

GUIDE 1:35 DOGMA

INTRODUCTION

In this frequently misinterpreted chapter, Maimonides complicates the reader's task in two ways. *First*, he tells of two different people, the "perplexed" and the "incapable," shifting back and forth between these accounts three times in this brief chapter. When he returns at the end of the chapter to the "incapable," his presentation, in some translations, leaves doubt whether he might instead be writing about the "perplexed" (Ibn Tibon is the most ambiguous; Friedlander achieves clarity that the last part really is about the "incapable"). This makes a difference because of the *second* complication that Maimonides introduces: the contents of the educational program for the "incapable." He gives four somewhat different accounts of these contents, leaving the reader wondering what this program contains.

I will clarify these ambiguities. The subjects in this discussion are two people, presented as generic representatives, who have difficulty understanding the prophetic writings. The first individual is *incapable* of understanding them because he has the five limitations catalogued in the last chapter: immaturity, lack of appropriate education, bad physical disposition, etc. Some of these defects can be remedied, some not.

The second individual is the right kind of person. He is the one previously described as *doeg, sar khameshim, yoetz, khakham kharashim* and *navon lakhash*, that is, humble, mature, imaginative, scholarly, insightful. Most importantly, he can figure things out on his own, *mevin m'daato*. Having read passages in the prophetic works, he is *perplexed* by their apparent attribution of corporeality to God. The moment of his perplexity is the moment we recognize that he should begin the divine science.

In neither case, however, that of the incapable or that of the perplexed, do we divulge the doctrines of the divine science. We give the incapable the dogmas of belief, while we give the perplexed the "chapter headings" from which he must weave the divine science.

This chapter is about those dogmas of belief, and, therefore, the focus is on the incapable ones. Maimonides brings in the training of the perplexed only to provide contrast. Although the account of those dogmas seems to shift the four times Maimonides recounts it here, his present interest is only in three of those dogmas, namely, *gashmut, hitpaaluyot*, and *dimion*, which are divine freedom from: 1) corporeality, 2) affection /*pathos*, or 3) likeness to any other existent.

We were already familiar with dogmas of belief about God from the first two Commandments, and from the first five of Maimonides' Thirteen Principles, found in *Introduction to Helek* in Commentary on the Mishnah (divine existence, unity, incorporeality, the evil of idolatry and polytheism). Those well-known dogmas are necessary to the *immortality* of each individual Jew. We know this because the main concern of Mishnah *Helek*, which says, "All Israel have a portion in the *world to come*," is what an Israelite must believe if he is to share in immortality (*Sanhedrin* 10:1).

All of these dogmas participate to some extent in the divine science. It follows that there is a necessarily stripped down version of them for the public, against a full account available only to the adept. Maimonides' seeks to *expand* the list of these dogmas to include two that are very largely part of the divine science, *hitpaaluyot* and *dimion*, and he does so on the strength of the fact that the Commandments and *Helek* both included *gashmut*, which, like *hitpaaluyot* and *dimion*, finds its full account in the divine science. We see this because in each of his four lists of dogmas, when he mentions these three, he affirms their dogmatic status *k'mo, just as*, we must believe in the earlier and more familiar dogmas.

The problem for Maimonides, and the reason he needs to contrast the incapable with the perplexed, is the problem of how much lore of *gashmut*, *hitpaaluyot*, and *dimion* we should burden the incapable. Because, as will emerge, the full account of these matters *must not be shared with the incapable*.

Various commentators have been so confused by this chapter that they perversely read it to mean that we *must* share the full meaning of these subjects with the masses. Such an idea is not only un-Maimonidean, but quite overlooks such disasters as allowing the incapable to ponder the apparent contradiction between divine impassivity and the efficacy of prayer, the clarification of which requires absorption of the entire Guide of the Perplexed.

DOGMAS

Having given sufficient warnings of what we should not teach and who we should not teach it to, Maimonides now tells us what we *must* teach.

There are certain dogmas from divine science that we teach forcefully to all. Some clearly derive from scripture. Some involve philosophy. We require the multitudes, including the semi-educated householders, children, the entirely ignorant and the mentally impaired, to assimilate these doctrines. Although these doctrines are clearly part of the divine science, they do not fall into that class of learning prohibited by the law in *Hagigah*. Indeed, it is necessary to teach the multitudes these things from the earliest possible age, and to drill them so no alternative rates serious consideration.

