

GUIDE INTRODUCTION II CONTRADICTIONS

Maimonides employs contradictions to avoid a Mishnaic law against teaching certain topics in public (Talmud, *Hagigah* 11b). That Mishna reads:

“The subject of forbidden sexual relations may not be expounded in the presence of three, nor the work of creation (*Maaseh Bereshit*) in the presence of two, nor the work of the chariot (*Maaseh Merkava*) in the presence of one, unless he is a sage and understands of his own knowledge.”

In the Introduction, Maimonides mentions several of the ways the Guide complies with this rule in principle while violating it in practice. One way he does this is by scattering these ideas throughout the Guide, forcing the student to find them and link them together, just as Solomon joined parable to parable.

Another way he conceals dangerous material is with *contradictions*. The student, armed with Maimonides’ theory of contradictions presented in this Introduction, transcends the concealment to come to the truth, without having participated in a *public* teaching. By means of his explanation, Maimonides also finds a way to direct the student’s attention to the dangerous *content* of the teaching.

The Mishna refers to *Maaseh Bereshit* and *Maaseh Merkava*. Strictly speaking, these are names for biblical texts: the beginning of Genesis and the chariot vision in the beginning of Ezekiel. In Jewish esotericism, they refer to the mystery of creation and to the mystery of divine providence. Many commentators translate these terms as “physics” and “metaphysics.” I caution against doing so. While that interpretation may occur in passages in Maimonides’ earlier works, the Guide does not support it. Michael Schwarz translates the terms as “knowledge of nature” and “knowledge of divinity,” *ha-yedia ha-tviit* and *ha-yedia ha-elohit*. José Faur says they mean “cosmology” and the pursuit of “human perfection.” Maimonides’ in the Guide takes them in their rabbinic understanding, since he explicitly refers to the wealth of meaning concealed in the Genesis and Ezekiel accounts. Even if we take them as references to the received titles of Aristotle’s *Physics* and *Metaphysics* and the worlds they contain, I would still hesitate to so translate them. The ancient view of physics and metaphysics is so distantly different from ours that their use in our times approaches anachronism (Schwarz’ translation of the Guide, notes 21 and 22, pp. 11, 12; Faur, *Homo Mysticus*, 18, 125, Syracuse, 1999).

SEVEN CAUSES OF CONTRADICTIONS

The last section of the *Introduction* to the Guide gives Maimonides’ list of contradictions found in books. He distinguishes them by their causes, their sources, and whether they were consciously created, as in the following chart:

CAUSE	INTENTIONALITY	SOURCES
1. ANTHOLOGIZATION	UNINTENTIONAL	MISHNA and TALMUD
2. RECONSIDERATION	UNINTENTIONAL	TALMUD
3. PARABOLIC	INTENTIONAL	PROPHETIC
4. APPLES & ORANGES	UNINTENTIONAL	PROPHETIC
5. EDUCATIONAL	INTENTIONAL	PHILOSOPHERS and GUIDE OF THE PERPLEXED
6. LOGICAL PROCESS	UNINTENTIONAL	MIDRASH and AGADA
7. ESOTERICISM	INTENTIONAL	PROPHETIC and GUIDE OF THE PERPLEXED

The first cause of contradictions, I term “anthologization.” These contradictions are typical of historical accounts in which the author presents a list of other people’s contradictory statements without naming those responsible. The author is not contradicting himself; rather he portrays other people’s contradictory statements to make some

point about them. The second cause of contradictions, “reconsideration,” is where an author changes his mind, so that his first statement contradicts his second statement. The third cause, parables, we discussed in the previous section. The fourth cause, “apples and oranges” are usually unintentional contradictions and generally so obvious as to be unimportant. The fifth cause, the education contradiction, arises when a teacher simplifies material for beginners who later learn the complexity of the subject. The sixth cause, the “logical process” contradiction, occurs in the usual course of dialectics and the production of syllogisms. Esoteric contradictions, the seventh class, are contradictions that an author purposely inserts to divert attention from dangerous content.

The contradictions are divisible into two broad groups, intentional and unintentional contradictions, meaning that the author inserted them in his text intentionally or unintentionally.

The walls between the categories are permeable and the contradictions blend in to one another. Thus, logical process contradictions and esoteric contradictions are both, to some extent, educational contradictions.

