

GUIDE 2:7 THE MORAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF ANGELS AND OF MEN

Maimonides' Fifth Principle of Faith: “The Fifth Foundation is that it is proper to serve Him, blessed be He, to ascribe to Him greatness, to make known His greatness, and to fulfill His commandments. We may not do this to any lesser being, whether it be one of the angels, the stars, the celestial spheres, the elements, or anything formed from them. For all these things have predetermined natures (*mutbaim*) and have no authority or control (choice) over their actions (*v'al pa'ulatam ain mishpat v'lo bekhira*). Rather, such authority and control is God's. Similarly, it is not proper to serve them as intermediaries in order that they should bring us closer to God. Rather, to God Himself we must direct our thoughts, and abandon anything else. This Fifth Foundation is based in the prohibition against idolatry about which much of the Torah deals.” (*Commentary on the Mishnah*, Sanhedrin X, trans. R. Eliezer Abrahamson)

Overview: Why Did Maimonides Need Another Chapter on Angels?

Chapter 2:7 is not the shortest chapter in the Guide of the Perplexed. The shortest chapter is Guide 1:14 (the lexical chapter about *Man*, the Hebrew *Adam*). Still, our densely packed chapter is only the size of a large paragraph (7 sentences in the Friedlander English translation, 153 words in the original Judeo-Arabic). Maimonides' short chapters are the hardest chapters to interpret.

Since Guide 2:6 was also about angels, why didn't Maimonides just add these lines to the end of it?

This is a question that the major glosses do not address, although it might have stimulated the thoughts of the ancient commentators R. Efodi and R. Shem Tov. Efodi concluded that this chapter was needed to resolve a discrepancy between two passages in the Torah, while Shem Tov thought Maimonides placed those texts here to create a contradiction that would conceal dangerous content by provoking perplexity.

While the reconciliation of those two passages is central to Maimonides' thinking, the reason that this material was not included in last chapter's discussion of angelology is because it opens an entirely new issue, the distinction between angelic and human moral choices.

This problematic becomes clearer once we see that his statement in our chapter, that the angels have both volition and choice, clashes with his statement in the Fifth Principle of Faith that they have no choice over their actions. More to the point, this is the first chapter in the Guide to deal squarely with moral issues. While it is a chapter about the choices that angels make, its deeper purpose is to have us think about the choices we ought to make in our everyday lives.

MAIMONIDEAN HOMONYMITY

“WE have already explained that the term *angel* is a *homonym* (*shituf-shem*), and is used of the intellectual beings, the spheres, and the elements (*ha-sikhlim, v'hagalgalim v'hayesodot*): for all these are engaged in performing a divine command.”

(On the term “Divine command” – R. Kafih has *pekuda*, Shwarz: *tzav*, R. Ibn Tibbon: *mitzvah*, Jud.-Ar.: מִצְוָה אֱלֹהִים).

The last chapter showed that the term *malakh*, angel, has various meanings. Thus, the minds that rule our world through the cosmic spheres are angels, but so are the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water, as well as other forces that precipitate events in our world. The key that relates these otherwise radically different actors is that they all are “performing a divine command,” that is, each one is on a mission from God.

The weight of evidence from the text of the Guide shows that the term *shituf-shem* (Jud.-Ar.: אַסְתַּף אִשְׁתַּף) is a *homonym* between two or more terms that sound alike. But there are other ways that translators render *shituf-shem*. Possible alternate translations, ranging from *least-like* to *most-like* are *homonym*, *equivocal* (*ambiguous/amphibolous*) or *synonym*. Some translators, like Pines, followed by Michael Shwarz and Steve Harvey, insist on translating it as *equivocal*. This is an error, but the reason for the error is that Maimonides used homonymity in a peculiar way.

The usual example given for two words that are homonymously related in Hebrew is the term *ayin*, defined as both an *eye* and a *spring of water*. Whatever ancient metaphorical relationship may obtain between those two meanings, in practice they share nothing but their sound. But when Maimonides calls two words homonymous the relationship between them is *tighter* than that between an eye and a spring of water. Thus, all *angels* are *messengers pursuing divine missions*.

