

GUIDE 1:33 BEGINNINGS

Chapter 1:33 furthers the survey of the problems teaching the divine science.

Maimonides says that the divine science concerns parables in the prophetic scriptures, “mysteries (*sodot*), and secrets of the law (*sitre torah*).”

But this chapter is not about the content of the divine science, nor whether to study it, nor how to study. Rather, the chapter is devoted to the *beginning* of the study.

Maimonides says it is “very injurious” to begin the study without first determining if the student is capable of it, and, second, without his completion of certain preparatory studies. Those studies are mathematics, geometry, logic, physics, and astronomy, as Maimonides’ contemporaries understood these disciplines. Torah studies are unmentioned but assumed, since his intended readers are young rabbis (as the Guide’s many unexplained rabbinic references suggest).

The reason the studies are injurious for the unprepared is that the student will “not only become confused in matters of religion, *but will fall into complete infidelity*.” It would be better, following Pines and Schwarz, to translate that last phrase as “but will empty the divine of any content.” The example of such a student was Akher, who rejected divine law and providence. He was too impatient to learn the mysteries and secrets of the law to prepare properly for the study.

As we saw, the unprepared student affirms as proven the unproven. He deprecates ideas as disproven whose contradictories are yet unproven. He rushes to perceive what he cannot perceive. His inevitable disillusionment ends in atheism, emptying the divine of any content. Like Akher, he rejects the religious community.

LIMITATIONS

“It is necessary to initiate the young and to instruct the *less intelligent (mugbalei ha-havana)* according to their comprehension... for it is the object of the Torah to serve as a guide for the instruction of the young, of women, and of the common people; and as all of them are incapable to comprehend the true sense of the words, *tradition (Ar., taqlīd)* was considered sufficient to convey all truths which were to be established and as regards ideals, only such remarks were made as would lead towards a knowledge of their *existence*, though not to a comprehension of their true *essence*.”

I highlighted the words “less intelligent” above, because they probably should be translated “limited understanding” (Pines: “deficient in capacity”; Schwarz: “*kitzrei ha-daat*”). Maimonides is never clear on whether intellectual limitation is due to nature or nurture. He might not have recognized the distinction. We are *all* limited to sublunary knowledge, and there are subjects whose limits we have no desire to overcome, such as whether the number of stars is odd or even. He also recognizes that some are more limited than others, since God did not distribute intellectual capacity equally.

In the last chapter, he said that while “everyone” recognized different physical limitations, only “the wise” recognized the inequality of intellectual limitations. Yet Maimonides always holds out some promise that limits are transcendable. He does say that limits and “causes preventing the study” (*sibot m'niat lamod*) are “requisite and necessary.” However, just because limits preventing study are, in the nature of things, requisite and necessary, does not mean they are insurmountable. Some will never be able to learn, but he grants educational nurture considerable leeway.

WOMEN?

His remarks about women are unremarkable in this historical setting. We should not forget the special influence of Muslim society upon Maimonides. There were Muslim women who were important in culture and history e.g., Sitt al-Mulk, d. 1024 C.E., Fatimid princess and regent. (In culture: *Hadith Literature: Its Origin, Development, Special Features & Criticism* by Muhammad Zubayr Siddiqi, Chapter 6, pp. 142-153, Calcutta University, 1961).

Nonetheless, the picture was bleak. By contrast, Europe had many female saints. Christianity's ability to assimilate the memory of pagan goddesses to Christian heroines is well known (*Santa Maria sopra Minerva*). Just before Maimonides' time, Héloïse d'Argenteuil (1101-1162), sadly married to the great philosopher Peter Abelard (1079–1142), was a famous thinker and writer, and other examples come to mind.

While Jewish law protected women in ways unknown to the other dispensations, Maimonides was still a part of the dominant Muslim society. There is no evidence that he knew any female scholars. What we do not know of his marital life massively outweighs what little we do know. He occasionally mentions outstanding women of the traditional and scriptural past, but never any contemporaries.

TAQLĪD AND UŞŪL

What can we teach of divine science to those of "limited" intellect? We teach significant opinions from the Torah, "though not to a comprehension of (their) true essence." Kafih explains that this meant fundamental religious concepts, such as divine unity, creation *ex nihilo*, and the existence of prophecy (note 9, *ad loc.*).

We convey these truths to those of limited intellect by *tradition* (the term Maimonides uses is the Arabic *taqlīd*), "which was considered sufficient to convey all truths which were to be established."

