

GUIDE 1:31 LIMITS OF THE CORPOREALIZED INTELLECT

Rabbi Friedlander, in note 1 of his translation of our chapter, sketches the program for the next six chapters:

“The arrangement in chapters 31 to 36 is as follows: man’s intellect is limited (1:31); a transgression of the limit is not only useless, but even dangerous (1:32). The limit is not the same for all. The study of metaphysics, accessible to some, is too difficult for the ordinary capacity of man, and for novices in the study of philosophy (1:33). Metaphysics is not a suitable subject for general instruction (1:34). The doctrine of the incorporeality of God, though part of metaphysics, must not be treated as an esoteric doctrine (1:35). Belief in the corporeality of the Divine Being is equal to idolatry (1:36).”

These six chapters are a non-lexical island in a sea of lexical chapters (1:1-30 and 1:37-45 with some exceptions). Together they provide a methodology in the study of the divine things, especially creation and providence, *Maaseh Bereshit* and *Maaseh Merkavah*. While R. Friedlander insists on the term “metaphysics,” Maimonides generally calls it “divine science.” The *desire* for this knowledge is the link between this chapter and the previous chapter and the theme of several quotations there. In 1:30 Maimonides used strong language of hunger and thirst for this desire or *eros*. One quotation was cautionary, “It is not good to eat much honey” (Proverbs 25:27). That passage recalls the infamous heretic Akher, who was one of the four who went to Paradise seeking this knowledge. His figure haunts these chapters.

Our chapter begins to address the dangers of this quest. There are strict limits to human intelligence. Exceed those limits and thought passes from intelligence to imagination. The imagination is the opposite of the intellect: the intellect analyzes *wholes* to find the truth in their elements; the imagination combines even incompatible elements. The intellect seeks truth, but the search for truth is not a goal for the imagination. At best, the prophets need imagination to represent incorporeal truths. But at its worst, the imagination produces idolatry.

WHY IS THE INTELLECT LIMITED?

Here are the steps in Maimonides’ argument. Just as we are not able to lift very heavy weights, and some people can lift more than others can, so intellectual ability is unevenly distributed and has limits. Some students learn readily, while no amount of teaching can help others. There are, indeed, things that no one can learn, such as whether the total number of stars is odd or even. The sign of these subjects is that we have no *desire* to learn them. “The place where intellectual perception stops, the desire for it also stops” (R. Even-Shmuel, *ad loc.*, 131). The unstated converse of this proposition would be that where such a desire does exist, intellect might not be barred. Still, Maimonides insists that while “man is able to comprehend certain things, it does not follow that he must be able to comprehend everything” (*v’ayn heyoto masig m’khayev sh’yasig kol davar*). This means that even though he may go far in divine science he cannot grasp the divine essence.

We should acknowledge our individual and collective limitations. Yet we possess a desire for certain kinds of knowledge. While unnamed, Maimonides has in mind cosmological and divine speculation. The fact that we have a desire to know these things means that they are not entirely beyond the bounds of discovery.

This desire to know the divine truths is unending. Nonetheless, our material intellect is limited to knowledge of things below the orbit of the moon. Just as our sense of sight is limited by distance, so our intellect is limited to the sublunary existences. Our desire forces thought to pass over to imagination, since despite our

sublunary limitation we want to know the truth of what is above us. “Everyone thinks that he has found a way by means of which he will know the true reality of the matter.” When mind exceeds its limit and desire replaces thought with imagination, the thinker displays hubris and makes himself a god. This is the special problem of the divine science, as opposed to physics and mathematics, where proof obtains.

On the other hand, some people who combine ignorance and arrogance reject all speculation. At one point, Maimonides seems to compare these un-teachable individuals to Bedouins who have no desire for the finer things in life. Because of this lack of desire, they never enter the “palace” where these higher things are (cf. 3:51, the Allegory of the Palace).

Maimonides makes a series of negative statements regarding such a close-minded individual, who he continually calls an ignoramus (*sikhel*, Judeo-Arabic—*al-Jahiliyya*/אלג'אהלייה from the verb *jahila*—to be ignorant—applied generally to the pre-Islamic Arab idolators). Because such a person resists proof, he is uneducable. This is a serious problem because it places the individual beyond the reach of Maimonides’ project, which is to remove corporeality by turning us from the imagination and toward the intellect. Why do people resist this beneficence?