After giving an account of each type of contradiction, Maimonides locates the contradictions in various kinds of texts, as shown in the chart. According to Kafih, a variant manuscript locates the sixth cause of contradiction (logical process) in the Guide, in addition to the fifth and seventh causes (note 28, *ad loc.*). The standard manuscripts, and the one Kafih approves, only list the fifth and seventh causes as those appearing in the Guide, that is, the educational and the esoteric contradictions. Those two are intentional contradictions in my chart, by which I mean that Maimonides inserted them in the text purposefully. Both of them are educational, although we understand the esoteric contradictions as educational only for the excellent student, not the general public.

WHY DO WE HAVE CONTRADICTIONS IN THE GUIDE?

These contradictions raise the question of just what kind of book the Guide is. Maimonides admits to inserting educational and esoteric contradictions. Thus, when we see two statements in the Guide that seem contradictory, he wants us to assume that he inserted them purposefully, not accidentally. Herbert A. Davidson has recently suggested that we take this sort of claim with a grain of salt (*Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works*, Oxford, 2004). He thinks the book is not as carefully written as Maimonides would have us believe. By contrast, Leo Strauss held it a basic hermeneutic principle always to interpret great philosophers as though they meant what they said, to “understand them as they understood themselves.” I tend to the latter view, that the contradictions are purposeful.

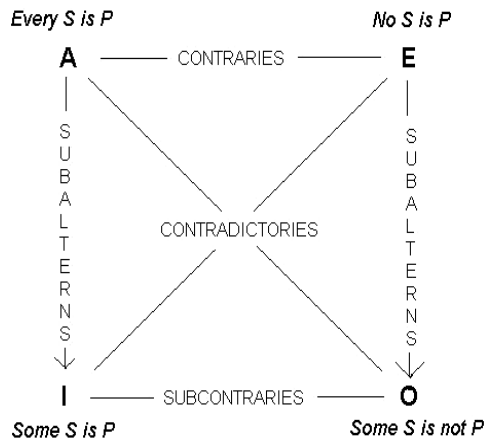
The second question we must ask is whether the contradiction is merely educational, the fifth cause. What we have to tell the elementary school student is different from what we tell the graduate student, because the elementary school student is not ready for the refinements of a theory the basics of which he can barely understand. If we can show that the contradiction is merely educational, it does not present a problem. Otherwise the contradiction may be esoteric, the seventh cause, and that is a problem. If the contradiction is otherwise unresolvable we must ask whether Maimonides is purposely misleading the student, and whether the Guide has a secret doctrine. The answer is somewhat complicated. Maimonides did not consider all students equally qualified to study the divine science. Moreover, the Mishna of *Hagigah* makes it clear that the *law* does not consider everyone qualified. Nevertheless, Maimonides has decided to commit the public teaching of divine science. By teaching those aspects of divine science enjoined by *Hagigah* in a contradictory way, he is, in a sense, not teaching in public, and commits no culpable violation.

I do not think a secret doctrine is involved, or that the contradictions are unresolvable. Maimonides applied a *medical* model to the presentation of doctrine. Thus, if Dr. ben-Maimon gives Reuben a fine white pill for cancer, Simon, who suffers from heartburn, should not object that he only got a homely brown pill: the white pill would kill him. Maimonides wrote the Guide on various levels, a technique familiar to us from literature. He meant the Guide to be helpful to any student, to whatever extent he can make his way through it, and however much he can understand. Thus, the contradictions, the odd style of writing, the placing of related points in unrelated chapters

and the many other devices, all serve to make levels of doctrine variously available to the variety of students, according to their degree of qualification. The Guide is the only book organized this way, and it is a category by itself.

CONTRADICTIONS VS. CONTRARIES

The best guide to understanding Maimonidean contradictions is Marvin Fox’ *Interpreting Maimonides*, University of Chicago, 1990, ch. 4. The actual Arabic terms used by Maimonides translate as “contraries,” “contradictions” and “divergences.” By *contradiction*, he follows common logical usage to mean that on a “square of contradiction,” the two contradictory statements cannot be both true and both false. An example is “all men are living” vs. “some men are not living.” *Contraries* cannot both be true, but both may be false. *Sub-contraries* are the opposite: both cannot be false but both may be true (*Treatise on Logic*, usually attributed to Maimonides, ch. 4). He tends to include “sub-contraries” in the term “contraries.”