Taqlīd (uncritical emulation), a concept from Islamic legal theology, is the acceptance of authority without questioning its scriptural basis or rationale. Unlike the western legal concept of precedent (*stare decisis*), which approves as authoritative those decisions which are concretized in written appellate cases, *taqlīd* points to the decisor himself, and it means that people must follow such an authoritative judge (*mujtahid*) in all of his rulings. It was debatable whether this norm applied outside of the strictly legal arena to the *fundamentals* of religion, called, in Arabic, *uṣūl* or *uṣūl al-dīn*. Most held, to the contrary, that a Muslim must attain fundamental beliefs through *individual* examination and demonstration, and that *taqlīd* did not apply to *uṣūl*. *Taqlīd* could also mean that those who had not carried out the study of fundamental beliefs should follow the guidance of those who had.

One problem of a fundamental nature in early Islamic history was Qur'anic anthropomorphism. Important interpreters asserted that *taqlīd* demands literalism *bi lā kayfa*, "without asking how," despite this being an area of *uṣūl*.

Jewish authorities converted the concept of *taqlīd* to their own use. Prominent among these theologians was Bakhya Ibn Pakuda (1040 CE), writing in Arabic well before Maimonides' time:

"I asked one of those who are thought to be Torah scholars some of the questions on the science of the inner life (*b'khokhmat ha-matzpun*)...and he answered me that [relying on] tradition can substitute for independent thought in all these matters."

This suggests some rabbinic acceptance of *taqlīd*, in its strongest version. Bakhya rejected the position, originating language that Maimonides carried forward in our chapter:

“My answer to him was that this is acceptable only in the case of women, children and uneducated men (*khasrei ha-daat*, limited intellect) who, because of limited perception and comprehension, cannot reason on their own. But whoever has the intellectual capacity to verify what he receives [from tradition] and yet is prevented from doing so by his own laziness, or because he takes lightly God’s commandments and Torah, he will be punished for this and held accountable for negligence.” (*Khovot ha-Levavot, Duties of the Heart*, trans., by Daniel Haberman, with facing Ibn Tibbon Hebrew, Feldheim Publ., 1996, vol. 1, p. 25)

Bakhya makes this investigation a *duty* of the heart. Those who fail not only transgress this duty, but end in a far worse situation:

“The same is true of one who acknowledges God’s unity because he relies on tradition. One cannot be sure that he will not embrace polytheism, for when he hears the statements and arguments of the dualists, his views might change and he might fall into error without being aware of it.” (*ibid.*, 74)

Bakhya argues that only through his personal confrontation with these fundamental concepts will the Jew be armed to resist heresy, quoting Talmud, *Pirkei Avot* 2:14, “know what answer to give a heretic.” For this, *taqlīd* is not enough.

Maimonides agreed that such *taqlīd* was sufficient and even commendable as a means of educating those of limited intellect, but for those who are past that stage, unquestioning acceptance could lead to heresy. *Taqlīd* fails to ground imagination in reason, and so representation transcends intellect. Unrestrained representation is the path to idolatry. (On *taqlīd*, Wolfson, *Kalām*, 32-43; Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, 93-106; and especially Michael Schwarz’ scholium on *taqlīd*, *ad loc.* to our chapter, note 7.)

Even when we do teach the fundamentals, we teach them with a difference. We do not teach the “true essence” of the three fundamental doctrines of unity, creation and prophecy, and, indeed, “they were presented in enigmas, clad in riddles, and taught by wise men in the most mysterious way (*v’ha-arim*) that could be devised (*ha-haarema*).” The idea is to teach them skillfully, even shrewdly, but not, as Pines sometimes suggests, deceptively. Even though it is necessary to resort to *educational contradiction*, where what we teach initially is different from what we can teach later, this is not a “ruse,” but, rather, a strategy to overcome normal human limitations.

GRADUALISM IN EDUCATION

The student should be “gradually advanced towards perfection.” A teacher is not necessary, although obviously one is preferred. The student is like an infant fed on adult food. The infant cannot digest it and will die from it. Just so, the student cannot begin the divine science until he graduates in the pre-requisite courses. Without a gradual introduction, these ideas are indigestible and injure the soul. This recalls the metaphor of *honey* in the last chapter. Too much honey causes not just sickening but expulsion, the *emptying* of our conscience of any concept of God.

Educational gradualism is close to the idea of patience in learning. Patience before apparent contradiction is part of the requirement of *humility*. Since the field of divine science is rife with apparent contradiction (see last chapter), we must gradually advance from stage to stage in it.

Maimonides makes it clear that though gradualism is required, there is nothing inherently wrong with teaching the subject of divine science. Although the science is harmful to the unprepared, it is neither inherently evil nor contrary to the tenets of Judaism.

Those who think otherwise are “fools (*ha-ksilim*) who are only philosophers in their own eyes (*dimu sh'kaver higu la'dragat ha-iyun*).” We should not take these “fools” for illiterate bumpkins. Maimonides frequently uses the term “fools” to deride his intellectual opponents. These opponents were rabbis who opposed systematic studies of Creation and Providence. They thought this was the pursuit of gentile philosophy antithetical to Torah. They misinterpreted the reason for the rules of Mishna *Hagigah* which restrict the public teaching of this lore, taking this pursuit as inherently foreign and evil. Maimonides scathingly rejects their view.