Despite this, Maimonides insists that the differences between minds and spheres, on the one hand, and elements, on the other, are essentially unbridgeable, just like the difference between man and God. Terms used of man and God are so completely different as to share only a name (which is why they do not enjoy an “*equivocal*” or *ambiguous* relationship, or, as Aquinas argued, an *analogous* relationship, *analogia*).

Still, as we explained in our discussion of Maimonides’ *via negativa*, there is still some *inarticulable but real* connection between man and God. That is why, at the very beginning of the Guide, Maimonides emphasizes that we are made “in His image.” There exists some intellectual/spiritual confluence, but it is not so close as to be a relationship of *similarity* or *equivocality*, nor is it an *ambiguous* or *analogous* relationship.

Similarly, Maimonides uses the tools of homonymity to differentiate among the angels, some of which are conscious in ways that surpass our own consciousness, while some have no consciousness whatsoever.

(See, generally, Harry A. Wolfson, “The Amphibolous Terms in Aristotle, Arabic Philosophy, and Maimonides,” 1:455 – 477, in *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, 1977, Harvard; Steve Harvey, “Key Terms in Translations of Maimonides’ Guide of the Perplexed,” in *The Guide of the Perplexed in Translation*, ed. Josef Stern, et al., 2019, U. Of Chicago, 305, 309 – 314, esp. 310; and Efras, *Philosophic Terms in Maimonides’ Moreh Nebuchim*, 119. On the similarity between divine and human psychology, see my chapter-essay on Guide 1:68. *Via negativa*: Guide 1:51-60)

THE COSMIC MINDS, THE SPHERES, THE ELEMENTS, THE BEASTS AND US

“But do not imagine that the Intelligences and the spheres are like other forces which reside in bodies (*shaar ha-kokhot ha-gufaniim*) which act by the laws of nature (*asher hem teva*), without being conscious (*masigim*) of what they do.”

The world of the angels turns out to have far more and different kinds of members than we might have thought. The first distinction that Maimonides makes among those forces is between mind and matter, that is, between the spiritual and the corporeal. At the highest level below God in the great chain of being are the cosmic *minds*, which he calls the “separate intellects,” *sikhlim ha-nivdalim*. They are “separate” from matter, unlike our own intellects, that have a persistent relationship with matter. They are also separate from God.

As we explained in Guide 2:4-5, these are the minds, from ten to perhaps fifty in number, each of which is unique, that God serially emanated according to the ancient cosmology. In that paradigm these intellects cause the rotation of the cosmic spheres. Since those separate intellects use the spheres to rule our world,

Maimonides reasoned that those intellects must be intellectually conscious beings. His logic was that since those rulers must know their subjects in order to rule them, they must therefore be conscious agents.

This is not true of the elements and the other natural forces which lack consciousness. They fulfill the divine will because it is their nature. These are the ancient elements, fire, air, water, and earth, and their forces, the hot, dry, wet, and cold, as well as forces in physical bodies.

The questionable case is that of the spheres. Aristotle asserted that the spheres are composed of a unique element, the fifth element – *quintessence*. Unlike the other elements, the fifth element was thought to be invisible, despite being a solid rotating matter. The sphere also had its own soul/mind. It was conscious of its ruling separate intellect but subservient to it. Its soul moved with that quintessence. In this the spheres were different from their ruling separate intellects, which were immobile since they had no connection to matter.

Those separate intellects were the higher angels. They were not, however, the only incorporeal angels. There were also the Platonic forms, which are the paradigms from which all material things are copied. Those forms are the object of God's own meditation. The Midrash knew them as the *pamalia shel maala*, while Philo Judaeus called them the *Logos*. Maimonides' catalog of incorporeal forces also included the souls responsible for vegetable growth, animal movement, and human movement. He described those souls as being so homonymously different from each other as to merely share the name: the vegetable soul, the animal soul, and the human soul (*Shemona Perakim* ch. 1).