EDUCATIONAL RESISTANCE AND THE PROBLEM OF OLD BOOKS

Maimonides turned for the answer to Alexander of Aphrodisias, an Aristotle commentator (c. 150-210 CE). Alexander gave three causes for educational resistance. Those causes are intellectual *arrogance*, *complexity* of the subject, and pure *ignorance*. Maimonides then adds a fourth reason for educational resistance, which he meant to be provocative:

“At the present time (*u’bizmanenu*) there is a fourth cause not mentioned by him, because it did not then prevail (*sh’lo hizkiru mipnei sh’lo haya etzlam*), namely, habit and training (*ha-hergul v’ha-khinukh*). We naturally like what we have been accustomed to and are attracted towards it.”

What “did not then prevail” with Alexander and the other pagan philosophers? The answer, although Maimonides does not state it explicitly, is scripture, together with the *Agadah* and the Midrash. He says:

“This is likewise one of the causes which prevent men from finding truth, and which make them cling to their habitual opinions. Such is, e.g., the case with the vulgar notions with respect to the corporeality of God, and many other metaphysical questions, as we shall explain.”

Maimonides tells us what this cause is that prevents men from finding the truth:

“All this is because of habit and training in texts (*lashonot*) that all agree upon their holiness and truth (*sh’ha-kol modem b’kedushatan v’amitatan*), but whose surface meaning teaches corporeality and other other untrue imaginings.” (My translation)

I abandoned R. Friedlander’s translation here since he broadly translates “texts” as “Bible,” but I agree that Maimonides had holy writ among other ancient texts in mind. This is what I call *The Problem of Old Books*.

One problem with books is that they freeze authority. Some readers of old books accept their words without questioning their provenance and without engaging with them in dialogue. This is especially true if they reach any kind of canonical status. Maimonides complained that this was a particular problem with Muslim theology. The later Muslims accepted the authority of late-ancient Greek and Syrian Christian arguments against their pagan philosophical opponents. They also canonized books that the early Muslims produced in

their earliest battles with the Christians and the philosophers. The issues and demands involved in those conflicts were unknown to latter day students centuries later. They thought that the doctrines were uncontroversial, that they arose from pure academic inquiry, and that there was no need to examine their premises or their sources.

“Therefore when philosophers of a subsequent date studied the same writings [from the past] they did not perceive the true [polemical] character of the arguments; on the contrary, they found in the ancient works strong proofs and valuable support for the acceptance or the rejection of certain opinions, and thus thought that, so far as religious principles were concerned, there was no necessity whatever to prove or refute any of their propositions, and that the first *Mutakallemim* [Muslim theologians] had discussed those subjects with the sole object of defeating certain views of the philosophers, and demonstrating the insufficiency of their proofs. Persons who hold this opinion do not suspect how much they are mistaken; for the first *Mutakallemim* tried to prove a proposition when it was expedient to demonstrate its truth and to disprove it, when its rejection was desirable, and when it was contrary to the opinion which they wished to uphold, although the contradiction might only become obvious after the application of a hundred successive propositions.” (Guide 1:71)

Maimonides did not mean that a basic biblical education impedes learning. Such an interpretation would go too far. He does identify biblical anthropomorphism as a cause of educational resistance to the systematic investigation of divine things. He thinks it necessary to have a teacher like Onkelos (the ancient Aramaic translator of the Torah – 2d Cent. CE) who can redirect the reader to an allegorical interpretation of these passages.

This should have been no problem for Alexander and the philosophers who have no Torah. But they also struggled with old texts, for Socrates and Aristotle criticized Homer and Hesiod for the physical exploits of their Olympian deities.

For Aristotle Greek scriptures could impede learning:

"The effect which lectures produce on a hearer depends on his habits; for we demand the language we are accustomed to, and that which is different from this seems not in keeping but somewhat unintelligible and foreign because of its unwontedness. For it is the customary that is intelligible. The force of habit is shown by the laws, in which the legendary and childish elements prevail over our knowledge about them, owing to habit. Thus some people do not listen to a speaker unless he...cite[s] a poet [e.g. a traditional poetic authority like Homer] as witness.” (*Metaphysics* 2:3, 995a)

Limits to Knowledge. What Maimonides meant by his remark about what “did not then prevail” with the philosophers was that since they are not bound by any biblical tradition in their search for truth, it is that much more remarkable that even they felt that our metaphysical grasp was limited (See my comments on 1:5 for what Aristotle said about these limits).

R. Yehuda Even-Shmuel explained why this might be the case: “Men of faith always tend to exaggerate the sphere of the unknown in order that the area of faith will fill the place of the rationally knowable,” (my translation). Thus, by contrast, “Since it is in the interest of philosophers to demonstrate that there are no limits to intelligence,” the fact that they encounter a limit to what is knowable made the similar claims of religion impeccable.