We answer questions by saying that the wise have explained these things and that should be satisfactory.

Maimonides was one of those Rabbis for whom there are laws of belief. These laws of belief are his 13 principles of faith found in Commentary on the Mishna, *Sanhedrin*, 10:1, and in Mishneh Torah, *Ysodei Ha-Torah* 2:9-10. (See, generally, Harry A. Wolfson, "Maimonides on the Unity and Incorporeality of God," in his *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, v. 2, 433-457, esp. 449-450). Those doctrines that flow at least partially from scriptural sources are:

- God exists;
- God is one;
- God is perfect;
- God is incorporeal;
- God is above all deficiency;
- He created the universe *ex nihilo*;
- The books of the prophets are true.

The obligation to believe God exists is the denial of atheism. His oneness implies his unique non-numerical unity. The denial of multiplicity implies opposition to polytheism and idolatry.

Arthur Hyman effectively explains how Maimonides sees the connection between these dogmas and the ultimate purpose in all his books:

"Once it has been seen that it is the function of the first five principles (from *Introduction to Helek*) to convey correct conceptual knowledge about God, their purpose becomes clear. It is to make immortality possible for all. Maimonides, it will be recalled, identifies the World to Come with the philosophical notion of the incorporeal existence of the human intellect, which takes place only when this intellect becomes actualized through the understanding of true opinions, primarily those about God. The Law then, by commanding that all Israelites, the masses no less than the intellectual elite, must know certain

true propositions about God, provides the possibility of immortality for all.” (“Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles,” in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance studies*, ed. A. Altmann, Cambridge, 119-144)

The final dogma is that the “the books of the prophets are true and interpretable,” *divrei ha-navua halelu emet v’yesh la-hem biur*. What Maimonides means is that we indoctrinate the people with our conclusions from the Guide’s lexicon of prophetic terminology, i.e., that we should interpret anthropomorphic terms as ambiguous or homonymous, and interpret parables rather than take them literally. If the people still do not understand, we emphasize that “the wise,” to whom they should apply, know the true interpretation.

HITPAALUYOT, DIMION, AND GASHMUT

Maimonides now argues that just as all are required to subscribe to these biblically derived rules of belief, so it is similarly obligatory to accept as dogmas three core conclusions of the divine science. We cannot derive this material directly from scripture. These conclusions underlie and protect the preceding general rules of belief and so he holds them correlative to those rules. Some of this material derives entirely from philosophy, as he acknowledges (thus, in the discussion below of *relation* he says this doctrine “has been shown in works on natural science” by which he means Aristotle’s *Physics* 7:4, 249a 1-5). There is a minimum version of these doctrines for the public, against a complete version that the capable few grasp only after much study and meditation. These three doctrines of divine science are:

- God has no *affections*, Hebrew: *hitpaaluyot* (Judeo/Arabic: אלאנפּעאלאָת). God’s *perfection* implies that He is not subject to *change*. *That is the limit of what we tell the public*. That He does not change means that no outside occurrence affects Him. The attribution of passivity or potentiality to God is tantamount to the forbidden attribution to Him of a defect. We, therefore, must *interpret* scriptural passages implying change. Moreover, God’s perfection implies that He does not suffer emotions. This last idea can hardly be part of the *public* dogma, although divine impassivity clearly implies His freedom from emotions. The *full* presentation of this material we reserve for the qualified divine science student. In Guide 1:55 we learn that this student must be able to prove that God has no affections, but that this proof requires proficiency in natural science, which the incapable do not have. The student must, ultimately, reconcile God’s impassivity with the efficacy of prayer.