The student must meet two requirements to make a *beginning* in the divine science. He must be wise (*hakham*) and understanding (*mevin*). First, the student has to achieve the level of the “wise” by successfully graduating in the study of logic, mathematics, etc., that is, the *Trivium* and *Quadrivium* of the scholastic curriculum. We assume that he concluded his rabbinic studies, that is, the mastery of the contents of the Mishneh Torah. Second, he must be “understanding.” This “understanding” refers to the *quality* of the student’s mind. He is *mevin m'daato*, i.e., able to figure things out on his own from strewn hints and lightning-like flashes. The subject matter necessitates this requirement: not only is it rife with apparent contradictions, but its fleeting insights only come through inspiration (see Introduction to the Guide).

WHY IS IT HARMFUL TO BEGIN THIS SCIENCE?

We should push the question further. First, what is this divine science that is so dangerous to begin? There remains considerable debate about its content. In the next chapter, Maimonides provides a précis of its subject matter and of its major themes, which are the themes of the Guide:

“(1) What the heavens are, what is their number and their form; what beings are contained in them; what the angels are; how the creation of the whole world took place; what is its purpose, and what is the relation of its various parts to each other; what is the nature of the soul; how it enters the body; whether it has an independent existence, and if so, how it can exist independently of the body [i.e. after death]; by what means [prayer or speculation?] and to what purpose [to unite with the active intellect or with God?], and similar problems....(2) All these subjects are connected together; for there is nothing else in existence but *God and His works*, the latter including all existing things besides Him: we can only obtain a knowledge of Him through His works; His works give evidence of His existence, and show what must be assumed concerning Him, that is to say, what must be attributed to Him either affirmatively or negatively.”

What is the relation between two parts I numbered? Is this science or is this dogma? The first part sounds like a philosophical pursuit. It assumes that one may *freely* inquire about real problems. The second part is either the end-result of this study or a dogma to which this study must give way, and it is not clear yet which he means.

Though the form of the second statement seems dogmatic, we know from the rest of the Guide that, except on one point, Maimonides contends that it is philosophically demonstrable. That remaining indemonstrable point is the debate over the creation or eternity of the world. He finessed that crucial point *sotto voce* by saying that there is nothing in existence but “God and His works,” since creation is one of those “works.”

Why is creation indemonstrable? There are two kinds of subjects: those above the Moon and those below the Moon. Maimonides, like Aristotle, holds that there is no proof of anything above the Moon. Since the creation of the universe is a superlunar subject, we can prove neither it nor its contrary thesis, eternity. Maimonides argues that in divine science we should advance “conclusive proof, where proof is possible, or by forcible arguments, where argument is admissible.” We can give conclusive proof of sublunary matters. We can even give conclusive proof of the existence, unity and incorporeality of God by extrapolating from His sublunary works. However, we can only make “forcible argument,” as Maimonides does in the Guide, on the critical superlunary issue of creation.

The *harm*, then, is that the student will not be able to disprove the Aristotelian assertion that God is just one existent in an eternal universe. Maimonides believes that this harm can be allayed only by following his program for the perplexed: gradual preparation following the Guide step by step. The path is not in and of itself evil; it will not dethrone God nor uproot the Torah. Moreover, the pursuit of divine science is the one thing needful; since only through it can we reach prophecy, the guidance the world must have. Prophetic revelation is the traditional basis that Maimonides will use to make “forcible arguments” against Aristotelian eternity. Still, until students reach the level of the “wise” and the “understanding” they must accept traditional dogmatic responses to the contradictions of divine science. This educational prudence is part of *humility*.

This study of divine science is not entirely philosophical, in the usual sense of Aristotelian philosophy, but more in line with the type of serious teleological and cosmological engagement of Socrates (or perhaps Pythagoras). Maimonides will later assert that it is a species of esoteric wisdom anciently pursued by the Jews but largely forgotten in our day; precisely the standpoint the cabalists took.

This helps to explain his deprecation of those who reject the divine science as “philosophers in their own eyes.” They have a starved version of philosophy, which they share with Akher, indeed, it is the obverse of his coin. They really are afraid of Aristotle’s contention that the universe is eternal uncreated. They fear that they cannot demonstrate its contradictory, creation *ex nihilo*. That is why they believe that the only result of such study could be the atheism of Akher. They do not know that we can bring “forcible argument” for creation. For those who are not merely “philosophers in their own eyes,” Aristotle’s position is an unproven assumption blocking the recovery of prophecy in Israel.

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