However that may be, Maimonides taught (See my *Introduction II*), the concept of the *educational contradiction*. This is the apparent contradiction between what we must teach early in the educational process, and what we teach later. We must explain some things simply so that the student at the basic level can appreciate them. The complexities can come later. Viewed baldly, the earlier explanation seems to contradict the complex but accurate explanation. In fact, there is no contradiction. Elementary educational methods familiarize the student with the Torah's surface, but, later, the good teacher whose qualified pupil yearns for spiritual knowledge searches its inner meaning, transcending the limits of language

The desire is the key that reveals the possibility of transcendence. This desire mobilizes the human *striving* that alone can produce this transcendence.

This erotic striving to transcend the limits of knowledge, however, also unshackles the imagination. This is the dark side of desire. Mishnah *Hagiga* warned against the public teaching of divine science just for that reason. These concerns also troubled the philosophers. We addressed this in Guide 1:5, where Maimonides contended that Aristotle exercised humility in cosmological speculation. We must *humbly* recognize our intellectual limits to keep from succumbing to pure imagination.

LOCKED OR UNLOCKED: A CONTRADICTION?

Educational Humility, as understood by Maimonides, is a set of rules and conditions governing the intellectual quest. We now have the first four of those rules. Alexander of Aphrodisius warned against *arrogance*, about the innate *complexity* of the subject matter, as well as most students' *incapacity*. Maimonides' adds his rule against dogmatic attachment to traditional texts whose literal meaning corporealizes the divine. He develops more rules of humility in the next chapter, which should be read with this one. The most important rule is *patience* in the face of apparent *contradictions*.

I showed, in my chapter-essay *Introduction II—Contradictions*, that while contradictions seem to proliferate in divine studies these contradictions are only apparent. An actual contradiction must conform to the logical rule of contradiction, and few do. The exercise of patience in the face of contradiction is the *sine qua non* of *humility*. This trait allowed R. Akiva to enter and emerge unscathed from his meditation on divine creation and providence. It allowed Aristotle to theorize the existence of an animate heaven (Guide 1:5).

Maimonides provided a wonderful example of such an apparent contradiction in this chapter and the following chapter. At the beginning of our chapter, he wrote:

“Know that for the human mind there are certain objects of perception which are within the scope of its nature and capacity; on the other hand, there are, amongst things which actually exist, certain objects which the mind can in *no* way and by *no* means grasp: the gates of perception are *closed* against them (*shaarei ha-sagatan n'ulim b'fanav*).”

At the end of the next chapter, 1:32, he wrote:

“It was not the object of the Prophets and our Sages in these utterances to close the gate of investigation entirely (*neilim shaarei ha-iyun l'gamrei*), and to prevent the mind (*v'hashbatat ha-sekhel*) from comprehending what is within its reach (*m'lahasig ma sh'efshar lahasig*)...”

Is the gate locked or can it open? If you thought this was an actual contradiction, he had these strong words for you, concluding:

“...As is imagined (*sh’mdamim*) by simple and idle people, whom it suits better to put forth their ignorance and incapacity as wisdom and perfection, and to regard the distinction and wisdom of others as irreligion and imperfection, thus taking darkness for light and light for darkness.”

In other words, if you took the statement in our chapter that “the gates of perception are closed” as the rule you would have succumbed to the imagination of fools. These “simple and idle” people are not just the non-philosophic multitude but include intellectuals who fail to exercise humility before apparent contradictions, of which this is the signal example. These intellectuals (who may even be rabbis) impatiently “put forth their...incapacity as wisdom,” announcing contradictions where there are none. They have not sought to discover what might be within their “reach.” Their striving comes to a halt.

Recall the motto preceding the Guide: “*Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in*” (Isaiah 26:2). The students’ capacity for humility directly relates to his ability to transcend the corporeal intellect and open those gates. We only find what is within the mind’s “reach” through patient investigation of the apparent contradictions. The four causes of educational resistance are not insuperable barriers to this quest.

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R. Yehuda Even-Shmuel’s summary of the chapter provides an especially good review of Maimonides’ argument and its implications:

“Human intellect is limited and has boundaries. The question is: How can our limited perception conceive the unlimited and unbounded spiritual [world]? The answer: By means of man’s natural [intellectual] perception. Man has no interest in things he cannot know; but if we find that he desires to know the source of spirituality and of all spiritual creations, the sign (*siman*) thereof is his ability to *recognize* their existence. You may ask: Why do controversies proliferate in spiritual investigations? The answer: It is precisely here that ordinary science stops, and a new science (*shita*) begins. Here the power of proof stops, but in accord with this new perception (the recognition of spirituality) the mind is compelled to discover for itself new ways to recognize these new things.”
(My translation)

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