

GUIDE 1:31
LIMITS OF THE CORPOREALIZED INTELLECT

Friedlander, note 1, 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 non-lexical. Together they provide a methodology in the philosophy of the divine things, especially creation and providence, *Maaseh Bereshit* and *Maaseh Merkavah*. The *desire* for this knowledge is the link between this chapter and the previous chapter, and was the theme of several quotations there. In 1:30 Maimonides used strong language of hunger and thirst for this desire or *eros*. One quotation is cautionary, “It is not good to eat much honey” (Proverbs 25:27). That passage is infamously linked to the heretic Akher, one of the four who went to Paradise seeking this knowledge. He is an important figure in these chapters.

Our chapter begins to address the dangers in this intellectual quest. There are strict limits to human intelligence. Once we exceed those limits, thought must pass over 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 the purpose of the imagination. At best, the imagination is necessary for the *representation* of incorporeal truths; at 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 bring others to learn. 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” (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 hiyoto masig, m’khayev sh’yasig kol davar*). This means that even though he may go far in divine science he can not 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 commits hubris and makes himself a God. This is the special problem of metaphysics, 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 pejorative statements regarding such a close-minded individual, who he continually calls an ignoramus (*sikel*). Such a person resists all demonstrative proof, and 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 the individual away from the imagination and toward the intellect. Why do people resist this quest?

EDUCATIONAL RESISTANCE

Maimonides turns to Alexander of Aphrodisias, an Aristotle commentator (c. 150-210 CE). Alexander gives 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 clearly 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 is it that “did not then prevail” with Alexander and the other pagan philosophers? The answer, although Maimonides is careful not to state it explicitly, is biblical 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 goes on to say 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 the Friedlander translation here since he broadly translates “texts” as “Bible,” but I agree with him that Maimonides has holy writ in mind.

Does basic biblical education impede learning? Focusing carefully on what Maimonides actually does say and does not say, I think 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 who can redirect the reader to an allegorical interpretation of these passages.

This is no problem for Alexander and the philosophers for they have no Torah. I question if they did not also meet resistance due to traditional texts, for Socrates and Aristotle had to respond to Homer and the Hellenic celestial pantheon. Maimonides apparently thinks that if the Greeks had Torah, Alexander would have included resistance due to scripture in his list.

In fact, Aristotle did pronounce habituation to Greek scriptures an impediment to 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. Homer) as witness." (*Metaphysics* 2:3, 995a)

What Maimonides meant by his remark about what "did not then prevail" with the philosophers was that since they are not bound by *any* tradition in their search for truth, it is all the more remarkable that even they thought our metaphysical grasp limited (See my comments on 1:5 for what Aristotle actually said about these limits). Yehuda Even-Shmuel explains (my translation) 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." Thus, by contrast, "Since it is in the interest of philosophers to demonstrate no limits to intelligence," the fact that they encounter a limit to what is knowable makes the similar religious claim impeccable.

However that may be, Maimonides teaches (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 subsequent complex and accurate explanation. In fact, there is no contradiction. Elementary educational methods familiarize the student with the Torah's surface but later the good teacher with the qualified pupil finds its true inner meaning, transcending the limits of language. Since there is a human desire for spiritual knowledge, there may be a possibility for intellectual transcendence of these limits. 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 unshackles the imagination. This is the dark side of desire. The necessary cautions regarding divine speculation were not brought merely because of the rule of the Mishnah *Hagiga*, but were concerns that troubled the philosophers as well. We addressed this in Guide 1:5, where Maimonides contended that Aristotle exercised humility in cosmological speculation. We must be *humble* before our intellectual limits to prevent descent to pure imagination.

LOCKED OR UNLOCKED: A CONTRADICTION?

Humility, as understood by Maimonides, is a set of rules and conditions governing the intellectual quest. We now have the first four. 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 is corporeal. 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 wrote above in *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 Akiva to enter and emerge from paradisiacal meditation on divine creation and providence. It allowed Aristotle to theorize the existence of animate spheres (Guide 1:5).

Maimonides gives a wonderful example of such an apparent contradiction in these two chapters. At the beginning of our chapter, he writes:

"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 it (*shaarei ha-sagatan n'ulim b'fanav*).”

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

“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*, lit.: lock out the mind) 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 is an actual contradiction, he has these strong words for you in concluding the above clause:

“...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 humility of the student 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 clearly not insuperable barriers to this quest.

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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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scottmalexander@rcn.com