- God has no *likeness, analogy, or comparison*, Hebrew: *dimion*, and is therefore not definable (Schwarz: *damiut*. Jud./Ar. אלוּשְׁבִּיּוּת, שְׁבִיּוּת). The Arabic term “Comparers” *Mushabbihs*, which has the same root, names the sect of the “ultra-Hanbalites” in Muslim theology, who held that divine attributes are identical when applied to man (Efros, *Philosophic Terms in Moreh Nebukim*, p.24). But God is *indefinable* because there is none *like* Him, none who *compare* to Him. This dogma of uniqueness flows from God’s unity and non-multiplicity. Since there is nothing like God, He is cannot be part of any species or genus. From philosophy, we learn that every definition consists of a genus and a difference. A genus is a group of *related* species, and the difference (species) identifies which members of that genus are the subjects of the definition. But God’s uniqueness means that He has no *relation* with any other. “No relation exists between two things unless they come under one genus,” *kol yakhas lo y’hei elei beyn shnei dvarim sh’hem takhat min ekhad* (cf. Aristotle, *Physics* 7:4, 249a 1-5). Thus, only if there is a relation of greater/fewer, stronger/weaker, etc., then two *relata* group together. But we cannot group God together with anything. He is not just stronger than we are; his strength means something entirely different from our strength. In other words, when we say that God is “strong” and that Samson is “strong,” the description is homonymous, not ambiguous. These homonymous terms when used for Him and us merely sound alike. Even among the “essential attributes,” such as divine intelligence, power, and existence, no definable relation exists with human intelligence, power and existence. If there is no relation, God has no *attributes* as such. The divine “attributes” that we utter mean nothing. This doctrine I term “extreme negative theology.” Surprisingly, we teach this extreme concept to the masses. By contrast, the complex version, which I term “moderate negative theology,” we reserve for the qualified student (See essay below).

- God is *incorporeal*, He has no *gashmut* (Jud./Ar. אֵלֶּזְטִיִּם). While we listed incorporeality with the general commandments of belief above, its derivation from scripture necessarily involves material drawn from philosophy. Mishneh Torah, *Yodei Ha-Torah* 1:8 puts together Deuteronomy 4:39 “The Lord thy God is in heaven above and upon the earth beneath” with Aristotle’s doctrine of *proper place* (*Physics* 4:4 212a, 5-6): since nothing corporeal can occupy two entirely bounded spaces at the same time, God could not be both above and below and be corporeal. Deuteronomy 4:15 “You saw no manner of *figure*” (*temuna*, which Guide 1:3 says means *shape*), he puts together with Aristotle’s doctrine that shape, such as straightness and curvedness, is an *accident* of the category of *quality* that always and only characterizes bodies (*Categories* 8:10a, 11-16). Since we “saw no manner of” shape, therefore, God cannot be a body. Maimonides thinks that God’s uniqueness, “To whom will you liken Me that I should be equal (Isaiah 40:25)?” implies incorporeality since “if God were a body He would be *like* other bodies” but since He is unlike anything He cannot be a a body (*Yodei* 1:8; Wolfson, *op.cit.*). *Gashmut* always implies multiplicity since all physical bodies consist of matter and form, and because bodies are *infinitely divisible*. Therefore, since God is one, not multiple or divisible, he cannot be corporeal. (Infinite divisibility of bodies is a concept Maimonides shares with Aristotle, as both oppose atomism: *hu gam mitkhalek v’sovel et ha-khaluka*. Cf. Aristotle, *On the Heavens*, 1:1, 268a 5-8; *Physics*, 6:1, 231b, 15-20; *Metaphysics* 5:13, 1020a, 7-10)

THE “PERPLEXED”: MAIMONIDES FURTHER DEFINES DIVINE SCIENCE

In the next movement, about half way into our chapter, Maimonides changes key and relates what we teach to the “perplexed,” that is, the anticipated readers of the Guide. Both the perplexed and the incapable are confounded by the corporeality of language in the books of the prophets. But we know that the perplexed have acquired the five prerequisites listed by the last chapter. Thus, the perplexed may be confounded, but because of their qualifications, they can overcome their perplexity.