Several rules emerge. If statements used by Maimonides actually are ‘contraries,’ we must not treat them as ‘contradictions.’ Contraries can be resolved (*Treatise*, ch. 11).

Only *statements* can be contradictory. Thus, a *command* is never in contradiction to a *statement*. This includes all *mitzvot* and *halakhot*, that is, any law from the Torah or other sources of law.

Singular Propositions are statements that are not universal or made of a group, but have only one subject, such as “Reuben is a man.” Maimonides does not treat these singular statements as subject to contradiction. This is important because all statements about God are singular propositions.

This leads to his term *divergences*, Arabic: *ikhtilāf* (Fox says the correct Hebrew for this should be *khiluf*). This is not a standard logical term. Maimonides uses it as a catch-all for inconsistencies that are not contradictions. He uses this actual term (as *khālāf*) for contradictions five and seven above, that is, those found in the Guide.

We are driven to the conclusion that in divine science there are few real contradictions, and that the purpose of the Guide is to teach the excellent student to dissolve apparent contradictions with the solvent of wisdom. The contrary position, pushed by self-styled “radical” Maimonideans throughout the history of the Guide’s interpretation, is that the contradictions are real, revealing an external doctrine digestible by the faithful while concealing a wholly opposed anti-Torah doctrine acceptable to the Aristotelian elite. I caution against the ready acceptance of this too frequently expressed opinion because it makes Maimonides the bearer of an Averroistic “double-truth” which he would have been shocked to be identified with.

OPENING THE LOCK

Unlike this section on contradictions, Maimonides peppers the other parts of his Introduction with obscure rabbinic references and parables. This despite his expressed unhappiness with the method of explaining one type of obscurity with another. In this section, on contradictions, by contrast, he gives but one such obscure reference.

That Maimonides makes only one such reference here means we should pay close attention to it. This is the rule of the Guide. Surprisingly, most commentators have ignored this reference (Yehuda Even-Shmuel explains it homiletically, *ad loc*, Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1935).

The reference is a sentence from the Talmud, *Shabbat* 30a:

“Thou, Solomon, where is thy wisdom and where is thine understanding? Is it not enough for thee that thy words contradict the words of thy father David, but that they are [also] self-contradictory!” (Soncino translation).

The Talmudic section as a whole is significant (from near the beginning of 30a to a quarter-way down 30b), as I will show, and worth digesting. Maimonides quotes only this line, giving no explanation why he chose this example for the “third or fourth” kind of contradiction. Those are the prophetic contradictions and the trivial apples/oranges contradictions. They are not of the fifth or seventh class, and, therefore, should not be in the Guide, unless he intended to insert this as an esoteric contradiction here. Moreover, he does not say why he thought it important to present this one reference.

The rest of the passage not quoted by Maimonides treats in typical aggadic fashion several quotes from Solomon in Ecclesiastes (4:2 and 9:4) against one from David in Psalms (115:17). The Talmud takes David’s saying “The dead do not praise God,” to contradict Solomon’s “I praise the dead which are already dead,” but takes this also to contradict Solomon when he says, “A living dog fareth better than a dead lion.”

The Talmudic rabbis try to harmonize these statements many ways, with varying success. They try to divide the quotes as treating different subjects, i.e., as apple/orange contradictions. The point would then be that once we understand the contradictions, they cease to be actual contradictions.

More interesting are the particulars the Talmud gives, which explain why this passage is an example of Maimonidean prophetic/parabolic contradictions (third class). They also bear out general themes running through the Introduction.

One of those themes is the importance of Torah. Since they are dead, the dead cannot study Torah or practice it:

“For as soon as he dies he is restrained from [the practice of] Torah and good deeds, and the Holy One, blessed be He, finds nought to [reciprocally] praise in him.”

Since study of the words of God is praise of God, the “dead do not praise God.” The Guide is concerned to educate the excellent student so he will be led from his perplexities to perfection, and to help the less than excellent students in any way they can be helped. In this way, Maimonides saves them from death, which is the death of the mind, the inability to study Torah.