Finally, the human psychological faculties are angelic forces. These are the *five senses*, the *common sense*, the *imagination*, the *potential intellect*, the *acquired intellect*, and at the summit, as a higher angel itself, the *active intellect*, called by its angelic name *ishim* (*Mishneh Torah, Ysodei 2:7*).

Although these forces are angels, Maimonides sharply distinguished them from those that were “natural” forces. The latter “...Reside in bodies and act by the laws of nature without being *conscious (masigim)* of what they do.” Those natural or corporeal forces include the elements and every other physical force, up to and including the vegetable souls and even the animating souls of many lower creatures. They discharge their naturally determined missions unconsciously.

(Nature=*teva* / Jud.-Ar. טביעה. The term *teva* does not take on the meaning of “nature,” until medieval Hebrew, its original meaning being *to sink* or *to stamp*, the idea being that nature is *God's stamp* imparting the natural character of things, see Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 519, citing *Bamidbar Rabba*).

Maimonides emphasized in the last chapter, Guide 2:6, that even these unconscious natural forces are angels:

“... All this — including the various parts of that which exists and even the creation of the limbs of animals as they are — has been brought about through the intermediation of angels. For all forces are angels (*kol hakokhot malakhim*).” And: “The elements are also called angels” (*afilu hayisodot n'krait gam hem malakhim*.)

The difference between these unconscious forces and the higher angelic forces, is that the latter are *conscious of their actions*. This is the key to Maimonides' conception of moral consciousness: “The spheres and the Intelligences are *conscious of their actions* and *select* by their own *free will* the objects of their [governance]...*masigim pa'uloteihem, u'vaalei b'khira u'manhigim*.” Their consciousness is what makes them moral actors.

The final distinction that Maimonides discusses is between the angels and us. We already saw, in the last chapter, that our mental faculties are called angels, and that the prophets are also angels.

How do we differ from the higher angels of the spheres? They exercise free will in their rule, “But in a way that is not like our free choice and our governance, which deal *wholly with things that are produced anew* (*shehem kulam b’dvarim mitkhadashim*),” (Pines trans). R. Kafih, responding to these words, explained that “Volition always deals with new situations, but our conduct differs from the conduct of the separate intellects because *they are endowed with foresight* (*sh’hanhagatam tzfuya*)” (note 3, *ad loc.* My trans).

In other words, our missions are executed in the present, in the *now*, but we make our choices confronted with alternatives whose hidden outcomes we cannot know. In that sense we are all like Yehuda, who faced just such a choice with the *disguised* Tamar at a *crossroads* in his life (Gen. 38:12 – 23). The angels are different. They know the outcome and freely choose the good. They *consent* to their mission. But why should we regard this as a *moral* choice? What kind of “choice” can it be to *always* choose to pursue the mission?

THE MORALITY OF ANGELS

“...The intellects [and] the spheres...all...carry out orders (*motziim pekuda l’poal*)...For the spheres and intellects *apprehend their acts* (*masigim pa’uloteihem*), *choose freely*, and *govern* (*baalei bekhira u’manhigim*)...All of this indicates to you that they *apprehend their acts* (*hasagatam et pa’uloteihem*), and have *will* and *free choice* (*ratzon u’vekhira*) with regard to the governance committed to them...The intellects and the spheres...always do that which is good, and only that which is good is with them...and all that they have exists always in perfection and in *actu* (*b’shlemut u’va’poal*) since they have come into existence.” (Pines trans. 266)

Despite what Maimonides said in his *Fifth Principle of Faith* that the supernal angels “Have no authority or control over their actions (*v’al pa’ulatam ain mishpat v’lo b’khira*),” here he tells us that they have free choice (*bekhira*). But how can the angels have free choice to pursue their divine missions, yet retain no authority to alter them?