What we teach the perplexed is, of course, a longer list than that curriculum provided to the incapable (compare the somewhat different list given in the last chapter). We teach them the divine science:

- The homonymity and ambiguity of figurative expressions in the prophetic works (from the Guide’s Lexicon chapters);
- Which attributes are denied;
- Which attributes are affirmed (*u’ma inyan ha-taarim ha-myukhsim lo*: “what attributes *are* to be attributed to Him”);
- Creation (in Guide 2:13-30);
- Providence (3:16-24);
- Divine will/wisdom (1:68-69, 3:13, 3:17);
- Divine knowledge and its relation to human free will (1:19, 3:8, 3:19-23);
- Prophecy and its gradations (2:32-48);
- The meaning of the multiple names of the one God (1:61-70).

Once the qualified student has learned those first dogmas enjoined by law and become “perplexed,” (*nevukho*, Ar. *hā’ir*) about the terminology and parables in biblical prophecy, his teacher leads him gradually to divine science, divulging the “chapter headings.” He may also learn by himself, using the methodology of the Guide, since he is *mevin m’daato*, that is, able to teach himself. But these are all “secrets of the Torah,” and therefore only for the capable student who meets the conditions previously listed from *Hagigah*.

THE “INCAPABLE”

Some students can only be made to accept that God is a perfect unity, that the teachings of the prophets are true, and nothing more. They will not understand parables and homonymy. They cannot resolve apparent contradictions. We tell them the bare minimum of the three divine science doctrines of *gashmut*, *hitpaaluyot* and *dimion*:

“The scriptural passage [causing perplexity] is clearly understood by the wise, but that they [these incapable ones] should content themselves with knowing that God is *incorporeal*, that He is never subject to external influence, as *passivity* implies a change (*hitpaalot shinui*), while God is entirely free from all change, that He cannot be *compared* (*y'dmei*) to anything besides Himself, [meaning] that no definition includes Him together with any other being, that the words of the Prophets are true, and that difficulties met with may be explained on this principle. This may suffice for that class of persons (lit., we stop at just this much: *v'la-amod imo b'shiur ze*).” (This fine translation is Friedlander’s. Schwarz also gets it right. Ibn Tibbon, Pines and Kafih leave the misimpression that Maimonides directed this paragraph to the qualified capable student)

We indoctrinate the incapable with these dogmas from divine science because we cannot allow them to remain believers in corporeality and affection, just as we could not allow them to neglect the biblically derived commandments of belief. Our concern is *heresy*, the subject of the next chapter. They must be satisfied that “the words of the prophets are true” and any questions they have “may be explained on this principle.” Maimonides’ dogmatic assertion of prophetic truth must not be taken as window dressing. In Mishneh Torah, accessible to all, he established the law that defines a true prophet (*Ysodai Ha-Torah* chapters 7-10, *Avoda Zara* 5:6-9). There is not the slightest doubt that he believed in the truth of prophecy.

The problem for divine science is that the explanation for apparent contradictions in prophetic writings is too complex. They require the entire Guide of the Perplexed to resolve. For example, the reconciliation of the doctrine of the efficacy of prayer with the doctrine of divine impassivity must await the adept’s acquisition of considerable sophistication in the divine science, for it depends on the concept of the active intellect and the possibility of conjunction with it. Still, to protect religion from heresy it seems that we must alert the rest of the adherents of the faith at a minimum that “God is never subject to external influence (*hitpaaluyot*) ... [for] God is entirely free from all change,” while foreclosing any further questions with the dogmatic assertion of the truth of prophecy. (Averroes would not even have allowed us to discuss corporeality with the multitudes, arguing that it would undermine their simple faith in divine unity. *Averroes on the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy*, trans. G.F. Hourani, 1961, 59-60)

VIA NEGATIVA

Our chapter introduces the Maimonidean doctrine of divine attributes, to which the Guide devotes chapters 1:46-47 and 51-60.

The divine attributes fall into three categories, for our purposes. These are 1) the anthropomorphic attributes, 2) the attributes of action, and 3) the essential attributes.

How do I describe God?

Such grossly corporeal descriptions as the eye of God or hand of God are *anthropomorphic attributes*. Onkelos began the tradition of removing anthropomorphic attributes from the Bible. He substituted the *Shekhina* and other entities created by God in his Aramaic translation of the Bible.

Maimonides takes a different approach. He denies these attributes. He argues that by denying attributes we come

closer to understanding God himself. This is Maimonides' *negative theology*.

