those quests, such as “God” or the “good.” This is surely a worthy project and appealing to my own sensibility and interests, as well as, I am certain, to many readers of this review. More often than not I have found the questioning, the struggle, the anxiety laden and determined commitment to the “truth” of those philosophers and theologians I am accustomed to studying far more fascinating and instructive than their ultimate answers. I am especially partial to studies that concentrate on medieval thought, for it was an age when ideas were a matter of life and death rather than some stray thought that can, or must, be captured in 140 characters. After all, if the final determination was really the sole end, what could I gain, for example, from an ancient philosopher’s or Maimonides’ (d. 1204) “answers,” which are anchored in an archaic cosmology populated by spheres and intelligences and a long debunked medieval science? Central to Lobel’s entire project then is Charles Taylor’s endorsement of the enduring power of ancient myths and images, long abandoned for more scientific descriptions of reality, to inspire and “point toward a moral source, something the contemplation, respect, or love of which enables us to get closer to what is good” (p. 55).

Lobel deals with a wide spectrum of thinkers and schools of thought, ranging from the ancient Greeks, to medieval, Jewish, Islamic, and Christian philosophers, while stopping along the way to engage seriously the Hebrew Bible, and the foundational texts of Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Though clearly an ambitious project that defies encapsulating in any single book, let alone one of some two hundred pages of text, Lobel manages, in her concentration on the quest, to capture a sense of each and the connective thread that justifies a shared examination in one book. More important is the book’s success in placing these disparate theologies, philosophies, beliefs, myths, and attitudes in some kind of dia-
logue that illuminates what each was precisely af-
ter and how each struggled to achieve it. The
process thought of Alfred North Whitehead meets
Chinese thought; Augustine, al-Ghazali, and al-
Farabi shed light on Maimonides, and, on each
other; the Upanishads commune with Plato; and
the Bhagavad Gita conjures up shades of Aristotle.

There is a certain beauty and existential al-
lure to a medieval cosmos permeated by knowl-
edge, worship of perfection, and existents that
overflow with knowledge to lower existents in an
unfolding of creation. If a “false” cosmology en-
genders the kind of *imitatio dei* that consists of ac-
quiring knowledge, which, regardless of its being
a means or an end, translates into a way of life
that “will always have in view loving kindness,
righteousness, and judgment,” then perhaps there
is much to be valued in how that medieval quest
for ultimate knowledge is constructed.[1] Al-
though debatable, as is every other facet of the
thought of someone like Maimonides, for Lobel
what is essential to its appreciation is the struggle
to reconcile the contemplative and active ways of
life. As Lobel argues, there is a continuum of
thought and struggle with intellectual predeces-
sors who were not necessarily religious compatri-
ots but shared an equal passion for the attain-
ment of the good life. Maimonides picked up on
the influential ninth-century Islamic philosopher
al-Farabi’s portrait of the ideal prophet-philoso-
pher, which did not simply involve self-perfection
by cultivating the intellect and realizing a self-
contained contemplative existence. The very high-
est of those mediavely conceived Intellects spurred human beings from their potentiality to
actuality. Thus, in a sense, they presented an ethi-
cal as well as an intellectual paradigm where care
for others, not self-sufficiency, was a critical com-
ponent of perfection.

Lobel's treatment of Maimonides is bookend-
ed by another Islamic philosopher, al-Ghazali (d.
1111) whose purely intellectual life as a student
and teacher of theology and religious law was
radically disrupted by a Pauline-like revelatory
experience which directed his search for meaning
toward the Sufis. Their experiential path of mysti-
cal ascent led al-Ghazali toward a post-intellectual
state where an “inner eye” was opened envisag-
ing some ineffable supra-rational form of knowl-
edge (p. 171). However, he did not remain caught
in an otherworldliness with which one often iden-
tifies the mystic life. On the contrary, he returned
to the active teacher’s life, but one thoroughly
transformed by his own mystical ascent. As with
later kabbalists in the Jewish mystical tradition,
al-Ghazali’s mystical flight was not an escape at
all, but consisted of a round trip journey, return-
ning home to a differently conceived landscape. His
involvement with others was now informed by an
immediate experience of God.

Lobel returns to Maimonides with what she
purports to be a better understanding of Mai-
monides’ own ambiguous constructions of the ide-
al life. The precise role of social, ethical, political,
and pedagogical activity in Maimonides’ thought
has been, and continues to be, the subject of much
passionate scholarly debate. The tenor of the de-
bate itself often mirrors what is at stake for the
virtuous life when we reflect on such issues. Yet
Maimonides’ exegesis of Jacob’s ladder, echoing
Plato’s allegory of the cave, seems to corroborate
Lobel’s reading more than any other. The angel’s,
or prophet’s, ascent toward self-perfection, is fol-
lowed by a descent back to a care for others “with
a view to governing and teaching the people of
the earth.”[2] In other words, intellectual perfec-
tion constitutes only half the quest, remaining un-
fulfilled unless followed by channeling that per-
fection outward for the benefit of others. The lat-
er consummates the former. Lobel follows this
question into Aristotle’s own balancing act on *eu-
daimonia* as either pure theoretical contempla-
tion or a combination of theoretical and moral
virtue. She argues persuasively, with the assis-
tance of Taylor and Alasdair Macintyre, for an in-
tegrated ideal. For Macintyre there can be no proper conception of virtues without placing
them in the context of “an overall life orientation, an overarching good” (p. 148). Likewise, Taylor understands Aristotle’s definition of man as a rational being in terms of telos and commitment. To be human is to orient oneself toward the good.

The only part of the book that I found a slight detour from the exciting path along which Lobel guides us is the analogy between Whitehead’s metaphysics that accommodates key discoveries of quantum physics and the Tao Te Ching of Chinese philosophy. Although I must admit utter ignorance when it comes to subatomic particles (or even atomic for that matter), my skeptical gene is aroused by any synthesizing of post-Newtonian physics and ancient currents of thought. Numerous apologetic attempts to do the same with the Hebrew Bible or kabbalah have perhaps soured me to the enterprise. However, among Lobel’s brief excursions into territory foreign to the Western philosophical tradition, such as Chinese and Indian “philosophies,” I found her excursion into Buddhism most, to use an apt term, enlightening. In the midst of all this frenzied search for some clearly delineated good, or aspiring for proximity to some ontological reality of a supreme Being, Buddhism offers the humility of the indeterminate. The Buddha does not commit to the “right” position on essential philosophical questions: such as is there a self or not? Is there an ontological reality or is all an illusion? Is the world eternal or created? Is nirvana existence or nonexistence? All these issues are unimportant in regard to a truth that centers on a mode of being characterized by “flexibility, openness, wisdom, and compassion” (p. 110). This conception of “nirvana,” Lobel claims, functions like those of the Good and God in other cultures. Though irreconcilable with someone like Maimonides and his construct of a universe anchored in a God, if only even as a first cause, Buddhism and Maimonides might actually converge for all practical purposes on how to play out a human mode of being. Moses can only advance toward God and the Good by “hiding his face” at the burning bush in an act of extreme intellectual restraint and humility.[3] His life is forever informed by knowledge of a Being one can never know and by a self-effacing posture that veers off from the Aristotelian golden mean to the extreme of selflessness. In this sense, Moses may have qualified as a disciple of the Buddha. After reading Lobel’s searching quest for the quest, those who grew up with the late Harry Chapin’s ballads will come to appreciate far more profoundly the concluding sentiment of one of them, “It’s got to be the going not the getting there that’s good.”[4]

Notes
[2]. Ibid., 41.
[3]. Ibid., 29.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic


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