Prof. Alfred Ivry, in his discussion of this passage, argued that the “choice” that Maimonides grants to the intellects and the spheres is “unintelligible, if the intellects of the spheres have no potentiality for making bad choices.” With due respect, his discussion missed the historic interest in the morality of angels in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholasticism, including its implications for human morality.

(Ivry, *Maimonides’ Guide of the Perplexed: A Philosophical Guide*, Chicago, 2016, 112).

R. Yehuda Even-Shmuel explains the problem in those scholastic terms:

“Perhaps you will ask, if they [the angels] indeed possess volition, why does their choice always come to *one* [particular] action? Don’t we, who are *essentially* volitional (*sh’mahuteinu hi ha-bekhira*), sometimes choose *this* and sometimes *that* (and sometimes good and sometimes bad!), such that from this, the things we usually do (*hamunhagim*) aren’t always the same in the same situations?
-- You should understand that there are *two types* of choice:
“1) Free Choice (*bekhirat ha-breira*), which *we* are granted, that we exercise from time to time as new situations arise, and,

“2) Consented Choice (*bekhirat ha-haskama*), that which is granted to the cosmic spheres and their intellects, in which the *intellect* and the *will* unite (*hizdahut*); and this will always *chooses* (*bokher*) what the intellect *cognizes* (*sh’hakhir hasekhel*). This, then, is an intellectually [justified] choice, and for that reason they make this choice joyfully (‘Happy when they leave and happy when they return’); And the conduct that arises from this *act of recognition* (*pa’ulat hakara*) is *free/autonomous conduct* (*hanhaga hofshit*), free though *constant*, since it does not vary in new situations (*ayn shum inyan mitkhadash*).” (My trans. of R. Yehuda Even-Shmuel here and throughout).

R. Yosef Kafih, as we saw, wrote that the difference was because our volition, unlike that of the separate intellects, lacks foresight. The angels always perform their missions and always choose the good, *not* because they are compelled to but because they can foresee the outcome. Entirely incorporeal beings act *atemporally* since time is always connected to the motion of matter (Props. IV and XV). It follows that their panoramic view of the world’s future is not limited by time-bound considerations. They can see and enter into the grand design, while their love of God prompts them to emulate His ways (*imitatio dei*).

This fits with discussions of morality in medieval scholasticism. Anselm (1033/4 CE-1109 CE) rejected the idea that we could only be free if we could choose to do wrong. Were that the case, then neither God nor the angels would be free. Rather, they are *confirmed in the good*. They are free though they do not act in any other way but to do good. Freedom is “The ability to preserve *uprightness of will* for its own sake.” They have the consciousness to *recognize the good* and the freedom to preserve it. Freedom only exists when one knows to do the right thing for the right reason. Knowledge is the key. The question then becomes whether the moral agent has the *ability* do what it knows it ought to do. Similarly, the *Dictionary of Scholasticism* defined *volition* as “The rational appetite, that *power* of the human soul or of a spiritual substance which tends toward a good apprehended by the intellect or away from an evil recognized by the intellect.”

This was also the Jewish view: the thief is not really free due to his limited outlook. He does not see that his acts damage the divine plan for the perfection of the world. His morality is forestalled by his small-mindedness. If he understood the big picture he would recoil from his scheme.

This is what Maimonides means when he conceives the moral action of angels and men as the “apprehension of their acts,” *hasagatam et pa’uloteihem*. Jewish morality is halachically based, meaning that the Jew must strive to understand what God wants of him in this world. *Ignorantia juris neminem excusat*, ignorance of the law never excuses (cf. Lev. 5:17). When men recognize their mission, they emulate the angels and imitate God, to the extent that they have the present ability to do so (*v’natna lanu yakholet*).

(Regarding the nature of time: see my chapter-essay on Guide: *Introduction* to Vol. 2, Prop. IV with Prop. XV. On moral choices in scholasticism: *De Libertate Arbitrii*, in the Anselm entry in *Stanford Enc. Of Phil.*, 4:1-2; *Dict. of Scholasticism*, “Volition,” B. Wuellner, 1956. The small-mindedness of criminals: the exceptions, of course, are the Amalekites and their evil successors whose consciousnesses never let them depart the path of terror).

