What the *Guide of the Perplexed* is Really About

It may seem odd to ask what a book universally recognized as a masterpiece of religious philosophy is really about – especially when the author clarifies his intentions right from the start. Maimonides tells us in a short Dedicatory Epistle that the *Guide of the Perplexed* is written in the form of a letter to an advanced student who is said to have a powerful longing for speculative matters but whose longing exceeds his grasp of the material. The book is thus written for the student and those like him who experience perplexity on how to interpret biblical verses dealing with divine matters. In the Introduction, Maimonides clarifies this a bit by saying that his primary purpose is to explain the meaning of certain terms occurring in the works of the prophets (1. Intro, 5). Some of these terms are equivocal, others have an original meaning that has since been modified, and still others equivocal at times and univocal at others.

To clarify these terms, Maimonides says he will go beyond the science of the Law in its legalistic sense and deal with it “in its true sense.” For a devout follower of Judaism, this move will create perplexity over whether he should hold fast to the foundations of his religion by taking the Bible’s anthropomorphic descriptions of God literally, e.g. the claim that humans are made in the image of God, or whether he should follow his intellect and take them as colorful ways of expressing abstract philosophic truths, e.g. that humans are the only animal species blessed with the ability to think.
Maimonides’ secondary purpose is closely related to the first: to explain the meaning of obscure parables in the works of the prophets but not identified there as such. According to Maimonides, even those who possess knowledge are inclined to interpret these parables according to their external meaning and be overtaken by perplexity. As examples he cites the story of creation (ma’aseh bereshit) and Ezekiel’s Chariot Vision (ma’saeh merkabah). Should one read these in their external sense or see them as ways of presenting natural science (physics) or divine science (metaphysics)? Maimonides will try to resolve this perplexity by arguing for the second approach.

If this were all Maimonides had to say, there would be no reason to write this paper. No one doubts that the works of the prophets contain parables, metaphors, and colorful descriptions of important ideas. Literal interpretation of these terms does lead to absurdity, e.g. the passages indicating that God has a face, an arm, a throne, or a physical location in space. But no sooner does Maimonides set forth his goals than the picture begins to cloud up.

First there is the fact that Jewish Law prohibits one from discussing the story of creation or Ezekiel’s Chariot Vision in a public forum.1 Second there is the fact that even if Maimonides were permitted to discuss these matters openly, he could not do so adequately because (1. Intro. 7): “You should not think that these great secrets are fully and completely known to anyone among us.” While truth “flashes out” from time to time, habit and our status as material beings intercede “so that we find ourselves again in an obscure night, almost as we were at first.” Third there is the fact that even in those brief moments when truth does appear, there are serious problems about how to

1 Hagigah 11b, 13a.
communicate it (1. Intro, 8): “Know that whenever one of the perfect wishes to mention, either orally or in writing, something that he understands of these secrets . . . he is unable to explain with complete clarity and coherence even the portion that he has apprehended.” Fourth there is the notorious fact that Maimonides says he intends to contradict himself.

Maimonides’ description of his intentions stands in sharp contrast to that of Thomas Aquinas. At the beginning of the Summa Theologica, a book to which the Guide is often compared, Aquinas tells us that Christian doctrine has been hampered by the multiplication of useless questions, the order in which issues have been presented, and the weariness and confusion brought on by undue repetition. His purpose, then, is to “set forth whatever is included in this sacred doctrine as briefly and clearly as the matter itself may allow.”

Unlike Maimonides, whose book is written to an advanced student, Aquinas says quite clearly that his book is intended for beginners. And while Aquinas does embrace skeptical themes in his exposition of sacred doctrine, e.g. the essence of God is unknowable in this life, there is nothing like the qualifications one finds in Maimonides and no admission that he intends to contradict himself. On the contrary, his purpose is to reveal the truth as simply and clearly as he can. Because Maimonides is working with a prohibition against discussing his subject matter in public, he claims (1. Intro. 6) that his purpose is that “the truths be glimpsed and then again concealed.”

What are we to make of this difference? Even a brief look at the scholarly literature on Maimonides will show that there is no clear consensus. What one might call the classical approach favored by Husik, Guttmann, Wolfson, and Altmann is to ignore
the qualifications expressed in the Introduction to the *Guide* and treat the book as a synthesis between Judaism and the Neo-Platonized Aristotelian physics and metaphysics prevalent in the twelfth century. Herbert Davidson, another proponent of the classical approach writes that “the positions at which Maimonides arrives fit together into a well-knit and comprehensive conception of God, the universe, and man.” In support of this view, it should be noted that Maimonides routinely argues that the Hebrew prophets were philosophers in their own right even though we do not possess any of their philosophic writings.