The *attributes of action* are known in Judaism as the *yud-gimel midot*, the thirteen descriptions of divine action:

“And the Lord passed by before him (Moses), and proclaimed, The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear [the guilty]; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth [generation].” (Exodus 34:6-7):

God had agreed to show Moses His “back,” that is, the *consequences of His actions*. The descriptions given of His mercy, etc. are not descriptions of Him but only attempts to frame those consequences in human language. Thus, just as a mother is merciful to the child in her womb (*rekhem*), God is merciful to man (*rakhum*, from the same root as *rekhem*, womb). Not that God has a womb, or is a mother, or has a child; but His action in preserving man is called “merciful” by metaphoric comparison (*dimion*). Again, as with the anthropomorphic attributes, so with the attributes of divine action: we understand God better by denying these attributes.

The major problem for divine science is the *essential attributes*, which include life, wisdom and knowledge, as opposed to the *action attributes* and the *anthropomorphic attributes*.

EXTREME VS. MODERATE NEGATIVE THEOLOGY

It is possible to interpret Maimonides' negative theology in two ways: either we deny all essential attributes, which I call *extreme negativism*; or we affirm them conditionally, which I call *moderate negativism*.

Extreme negativism denies that God has wisdom or life under any understanding of these terms. The terms are homonymous, that is, they mean completely different things for God and man but only sound the same. If this interpretation were true, whatever we say about God would be exoteric camouflage for a sort of esoteric mystical atheism. It would be something like a Buddhist view: through meditations and ascetic practices, the adept obliterates his persona by assimilating it to the nothingness at the heart of the All. God would just be the *Ayn Sof* (the Endless) of Cabala, but abstracted from all the rest of Cabala, including its grand sefirotic emanations. This would entail the denial of the cosmological macrocosm (Guide 1:72). It is hard to see the Maimonides we know embracing such a doctrine.

Under moderate negativism, there is a difference between human and divine “existence” or “knowledge.” Homonymous attributes used both of man and God are *accidental* with men, but *essential* with God. What this means is that occasionally man understands something, but that God always understands everything; again, man lives and dies, but God's existence is atemporal and essential to Him (Efodi, *ad loc.*: “God's wisdom is absolute and is the cause of the existing things; our wisdom is contingent and acquired from existing things.”)

Herbert Davidson, in *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works*, Oxford 2004, p. 363, argues from moderate negativism. When Maimonides denies the essential attributes of life and existence he does it in a form that is a *non-denial*. That is, Maimonides “negates” divine life and existence by denying that God is *deficient* in life or intelligence. Davidson notes: “with a single exception, the illustrations that Maimonides offers are not negative terms at all but positive terms construed negatively.”

I have seen our chapter cited for extreme negativism. But it should be carefully noticed that the extreme view is only meant for the education of the *many*. We tell them that the essential attributes of life and wisdom are so incomparable to ours that they are as two different genres of life and wisdom, a comparison of apples and oranges. There is no relation, and such comparison is a *category mistake*. The story is different with the elite. We teach them those attributes that *are* related to God: *u'ma inyan ha-taarim ha-myukhasim lo*.

One might well wonder why we teach the hard-line view of extreme negativism to the multitudes.

Jewish law knows of this sort of educational discrimination. The command against homicide is one of seven Noahide commandments obeyed by civilized gentiles. The Noahide laws also apply to the Jews, but, critically, with the many conditions, exceptions, and complications set forth in the Talmud. As applied to the Gentiles, however, the law is absolute, and applied uncompromisingly. So, for example, the law denies abortion under all circumstances to Gentiles, while a Jew can abort to save the life of the mother (*rodef*). We assume Gentiles are beyond the reach of the complexities of Torah law, and it is not lawful to teach the Talmud to them.

Just so, we assume the many are incapable of grasping the complexities of the divine essential attributes, and we do not threaten their belief with that inquiry. Besides, their misinterpretation of the attributes could descend, as we will see, to dangerous results, like the eternal uncreated Qur'an, the Trinity, and even polytheism. It is not lawful to teach them divine science. For them extreme negativism is paradoxically appropriate. For those who can understand more, we teach the complexities of divine science, including moderate negative theology.

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