TWO TORAH PASSAGES ABOUT ANGELIC MORALITY

Having explained in general terms that angelic moral consciousness is the voluntary but consented choice to their mission, Maimonides then states, “I have been led to adopt this theory by certain passages in Scripture.”

The two passages he speaks of are from Genesis ch. 19, and Exodus ch. 23. The first is about Lot’s relocation from Sodom to Tzoar. The second passage concerns the angel who will lead the Jews after the transgression of the golden calf. Here, first, is the full passage about Lot, with Maimonides’ quote-shards in **grayscale**.

Genesis Ch. 19

17. And it came to pass, when they [the angels] had brought them forth abroad, that he [one of the angels] said [to Lot], Escape for thy life; look not behind thee, neither stay thou in all the plain; escape to the mountain, lest thou be consumed.
18. And Lot said unto them, Oh, not so, my Lord:
19. Behold now, thy servant hath found grace in thy sight, and thou hast magnified thy mercy, which thou hast shewed unto me in saving my life; and I cannot escape to the mountain, lest some evil take me, and I die:
20. Behold now, this city is near to flee unto, and it is a *little* one [i.e., it was built more recently than Sodom]: Oh, let me escape thither, is it not a *little* one? [its populace had committed fewer transgressions] and my soul shall live.
21. And he [the angel] said unto him [Lot], **See, I have accepted thee concerning this thing also**, that I will not overthrow this city, for the which thou hast spoken.
22. Haste thee, escape thither; **for I cannot do any thing** till thou be come thither. Therefore, the name of the city was called *Zoar* [which means “little”].
23. The sun was risen upon the earth when Lot entered into Zoar.
24. Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD...

In the last chapter we saw that some angels pursue a single mission, while others eternally perform multiple missions. Without deciding which to call Lot’s angels, Maimonides stressed the *specificity* of their work.

Lot’s angel recognizes the specificity of its mission. The angel has no power to alter it. Maimonides cites verse 22, “Haste thee, escape thither; *for I cannot do any thing* till thou be come thither.” The angel’s mission includes the “overthrow” of Sodom and the salvation of Lot (Rashi: *ekhad hofekh, v’ekhad matzil*). The actual destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, however, was due to God (19:24).

The Netziv (R. Naftali Berlin, 1816-1893) explained why the angel “could not do anything” when Lot asked it to save Tzoar as his refuge. The angel needed Lot to flee the area before God rained fire and brimstone upon it at sunrise. Otherwise, Lot would have been left among the targets of divine wrath, and the angel could not perform its parallel mission to save him. Maimonides cited this passage to emphasize that the angels’ consciousness of the specificity of their mission completely determines their choices.

However, when the angel promised Lot to save Tzoar, it says: “*I have accepted thee* concerning this thing also, that I will not overthrow this city...” How can the angel consent to this “mission creep?” The question dissolves when we see that Maimonides arranged his quote-shards out of order, in that the angel first agrees not to overthrow Tzoar, and only then demands that Lot make his timely escape.

Since saving Lot was itself one of the angelic missions, the angel has not changed it. R. Yehuda Even-Shmuel argued that otherwise “It would be as though the angel could freely act [contrarily], as though [saving Lot] was not his mission to fulfill.”

(This may not even be considered two missions but the same one: see Or haChaim, 1696-1743 responding to Rashi on Gen. 19:16. Note that the tradition is willing to consider that these angels were *punished* for claiming that they themselves would destroy Sodom, see Rashi to 19:22; R. Bakhya ben Asher, 1255-1340, on 19:13; *Ber. Rabba* 50:9; and Job 4:18, 15:15. Nonetheless, Radak, 1160-1235, stated that since the angels are intelligent, God lets them modify their instructions when, in their judgment, that will better fulfill the mission. Ramban, 1194-1270, disagreed.)