The Talmud follows with a second theme, the importance of traditional revelation. These are the revelations of the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and by extension their intellectual progeny Joseph and Moses, devotion to which will unlock gates locked to all. Later in the second section of the Guide, the Patriarchs become Aristotle’s antagonists in the central debate over creation. These patriarchs are “the dead which are already dead” who are deserving of “praise” (Rashi explains that they died: “before the evil inclination overwhelmed them to repel them from God.”)

The Talmud story then describes Solomon’s struggle to finish the Temple by taking the Ark of the Covenant into the Holy of Holies, the gates of which were locked. King Solomon had tried every possible form of prayer seeking the power and the permission to enter:

“Yet he was not answered. But as soon as he prayed, ‘O Lord God, turn not away the face of thine anointed, remember the good deeds of David thy servant,’ (2 Chronicles 6:42) he was immediately answered. In that hour, the faces of all David’s enemies turned [black] like the bottom of a pot, and all Israel knew that the Holy One, blessed be He, had forgiven him that sin (of Bathsheba). Did then not

Solomon well say, ‘wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead’? And, thus, it is written (1 Kings 8:66), ‘on the eighth day (of the Temple dedication) he sent the people away, and they blessed the king, and went into their *tents* joyful and glad of heart...’ [30b] And as for the question which I asked before you, — a lamp (*ner*) is designated lamp, and the soul of man is called a lamp: better it is that the lamp of flesh and blood be extinguished before the lamp of the Holy One, blessed be He.”

This page of the Talmud began with a question whether one could justify extinguishing a candle on the Sabbath (a capital violation) to save the life of a sick man. I do not understand why extinguishing a candle could save a dying man (the Mishnah says it lets him sleep), but let us accept the premise. The conclusion, of course, is that the law can always be broken to save a life, except in three cases (one may not commit bloodshed, idolatry or sexual perversion). Recall the earlier parable of the penny candle that penetrates a room dark and full of furniture to find a lost pearl, where the light represents the light of the mind working through the parable to its moral. In this case, we see a more remarkable conclusion. The Talmudic author now says that we may extinguish the penny candle to save the soul of a man, God’s light. The light of the mind reveals that dousing the candle saves life. Thus, this light, which can distinguish the pearl in the dark, is God’s lamp. We do God’s work, in the sense of advancing His purpose, by using that lamp to illuminate the meaning of His prophet’s parables, and, by extension, the esotericisms of the Guide.

The words of Solomon “contradicted” the words of David regarding the meaning of death. Solomon was unable to resolve the issue. He could not open the doors of the Temple to atone for the people until he invoked God’s love for David. Recall that David was not allowed to build the Temple. Solomon, alone of David’s sons, is David’s true intellectual progeny. It is through Solomon that David yet lives and his project is fulfilled. Despite David’s pessimistic remark that the dead do not praise God, his thought lives through Solomon. David’s idea, a Temple for the Jews to praise God and for God’s indwelling, is built by David’s intellectual progeny, Solomon. The light of his soul saves the light of his father’s soul.

A key piece of the Talmud section on 30a notes that once Solomon’s prayer was answered and the gates of providence were opened, the people went into their *tents* joyful and glad of heart (1 Kings 8:66). The Talmud explains:

“‘And they went unto their *tents*,’ means that they found their wives clean (non-menstruant); ‘joyful,’ because they had enjoyed the luster of the Divine Presence; ‘and glad of heart,’ because their wives conceived and each one bore a male child; ‘for all the goodness that the Lord had showed unto David his servant,’ that He had forgiven them the sin of the Day of Atonement (i.e., not fasting).”

The word “tent” is like the word “house,” which in Jewish esotericism means “wife” or “spousal intercourse” (Jastrow, *Dictionary*, p. 168). The text links the opening of the Temple to the opening of their tents, that is, to sexual intercourse. Both are processes by which something new is created. Maimonides employs this analogy because there is no means but human conception to express this creative process in our language (Guide 1:46, p. 99, Pines’ note 8).

The gate of creation was locked to the people but by linking words and parables, Solomon unlocked it. Solomon resolved the contradiction by illuminating the truths obscured in Torah. He thus found the key to unlock the gates of the parables. He saves the souls of Israel by opening the Temple. They enter their tent joyful and glad of heart for their restored creativity, analogous to the creative impulse that causes creation *ex nihilo*. Our task is to use that creativity to unlock the Guide’s gate of contradictions, and save our own souls from perplexity.

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