Against the classical approach stands Leo Strauss, who argued that the intellectual vitality of the West derives from the fact that philosophy and revealed religion – Athens and Jerusalem – are not compatible so that any attempt to synthesis results in a position both less interesting and less viable than either of the alternatives taken on their own. In Strauss’ words: Maimonides “took . . . for granted that being a Jew and being a philosopher are mutually exclusive.” For Strauss the key to understanding the *Guide* is to untangle the contradictions that he says he is going to commit. Although Strauss himself does not take sides on the Athens/Jerusalem controversy, he leaves the reader with the overriding impression that Maimonides’ heart was with Athens and that the purpose of the book is to conceal this from the majority of his readers who would regard his position as heretical.

I obviously would not be reading this paper unless I thought both of these approaches are flawed. The classical approach presents Maimonides as a Jewish Thomas

---


Aquinas affecting a synthesis between faith and reason and relying heavily on demonstration. Granted that Maimonides’ presentation of the material may be convoluted at times, his goals remain truth and clarity. While Strauss rejects the idea of a synthesis between Jerusalem and Athens, like the classical approach, he assumes that Maimonides has a well-formulated position that he could reveal to the reader if he wanted to. In my view, neither takes seriously – or seriously enough – Maimonides’ doubts about what he was doing and his conviction that the world we inhabit is essentially dark.

In Book VII of the Republic, Plato compared the human situation to that of prisoners in a cave looking at shadows on the wall. But Plato allowed for the possibility that a prisoner might one day escape and eventually look up at the sun. We have seen that for Maimonides the most an escaped prisoner can expect are a few brief flashes of illumination followed by continued darkness.

To understand what I am saying, let us begin with God. Maimonides has no doubt that God simple and incorporeal and offers several demonstrations to show that God or a first cause of the universe necessarily exists. But no sooner do we accept God’s existence than we come to see that the proposition “God exists,” though true, is problematic. At Guide 1.52, the first of the negative theology chapters, Maimonides presents as uncontroversial the view that God cannot be defined. The reason for this is that if definition proceeds by genus and specific difference, there is no genus or wider category into which God can be put. If no definition can be given of God, then strictly speaking we have no knowledge of what God is – or as Maimonides says (1.54, 123):
“His essence cannot be grasped as it really is.” This conclusion is entirely consistent with Exodus 33:20, where God tells Moses “No mortal can see my face and live.”

It is this insight that causes Maimonides to argue that all positive claims about God’s knowledge, life, or power should be turned into negations and that even negations introduce some degree of distortion when applied to God. What about existence? Though Maimonides does not doubt God’s existence, he hastens to point out that God’s existence bears no resemblance to anything else in the universe (1.58, 137) so that “exists” is completely equivocal as applied to God and us. In short, none of the propositions we utter about God can be taken at face value. Their purpose is to “conduct the mind toward that which must be believed about God.” By Guide 1.59, Maimonides cites the 65th Psalm to the effect that “Silence is praise to thee.” I take this to mean that the best we can do is to recognize that all attempts at reference or description fail. In his words:

Glory then to Him who is such that when the intellects contemplate His essence, their apprehension turns into incapacity; and when they contemplate the proceeding of His actions from His will, their knowledge turns into ignorance; and when the tongues aspire to magnify Him by means of attributive qualifications, all eloquence turns into weariness and incapacity!

To be sure, the ignorance Maimonides is talking about is a learned ignorance that may take years to achieve. But learned ignorance is still ignorance, which means that for

---

4 Guide 1.54.
Maimonides, as for Socrates, there are cases where ignorance constitutes a higher form of awareness than knowledge.

Turning from God to the issues of creation, prophecy, and providence, we find the same skeptical doubts at work. We saw that for all of the problems that arise over the interpretation of “God exists,” Maimonides does claim to have a demonstration of its truth. This is not the case when we come to creation, prophecy, and providence. On these issues, he claims that demonstration is impossible so that the best we can do is identify the most likely candidate among a variety of alternatives.

Consider creation. Although Maimonides defends the view that the world was created ex nihilo and de novo, he admits (2.16, 294) that the most he can do is to tip the scales in that direction. By the time he is finished with his discussion, he admit that the opposite view – that the world is eternal – though not likely is still possible. In fact much of Maimonides’ treatment of creation is tied up with his view of medieval astronomy. Here he expresses himself with admirable clarity (2.24, 327): that the heavenly bodies are too far away and to high in rank to be reached by the human intellect. At one point (2.24, 326), even he confesses perplexity about the true nature of things. So once again, the world we inhabit is essentially dark. And it is just as dark with prophecy and providence.

Confronted with all this darkness, a discerning reader might expect Maimonides to argue that when knowledge fails us, we have no option but to turn on faith. Aquinas too thought that the creation of the world could not be demonstrated and that its eternity was at least a logical possibility. But after pointing this out, Aquinas maintained that creation should be accepted as an article of faith. Although Maimonides says something
similar at Guide 2. 16 – that creation should be accepted without proof on the basis of prophecy – I take this to mean that one should follow prophecy if one does not have the ability to follow the scientific and philosophic arguments that Maimonides offers. For as Maimonides shows, the prophets do not speak with a single voice on this issue and interpreting their words is fraught with many of the same difficulties that plague science and philosophy.