Maimonides wants us to conclude that Genesis 19 supports his theory of angelic volition: “I have been led to adopt this theory by...Scripture.” That is, he claimed that the passage supports his doctrine that the angel has cognition, volition, and governs through what R. Even-Shmuel called “heartfelt agreement” to the details of its mission [בהסכמה שבלב], including both the overthrow of Sodom and the salvation of Lot.

Maimonides also claimed support from the verse about the angel who will lead the Israelites:

Exodus Ch. 23

20. Behold, I send an Angel before thee, to keep thee in the way, and to bring thee into the place which I have prepared.

21. Beware of him, and obey his voice, provoke him not; for he will not pardon your transgressions: for My name is in him.

22. But if thou shalt indeed obey his voice, and do all that I speak; then I will be an enemy unto thine enemies, and an adversary unto thine adversaries.

23. For mine Angel shall go before thee, and bring thee in unto the Amorites, and the Hittites, and the Perizzites, and the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites: and I will cut them off.

Rashi explained that “Here they [the Jewish people] were informed that *they would once sin*...and that [God] will not go up in the midst of thee.” When he said that “they would once sin” he referred to Exodus 33:3, the future time when the Jews would worship the golden calf. That passage pronounced their fate: “I [God] will not go up in the midst of thee; for thou art a stiff-necked people: lest I consume thee in the way.” Rashi derived this from *Exodus Rabbah* 32:3, which explained that as long as Moses lived the Jews remained under the direct rule of God, but upon his death their guardian angel would lead them. According to that Midrash, this was the angel that appeared to Moses’ successor, Joshua, at Jericho (Joshua 5:13).

Reading line 21, that we should beware and obey this angel who will not pardon our sins, R. Even-Shmuel asks the following pointedly rhetorical questions:

“How is it possible that such broad authority was placed in the hands of a messenger? What could be heard from this messenger other than the sound of his [specific] message? Who could pardon transgression other than God? Can there be any other explanation but that the angel knows the thought of God (דעת עליין) and is in total agreement with it, such that this messenger came instead of its Sender? (‘For My name is in him’).” (R. Even-Shmuel, *ad loc.*)

This angel has this great power because “My name is in him,” i.e., the angel acts in God’s name with His authority. Still, with all its power it cannot *pardon*, grant *favours* nor answer *prayers*. This is precisely what Maimonides meant in his *Fifth Principle of Faith*:

“... [Because the angels] have *no authority* or control over their actions (*v'al pa'ulatam ain mishpat v'lo b'khira*) [but] rather, *such authority and control is God's*,...*it is not proper to serve them as intermediaries in order that they should bring us closer to God.*”

This angel has more power than Lot’s angels, but if the angel in Exodus 23 can neither pardon nor grant favours, it follows that Lot’s angels also have no independent power to grant his request or hear his prayers.

HOW THE MORAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF ANGELS DIFFERS FROM THAT OF MEN

Concluding his biblical discussion Maimonides writes, comparing the angels’ consciousness to ours:

“All of this indicates to you that they (the spheres and the intellects) apprehend their acts and have *will* and free *choice* (*ratzon v'bekhira*) with regard to the governance committed to them, just as we have *will* (*ratzon*) with regard to that which from the foundation of our existence has been committed to us and given over to our power.” (Pines trans., p. 266, for all English quotes in this section.)

Volition vs. Choice. While the angels were granted both *volition* (*ratzon*) and *choice* (*bekhira*), men just have power of *volition*, and only with respect to what they can control.

R. Kafih explains (note 7, *ad loc.*) the distinction between *volition* and *choice*, as Maimonides inherited it from the Arabic philosophical tradition, specifically from Avi Netzer Al-Farabi (870 CE – 950/951 CE). *Choice*, *bekhira*, means that a person can choose that which is *possible* for him to do. *Volition*, *ratzon*, i.e., wishing or willing, can apply to things that may be *impossible* to do. As an example, everyone *wishes* not to die, but no one can *choose* immortality. We can wish for anything, but we cannot choose anything we wish.

