

GUIDE 2:3

THE OTHER ARISTOTLE PROBLEM

Why did Maimonides write Guide chapter 2:3?

On its face, this chapter is another introduction, just as the last chapter introduced Maimonides' Book of Creation. Here he introduces the role of the separate intellects in creation.

Our chapter, however, seems to add nothing that we had not already learned in the last two chapters.

He tells us here that the theory of the spheres led Aristotle to "assume" the existence of the intellects. But Maimonides had previously detailed Aristotle's argument that the motion of the heavenly spheres required the existence of separate minds to move them in Guide 2:1.

Maimonides tells us now that Aristotle had no proof for the existence of the separate intellects, but only strong arguments, although they were the best existing explanations for heavenly motion. But in Guide 2:2 he had already said that Aristotle's opinion was the "...fittest to be believed in," just as he says here that it "...is the least open to doubt and is more systematic than any other."

Maimonides' says that he drew these two claims about the separate intellects from the essay *Principles of the All* by Alexander of Aphrodisias, the third century CE Anatolian Greek Aristotle commentator. (It is extant only in an Arabic manuscript, not in the original Greek. It was translated in pertinent part by Shlomo Pines in his "Translator's Introduction" to his edition of the Guide, p. lxix).

Maimonides goes beyond Alexander to urge that Aristotle's concept of the intellects was in harmony with the Jewish belief in angels created by God. He had said the same thing in the last chapter.

None of this explains why he wrote this apparently superfluous chapter.

The real concern that likely motivated him was a passage in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* that Maimonides is at pains not to mention. In that passage Aristotle says that the separate intellects are gods, not angels. Maimonides must not reveal this pagan view of the separate intellects, since it would disfigure his argument for creation, which depended on the concept of those intellects (see my reconstruction of that argument in my chapter-essay on Guide 2:2).

The clue that this chapter conceals such dangerous esoteric material is its length. The short chapters of the Guide are the most difficult to interpret and always conceal explosive ideas. Guide 2:3 is one of the shortest, 79 words in the Judeo-Arabic original (for comparison, the shortest, 1:14, is 57 words, followed by 1:6, at 64 words. Both conceal esoteric content – see my chapter-essays on each).

Alexander's essay referred only to the relationship between "God, the Great and the Sublime," and what he called "the divine body," which Prof. Pines explained in a footnote as "the heavenly sphere." This camouflages what Aristotle actually said in his *Metaphysics*:

"There has been handed down from people of ancient and earliest times a heritage, in the form of myth, to those of later times, that these original beings [the separate intellects motivating the spheres] are gods, and that the divine embraces the whole of nature. The rest of it was presently introduced in mythical guise for the persuasion of the masses and into the laws for use and benefit; for the myths say the gods are of human form or like some of the other animals, and other things that follow along with and approximate these that have been

mentioned. If one were to take only the first of these things, separating it out, that they thought the primary independent things [the separate intellects] were gods, one would regard this as having been said by divine inspiration, and, since it is likely that every kind of art and philosophy has been discovered to the limit of its potential many times, and passed away in turn [this refers to the notion of “The Eternal Return of the Same”; see Sachs’ note 27], one would consider these opinions of those people to have been saved like holy relics up to now. So, the opinion of our forefathers that comes from the first ages is clear to us but only to this extent.” (*Metaphysics* 12:9:1074b1-15, p. 247, Joe Sachs’ trans).

Up till now the theological problem with Aristotle was his “God of the philosophers,” a *non-transcendent* deity subject to the laws of an eternal uncreated universe. Maimonides had, surprisingly, not yet grappled with Aristotle’s other serious theological problem, his paganism, or, to put it precisely, his *henotheism*: the belief in a single supreme god governing many subordinate gods.

Aristotle’s statement is salutary in one way, as it continues the Athenian philosophers’ demythologization of Hellenic religion. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle sought to free their gods from Homer’s anthropomorphic portrayal of their vices, including theft, murder, and rape. Still, despite this demotion of myth, Maimonides must have been disgusted by Aristotle’s endorsement of the tradition that the separate intellects were indeed gods. For Maimonides the intellects are not eternal but created (Guide 3:13), and therefore, are not gods.

Without mentioning this troubling text (which I assume he knew of in some form), Maimonides processed it by focusing on his own tradition’s angelology.

“These sayings [of Aristotle regarding the separate intellects] also are in harmony with many sayings of the Law [The Torah] and more particularly, with what is explained in the generally known *Midrashim* [regarding angels], about whose having been composed by the Sages there is no doubt, as I shall explain” (Pines trans. And see Guide 2:23, quoting *BT Baba Batra* 115b).

Of course, there could be no harmony if Maimonides had mentioned that Aristotle made them gods.

Friedlander (*ad loc*) suggests that Maimonides’ commendation of *Midrashim* “whose having been composed by the Sages there is no doubt” was meant to endorse only texts which “there is no doubt that men of wisdom and understanding have originated them.” This conveys that Maimonides would *not* accept every text or textual variant that presumed to the title of Midrash. Friedlander explains that “By describing these as genuine he [Maimonides] indicates that he would not defend all *Midrashim* or all Midrashic sayings as genuine, that is, as utterances of our sages.” This hermeneutical move sounds vaguely like Aristotle’s rejection of mythical accretions on Greek *ur*-religion.

In the first chapter of the *Laws of Idolatry* in his Mishneh Torah, Maimonides explained that mankind’s great error (*ta’u bnei ha-adam ta’ut gadol*), already in the times of Enosh, was to treat the stars and spheres that serve God as deserving the honor due only to God. “This was the essence of the worship of false gods and this was the rationale of those who worshiped them.”

Despite his salutary acts of demythologization, Aristotle was still guilty of this idolatrous polytheism, mankind’s great error, the focus of Israel’s historic mortal struggle. Maimonides jettisoned Aristotle’s deification of the intellects by conceptualizing them further. The Zohar completed the process by removing the intellects from astronomy, that is, by taking the *Sefirot* out of the spheres.

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