This is all a way of saying that while Aquinas could rely on well formulated articles of faith to fall back on when reason faltered, Maimonides could not. As the reader comes to see, there are Jewish precedents for whatever position on creation one cares to name. Beyond that, there is a major difference between Maimonides’ epistemology and Aquinas’. For Aquinas, faith perfects knowledge in the same way that grace perfects nature. There is no corresponding doctrine in Maimonides and no recognition of faith a superior form of awareness. On the contrary, in the “Parable of the Palace,” which begins the final summation of the book, those who have achieved mastery of the sciences and are engaged in speculation are closer to God than those who accept religious doctrines on traditional authority (3.51, 619).

Earlier on (1. 32, 68), Maimonides characterizes his epistemology by saying:

For if you stay your progress because of a dubious point; if you do not deceive yourself into believing that there is a demonstration with regard to matters that have not been demonstrated; if you do not hasten to reject and categorically to pronounce false any assertions whose contradictories have not been demonstrated; if, finally you do not aspire to apprehend that which you are unable to
apprehend – you will have achieved human perfection and attained

the rank of Rabbi Akiba . . .

Simply put: if you recognize your limits and stay within them, you will achieve the same status as one of Israel’s greatest sages. So far from a recommendation to turn to faith, this sounds like a recommendation to proportion one’s belief to the weight of the evidence.

The reference to Rabbi Akiba refers to a legend in which four rabbis entered the garden of paradise (paradise), which is normally taken to mean that they were exposed to esoteric subjects. One rabbi went mad, one killed himself, and one became an apostate. Of the four, only Akiba went in and came out in peace. The lesson Maimonides draws from this is that of the four, only Akiba recognized his limits and stayed within them. This should not be read as an anti-philosophic polemic. The point is not that the search for knowledge is futile and should be abandoned but that we need to be honest with ourselves about when we have knowledge and when we do not. In the latter case, the most authentic response is not to push ourselves beyond our natural limits but to recognize those limits and understand why we cannot go beyond them.

Where does that get us? On my view, Akiba, who did not have the gift of prophecy, is representative of the human condition at large. For a person who has mastered natural science, or, alternatively, the science of the Law in its legalistic sense, the urge is turn to divine science and ask questions about God and the universe is almost irresistible. But having made the turn, a person soon finds that he or she is overwhelmed by material too difficult and to marvelous to understand. This is true whether one comes to the material by way of Athens, Jerusalem, or something else. The problem is not the
approach to the material but the material itself. Turning to divine science is like looking at the sun and being blinded. In Maimonides’ words (1.59, 139): “We are dazzled by His beauty, and He is hidden from us because of the intensity with which he becomes manifest . . .”

Let us grant for the sake of argument that Maimonides has demonstrated the existence and unity of God. We saw that even here problems arise, but those problems need not concern us at this juncture. Once we get beyond the existence and unity of God and turn to creation, prophecy, and providence, demonstration can no longer carry us so that additional doubts cannot help but creep in. For some people, the whole point of religion is to remove doubt, to induce a feeling of certainty even when the subject matter exceeds the limits of human capacity.

Maimonides’ view is the opposite: if a demonstration is not forthcoming, certainty is not warranted, and there is nothing to be gained by claiming more insight than what our natural abilities allow. It could be said, therefore, that Maimonides’ primary conviction is that one can admit one’s limits, entertain legitimate doubts, and still be loyal to one’s religious tradition. In fact, we could go further: loyalty to a religious tradition means one has to admit one’s limits. To repeat: even Moses, the greatest prophet Israel has ever produced, could not see the face of God. At Guide 1.59, Maimonides argues that Moses was the wisest of people because he knew better than anyone else that God is beyond comprehension. Earlier (1.5), he points out that Moses hid his face and was afraid to look on God at the burning bush while the nobles of Israel were overhasty at Exodus 24:11 and achieved only an imperfect apprehension as a result.
What is the **Guide to the Perplexed** really about? I suggest it is a study in how to cope with limited knowledge, how to admit doubt with succumbing to nihilism or skeptical quietude. Rather than unswerving faith, it asks for honesty and humility. Is this enough on which to construct an entire religion? Although honesty and humility may be virtues, they do not offer much in the way of comfort. The question takes us back to the Dedicatory Epistle. Maimonides’ book is not written to people whose commitment to Judaism is wavering; it is written to a learned and observant Jew who has reached a state of perplexity. For that person and others like him, Maimonides has written a 650 page trying to show that honesty and humility are enough on which to construct a religion and that at the highest level, that is all that God asks of us.