Volition, therefore, is more general than choice. We, unlike the farsighted angels, can only guess at the outcome of those choices that we have the ability to make.

Defective Choices and Choices Disrupted by Privations. Maimonides concluded his thought with these further checks upon our choices: “We sometimes do things that are *defective* (*b’ofen gro’ah*)...., and our governance and our action are preceded by privations ...”

He means that our inability to predict the outcomes of our acts, and to see the big picture, result in our making wrong choices, even to commit evil. Our actions and moral choices are inconsistent, erratic and chaotic. That is why our moral consciousness is inferior to that of the angels.

Maimonides contrasted the choices and actions of those angels:

“Whereas the intellects and the spheres are not like that, but always do that which is good, and only that which is good with them (*v’ain etzlem ki im ha-tov*), All that they have exists always in *perfection* and in *actu* (*b’shlemut u’v’poal*) since they have come into existence.”

Their consistent goodness and perfection flow from the *simplicity* of their noetic nature. Unlike man, who is a complicated mix of matter and mind, the angelic messengers are entirely spiritual beings. They lack our complexity, which causes our inconsistent actions. Angelic simplicity and perfection are corollaries of Maimonides’ Prop. XI, that the soul and the mind cannot be divided in any way, while his Prop. XVI asserted that nothing incorporeal could be numerous, composite or complex.

Our *potentialities* are part of that complexity. Our *wants* are merely potentialities until we *actualize* them by putting them into effect. This is not true of the angels nor of God, for neither is subject to potentiality.

Maimonides wrote that “Our governance and our action are *preceded by privations* (*kadam ha-heider*).” In Aristotelian science the gap between potential reality and its actualization is called *privation*. This privation is the motor that produces natural change since it allows matter the space to exchange one form for another. (Props XI and XVI: See Introduction to Volume II of the Guide. On *privations*, see “Parable of the Married Harlot” in my *Commentator’s Preface*).

Thus, while the angels act uniformly, consistently, and continuously, our actions are inconsistent and full of gaps between our intentions and our choices. Nonetheless, they share one important commonality.

THE IDENTITY BETWEEN HUMAN AND ANGELIC CONSCIOUSNESS

Remarkably, apart from these differences, the structure of the moral consciousness of angels and men is the *same*, since both “apprehend their acts,” *hasagatam et pa’uloteihem*. This parallels the similarity, if not the identity, that Maimonides revealed between God’s mind and man’s mind in Guide 1:68 (see my chapter-

essay). The difference in both cases lies in our physicality, which subjects us to time, complexity, and lack of vision. Otherwise, the moral consciousness of angels and men is identical.

R. Even-Shmuel emphasized this point when he wrote that the higher angels govern through their volitional agreement with their mission. He added that they are – “*Exactly like us*, for we should also want to do what has been placed upon us from our inception to the extent that it is in our power to do so,” *mamash kmo sh’anakhnu, bnei adam, rotzim b’mah sh’hutal aleinu m’reishit hyoteinu, v’yakholet l’maloto*.

The inconsistency in our actions is partly due to the mixture of *matter* in our nature. That is the reason why, unlike us, the angels, who are free of any connection to matter, “Exist always in perfection and *in actu*.”

Pines’ translation employs the Latinization *actu* for Aristotle’s *entelechia* (*po’al* in Hebrew, Jud. Ar.: אלפעל). It means *the actualization of a potential*. To be continuously in *actu* is the province of God and the angels alone. Their perfection and simplicity leave no room for potentiality. Nothing about their actions needs to be perfected since nothing about them is potential or exists in a state of potentiality.

Contrast this with the consequences of our *corporeal* nature. The moral consciousness of men differs from that of the angels in three ways: 1) our choices are “deficient” in that they miss their mark or are bad, 2) they are inconsistent, interrupted by gaps, and chaotic, and 3) each of our choices is a new choice.

The conclusion can only be that we should strive, as much as possible, to do what we can in emulation of the actions of God and the angels, who act on their recognition of the whole divine plan. Our mission is to understand what God wants of us in the Torah and, to the best of our ability, fulfill that mission.

MAIMONIDES VERSUS ARISTOTLE

In this last sentence Maimonides reinforces his public dispute with Aristotle: “All that [the angels] have exists always in perfection and in *actu*, since they have come into existence (*m’az sh’nimtzaoo*).”

When he says that they have *come into existence* he meant that God created them. Aristotle’s separate intellects, by contrast, are uncreated and eternal, since nothing in Aristotle’s universe was created. God was just a part of his eternal universe, not its transcendent Creator. The consequence is Aristotle’s deification of the cosmic minds as the Olympic gods. (*Metaphysics* 12:9:1074 1-15). Maimonides’ angels, by contrast, are not immortal. He said this in his *Fifth Principle of Faith*, which warned us against the worship of angels:

“...It is not proper to serve [the angels] as intermediaries in order that they should bring us closer to God. Rather, to God Himself we must direct our thoughts, and abandon anything else. This Fifth Foundation is based in the prohibition against idolatry about which much of the Torah deals.”

R. SHEM TOV AND THE DREADED CONTRADICTION OF THE SEVENTH CAUSE

Commenting on Maimonides’ use of the verses from Genesis 19 and Exodus 23, R. Shem Tov wrote:

“Maimonides brought these verses according to the *Seventh Cause of Contradictions* because they refer to [the angels’] apprehension of their actions, and to their volition and choice regarding what has been given to them to rule, just as we have volition over that which has been granted to us, as we are, to the extent that we can achieve it.” (*Ad loc.*, 24b, my trans.)

With all due respect to Rabbi Shem Tov, I think it commentator malpractice to toss out that something is a “contradiction” in the Guide, especially an explosive contradiction of the *Seventh Type*, without giving any account of why he came to this conclusion.

Few who use the term “contradiction” understand its *logical* meaning. Most of the alleged contradictions in the Guide are readily resolvable contraries or divergencies. The rest are either educational in purpose or are meant to mildly mask material that the second Mishnah in *Hagigah* forbade to be taught in public. Those concern certain types of mystical and sexual discussions, including *Maaseh Merkava*, the topic of divine providence, which does include the study of angels. R. Shem Tov’s specific reference about the “Seventh Cause” was to Maimonides’ statement in his *Introduction* to the Guide that:

“There are seven causes of inconsistencies and contradictions to be met with in a literary work.... The Seventh Cause: It is sometimes necessary to introduce *very deep matters* (*ha-davarim b’inyanim amukim*) as may partly be disclosed, but must partly be concealed: while, therefore, on one occasion the object which the author has in view may demand that the...problem be treated as solved in one way, it may be convenient on another occasion to treat it as solved in the opposite way. The author must endeavor by concealing the fact as much as possible, to prevent the *crowd* (*he-hamon*) from perceiving the contradiction.” (Friedlander trans., slightly altered by me in italics to conform more closely to the sense.)

The motivation for the contemporary mania to search out contradictions is the notion that Maimonides concealed a secret anti-Torah doctrine in the Guide. Various “radical Maimonideans” have argued that this alleged doctrine is either Aristotelian, Platonic, skeptical (Pyrrhonian skepticism), proto-Reform Jewish, anti-cabalist, agnostic or even atheist.

There is, however, no secret doctrine. And just as there are no contradictions in God, it is a fool’s errand to seek contradictions in the divine science.

(For my view on the “contradictions” in the Guide see my *Commentator’s Preface*, under the heading “Are you a Straussian or an anti-Straussian?” together with my *Introduction II : Contradictions*.)

I do not know why R. Shem Tov wrote this, since the passages in question, as I have shown, are easily reconciled. Perhaps he thought that Maimonides introduced a mild discrepancy in order to shield the *Maaseh Merkava* topic of angelic morality from open public discussion. In my view, it would have been better had he left Seventh Cause Contradictions out of his comments on this chapter.